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The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess

Chapter



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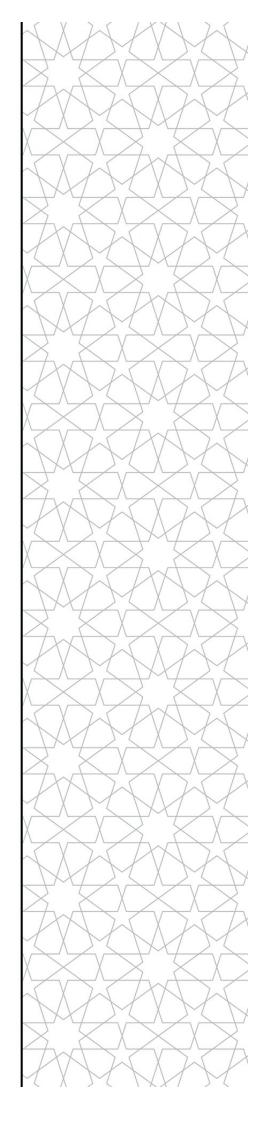


Chapter



**Epilogue** 

**Special Story** The Cutest Is...



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## **Chapter 1**

Memories of her past life came rushing back all at once to the six-year-old princess Claudia. Meanwhile, she was staring at her attempted murderer. The man in front of her had pushed her out of the tower window. Her uncle—her own blood—meant to kill her.

"Don't hate me," he said. "Your death means we can raise Leonora as a princess! And as her guardian, I'll be able to live lavishly!"

Claudia stretched her hand out, marveling at its tiny size even as she fell. She gazed up at her uncle's face, meters away now, and blinked.

Her smile was eerily calm.

Foolish man.

He gasped in shock, but she didn't hear anything he said; her body continued to plummet the vast distance toward the forest below.

I wonder if he truly thinks he can pass off his own daughter as the princess.

Although...considering how Father and Stepmother have confined me in this life, perhaps no one will notice my absence, replaced by my cousin.

The words of the lady's attending maids floated to mind as her unwilling descent continued.

"I can't believe my dismal luck in being forced to serve the Lacking Princess! She doesn't possess even an iota of magic despite her station."

"It's inevitable. Even His Majesty's royal blood wasn't strong enough to overcome her mother's lowborn stock. The woman might have been a diva of unparalleled beauty, but in the end, she was simply a commoner without any relations."

"I'd like to return to the capital at the very least. I can't stand living in such a remote forest, one in which monsters appear, to boot! Ahhh, if only Princess Claudia didn't exist..."

A chortle threatened to escape her lips as she thought back on these memories.

To call me lacking and magicless! How very droll! Hee hee. They can't even imagine the power I wielded in my old life.

Society would have deemed her perfect in her previous life as Adelheid. Her blessings had been many. Born to a pedigreed family, she had overflowed with talents aplenty and possessed an intellect to match that put them to good use. Though she had been showered with praise, her life had ended too soon, which brought her to now.

Reborn yet disdained by even the servants. Such was this life.

"Right, then."

The wind whistling past her ears coupled with the sound of birds cheeping. The tops of the trees were rapidly approaching before Claudia's very eyes, ready to pierce through her—or perhaps she would crash through branches hosting birds' nests and slam to the ground instead. She spread the fingers of her small right hand and pointed the palm down before mentally casting a short spell.

Stop.

Her body stopped immediately. A moment later, the hem of her dress billowed softly around her. Just like that, Claudia slowly descended until her feet gracefully reached the ground. She clenched and unclenched her tiny fists vigorously as she felt the magical energy circulating through her.

One can never be too cautious, so I cast the spell silently, but it seems to have worked fine. Though it would be best if I vocalized for more powerful magic.

She hadn't expected much from this vessel, but it could prove more useful than she'd thought. For a child's body, it reacted quickly to an invocation and withstood the resulting recoil well enough. In which case, she needed to think about what came next.

I could return directly to the tower, but I'd rather not. I must say, it would be more amusing to crush my uncle's ambitions once I'm a bit older. That aside, I have a pressing problem to solve, since it seems I'll be forced to wander the

forest for some time...

Claudia lightly brushed her hand over the space in front of her. A mirror appeared.

Look at me, clad in such atrociously unsuitable attire.

She peered at the reflection of a child too slight in build for a six-year-old. Reed-thin limbs and broken nails. Shoes with scratched tips and an exceedingly plain white dress. Her hair, which had grown past her knees—not by her volition—lay in a disheveled mess. And her pallid, unhealthy complexion only made matters worse.

The nerve of them to treat her so horridly. Still, she realized she'd lived her life with nary a complaint before recovering her memories.

Claudia pursed her lips tightly in annoyance before clicking her heels together.

Purify, Restore, Mend, Tidy, Fortify...

With every one-word spell she cast, beads of light burst forth from the heels of her shoes. They whizzed around and enveloped her, caressing her with a comforting warmth. Then she looked in the mirror once more.

I suppose this will do.

With that thought, she combed her fingers through her beige hair. As she did so, a young girl possessing big eyes framed by long lashes and small lips stared back at her from the mirror. Her hair, now shortened enough so that it fell midway down her back, gleamed like it had been combed with a real brush. No longer tangled, it hung pin-straight and fluttered in the gentle breeze winding through the forest.

Claudia revitalized her skin with magic until it shone, and she transformed her plain, worn-out dress into a soft, luxurious one. She couldn't do much about her thinness, but she made sure to polish the tips of her shoes. The next thing she did was check her eyes.

The striking pair resembled a doll's, large and round. Previously hidden by the unruly fringe of hair, they were visible now, their color changing depending on the light. They sported all the colors of the rainbow, like a multitude of jewels

crushed and mixed together.

"The greatest witch of our time. The true conjurer, Lady Adelheid!"

"Your prismatic eyes are proof of your ability to manipulate magic. You truly deserve to be called magic's beloved!"

She sighed, recalling words once spoken by her former disciples.

Everyone knew the legend of the mighty conjurer, Adelheid, the woman who made a name for herself with her power. Before recovering her memories, even the listless Claudia had heard the name.

I harbored a tiny hope of living my next life as I pleased. To think that I was reborn not only as a princess, but an oppressed, confined one. And to remember this all as a terribly young girl, at that.

She narrowed her eyes as she gazed up at the tower she'd fallen from. The smirk on her face suited a wicked witch.

Honestly...I couldn't have asked for more!

Today was a day of celebration. Her mood improved by leaps and bounds, she made the mirror disappear with a snap of her fingers before she took her first steps deeper into the forest. She practically bounded forward, she was so exultant.

Time for a stroll. Let's see what this forest, rumored to be the den of monsters, has in store!

She unconsciously started singing a tune from her old life. Sometimes she lisped and stumbled over the words like young children are wont to do, and her voice reverberated throughout the woods.

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Adelheid had been a princess too. Her country had flourished thanks to the powerful magic its royal family possessed for generations. Known as the crown jewel of her long and storied bloodline, she'd had many serving at her feet.

"Adelheid, you are the epitome of beauty. Your lovely hair, the color of lilacs, and those bold, mesmerizing eyes are peerless in this realm."

"Your magic is the pinnacle of power itself. I've never before witnessed magic that is both so strong and pure."

"Should you become my consort, my country will prosper for eternity. So, please, Adelheid, I beg of you to marry me!"

Kings and princes from every country in the world bowed their heads as they sought her hand. But they all bored her. No matter how much they kissed the tips of her shoes or lavished her with expensive gifts, her heart remained unmoved. Because anything a man could give her, she could acquire in one way or another through her own magic.

I've had more than enough of all that, thank you very much. A fair face no longer surprises me, and I tire of status and fame.

With a huff, Claudia leaped over a large tree branch and ambled deeper into the forest.

More importantly, I'd like to do all the things I couldn't in my old life. For example, getting a big dog!

Her heart danced merrily as she contemplated her dreams now.

A gorgeous, intelligent dog would be nice. Sleeping with it would be like resting on a fluffy cloud. Oh, I can just imagine how warm and wonderful it would feel... Do fenrirs live in this forest?

She saw traces of monsters here and there on her walk. Perhaps she might stumble upon a fenrir if she took the time to search for one.

It's fantastic to live as I please so far away from the royal capital. Well, now... It seems I have company. Will I have my wish granted so soon?

When Claudia heard footsteps, she directed her attention to the direction from which they came. She wondered if it was a large, four-legged monster. Was it a carnivore? Or a huge pack of monsters? Whatever the case, she would look it over and claim it if it was fit to be her pet. Just as these thoughts ran through her head, a gigantic creature flew out from within the woods.

It was a gryphon. The eagle-headed monster with a lion's body raced straight at her. Though the creature wasn't the dog she'd been hoping for, its ability to

fly could prove convenient.

Resolved that she would have it, she raised her hand to bring the monster under her command.

At that instant, the gryphon let out a shriek and bounded over Claudia's head, rushing past her. She was caught by surprise for a moment, but she quickly focused her attention deeper into the forest from whence it fled. She could sense the presence of something different from a monster.

Hmmm...

Her lips curled into a smile. A beat later, her small feet pointed in that direction, and she began striding briskly, her steps sure.

Gryphons are strong, territorial monsters. Curious, then, to see it so utterly intent on escape that it didn't even bother with me or anything else for that matter.

She headed deeper into the woods, light rustling sounds coming from her feet as she stepped on fallen leaves. The presence became more and more distinct the closer she drew to it. Rampant bloodlust thickened the atmosphere.

The disturbance of magic makes it seem less like a living thing and more like a harbinger of disaster, hmm?

Something was definitely up ahead. She reached the shore of a small lake just as these thoughts flashed through her mind. The air should have been clean in a place like this. Instead, she found it permeated with stagnant magical energy.

And it unmistakably radiated from the person Claudia discovered.

A raven-haired boy crouching on the ground.

He looked to be around nine years old. He panted roughly while supporting his seemingly heavy upper body with one hand planted on the ground. Drops of sweat trickled down his forehead and plopped on the ground.

That magic...

A black haze shrouded him. It raged like countless snakes coiling relentlessly, emitting a sinister thirst for blood. Claudia took a step toward the boy. He flinched in response, his thin shoulders shaking.

"Don't! Don't come any closer."

Yet unchanged by the events of adolescence, his voice rang out high, but a hint of spirit imbued it, which made her cheeks tingle with nerves. The eyes that glared at her were black like obsidian.

"I said...s-stay away..."

Several dead gryphons lay scattered around him. Normally, one of these monsters was powerful enough to destroy a town or two. Defeating even a single gryphon was no easy feat.

"You killed them, yes?"

He remained silent.

The black haze wafting in the air seeped out from near his heart. Like chains restraining a dog, a few of the snakelike wisps entwined his neck.

I see now.

Claudia stared intently at the face of the boy who continued to glare at her. *I* see now, she thought again.

His short, black hair would gleam beautifully if groomed properly. Though he was young, his almond-shaped eyes, framed by double eyelids, were clear and striking. A well-defined nose and thin lips rounded off his features. With such a refined face, he was bound to grow up into a handsome young man. Still, his eyes captured her attention the most.

They're so dark that it feels as if I'm being swallowed up. I can see unyielding determination dwelling in them alongside insight and dignity.

The boy spoke, his voice hoarse. "Take another step and I'll kill you too."

"How...marbelous." Her six-year-old mouth stumbled over words sometimes.

"Huh?"

Claudia smiled softly. Joy surged through her. "What a lubbly pup I've stumbled into!"

His eyes widened in shock, and the black, hazy snakes curling around his neck warped effortlessly and grew in size.

"Ngh! Ahhh...!"

He pressed both hands against the left side of his chest, but the river of haze flowing from him only turned into a fiercer torrent of more of the inky stuff. Immediately after, it surged forth and rushed straight toward Claudia, like a gaping, hungry maw.

"Sh-Shit! Hurry up and get away from here!"

She held up her palm toward the haze. "Erase."

With a *whap*, she blasted the amalgamation of snakes away. Its fangs never would have reached her. All it managed to do was make the hem of her white dress slightly rise with the torrent's momentum before she ended it.

"What the...?" He exhaled sharply. Then with a grimace, he promptly collapsed on the ground, still pushing down on his chest.

"I'm amazed you managed to surbibe in that situation. Good job."

She surmised the thing trying to kill him was the solid magic implanted into his heart.

"A slave contwact... Didn't your mastuh teach you you'd die if you twied to run away?"

"Ngh— Haaa..."

The boy gave ragged breaths as he pressed his forehead into the ground. He was clearly in pain. He writhed uncontrollably and ground his molars together, yet he didn't scream or complain even once. On the contrary, he desperately pulled himself up, and when he raised his head, his glare bored into Claudia.

The black haze twisting around his body was intent on wringing every last bit of life from him. The fact that he could maintain such a fierce expression despite his certain agony impressed her. Unconcerned, she traipsed over to the boy and sat on her haunches in front of him.

How very unusual. A slave contract that binds the target with magic and forces them to obey until death... I'm surprised to learn there are people even in this era who employ such curses.

The magic of a slave contract places powerful restrictions. The boy must have

exchanged something with his master to agree to it. But he violated it and escaped, resulting in the "punishment."

"That's not evewything, though, is it? Don't tell me you twied to tear the contwact off by force?"

"Shut...up..."

"You dolt. All that does is incwease your pain before you inebitably die anyway."

"Shut up, shut up, shut the hell up...!"

Despite his pretty face, his speech was quite coarse. Claudia frowned, then suddenly noticed his strained movements.

"Unbeliebable. Are you resisting even now in an attempt to tear off the contwact?"

The boy didn't reply. His silence spoke volumes. Even without it, she would have sensed the magic he possessed rioting violently inside him.

"It's pointwess doing so, you know. The only thing you accompwish is incweasing your torment until the moment of death. If you simply didn't incite the bwack snakes, they would have remained docile."

"So what? You think I care?" Even as he continued glaring at Claudia, the boy mustered all his strength to speak using his terribly raspy voice. "I don't plan on staying that bastard's slave until I die. It doesn't matter how long my escape lasts, a second, an instant, as long as I can get away."

She recognized that a powerful strength rested in his hands as he pressed down on his heart.

"I couldn't choose how to live my life... So if I was going to lose it anyway, I wanted to at least choose the way it ended."

Claudia clasped her hands behind her back and chuckled. "You truly are lubbly. Awthough a wee bit foolish."

"What...are you..."

She gave a self-assured grin at the displeased boy in front of her. "Since your

life has come to this, I have a proposal for you."

She chanted a spell in her mind and produced a dagger in her hand.

"Choose a way to live, not a trivial way to end."

Then she thrust it into the left side of her own chest.

"What the hell are you doing?!" he yelled.

Claudia kept her eyes on the dagger, making sure the magical blade reached her heart. When the tip touched it, she felt magical energy gush out and pulled out the weapon swiftly. The boy grimaced reflexively at the sight of the oozing red blood. However, this wasn't mere blood.

"The blood...is glowing...?"

Tinged in gold, her blood coated the short sword's blade. Her fingers touched his chin and forced his head up. Looking down on the haze coiled around his neck, she held the dagger point against the left side of his chest.



"I'll slice through these ugly chains, but I need you to endure the pain for just a bit. You mustn't flail no matter how scary it might get."

His eyes widened, which Claudia took as assent. She smiled in satisfaction. Gazing at the dark pools of his eyes from this close made them all the more enchanting. She parted her lips slightly, took a short breath, and cast the spell.

"Demolish."

"Ngggh!!!"

Both their hearts slammed hard in their chests. Claudia's dagger jutted from the boy's chest. The curse reversed course, and the blackness of the haze deepened. The magic of the slave contract rampaged wildly. The hilt of the dagger held in her right hand practically boiled.

"Oh my. Will you defy me, then?" She giggled in amusement at the novel sensation. "Alas, I can't do what must needs be done with my cuwwent body, so I have no choice but to obawite your slave contwact."

"Overwrite...?" Though his face was twisted in pain, the boy never once broke eye contact.

"Don't wowwy. I'll undo the collar wight away."

"Ngh...!!!"

At that moment came the sound of something breaking with a *krak*. The wind blew so hard that it whipped her dress around and made it impossible to keep her eyes open. As Claudia held her milk-tea-colored hair in place, she slowly opened her eyes once the wind died down.

"This... How... What..."

The boy surveyed their surroundings, bewildered at what he was seeing. With the black haze now eradicated, a gentle stillness blanketed the forest. Then he looked down at the left side of his chest, which was covered by his shirt. There were neither black snakes slithering out nor any wounds from the dagger. The weapon in her hand faded with a soft *whoosh*.

"Did you...? Did you end my punishment? Wait... You... You did something to my slave contract too..."

She yawned daintily before replying, "To be clear, it's still there. I merely we connected the end of the chain attached to your soul—from your old mastuh to me."

Claudia did her best to shake off the dirt clinging to her dress, but her tiny hands were ineffective. She never would have picked white had she known how conspicuously stains appeared. Her lips twisted in a moue of displeasure as she stared up at the boy.

"Later, I'll bweak the contwact, and it will be as simple as that. Tell me, what's your name?"

"I...don't have one."

"I see. Then I shall call you Noah in the meantime."

The boy she named Noah stared at her warily. Was it really so strange that she didn't dwell on the fact he had no name?

"What the hell *are* you? No matter how you look at it, you aren't a normal child, are you?"

"Mmm... I have no kwams about wevealing the truth to you, especially since I promised to void our contwact anyway. But, first..."

The ground had been shaking gently for a few moments now. Claudia held her hand over Noah and cast a simple spell. "Heal."

A ball of light winked softly into existence and spun around him.

"You should feel much better now, yes? In exchange, I want you to hug me."

"H-Huh...? Hey, wait a second!"

When she put out her hands in silent demand, Noah automatically held her away.

"I'll have you know that I'm vewy, vewy sweepy."

"You're...what?"

"I think I used too much magic... My body...can't endure... At...its limit...
Ahhh..."

Claudia finished with a huge yawn then clung to Noah limply.

"Hold on. Don't tell me you're actually planning on sleeping? *Here* of all places?"

"Take...me...home... Mrgh..."

"Hey! Listen to me!"

He felt her abruptly slip into unconsciousness after the last unintelligible mumble. With her head resting against his chest, he heard the quiet breaths of her sleeping. No matter how much she shook her, she showed no signs of waking anytime soon.

As he held the slumbering Claudia in his arms, Noah muttered in a puzzled voice.

"But...I have no idea where your house is..."

## **Chapter 2**

Evening slipped into night. In a room in an inn located on the outskirts of the forest, an older Claudia wore a loose nightgown and questioned Noah, who sat on the bed opposite hers.

"Do you know of the witch from five hundred years ago named Adelheid?"

"You mean...the legendary magician, right?"

Noah looked very tidy now, dressed in old clothes belonging to the innkeeper's children, after having washed off the dirt and blood in the inn's bathtub. His wet black hair had already dried as well, the ends curling softly. Seeing him like this, Claudia was once again struck by his harmonious exterior. Dress him up in finery and it would be easy to lead others to believe he came from nobility or royalty. Aside from the beastly glare in his black eyes and the dagger he gripped tightly, of course.

"They call her by different names: 'the Witch Who Changed the World' and 'the Origin of Modern Magic.' Everyone knows at least that much."

"Tee hee. Yes, thank you."

"I have bigger things on my mind, though." With the tip of the dagger pointed at her, he scowled ferociously up at her. "Who the hell are you?"

She tilted her head curiously in response. "How rude of you, Noah, to forget your savior so soon."

"I met a runt in the forest who was five years old, if that." Despite the exasperation on his face, he remained on guard. "It sure wasn't a grown-up like you."

"Hmmm..."

Claudia leaned out a bit from her bed and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall. A beautiful young girl around sixteen stared back at her. She possessed long, slender, well-proportioned limbs and mature features.

Her breasts were supple and ample, and her waist slim. However, her creamy beige-colored hair remained unchanged from her six-year-old form.

"The truth is, I actually wanted to fashion an appearance closer to twenty years old."

"What do you mean?"

"After sleeping long enough for my magic to recover a bit, I temporarily took on an adult form. You must have seen the transformation with your own eyes."

She had transformed a short while ago, right before they arrived in the village they now stayed in.

"No inn would rent rooms to two children, don't you think? And I certainly didn't expect you to carry me so far out of the woods either."

"What was I supposed to do? You fell asleep without telling me where exactly your 'home' is. That's your problem, you know. You never explain anything."

"Well, aren't I explaining things to you now?"

The bed creaked under her as she readjusted herself to sit on the edge of the bed. Opposite her, Noah lowered the dagger point the slightest bit.

"Wait. Don't tell me you're gonna say you're Adelheid?"

"Strictly speaking, I'm her reincarnation. My standing in this life is as a princess in this country, Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz. I am six years old."

His refusal to believe her was written all over his face. When she smiled cheerfully at him, he set aside the dagger, though his sullen expression didn't change.

"Oh my. Are you absolutely certain you want to do that, despite your face making it clear you don't want to believe me?"

"Not wanting to believe something and being unable to believe something are two completely different things. And I definitely don't wanna believe you, but..."

At that moment, he heard a small *pop* come from the vicinity of Claudia's chest.

Smoke puffed out around her, and when it cleared, she had reverted to her six-year-old body. She sat there on her bed looking as tiny and quiet as a mouse. Her feet didn't even reach the floor. The sight aggravated Noah, and he didn't conceal the sentiment.

"It's such a waste of magic to use it for stupid reasons like this," he said.

"I knew it. You have some understanding of magic, don't you?"

Claudia observed Noah thoughtfully. Extremely pure magical energy flowed inside him. The color of a person's eyes indicated the nature of their magic; even she had never before seen a remarkable jet black like his.

"If you're really the reincarnation...of the witch Adelheid..." Noah muttered quietly. His tone remained less hostile even after she returned to her child form, perhaps because he accepted that she was older than him, at least on the inside.

"Then that means you're actually an adult on the inside, right? Like the body you were just in?"

"Tee hee, cowwect. You can think of me as an older sister or something awong those lines."

"No way." He looked genuinely revolted by the thought. A beat later, he continued. "I wanna ask you another thing... Is there a new slave contract between you and me?"

"Not quite. The magic is that of an acowyte contract and it's much stronger."

"Acolyte..." the boy murmured as if he was reflecting on the meaning of the word. "For a while now, I've felt some kind of huge, powerful magic swirling inside me... Here."

Noah pressed his hand against the left side of his chest covered by the white shirt. "This is *your* magic, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Any acowyte of mine can use my magic."

When he did not reply, she continued.

"It might be unpleasant, but I want you to bear with it for a little longer. I'll undo it once I'm well again."

He affixed her with a serious gaze. "I'm fine like this."

Taken aback, Claudia stared blankly at him. "Why?"

"Being able to use your magic works out in my favor."

Her eyes narrowed. In light of what happened earlier that day, it was plain to see that Noah had his own circumstances to deal with. After all, why else would a child not even ten years old throw away his own life to escape such an outdated slave contract?

I do so hope his circumstances are interesting enough to warrant all this...

"If there's a price to pay, I'll pay it," Noah stated firmly, as if he had guessed the direction in which her thoughts traveled.

"Can you, though? Tell me...do you think you can afford my pwice?"

"I know I have some kind of value to you. That's why you let me live, right?"

"Well, well! Tee hee!"

Claudia tittered merrily, pleased by the entertaining turn of events. She sprung off her bed, took a few steps to stand in front of him, and stared raptly up at him from her diminutive height.

"In this life, I intend to do only the things I want to. Being my acowyte means accompanying me in such endeabors. So are you absowutewy sure about this?"

"Yes. I'll serve you."

"You might expewience even more terrible things in my service. Do you accept even then?"

"Yes. I'll serve you even then." Calm, Noah watched her with his jet-black eyes.

"I mean, you're the one who told me to choose how to live, right?"

No matter how I look at him...I can tell his eyes aren't those of a child living the life he wants...

She smiled her wicked witch's smile. "As you wish."

At any rate, the Claudia in this life was determined to do what she wanted

and only what she wanted.

"Then we'll hasten to my tower first thing tomowwo."

"So...what are we gonna do there?"

Still smiling, she recalled the face of the uncle who had pushed her to her death. "Spring cleaning."

"Cleaning?"

She nodded in response to Noah's perplexed expression. His eyes demanded an explanation and she closed her own, wondering where to start her tale.

"Let me tell you about 'Claudia.' She was expelled from the castle shortly after her birth by the king's official consort."

She hopped up onto Noah's bed and sat next to him.

"The woman who bore me, my mother, was a famous diva. She didn't possesh much magic, and she was lowborn too. Once he learned she was with child, my father intended to make her his mistwess, so he invited her to live in the castle with him."

"Well...that's a pretty common story, huh?"

"Indeed. Just like my mother dying immediatewy after giving birth to me." Claudia yawned, rubbed her eyes with her tiny hands, and continued.

"The queen wasn't opposed to my father taking a concoobine of noble birth. But it seems she couldn't forgib him for choosing my mother, who grew up destitute. So she secretly switched the crystal at my magic evaluation when I was a baby."

She flopped down on the bed and stared up at Noah. Back then, this was how she must have stared up at the queen's rouged lips from her not-so-soft cradle.

The woman had shouted abuse at the newborn Claudia. "This babe is lacking, in both magic *and* lineage suitable for the royal family! Look! Just look at how the evaluation crystal doesn't react at all!"

Claudia continued her explanation. "You see, though my father took a liking to my mother, he had no intewest whatsoeba in the child she bore. So I was

banished to a tower in a remote region and provided five maids loyal to the queen. They beat me when I cried, wefused to feed me, and often locked me away because they found my care tiresome..."

She had suffered other mistreatments as well. Frowning, Noah stared down at her as she rolled around on his bed.

"But you don't seem like someone who'd just sit back and take it."

"At the time, I didn't have Adelheid's memories. But I was in there, in the vewy depths of Claudia's consciousness, and I watched everything."

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that she hadn't awoken to the truth of her past self earlier, because it might have gone poorly otherwise. A baby's body would have been even more ineffectual than this one at manipulating magic, leaving her truly and utterly helpless. Having awareness but being unable to counterattack would have meant an endless series of agonizing days.

"Your eyes." He cupped her cheek with one hand then peered boldly down into her eyes. "The color looks completely different depending on the intensity and angle of light... Are these the same eyes Adelheid had then?"

It was said the color of a person's eyes indicated the nature of their magic. Those possessing fierce magic had red eyes. Those who had quietly brilliant magic had light blue eyes to match. So Noah's obsidian eyes must've indicated the deepest and blackest dark magic.

And Claudia's eyes were proof she could wield all styles of magic.

"Naturally, my eyes aren't a twick."

An ironic smile stretched his lips at her remark. "Looks like this country's royal family or whatever people call them have bad eyes, huh?"

"Tee hee."

Claudia had been exiled to the tower before her eyes even opened as a baby. She grew up there in confinement. Neither her wet nurse nor her maids ever once looked her in the face. As well, her overgrown fringe hid her eyes from the uncle who sometimes visited.

"My guardian is my uncle, who cwaims to be my mother's elder brother."

"Huh."

"Right befoh I met you, he pushed me out of the tower window. He thought that by kiwwing me he could have his own daughter, whose hair is the same color as mine, raised as Pwincess Claudia instead."

Noah lowered his lids to half-mast over his black eyes.

"What an idiot."

"I couldn't agwee more—but! Surpwisingly enough, his plan might work. So long as he dismisses all the maids, there will be no one aside fwom him who knows the true Claudia. Neither my father nor his wife have seen me either since banishing me..."

She ended with a yawn. As sleep attacked her in earnest now, she pulled the quilt over herself and snuggled under it.

"For the first time ever, an inspectuh from the castle is due to arrive tomorrow... And my uncle intends to present his daughter in my stead..."

"Then by 'spring cleaning' you mean getting rid of your uncle and the rest before this inspector or whoever shows up?"

"Tee hee..."

All she did was laugh in that strange way, but it was enough to make Noah shiver in fear.

"I'm vewy glad you're here to help."

"Why?"

"Because if you do the cleanup, the situation won't get out of hand. For you see, as I am now, I can't contwol my magic vewy well." Claudia smiled sleepily up at him. "It wouldn't do to kill them, hm?"

Noah frowned for a moment then exhaled sharply before speaking. "Agreed, I guess... Revenge is meaningless if they escape through death."

"Mm-hmm..."

She had wanted to give him a proper reply, but drowsiness won the battle, so that was all she could manage. She curled the quilt tightly around herself and

moved her head to the pillow.

"Then...tomorrow... Mrgh..."

"Hold it right there. You're not seriously planning on sleeping here?!"

"You can...sleep...there..."

"Except that bed is full of the clothes and accessories you created from magic... Hey! Wake up!"

Claudia clung to Noah, pretending not to hear him.

"I...order you... Let me...sleep...here..."

In any case, tomorrow was shaping up to be quite busy. Now was their chance to get a good night's rest and restore their energies.

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That day, Claudia's uncle, Hannes, had been buzzing about since morning. After rising from bed, he dressed and made himself look presentable, then set about giving the maids their orders while telling Claudia's personal attendants to take the day off. To make up for their absence on staff, he brought in maids from his own household.

Sitting in front of him now was a young girl with milk-tea-colored hair, but she most certainly wasn't his niece, Claudia.

"I still can't believe our luck in Claudia being magicless."

Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Hannes took a seat in one of the chairs in the private parlor.

"Though I must say I worried something fierce when I heard an inspector from the royal castle would be visiting. Thank the heavens, your hair is the same color as hers, Leonora."

"Father, you really mustn't say such rude things." The nine-year-old girl scolded him between nibbles on a confection. "I'm nothing like Claudia with her unkempt hair, her skinny, bruised frame, and her slovenly appearance. Also, for goodness' sake, please don't compare her atrocious mud-colored hair to my own lustrous locks. And I can't believe it took you this long to switch me for her!

As if we haven't been claiming all her worldly goods like her dresses, snacks, and jewels for our own this entire time."

Leonora tittered and peeked at her reflection in the hand mirror, her eyes narrowing with delight at what she saw. "Any way you look at it, I'm much more of a real princess than the likes of her."

"I couldn't agree more. That snow-white translucent skin and well-groomed tresses. If I told everyone you're the real princess, I very much doubt they would suspect otherwise."

Although the princess was as good as abandoned, the royal family nonetheless provided funds to raise Claudia in the name of maintaining their dignity. It might have been a pittance for them, but it had been a fortune for Hannes. He pocketed most of it, spending the funds lavishly on himself and his family. It had never even occurred to him to use it for something like this. In a twist of fate, however unintentionally, his actions turned out for the better. With all of Claudia's money that he'd poured into his daughter's upbringing, Leonara had grown into a girl worthy of being called a princess.

Good grief... Hannes thought. I'm still feeling the residual panic had the inspector seen Claudia, emaciated, scarred, and mute. As her foster parent, I most certainly wouldn't have escaped punishment for her state. It truly was a stroke of genius on my part to come up with the idea to kill her and replace her with Leonora.

Hannes hadn't told his daughter he'd killed the real Claudia. Telling her the truth was out of the question. Still, she'd been thrilled when he informed her that she would become a princess, and she had enthusiastically taken to the proxy plan. He was tremendously pleased that the girl had grown up to be such a filial child.

"Honestly, I was so relieved to hear she ran away! We saw each other sometimes, but no matter how hard I hit or pinched her, the girl would never say anything. She was just like a doll."

"Ha ha ha. Just remember, though, Leonora, none of your naughtiness while the inspector is here. You must be well-behaved, understood? If he sees that 'Claudia' has been raised as the epitome of a noble daughter, the royal family will trust me and I can finagle more money from them. Meaning you as the 'princess' will be able to indulge in every possible luxury."

"Wonderful! Tee hee hee. I can't wait! Father, isn't it about time for the inspector to arrive?"

Leonora hopped down from her chair and Hannes held her hand as he stood up from his.

"Right you are, my dear. Let's be off, then..."

For whatever reason, he felt a sudden urge to look out the window. As he stared through it, he remembered the moment yesterday when he had pushed Claudia. From the window on the twenty-second floor with nowhere to land except the forest spread out below. The forest nested with monsters, from which one couldn't return alive without using warding magic against said creatures. There was no need to even search for her corpse; the carnivorous monsters should have taken care of the evidence. However, to avoid arousing suspicion, he hadn't yet gone out there to check.

This unease must just be nerves about whether or not we can successfully deceive the inspector.

Yet no matter how much Hannes tried to convince himself, the sense of foreboding refused to dissipate. It lingered, which was why he had spent a huge sum of money yesterday hiring several talented conjurers.

I know very well that was a waste of money. There's no chance at all a sixyear-old child without magic would have survived a fall from that height. And yet...

He couldn't forget Claudia's expression from the moment he pushed her out of the window. It kept him restless.

Why did she smile then?

"Father?"

He forced himself to smile down at his daughter, who looked curiously up at him. "It's nothing. Are you ready to do your duty, *Claudia*?"

Accompanied by his daughter, he headed to the drawing room reserved to

entertain visitors. Despite shuttling back and forth to this tower for six years, it was his first time using this particular space. Princess Claudia, banished because of the queen's jealousy, had never even been visited by her own father, much less any others. She was the only one who'd lived in the tower.

Already in the drawing room, the waiting guests stood up politely when Hannes and Leonora entered.

"Oh my. The silver-haired gentleman in the center is so very handsome...!" Leonora whispered, excited. Her eyes were locked on a tall man who stood in the middle of the five individuals.

Hannes agreed with his daughter's assessment. The man was immediately captivating. His silver hair was gathered into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, and his red eyes shone a deep crimson. He gave Hannes a single cold glance before genuflecting in front of Leonora.

"A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Princess Claudia. My name is Karlheinz Reinard Exner, and I was appointed as the chief conjurer of the royal castle."

Did he just call himself the chief conjurer?

He looked to be in his midtwenties, late twenties at the most. However, despite his youthful appearance, he claimed to be the new chief conjurer in the royal castle, where only the foremost conjurers gathered in the first place. That in itself was surprising, but the stronger emotion welling inside Hannes was an unpleasant fear.

I thought the inspector's visit was supposed to be a token one, simply a matter of form? So why in the world would the chief conjurer deliberately come to see Claudia of all people...?

"It's my pleasure, Master Karlheinz." Cheeks pink, Leonora caught the hem of her dress and curtsied prettily at him before continuing. "I'm Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz and I'm delighted to meet you."

"Allow me to get straight to the crux." Karlheinz stood up and waved his hand in some sort of unspoken command to the magicians behind him. "I trust you already know the purpose of this inspection, Lord Hannes?"

"I-I'm not sure what you mean..."

"Well, now. Are you saying, then, despite being the princess's legal guardian, you aren't aware of our country's tense relations with our neighbor?"

Hannes flinched under the man's icy gaze, but he also felt anger rising at the same time. After all, as the princess's uncle, he shouldn't be subject to such comments by someone so much younger than himself. Karlheinz, however, seemed entirely unconcerned by this breach in propriety.

"Those possessing powerful magic serve as deterrents to this nation's neighbors. Every member of the royal family is currently undergoing a reevaluation of their magics, which is why we hurried here."

"I-In that case..." While Hannes silently admonished himself to calm down, he cleared his throat before replying. "By birth, Princess Claudia's lot in life is to be without magic. It's my understanding that the queen herself was present at the child's magic evaluation and confirmed this truth, yes?"

"Indeed. Her Majesty was there. Alone. However...I find it incredibly difficult to consider the possibility that His Majesty's child possesses not even an iota of magic, you see."

Rancid sweat began beading on his skin. Magic flowed mostly inside those of a high station. As an orphan, Hannes lacked magic, and so did his daughter.

"B-Be that as it may, I'm her uncle, and I can affirm she truly doesn't have magic..."

"Is that right?" Karlheinz's red eyes stared down at Leonora in boredom.

"Regardless, the point we need to investigate is whether or not Princess Claudia truly is His Majesty's child."

"Wh-Wha ... ?!"

Hannes feigned anger to drown out the sudden agitation caused by the other man's words.

"I-I don't care what your position is, but I will not stand for your rudeness! Doubting my younger sister's fidelity is tantamount to committing lèse-majesté against our king himself!" "How can you be so cruel, sir?! I am the real princess!"

Leonora covered her face with her hands and pretended to start crying. Hannes pulled her into his arms and played the part of a caring father comforting his daughter.

To hell and be damned, this isn't turning out how I planned. My only option now is to worsen the situation and drive them out, leaving things unsettled!

He pushed Leonora behind him protectively and glared at Karlheinz.

"It aggrieves me to say that Her Highness is terribly wounded. I ask that you take your leave—"

A boom cut him off as a massive tremor shook the tower's foundation.

"Wh-What is happening...?!"

"We have a problem, Master Hannes!"

One of the mercenary conjurers he'd hired yesterday had come running in. Clad in a black robe, he made his report quickly even as he smoothed out his expression.

"It's the barrier, the one designed to keep out monsters. Somebody broke through it!"

"What?!"

A barrier was always erected around this tower in order not to draw the attention of the monsters in the forest. "Do not permit the uninvited inside." A classic but powerful magic, this was essentially how it functioned. As long as the barrier stood, it wouldn't allow anyone, monster or human, inside who hadn't been invited by tower residents.

"Are you telling me someone destroyed the barrier from the outside?! The same barrier designed by the royal conjurers, the one that will hold even if a dragon tries to prize it open?"

While Hannes panicked, Karlheinz commanded his subordinates.

"All of you, prepare for an enemy attack."

"Yes, sir!"

Then the tower shook again, like some mighty power had struck it. The table jumped, cups crashed to the floor, and decorative ornaments fell tragically, shattering on impact. It was neither the time nor the place for an inspection anymore.

"We're heading into battle. Come."

"Eeek! Father, I'm scared! Save me!"

"You dolt! I'm your uncle!"

Even as he hurriedly pulled Leonora close, Hannes tracked Karlheinz and his men's departing figures with his gaze. Then the doors to the drawing room flew wide open.

"Nooo!"

Startled by the loud noise, Leonora clung more tightly to him. Hannes, too, sucked in a shocked breath at the sight of the person standing on the other side.

Is that...a child...?!

A young, raven-haired boy stood there. Though he had a handsome face, his eyes were defiant, and an arrogant aura cloaked him. After staring at Leonora with his obsidian eyes, he turned his gaze to Hannes. He said nothing.

Ngh...

The boy's stare was cold and contemptuous. Hannes didn't deserve to be looked at in such a way by some child who appeared out of nowhere. So he tried to rebuke him, but found himself unable to speak properly.

"Ah...?"

His body trembled. His knees shook so badly, he was on the verge of disgracing himself by collapsing to the floor. A few seconds later, he finally realized why he felt like this. It was that boy's relentless glare. Hannes instinctively felt the fear in the pit of his stomach.

Don't tell me this whelp was the one who broke the barrier? Wait...he's holding some kind of blade in his right hand...

The boy suddenly exhaled sharply before focusing his eyes on Karlheinz next. Seeing this, Hannes somehow managed to wring words from his throat.

"M-Master Conjurer! This child is an intruder! I have no inkling of his identity, but you must seize him immediately..."

However, Karlheinz didn't take a single step in his direction. In the meantime, the blade disappeared from the boy's hand. He moved next to the door and knelt respectfully, then gestured to make way for someone before taking the hand of that someone.

"Wha ...?"

Hannes was at a loss for words.

With her hand in the boy's, the child looked both familiar and unfamiliar to Hannes as she stepped regally through the threshold like a highborn daughter of nobility.

"No. It can't be..."

Soft light-brown hair, the color of black tea blended with milk. A heavily frilled dress emphasized the daintiness of her slender, doll-like limbs. Though her pale complexion seemed a bit unhealthy, it also exuded a strangely mystical aura.

A beauty exactly like her mother's. The eyes turned on him glittered with a thousand hues just like an opal.

"I'm dewighted to see my timing couldn't have been more perfect." The young girl smiled brilliantly and spoke with a slight lisp. "Hello, my dear, foowish uncle."

"Claudia...?!"

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Still holding Noah's hand, the beaming Claudia stared up at her uncle. The man in question, who had only a moment earlier called her by her name, frantically covered his mouth when he realized his error. A greasy film of sweat covered his face and turmoil swam in his eyes. He was the picture of confusion.

A very nice expression, but...it isn't nearly enough.

Next, she looked at the magicians standing a few meters in front of him. Each and every one seemed quite capable. However, only one of them captured her attention—the man with the red eyes and silver ponytail.

Is that man Karlheinz, the chief conjurer?

She had been listening to his conversation with her uncle via magic from outside the tower.

An attractive man blessed with a great deal of magic. And yet...

When Claudia bestowed her smile upon him, the silver-haired man's eyes widened just the slightest bit. This exchange had her uncle exclaiming in a taut tone.

"Um... Sh-She's a fake! No, an intruder! Intruders in the princess's tower! What do you think I paid you louts for?! Hurry up and eliminate those brats!"

Her uncle furiously urged a man wearing a black robe, somebody he must have employed. The wariness in the mercenary's gaze as he stared at the two of them revealed he wasn't letting his guard down even though his opponents were children. Why? Because he had seen with his own eyes how Noah had defeated his comrades and broken the barrier.

The mercenary started reciting an incantation, his voice laden with caution. "Thunder, I call upon thee. Shatter the chaos, tear the sky apart."

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"Well, Noah? Can you do it?"
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"Yes."

He answered her casually, producing an ice blade in his right hand. Claudia had taught him this magic a short while before, and he had taken to it easily, like a duck to water. He charged directly at the mercenary conjurer.

"With your power emerging from a moment in time, repel mine—"

"Too slow."

The man's face twisted in surprise when Noah closed the distance between them in a single lunge. Still, he managed to squeeze out the final word.

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"Ngh! Enemies!"
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A thunderbolt burst from the mercenary's palm. Noah cut down the attacking flash of white light with his blade. Expression unchanging, he moved nimbly, keeping his body low while dodging the man's attacks.

Then he chanted a spell so low under his breath, the words were difficult to make out.

"Eeep!" Leonora shrieked as something resembling an ice wave surged toward the mercenary. Hannes pulled his daughter into his arms, shielding her. Claudia cared not for them anymore.

Ice magic.

She stared intently at Noah's back as he moved farther and farther away from her.

That's not all, though. Is he enhancing himself too? she wondered. He's siphoning off my magic alongside his own.

Mixing one's magic with another's was a surprisingly difficult thing to do, yet Noah mastered it effortlessly. As far as Claudia could tell, it came to him naturally.

He's more talented than I thought... Actually, this is a possibility I never even imagined.

An exhilarating feeling began budding in her chest.

Tremendous power, purity, and precision...! Though unpolished, this diamond in the rough might prove to surpass even my greatest disciples!

Having dodged all the lightning attacks, Noah kicked the floor and leaped into the air. Then he swung his blade straight at the conjurer.

"Gah...!!!"

The man let out a short scream before collapsing, unconscious. Hannes ran to him, clinging to him desperately, shaking him with all his might.

"This isn't funny! Wake up, damn it, wake up! Do you have any idea how much I spent on you lot...?! Where the hell are the others?!"

"Noah took care of all of them," Claudia said with an amused giggle.

In response, her uncle shouted at Karlheinz, hatred in his expression. "Chief Conjurer! What are you doing?! Hurry up and protect the princess... Whoa!"

A hot wind suddenly rose and flames covered the floor. Karlheinz, the source of both these occurrences, sighed quietly before studying Claudia with a composed gaze.

As if I'll be led astray by the calmness in those eyes.

For the color of his crimson eyes indicated their owner possessed fierce reserves of magic.

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"Noah."
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"I know."

He made the ice blade disappear and raised his right palm at Karlheinz.

How very dependable.

She had taught him an ice magic spell beforehand, and it was perfect for this occasion. With this thought running through her mind, Claudia held her temporary servant's hand. Then both sides chanted their respective incantations.

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"Scorching heat, devour."
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"Freeze."

A single glance made clear the victor. Despite generating flames, Karlheinz hadn't been serious with his magic. The proof being the fact that Noah's ice magic swallowed his flames disappointingly fast.

"Eeeeeek!"

A column of steam rose with a hiss alongside Leonora's scream. The raging flames scorched the ice, but in the end, they vanished. The ice crackled as it swept over the carpet of flames blanketing the floor. The drawing room was covered in clear ice.

Claudia released Noah's hand and walked over to Karlheinz, her shoes clacking with every step.

"I am Princess Claudia," she said after a short pause. She smiled brilliantly up

at the conjurer, who had known since the beginning. "What bizness do you have with me, sir?"

Karlheinz cast his eyes down at her, then knelt on the ice. Head bowed deeply, he said, "Please accept my sincerest apologies for the grave discourtesy...Your Highness."



"Wha— N-No! Who are you addressing?! That brat isn't Claudia...!" Hannes shouted. Even now, he was stubbornly sticking to his farce.

Claudia leisurely turned her attention to him. "That's what you would like to be twue, isn't it, Uncle?"

He flinched.

"Because you know the twuth about what the real Claudia has suffered in her life here."

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"L-Lies...!"
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Karlheinz slowly raised his eyes and stared coldly at her uncle. His nervous gulp practically echoed loudly throughout the room.

"Uncle, riddle me this. Under normal shircahmstances, a six-year-old child who can't use magic would die if pushed out of a window, yes?"

"S-Stop it... What the hell are you saying?! I-I... That wasn't my intention..."

"I didn't hear you." Claudia gazed quietly at him, who stared back at her with a bewildered expression. "I said, I didn't hear you say, 'I'm sorry.'"

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"Ngh...!"
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He could only make that strangled sound in response, and it shamed him to do so in front of his daughter, but Claudia didn't care a whit about a parent's dignity.

"You must apowogize after doing something bad. After all, you're an adult, Uncle, and adults should behave accondingwy, don't you think?"

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"I-I'm s-sor..."
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"Yes, yes, you're doing well, uncle! Almost there! With that said...I'll forgive you and you can forgive me as well after I apowogize too, hm?" Claudia tucked her milk-tea-colored hair behind her ear and smiled. "You might be wondering for what, yes? Why...for pushing *you* out the window. I shall start pwacticing now in order to become adept at it."

Despair suffused her uncle's face. Sitting helplessly on the floor, he evidently realized there was no escape for him.

Claudia stared up at Karlheinz. "Sir, will you ask my uncle what happened to all the money my father sent for me?"

"As you wish. I'll make arrangements for the appropriate punishment once our investigation is complete."

"Excewwent. Make sure you look into not just the items in his home, but also in his mistwess's. I suggest you survey *everything*."

Leonora stared aghast at her father. "M-Mistress...?! Father, what in the world does she mean?!"

"I-It's not what you think! No, she's lying, Leonora! Oh, God, please, please don't look at me like that...!!!"

Claudia covered both of her ears with her hands when her cousin started screeching.

Stripped of the wealth he's accumulated thus far. The trust in him, forfeited. Abandoned by both his family and mistress, disdained by his daughter and vilified by his wife, imprisoned in a cell of despair... Quite a lenient comeuppance if I do say so myself, but I suppose it'll do.

At any rate, she had enjoyed the spectacle on this occasion.

"Noah."

The royal conjurers set to work restraining her uncle. Claudia took this as her opportunity to walk as briskly as her small feet would carry her to her male servant. Unfazed by the commotion, he stood alone in a corner of the room, scrutinizing his palm.

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"Are you hurt?"
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"No."

"Lubbly. You're a vewy good boy, you know. Well done."

"I only did what you told me to. It was nothing special."

So he said, but what Noah did was extraordinary. The boy himself understood this. His black eyes clashed with hers.

A dark smile spread on his face. "I think...I can do anything as long as I have

your magic."

"Tee hee." Claudia giggled, joy unfurling inside her. How thrilling! She just might have discovered something more fascinating than expected. As the thought tumbled through her mind, someone called out to her from behind.

"Begging your pardon."

She turned around and stared at Karlheinz in thoughtful silence for several moments.

What to do, what to do.

"Your Highness?"

Frankly speaking, the situation had taken an aggravating turn.

Dealing with this man seems like it will be quite troublesome...

Having made her decision, she suddenly clung tightly to Noah.

"Waaah, Nooooah," Claudia whimpered while hugging him.

"Hey. Stop it."

"This man's face is shooo scawy. Take me somewhere safe. Waaah. Waaah."

"Hey. Princess."

An exasperated voice came from above her head. "No one here's going to believe that crying act," Noah said.

She abruptly stopped wailing then.

"Especially since you stood there so calmly surrounded by flames. After that, who would actually believe *you* crying because a man's face is scary?"

"Hmph."

Chastised, she pulled her face away from Noah and pouted mulishly. The boy looked a bit surprised as he stared down at her eyes. However, she paid him no mind when she spoke again.

"You don't know that for certain. His face could vewy well be scawier than fire."

"Not a chance. Sure, it's a little scary, but not that scary."

"It's not good to base your thinking on your own standards, you know. You must broaden your perspectives, or you'll only limit yourself."

"From anyone's perspective, you'd be a terrible actress."

"Pishposh!"

"Your Highness. Might I have a word?"

She wanted to say no, but it was clear that Karlheinz with the simultaneously handsome and frightening face had no intention of letting Claudia get away. She mulled over which choice would be less annoying, then turned around once more in resignation.

Expression serious, he bowed his head to her.

"My name is Karlheinz Reinard Exner, and I was appointed by His Majesty himself to the seat of chief conjurer in the royal palace. While I'm pleased to see you safe, do allow me to express my deepest sympathies for the painful days you surely must have endured until now."

"Master Karlheinz, you're the first guest to come cawwing in my tower, so I'm dewighted to have you here."

When he raised his head, he found Claudia smiling cheerfully at him. "Such wonderful golden eyes you have, Your Highness."

Noah said nothing, because he knew her eyes possessed every shade of the rainbow. However, at the moment, she was using magic to tamper with the color, which showed as a clear golden hue. This was why he'd been surprised moments earlier.

"And tell me, who is this boy? If I evaluated him, I'm certain his magical values would be off the charts."

"Noah is my serbant. That show of strength... Don't you think he's mawbewous?"

"Ah, so he's a servant. This is the first I'm hearing of it, though..."

"I cannot tell you more than that, as the rest is still a secwet."

The way she continued smiling at him as she spoke made Karlheinz narrow his

eyes, a searching look in them.

"Commander Karlheinz, guards from the royal castle will be arriving here shortly."

"Right, then, handle Hannes Leister's transfer. You can take his daughter or whoever she is with him. As for you, Your Highness...I'd like to speak to you privately elsewhere."

"My apowogies, Master Karlheinz," Claudia replied while holding Noah's arm tightly. "It's awmost nap time for me."

The chief conjurer's eyes widened at this remark.

"Nap...time?"

A redheaded conjurer who'd assisted in transporting her uncle was ready to advise him. "Commander, are you not aware?! Children this young can't stay awake for extended periods of time."

"R-Really ...?"

"Yes, really! If they aren't put down for a nap around this time, they'll doze off in the evening and then be unable to fall asleep properly at night. I think Her Highness's nap time is a vital item on our agenda here."

Precisely. Your support is much appreciated, Mr. Conjurer.

Karlheinz looked a bit perturbed by his subordinate's explanation as he stared at Claudia. "Then, Your Highness, please indulge in this 'nap time' activity of yours. If you could provide an estimate of when you'll awaken..."

"Awight, Noah, let's go. Good night, everyone."

She grabbed his hand and started walking stridently. Noah obviously wanted to say something, but he decided not to and obediently followed her. They descended the stairs on their trip to a certain room. Inside, Claudia sat down on a plush, comfortable sofa and gave a big yawn. Noah surveyed the room's interior and squinted as if it were too bright.

"What the heck is wrong with this room? All these sparkles are in really bad taste."

"It was prepared for my uncle's exclusive use, even though he seldom visited the tower and even then, he only stayed for a few hours."

The chandelier was unnecessarily large, the carpet was an eye-wateringly gaudy color, and there were simply just too many useless things inside. She'd had no other choice, however.

"My room, well, if you can even call it that, is more like a jail..."

"What?"

"It was originally a storage room. Sleeping in there would ruin my dress... Ahhh."

She ended with another yawn then flopped down on the sofa with a soft thump. Standing next to Claudia, Noah stooped down to get a closer look at her.

"You helped me when my ice magic collided with that man's flames. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Oh my. You wealized, hm?"

Evidently, not only was his ability to use magic high, but so was his sensitivity to it. An indispensable trait for a first-class magician.

"What happens when I use magic while borrowing yours? Are you the one who suffers the recoil?"

"Hmmm... Yes, but the effects aren't as strong as when I use magic directly..."

Be that as it may, there was a recoil and she was sleepy. Today, Claudia had brought herself and Noah all the way to the tower by teleporting them, and then she'd had him defeat four conjurers. After that, she destroyed the barrier, used transfer magic again, and moved them to the floor her uncle and the others had been on. After that, she gave her magic to Noah, took down her uncle's last hired mercenary, and faced off in a battle against Karlheinz.

That was the "only" magic she had used, but there was no doubt it had been too much for her six-year-old body to bear. If it hadn't been for Noah acting as a conduit, she wouldn't have been able to control her magical output, possibly leading to destroying the tower itself and rendering herself unconscious in the

process.

"Can I still receive your magic even if we're far apart?" he asked.

"Yes, not a problem at all... Since we...have a soul contract..."

Claudia stretched out a small hand and patted Noah on the head.

"It seems my magic has taken a liking to yours. Even taking that into account, you were able to use it surpwisingly well. You're a good boy, Noah. Vewy good, indeed."

"Bah."

Perhaps he didn't like being praised as if he were a small child? Looking disgruntled, he frowned and pushed her hand away.

"That Karlheinz man... How much are you going to tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"For example, are you going to tell him you're Adelheid's reincarnation? Or how crazy powerful your magic is? That's what I mean."

"I don't pwan on telling him anything of the sort."

Because any way she thought about it, revealing the truth was only bound to cause trouble.

"But I must make sure to explain your pwesence properly... A good reason for you to stay by a pwincess's side forever... I'll have to think of a conbincing lie."

This had been much simpler in her old life as Adelheid. All she had to do was say she was taking a disciple, and that sufficed. Unfortunately, she had reached the limit of her drowsiness.

"In any case, you have nothing to worry about."

Noah said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"Because this is my...wesponsibility as...your mistwess..."

Her soft, even breaths indicated she had fallen asleep, which explained why she didn't hear Noah's mutter.

"Not like I even need you to look out for me."

Several hours passed. the tower.	Claudia w	oke up after	Noah had al	ready vanish	ed from

## **Chapter 3**

For some reason, her body felt extremely heavy. Claudia struggled to sit up with this thought flashing through her mind. She found many blankets layered on top of her. Despite autumn soon coming to a close, the lumpy heap would certainly prevent her from catching a cold. As of now, there was only one person in the entire world who would cover her sleeping form with a blanket.

"Noah?"

Though she called his name, no response came. Of course, she'd expected that because she couldn't feel the presence of his magic inside the room.

Well, this happened faster than I anticipated.

She'd been certain he would eventually run away. That moment just so happened to be now, she realized as a matter of fact.

When she hopped out of bed with a grunt and stood on the floor, flower petals drifted softly down.

Evidently, someone had decorated her hair with flowers while she slept. They seemed to have been plucked from the vases arranged around the room. The white blooms were incredibly small and held a faintly sweet scent.

Blankets and flowers... My very first gifts, hm?

She gently pulled a flower clinging to the side of her head and held it up to the light filtering in through the window, staring at the blossom. Then she cast several spells.

\*

Once upon a time, in a country situated on the southern end of the continent, there lived a crown prince with scant stores of magic. Although he had been born to a mother and father possessing powerful magics, his magical abilities were on par with commoners. Thus, he took out his anger and humiliation on his younger half brother, the second prince.

The second prince's mother was a woman of common birth. Nevertheless, he inherited all of his father's talents and became an unparalleled master of magic. The crown prince tormented him relentlessly.

"In the end, you were born of a lowly woman. Blood tells all! It matters not how much you surpass me, for I will always be above you."

"I care not if you die. Because I will become this country's king!"

The second prince was nearly murdered many times, wandering the planes between life and death on each occasion. When their father, the king, passed, the crown prince ascended to the throne, and his treatment of his younger brother became even crueler. The second prince finally swore vengeance on his half brother, who was overjoyed by the recent birth of his second child.

"Stop it! How dare a by-blow like you bare your fangs at me?! Ngh...
Nooooo!!!"

He didn't hesitate to kill his elder brother and his wife; he knew his pain would end with the man's death.

But it was a mistake made in the heat of the moment. In truth, he wanted to let his brother live longer and make him suffer even more. Thus, having become king, he began instead to exact his vengeance on the children of the man he despised—his nephew and niece.

His niece, only recently born, he kept confined close at hand. And his nephew, just four years old at the time, he threatened into a magical slave contract with the words, "If you wish to protect your sister, you'll do everything I say."

\*

"Nh... Haah..."

The boy given the name of "Noah" exhaled quietly. Because he'd been running until now, his heart beat hard, the drumming loud in his ears. He was out of breath, sweat ran in rivulets down his body, and he could taste blood in the back of his throat. He sank down in the shade of a pillar and panted repeatedly, trying to catch his breath.

I finally made it this far, but...

He heard frantic footsteps in the corridor beside him.

"Find him! Find him now! His Majesty has ordered us to seize and drag out former prince Leonhard by any means necessary!"

"If the people learn that the former king's son lives, His Majesty's authority will be called into question! We'll devote all our energy to rooting out Leonhard!"

The magicians were searching for him. Though he had been born and raised in this castle, it had always been enemy territory to him.

Calm down.

He hung his head as low as it would go and forced himself to think.

I broke through all the barriers. That man is in the throne room just up ahead.

Claudia, the little girl who claimed to be the reincarnation of the witch Adelheid, had taught him how. Not only that but also the transfer magic he'd used to come all the way here. While helping her with her "cleaning," Noah had studied the method thoroughly and acquired it as part of his own repertoire.

As long as I have her magic, it should be easy enough to break through, but...

He pressed his hand over the left side of his chest, grabbing a fistful of his shirt. Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet. He wrapped his fingers tightly around the hilt of the ice blade, which had been leaning against the pillar.

He thought back on their conversation from this morning.

"You see, your magic speciawizes in attack," she'd said. "The attack power in your magic is of the highest gwade. In exchange, though, this makes it difficult for you to actibate it instantaneously or adapt it easily for diffewent situations."

"Then how can I make up for that?" he'd replied.

"It's simple. Why not keep your magic actibated at all times during battle, so there's no need to adapt it? For example, you could create a sword with magic and use that to fight." The little girl giggled then. "But this appwies to situations where you're using only your own magic."

"Meaning, when I'm using yours..."

"Cowwect. You'll have no such weakness. You'll be able to generate magic instantly, fwexibly, and powerfully."

The reality was that the fight in Claudia's tower had been easy. Noah's blade wrenched the barrier open, and her magic extended the fissure. He repelled the magicians' magic with his weapon and crushed the flames with his ice magic. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't elated by the magic given to him.

You selfish git... Even though she saved your life, you pretended to obey her while ultimately betraying her by running away.

He had desperately needed Claudia's magic to rip this castle's barrier apart. However, as her acolyte, when he used magic, the recoil returned to her, so since entering the castle, he'd used only his own magic until arriving at the topmost floor. But he knew the magic he'd used in the beginning to teleport himself to the grounds and break through the barrier had to have been placing a burden on Claudia, whom he'd left behind in the tower.

I can't use any more of her magic.

Noah slowly opened his eyes and charged toward the throne room. He had a blueprint of the place in his mind. After all, this was the same castle which had been his home for the first four years of his life.

"I see him! That black-haired child is without a doubt Prince Leonhard!"

"Be careful! He's already taken down more than ten first-class conjurers! Use binding magi— Gaaah!!!"

He mowed down the magicians with his sword and ran down the corridor, keeping his body low. A ropelike light stretched toward him from behind and coiled around his right ankle.

"Ngh...!"

A grinding noise. He slashed with his ice blade, twisted his body, and quickly regained his balance.

I'm almost there...!

At the end of the corridor, Noah could see the imposing doors of the throne room. Unlike before, he wasn't using magic to physically enhance himself. Every

time he moved recklessly now, he felt pain throbbing all over his body.

Only a few more steps until he reached it.

And then, at that moment, something exploded on the other side of the doors.

"Ngh!"

A hot wind, like a shock wave, rushed past with a violent sound. The only reason his skin wasn't charred was because he'd immediately thrown up a protective barrier. In fact, the conjurers behind Noah screamed as they clutched their faces and arms.

"So, you were still alive, Leonhard."

The man who appeared was the one who'd enslaved his half brother's son and treated him as worse than a mongrel. Unlike Noah and his father, he had golden hair. But like Noah, his irises were jet black. The man, this country's current king, looked down on Noah as flames whirled around his hand.

Noah gripped his transparent blade tightly and glared at him.

"You will give me back my little sister."

"Ohhh, is that right?" The current king smirked, stroking his beard. "Don't tell me you don't know what happened to Anna?"

Noah remained silent.

"No, of course not. It's precisely because you *do* understand that you destroyed your kennel and escaped, eh?"

He chuckled deep in his throat and narrowed his eyes.

"How unfortunate, Leonhard. If you had only resembled my brother more, my pleasure in your pain would have been beyond compare! But as luck would have it, you take after your mother. Ahhh, I told you countless times, didn't I? I yearned for her for as long as I remember. And because of my love for her, I unconsciously treated you more leniently than I should have when I forced the burden of my revenge against your father on *your* shoulders."

In all the years of abuse he suffered at this man's hands, Noah didn't have a

single memory of his so-called leniency. But he didn't care at all about the things that had happened to him.

"Give her back to me."

Noah repeated himself slowly yet firmly. Even then, the current king only sniggered, the smirk never leaving his face.

"You know, I just had a brilliant idea. Let's celebrate your return by burning your face. That way, I can torment you to my heart's content! So, what say you?" The flames wrapped around his right hand swelled at a leisurely rate. "An ingenious idea, don't you think...?!"

And then the flames attacked while spewing black smoke. Calmly, carefully, precisely, Noah determined the current. Holding his ice blade straight in front of him, he swung it down in a wide arc.

"Guh...!!!"

He split the flow of flames into two and they rushed by on either side of him. The resulting pressure almost sent his sword flying, but he braced himself by calling upon every iota of strength in his body. It felt less like a stream of flames and more like a colossal river of water rising against him.

"Ha ha ha! Considering your tremendous magical capacity, it's almost hard to believe you're my brother's child! Yet your power is incomplete, inexperienced, and above all, inadequate!"

Noah erected a barrier in front of him at the same time his ice blade shattered, but he couldn't protect himself completely. In exchange for escaping the treacherous heat of the flames, his body flew backward and he slammed into the floor on his back.

The shock to his lungs made it difficult to breathe properly. Even as he coughed violently, he righted himself immediately and regained his balance. He generated his ice blade once more, gripping it tightly, but he knew it wasn't enough to reach that man.

Don't retreat... Don't lose to him. No matter what happens.

"Give it up. For you see, it's your fate to atone for the sins your father committed against me!" The current king looked genuinely thrilled as he stared down at Noah. "You will take his place and live the rest of your life as my plaything."

Noah simply glared at the man. "I choose the way I live."

"What did you say?" His eyes slitted sharply at the boy's words.

"That's what my savior told me to do. Which is why...even if I die here, I will take back my sister's remains from you."

"Bah!" The current king clicked his tongue in a vulgar manner even as he produced flames again. "To think you actually returned even knowing Anna is dead! Foolish boy..."

"I couldn't protect her while she was alive, so did you really think I'd let her be alone in death?"

But Noah knew his wish would never be granted. Because he had long since realized the huge gulf in power between him and the terrible man before him. He might have won by using Claudia's magic, but from the start, he'd had no intention of doing that.

I made it this far by betraying Claudia and borrowing her power without permission.

He breathed in deeply and tightened his grip on the sword hilt.

I won't add to her burden any more than I already have.

"Always... Always you watch me with those eyes full of loathing even with chains wound around your neck."

Everything would end with the next attack.

"I've decided. Burning your face won't be nearly enough to satisfy me. I'll seize you once more and this time, I'll burn those eyes too!"

"Ngh!!!"

In the moment he steeled his resolve when the flames roared at him—

"What an absurdly foolish thought."

—milk-tea-colored hair rippled sinuously right next to him.

"Wha..."

Though delicate, the hand she rested on Noah's right shoulder was the size of an adult's. He looked up to find a beautiful young lady around sixteen years old standing there with a brilliant smile on her face.

"I suppose it makes sense that an idiot can't understand the beauty of this child's obsidian eyes."

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"No way..."
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"Isn't that right, Noah?"

He couldn't believe it. But without a doubt, the little girl he had betrayed and left behind was right there. "Why are you here?"

"Tee hee." The adult Claudia thrust her palm directly at the raging flames. "Erase."

Instantly, a tremendous sound like a thunderclap reverberated in the room and she blasted the flames away.

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Why...? Why is Claudia here...?
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When Noah realized he was about to say her name, he willed himself to keep his mouth shut. She seemed to pick up on it, because she praised him with a "Good boy" and a smile.

Meanwhile, his uncle shouted angrily at her, blindsided by her sudden appearance. "Who the hell are you?!"

"Who am I?" Claudia smoothed her wind-ruffled hair down, combing it with her fingers before she answered calmly, "Why, Adelheid, of course."

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"What ...?"
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Staring up at her, Noah saw her eyes glitter in a variety of hues. Those eyes studded with the colors of every jewel in the world, as if scattered with their shards. There was no one in this world who didn't know what those eyes meant.

"Adelheid? Don't make me laugh." A twisted smile curled his uncle's lips as he brushed his fringe up. "The legendary witch who lived five centuries ago! The same one who committed suicide one day despite being showered by the people's adulation. You would proclaim to be *her*?"

"Suicide, hm?" Noah gasped quietly. He never could have imagined Claudia doing such a thing.

But she didn't refute his uncle's statement. In fact, she simply ignored him and gazed down at Noah. "Oh, look at the awful state of you. Goodness, my heart positively breaks."

He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd sworn at him or reprimanded him harshly. He would have even accepted death from her right here as his just punishment. Instead, as Noah looked up at her, prepared for the worst, he heard something entirely unexpected.

"I have come for you, my servant."

"What...are you even saying?"

The smile she bestowed upon him only exacerbated his deep confusion. Didn't this basically mean she forgave him?

"I refuse to believe you don't realize what I did. I *betrayed* you, used *your* magic—!"

Claudia held her index finger over his lips.



"And? What of it?"

Her right hand remained in the air, facing his uncle. She had apparently created a clear barrier through magic and protected him from the man's own.

"You definitely need to be punished, though. If you wanted something, you should have simply come to me. How dare you go to him instead? I'm disappointed in you, you know."

"There was no way I could have told you."

"Oh, dear. Whyever not?"

"Because he's the current king of this country. He rules Lemilsia."

And despite her exile, Claudia was, for all intents and purposes, a princess of Avianoia. So an attack on the king of a major power by a princess of *another* major power no less would only create a major *problem* between the two nations.

"I can't burden you any more than I already have," Noah said.

"Tee hee."

"What's so funny?"

He thought it was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, but Claudia only tittered.

"I just find your reason so very charming is all."

"What?"

"Having said that, it's also a *stupid* reason. Because you *do* realize you're still my servant since the acolyte contract yet remains in place, yes?" Then, she declared with a smile, "It is a given that I would prioritize you over this country."

"Huh...what...?!"

She wasn't teasing him or joking. He sensed her words came from the heart, and he sucked in a sharp breath at the realization.

"A sweet pup I picked up is much more adorable than a nation for which I

have no love."

"You... You're..."

"I told you, didn't I? In this life, I intend to do only the things I want to."

With a *crack*, the magical barrier disappeared.

His uncle, who hadn't cut into their conversation, seemed on guard against Claudia. Despite the sneer on his face, he clearly perceived something.

Normal people can't understand others' magic powers. Even so, Claudia's is obviously on a different level.

However, she had a weakness too. Her body's inability to withstand her magical energy.

"I heard you discussing your sister. Did you come to rescue her?" Claudia asked.

She must have heard only part of the conversation, so Noah replied shortly, "She's already dead."

"I see."

For a moment, it felt like her multicolored eyes shimmered scarlet. Then she started walking toward his uncle, the skirt of her long purple dress fluttering with every step she took.

"Allow me to express my intent formally to you, king of Lemilsia. The witch Adelheid shall be taking this child into her care."

"Well, your confidence is certainly impressive. However, do you really believe someone who calls herself by the name of the legendary witch has the power to steal from *me*, one lauded as rivaling the founder of my nation?"

"So your people put you on par with the first king of Lemilsia, hm..." Claudia appeared nostalgic somehow before she abruptly exhaled. "Lies. The likes of you will *never* measure up to Reinard."

"How dare you speak to me that way!"

"Know that your reserves of magic, the way you use it, even your flair, or lack thereof, for it can't compare to his. How presumptuous of you to even try. And to top it all off, you've exhausted your potential. There is no more room for your growth."

Then she gazed at Noah, almost like she was showing off a prized possession.

"Not so for Noah, however. He is full of promise. *He* has the true makings to rival Reinard—no, surpass him."

"You've forced me to listen to this drivel in silence for too long now...!"

His uncle practically tore his hair out in rage as he dragged his fingers through it, glaring balefully at her.

"And don't call him Noah. That whelp's name is Leonhard, and he is my slave!"

"I see no slave here. Whoever could you be referring to? For *Noah* is my acolyte."

"Hmph!"

Noah felt the bloodlust surging from his uncle, and the boy got chills. He knew his uncle was about to attack before he'd even started his incantation.

"Damn it, enough! I don't want you caught up in this mess anymore..." Noah grumbled.

"Did I not tell you to choose your own way of life?" The woman, the epitome of beauty itself, stared down directly into Noah's eyes. "Since you chose to use my magic for your own purposes, I suggest you see your decision through to the very end."

"Nnn..."

Immediately after, his uncle finished his short incantation.

"Burn my enemies to ash!"

A cluster of howling flames far more powerful than before rushed at them. Noah jumped in front of Claudia to protect her at the risk of his own life, but he didn't even have time to ready his sword.

"Scatter."

With a frothing, bubbling sound, the flames vanished without a trace. His

uncle's magic should have been powerful in its own right. And yet, she had dispersed it in only a second, without using any water or ice at all. It was as if his uncle's magic were just a formless illusion.

"Impossible..."

The heels of her shoes clacked on the floor as she took another step toward the man.

"Are you sure you unleashed that magic with the intent to kill me?"

"Impossible... Impossible. Ludicrous. It was my ultimate magic... How...? A magic so ferocious it requires more than half of my energy..."

"That consumed half of your magic? So much power for such a middling result? Tut-tut." The contempt in Claudia's voice came from the depths of her soul. "You're awful at this, you know."

"Don't mock me!" he spat. As he tried to cast another spell, vines suddenly wrapped around his mouth.

She used her magic silently? Noah thought, his eyes widening at the vines. No way. Forget her one-word spells. She can cast magic without reciting an incantation out loud...?!

The shorter the incantation of a spell, the more advanced it was considered. The less skill a magician had, the longer the incantation they had to use. Only a select few prodigies in the world could cast powerful spells with short incantations. Noah's uncle ought to have been one of them.

I knew Claudia could produce powerful magic with a single word, but I never imagined she doesn't even need an incantation...

Which meant she was carrying an even heavier burden to compensate. Yet she didn't reveal even a hint of it as she turned around to face Noah.

"Noah, what do you wish to do? If you want to kill him, I'd be more than happy to help."

His mother's voice flashed through his mind then, the voice he'd thought of countless times over the years: "This child will be your younger brother or sister. So make sure you protect them when they're born, hmm, Big Brother?"

The next memory that swooped in was of the day his parents were murdered. His father's last breaths, his mother's wails from their bed, and Noah himself held down by his uncle, his hands twisted behind his back. "Stop it! Release my son! Please, I beg you to spare my children! Please!"

His sister's first cries as she came into the world, the smell of his parents' blood. And amid this scene he could never forget, spoke his uncle who held his little sister: "If you wish to protect your sister, swear to obey me. Tell me you will atone forevermore in your father's stead."

As a result, Noah had endured the five years since then as if they were nothing. As long as he did, he could protect his sister. He'd believed that by doing so, he'd fulfill both the promise he made with his mother and the bargain with his uncle.

Until a few days ago, when one of the magicians who brought him food scraps had informed him that his sister had died of an illness.

"I'm not going to kill him." Noah spoke slowly. "Just give me back her remains...so I can give her a proper burial."

When Claudia narrowed her eyes, the vines constricting his uncle loosened the slightest bit.

"Ngh- Haah! Gaah!"

"Descendant of Reinard, I will give you only one chance to speak. Where is Noah's sister?"

"Gh... Bwa ha ha ha ha!!!"

The warped laughter burst out of his uncle as he stared at them with eyes the same color as Noah's.

"Why, I disposed of such waste immediately, of course!"

A calm coldness spread deep inside Noah's heart.

"Truth be told, I should have just burned her corpse down to a deplorable pile of ash, leaving behind not even a single bone chip, then dumped it all in the capital's sewer! To my lament, however, Anna was the spitting image of her mother. Since I couldn't bear to do the deed myself, I ordered my magicians to

toss her remains in the capital instead... Her corpse was carried there as an orphan's, so she must have been buried in some unmarked plot somewhere. Now you'll *never* be able to find her!"

Noah took a deep breath.

"I like that expression, Leonhard. It's one I've always wanted to see! Five years. Five long years, but I can finally witness your despair...!"

"Adelheid, one more time. Just lend me your magic one more time, please."

She smiled a little at his entreaty. "You know, it's only natural for a mistress to supply her servant with anything he needs."

"Thank you." His words came at a hesitating pace.

He bowed his head deeply at her then turned to again face his uncle, whose forehead showed throbbing veins popping forward at the humiliation of having his entire body bound by vines.

Intent on agitating Noah, the man screamed, "You do intend to kill me, after all, eh? In the end, you're no different from him... No, Leonhard, you're someone who shares the same blood as me!"

Noah quietly tightened his grip on his ice sword. "Uncle, I'm not going to kill you. But."

His uncle made a questioning sound in his throat.

Then Noah whispered a single incantation too quiet for anyone else to hear. It was one Claudia had uttered yesterday in the village to which he'd carried her. The spell was a bit difficult to handle because it was different from offensive magic. Even so, her magic circulating within him transformed Noah's body.

"Wha...?" His uncle's eyes widened. Most likely due to the boy looking like a nineteen-year-old young man now. "You...!!!"

He was much taller now, and his shoulders broader. His legs were muscular too. The clothing created through magic covering him was the formal attire worn by the royals of this country. For Noah, he didn't have any particularly strong feelings for this adult form gained through magic, but it would be a different story for his uncle.

"B-Brother...! Brother, why? Why are you here?!" Terror filled those jet-black eyes as they stared up at the grown Noah.

His father's eyes had been reddish brown, different from his own. Nevertheless, Noah looked so much like his father in this guise that all his uncle saw was his older half brother, which was, of course, exactly Noah's aim.

Noah recalled something his uncle had said before. "Though you resemble your mother, ultimately, you look identical to your father. Every time I see your face, I remember him...!!!"

Whenever you talked about my father, your voice always trembled.

Once upon a time, he thought the tremor came from the impulse to commit violence. But through years of observation, he realized that wasn't the reason why.

"Don't hit me! Please don't hit me!"

His uncle shook when Noah took a step forward. Noah's royal attire was the same as the one his father wore while he was alive. With every step he took, the medals on his chest jangled, and his uncle shrunk each time he heard the sound.

"It... It's your fault, Brother! You were the one who wronged me! Whenever you're in front of me, I can't help but quake in fear. I planned on holding back and torturing you slowly, but then you started yelling at me...!!!" his uncle screamed. "I didn't think you would die just from that! In truth, I wanted to keep you alive and make you suffer, but you're always so frightening, so I had no choice but to use Leonhard as a replacement instead...! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm begging you—please don't hit me anymore!"

Noah's narrowed eyes held a sharp edge.

"If you do want to kill him, I can teach you just the right magic," Claudia whispered to him from behind, as he now towered over her in his adult form.

"I told you already, didn't I? I'm not going to kill him."

But...in exchange for sparing his life...

Noah clenched his fists tightly. When his uncle saw that, his complexion paled

further, and he shook his head frantically, still trembling.

"Don't hit me! Brother, please! Please...!!!"

Ignoring the desperate pleas, Noah mustered up all his strength and kicked his uncle hard in the face.

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"Ngh...!!!"
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The man's body went flying backward. He tumbled on the floor and lay there in a disgraceful heap. Eyes wide with terror, he continued muttering deliriously.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry... Forgive me, Brother, forgive me, forgive..."

His voice was lifeless.

"Revenge is meaningless if they escape through death," Noah murmured quietly as he stared down at his uncle. "Stay afraid of your own brother's shade until the day you die."

"Hm...I don't think he can hear us any longer," Claudia said, getting Noah's attention briefly before he turned his gaze upon his uncle again.

The man stared blankly up at the ceiling, apologizing over and over to someone who wasn't here. His uncle looked so small when viewed from his adult body.

"This way! Call for reinforcements! Prince Leonhard is with His Majesty...!!!"

As soon as they heard the magicians' voices, Claudia took Noah's hand.

"Transfer."

In the next instant, the scenery changed suddenly as she took them to a location overlooking the capital of Lemilsia.

"We're in the..."

"For the time being, I decided our best option for escape was to go up. What with the lovely view and all."

She was right, this being the royal castle's rooftop garden. Facing Noah with their fingers intertwined, Claudia stared up at him.

"Do you wish to retake the throne from that man?"

Noah frowned at her question. "I've never once thought about that."

"You are free of avarice, hm? Don't you think this is a perfect opportunity to ascend to the kingship considering that man is completely useless now?"

The sixteen-year-old Claudia indicated the royal capital sprawling beneath them. Since he, too, was an adult at the moment, he didn't need to look up at her. In fact, he had to tilt his head *down* quite a distance as he listened to her.

"You can make all this yours, you know."

He said nothing.

The sun continued to set on the other side of the sea jutting against the capital. Memories rushed forth, nostalgia overcoming him as he stared out at the cityscape dyed in a navy blue. During these last five years, he'd had few chances to leave the dungeon, much less to leisurely enjoy looking at scenery like this. Even so, nostalgia was all it was.

"I don't need this," Noah declared. "Not to mention he has a child of his own. My cousin is a year younger than me, and I've heard rumors of his brilliance. He'll probably succeed that man as king."

"Oh my. You would turn a blind eye to the child of the man you hate?"

"I don't confuse the target of my revenge."

Besides... he thought.

"I saw my sister one time. She wasn't a baby anymore. It was just the once, though."

Noah hadn't told Claudia the details of what had happened to him. He suspected she didn't mind if he kept quiet about his circumstances, and he'd taken advantage of that.

"She was smiling."

Her figure he'd glimpsed from far away, he could recall it clearly even now. His younger sister had been smiling happily. Her golden hair, inherited from their mother, had been fluttering in the wind as sunlight filtered through the trees. Both his uncle and his cousin had been by her side, patting her head affectionately. His uncle must have been telling him the truth about his love for

his mother as well as how much his sister resembled her. So his younger sister, and her alone, had been raised properly and happily.

"And that's all that matters," he continued. "Wanting to bury her with my own hands was just for my own pride and satisfaction."

"I see."

Claudia turned her cold eyes to the castle town below. She let go of Noah's hands and started walking around the rooftop garden. The flowers blooming so colorfully were likely beautiful in daylight. But right now, dusk enveloped them.

"What did your sister enjoy?"

Noah couldn't answer her. Because the one and only time he'd met her face-to-face was right after her birth, and before then, he'd talked to her while she nestled in his mother's womb. So there was simply no way for him to know what she liked.

After a pause, he answered, "When I saw her, she was picking flowers with both hands."

"Flowers, hm?"

Claudia stood at the edge of the garden and stared at the cityscape below. Her light-brown hair danced in the breeze. A small bead of light formed at the tip of her finger. She murmured an incantation, but he couldn't make out the words.

Then she turned around to look at him and beckoned him to come over with a small wave of her hand. He obeyed and walked to her. When he stood next to her, he caught his breath in surprise.

"This..."

Clusters of light whirled upward merrily from the night-cloaked city. They glowed a pale orange against the backdrop of the blue-black darkness. Each resembled a flower, and they twinkled gently as they floated in the air. The castle town glittered as if sprinkled with stars. It was such a beautiful sight, it left him speechless.

"Mourn for her." Claudia traced shapes in the air and lights appeared in

response. "She'll be able to see this no matter where in the city she's buried. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Claudia..."

"There is no need to think of mourning as self-satisfaction or something equally silly." Those eyes, ever changing colors like an aurora, stared directly up into his. "You've done very well thus far and I commend you for it."

A strained sound escaped from Noah's lips as he felt a lump in his throat the moment she smiled at him. Tears pricked at his eyes and the only thing he didn't want to do was cry, so he squeezed his hands into tight fists. He had no right to cry here when, in the end, he'd accomplished nothing.

"Sweet, adorable Noah. You don't have to put up a brave front. Not with me."

"I'm not, all right? I... Claudia."

She tilted her head thoughtfully as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"I used you. Even though I said I'd serve you, I lied and ran away from you."

"I made the contract knowing that from the start, so I have no recollection of being deceived by you."

"Still..."

Even if she didn't kill him, he deserved to be abandoned. Yet she had come to his rescue. Not only that, despite him running away, she had declared to his uncle in front of Noah that it was her duty to protect him because he was her servant. And finally, she helped him mourn his younger sister.

"I know only too well that I'm not trustworthy. But I want to repay my debt to you, even if it takes my whole life to do it," Noah said.

The two were close enough that he could see the reflections of the flowers of light in her eyes. He locked his eyes onto hers and firmly made a declaration.

"Once more, I swear an oath of allegiance to you as your acolyte."

The way she blinked in a daze was very much how a little girl would. A few seconds later, Claudia smiled teasingly at him. "Silly boy. Someone of your

mettle should never be forced to live as another's hound."

"You told me to 'choose the way I live,' right? Well, the reason I've been alive until now is gone as of today."

From now on, he would no longer live to protect his sister, nor would he allow himself to be kept alive for his uncle's vengeance. If he truly intended to choose his own way of life, he wanted to choose a path from his heart.

"So I'm fine with being your hound."

As he held his gaze, she quietly lowered her own.

Also...

His uncle's earlier words bothered him.

"The legendary witch! The same one who committed suicide one day despite being showered by the people's adulation—"

Claudia had made no denials about Adelheid's final moments. In fact, that silence had seemed like an affirmation. Which meant Claudia had chosen death by her own hands in her past life.

Though she's strong, she's also reckless. In that case, it's my duty to...

"All right." She gently cupped both of his cheeks with her hands. "I'll make you mine. I always wanted a large, powerful, and beautiful pup, and you're perfect. *But...*should you ever feel the need to run away again, tell me right away. Understood?"

She said that like it was an inevitability in his future, with a lovely but lonely smile.

"I won't ever want to run away again. I swear."

"Tee hee."

The look Claudia gave him said she didn't believe him one whit. Then she stared down on the castle town again.

"The conjurers pursuing us will eventually realize where we are and make their way here... Noah."

Knowing exactly what she meant, Noah too looked down. Somewhere down

there, his sister rested peacefully, and he seared the cityscape into his mind. He had been born here, raised to become this country's future king, but that future had been stolen from him. He suspected he would never again look upon the city like this again.

"Noah. If you do want this country for your own, then why not fight once mo —"

"Transfer."

He clasped her hand in his and said the spell, cutting her off.

The next time they opened their eyes again, they were back in Claudia's tower. A pile of blankets and the flowers he'd arranged in her hair lay on the sofa.

"Quite cheeky of a mere manservant to forcefully move his mistress, wouldn't you say?"

The thread of amusement in her voice belied her words.

"Does it really matter? I know you're sleepy. You sound softer and sweeter than usual."

"Mmm..."

She gave up and flopped down on the sofa when she realized Noah had seen right through her. It would be too cramped for her to sleep on the sofa in her sixteen-year-old body. If she could at least transform into a child, he could carry her to the bed situated at the back of the room.

"Hey, go back to your original size. It'll be too hard to carry you as you are."

"No. Right now, I'm so sleepy I don't want to do anything. Therefore..."

Claudia extended both hands toward him.

"Pick me up."

"Damn it."

His scowl said, "You have *got* to be kidding me, right?" At the moment, Noah appeared to be nineteen to Claudia's sixteen. Did she seriously not have any objection to being carried in their current forms?

"Pick. Me. Up. That's an order."

Noah sighed heavily at her pestering. Resigned, he bent down and lifted her in his arms, cradling her like an infant.

"Tee hee. Noah, do you realize that this is your first task as my official manservant?"

Her mischievous comment exasperated him.

"I would have preferred a more decent command..."

"In good time. All in good time. For example, I might tell you to drive off the royal magicians or find some way to mislead them."

Claudia's words reminded him of their existence, and now he wondered what actually became of them. Nonetheless, he suspected she was deliberately keeping him in the dark without any explanations until she was good and ready, so he didn't bother asking her.

Then he looked down at the sleepy girl in his arms.

Even though I know her body is made through magic, it's still way too light.

He carried her to the bed and gently laid her down. By this point, she was already breathing softly in sleep.

"Good night," he whispered.

Noah yawned. Sleeping here would surely make him a failure as a manservant. He knew it, but he couldn't resist sinking into the bed.

In the end, he slept soundly until morning.

## **Chapter 4**

As the room filled with translucent sunlight that morning, Claudia was using important magic. It would have a direct impact on their future, so she absolutely could not cut corners. After careful deliberation, she finalized the image she'd been constructing in her mind.

"Here I go, Noah."

She gently waved her index finger at her manservant, who looked slightly uncomfortable. A ball of light emerged from her fingertip and floated toward Noah, dressed in plain white clothes. It expanded large enough to envelop him, shone dazzlingly bright for an instant, and then slowly disappeared.

"This should do well enough."

He said nothing while Claudia nodded in satisfaction at his new appearance. He looked unsettled by the military-style uniform now covering his body. The elegant design suited the slim but tall Noah very well. Claudia smiled, pleased by how much the attire enhanced his already splendid features.

She also made him wear a red earring. The long accessory tinkled when he moved his head and was the key symbol marking him as her servant.

"Marbelous."

The reality turned out even more magnificent than the picture she had drawn in her mind. Claudia beamed in delight and clapped daintily using just her fingers.



"You look vewy handsome, Noah."

After reluctantly inspecting himself, Noah scowled down at her with halfclosed eyes. "As your dog, I'd like to make a suggestion."

"Ohhh? Go on. Tell me."

"Don't. Waste. Magic."

He emphasized each word deliberately, like he was trying to carve the words into her mind. Evidently, this lovely pup had a propensity to disobey even his own master's orders if it meant protecting said master. Claudia giggled and straightened Noah's lapels.

"It isn't a waste. In fact, it is absowutewy essential that I dress you up nattily."

He paused before responding. "Is that so?"

"Yes, weally."

She nodded then slipped her tiny hand into his. Clad in his new attire, he stared down at her with a conflicted expression. It seemed he thought of her as someone older than him.

He's attuned to the age of my soul rather than my apparent age. Every day he shows me how right I am about his strong affinity for magic.

Excitement for what was to come bubbled within Claudia. "Today, your task is to pwotect me. Understood?"

Of course, she could protect herself. Noah knew this as well, so perhaps he would refute the order with "But you don't even *need* protection." Much to her surprise, however, he defied her expectation by agreeing obediently, his expression earnest.

"Understood."

Oh my... How very reassuring.

Chuckling, she squeezed Noah's index and middle fingers.

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"Princess Claudia."

Karlheinz, the magician waiting in the parlor, bowed politely to her. Claudia stared up at him, her hand held in Noah's. Behind him were fifteen other conjurers who seemed to be his subordinates. And all of them focused not on Claudia, but on Noah.

Just as I intended.

Beaming, she looked up at her unwilling manservant.

This is where Noah fought my uncle, so it's only natural he would garner their interest.

Then she redirected her attention to Karlheinz.

Unfortunately for me, this man is clearly cut from a different cloth.

As usual, Karlheinz's red eyes gazed down upon Claudia. She could do nothing about this man's perceptiveness when it came to her. So for now, she decided to focus on the other magicians instead.

"My lady."

"What is it, Noah?"

"We must greet our guests properly."

Noah knelt and spoke the words as planned. Claudia pretended to gasp like she just now remembered her manners, and she faced the group of conjurers. Then she grasped the folds of the skirt of her dress and curtsied clumsily.

"Good day, eberyone. My name is Claudia, and I'm six years old."

The magicians seemed charmed when she bestowed upon them her finest smile.

"My faborite animals are large, fwuffy puppies! Although wecently, I find myself partial to a particular, lubbly black-haired pup."

From next to her, she felt Noah's pointed glance, but she remained completely unfazed. Her crucial task at the moment was to focus on the magicians.

"Eberyone, ummm... Well...you see...um..."

Claudia stopped talking and fashioned an anxious expression. Immediately, her audience looked panicked.

Well, isn't this a surprise? So many good-natured individuals among them.

She could sense the adults silently encouraging her as they held their breaths. Her wailing performance from a few days ago, which Noah had claimed was terrible, certainly would have worked on *them*. Which was why she suddenly started crying and clung to him, just as they'd planned.

"Noaaah..."

"My lady, repeat after me. 'Everyone, we are glad to receive you.'"

"Glad to! Receib!"

Abruptly, her expression brightened and her attitude reflected a supposedly newfound confidence.

"Eberyone, ummm... We gladly receib you!"

When she said those words with a determined smile, the magicians broke into broad smiles of their own and clapped enthusiastically.

"You did wonderfully, Your Highness! How very charming you are..."

Claudia huffed out a relieved breath, then she shyly hid behind Noah.

Of course, it was all an act. While the conjurers beamed and sang her praises, the only ones whose expressions remained impassive were Noah, who knew the truth, and Karlheinz, who evidently saw right through her.

Noah spoke to Karlheinz as he stood protectively in front of Claudia.

"My lord, as you can see, the princess is unaccustomed to being in the presence of so many people. So, please, if you wish to speak with my lady, I request you do so alone."

The redheaded magician by Karlheinz's side protested at this request. "Excuse me, Noah, was it? Unfortunately, we can't..."

"I don't mind," Karlheinz interjected.

"Commander."

The chief conjurer walked forward and dropped to one knee in front of Claudia.

"Princess Claudia, I apologize for my rudeness. Forgive our lack of care for your needs."

Up close like this, the watchful scrutiny in his red eyes was even more apparent as he gazed at her. Her lips curved upward briefly before she clung to Noah again.

"Waaah. Noooaaah!"

"My lady is in tears. Please, everyone, I ask you to step outside lest you cause her further distress."

"All right. We understand."

That took care of one nuisance. Satisfied, Claudia sat down on a plush chair in the parlor now that she, Noah, and Karlheinz were alone.

"Excellent. Since it's onwy us in here..."

She gracefully swirled her index finger in the air, like a conductor directing their orchestra. A moment later, a tea set appeared with a *thunk*, and Karlheinz sucked in a startled breath. With her magic, she manipulated the pot to pour black tea into a cup. Noah quietly watched the liquid splash into it.

"Do you take sugar in your tea, good sir?" Claudia asked.

"No, I don't. But thank you for asking."

With a smile, she floated one of the teacups in Karlheinz's direction. She waited for him to take the cup in his hands before she undid the magical buoyancy. Then she reached for her own teacup and blew daintily on the hot tea.

After taking a sip, Karlheinz placed his cup on the table, his face expressionless. "To create something out of nothing requires highly sophisticated magic. Added to that is your exquisite control of movement and temperature. *Furthermore*, you accomplished all of this sequentially without casting a single incantation aloud."

Those red eyes studied Claudia dispassionately. However, the words of praise

that fell in the next moment from his lips conveyed his genuine feelings.

"Simply astounding. Bravo, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

With an elegant smile, Claudia stopped acting the part of a six-year-old girl. It was meaningless to maintain the facade in front of one such as Karlheinz. As one who bore the title of chief conjurer, he was very clearly different from the other magicians.

If I can't pull the wool over his eyes, then I'll just have to use another method —to make sure this man doesn't interfere with my life.

Sitting as she was on the chair, she was too small to reach the table. So when she instructed Noah with a "Set it down," he took the teacup and saucer from her and placed them down gently on top of the table.

"Now then, good sir. Tell me why you're here."

Naturally, Claudia already knew Karlheinz's objective. She had heard the entire conversation between her uncle and the man sitting across from her, but she wanted to hear the words directly from his mouth.

"His Majesty seeks a new force for the defense of our nation. And, as he believes that the first step begins with the royal family, he's conducting a new investigation into their magical powers."

"Then please hand over the cwystal. I'll allow you to measure my magic." Smiling, Claudia thrust her dainty hand forward like a child demanding candy. "Will Father finawy weave me be when he confirms that I am indeed 'lacking'?"

Noah, standing behind her to the side, gave her a dubious look. She didn't even have to turn around to feel the exasperation mixed in his expression. She herself didn't actually believe that her request would be granted.

"Your Highness, I am one who serves this country." Just as she expected, Karlheinz answered her in his overly serious manner. "Therefore, it is my *duty* to adhere to any measures His Majesty takes in the interest of national defense. Regardless of how you manipulate the crystal's evaluation, I have an obligation to report to him what I've witnessed with my own eyes."

"Well, that won't do. It won't do at all. After all, I'm onwy six years old. A wee little thing. Don't you think it would be *unthinkable* to use me as a weapon for war?" Claudia narrowed her eyes and tittered.

"Once I make my report to the king, you will be summoned back to the royal capital, Your Highness. There, while undertaking an education befitting your station, you will also make the necessary preparations for the impending war..."

"Karlheinz."

It was the first time she said the man's name. He should have sensed the meaning of her action. Hugging a soft cushion to her chest, Claudia continued, her tone deceptively amicable.

"Should the fancy ever strike, I can easily destwoy one of this kingdom's neighbors. Would you like to hazard a guess on how long it would take me?"

Karlheinz expelled a short breath before replying with the utmost caution. "No more than a few seconds for an enemy king. Several minutes to decimate an army of magicians, an hour for a capital, and three days at the most to reduce an entire nation to ash. Am I close?"

"Tee hee. You truly are bwilliant."

Despite only glimpsing a sliver of her magical capabilities, Karlheinz's assessment was almost correct.

But almost isn't enough.

Pleased by what she'd just learned about him, she watched the man intently.

"Then what is your judgment of Noah?"

"He possesses a tremendous talent for magic...enough to rival the royal family of a major nation."

"Indeed. Because you see, Noah has roughly the same amount of magic as I do."

As he stood there silently, Noah's gaze no longer held any objections. He had apparently already discerned what she wanted to do.

There is no question of Noah's talent. However, saying his reserves of magical

energy are on par with mine is a lie. The truth is, our acolyte contract is currently supplying him with my magic.

When he examined both her and Noah's magics, in reality, he was only looking into one repository. However, from Karlheinz's perspective, it should look like there were *two* repositories of the same size.

Karlheinz is brilliant... Which is precisely why he can easily imagine how great of a threat the combination of Noah and I would pose.

Claudia smiled calmly at him. "The reason you wish to take me back with you is to pwotect the country, yes? Then the sowution is simple." She held up an index finger to her small lips and spoke. "The best way to pwotect the country is to stay out of my way."

Karlheinz slowly closed his eyes and ruminated in silence for several long moments before responding. "Such words could be interpreted as harmful to our nation. Even if you are the princess, I cannot overlook this..."

Noah stepped forward then. Karlheinz's gaze shifted to him. Claudia suspected her servant was glaring quietly at the man with his jet-black eyes. While praising him as a "Good boy" and petting him in her mind, she smiled on the outside.

"Let me make this clear to you, good sir. I'll do onwy the things I want to. Nothing else," she declared, her chin resting on the cushion in her arms.

"Karlheinz... Tell me the twuth. You say you wish to take me back for my father's sake, but that isn't your real intention, is it?"

His eyes widened ever so slightly when he heard that. The change in him was minute, but his reaction gave her more than enough conclusive proof to confirm her suspicion.

"Why is this country's rewations with its neighbor so awful?"

He answered, although he did so with hesitation. "The reason for the sudden rise in tensions is due to the continued friction on the border. Skirmishes between citizens of both nations have occurred, disrupting the public order, and magicians attempting to ameliorate the situation have themselves ended up fighting each other."

"I wonder why the people are fighting each other."

"The citizens of this country who have drifted to the borders tend to be those suffering from poverty. Because they don't know when their next meal will be, they cross the borders and begin living as thieves."

"Then tell me, who exactwy is at fault for their empty bellies?"

"Your Highness..."

Before recovering her memories, Claudia had been alone, like a doll forgotten on a shelf. But that didn't mean she hadn't seen and heard things. So, by reorganizing the information she'd absorbed from those days, she was able to glean a rough outline of the situation.

"It's not difficult for anyone to gwasp what will happen if a foolish king is given a 'weapon' capable of easily destwoying a country."

Karlheinz frowned. As one working in service of the nation, he couldn't afford rash outbursts.

"Think. Think veeewy carefully about what this country needs to pwotect itself."

His thoughtful silence continued.

"Now, then!" Claudia jumped down from her chair and smiled like a little girl. "Noah, it is time for our guest to leave. Let us see him off."

"Yes, my lady."

Noah's voice contained a measure of warning directed at Karlheinz. The man detected it and stood up, bowing deferentially to Claudia.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. We're staying in a nearby village, so I'll visit you again in a few days," Karlheinz said.

"People will become suspicious about why the chief conjurer is staying so long in a place like this. Such a situation is bound to inconvenience *all* of us," Noah asserted.

Karlheinz stared down at Noah in response. "Black eyes, eh?"

"Wonderful, aren't they? But I won't give him to you."

Instead of commenting on Claudia's remark, Karlheinz simply bowed again as if apologizing for his insolence. Then he finally left.

Haaa. My, oh my.

Claudia hopped back onto her chair, the gears of her mind turning as she once more hugged a cushion.

I'm sure what happens next will be just as I imagined. Disappointing, but inevitable.

When she closed her eyes, she sensed Noah, standing next to her, move. So she opened them again and looked at him. She found him kneeling in front of her, his expression gentle as he reached out to stroke her cheek.

"You exhausted your power again, didn't you?"

"I needed to make sure Karlheinz understood my strength. Besides, I had a craybing for tea."

"So, making clothes for the both of us really is advanced magic?"

"Yes. Advanced *and* powerful. Merely by being properly dressed, one's words and behavior become a great deal more persuasive."

Noah's brow furrowed in response to her cheerful explanation. "I'll learn how to pour tea."

"Noah?" Claudia blinked in surprise at his unexpected statement.

"I'll prepare your clothes too. I'll comb your hair too and help you dress every morning however you want."

He had rendered her speechless.

"Because as your manservant, I'll do whatever is necessary." Then he continued, his expression serious. "So stop hurting yourself like this."

She remained at a loss for words, truly stunned by his outpouring of words. Magic and stamina were very similar, and depleting either made one tired or ill. And Claudia's inability to resist sleepiness was entirely due to this.

However, she had never imagined someone would be so concerned about her. Even in her past life as Adelheid the witch, no one had ever said such a thing to her. It was natural for Adelheid to wield powerful magic and influence the fate of an entire nation, so no one had ever given a single thought to her exhaustion.

And yet, the nine-year-old boy in front of Claudia worried sincerely about her.

Her shock was so great she couldn't think of anything to say for some time. As the silence lengthened, Noah suddenly and awkwardly broke his gaze from hers. Perhaps he'd grown embarrassed the longer she remained quiet.

"Forget I said anything. I'm probably off the mark anyway."

"You..."

Still dazed, Claudia asked him.

"You'll help me get weady every day?"

He made a startled sound in his throat. His jet-black eyes widened momentarily then he nodded immediately, earnestly.

"I will."

"Tee hee." She beamed at him and gave voice to the feeling in her heart. "That makes me vewy happy indeed."

It was Noah's turn to be speechless. And then, a broad smile suddenly split his face too.

With that settled, now she wondered what she should teach him first. Excitement thrumming in her veins, Claudia started devising a plan for Noah's education.

This was certainly a strange turn of events, one she could never have even imagined.

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A white lace ribbon swayed in the cold breeze that blew through the forest. Little Claudia, her milky tea hair flowing in the wind, waved her short, thirty-centimeter-long wand with a flick of her wrist.

"Take that!"

A thunderous explosion boomed in direct contrast to her easygoing

exclamation. A series of small-scale lightning bolts struck the ground like fangs sinking in. A small figure ran, weaving between them. It was Noah, with a thunder blade in his hand.

Claudia aimed unhesitatingly at Noah, but he dodged her attacks with his quick defensive movements. He twisted his body this way and that, used the thunder blade to repel her assaults, and occasionally planted his hands on the ground to regain his balance.

He raced single-mindedly toward her. Fearless, daring, and resolute, all the while maintaining caution. She had told him to come at her like it was a true battle and he'd obeyed, his black eyes deadly serious. When he finally arrived within arm's reach of her, he raised his sword overhead.

"Oh my...!"

He has a talent for this.

If he wanted to cut her down, there was no better time to do it. Staring up at him, Claudia waved her wand with a flourish. "But you won't win."

He grunted in surprise then. Instantly sensing something, Noah lowered his sword poised for attack and positioned it diagonally in front of him. He somehow managed to use the blade as a shield and avoided a direct hit from her ice pillar.

"Gaaah...!!!"

*Klang!* The sound of a collision, followed by Noah flying backward. She brandished her wand again and dispatched a second, then a third icy projectile in his direction.

"Shit!"

"Oh dear."

Even as he clutched his stomach, Noah swung his blade sideways. He blocked the icicles and they shattered without hitting him. His quick action had surprised her, so she clapped now in genuine praise.

"I commend you, Noah. I honestwy didn't think you'd be able to stop my attacks just now."

The wand in her hand was a lovely thing, sporting a round stone at the tip and a ribbon tied around it. Of course, she didn't *need* a tool to use magic, but she quite liked its appearance. She stowed it away using her magic and approached her manservant kneeling on the ground.

Hunched over and panting, he said in a strained voice, "Ngh... Can't you...hold back...a little?"

"Do you really want me to?"

"I'm not joking...!" Even dripping with sweat, he glared at her.

Being on the receiving end of his straightforward, jet-black gaze felt good. In high spirits, Claudia replied to her manservant, "Be that as it may, you really are wemarkable. The fact that you were able to grow this stwong in such a short period is proof of your twemendous efforts, Noah."

Noah deliberately slowed his heavy breaths before responding. "I have to try. It's the least I can do." The tone, more polite than when they first met, was one he had recently begun to use. "As your servant, I need to become strong enough not to lose to anyone."

Claudia beamed at the perfect answer from her attendant. "Good boy. Howeber, we're done for today. I am absowutewy famished."

"Well...don't worry because I'm going shopping after this. The old man who runs the village bakery said he'd bake more of that bread you like."

"Marbelous! Let's buy more eggs too, hmm? Then you can make an enohmous omelet for me."

"I don't mind, but how much magic do you have left...? You're using too much of it, spending it like water even though it's just for training me."

"I'm fine. And besides, of course I'll use it genewouswy *because* you're my cute servant."

Noah looked cross when she said that. "Stop...calling me...cute..."

"Tee hee!"

His polite speech reverted to his usual roughness during training, since his focus was on beating her, or when he sulked. But Noah himself scowled in

frustration each time he realized he'd slipped back into his old habits.

It obviously bothers him a great deal that he's mentally younger than me, hmm?

She found such immaturity charming, but she was sure the boy himself didn't realize it. She covered her mouth with a hand and yawned.

Still, I'm surprised by how much I've adapted to this life.

Roughly a month had passed since Claudia regained her memory of her past life and taken this adorable boy, Noah, as her manservant. In the tower standing tall in the forest, the two of them continued living together. She'd spent this time training Noah, who'd spent many years as a slave, in magic and other things.

In her previous life as Adelheid the witch, she'd had a large number of disciples. She never turned anyone down when they asked to become one, giving them a comprehensive education, but she never chased after the ones who failed under her tutelage. As a result, she always had around twenty of them at any given time back then. They changed so frequently, she couldn't ever remember all their names and faces.

Yet even among her many disciples, numbering in the hundreds in her past lifetime, Noah possessed the greatest talent. Furthermore, despite her thorough, unsparing training, he never once complained. Were it not for her calling a halt to their sessions, he would continue without pause, his fighting spirit driving him onward. So, it was no wonder she found him cuter and cuter with each passing day.

And besides, Claudia thought with a smile.

"My plait is unrabeling, Noah. Retie it, won't you?"

Noah frowned when she touched the ribbon binding her hair. "If I touch you now, your hair will get dirty."

"I don't mind."

"Ugh... Fine, come here."

Claudia walked over to him and stood in front of him, facing away. Noah

completely loosened the ribbon before braiding her hair as he'd done this morning. Though the plait was a very simple one, he had struggled something fierce on his first attempt. Her fine, silky hair had evidently given him trouble. But as with everything else, he had improved by tremendous leaps and bounds from a desire to master the skill, so now the plaits looked very nice indeed.

"I'm done."

"Thank you. It's pwetty."

He turned away from her in response, looking unconvinced by the necessity of her request.

"Now, then! Time to go shopping!" Claudia said, beginning her transfer magic.

"What? No, you're supposed to stay behind..." Noah remarked, impatient.

When the rush of light settled from the teleportation, they found themselves in a corner of the usual village. She held his hand in hers.

The farming village was fairly large—at least for a village—but a single step from the main street would find one ambling among the grazing animals. In order to avoid her magic being witnessed by the villagers, she always chose a deserted location, which meant after arriving, they generally found themselves surrounded by livestock.

Noah was silent as he pushed away the *baa*ing sheep who approached them curiously. After several moments of shoving a few of the animals, he quietly made his objections known.

"Your *Highness*. How many times must I tell you not to waste your magic like this?"

"You know I get so bored simpwy staying behind in the tower while you're busy. What's done is done. Let's go, Noah."

After patting the fluffy sheep that were now familiar faces to her, Claudia set off with Noah. She visited this village much less frequently than Noah. Depending on the circumstances, she would sometimes be asleep from exhausting her magic, so on those occasions, she of course remained in the tower. However, their comings and goings here the past month had made the

two of them veritable celebrities among the villagers. This day was no different; it wasn't long before a man called out to her as she walked briskly on her small feet.

"Princess! And Noah too! What brings you here today?!"

There, they found a group of men surrounding a few wooden crates. She immediately put on a performance just like she did in front of the magicians. The smile she fashioned was appropriate for an adorable, innocent, and sweet six-year-old child.

"Hewwo, Uncle!"

Noah glanced pointedly at Claudia, but the man looked unperturbed. He ignored the other men's curious looks as he talked to the two of them.

"I see you two little ones are as mysterious as usual, popping in from who knows where, eh? Maybe this time you rode in with the peddler who arrived just earlier?"

"Tee hee hee! That's a secwet!"

"A secret, huh? Well, I guess that's that, then. Princess, have a look at this, won't you?"

"What is it?"

When the man pulled out a box of cheese from inside one of the wooden crates, another one commented in confusion.

"H-Hey, Daniel, what the heck ya plannin' on askin' this kid?"

"This little lady is a marvel. You remember when my little one was completely exhausted from nights of colic? Well, one day, this wee princess just happened to pass by and rubbed his head. Since then, my boy's been sleeping straight through the night with nary a whimper."

As the man said, his child had piqued Claudia's interest on her previous visit to the village. The reason being a disturbance in the babe's magical powers. This wasn't uncommon for children with magical talent, but if the adults caring for them were unfamiliar with magic, the child in question would remain distressed by the bothersome tingling sensation.

So she'd played innocent and asked if she could pet the grumpy baby. While doing so, she had secretly regulated the flow of his magic.

"But...a cow isn't the same as a babe. Ya know that, right?"

"I know, I know, but let's just see what she has to say first. Princess, can you take a look at this cheese?"

Claudia stared dispiritedly at the wheel of cheese before her eyes.

"It doesn't look...vewy tasty..."

"Ha ha ha! Clear as day to you too, huh? Let me tell you, missy, this here cheese was the pride of our village. We used to sell it wholesale in the royal capital, but lately, the quality hasn't been so good. Clearly something's wrong with the cows. They got plenty of pastureland to graze on *and* sunlight to bathe in. But they're not producing good milk. Maybe you could tell us why?"

"Daniel. At *least* show her the cows before you go and interrogate her."

After scrutinizing the cheese, she turned away from it and started walking.

"P-Princess? The cheese is here..."

"That's kids for ya. Little lady, don't get too close to the crates or you might hurt yourself."

"Noah! Noah, wook!"

When she called out to him, he followed obediently. Then together, they looked down into a corner of one of the wooden crates.

"I have a widdle for you. What do you think these scuff marks are?"

Upon hearing her words, the expressions on the adults' faces abruptly changed. Noah frowned in thought for a few moments before answering in a soft murmur. "A cow's bite mark?"

"Nooope! Wrong!" Claudia smiled cheerfully as she made an X with her fingers. "The cowwect! Answer! Is! A scawy bear! Marking its tewwitowy!"

"A bear..."

"Did she say a bear?!"

The men crowded around the crate, standing behind a scowling Noah. Then, after discovering the claw marks in one of the corners, they exchanged meaningful glances.

"Those claw marks were definitely made by a magical beast! She's right about the marking too. Does anyone know where this crate was?"

"A bunch of them were piled up next to one of the barns... Maybe a bear was prowling around it at night? That would also explain why the cows haven't been sleeping so well."

"I'm gonna go ask the mayor to hire a conjurer to take care of this right away!"

As the men sprang into action, Noah questioned her softly. "Your Highness, how did you know what it was?"

"When a magical beast makes its mark on something, a minuscuwe twace of its magical energy remains. All I had to do was look for it."

"Magical energy..." Noah glared down at the claw marks like he was looking at something difficult to comprehend.

"Noah, there's no need for you to learn how to do this."

"No. As your manservant, it's important that I'm able to, so I'll learn."

The way he almost spat out the words with such a serious expression made her smile. A beat later, the man who'd first spoken to her walked over to them. He was alone now.

"Hmmm? Uncle, what happened to evewyone?"

"A few of them went to inspect the barns and one of them went to the mayor's house to ask him to arrange for a conjurer. More importantly, you sure didn't disappoint, Princess Claudia! None of us even noticed the claw marks all the way down there in the crate. Only a teeny tiny thing like you could have spotted them, eh!"

"Tee hee hee!"

In reality, height was irrelevant, but Claudia pretended to giggle in delight.

"Here, take these muffins as thanks! My wife baked them and there's plenty more where that came from, so don't hold back!"

"Wow, sweets! I love sweets! Thank you, Uncle!"

"No, no, thank you. Noah, make sure you eat a ton too, okay? And oh, yeah, the elderly lady next door said she wanted to thank you for carrying her things."

"No need. I haven't done anything to deserve special gratitude," Noah said.

Oh my. This is what he does when he takes trips to the village on his own, hmm?

He never mentioned anything of the sort, so Claudia simply hadn't known until now. Scowling, Noah refused to look at her. Perhaps he was feeling a touch embarrassed. She accepted the basket of muffins with a chortle.

"Your Highness, I'll carry the basket. Please give it to me."

"Thank you, Noah. Now, let's go shopping!"

She waved to the man with an enthusiastic "Bye-bye!" Noah gave him a slight bow, and the two of them started walking. The man saw them off and mumbled quietly to himself.

"Ha ha ha! Even Noah indulges her, his face oh-so serious when he calls her 'Your Highness.' Funny that, considering there's no way a bona fide princess lives in a remote place like this..."

"Hey, Daniel!"

"Oh ho, that was fast! What did the mayor say?"

"That it shouldn't take long to hire a magician. Still...what a shock."

Out of breath, the other man watched Claudia's and Noah's figures disappear into the distance as he muttered.

"Who the heck are those two anyway?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. At any rate, they're mysterious little ones."

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After that, as Noah and Claudia walked through the village, more villagers

struck up conversations with them.

"Claudia, Noah! Thanks for warning us about the rain the other day. Here, our chickens laid lots of eggs, so take some with you!"

"Noah! Heard you're the one who drove away the pack of demon dogs in the graveyard with your magic? Well done, lad! I just bought a ton of these oranges —fresh! Do me a favor and take some off my hands, will you?"

"Miss Claudia, take a gander at the newest cape I wove! I thought it might suit you. I know this isn't nearly enough to thank you for what you did, but please, take it if you don't mind."

They were all folks whom Claudia and Noah had helped using minor spells this past month. Every time one of the villagers stopped them, they insisted the children take this, that, and more with them. Thanks to their generosity, the basket he carried filled up quickly without them ever stepping foot in the general store.

Beaming, she stared up at him.

"Well, we've found ourselves with a twemendous haul, hmm? All these offerings might just last us quite some time."

"I disagree. There aren't nearly enough vegetables here for a proper diet for you, Your Highness."

"Oh dear. Perhaps you didn't hear me, Noah? Let me repeat myself. Ahem. All these offerings might just last us *quite* some time."

"You can affect a charming expression and make your eyes brim with tears, but none of that will change my mind," Noah shot back bluntly.

Claudia pouted deliberately like a child would and sighed huffily.

"Considering you're a sixteen-year-old adult on the inside, please refrain from being a fussy eater. Only young brats behave like that."

"Noah, I want you to wemember this. Even after one becomes an adult, one will still dislike the foods they dislike, and disgusting food will remain disgusting."

"That's incredibly immature..."

While they chatted, Claudia suddenly stopped in her tracks. Because up ahead, she sighted several robed men, possible conjurers, talking to some villagers.

"We're just trying to warn you officials. It doesn't matter to us whether the government sent you or not, but that there forest is teeming with monsters."

One of the conjurers *harrumph*ed in response. "As if we don't already know. That's precisely why I said we're looking for someone who can guide us through the forest. Despite our best efforts to teleport directly to the tower, for some reason we haven't been able to pinpoint its exact location for the past month."

"You're asking for the impossible! Never mind powerful magicians, if anyone from our village went in there carelessly and found themselves under attack, what are we supposed to do then?!"

"As long as we guard the guide, I don't see the problem at all. Now that you understand the situation, kindly select someone for the job. You have three days."

"This is too high-handed of you, sir..."

Another of the magicians replied to the protesting villager, his tone brooking no argument. "This is an order from the royal family."

The villagers paled the moment they heard those words. "Th-The royal family? Are you saying the king himself is ordering us to do something so dangerous?"

"Yes. I trust you'll have no issues obeying now? Three days. Get it done."

"But...! We don't even have any guarantee your lot will actually protect the guide..."

The villagers looked at each other in dismay.

Noah, still carrying the basket filled with a variety of goods—cheese, honey, eggs, and more—posed a question to Claudia.

"Your Highness, aren't those buggers the ones who tried to take you away by force?"

"No...I don't think so..."

Good grief, what an aggravating turn of events this was. Claudia grew annoyed, her bubbly mood dashed to pieces. Magic crackled in the atmosphere.

"Begging your pardon, Your Highness."

Noah moved into a position to protect Claudia at the same time the man appeared behind her. "Karlheinz."

She stared up at Karlheinz and spoke with a mulish expression.

"I know I ordered you not to come near me in this viwwage."

Ever since his first visit, Karlheinz had been staying in another village. "I cannot return to the royal capital without you, Your Highness." That was how he had explained the reason for his long sojourn. "As you can see, circumstances no longer permit us the luxury of time. Those people are *not* His Majesty's envoys."

Though Noah seemed a bit surprised, Claudia had in fact suspected as much. Her father simply wanted to measure her magic, so it stood to reason he wouldn't dispatch such boorish individuals. If anything, those conjurers had the air of people who wanted to eliminate anyone who stood in their way.

I suppose the queen consort who banished me likely sent them.

Those men wanted to kill Claudia. Noah glared quietly at Karlheinz. "Was it you? Were you the one who told the royal family about Her Highness's magic?"

Despite Noah's subdued tone of voice, she could clearly detect the deep wariness he felt toward Karlheinz. Facing the head magician, he demonstrated a courage that was hard to believe coming from a nine-year-old boy. Ever since he pledged to become her servant, he'd been doing his best to protect Claudia at every turn.

Having sensed as much, Karlheinz answered him sincerely.

"All I communicated to His Majesty was this: 'Her Highness has fallen ill and is in no state to have her magic evaluated, much less to travel to the capital.' I myself have been careful not to act in such a manner as to arouse suspicion."

Noah said nothing for a bit before he responded. "It's also possible that by provoking the queen, you're trying to force Her Highness back to the capital."

"I swear I would never do anything like that."

"And I'm supposed to just believe you? Look..."

"Noah, enough." Claudia tugged on Noah's sleeve to stop him. Her voice was calm. "I bewieb Stepmother wishes to kill me before I recober from my supposed illness."

Karlheinz's eyes widened in astonishment. Noah, however, only nodded in agreement. After all, he knew what it was like to have his own uncle try to kill him.

"Then how do you suggest we proceed, Your Highness?" Karlheinz asked.

"A good question, indeed. I wouldn't mind dribing them away."

Those magicians must be part of the queen consort's private army. Their power was no match for Claudia's, let alone the magicians under Karlheinz's command. At that level, she could overpower them all in seconds. But what she found most unacceptable was their meddling in the villagers' affairs.

"Your Highness?" Karlheinz said after a pause.

"Karlheinz, you should know I very much like this playgwound."

Especially the fluffiness of her sheep friends. Not to mention the sunny villagers themselves, who always doted on her and Noah and shared their scrumptious foods with them.

"I loathe anyone who makes a mess of my garden, so..."

Claudia gave him her finest smile. Karlheinz stiffened and Noah pressed a palm to his forehead. Completely unconcerned with both of their reactions, she announced her decision matter-of-factly.

"I shall go. I shall see my father."

"My lady..." Noah trailed off, at a loss for words.

She didn't like it, but there was no other way around it. Eyes cast downward, she giggled as she declared, "I'll prove to him that I am a pwincess 'lacking' magic. And it will be a spwendid performance."

## **Chapter 5**

A great many people were gathered at the royal castle. Princess Claudia, who hadn't been seen in public even once since her exile soon after birth, would again undergo an evaluation of her magical powers.

In light of the large audience, it had been decided that her assessment would be held in the cathedral inside the castle. One of the priests had recommended that "it should take place in public to avoid any hint of impropriety." In Princess Claudia's particular case, her original magic evaluation had been conducted in absolute secrecy not long after she was born, so the priest had advised that utmost care needed to be exercised in her reassessment.

The king had agreed and requested the presence of the queen consort, their children, as well as high-ranking members of the country's peerage in the cathedral. The thirty or so seated nobles whispered to each other, their voices carefully hushed so as not to be heard by the royals seated above them on the second-floor balcony.

"To go to such lengths to perform a magic evaluation on a six-year-old princess... Clearly, His Majesty is quite serious about the next battle."

"Even if he *is* seeking to add power to his arsenal, is it truly necessary to go to all this trouble to find it among the royal family? My son would prove leagues more useful to His Majesty."

Among the aristocrats were a few who gossiped in such a manner about their king's actions. Most of the rumors, however, were a mixture of scorn and ridicule toward Princess Claudia.

"I heard her mother was a dancer raised in an orphanage? Or was she a diva? Regardless, it doesn't change the fact she was lowborn. Though she may be His Majesty's daughter, it's unfortunate she has such vulgar blood flowing through her veins."

"According to the various lady's maids assigned to her, the child is ugly, far

too skinny, and all around unkempt. On top of that, she hardly ever speaks, her stare always vacant..."

"Ha ha ha! Well, I feel sorry for the chit. Imagine dragging a princess lacking any proper etiquette into a place like this. For goodness' sake, she doesn't even have anyone decent on hand to protect or support her, right?"

"Too right. I've already warned my son about his behavior at the children's-only tea party after this. I told him that he's to be kind to Princess Claudia and he mustn't laugh no matter how ill-mannered she is."

Such idle chatter quieted down when they heard the cathedral's outer doors being opened.

"At last, The Lacking Princess makes her debut. I wonder what she's like."

"I sincerely hope she doesn't start wailing from nerves. How pathetic would that be, hmm?"

But nobles such as these gasped in shock the moment the inner doors opened and a little girl appeared.

"Is that...Her Highness, Princess Claudia...?"

She possessed small lips the color of a light pink rose. Her snow-white cheeks were perfectly curved, and earrings dangled from her tiny ears. Elegant but adorable, the white dress she wore billowed around her.

The little girl's lustrous, pale brown hair rippled silkily with her every moment. It was obviously well cared for and held a healthy shine. Though simple, her plait blended beautifully with the flower-shaped ornaments arranged in her tresses.

Her eyes were large and bright, framed by long lashes. Claudia cast her eyes down, tugged on the hem of her dress, extended one leg back, and dropped into a polite curtsy. A perfect lady's greeting.

Stunned, the attendees exclaimed in wonder and once more began murmuring to each other.

"She is not at *all* what I expected. Who in their right mind would describe *that* as an ill-mannered, ugly princess?"

"And look at how confidently she carries herself, despite being surrounded by so many."

The figure who followed Claudia inside further surprised the aristocrats in the cathedral.

"That's..."

A man with long, silver hair and ruby-colored eyes. His well-defined features only accentuated his ever-constant placid, impassive expression. The embroidery on the robe he wore indicated his status.

"Master Karlheinz...!"

The country's chief conjurer stood behind the young Claudia, as if to protect her and pledge his loyalty. Karlheinz was famous not only for his magical abilities, but also for his fastidious nature. Despite numerous upper-class women vying for his attention as their escort, Karlheinz had never once complied. Commoner or noble, he treated everyone equally.

That's why it was a shock to those in the cathedral to see a man like him by this princess's side, a princess whom no one had given even a single thought to until now.

"Why is he with her?"

"C-Could it be..."

Karlheinz began speaking dispassionately. "My name is Karlheinz Reinard Exner and I am pleased to be given the opportunity to be present here as Her Highness, Princess Claudia's temporary guardian."

His words caused another uproar inside the cathedral.

"Our nation's foremost magician is guardian to a princess without magic?! What nonsense is this...?!"

"Karlheinz is a powerful man everyone wishes to have by their side. I can understand him attending to the princes, but *her*?"

Even as the nobles gave voice to their doubts, their eyes remained focused on Claudia. As she began to walk toward the altar, not a single person seemed to realize that she was commanding all the attention in the room.

On the whole, their reactions are what I expected.

Smiling, Claudia walked to the altar one step at a time in her shoes, polished to a brilliant luster. Though she had curtsied very maturely earlier, her basic course of action remained the same. She planned to play the part of a young, innocent six-year-old princess to the hilt in order to avoid unnecessary headaches.

And this was precisely why she was in the midst of gathering vital information using silent magic.

I heard the audience would consist of leading figures, but most of them are of little importance. These fools truly believe that I and the rest of the royal family are unaware of their impudent stares, gawping expressions, and ill-concealed whispers.

Even as she walked as swiftly as her little legs could carry her, Claudia looked toward the special seats situated behind the altar. They were hidden by a thin cloth canopy. On the other side, the figures of the royal family wavered like a hazy mirage.

One woman with a moderate degree of magical ability.

She suspected it was the queen consort.

Three children possessed of powerful magic. Not much far apart from me in terms of age... And then there's the individual with the most powerful magic among them, powerful enough to rival Karlheinz himself...

Her eyes captured the shadow of the man seated in the center of the special seating area.

That is...my "father," hmm?

Claudia stopped in front of the altar. Even on the other side of the canopy, she felt the king smile.

"Must have been quite a challenge, Karlheinz. Well done."

Silence immediately fell inside the cathedral the moment he spoke. Even the nobles, who had been continuing their idle chatter, shut their mouths as if by

mutual agreement. With that simple act, tension stretched tautly over the vast hall.

Standing behind Claudia, Karlheinz bowed his head deeply. "Not at all, Your Majesty. I simply acted in accordance with your wishes as well as to repay the tremendous favor shown to me by Her Highness's mother, Lady Dorothea."

"Fascinating. I never would have imagined you having close ties to the child's mother."

"When I was young and turned out into the streets, Lady Dorothea, who just so happened to pass me by, shared her meal with me. Even now, I have not forgotten the taste."

I know I told Karlheinz to craft a lie along such lines, but... Claudia contemplated silently. I didn't expect the wealth of emotion in it... Perhaps then, it isn't entirely a groundless fabrication.

However, the details didn't matter to her.

"Let's move on. Princess." Her father addressed her now. "I have only one command for you: place your hand on the crystal."

"Cwystal?"

"You. Go."

At the king's order, the priest stepped forward. The man knelt respectfully, holding the pedestal with the crystal on it, his head bowed and showing no sign of looking at Claudia.

"The magic evaluation of the youngest princess will now commence." The king's voice reverberated throughout the cathedral. "Deception is neither possible nor permitted. Let no one avert their gaze."

Claudia felt his formidable gaze focused on her. But there was someone here even stiffer than her—the queen consort sitting next to her father.

"Your Highness, your hand, please."

First, she reached out toward Karlheinz with a tiny hand and grasped tightly at his clothes.

The method by which the queen had falsified the results of her original evaluation was the hackneyed one of using a fake crystal. Back then, the king held no interest in Claudia, so no one attached any great importance to the outcome. Having regained her memories of her previous life, she could even clearly recall scenes from the earliest parts of this life.

Except this time was different. With a clear goal in mind, her father intended to appraise her magic.

A flawless, genuine crystal and an assessment conducted in front of an audience. This shows he's reasonably confident that I have magical power, hmm?

Feigning unease, Claudia lifted her head and stared up at Karlheinz. Tears welled in her eyes as she tightened her grip on his clothing. When she did, his expression changed to one of concern, even though he knew her true personality.

She had no doubt that her existence appeared even frailer to the attendees. Not a single one of them realized that the tiny six-year-old princess was scheming her heart out.

"Karlheinz..."

"Your Highness, there's nothing to fear. Won't you put your hand on this crystal?"

Claudia nodded, though she trembled. The tension abruptly ratcheted higher in the air and the king's gaze sharpened. She silently cast a spell in her mind, taking extreme care not to arouse anyone's suspicion.

Nullify.

Instantly, the enormous wellspring of magic circulating inside her body pulsated quietly. The power that filled her down to her fingertips changed flow for just a moment. It made her hair and eyes twinkle, but everyone there would simply assume that was an effect of the sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows.

Come now. Prove it.

She extended her small, dainty hand directly toward the transparent crystal.

Prove that I am The Lacking Princess!

Her fingers with nails the color of rose-pink tellins touched the surface of the crystal. At that moment, a fraught stillness settled over the inside of the cathedral. The ringing in her ears echoed almost painfully as everyone's stares honed in on her.

The crystal, the focus of their attention, showed no response whatsoever. A collective gasp resounded in the room.

Once the initial shock wore off, those in the audience started murmuring to each other, not even attempting to be circumspect about it this time.

"It's true...! Princess Claudia truly does have a magicless constitution."

"Beauty matters not in the face of such misfortune, eh..."

"I for one am in shock to learn that one of His Majesty's children is...well, that."

"Disappointing, isn't it? Just a drop of magic would have been enough to transform her future as part of the royal family."

Satisfied, Claudia listened to their silly assumptions.

Excellent. I believe that should do the trick.

She turned around to look up at Karlheinz, pretending to be anxious as she questioned him. "Did I do a good job?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Wonderful, in fact."

"Hooway!"

She sighed in relief, her eyes trained on his face.

Goodness, I'm so glad it worked. With this many people observing, everyone will naturally think it was impossible to falsify the results. Even issuing a gag order would be meaningless.

Then Claudia faced the king sitting behind the canopy and beamed at him.

Thank you for the opportunity, "Father."

And yet, his appraising gaze on her was most certainly *not* a figment of her imagination. But she remained unfazed.

"Noah!" She spun around and called out loudly to her manservant by the cathedral's front doors. Everyone turned their attention to him. "Noah, I'm done!"

He'd been waiting patiently outside the doors and the look on his face now clearly indicated he hadn't expected her to address him directly here. After initially looking a bit bewildered, he immediately smoothed his features into a calm expression uncharacteristic of a young boy. He spoke after a brief pause.

"You were splendid, my lady."

"Tee hee hee! I want you to wub my head lots later, okay?"

The nobles in attendance weren't the only ones staring at Noah. Her father, the king, completely ignored Claudia and asked Karlheinz.

"Karlheinz, is that child the princess's servant?"

"Correct, Your Majesty. While living in the tower, he became Her Highness's personal attendant. She even gave him his name."

"Hmph. Just like picking up a stray dog." The king laughed scornfully, then captured Noah with his gaze. "Eyes the color of obsidian, eh?"

Noah said nothing. He merely stared right back at the monarch then bowed his head properly.

With this, I've accomplished my second goal.

Claudia tugged on one of Karlheinz's sleeves.

"Karlheinz, you pwomised me a tweat..."

"Your Highness, please be patient for a little while longer."

Karlheinz gently chided her, but her father paid them no mind as he spoke again, his tone bored.

"I've seen enough. The appraisal ceremony is over. I want her ready for the tea party after this."

"Wow! A tea party!"

Claudia raised her hands in innocent delight. Karlheinz dropped to one knee next to her and murmured in a voice so low it was almost inaudible.

"Noah seems to be in a bad mood. What do you suggest we do?"

"I have nooo idea what you're talking about."

He exhaled at her response, then escorted her back to Noah.

\*

After the evaluation ended, the lady's maids within the castle helped her change into another outfit before one of them led her to the garden.

"Now then, Princess Claudia, the lawn here is a bit muddy, so please hold my hand as we walk."

"No! I'll hohd Noah's hand!" Claudia reached for his hand as he walked a step behind her. Despite the boy clasping her fingers firmly in his, his mouth was turned down in a sulk.

"My lady... For your safety, I believe it would be best if you held an adult's hand."

"No! I want to hohd your hand, Noah."

Pretending to throw a tantrum, Claudia scowled up at him. When she did, he abruptly looked away, perhaps afraid she saw right through him.

Heh. Even with your face turned away like that, you still can't hide your emotions at all.

Though she found his attitude charming, she refrained from smiling for fear he would take it the wrong way. Despite playing ignorant about Noah's bad mood to Karlheinz, she was well aware of the cause.

In any case, I'll handle him later. Right now I need to concentrate on what comes next.

A tea party for the children of royalty and nobility was being held in the courtyard up ahead.

Karlheinz had explained it to her as such: "Originally, this tea party was intended to be a celebration of your magic, Your Highness, after which you

would have been ushered into the royal castle. However, now that the plan has gone awry, you'll likely be sent back to your tower, though the party itself will still proceed."

If I recall correctly, he also mentioned that only the most magically powerful children of the upper echelons of society have been invited.

Claudia whispered, "Noah, I wouldn't have minded if you stayed behind and rested, you know?"

"My duty is to protect you, Your Highness."

His profile told her he was still brooding, but he spoke clearly and firmly. She could feel his stubbornness in the way he refused to look at her. She giggled then, unable to contain herself anymore.

Just as she expected, Noah's scowl deepened along with his growing displeasure. He took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing.

"I only speak the truth, my lady. I can certainly prove more helpful to you than any adult guards here who might be present at the party."

"Tee hee hee. Yes, yes, I know that better than anyone!"

Despite her high spirits, Claudia couldn't help thinking to herself.

That's precisely why I acted the way I did earlier, even knowing the risk of upsetting you.

Then Claudia and Noah arrived at the garden decorated expressly for the tea party.

"Oy, she's here!"

At the sound of a boy's innocent voice, everyone's attention focused on them. There were around twenty children in total, boys and girls alike, with the oldest around ten years old and the youngest around four.

I see. Surveying them, she nodded in understanding. These children certainly do possess high-level magical abilities.

Until now, it was plain to see that the children had been passing the time by playing together and eating the confections arranged on the table. However,

the moment Claudia arrived, as if on cue, they stopped what they were doing and began observing her in silence. It was a strange sight to witness, so strange that the lady's maids standing behind her flinched within sight of everyone.

"Noah, wait over there pwease."

He'd been standing in front of her, his stance protective. Now, he turned around, his expression saying he took issue with her order. Her stern gaze told him to obey and he nodded reluctantly.

"Understood. Your Highness."

The children's bodyguards and servants stood lined up in front of the hedges encircling the garden. Seeing the nine-year-old Noah join them might have presented a peculiar sight to the children.

It wasn't long before a boy strode over to Claudia and glared down at her. "Oy, dismagus." He meant for the pejorative to sting.

The ends of his golden hair stuck up in an unruly fashion, and he had eyes the color of garnet. He seemed to be around ten years old with an appearance guaranteed to attract attention anywhere he went. Though young, he had handsome features, and his almond-shaped eyes expressed his strong will.

"There's no way you're our little sister," he said.

"Who, me?" She cocked her head in confusion, but there was no need to ask the question since she already knew the answer.

So this is one of my older brothers, hm?

Claudia recalled her conversation with Karlheinz on the topic:

"Your Highness, you have two older brothers and one older sister."

"That's not very many. How supwising. What are their names and the chawactewistics of their magics?"

"Your oldest brother, the crown prince, His Highness Wilhelm, is ten years old. He has a very lively temperament. Despite his rough control of his magic, I believe he will grow up to be a mighty warrior."

In short, this flaxen-headed boy by the name of Wilhelm would be the

country's next king.

"It's *impossible* for a member of our royal family to not have even a trace of magic. Am I really supposed to accept such a weak person as a princess? What a joke!" Wilhelm spat.

She remained silent.

"I'm only attending this tea party because Father said I had to. So don't think I'm talking to you because I want to."

Her silence lengthened.

"At this point, I'm starting to question who your *actual* father is... What is wrong with you?! Why do you keep staring at me like that?!"

Claudia pointed at Wilhelm with her tiny finger and bestowed upon him her most adorable smile.

"Big Bwudder Wil?"

He made a shocked sound in his threat. Eyes wide, Wilhelm immediately took a step back. Yet there was no denying the sudden redness of his ears.

"D...Don't call me that! I don't want to hear it from the likes of you!"

"But you're my big bwudder." Continuing to play the innocent, she trotted closer to Wilhelm. "You're my biggest big bwudder. Wilhelm. You're also the stwongest, right?"

"No... No, I'm not."

"Oh, weally ...?"

Now she looked dejected, letting her shoulders slump despondently.

"You're not stwong, Big Bwudder Wilhelm?"

"I... I am! Of course I am! After all, I'm the crown prince!"

"But you won't pwotect me because I'm weak, right?"

The sound he made this time was more strangled. Her expression devastated, Claudia gazed into Wilhelm's eyes.

"Are you buwwying me even though I'm sho small because you hate me, Big

Bwudder Wilhelm...?"

"That— I..." He looked uncertain now, his expression conflicted.

The need to eliminate outsiders is the flip side of having a strong sense of justice. Now, show me how you'll respond to this quandary.

While she observed him thoughtfully, someone came to Wilhelm's rescue.

"What are you doing, Brother?"

"Ehrenfried!"

A boy approached, his expression exasperated. His silky golden hair was styled in a bowl cut often seen on children. In his hand, he held a thick book.

In their briefing session, Karlheinz had told Claudia, "Your other older brother is Ehrenfried, and he recently turned nine years old. Possessed of an exceptional intellect, he has already developed several types of new magics despite his young age. However, his maturity makes it difficult for him to blend in with those around him; he usually cloisters himself in the library."

This boy was her second oldest brother, Ehrenfried. His eyes were an aquamarine blue and indicated the nature of his magic as calm, cool, and collected. He now looked down on Claudia with an icy gaze.

"Did I not tell you it's in our best interests not to engage with her? By doing so, she'll think we've accepted her as a member of the royal family. How then are we supposed to correct that misunderstanding?"

"I-I don't remember accepting a magicless brat like her!"

"Excellent. Let's keep it that way, shall we? Hey, dismagus. Do you understand now? Normally, someone of your station wouldn't even be permitted to speak to us."

Claudia looked up directly into Ehrenfried's eyes too. Then she addressed him in the same way she had Wilhelm.

"Big Bwudder Ehren!"

Even in the face of her beaming smile, there was no change in Ehrenfried's expression. "I won't be falling for that. Unlike my older brother, I'm not nearly

so naive."

"Hey, who exactly are you calling naive?" Wilhelm grumbled.

"Um, um, Big Bwudder Ehren, I..." Claudia stretched up on her tiptoes and pointed at his hand. "That book!"

He gasped in surprise, his eyes widening.

"I like books too! I have that book in my woom too, and I wead half of it."

"R-Rubbish. You do know this is a book of myths? I simply refuse to believe a child like you can read something this dense, especially with its lack of illustrations."

Aren't you a child as well?

Giggling internally, she continued gazing raptly at Ehrenfried. "Let me see if I wemember what happened. In the beginning, a bijig dwagon appears. With a bang!"

He said nothing, so she continued. "And then a powerful wizard comes! He becomes fwiends with the dwagon and they go on an adbenture together!"

His silence deepened.

"But...just like you said, Big Bwudder Ehren, it was a widdle hard to wead..." Once more, her shoulders drooped and she cast her eyes down sadly. "I only got as far as the lion."

"What...? But that's when the best part starts."

"Oh, weally ...?"

She raised her head, making her eyes sparkle with curiosity. Though not even a moment later, her expression became tearful as she spoke to her second oldest brother.



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"But... I can't wead...books on my own..."

"Urk...!"
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Ehrenfried frowned. Wilhelm gave his younger brother a sidelong glance. Evidently, the second prince didn't have anyone with whom he could discuss books.

"Th-Then...I suppose we can read it together later...but don't think this changes anything!"

"You twuly mean that, Big Bwudder Ehren?!"

"Oy, Ehrenfried!" Wilhelm barked. "Did you already forget what you told me?!"

"I-I mean...! At the very least, this will be more worthwhile to me than being forced to read the books assigned to *you* for your lessons!"

"Say that again! I dare you!"

The other children, a mix of royal relatives and nobility, watched nervously as the brothers started quarreling. It seemed they were unable to stop the two princes from arguing.

Ahhh, how amusing! I know I could have just ignored them, but I'd rather not deal with the fallout later of making enemies of them.

Claudia waved to Noah, who stood a few meters away with the other staff.

The expression on his face was a mix of sympathy for her brothers, who had the misfortune to be the target of her teasing, and exasperation toward her.

Oh...dear.

Both she and Noah realized something at the same time.

Someone is trying to hurt me, hm? However...

She deliberately chose not to act. That would be only natural for a little girl who lacked magic. Though she had been just fine with her decision, what surprised Claudia was Noah suddenly leaping in front of her.

Noah grunted, and a dull *splat* sounded. Mud dripped from his clothing and plopped sluggishly onto the lawn. The adult chaperones' eyes rounded in shock

at the sight.

"Noah!"

He turned around when she called his name. "Your Highness, are you hurt? Is your dress stained?"

"I'm fine. But wook at you, Noah. There's mud all ober you."

"Please don't worry about me. More importantly..."

He faced forward again, his eyes resting on the girl standing in front of him. A girl with soft red hair wore a dress of the finest quality, better than any of the other girls in attendance. But in her hands, she gripped a clump of mud.

"It didn't hit her? Hmph. What a bore."

"H-Hey, Emilia...!" Wilhelm shouted.

Claudia also knew that name. Ah, my older sister.

Emilia glared right at her.

Not just that...she's the queen consort's only child.

Before their visit to the royal capital, Karlheinz had told Claudia many things in the tower in which she lived not knowing she was the legendary witch Adelheid on the inside. However, he of course realized she wasn't a normal little girl, so he did his best not to conceal anything from her.

"The mother of Prince Wilhelm and Prince Ehrenfried is His Majesty's second wife, Lady Cassandra. Although she has a weak constitution, she is the one most favored by the king of all his wives," he'd informed her.

"So how does he feel about his official consoht?"

"As to that...I am not certain I should be the one to tell you."

His evasive response had been more than enough for her to grasp the situation. She'd concluded that her father held no feelings of love for the queen consort. And everyone in the royal castle knew based on his treatment of her.

"Then can you tell me where she's owiginally from?"

"She was a princess of the great power, Magnonia, which has been an ally of

Avianoia for many long years."

"Hmmm, is that so..."

During their conversation, Karlheinz had been kneeling before her on one knee. He looked up at her then. "The queen consort also bore a child to His Majesty, Princess Emilia. Close in age to Prince Ehrenfried, she is eight years old, which makes her your elder sister, Your Highness."

"Does she possess a great deal of magic as well?"

"Yes, likely the most out of all the princesses in this country's history... With the exception of you of course, Your Highness."

In the present, the redheaded princess standing in front of them stared at Claudia with a cold expression. "After all these years, why is such a lowborn child here in our castle?"

"Emilia, stop it! You know you shouldn't behave like this," Wilhelm said. "Where in the world did you get that mud from anyway...?"

"Brother is right. What even possessed you to throw it in the first place?"

"Kindly remain silent, brothers."

"Ngh..."

Both of her older brothers shut their mouths in response to Emilia's dispassionate words. Her purple eyes, the color of amethysts, seethed with a quiet anger.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear. *Everyone* here despises you. A coating of mud suits your filthy, magicless existence *very* well."

Claudia said nothing, simply staring up at Emilia from behind Noah. This only deepened the frost in her sister's expression.

"What? Is there something you'd like to say to me? Or are you so terrified you wish to flee at once?"

Claudia's silence only lengthened. Apparently, Emilia had thought the younger girl would be sobbing in fear. But after a few more moments of gazing at Emilia, Claudia suddenly turned her face away and ignored her elder sister.

"How dare...!" Emilia seethed.

"Noah. Noah, does it hurt anywhere?"

"Your Highness, please."

Claudia tugged on his jacket and forced him to look at her. "Your clothes are a mess. I feel so awful for you..."

"I'm fine. A proper wash will have them right as rain again."

"Then let's go do just that! Come on, Noah, huwwy up!"

She took Noah's hand and pulled him with her as she started walking away. Emilia, still expressionless, started trembling.

"You lowborn... Are you ignoring me? A gutter rat like you?"

"Noah, watch your step ober here. I won't let you fall, okay?"

Claudia told Noah with her eyes she had no intention of engaging with her sister. *Unlike my brothers, her hatred of me is deeply rooted. I'll be returning to the tower tomorrow anyway, so I'd rather avoid the nuisance of dealing with such a malicious person.* 

She explained as much to him, though she made sure no one around them heard her. Noah followed her without hesitation, walking protectively by her side. And then, just as the two of them were about to cross the hedged boundary of the garden, a voice demanded their obeisance.

"Stop right there! Don't you take another step!"

They sensed Emilia raising her hand, winding up to hurl another clump of mud. Except this time, Noah didn't move either; it was clear it wouldn't hit Claudia. Instead, it landed on a man who had appeared from the other side of the hedges.

Everyone sucked in a stunned breath. All the children went pale. He was dressed in white attire embroidered in gold. The mud splattered on his trousers stained the fine fabric.

The man said nothing as he looked down at his own legs. When he did, strands of his short, golden hair fluttered. Then his red, garnet-colored eyes

narrowed and displeasure radiated from him as his expression chilled. With his incredibly beautiful features, he had a somewhat androgynous air about him.



"Oh no..."

Despite standing a distance from Emilia, both Claudia and Noah heard the quiver in her voice.

"I'm...sorr..."

Aha, the man himself. Volkhard Marcus Breitkreuz. The king of this country and my father.

She knew of him from Karlheinz.

In response to his cold stare upon her, Claudia smiled sunnily at him. All the adults went white as sheets, unable to form any words whatsoever. The same went for the children here, including her older brothers.

As for Emilia, her face was stiff and she looked like she'd collapse at any moment. But the one whose expression changed the most was a woman with the same red hair as the girl.

"Emilia!"

She rushed forward and wrapped her fingers tightly around Emilia's wrist.

And this is the queen consort, Irmela, hm?

A lovely, slender woman whose face was currently clouded with panic. "What have you done?!"

"Uh... I-I..."

"How *dare* you play such an outrageous trick on His Majesty! Did you even *consider* the consequences of your actions?!"

"B-But, Mother!" Emilia shook her head stubbornly and jabbed a finger in Claudia's direction. "It wasn't my fault! *She* is to blame! It's all her fault!"

"What...? Is that true?"

Oh me, oh my. It seems suspicion will fall on me even though there's no proof to her words.

Naturally, Claudia didn't give a fig. However, anger burned in Irmela's amethyst eyes as she glowered at the little girl.

"Is that so? And you're absolutely sure the blunder wasn't yours, yes, Emilia?"

"Th-That's right, Mother! This only happened because she was so cruel to me!"

"What an awful child...! Did you hear that, Your Majesty?! The only reason Emilia even behaved in such a manner is because of Princess Claudia...!"

King Volkhard, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke. "Oy."

"Mpf...?!"

Irmela reflexively hugged Emilia tight to protect her.

"Your carping has stretched my nerves thin. Enough already."

The king's tone was so cold and intimidating that the queen consort huddled even more defensively over her daughter. He lightly brushed the mud off his clothes, then practically spat his next words, his irritation clear in his voice.

"Stop screeching like a fishwife over something so trivial. The solution is simple when one's clothes are dirtied—change into a fresh set and toss the old one away."

"Y-Your Majesty..."

"More importantly..." Volkhard pointed directly at Irmela and Emilia. "It's extremely unpleasant to be around people who scream from emotion. Leave, and take Emilia with you."

"But...! Please, listen to me. I'm certain Princess Claudia will harm the other children too! So before that happens—"

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

The queen consort made a choked sound.

King Volkhard's red eyes were the same garnet color as his eldest son. Eye color indicated the nature of someone's magic and the temperament of that person. His blazing crimson eyes alone seemed to subdue everyone around him.

For a moment, Queen Irmela stared at her husband in fright before hanging her head in defeat.

"As...you wish, Your Majesty."

"Mother... I... I—"

"Enough dawdling, Emilia! Come!"

Irmela straightened and began walking briskly, her hand holding Emilia's mudcaked wrist. When she passed by Claudia, the little girl sensed the queen consort staring daggers at her. She could only imagine it because Noah stood in front of her, guarding her with his small, boyish back.

He truly does give his all to protect me, hm?

She buried her face in Noah's back. Of course, he could feel her giggling uncontrollably. She whispered for his ears alone, "Tee hee. Don't pout, Noah. I'm laughing out of joy, you know?"

"My lady..."

"That aside... I want you to continue being a good boy after this, all right?"

Once Irmela and Emilia vanished from sight, the king said bluntly, "Look at me, princess."

Noah initially refused to move, but when Claudia gently pressed her hand against his back, he obeyed the silent signal and immediately stepped aside. Now nothing and no one blocked the path between her and her father. Once more, she looked up at him.

King Volkhard quietly returned her stare with his own. Though his expression lacked his earlier cold ferocity, that did not mean it contained love; it was quite indifferent. Certainly it was not the face of a man who'd never met his daughter in person in the six years since her birth. His golden hair and long eyelashes seemed to glow faintly under the sunlight shining down on the courtyard.

Objectively speaking, he's a beautiful man. However...

With an almost sour expression now, Volkhard finally remarked, "Come here so I can pick you up. That is my right as your father, no?"

Upon hearing those words, Wilhelm's eyes widened in surprise. "What is Father doing...?! Ehrenfried, has he ever hugged you?"

"O-Of course not! He's hardly ever even spoken directly to me..."

Though her brothers were a fair distance from her, magic carried their voices to her. Naturally, neither her father nor any of the attendants at hand heard them, but their faces revealed the same shock her brothers expressed at Volkhard's declaration.

"What's the matter? Come."

"Father?" Claudia sounded timid.

"That's right. I'm your father."

He extended an elegant, long-fingered hand toward Claudia, silently urging her. One of the attendants spoke in an attempt to give her a necessary push.

"Y-Your Highness, quickly now!"

Offending this man will cause a great deal of trouble for us all, hm... I have the feeling he won't show mercy to anyone who disobeys him, even if she is his own daughter.

Everyone's attention was focused on them. Even Noah, standing next to her, watched her quietly.

"Get a move on, child. I'm not known for my patience."

"Fa...ther..."

"Yes. Now come here."

And then, giving him her most innocent, adorable smile, she said, "No!"

Her beautiful father made an astonished sound while his eyes widened in shock, as if struck dumb.

"Y-Your Highness! Such behavior toward His Majesty is unacceptable...!" an attendant said in shock.

"That's right, runt! You can't say something like that to our father!" Wilhelm shouted.

Meanwhile, the king looked down silently at her. Her innocent smile unwavering, she sweetly said, "But it's not my fault. I don't know what a 'father' is. Can somebody tell me?"

"Your Highness!!!"

Volkhard remained silent.

Claudia continued. "I have never met anyone named 'Father.' Not once in my whooole life." Then, still smiling, she narrowed her eyes just the slightest bit before speaking again. "The only one who can hug me is Noah."

"Huh. You don't say." The king's lips curved up in amusement.

"Your Majesty, I beg of you... Her Highness is but a child who has no notion of your status."

"Silence. I didn't ask any of you for your opinions."

Annoyed, her father dismissed his attendant's counsel. Thus far, he'd been standing as he looked down on Claudia. Now, he bent a knee, bringing him to her eye level. His action served to further agitate his retainers.

"You are correct. As far as you're concerned, I'm someone you've never met since you were born. Although blood binds us, I can't rightly be called your father."

She maintained her facade of innocence as she replied, "Yes, it's stwange for me to call you that. Besides, you don't think of me as your daughter either, right?"

He sucked in a surprised breath then.

"Y-Your Highness, please!" the attendant cried.

Volkhard barked out a laugh then curled his hand around Claudia's neck. It was a large hand. Large enough to choke the life out of a small child by itself. As if to suggest this very thing, he exerted the slightest amount of pressure.

Neither of them said a word. Watching them by her side, Noah clenched his own hands into fists. He was doing his best to obey her earlier instruction to "be a good boy."

Meanwhile, the innocent smile remained firmly on her face as she continued staring directly into her father's eyes.

"Oh...? What's this?" A few seconds later, his hand still curled around her neck, his throat started thrumming with stifled laughter. "It all makes sense now. You know, you might be the first person I've ever met who hasn't felt a

shred of fear by my presence."

"Because you're not scawy to me, Father."

"I can see that. Seems my daughter's education in that tower has made her indomitable." With that, Volkhard released her. "Now then, Claudia."

Up until moments ago, he had only addressed her as "princess." Now those same lips called her by her name. He looked at Noah next. The boy, waiting by the closest hedge, bowed his head quietly in response.

Even setting aside her own biased opinion as his mistress, Claudia saw in him both the education he'd received in his brief time as royalty himself and the manners that Claudia had instilled in him over the past month.

"So this is your manservant?"

"Yes! His name is Noah! He's beeery strong and kind!"

Volkhard chuckled. "There's a legend that those with obsidian-colored eyes possess tremendous magic. Hmm... I've made up my mind. He'll undergo a magic evaluation later as well."

"Wow! Isn't that exciting news, Noah?!"

"My lady..."

He was about to say something, but he thought better of it and instead lowered his head again. Her father stood up then and summoned her older brothers.

"Wilhelm. Ehrenfried."

Her brothers flinched then immediately rushed over, dropping into respectful bows before him.

"Y-Yes, Father!"

"What can I do for you, Father...?!"

Claudia noticed the other children had also fearfully lowered their heads.

"I trust Claudia will be attending the function tomorrow night?" the king asked.

"The night party, my liege?"

"Yes. I'll have the staff prepare a room for her. As her older brothers, you two will help her navigate the event."

Oh dear. But I was told I'd be sent back to the tower as soon as this tea party ended.

Her brothers must have thought the same thing because they looked confused for a moment before schooling their features and nodding in agreement.

"Yes, Father! I'll take care of my little sister!"

"Father, I shall treat her with care as well."

"Good." Then the king gazed down upon her once more. "Enjoy it to your heart's content. Until we meet again."

He's acting as if he's acknowledged me as his daughter, hm?

Turning on his heel, Volkhard headed back toward the main part of the castle.

I know the truth, though. He simply intends to use me to fulfill his objective.

Now that only the children and their guards remained in the garden, they all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"That... That was terrifying."

"Lord Wilhelm! So that was His Majesty, hmm?"

"Y-Yes... M-Magnificent, isn't he?! Our father is amazing!"

Amid the sudden clamor, Noah rushed over to her and touched the nape of her neck where her father had squeezed. "Your Highness, are you hurt?"

"Tee hee. I'm fine, Noah."

He paused before asking, "You deliberately provoked him, didn't you?"

Claudia grinned in response. "I'm sorry for fohcing you to endure that. But I acquired important information."

"What do you mean?"

"I learned why he summoned me to the castle."

He grunted in surprise, and she clasped his hand tightly.

"Come, Noah. It's well past time to clean up your cwoves."

He said nothing and merely followed her lead as she dragged him out of the garden. Her mind churned with thoughts as they walked.

Karlheinz's explanation wasn't enough to convince me that Father desires only war. Just because he's thinking of war with another country is no reason for him to stage such an ostentatious show of my magic evaluation after so many years of neglect.

To say nothing of the fact that Claudia was six years old. Regardless of how powerful her magic proved upon reassessment, it was simply unheard to send a child into battle.

Which leads me to conclude that war is not his only purpose. What's more, it isn't necessary for him to fixate on the royal family to add to his fighting strength. Then...he could have just wanted to prove that Claudia has magical powers...

She analyzed their earlier exchange and finally came to a realization.

Father's true aim is—

It wasn't *her* he wanted. No, he'd been hoping for what would happen *after* the assessment proved her powers.

He wanted to expose the dishonesty of the magic evaluation the queen consort, Irmela, held six years ago. And when the truth came to light, he would have been able to banish her.

Claudia herself had been exiled from the royal castle shortly after her birth, when the results of the magic evaluation showed she lacked magic. Though Irmela had been the mastermind behind the plot, her father had turned a blind eye back then. She suspected this had been a trivial issue to him at the time.

However, at present, King Volkhard found Queen Irmela's very existence loathsome.

To her benefit, she's royalty from a major power, and her marriage to Father is a political one. In order to expel her from our royal family, her homeland

would demand conclusive proof that she was at fault. Without that, he can't divorce her.

And without such evidence, he risked war because of the separation. As cruel as her father seemed, even he wished to avoid the aggravation of war.

That is why he zeroed in on me. Excluding exceptions like the contract Noah and I have, one's magical capacity is fixed from birth to death. So if I possess magic now, it would mean the appraisal conducted soon after my birth was fraudulent.

The half-siblings she met here today were all exceptionally blessed in terms of magic. Considering they all shared the same father, it made it all the more difficult to think Claudia had not a speck of magic. It seemed the king had also come to this conclusion.

Now I understand why the queen is suddenly concerned about me again after leaving me alone all this time. She must have figured out Father's goal of expelling her, which explains why she sent assassins to kill me. Her decision six years ago was born out of a simple dislike of my existence, but now it's come back to haunt her.

If the truth of her fraud was revealed, Irmela would be treated like a criminal. Even should she be repatriated to her homeland, at best, she faced confinement, and at worst, capital punishment.

My very presence is proof of Irmela's wrongdoing. It's no wonder, then, that she wants me dead as soon as possible.

Still pulling Noah by his hand, she mulled over the situation as they walked on the lawn.

For her, the perfect opportunity to kill me is while I'm here at the castle. And she most certainly will not let it slip her by...

An image of Volkhard's retreating figure floated in her mind.

This is also the perfect opportunity for Father. By keeping me in the castle, he's trying to force the panicked Irmela to show her true colors once and for all.

Just as she'd thought, he didn't think of her as a daughter at all.

"Heh. Heh heh heh heh."

"My lady?"

"I'm starting to enjoy myself. At this point, perhaps I no longer have to hold back."

Claudia and Noah stood on a gently sloping hill a bit of a distance from the courtyard they'd been in. Grass stretched all around, and the sky was the bright blue of early winter. With this scene as a background, she began talking secretly.

"Noah, I want you to wisten to me."

She went on to confide in him, and Noah frowned deeply.

"And there you have it. Of course, there's a chance I'm wrong."

"I suggest we consult Karlheinz on our actions moving forward."

"I agree we need his help, but first, the matter of your cwoves, Noah. Be patient while I clean you up."

"No, that won't be necessary."

She gasped then. Before she even reached out toward him, Noah raised a hand over himself. A soft, gentle light bloomed. Purification magic gushed forth, enveloping the stains caused by the mud Emilia had thrown at them.

And just as quickly, the light disappeared. All that remained was his uniform in its original pristine state, not a hint of dirt to be found anywhere.

Then Noah looked right into Claudia's eyes.

"I can already do this much on my own."

She had no response to that, though she did think his sullen expression was very age appropriate. His scowl deepened when her shoulders started shaking because she could no longer contain her laughter.

"I know you may only see me as a child, but..." he began.

"I'm a child too, you know?"

"The real you isn't."

Claudia beamed at him suddenly. Without replying right away, she cast a spell in her mind. Noah noticed the vast barrier she put up all around them. She took the opportunity to cast another spell, a new magic. One that painted the landscape of this hill.

He caught his breath in amazement.

The hilltop, once covered with grass, was now completely blanketed with an array of colorful flowers.

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"Ready, set, thump!"

"Gah!"
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She grabbed his hand, pulled hard, and tumbled down with him in the field of flowers created through magic. They rolled around together, inhaling the sweet fragrance of the blooms. The pair faced each other, surrounded by the flowers. Though he lay down obediently enough, his face clearly showed signs of protest.

"Your Highness... Again with the wasteful use of magic."

"But aren't the flowers sooo pwetty?"

She had made a variety of them bloom instead of choosing a specific type. Reds and pinks, light blues, purples, and yellows as if dyed by the sun itself—the vivid colors complemented Noah's jet-black hair and eyes beautifully.

Supremely satisfied, Claudia reached out to Noah. "You know, I was thinking I'd let her mud ball hit me earlier."

She touched the cloth covering his stomach. Though it had been stained just moments ago, it was now sparkling clean.

"So you didn't have to pwotect me."

"I know. But...I couldn't take it anymore."

"Then why didn't you at least use magic to aboid it? I have taught you many spells you could have used."

He answered her in a displeased tone. "I'm the one who should be asking you that."

"Noah."

"Why have you been acting like that ever since the appraisal? That's why I didn't want to use magic. You're deliberately trying to draw His Majesty's attention to me."

His obsidian-colored eyes stared right into hers.

"Almost like you're trying to make him think my existence is more important than yours, a princess's."

Noah had realized her intention from the start, which explained his foul mood this whole time. Claudia had known the reason for his attitude, but she dared not make any excuses.

"It was only natural I wanted to show you off to my father since I'm so proud of you."

"Your Highness."

"Because you must understand, Noah..." She smiled at her adorable manservant. "Your potential is practically limitless."

"Urk..."

Meaning he could choose a splendid future for himself. He had so much magic in him, and he'd shown his innate gift of controlling it and mastering it in such a short period of time.

He was descended from royalty and possessed an extremely clear, sharp mind. His supple limbs moved well and he would continue to grow more and more. She could easily imagine the dashing figure he would cut as an adult, tall and well-built.

"Your strength is one that everyone should acknowledge. At the very least, it should be acknowledged by this country's king, its highest authority."

"Nh... I..."

"It is quite possible my older brothers Wil and Ehren will want you for their own, you know."

Noah frowned at that.

Much better than being an exiled princess's manservant. In truth, if you were to become an attendant to my father or one of my brothers, the possibilities for your future would be endless.

Though she didn't give voice to her thoughts, he still sensed them.

"That isn't funny."

He sat up quietly and stared down at Claudia, who remained lying on the ground. His eyes smoldered with resentment. She rolled over so she was lying facing up now and when she looked up, she found his eyes leagues more dazzling than the sky itself.

"I told you, didn't I? I'm fine with being your dog."

"Yes, I wemember." She smiled and nodded slowly.

Noah, his earnest expression tinged with anger, continued. "You saved me."

A late autumn breeze blew through, shaking the flowers blooming out of season.

"When I escaped from under my uncle's thumb and unthinkingly transported myself to that forest, I really thought I'd die just like that, alone and forgotten... I hated how miserable I was and how everything had been stolen from me. But even more, I hated the fact that I couldn't do anything about any of it."

She remembered him when they first met. Despite his young age, he had been fighting fiercely against magic. Even as he struggled on his hands and knees, he'd glared up at Claudia. Now she listened attentively as he told her what had been going through his mind at the time.

"After I betrayed you and went back home, I'd made my peace with dying there if it would have come to that. But then you came to my rescue again, and you even helped me mourn my little sister. And then...you praised me, telling me how well I did."

Claudia nodded again, the smile still on her face.

"Right then and there...for the first time in my life, I thought to myself, 'I want to keep living.'"

Since the incident happened only a month ago, she recalled everything

clearly. Back then, Noah had been on the verge of tears. But he fought the urge desperately and instead pledged his fealty to her. His gaze now as he told her all this was far more earnest than it had been then.

"That's why I'm okay with being your dog... I don't need another way to live."

Words truly apt for a brave and loyal hound.

He's always honest, isn't he?

Even though he often put on a brave front and pretended to be more mature than he actually was, he did all of it so Claudia would rely on him. She was well aware of how he always tried to protect her—so she decided to be honest with him in turn.

"Speaking of, Noah..." She stretched her small hand and rested it gently on his cheek. "You only say such a thing because you simply don't know any other way to live."

He made a soft sound of protest and grimaced. "No, you're wrong... Because I...you..."

"Yes?"

When she prompted him, Noah squeezed his fingers into tight fists. He hung his head low, then unclenched one of his hands to cover his face before mumbling quietly, like he was talking to himself. "Because I..." He paused for a long moment. "Because I worry about you."

Such refreshing words to hear. Others had seldom worried about her, both in her previous life as Adelheid and her current one as the exiled princess Claudia. When she looked back on this past month, Noah's attempts to protect her could also be described as genuine concern for her.

"The past you...is dead."

"She is, indeed. If she did still live, she'd be an old woman of five hundred and eighteen. Tee hee!"

"Supposedly, you committed suicide."

At the mention of her past, Claudia's smile turned wistful, her eyes narrowing.

"The reason was never recorded for posterity's sake. Any last will or testament you left behind has been kept hidden by your disciples," Noah said.

"Oh, you are just so cute! Clearly, you wesearched all this in secret, hm?"

"I have no intention of asking you why you died. But in your current life as Claudia, you've inherited whatever danger the strongest witch Adelheid faced, one that suddenly led her to choose death by her own hand."

Goodness...the sincerity in his eyes shows me he's truly worried about me.

She slowly raised herself up to a sitting position in the field of flowers. Perhaps she had petals stuck in her hair, because Noah touched the strands as he continued speaking.

"Why do you go out of your way to provoke your father?"

"Because I thought it would make things more entertaining."

"Really? Is that *really* all it is? Or did you think that by incurring his displeasure then shifting his attention to me, you could manipulate him into taking me away from you?"

Noah had come to understand Claudia incredibly well in such a short amount of time.

"Tee hee."

It was exactly as he said. She wanted this outstanding ball of potential otherwise known as her manservant to find futures besides the one at her side.

I mean, he's such a good boy, so it's only natural I want the best for him. She felt this from the bottom of her heart. I want him to know how vast the world is, and I want him to meet all sorts of people.

Noah, that's where a grand future awaits you.

Instead of saying that out loud, Claudia touched the left side of Noah's chest.

He started in surprise. Not a moment later, a strong wind rushed over them and he automatically closed his eyes. Then, when he opened them again, she was in her sixteen-year-old form, and he looked nineteen.

"Your Highness..."

The adult Noah gave her an exasperated glance, and the adult Claudia grinned in response.

"Surprised?"

He said nothing, merely stared at her face.

"Noah, do you remember what Father said? There's a party being held in the castle tomorrow night."

He most certainly didn't miss the fact that she was clearly changing the subject. He also realized it would be pointless trying to press her any further, so he hung his head briefly and sighed. His eyelashes, long even in his adult form, gave his irritated expression a hint of sensuality.

"What exactly is expected at this party anyway?"

"Only children are in attendance at these so-called night parties, enjoying the function as they gorge themselves on snacks and juices. It's the only day without adults chaperoning them, meaning they can eat as many sweets as they like and stay awake as late as they wish. Sounds fun, don't you think?"

Claudia readied herself to stand up. Noah, who'd predicted her movement, had stood up first and now extended a hand to help her up. He'd been taller than her even in their younger forms, but now he towered over her. She had to crane her neck back to see his face. Furthermore, his shoulders were broad and his physique was solid, muscles toned. Claudia could even tell that his body retained its sense of limberness, suggesting he still had plenty of room to grow.

"However, I much prefer an evening soirée for adults than a children's night party." She pressed her palms against Noah's and twined their fingers together.

"Then you're planning to sneak in like this? We'll likely be tossed out on our ears for trying to enter without an invitation."

"I know. I suppose we'll just have to save that particular fun for when we're real adults, hm?"

When she smiled softly at him, he sucked in a breath. Then she shut her eyes and started humming a tune very quietly. She had unconsciously chosen one from her birthplace five hundred years ago, a song no one alive now knew. The

musical scale was gentle and beautiful but melancholic. While singing the old song, her hands still holding Noah's, Claudia spun the two of them around slowly.

It wasn't enough to be called a true dance. Just her simply passing the time.

When she wound one arm around his back, he looked briefly uncomfortable before placing a hand on her waist. Then, in an unexpected move, he forcefully pulled her close and positioned them both for a proper dance. She was only the teensiest bit shocked.

"You can dance?"

"A little."

As expected of a former crown prince. Though he'd spent much of his young life as a slave, he must have received a formal royal education before then.

"More importantly...I'd like to hear the rest of the song."

Perhaps he's embarrassed by this position?

He stubbornly avoided her gaze, but she refrained from mentioning that. When Claudia started singing out loud in the field of flowers, Noah took the lead and slowly whirled them around as he supported her weight.

His steps were leisurely as he matched them to hers. He was a much better dancer than she could have ever imagined, and that knowledge delighted her. Because of his firm hold on her as he led the steps, she had no problem moving in the adult form she hadn't taken on in a while. Petals twirled in the wind and her hair, styled by Noah, fluttered softly too along with her dress.

"You truly can do anything, hm, Noah? Your swordsmanship has improved tremendously, and you're gradually becoming more skilled with magic too."

"Of course. I'll master everything you teach me." The low timbre of his adult voice carried well. It clearly conveyed the sincerity of his thoughts.

Before she knew it, his eyes, which had been averted, now locked onto hers. She beamed at his frankness. "How *ever* did I get so lucky as to acquire such a studious, hardworking manservant?"

"And yet you're the one who's talking about throwing me away." He scowled.

"If you always planned on letting me go someday, then why did you allow me to become your servant?"

Her tone was conciliatory when she answered him, as if comforting a helpless child. She continued dancing, her steps airy. "Because a child like you will soon waste his life if he isn't given the role of living for someone else."

The moment Noah's feet stopped, Claudia too gave up the pretense of dancing.

"You see, in my past life, I encountered many a magician just like you. I even had quite a few with such personalities among my disciples. Unfortunately, I let them die in the war..."

Perhaps her brief brush with the memory of her death as Adelheid led her to recall the emotions Claudia experienced in her previous life. And from there, came the words of dear faces she would never see again.

"Lady Adelheid. We offer our lives in service to you and this country."

"Great Witch Adelheid. We have no fear of staking our lives in battle if you are the one we leave behind."

The expression in your eyes is the exact same as theirs, she thought.

She smiled sadly as she remembered them. "My plan was to raise you so that no matter where you went, everyone would need you."

"But...that's not what I want."

"You're a strong, kind boy. I'm proud to have you as my manservant." Just like she did before, Claudia again pressed her hand over Noah's heart. "Which is precisely why you ought to choose a more magnificent future for yourself than simply staying by my side."

He grunted when she pushed him. A soft light appeared. He stumbled back a few steps and reverted to being a nine-year-old child.

After looking down at his hands, Noah raised his head and frowned up at her.

"Summon Karlheinz please," she instructed.

Silence from him.

Claudia was the only one still in her adult form crafted through magic. She knew it was cruel of her to say the name of a grown-up who wasn't Noah. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but his face contorted in frustration and he hung his head instead.

After several long moments, he finally spoke.

"Understood. I'll return shortly."

"Thank you."

Having swallowed his objections, he turned around and began walking away from her.

I'm sorry, Noah. But you're too precious to me.

She watched the little boy's back from atop the hill covered in flowers.

It's my duty as both your mistress and teacher to make sure you can thrive anywhere and send you off to a bright future.

\*

"Waaah... Hic... Hic..."

The country of Avianoia's eldest princess, Emilia, sobbed in a hidden corner of the palace. Dried mud clung to her hands and blackened the space under her fingernails. Unable to even wipe the tears from her eyes, the young girl had been crying in secret all alone for some time now.

Her mother's scolding voice echoed in her mind.

"How could you have thrown mud at His Majesty? I didn't raise you to be such an awful child, Emilia!" she'd yelled.

"B-But, Mother...! Just as I told you earlier, that child—"

"Enough! Do you think it even matters now?!"

When they'd been at the garden party, her mother had believed her lie. But ever since her father had expelled them from the courtyard, she wouldn't listen to a word Emilia said. "I simply cannot believe he told us to leave! Us! The queen consort and her daughter! He disregarded us and let that filthy child birthed by a base commoner stay?!"

"Eeek...!"

"Emilia, what even possessed you to act so uncouthly in the first place?!"

"I-I'm sorry... Mother, I'm so very sorry...!" No matter how much she'd apologized, her mother hadn't listened. "Mother, I...!"

Then a retainer appeared. "Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but the magicians from Magnonia have arrived for their discussion with you."

"I'll be there right away. Emilia, you shall stay here and reflect on your behavior."

With that sharp remark, her mother went off somewhere accompanied by her retainer. Since then, Emilia had been at a complete loss in this rear garden.

I just... I just thought that if I tormented the girl enough to drive her away, it would make Mother happy!

But she hadn't been able to tell her mother that. Dejected, she continued crying helplessly.

If only Claudia didn't exist... If only Claudia wasn't my younger sister...

Rage began swirling deep in the pit of her stomach. Sadness and resentment made a mess of her mind. She remained stymied by her inability to wipe her tears away with dirty hands. And then...

"Eeep!"

No one else should be here in this rear garden, but a figure suddenly leaped out from beyond the tall hedge. The person froze, startled by her presence too. Though her tears blurred her vision, Emilia nevertheless recognized him.

"You're her servant..."

A young boy around her age with black hair and eyes stood in front of her. In truth, she'd thought him quite handsome ever since she first saw him. His looks were striking enough to draw even Emilia's attention, and she was a *princess*.

His double eyelids and eyelashes as long as her own drew attention. Simply staring into those dark, mysterious eyes made her feel like she was being sucked in. His dignified features almost made her believe he was a prince of

some foreign land.

Though he seemed to be roughly the same age, he was much, much taller than her. He also looked very mature, perhaps because of his taciturn aura and calm expression.

"I apologize for startling you."

Emilia flinched when he unexpectedly bowed his head quietly at her. "A-As if the likes of you could startle me."

"But..." He likely wanted to say something because he'd noticed Emilia crying.

Embarrassed now, she hurriedly lowered her eyes. She no longer cared about dirtying her face, so she lifted her hands to wipe the tears away.

"You mustn't rub your eyes like this." The boy caught one of her wrists to stop her.

"What...?! How dare a vulgar servant like you touch me!"

"I humbly beg your pardon. However, you might injure or sicken yourself by using those mud-stained hands on your face."

Except her handkerchief was tucked away in a concealed pocket of her dress. Taking it out with her filthy hands would mean ruining the dress. Emilia had no other means of wiping her tears away.

The boy hesitated for a moment before he spoke softly to her. "Would you keep what happens next a secret from the adults?"

"Huh...?"

He whispered a spell incantation. She *thought* it sounded very short. And yet, light overflowed gently from his hand, forming a sphere that floated airily.

"Wh-What is this...?! What are you going to do to me?!"

"Please be quiet."

She stifled a shriek. The way he said those words so calmly irritated her. The boy paid no attention to Emilia. His focus was entirely on guiding the ball of light.

It drifted toward her hands and surrounded them. She found its warmth

comforting, then it disappeared in an instant, as if popping.

"They're clean..."

She blinked repeatedly, baffled by the sight of her clean hands.

"This is your doing?"

"Yes, a simple purification spell. With those hands, you should now be able to retrieve your own handkerchief, yes?"

"Ah..."

That was when she finally understood why the boy had used magic.

No. Don't tell me he did it for my sake?

Her heart started pounding.

The incantation. Normally, one can't use magic without reciting a long incarnation, but all this boy did was whisper one word. Could it be that he excels at magic?

He stepped away from Emilia and bowed politely with his eyes cast down.

"I'm in the midst of an errand, so I'll be taking my leave now. Again, my apologies for startling you."

"Oh! W-Wait..."

The boy ran off again before she could stop him.

That servant... I believe his name is Noah.

Her heartbeat sped up even more and her cheeks grew flushed with heat. No longer crying, Emilia pressed both of the hands Noah had cleaned on the left side of her chest. Then she murmured to herself.

"He's incredible... I want him...badly..."

## **Chapter 6**

In his dreams, he often sees an unforgettable memory from his childhood. The paving stones on which he walks barefoot are freezing cold. Under the falling snow, his body is so cold that he can't move and hunger gnaws at his insides.

Is this how I die?

He always stops walking when that thought flashes through his mind. He's holding on to dear life only through sheer willpower. If it breaks, then it's all over. That much is clear to him, even though no adults in the icy city care enough to stop and show concern for him.

It doesn't matter... Nothing matters... I'm fine if it all ends here...

An irresistible drowsiness overcomes him, as if about to snatch everything away. He leans against a cold brick wall and contemplates closing his eyes slowly. This is the exact moment he hears her voice.

"Wake up! Please, wake up! Get a hold of yourself!"

He grimaces at the awfully loud voice. All he wants to do is sleep, but the girl keeps shouting, shaking him rudely.

"Hey, can you hear me? Can you smell this? It's soup. Nice, warm soup..."

"Ugh..."

"Wake up. Please, drink some. Can you open your mouth for me? Yes, just like that. Good. Drink it a little at a time...!"

Warm soup flows from the bowl being pressed to his lips. The taste on the tip of his tongue is more delicious than anything he's eaten until now. Even though the soup itself contains only vegetable scraps and a simple seasoning of salt.

"Oh, I'm so glad... Are you feeling a little warmer now? If you are, come here. I know this is just the back of a wagon, but we can sleep here together until the snow stops. We won't freeze."

Of course, the girl is a stranger to him. He's never seen her before, but she

smiles at him genuinely and reaches out with a hand to help him.

"That was your soup just now, wasn't it...?"

"Don't worry about me, silly! I already stuffed myself full, and besides, that was just a reward for singing well!"

As soon as she finishes speaking, her stomach gurgles with hunger. She places a hand over it, pressing down, then looks at him with her golden eyes the color of yellow sapphires, and huffs out an embarrassed laugh. The cold wind ruffles her light hair, the color of milk tea.

"Heh... I'm fine, truly. All I need to fill my stomach is you surviving this night and saying 'Good morning!' to me with a smile tomorrow!"

I don't say anything in response to that.

"Now, come over here! I'm Dorothea, and I'm a singer. What's your name?"
"I... My name is..."

Karlheinz knows of no food that tastes as warm and irreplaceable as that soup. After becoming the country's chief conjurer and amassing a modest fortune of his own, he's never had to worry about food again. But he can still never forget the soup, seasoned only with salt, he drank twenty years ago.

\*

That night, Avianoia's chief conjurer, Karlheinz, had an audience with its king, Volkhard.

"A job very well done on bringing Claudia here, Karlheinz."

Seated on his throne in the audience chamber, King Volkhard seemed to be in higher spirits than usual. But Karlheinz knew the man was at his most dangerous when he looked like this.

"A pure child but a strong-willed one too. So was she actually sick this past month or was that a lie?"

"It absolutely was not a fabrication, my liege. As far as I am aware, when we met, she was suffering from a high fever."

"Ha ha! Is that right?"

Volkhard dismissed Karlheinz's lie with a laugh.

"Claudia's eyes were a light golden color, weren't they? Though the color of someone's eyes indicate the nature of their magic, the shade itself is a rough measure of the *strength* of their magic. With how light hers are, then, it's easy to accept her magicless state, just as you reported." The lamplight reflecting in Volkhard's crimson eyes wavered. "Surely you don't expect me to believe simply what I see?"

After a long pause, Karlheinz said only, "Your Majesty."

"Don't insult my intelligence or yours by telling me you, too, have been fooled by her. Although...I suspect Claudia herself doesn't think she can completely deceive you or me."

Karlheinz agreed with him on that point too.

Princess Claudia is exceedingly clever. So much so that it's hard to believe she's a six-year-old girl who had been confined for such a long time without even the benefit of a proper upbringing.

Intelligent and deeply thoughtful, she viewed the world from a mature perspective. Even her bold and fearless attitude was convincing, as if the odds of success were in her favor.

Although she hasn't allowed anyone to assess her magic, I have no doubt her capacity for it is enormous. Someone like me...perhaps even the king himself, can't hold a candle to her. Additionally, Her Highness insists on concealing this truth from everyone around her.

During his stay in the inn near her tower over the past month, he had visited her and Noah at every possible opportunity. He'd even assisted them occasionally when they helped the residents of the nearby village solve their problems. However, each time, Claudia played the part of a magicless little girl, letting both Noah and Karlheinz take the credit.

As for the magic evaluation, she had camouflaged her powers in front of the crystal. Most of the people in attendance likely never even noticed the subtle change. But anyone used to controlling their own vast magical energy on a daily basis would have detected it no matter what. The fluctuation in magic had been

clear to him. Of course, then, this meant Volkhard—said to be the most brilliant magician among all the kings in this country's history—must have sensed Claudia's magic too.

Princess Claudia would have wanted to hide her magic from her father the most...but it's likely she was prepared in case she couldn't manage that feat.

He lowered his eyes thoughtfully.

Which means she came to the royal castle aware of all this because she didn't want the villagers caught up in unnecessary troubles, regardless of the consequences to her own person... Naturally, I should steel myself for whatever comes as well.

Still, Karlheinz chose his words carefully. If he said the wrong thing now, he risked creating problems for the princess.

"I could not obtain definitive evidence concerning Her Highness's potential for magic. Regrettably, I was unable to inform you in advance, as it would have led to various issues if I had mentioned anything unexpected at that stage."

"Interesting. Let me take a gander as to why. Perhaps you thought it would be reckless to tell me she possessed magic without proof because you feared I would use that as justification to divorce the queen, thereby leading to a break in relations with Magnonia?"

Karlheinz took a moment before responding. "I would like to extend my sincerest apologies for not informing you sooner, Your Majesty."

"I don't accept your apology. Did you *actually* expect me to forgive you for this?" Volkhard's tone was ice-cold. The pupils of his garnet eyes were blown wide with fury as he went on.

"Despite being my subject, you tried to hide things from me. How could you, the chief magician, commit an act of folly that could be interpreted as treason against our nation? You understand the gravity of this situation, don't you, Karlheinz?"

The king chose his words deliberately.

"That what you've done is more than reason enough for me to kill you."

Karlheinz said nothing.

Volkhard stared at him like he was an object or livestock, nothing of import. Bloodlust began radiating from the king, the heavy pressure constricting around Karlheinz's throat, yet he didn't flinch. He simply demonstrated his loyalty calmly.

"I swear on my soul that there is no treachery in my heart toward you, Your Majesty."

"You aren't the judge of that."

"I know. Therefore...if you truly cannot abide my presence, please take my life as you will." He closed his eyes and knelt in front of the throne, offering his head in a gesture of devotion to his master.

On the whole, I suppose this is in line with what I expected.

Karlheinz had prepared himself for any eventuality since he first set eyes on Claudia a month ago.

When he'd been a starving, freezing child on the verge of death, a lone girl with pale brown hair and golden eyes had saved him. Smiling, she'd told him she was training to be a songstress. Her musical troupe was poor and consisted of people without relatives, but he knew he couldn't stay there forever. The day after the snow stopped, Karlheinz left them and began striving desperately to repay his debt to her.

Thanking her for the soup that night with more soup simply wasn't enough. No amount of food would be enough. And no amount of clothing, no matter how fine, could compare to the warmth of the blanket she shared with him on that bone-chilling winter night.

So when his abilities as a magician were acknowledged by others and he officially gained a position serving the country, he went searching for her once more. However, at the time, Karlheinz was told that "a rich man in a faraway country bought her." Never mind meeting her then, he didn't even know if she still lived. After that, he'd lived his life resigned to never seeing her again. And then he'd laid eyes upon Claudia in the tower.

This little girl possessed the same color hair and eyes as the girl who'd helped

him. His eyes had unwittingly widened at the shadow of the girl he once knew in Claudia's smiling expression. Then he remembered rumors about the princess's mother being a diva of some renown. In his upset over being unable to save his savior, he had unquestioningly accepted the explanation that she'd been taken away to another country. If the person who bought her had been someone of high social standing, the truth of their identity certainly wouldn't have been revealed to him. In hindsight, he knew he should have realized as much.

Even so, since it was His Majesty's order, I had to bring Her Highness as a prospect for the war effort.

Clearly, Volkhard had been confident about Claudia having magical power. It would have been even more convenient for him if she possessed a capacity for it as tremendous as the two princes and Princess Emilia. But even if her magic had been minuscule, that would have been pretext enough for the king to divorce Queen Irmela. Such must have been his liege's thinking. The situation embroiling this country and others was different now than it was six years ago, when Volkhard turned a blind eye to Claudia's banishment.

So keeping all this in mind, Karlheinz followed orders and tried his best to persuade her with the truth. To his chagrin, his desired outcome hadn't come to pass; Claudia refused to go to the castle.

And of course she did... After all, no matter how one considers it, there is something inherently wrong about summoning a six-year-old child for the purpose of war.

If he'd forcibly taken her back to the capital then, he knew Volkhard wouldn't have been displeased with him, but Karlheinz hadn't wanted to do that to her. That was precisely why he'd pulled the wool over Volkhard's eyes and used her falling ill as an excuse to stave the king off for a month. From that point on, he knew that when he eventually took Claudia with him, he would incur Volkhard's wrath.

As His Majesty said, this act is treason. Thus it would not surprise me to be sentenced and executed on the spot.

With that thought, he closed his eyes.

But...with this, I finally fulfilled my long-cherished desire. I was able to protect her.

Volkhard's intent to kill him sharpened the more time passed. "Though you may be the chief conjurer, you're also someone who doesn't obey my commands. And the more powerful you are, the greater of a hindrance you become."

After a beat of silence, Karlheinz replied, "It is as you say, Your Majesty."

"Hm. You do understand that if you plead your case, the manner of your death will be unsightly and agonizing, don't you?"

Karlheinz didn't care, though he wouldn't say so out loud.

Volkhard stood up from his throne. Karlheinz bowed his head even more deeply.

A bright voice, completely out of place, reverberated in the audience chamber. "Aha!"

It took him completely off guard.

"So this is where you were, Karlheinz!"

Impossible. Why is she here...?

He couldn't believe his eyes.

"You meanie! You pwomised me! You pwomised me you would sing me a song before I go to sleep tonight!"

A tiny girl had opened the double doors to the room. One with hair the color of milk tea and eyes the color of gold. The child who reminded him of his savior tottered clumsily toward him.

"Princess Claudia..."

"So!" She beamed as she stood in front of him. "I ask you to return him to me, Father."

The king met her request with utter silence. His expression didn't change at all despite his own flesh and blood smiling at him.

"You're making a nuisance of yourself, Claudia. How did you even get in here?

Take yourself elsewhere—now."

"No! I won't go anywhere. I want Karlheinz!" Her lips twisted into a moue of pique and she whirled around to stare at the kneeling magician. "You wanna go with me too, right?!"

"Your Highness... You should not be here. Please return to your quarters."

He couldn't stop his anxiety from leaking into his voice as he tried to keep her in check. He knew she wasn't an ordinary child, but she was nevertheless six years old. Regardless of the power of her magic, things wouldn't end well for her if she roused Volkhard's anger. The king himself would make sure of that.

Because if he decided she was a threat to him, he would eliminate even his own daughter. And just as Karlheinz expected, the other man advanced on Claudia, his gaze cold and pupils dark with fury.

"Your Majesty, please, I beg of you. Her Highness is young and only wishes to play."

"Silence. I don't remember giving you leave to speak, Karlheinz."

The king's aura went beyond menacing—he was ready to kill her. Karlheinz's instincts warned him of the danger in this situation. Expressionless, he tried to devise a way to protect Claudia.

Should His Majesty intend to harm Her Highness... If it means committing treason against the king...

"Hmph." A twisted smile formed on Volkhard's handsome face. "Look, Claudia. Look at how *my* retainer, who should have been loyal to *me*, has fallen under your spell."

"Tee hee hee! That's because he lubbs me very much!"

"Yes, I can see that. However..." He gripped her face with one hand. "Your education is lacking, daughter of mine. At the very least, proper etiquette dictates you don't steal others' possessions, but obviously, you haven't even been taught that much."

"Your Majesty!" Karlheinz interjected.

"Now let me see if I can't correct that and teach my daughter in the way a

father would, hm?"

Volkhard prepared to recite an incantation. Karlheinz raised his head and searched for a counterspell to stop him. It was only a moment, but even that moment felt like an eternity.

I don't care if I'm executed here. Because...no matter how much power one gains, it's meaningless unless those we wish to protect are still alive.

He had regretted it ever since losing track of his savior. And the instant he'd realized she was Claudia's mother was also the instant he knew she was dead.

This time I must protect her. This time for sure...

Just as he moved to act with that one thought in mind—

"Take that!"

"Your Highness...!"

Claudia, whose face Volkhard cupped with one hand, thrust her hands out in front of her. No sooner than she did, her small hands wrapped around her father's face. And with a grunt, she squashed his cheeks.

She'd stunned the king into silence then.

"What ...?"

Completely blindsided, Volkhard sounded almost hysterical. Karlheinz, too, froze in open-mouthed shock. As for Claudia, well, she smiled innocently as she enthusiastically massaged her hardheaded father's cheeks.

"Father, you're very good at stehwing contests, hmm!" Her sunny voice echoed in the audience chamber. No one else spoke. "Does this mean you'll play with me? Is that why you squeezed my face too? My cheeks are cute and chubby, aren't they?!"

Still, only silence in response.

"Ahhh, but maybe you can't tell because I can't stop smiwing since I'm soooo happy I can play with you, Father!"

Claudia fashioned a serious expression on purpose, then slipped out of the suddenly powerless Volkhard's grasp and looked up at Karlheinz.

"Karlheinz, does this mean I wost the game?"

Perplexed, he stared back at her, unsure how to answer. Then, in the next moment, laughter reverberated around the room.

Volkhard's sudden laughter rang throughout the room. "Pfft... Nh... Ha ha—Ha ha ha ha ha!!!"

"Your Majesty?"

"Ha ha! Pfft! My face... Claudia. You are the first audacious enough to not only touch me but do as you please with my person."

"Oh! You're laughing, Father!"

"You truly don't know the meaning of fear, eh? Good grief, don't I look the fool now."

Karlheinz sucked in a startled breath at the way he said those words.

He isn't angry...? Ordinarily, he would have taken the princess to task for such behavior, so it's unthinkable that he didn't. And yet, His Majesty seems to be genuinely enjoying himself right now...

Then a smile blossomed on Claudia's face. "Father! Father, you laughed! Does this mean I won?!"

"Rubbish. Who's the one who laughed first? You, Claudia."

"Ah! You're right!"

She clapped a tiny hand over her mouth. When she did, Volkhard explained to her in a gentle tone one would use to reason with a young child.

"This is what we would call a 'draw."

"A dwah!"

"It means you and I both lost, but we also both won."

Claudia nodded vigorously to show her understanding and then grinned cheerily. "Meaning you and I match, Father?"

"Hm, I suppose that's one way to say it..." The king turned. "Karlheinz."

"Yes, Your Majesty?" he replied after a pause.

Karlheinz stood at attention once more.

"As I just said, this has turned into a ridiculous farce. For now, I'll overlook the 'lapse' in your judgment."

Hiding vital information from him isn't a simple 'lapse in judgment' but a full-fledged act of disloyalty. Despite knowing this, he...

The Volkhard he saw now seemed to be in a genuinely good mood.

No, I can't get carried away. Regardless of what His Majesty says, I shouldn't be satisfied in this situation. I must take responsibility for my actions...

"Karlheinz!"

He jolted in surprise when Claudia's small hand tugged on his clothing.

"Let's go! Sweepy time for me! Noah isn't here right now, so if no one sings to me, I can't fall asweep."

When he did nothing, she added, "Huwwy, huwwy!"

This time, she yanked powerfully at the fabric. Her strength suddenly reminded him of the past.

"Wake up! Please, wake up! Get a hold of yourself!"

The girl shaking him awake from the sleep of death on that long-ago snowy night had looked straight into Karlheinz's eyes the same way Claudia did now.

For Her Highness as well, her conduct just now was surely a gamble. She knows only too well what could have happened by incurring the king's displeasure. At best, her tranquil life would have been threatened, and at worst, he could have killed her.

No matter how powerful her magic or how capable she was in using it, neither of those things changed the fact that this was a tenuous situation. Nevertheless, she acted on his behalf.

Heh... I did not expect to repay my debt through childminding instead of protecting her.

The discovery of this unexpected fate brought an unbidden smile to his lips.

He took a moment to collect himself before responding.

"As you wish, Your Highness." Karlheinz raised his head after bowing deeply at Claudia and addressed the king. "Your Majesty, if it pleases you, I shall now escort the princess to her chambers."

"Fine. You're dismissed as well."

"Yes, my liege. Well, then, Your Majesty, may the veil of a good night drape over you and the golden dawn soon come."

"What he said! Goood night, Father!"

Claudia waved energetically at the king with one hand while Karlheinz held the other one firmly in his own. He had learned this from watching Noah. After closing the doors of the audience chamber behind them, he unhesitatingly knelt before her in the corridor outside.

"Thank you very much for your aid, Your Highness. However, I ask that you henceforth refrain from placing yourself in jeopardy to save the likes of me. On that note, kindly do your utmost to prioritize your own safety."

"Jehpahdy? What jehpahdy?"

"You know very well how dangerous that was. Despite his words just now, one can never know when His Majesty will have a change of heart, and if he does, he may very well cast a heavy judgment upon you."

There was no denying that Volkhard thought her an entertaining oddity. But that was only for the moment. The fearless attitude she showed him might one day bore him, even offend him. Yet Claudia waved away Karlheinz's genuine concern with a smile.

"So what?"

He gasped in surprise at the remark. She had started walking already ahead of him. Her voice no longer held any trace of the childish innocence she'd cloaked herself in earlier.

"More impohtantly, Karlheinz."

He stood up quickly and followed her. She continued with a very serious expression.

"Noah has been pouting this whooole time. Ebidently, he hated my plan after

I told him about it."

"The plan... Might you be referring to the magic evaluation? Specifically, you attempt to turn His Majesty's interest not on you but on Noah?"

"Cowwect. Tell me, how does one go about restowing the mood of a nine-year-old boy?"

The way she said those words almost made her sound like an older woman, much older than nine, asking about another much younger than herself.

So she's more worried about her manservant's mood than the king's? For goodness' sake, I truly cannot comprehend her.

Karlheinz took a second to sigh. "Why don't I speak to him?"

"You? Hm... I do believe a man's touch might be preferable in this situation."

"Yes, well, I suppose being of the same sex will likely help..."

But that certainly wasn't all. He could imagine Noah's feelings as if they were his own.

I understand your frustration, Noah... The frustration of being unable to protect the one you wish to.

So he avowed to Claudia, "Allow me to return the favor, Your Highness. Please give me some time alone with him."

She merely tilted her head thoughtfully in response.

\*

"Respectfully, Lord Karlheinz, I don't remember asking you to teach me."

"Oh? Those are some very strong words indeed, Noah."

After helping Claudia get ready that morning in complete silence, Noah had been summoned to one part of the royal castle. She'd been the one to order him to go, but he found someone else entirely waiting for him. Caught flatfooted, he had simply stared at the man who stood there.

Karlheinz, wearing his long silver hair in his usual ponytail, had this to say to him when Noah had first arrived:

"Leave Princess Claudia's care to the castle maids today. In exchange, I'm educating you on combat here."

The news had been unexpected to Noah, who reflexively rejected the idea, but Karlheinz was undeterred.

I won't do it. There's no way. He wants to train me? How in the world did he even come up with this idea...? he grumbled internally.

The situation didn't make sense no matter how he analyzed it. First of all, though Noah tried his very best not to show it, he just did *not* like Karlheinz.

When he warily took a step back, Karlheinz kept talking in a calm voice.

"I thought so. I've suspected as such for some time now, but I believe you hate me, no?"

"Yes... Yes, I do. For example, the way you confirm your hunches with a straight face."

"I would have to say you're just as lacking as I am when it comes to expressing the more positive emotions..."

I don't need any advice from the likes of you.

Noah's lips twisted angrily, but then he shook his head with a start. He was reluctant to show his feelings, whether positive or negative.

Controlling my emotions is also an important part of protecting my mistress. I need to remain calm and calculate how I present myself at all times...just like Her Highness.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, exhaled, then slowly opened them again. Karlheinz observed him dispassionately, hand resting on his chin, eyes narrowed.

"You're nine years old, right? Despite your youth, you have phenomenal control over such power."

"Youth," he says...

Though he didn't like the man's choice of words, Noah nevertheless repeated himself. "Your guidance is unnecessary. Perhaps you're already aware, but the

princess is already teaching me."

"I'm sure she is."

"She is my teacher. So! I don't need anything except what she gives me."

Noah didn't mince his words.

Karlheinz's eyes widened momentarily before his expression softened, as if he were looking at something pleasing.

"Whatever it is you want to say...I'd rather you say it, my lord."

"Heh. Why, what gave you that idea? I have nothing in particular to note."

Shit. The nerve of the man when he's always so boring and expressionless...

"I can easily imagine what you're thinking, so let me say it however many times you need to hear it—you and I are cut from the same cloth."

As Noah cursed him in his mind, Karlheinz's words hit him right where it hurt.

"Something leaves you dissatisfied about the princess you so love and respect, hm?"

"Nh! N-No, that—" Feeling awkward, he replied, albeit unwillingly. "All right, yes, fine. She intends to release me from her service and force me to serve His Majesty and the princes."

"She does indeed. And on the occasion you do, she's asked me to look after you."

"So...you were just pretending not to know when you knew all along, didn't you?"

Not only had Claudia told Karlheinz her intentions, she'd even asked him to make arrangements for the future. Vexed by the knowledge, Noah clenched both fists tightly.

"It's because I'm still weak."

Karlheinz nodded, readily agreeing with the words Noah whispered unthinkingly.

"You are. As far as Her Highness is concerned, you are the one who needs to

be protected."

"A manservant doesn't need such consideration from his master."

An image of his younger sister's smile flashed through his mind, a smile he'd seen only once.

I couldn't protect her. And in the end, I can't even do anything for the one person I swore to protect with my life from here on.

Embittered by this thought, he muttered again.

"I don't even mind if she uses me as something disposable..."

"That attitude of yours is exactly why she wants to send you away from her side."

"What the hell do you even know?"

"Plenty."

Noah was genuinely surprised by Karlheinz's blunt answer.

When the man looked down, his expression took on a distant cast, as if he were somewhere else in his past.

"I also know what it feels like to have your life and soul saved," Karlheinz said.

Noah made a choked sound. It was then he realized why he didn't like this conjurer.

We really are alike, aren't we? It's as simple as that.

Claudia had taught him about this concept before—disliking people similar to yourself. Although he was fed up with himself for being so childish, he couldn't help blurting out his true feelings.

"Even without me around... No, it would be *better* for her if I wasn't around because I know that would make her life easier."

What made Claudia agree to go to the royal castle made things very clear for him. She had an attachment to that village. If not for her desire to avoid causing trouble for the villagers, she would have simply ignored the royal summons and manhunt and hidden herself.

And for her, the current Noah was no different from the village. So for the sake of his future, she was trying to send him off to work for the royal family. For this reason, she even behaved in a way that displeased her father.

A manservant who only gets in her way doesn't deserve to be protected by someone like her.

He felt both frustration and panic.

Seeing straight through him, Karlheinz remarked, "I know you're lying when you say you're fine with her using you as something disposable."

"I'm not. I—"

"I know your real wish is to become someone capable of protecting and supporting her."

Noah sucked in a breath.

His expression that of a somewhat wicked adult, Karlheinz smiled tauntingly at Noah.

"And that is precisely why I'm telling you I will teach you. If there is something you want to protect, you'll need to be versatile in many skills."

"Did... Did the princess order you to do that?"

"Not at all. In fact, it was my suggestion. Noah, you sometimes use a sword when fighting with magic, don't you?"

The man knew this because he just so happened to be at the tower during one of Noah's training sessions with Claudia.

"While I was a tad surprised to learn Her Highness was instructing you, I don't think she's all that experienced in swordsmanship."

Karlheinz's conjecture was right on the mark. "I hate swords. They give you cawwuses. But I had many who used them among my disciples, so I can provide you with a basic education in swordsmanship" was what Claudia had told him.

"How did you know?"

"It's easy to tell whether or not someone is fond of swordsmanship by observing their everyday behavior. Perhaps...I didn't tell you? My current title is

Chief Conjurer of the Kingdom."

Karlheinz uttered a short incantation and produced a sword in his hand.

"In the past, I also served as an instructor for the Magic Sword Corps."

Noah grunted in surprise. Though the man spoke lightly, there was no denying it was an incredible achievement. When he saw the boy's eyes widen, Karlheinz continued in a more familiar tone.

"I worked hard, you know... Because I had someone I wanted to protect too."

He's suddenly speaking so casually...

Up until now, Karlheinz was the sort of man who spoke politely, even formally. But now, in front of Noah, he was letting his guard down. To Noah, his words sounded like an appeal to a comrade and they made him straighten his posture, stand up tall. Then he bowed his head at the man.

"Despite being aware of my own weakness, I spoke presumptuously, and for that I sincerely apologize, Lord Karlheinz."

Then he lifted his face, chanted a spell, and manifested a sword. He swung it lightly.

"May I trouble you to teach me how to use a sword?"

His grip firm on the hilt, Noah stared directly into Karlheinz's eyes.



"Because...I need to be stronger to protect the princess. Much, *much* stronger."

"I won't show you any mercy, you know."

"I wouldn't want it any other way."

And so, Noah trained with Karlheinz until it grew dark. Claudia's face never left his mind the whole time he did. He remembered her sad smile as she stubbornly tried to push him away, his pleas falling on deaf ears.

What in the world is she even afraid of? I wonder...

Once the sun set, the night party for children would commence. Since Noah was a child as well as a servant and guard, he would be attending the function. He just needed a little bit of time during the event to talk to her.

Even as these thoughts ran through his mind, he focused on the training at hand.

## **Chapter 7**

Panic consumed Irmela, queen of Avianoia, to the depths of her soul.

"So? Did you finally find the magical device as I ordered?"

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty. Even we, who are capable of rounding up the finest selection of goods from around the world, have found it difficult to fulfill your request..."

The merchant before her had been saying the same thing for a week now and today was no different. Suppressing the savage urge to tear his throat out, Irmela stalked toward him.

"Enough of your excuses. Was I or was I not clear that today is the deadline?"

"Please, my lady, you must understand. An item that can take a human life and erase all traces of magical energy from the deceased is a rare one with limited use...!"

Blood rushed to her head when she sensed some hidden meaning in the merchant's explanation.

"Show me everything you've collected! I refuse to believe you—one granted the privilege of my favor—came here empty-handed!"

"H-Have mercy, Your Majesty!"

Terrified, the merchant gestured toward the wooden box lying at his feet and shrank back. Irmela picked up the velvet-covered box, opened it, and hurled its contents to the marble floor.

What in blazes is all this?! Useless rubbish, every last bit of it!

She searched through the mess of items looking for what she sought, but she found nothing. She was knowledgeable in her own right and knew the function of a magical device, whatever its form, just by looking at it.

Why in the world must I crawl on the floor and suffer this humiliation?! Damn and blast that infuriating, baseborn girl. His Majesty abandoned her even before

she was born, but here she is now, an eyesore no matter where I go!

An image of Princess Claudia flashed through Irmela's mind. Huge, pale-gold eyes complemented fine hair, a soft light brown color. The child strongly resembled the beautiful songstress the queen had seen only once. A stunning diva worlds apart from Irmela herself, who'd been shunned all her life for her mean gaze and dour face.

Lowly women like her shouldn't be allowed to give birth to royalty.

Six years ago, she justified her actions with that thought. She acquired a false crystal for Claudia's evaluation, resulting in the girl being found magicless. The announcement came right alongside the news to Volkhard that the songstress died during childbirth. He had simply said, "I see," his attitude seemingly indifferent, which filled Irmela not only with relief, but also with dark joy.

She then quickly set about arranging Claudia's exile. In the years since, other than thoughts of Claudia occasionally surfacing, life had been peaceful.

For a long time, Klingate, the major power to the west, has been in a state of tension with this country, so to think they're now Avianoia's ally... The forming of this new alliance means His Majesty no longer has much use for my homeland of Magnonia.

Volkhard and Irmela's marriage had been a political one designed to strengthen the relationship between their respective nations. So a new ally made her existence superfluous to him. There was no longer any need to fill the vital position of "queen consort" with a member of Magnonia's royal family. She suspected he wanted to open it up for a new political marriage.

Regardless, Magnonia was still a powerful country. Unilaterally divorcing her for his own reasons and thereby making an enemy of her homeland wouldn't be a wise course of action. That explained why Volkhard was now so intent on exposing Irmela's crime, one he'd turned a blind eye to six years ago. Because if he used her scandal as a pretext for divorce, he would lose nothing. In fact, he stood to gain not only a new queen, but her wrongdoing meant he could also seek reparations from Magnonia.

And Irmela would be banished to her motherland, where she would face punishment. At worst, execution. At best, imprisonment.

Then what would become of Emilia...?

She shuddered, thinking of her precious daughter. For the sake of her child, she absolutely could not and would not lose everything. Not now, not after all this time.

Argh! How maddening!!! I never could have imagined what I did six years ago out of simple loathing would end up creating a noose around my own neck...!

But no matter how deep her regret, it was far too late. The only thing Irmela could do now was make sure her lie held fast.

Why is this even happening? Especially when it turned out Claudia in fact has no magic!

Volkhard had witnessed it too. The crystal hadn't reacted when the girl had touched it this afternoon during her reappraisal.

Furthermore, concealed by the canopy in his special seat, Volkhard had smiled enigmatically.

So why did His Majesty...?

I have an awful premonition... I need to kill her—and not a moment too soon! I must get my hands on a tool or method capable of erasing any trace of magic from her remains!

Irmela didn't possess much magical power. Of course, being of royal blood, she certainly had more than commoners. Historically, political marriages between magically powerful individuals had been a tradition for royalty and nobility. But among such a storied group, her magic was disappointingly lacking. She knew her magic wasn't enough. And this was precisely why she'd once more summoned the same merchant she'd hired for her plan at the time of Claudia's birth.

Her eyes scanning the various magical tools froze on one particular item. After a pause, she asked, "What is this?"

"Ah! W-Well..."

Pale, the merchant told her of the item's purpose, daring not to speak no louder than a whisper.

Irmela's only response was a long silence. For she, too, quailed at the knowledge of the tool's effect. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized it was her only option.

Can I possibly be forgiven for doing such a thing...? What a foolish question. Of course not! Yet I don't have any other choice...

Gripping her necklace, she swallowed audibly.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, your magic will not be enough to activate that device..." the merchant informed her, though he was clearly hesitant to even mention it. But she wasn't particularly troubled by the news.

I know how to make it work. I'll bring it with me to tomorrow's night party, and then...

\*

"Oh, aren't you just the prettiest little thing, Princess Claudia!"

As the sun set, the lady's maids of the castle clustered around Claudia in her private chambers. They *ooh*ed and *aah*ed over her reflection in the dresser's mirror.

"The dress's delicate hue suits you wonderfully!"

"Tee hee hee! Thaaank yooou!"

"You look just like a flower fairy. Here, please hold this stuffed bear... I knew it! You're so adorable, I want to capture you like this in a portrait! For your next function, I would absolutely love to see you in this dress as well."

"Don't you think this outfit would look simply darling on her too? Everything complements her so well; I feel as if there just aren't enough dresses in the world."

The women chattered with excitement while trying various outfits on Claudia.

All of these dresses are certainly quite stylish. And each, very well-made to boot.

Less than a month ago, the lady's maids in the tower had treated her coldly. They had derided and ignored her; not a single one knew the color of her eyes.

Surely, this outcome was something they'd never imagined for her.

But this is starting to bore me... Haaah...

Sat in front of the dresser, Claudia buried her lips in the plush toy's head. The women whispered softly to one another at the sight, so quietly that no one would overhear.

"Goodness, she really is too adorable. If only she had magic too, then everyone in the country would know her name as an exalted princess. Poor thing..."

"Hush. You know there's no point saying such things. It's not like anything can be done about someone's inherent lack of magic."

Naturally, Claudia heard everything they were saying via her use of magic. However, she frankly didn't care, and the lady's maids clearly didn't expect her to listen in on them anyway.

I've already looked into the castle's state of affairs, and the maids' gossip has taught me a great deal about all sorts of things, Claudia thought. The only thing left for me to do is handle the situation at the night party, after which I can boast about Noah to my elder brothers and pique their interest in him.

This would prove beneficial for Noah's future.

"Now then, Your Highness, how would you like us to style your hair?"

"Shall we tie it with a ribbon and wear it up? Or would you prefer pigtails? A more mature style with your hair half up and half down would look lovely too."

Claudia said nothing, merely pondering in silence.

"As I recall, your hair was in a simple plait yesterday."

"So let us arrange it tonight for you. We can fashion even the most complicated braids. Whatever you ask, Your Highness, we shall happily oblige."

The lady's maids currently attending to her normally looked after her older sister, Emilia, which meant they could style her hair very prettily. In that case, she wouldn't even need to use her magic. She continued thinking silently.

Then, finally, Claudia shook her head. "I like it just like this."

"Are you certain, Your Highness?"

At the moment, she was wearing her silky, light brown hair down. It was styled neither in pigtails nor a braid, and fewer ribbons adorned it.

"I'll go to the night party with my hair just like this!" Claudia said.

"But wouldn't you like a stylish coif of some sort to go with your lovely dress and shoes?"

"Yes. But this is nice too!" Claudia bounced down from the chair then twirled, making the skirt of her dress flutter. "Don't you think I look shooo adowable like this too?"

The lady's maids couldn't help smiling in response to her beaming countenance.

"Well, now, look at you go..."

"Of course, you look wonderful, Your Highness."

"Such a tiny little thing you are. Perhaps it isn't such a bad thing to let her go with her hair down. Au naturel, so to speak."

"Yay! I'm off to the night party! Thank you bery much, Miss Maids!"

Claudia exited the room, and instead of finding Noah, she saw two adult magicians standing outside, waiting to escort her.

"Are you ready, Princess Claudia?"

"Yup."

"You're prettier than a painting, Your Highness. Let us be off to the hall."

She nodded in response. Noah was nowhere to be found. That was just as it should've been, because she'd ordered Karlheinz as much beforehand.

Claudia thought back to their conversation. She'd instructed, "I want Noah in your charge until the party starts."

"Of course. That works in my favor, as I wished to have as much time as possible to teach him. However...are you absolutely sure you don't want him by your side?"

"Things might moob along faster if I'm alone."

When she'd said that, Karlheinz's expression had clouded over with sympathy for Noah. Nonetheless, she was firmly of the opinion that time was of the essence. And the faster things moved, the better.

If the queen consort will do me the favor of making her move early, she'll save me the trouble of having to wait. Especially since I doubt Father will try to protect or save me.

Nevertheless, Claudia had estimated a low probability of the queen attacking during the daytime. The king had assigned a veritable cadre of magicians to protect her. She also guessed that the queen didn't see Noah as a threat because of two reasons: he was a child, and the woman would want to do her best to avoid attracting the magicians' notice.

"When the time comes, please tell Noah to head diwectly to the hall."

"I will. With that said, my apologies in advance for leaving you without your manservant, however briefly it is."

Once their conversation ended, the morning and afternoon passed by without incident. Claudia whiled the day away drawing pictures in the castle and taking walks. And now, night had finally arrived.

Walking briskly on her small feet, she surveyed the annex of the castle where the party was being held.

I wonder if the queen will come after me here. Father will notice if she uses magic, so perhaps her plan will be a simple one, relying on something physical, like a blade.

Claudia tilted her head thoughtfully. Anyone looking at her from the outside would never imagine such heinous thoughts running through the mind of a child this young. And that reminded her of something Karlheinz had said.

"To be perfectly honest, even if Queen Irmela is plotting to assassinate you, Your Highness, I'm not entirely certain she would act in front of all those children, especially her beloved daughter, Emilia."

Claudia pondered over that. Hm...

The escorts to her right and left stopped alongside her as she gazed down unseeingly.

"This is where we leave you, Your Highness. Please enjoy yourself."

"I will! Thank you, Mister Bodygahds!"

After seeing the two men off with a wave of her hand, she observed the hall.

Right, then...

The children-only "nighttime extravaganza" lasted until midnight, a time when they normally weren't allowed to stay awake. Unlike adults' evening functions, the hall's interior was decorated with a multitude of balloons. Plush toys made mobile via magic sat next to an arrangement of refreshments, confections, and juices on the table.

"Sister, let's have some chocolate cake!"

"Ah, wait a moment. I want to hug the bunny first!"

The gathering of children here tonight wasn't limited to only the ones from yesterday's tea party. Claudia counted roughly fifty in all, the youngest around four years old and the oldest ten. Their parents and guardians were in the midst of enjoying their own party in the castle's main hall.

"Let go! That balloon is mine!"

"I claimed it first!"

"Hey, stop fighting! Don't you know the grown-ups will cancel the night party if they find out we're causing trouble?"

"S-Sorry..."

Despite being a celebration for children only, the adults had strategically cast magic all around to make sure nothing dangerous occurred. Surveillance magic kept an eye on them so that magicians on hand could ensure the young attendees' safety.

Claudia stepped into the excited atmosphere of the hall. Immediately, a familiar face appeared in front of her.

"My lady."

"Noah."

She was just a tad surprised by his direct approach. Though he was here as her escort, she distinctly remembered telling him to "indulge a little in the sweets on offer tonight." But he had shown no interest whatsoever in the food and walked without hesitation straight toward her. Moreover, he *knelt* in front of her now, his posture impeccable.

"I extend my sincerest apologies for leaving you alone for a full day."

It's only been a day. And yet...he seems to have matured a bit more in such a short time.

Claudia blinked rapidly as she sensed her intuition was correct.

Tonight, Noah wore a red, military-style outfit. It looked to be the same as the one she'd created with her magic, except for the black gloves covering his hands. She'd never seen those before. Add the dashing figure he cut in his attire to his well-defined, dignified features—despite his young age—and he captured the attention of every girl in the space.

"He's sooo handsome..."

"Just like a fairy-tale prince!"

But Noah stared intently at Claudia and Claudia alone.

Karlheinz, you rascal. His will has only solidified. You've done the opposite of what I asked.

Irked, she twisted her lips into a pout. But what was done was done. Nothing she could do about it now.

Then I must break Noah's heart.

When she narrowed her eyes, he stood up and extended his hand toward her.

"Princess, if you would."

"Okay, Noah! Oooh, can we go eat some of that ice cweam?"

She fashioned an innocent smile and gripped his hand tightly with hers.

What's more, if the queen intends to make her move...

It meant one of the magicians surveilling the hall through magic might be Claudia's enemy. Maybe even *all* of them were. There was another possibility too, that the queen herself might be one of the monitors.

I should make it easy for her to target me. Perhaps by moving to a dark corner somewhere, hm?

As the wheels in her mind turned, she walked with Noah to get some ice cream.

\*

Though Claudia had some prior knowledge about the children-only social function known as the night party, it was her first time actually attending one. Holding hands with Noah, she strolled around the hall with its many tables piled high with confections of all kinds. At one point, she even accepted a lollipop that resembled frozen stardust from one of the stuffed animals they passed by. Just when she was about to take another for Noah, a few of the boys clustered around her.

"H-Hey, you! Here, I'll give you this candy! Try it. It's delicious!" one insisted.

"Forget him. There's a pink rabbit plushie over there. Won't you go with me to look at it?" another asked.

"I'll get a balloon for you. What color do you like?"

There was seemingly no way out, surrounded as she was by them in every direction. Claudia smiled cheerfully and said, "I like people who are good at pwaying tag."

"Huh...?"

"Okay! I'll be 'it'!" she said. "Here I go. Ooone. Twooo..."

"Whoa, whoa! Give us a second to run first!"

The boys scattered in a panicked rush when they heard her start counting. Noah watched them go with a sympathetic gaze.

"That's settled. Let's go, Noah."

"Are you certain you wish to send them away like that?"

"It's difficult to enjoy myself leisurewy, swarmed as I was. With so many tables set up in here, I must make my rounds as we planned."

He stared at her in surprise. "Looks like you're having fun, then, hm?"

"I am, indeed. There are plenty of sweets, the music sounds lubbly to my ears, and the stuffed toys are so very adorable. And you, Noah? What do you think of tonight's party?"

Expression placid, Noah closed his eyes and retorted, "I'm not childish enough to be happy about something like this."

"Oh dear."

Claudia giggled and approached another table. She stood on her tiptoes, placed a small piece of chocolate cake on a plate, then lowered herself again before poking it with a golden fork.

"Here, Noah. Say 'ahhh."

He made a startled sound in the back of his throat. For a brief moment, she'd blindsided him. His eyes widened ever so slightly before he parted his lips to accept the morsel, awkwardly covering his mouth with the palm of his hand. He chewed carefully.

Once he swallowed, he addressed her pointedly, "My lady..."

"How was the cake? Scwumptious?"

"I— Uh..."

Claudia tittered again before her voice took on a soft tone. "I'll tell you a secwet, Noah. Adults love sweets too, and the prospect of a fun night positively thrills them."

"O-Oh... You don't say."

"Indeed."

Nodding, she fell into a thoughtful silence.

Besides... You should enjoy to your heart's content everything normal children would. I want that for you.

With this in mind, Claudia gazed across the hall at her intended targets—two

flaxen-haired boys, her two elder brothers Wilhelm and Ehrenfried. A gaggle of children, mostly boys, had surrounded Wilhelm.

"Lord Wilhelm, look, look! I saw so many strawberry snacks over there!"

"Good for you, Dirk! I know how much you love sweets. Kurt, stop! If you're heading to the garden, I'll go with you!"

Wil appears wild on the surface, but he's actually quite good at looking after the younger kids, hm? By that same logic, I think he'll dote on Noah, since he's a year younger.

"Ehren, you come with us too!" Wilhelm called out. Ehrenfried was standing farther away from the group.

"I'm fine here, thank you. I'm in the midst of investigating what sort of magical power is mobilizing these toys."

"Are you seriously studying *again*? Even though we're at this long-awaited night party?! You're unbelievable!"

Ehren, on the other hand, is so dedicated to his studies that he doesn't push himself too hard, making it easy to guard him. Noah is the quiet sort too, so he shouldn't find Ehren's presence overly taxing. As for Emilia...

Claudia didn't bother hiding the thoughts churning in her mind. And next to her, Noah must have picked up on them, because he spoke to her with a displeased expression.

"Princess."

She said nothing as she simply stared up at him in response. Then a beat later, intent on presenting him to her older brothers, she dragged him by the hand toward them.

"Brothers! Um, um, I want you to meet my Noah..."

"Ack!" Noah caught onto Claudia's scheme and immediately panicked.

She gasped and widened her eyes unconsciously.

Her brothers turned around at her call but saw no such girl around.

"Huh...? I could have sworn Claudia just called out to us. You heard her too,

didn't you, Ehren?" Wilhelm asked, his voice sounding muffled.

"Yes, I did. How strange, though, I see no one here..."

Of course they won't find me like this.

Because Noah had grabbed her arm and pulled her underneath a clothdraped table with him.

"Damn."

It seemed Noah himself was the most shocked by this situation. Hidden as they were, he now held her tightly in his arms.



Claudia couldn't think of a single thing to say. She simply blinked blankly at this unforeseen turn of events.

Behind her, she felt Noah's heart hammering in his chest. He obviously didn't want her brothers to discover them, and this perplexed even him.

From the dimness underneath the table, she could hear their voices beyond the tablecloth separating them.

"Ehren, did you hear Claudia's voice around here?"

"No... I'm almost positive it came from a bit closer."

"Hmmm. But she's nowhere to be found, huh?"

After their voices faded into the distance, Noah finally relaxed his hold. He looked down at her as she faced him.

"I... Forgive me, my lady."

For a moment, she said nothing, merely stared up at his face, which reflected his deep discomfort. Then she spoke.

"Actuawwy...your timing is perfect, Noah. Fix my hair, please."

"What ...?"

In the space underneath the cloth-covered table, she scooted around and sat facing away from him. She pulled out a barrette from a hidden pocket in her dress that she had taken with her just in case.

"Here, use this."

After a pause, he replied, "Understood."

She handed it over to him and despite his hesitation, he started arranging her hair in the usual style, his fingers scooping up strands of it.

The silence between them stretched for what felt like an eternity but couldn't have been more than a few minutes. He worked on her tresses during it and she could no longer contain herself.

"Pfft. Tee hee."

Noah met her muffled chuckle with more silence.

She had lost the battle against her self-control with the unbidden slip and now her shoulders shook with laughter after holding it in for so long.

"Hee hee...!"

"Princess..."

She'd even given up on covering her mouth with both hands. After all, how could she *not* be charmed by the unexpected action of her manservant? No one beyond the curtain of the tablecloth should be able to hear her on account of the music being played by the stuffed animals. Noah knew this too, so he couldn't exactly chastise her. He simply kept plaiting her hair as he endured whatever it was that bothered him.

"Ha ha! Ahhh, too funny! Which makes me wonder...do you twuly hate the idea of my scheme so much?"

When she asked him, he answered in a tone that plainly conveyed his displeasure. He didn't even try to hide his feelings this time.

"I do. I told you so yesterday too, didn't I?" As he continued, his next words sounded frustrated. "Shit... I wanted to say all this logically and clearly, but here I am blurting it out..."

And I find that stubbornness of yours all the more adorable...

Claudia knew telling Noah that would only embarrass and irk him, so she wisely said nothing. She attempted to reason with him instead.

"Don't you understand how the possibiwities in your future would expand if you were to serve my father and brothers?"

"Any future where I don't live by your side is no future to me."

She gasped softly, her laughter ceasing abruptly at those words.

Noah finished braiding her hair and set the barrette in place. When she turned around, her eyes locked with his. In the past month, she had never before seen him so mature and earnest. She huffed out a wry laugh in response.

Even though I was going to break his heart... Of course that's going to be difficult to do when he looks at me like this.

He truly had grown so much in the short time they'd been apart.

"Regardless, Noah—"

"Ehren!"

Just as she was about to try to convince him again of the soundness of her plan, she heard Wilhelm call Ehrenfried's name.

"You're reading *another* challenging book? I seriously don't understand what you find so interesting about them."

"You don't have to. They're interesting to me, Brother. Might I recommend you learn something from history yourself?"

"History, huh? You really think ancient history is good for reference?"

"Yes, of course!"

Her two brothers passed by the table as they conversed. The second son continued. "In fact, the truth about the legendary witch, Adelheid, is written in this particular tome."

Remaining quiet, Claudia slowly cast her gaze in the direction whence their voices came.

"It contains proof of the fact that five hundred years ago, she prevented the destruction of the world at the cost of her own life!"

The children from this era were chatting about one so long ago—the very one from her memories. While she silently mused on that, she felt Noah's stare boring into her. Claudia smiled a little before crawling out from underneath the tablecloth.

"Princess," Noah said, immediately following her.

Since she'd waited for the vicinity to be deserted before exiting, none of the other children saw the two of them coming out from under the table.

"Is it true...what your brother just said?"

She accepted balloons offered by the plush toys and said, almost to herself, "Good grief, I wonder which one of my disciples was wesponsible for elevating something I did for my own personal satisfaction into myth. A tewwibly shoddy

one at that."

Sighing, she took a fourth balloon. Pink, yellow, purple, and light blue—Claudia would have stood out in the hall, walking as she did with the four balloons floating merrily in the air. No other children besides Noah followed her as she strode into the darkened courtyard, for the darkness of night was a terrifying thing to the young. And the only one who stepped fearlessly into it by her side was Noah.

"Did you really sacrifice yourself in your past life to save something?"

"Tee hee. Perish the thought."

It vexed her to be thought of as some kind of savior. Resigned, she decided to tell Noah the truth.

"Do you know the true nature of the magic cast on you through the slave contwact?"

He could only make a puzzled sound. When they had first met, a black, snakelike miasma had wound around the left side of his chest, where his heart rested.

"I'll tell you: it's a curse."

Holding balloons in both hands, she played with them by jerking their strings up and down. Claudia wondered if the four bouncing balloons were conspicuous even from the hall.

"Is that different from magic?"

"Essentiawwy, they're the same. However, its sinister chawactewistic makes it a curse."

But there was more.

"And the acolyte contwact I used to overwrite it is, in reality, another type of curse."

Noah's only response was a heavy silence. The contract magic his uncle had cast on him was hard enough to break as it was. Now he understood why Claudia had overrode it with a stronger magic and changed its link from his uncle to herself. The only thing that could nullify a curse was another curse.

"In the cuwwent era, there should be very few means left to create the magic known as a curse. I strongly bewieb my disciples erased as much knowledge on the topic as they could."

"Because...they were following your last wishes?"

"Curses were rare even five centuwies ago. But many more could utilize them in that time period than now." Claudia retraced her memories. "The power over another is the power to control their life as one pleases."

And this was why the effect on a slave or acolyte was powerful enough to steal their will.

"There was a country who deployed such magic in war."

Noah's breath caught in his throat.

Claudia recalled how awful a sight it had been. "They spread a curse throughout the enemy nation, which allowed them to control its citizens. Not just soldiers, but cibilians too—regular people who couldn't fight. Siblings, parents and children, lovers... All conbinced the other was the enemy, so they killed each other."

"B-But..." Saddened, Noah winced and clenched his fists as he imagined the tragedy she recalled. "My uncle succeeded in enslaving me because he possessed a vast amount of magical energy. So how is it even possible to cast a curse, powerful as it is, on such a huge scale?"

"Those known as the gifted exist, you see... And one of them, a certain man, created a magical instwument for curses and had it imbued with the magical energy of conjurers."

"Then, as long as someone had a device like that..."

"Yes, they could have cursed the area around it in an enemy nation simply by actibating it, all without the need for powerful mages of their own."

From within the heart of their own country, safe and sound, the magicians, including the royal family, had continued to pour enormous amounts of magical energy into the magical tools. They were then "exported" to the enemy nation by their own soldiers, who also activated them. By sacrificing just a few of their

own soldiers, the country had succeeded in cursing huge swathes of the enemy's population.

"Its people killing each other due to the curse weakened the country enohmouswy. Unfortunately, the nation didn't stop with just one of its enemies. It actibated the curse in all of its foes' lands simultaneously, and by the time the magicians in each nation realized what was happening, it was too late."

Claudia could recall clearly the murky, pitch-black sky back then.

"The magicians exhausted themselves trying to rescue and heal their fellow citizens while at the same time fighting off the invaders. And...the country Adelheid belonged to was no exception."

The mage soldiers had truly suffered under the weight of a savage war, fiercely attacked by the very people they had wanted to protect. The magicians had done their utmost to control their powers—to avoid hurting the civilians as well as to heal and protect them. Amid all this, the enemy nation continued its relentless, merciless assault, uncaring that even the innocents she and her allies had tried to protect were slaughtered.

"You see, ever since her birth, Adelheid's sole purpose for living was her country."

"My lady..."

Even now, remembering her previous life opened a yawning hole somewhere deep in her chest.

"Five hundwed years ago, witches were akin to divine maidens. They used their magics for the sake of their people, doing everything they could for them...always alone. Though it wasn't a bad life by any means, I suppose it was a bit of a lonely one."

Noah simply listened quietly.

"When I was young, sleeping without anyone by my side saddened me. Howeber, before I knew it, I became well-bersed enough in magic to teach others how to use it, at which point I was allowed to take on disciples." Overjoyed, she had accepted droves of apprentices. And as a result, the ones who ultimately remained after undertaking her vigorous tutelage were mages of the highest caliber.

One such apprentice got her attention one day. "Look, Lady Adelheid, look! Don't you think I've done well executing this magical theory?"

"Oh my, you truly have," Adelheid had responded. "I only taught it to you a short while ago, and here you are on your way to mastering it already. Let us celebrate."

"Good for you, mate. Adelheid, he's been working himself hard to earn your praise. That said, stop by later and take a look at how much my skill with tuning magic swords has improved!"

"Heh. Of course. Why don't we have a match after lunch? Shall I let the others know?"

"I'll tell them. Adelheid, you and the rest can go pick strawberries in the field."

For the first time in her life, she'd been able to enjoy life surrounded by the warmth of others. Having been alone for so long since her birth, she had thought of her disciples as family. But then the enemy attacked, bringing with them a curse to cast on her country in which she'd spent those halcyon days.

"Once the curse spread, the leaders of our gobernment naturally wished for us to fight for our nation. However...dealing with our fellow cursed citizens whilst fighting off a major power meant we stwuggled, and things didn't go well."

Her apprentices weren't the only ones who had fought fiercely back then. Adelheid, too, had exerted every ounce of her power. Even then, it hadn't been enough.

"My sweet, sweet disciples wanted to die protecting me."

Noah gasped then.

She stayed by their side for many years, rejoicing in their growth and watching over them, sharing meals and sleeping quarters with them. Despite them being her disciples, they were all relatively close in age to Adelheid, so

she'd thought of them as brothers and sisters.

And they had all looked resolute when they stubbornly insisted on being her shield.

"Lady Adelheid! If you die, what will become of us...? So, please, we beg you to escape! Even if you're the only one!"

There was no way she could have done that.

"As long as you live, you can carry our hopes with you. Hurry! Go! Please...!"

What good was hope if only she survived?

"If it means you'll live, we'll happily die smiling here."

Silly fools. Every last one of you.

Their final words to her had inspired a new realization: she had let too many die to reach this point. Though she had wished she realized it sooner, it was too late for regrets. But she could still choose what happened next.

I would much, much rather have you all live than survive all alone.

With that thought in mind, she had answered them with a smile as they stood on the battlefield. "You see...in my own way, I think I've dedicated my life thus far to our country. I have studied the theories of magic, transformed them into useful technologies for our people's use, and freely shared all that knowledge with those around me. So wouldn't you say I've more than done my share of living for others?"

"Lady Adelheid...?"

"I've made my decision." And then she had hastily calculated a magical formula, putting her new theory into effect, one inspired by their words. "From now on, I'll only do the things I want to."

"Wait...! What are you up to, Adelheid?!"

Using her colossal reserves of magical energy as a driving force, she had invoked a new magic. It was second nature to her, something she had always done thanks to her life until now.

"I'm angry, so this is what I'm up to. This is pride on full display. Do you think

that I, Adelheid, could bear to lose to another mage when it comes to magical instruments?"

"Stop it! Please stop! If you're going to use it, then take my life instead!"

Her disciples had tried to sacrifice themselves instead. She knew all too well how serious they were—because they would have done anything to protect her. That's the kind of wonderful people they had been. Which was exactly why she hadn't wanted to choose a path resulting in their annihilation.

"You know, I was one of the gifted too." Claudia turned toward Noah with a playful smile. "So I'm confident the new magic I crafted on the spot back then worked. Thus was the curse lifted from all around the world. And they all lived happily ever after, etcetewa, etcetewa."

He remained silent.

In the generations after Adelheid's life ended, her death had evidently come to be thought of as suicide. However, a closer investigation revealed that the existence of curses as a concept seemed to have faded from memory in the present age. Even if the people of today knew that a great war had once taken place, there didn't appear to be many historical records noting that a curse had precipitated it in the first place.

Well, it looks like the disciples I left behind did quite a thorough job of erasing knowledge of curses. So the fact that Noah's uncle was able to cast enslavement magic at all might be because of their ancestor, Reinard. He must have left behind some kind of message or document.

Even as speculation ran rampant in Claudia's mind, Noah's gaze remained steadfast on her, despite his pained expression.

"And that's the thing you wanted to do?"

"Indeed. I was fuwious, so I fought back with all my might and decided to live my life the way I wanted to from then on."

She hadn't saved the world through self-sacrifice nor had she committed suicide for tragic reasons. She had simply done it for herself.

"Do you understand now? Adult or child, when the time comes, we all act on

emotion. That is a constant truth."

From the nine-year-old Noah's perspective, both the eighteen-year-old Adelheid and Claudia, inheritor of that personality, might seem like grown-ups. But under the surface, they were all the same. Yet he looked distressed as he replied.

"I...don't. I don't understand." Still holding her gaze with his, he continued adamantly. "I don't know what emotions you were feeling at the time... But I know this without a shadow of a doubt—what you did freed me from the pain of the curse."

Her eyes widened at his incredibly candid remark.

"If the choice you made brings light to someone's future, then..." Noah stepped forward and knelt in front of her, eyes still locked with hers. "Then I also know that you saved them."

A small, shocked sound escaped from her lips. At the same time, she unconsciously released the strings of the four balloons she held in her hands. No longer trapped, they floated off into the sky. They drifted and danced amid a backdrop of brightly twinkling stars. The murky, blackened sky from five centuries ago might as well have been something from a fairy tale.

"I...saved them...?"

She wondered if the only reason he could even be so direct with her was because he was still a child. Or was it because of his genuine kindness? Claudia squinted instinctively, dazzled by Noah, who possessed something she could never have no matter what she did.

"Me...?"

Impossible. Though she had intended to deny his claim, her lips flapped with disbelief.

Without hesitation, he answered her, "I told you already, didn't I? I'm also one of the people you saved."

With a strange feeling in her heart, she silently brooded over his unwavering affirmation. Noah's obsidian eyes narrowed in sympathy. Then he reached out

to her with his hand, a child's hand.

"You'll catch a chill wearing such light clothing. Come, let's head back inside."

Claudia took it without saying a word and began walking. A mysterious warmth bloomed somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach. At the same time, words people had spoken to her in her life as Adelheid rushed to mind.

"How?! You are the magnificent witch, Adelheid! 'Tis unthinkable for someone of your repute to lose against a country like that...!"

"Hurry, please, help us! You're a witch, aren't you?! The most talented in recorded history, no less! Please, open my sons' eyes to reality. They're killing each other without understanding what they're doing...!"

"You couldn't stop the curse. You let it spread, so the blood may as well be on your hands...!"

Since being reborn as Claudia but before she recovered her memories as Adelheid, voices like these had echoed in her head. She only just remembered them now. Yet another's voice rang even more clearly in her mind—Noah's, from mere moments ago.

"But I know this without a shadow of a doubt—what you did freed me from the pain of the curse."

She quietly cast her eyes down while walking.

"Noah."

"Whatever it is you want to say, please save it for later. Right now, we need to get back inside the hall and have you drink something warm..."

"I didn't go into the garden to talk to you, Noah."

He froze, no longer pulling her insistently by the hand.

"In truth, I was waiting. I thought that if the queen had a proper *conscience*, she would prefer the darkness to attack me."

"I don't understand, my lady..."

"I tried using the balloons to mark myself as a conspicuous target, but in the end, she didn't come after me. So I decided to twaipse into the courtyard

instead. No adults, pitch-black, and far from the other children... I gave her the perfect opportunity. Alas, she didn't take it. Which means the assassin is *not* an adult."

Noah made a startled sound because he picked up on her implication right away.

"Then..."

"I honestly didn't want to consider such a possibility, you know. But if someone *is* here tonight who intends to kill me..."

Before she could finish speaking, they heard a *whoosh*, like the sound of something popping. The flames in the hanging magical lanterns had been extinguished all at once. With the garden now enveloped by darkness, Noah immediately rushed to defend Claudia. She whispered an incantation and cast a spell.

"Protect." He grunted quietly in reaction but otherwise didn't move.

Children's screams came from the other side of the door leading to the hall.

"Princess, this is..."

"How very...dishappointing."

Her murmur expressed her deepest sentiments.

The garden where Claudia and Noah stood wasn't the only place submerged in the unrelenting darkness. They could hear the children's frightened cries of the darkness coming from the hall where the night party was being held.

"To think she would twaumatize other young children just to kill one small girl."

Noah looked ahead. The courtyard hadn't been well lit in the first place, making it dimmer than the hall. Thanks to that, they quickly grew used to the darkness and were able to discern some of their surroundings.

A lone girl stood in front of the glass door leading from the garden to the hall. Perhaps she hadn't yet made her way down here because the dark of the night scared her. Though she had been ordered to play the role of "assassin," she remained paralyzed, unable to carry it out. Still, she had mustered up the

courage uncharacteristic of a child in such a situation and executed the plan this far.

"Oh my! It got so dark so fast! That gave me such a fwight!"

Acting innocent, Claudia called out to the girl. "Are you awwight? This place is dark and scawy, so let's go back to the hall together."

Silence from the girl.

"Princess..."

The girl finally twitched in reaction to the sound of Noah's voice addressing Claudia.

Perhaps she had wished to show off to someone at the night party. Because the girl looked much more dressed up than she had been yesterday. The black ribbon in her red hair, the same as her mother's, was charming. The dress she wore was a darker shade of her violet eyes. Elegant and far beyond her years, the dress suggested a certain resolve. A silver necklace rested on her chest.

Then Claudia said the name of the girl with whom she shared half her blood.

"Emilia."

"You... If it hadn't been for you..."

Emilia glared hatefully at Claudia. The deep hue of her amethyst-colored eyes spoke of her strong magical power. And the emotions blazing clearly in them were jealousy and anger.

"I don't consider you my younger sister. A lowborn girl like you with no magic could never...!"

"Noah, we're going back inside the hall. The effect is far-reaching and young children are at gweatest risk."

"Understood. My lady, could it be that necklace...?"

"Goodness, this certainly brings back memories."

As always, only its appearance was beautiful. At first glance, the necklace seemed to be nothing more than a delicate piece of silverwork. It resembled a rose with leaves. The tiny silver flower swayed against Emilia's chest.

Until just a few moments ago, it must have been empty, having run out of the magic put into it at the time of its creation. No matter how sinister the tool, without the power of magic, it was no different from an ordinary ornament. Still, its most abhorrent quality was that one would never notice its true nature even if it was brought close to one.

And Emilia had poured her magic into such a necklace. A lingering scent of corrupted magic wafted from it. The trace was so minuscule an average magician would never notice, but Claudia detected it clear as day.

"That is indeed the cursed magical instrument."

Emilia gazed at Claudia with purple eyes filled with loathing.

## **Chapter 8**

The first princess, Emilia, had accepted the beautiful necklace the previous night.

I need to ask Mother's permission to attend the night party...

She pictured the boy named Noah and his stunning face in her mind.

Claudia's going back to her tower the day after tomorrow. Which means Noah will too, so I must see him again at tomorrow's night party before he leaves.

Simply thinking of him made sent Emilia's heart aflutter.

And when we meet, I'll definitely tell him, "Become my servant!" He would be so much better off in my employ than hers. That will surely make Noah happy, and then he'll fall in love with me and stay by my side forever because he'll be proud to have such a wonderful mistress.

In order to ensure this future occurred, she needed to attend the night party.

I wonder if Mother will allow me to go.

That thought alone terrified Emilia. She remembered what her mother always said whenever she asked for permission: "You wish to attend a night party? Absolutely not. To think that children are allowed to stay up into the wee hours of the night at a function exclusively for them. I don't care how much of a custom it is in this country; it's unseemly."

This party took place twice a year, yet Emilia had never attended a single one in her life. Whenever she saw her two older brothers prepare excitedly for it, she would always snipe with a remark like "I didn't want to go in the first place," while bitterly cursing all of them in her heart as she watched from a distance.

But I have to go tomorrow—no matter what...

She paced nervously in front of the doors leading to the drawing room. After

scolding Emilia, her mother had shut herself inside the room along with a conjurer from her homeland here on business. Emilia wanted to speak to her as quickly as possible. However, she couldn't just barge in and interrupt their discussion, so she'd been waiting for her mother's guest to leave.

Just like that, the doors opened. She involuntarily gasped and raised her head on reflex, thinking the merchant was finally leaving. However, her mother was the one exiting the room.

She's going to reprimand me again...!

In utter contrast to expectation, Emilia's mother instead smiled when she spotted her daughter. "Oh, what excellent timing, Emilia. I was just about to look for you."

"Wh-Why...?"

An ominous feeling unfurled inside her at that moment. Only the most awful children had such thoughts about their mothers, and her own even spoke to her in a gentle tone.

"There's something I want you to do for me, Emilia. Will you lend me your ear?"

"Something I can do for you, Mother...?"

"Yes, though I realize this is out of the blue. I want you to attend tomorrow's night party."

Emilia's eyes widened at her suggestion, as if her mother had read her mind. Naturally, that was exactly what she wanted to hear, but she had to be careful not to express it for risk of being scolded again, so she feigned composure when she questioned her mother.

"M-May I ask why, Mother...? You always said that only vulgar children attend night parties."

"And I stand by my words, which is why I feel so terrible about putting you through such an ordeal..."

"But I would be doing this for you, yes, Mother? In which case, I'll go."

Her mother beamed happily at her. "You're such a gentle, wonderful child,

thinking of your mother like this... I have every faith that you'll fulfill my wish, Emilia."

"What is this necklace, Mother?" Emilia asked as her mother placed it upon her with its silver rose-shaped pendant.

It was so beautiful that Emilia almost couldn't tear her eyes away from it. Strangely, though, the piece of jewelry felt heavy where it rested on her neck.

Her mother fixed her amethyst-colored eyes on her. "It is a magical tool that punishes bad children."

"Wh-What...?"

At that moment, her mother's smile was unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

"Only children attend the night parties and even then, only those children who would cause a ruckus to the early hours of the morning. Therefore, Emilia, you will go to tomorrow's function to punish such children."

"M-Mother, I don't understand."

"Princess Claudia is the worst of the lot. How shameless of her to be in this castle when she comes from lowborn stock unworthy of royalty..."

Emilia swallowed fearfully.

"All you have to do is imbue this necklace with your magic, dear, and it will do the rest by reacting to anyone whose magic is the weakest."

"But, Mother, what is this punishment?"

"You are the legitimate daughter of the king and as such, I ask this of you as your duty, Emilia. Crown Prince Wilhelm and Prince Ehrenfried go about their lives blithely, unaware of the roles they must play, so it is up to you to play your part properly."

"M-My part...?"

"You shall punish the horrid Princess Claudia in my stead, hm?"

Even Emilia knew something was wrong with her mother. Her strange behavior hadn't started today, though. No, it had been going on for the past few months. She seemed to be afraid of something, easily startled and jumping at shadows. She didn't smile much anymore either.

Is that Claudia's fault too?

Thus, tonight Emilia arrived at the night party wearing the necklace entrusted to her by her mother.

"Good for you, Emilia!"

Everyone and everything glittered at her first ever night party.

"You can finally enjoy a night party like the rest of us. We always talked about how nice it'd be if you could come too."

"Wilhelm..."

Her older brothers and the rest of the children had been delighted to see her there. It shocked her to learn how much fun it was to play with other children in a place devoid of adults.

After enjoying herself for some time, Noah arrived. His clothing tonight was different from yesterday's. It resembled a servant's formal uniform, and he looked so dashing that he took her breath away. Simply being in the same room with him thrilled her, made her heart feel like it was floating right out of her chest.

At first, she simply watched him from afar, taking the time to gather her courage. Then she approached him as he stood by a wall. Unfortunately, her timing couldn't have been worse.

"Princess!"

No!

The moment he saw Claudia enter the hall, Noah unthinkingly rushed to her. He knelt in front of the girl, then took her hand and spent the rest of the night staring only at her. Emilia was painfully aware of the fact that there was no chance for her to talk to him. The knowledge saddened her so much she stood there for some time in a daze.

Where did those two go?

When she lost sight of them, she began walking around the hall searching for the pair. Coincidentally, she found her brothers also looking for Claudia. They surveyed the hall, discussing how one thought he heard her voice come from over there while the other felt like she was nearby. It wasn't long before Emilia noticed the glass doors leading to the courtyard standing open. Her feet hesitantly carried her toward them.

It's pitch-black out there and so scary...

Lacking the courage to step outside, she froze right in front of the doors.

There's simply no way a child as young as Claudia would willingly venture into that darkness. I mean, it's too dangerous since there aren't any grown-ups here.

A realization came immediately on the heels of that thought.

However...Noah is by her side.

Emilia imagined herself in Claudia's place. Walking into the dark garden alone was a terrifying idea, but if Noah had been with her, holding her hand, she felt like she could go anywhere.

Why does Claudia get to be with someone like Noah?

Just imagining it tied her stomach into angry knots.

I should be the one most suitable as Noah's master. A girl whose blood is tainted with that of a commoner's doesn't deserve a beautiful servant like him...

Up until that moment, Emilia had intended to defy her mother's order. She hadn't wanted to punish any of the children. Though she despised Claudia, recalling how the mud she'd aimed at the girl had instead hit her father made her fearful of incurring someone's wrath; Emilia didn't want to risk that again.

That had been her intention—except the moment she saw Claudia and Noah returning hand in hand, she gripped the rose pendant hanging from the chain on her neck.

I must punish her.

After all, her mother had said as much yesterday: "Pour your magic into this necklace. By doing so, you can punish any child meager in magic who happens to be in the vicinity...in short, the magicless Claudia."

Mother...

"Don't fret. This tool is nothing to be afraid of, not for one as magically powerful as you, dear."

Emilia pressed her lips together tightly, mustered up her courage, and infused her magic into the necklace.

Then everything around her went black.

"Grrr, I've had enough of this. I hate you... I hate you! I hate you!!!" Emilia now screamed and glared at Claudia, who'd found her in the garden.

"Sister."

"Mother is troubled because of you. And I can't get what I want because of you..."

Her eyes strayed toward Noah, who hovered protectively over Claudia. In the dimness illuminated only by moonlight, Emilia saw him staring directly at her. His gaze held none of the kindness from when he'd used his magic on her behalf yesterday.

He should be mine...!

She bit down hard on her lip.

It's fine, though. Soon enough, he, too, will realize that child is worthless. Mother told me the hall would be encompassed by a barrier once the punishment starts! The adults won't get in my way now. Father can't possibly be angry at me either...

But Claudia ignored Emilia's overwrought emotions and quipped matter-of-factly, "Let us pass, Sister."

"How dare you call me that? I won't allow it!" Emilia squeezed the rose-shaped pendant and continued, practically spitting her next words. "You're going to be punished now, cursed by my magic. Serves you right!"

Claudia said nothing.

"Did you know that curses are incredibly painful and terrifying? I doubt you

did, so thank your lucky stars I'm warning you now."

The only reason Emilia herself knew about curses was because her older brother Ehrenfried had taught her a short while ago during the party. The king's second son read all sorts of books, and he was particularly interested in stories from the witch Adelheid's era, so he'd regaled her with some earlier.

"A puny thing like you could never endure a curse. You might even die, you know."

Surely her words frightened Claudia. Emilia had no doubt she would soon blanch and start screaming and crying, begging her to forgive her. After that, the stupid girl would apologize to her mother, regret ever being born, and would never again come to the castle.

She would even release Noah from her service if Emilia ordered her to. Having nowhere else to go then, he would pledge himself to her. He would eventually fall in love with her and become her faithful servant as well as her lover.

With those expectations filling her head, she examined Claudia.

Now then, let me see you wail and screech like the unsightly rabble you are.

However, Emilia's imperious stare turned into one of shock because Claudia's expression, which should have been frightened, was anything but. Emilia couldn't hold back a gasp.

This little girl was smiling.

"I'm actually quite well-versed on the topic of curses. They truly are agonizing, howwific things, aren't they?"

This... This maddening girl...!

Claudia ambled leisurely toward her, still holding hands with Noah. "Now, let me tell *you* about the magical tool in your possession. If used against those with weak magical powers, you can kill at least one thousand at once."

"Wh-What ... ?!"

Upon hearing that, Emilia reflexively let go of the necklace. The rose-shaped pendant swayed as it dropped against her chest. The item she had just used suddenly seemed very terrifying.

"D-Don't lie! There's no way someone like you would even know anything about this...!"

"Even though I studied aaaaaall there is to know and then some about curses?"

Claudia stood there with her head tilted thoughtfully. She was nothing more than a young child—at least that's what she resembled. So then why did Emilia find her incredibly menacing right now?

"You see, that rose is a debice designed to absorb magical energy." Claudia pointed directly at it with her tiny finger. Emilia made a choked sound. "A cursed thing that gathers magical energy for the pwactitioner by sucking it dry from the people around them. A country depwoyed mass amounts of these items in war to supply its own conjurers with energy absorbed from the popuwations of its enemies."

"Enough! I told you to stop lying...!"

"The tool starts with those whose magic is the weakest, so the queen consort must have chosen it to target me specifically, a dismagus, one without magic. Ahhh... How truly unfortunate."

"Shut up!" Emilia screamed at Claudia, who had been spouting all manner of nonsense for the past few minutes. "Say whatever you want! Because no matter what you think you know, it's useless!"

"Hmm-hmm, is that right?"

"Yes! The only one who can counter a curse is the legendary witch, Adelheid!!!"

That Emilia knew at least. Ehrenfried had told her that curses reached the height of their use five hundred years ago; the magic was essentially lost today. As a result, the only one who knew the most about counteracting a curse was the witch who died back then.

"Tee hee!"

Emilia gasped in confusion as Claudia started giggling in response to her threat. A chill skated down her spine even though she didn't know what the girl

found so amusing.

Claudia put on her most endearing grin. "Hencefohth, I'm going to imitate our brother Ehren and teach you something positively amazing. Are you ready, Sister? You can relay the infohmation to Queen Irmela later too." Her expression turned ice-cold. "A curse eventually returns to the one who casts it."

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"N-No...!"
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Emilia collapsed to her knees right there and then. Claudia's horrifying revelation wasn't the only reason she couldn't move. She felt a pain in the left side of her chest when her heart began to pound rapidly.

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It... It hurts...!!!
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She wanted to scream, but her voice wouldn't come out.

Why, why, why?! This shouldn't be happening to me! Claudia's the one who's supposed to be punished! So why isn't anything happening to her?! Why am I the one in pain...?!

"Noah, over here."

No matter how hard she tried to suck in a breath, it felt like a vice grip squeezed her throat inside. A black, snakelike haze slithered up Emilia's legs and wound restlessly around her.

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"N-No... Nooo...!!!"
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Plopped on the ground in the garden, she desperately tried to peel it off of herself, but it was a futile effort. Because the mist lacked a physical body, all she could do was grasp helplessly at the air.

Emilia wrapped her arms around herself.

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I'm scared...!
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"Lend me a hand. Do you think you can diwect your magic into me?"

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"Not a problem. Here...I go."
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Emilia didn't understand what was happening around her nor did she know who said what. It aggravated her when she felt someone's touch on her skin. Forgetting herself in this situation, she unthinkingly batted the hand away.

It's so...cold... Stop! It hurts...!!! Why? Is it because I cast a curse on Claudia?! I just did what my mother asked me to do. I just did what I was asked...!

She could no longer sit properly, so Emilia planted her hands on the ground to support herself upright.

"My lady, the magic—"

"Later. Right now, she comes first."

It hurts, it hurts, I'm scared, I hate this!!! I didn't want to do this in the first place! Even when Mother told me to curse her, I didn't want to do it! I didn't do anything wrong... I didn't do anything...!

Despite her thoughts, she knew the truth better than anyone else.

No, that's not right... I was the one who chose to curse Claudia. Not Mother. It was me...

Her breaths came in short rasps as tears began clouding her vision.

In the beginning, I only thought of her as an eyesore, a nuisance. I mean, Mother kept going on and on about the outrage of a lowborn girl visiting our castle! I wanted to get rid of her, especially because of how wretched it made me feel when Father chose her. I just wanted to make Mother smile again. But more than anything else...

Noah's eyes were always fixed on Claudia, and that was something Emilia would never forgive Claudia for.

I tried to take what belongs to someone else.

Her heart beat even faster and louder, the pain so great it almost numbed her whole body.

Am I suffering because I cursed her of my own free will? Did I really...try to inflict this agony on a child so small, someone younger than myself...?

The tears spilled over.

I'll cast the curse and make her suffer like she never has before.

Emilia had made her decision with such a careless thought, but she hadn't truly understood the weight of her actions until now.

No wonder it hurts so much...!

She started growing dizzy from the pain. Emilia truly believed she would die here.

"Mother..."

Though she cried out for her mother to save her, a barrier covered the hall. She remembered her mother telling her that once she activated the curse, adults wouldn't be able to enter. So even though she knew her mother wouldn't come, Emilia still desperately searched for her.

Mother, where...? Where are you...? I have to tell you something. I have to tell you that I don't want to curse her...

Unable to think clearly, Emilia opened her eyes in a daze. The first thing she saw was a little girl with hair the color of milk tea peering into her face.

"Nnh..."

A light shone from her hands, illuminating her face clearly. It reflected off her eyes, which were no longer the pale gold they had been until moments ago.

"I'm...sorry..."

There was no response to Emilia's spontaneous apology.

"I did something...awful to...you even though...you're my younger sister... I'm sorry..."

At that, Claudia smiled softly. Her eyes resembled a swath of colorful jewels crinkling at the corners.

"You're a very good girl, Sister."

Emilia didn't know what to say. Claudia closed her eyes and placed her hands over Emilia's neck.

It's... It's so warm. And light, just like when Noah cleaned my hands yesterday...

Suddenly, the pain making it difficult for her to breathe began to ebb.

Is this magic? Is Noah using his magic on me again...? No, I don't think that's right...

Emilia was said to have the strongest magical power among all the princesses in the country's history. In order to live up to her name, she had never neglected to practice using her own magic. This was precisely why she knew Noah wasn't the one using such magic on her.

"Claudia...?"

"Sleep, Emilia. Just for a little while."

Claudia pressed her small, warm hands over Emilia's eyelids. And that was all it took for her to suddenly lose consciousness.

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Having finished treating her half sister, Claudia lifted the rose necklace from around the girl's neck before standing up with it clutched in her hand.

"Emilia's fine. Let's hurry back to the hall."

Noah nodded, taking off his coat and covering Emilia with it. "You must always show considewation to everyone, not just your master." Claudia's lessons on deportment and such had been deeply ingrained in him.

On their way back to the hall, he asked only, "Your Highness, are you stopping the curse from taking effect?"

"I used my magic out of a conditioned refwex, but it looks like it's working, which is a relief."

The moment the magical lights in the hall had winked out, Claudia had immediately chanted a spell.

"This curse absorbs magical energy from its suwwoundings, wringing it out of anyone it touches. It was also used as a tool to repwenish magical power on the battlefield, so it's designed to steal from slaves in order, starting with the magically weakest."

"Slaves..."

"Some even died from the shock of having their magic forcibly extwacted. Since it was expensive to maintain slaves, having the weakest die quickly was cost-effective."

Despite the passage of five centuries, Claudia still despised the enemy nation for using such a curse in battle. Noah, too, looked displeased by the idea, but before he could comment, he saw her stumble on the ground, so he extended his hand toward her.

"I will carry you. Begging your pardon, my lady."

He lifted her in his arms. Though she was small for a six-year-old, she must still be heavy for the nine-year-old boy. However, he showed no hints of strain, his footsteps sure as he climbed the stairs leading to the hall.

The cries of many children continued unabated from within the space.

"Waaah!!! Mother...!!!"

"So dark... So scary... I hate it, I hate it, I want to go home!"

"Everyone, don't cry...!"

Her eldest brother, Wilhelm, was doing his best to soothe the confused children. On the other hand, the second prince, Ehrenfried, stood there looking impatient and frustrated. He raised his voice to be heard.

"It's not working, Brother...! No matter how often I try, I simply can't use my magic!"

"Shit! What the bloody hell is going on if even you can't use your magic, Ehren?!"

Just as I thought. The barrier is active inside as well.

A thick barrier blanketed the hall where the night party was being held. Not only did it prevent any interference from outside, but it also restricted anyone inside from escaping and using their magic.

This is the same as five hundred years ago. They brought imprisoned slaves along with them as a source of magical replenishment. The barrier made it impossible for the slaves to escape while making it easy for their enslavers to steal their energy.

Claudia pursed her lips in anger. But there was no time to indulge the emotion. Though she had taken control of the curse, her power over it wasn't complete.

"Princess, how much magical energy do you have left?"

"Don't fret. I can persebere for a little longer."

"You haven't been able to fully suppress the curse, have you?"

Evidently, Noah saw right through her. She nodded once he gently lowered her to her feet on the floor of the hall.

My current body limits my maximum magical output.

Even if she possessed a vast amount of magical energy, she lacked the power to convert it into magic and activate it. Magical energy determined a spell's strength, but to use magic effectively, she needed a variety of elements, including physical strength and concentration.

"I have appwoximately ninety-eight percent of the curse in check. Unfortunately, the weakest parts of it are the ones escaping my control..."

"Prince Wil, my head hurts...!"

"I'm scared! I don't like this! I don't like this..."

Some of the younger children screamed in discomfort as they clung to Wilhelm.

So long as they're here, the curse will start with the children possessing the least amount of magic. And the youngest won't last long.

It was clear what Claudia needed to do now that she'd arrived at this conclusion.

"Light."

An orb of light blinked into existence at her chant. Though the barrier sealed the use of magic inside, Claudia somehow managed to use hers despite consuming a great deal of her energy on healing Emilia earlier.

"Noah. As I thought, if we invoke a good deal of our power, it seems we can use magic."

"I'll take the lead. My lady, you should save yours."

"You can feel how we can't afford to waste time like that, can't you?" Her smile needled him, and he frowned.

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"Nghhh! I-It hurts... This feels wrong...!"
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Wil tried his best to soothe them. "I'm sorry. We'll definitely find a way out of this, so please, just hold on a little longer...!"

She walked resolutely toward her older brothers.

"Ehren, can you take care of the little ones? I need to find Emilia and Claudia...!"

"But, Brother, we have no notion of what's even happening!"

"That doesn't mean I can just abandon our younger sisters! I haven't heard either of them cry out. What if they're shaking in terror, so scared they can't even move...?!"

"Then I will be the one to search for them! If anything happens to you, Brother, what will become of us?"

"Wil, Ehren," she called to them.

Their eyes widened.

"Claudia! You're safe! Are you hurt?!"

"Come here, Claudia. You have nothing to fear now! Wait, what...?"

Her brothers, so concerned for her safety, finally noticed the balls of light floating around her.

"You... Those lights...?"

"Don't worry. They're sparkly and warm. Here, look for yourselves."

When she commanded them, the orbs drifted away to be near the children in the hall. They lifted their heads at the sight of the warm lights even as they continued sobbing.

"Nnn... It's...shining."

"So pretty..."

The unrelenting darkness had finally lifted. That combined with their interest in the unfamiliar lights helped dim their fear just a bit. Her brothers, unable to

<sup>&</sup>quot;Prince Wil, Prince Ehren...!"

move because of the children clinging to them, also breathed quiet sighs of relief. As both princes and the eldest of the party-goers, the two boys needed to project confidence, but she knew even they must have been afraid.

"Claudia. Is this your mag..."

"Listen, listen!" She beamed as she cut off Ehrenfried. "Emilia is fine too. She was sooo tired, so she's taking a nap over there."

Then Claudia sucked in a small breath before raising her hands and facing them in their direction. She chanted, "Isolate."

A chorus of gasps erupted when a transparent membrane surrounded them protectively.

"Is this...a barrier?"

"You're kidding, right?! I couldn't use my magic no matter how hard I tried and the same goes for Ehren. So how the heck can a dismagus like you do this, Claudia...?" Ehrenfried asked, the first to realize the truth.

Wilhelm followed, stunned. "Claudia. Don't tell me you're..."

Claudia didn't give her brothers a clear answer, merely beaming at them. "You should be able to use a little bit of your magic inside that. Moreover, you won't feel as ill there. Ehren, pwess your hand against it. Do you see what I mean?"

Still perplexed, he nevertheless did as she bade and touched the lining of the barrier.

"I...do. Although the structure of the magical formula is incredibly precise, the formula itself isn't all that complicated. A barrier that's easy to understand in spite of its sturdiness..."

Ehren is a magician who excels in the theory of magic. If he can analyze it to such an extent at this young age, then he has a very promising future ahead of him indeed.

Claudia gave her next set of instructions with those thoughts in mind.

"Wil, I want you to stwengthen the barrier with magic so it doesn't break. I'm sure Ehren can tell you how to do it. I have another task for you as well...and

that is to encourage everyone."

"Like you even need to ask!" Wilhelm's unexpectedly forceful tone startled her just a smidge. "Never mind all that! What about you?! You get in here too. Hurry!"

"Tee hee... Thank you, Brothers!"

Claudia flashed them a grin before she turned away. Noah, who'd been patiently waiting next to her, immediately stretched his hand out. She took it before looking back one last time to speak to her brothers.

"Be good boys, hm? I'll try my best to end this as quickly as possible."

"Claudia, what ...?"

Then she focused her gaze on the ceiling illuminated by her magical lights. Shadows created by the chandelier swayed there, but she could see the writhing black haze behind them.

My goodness... This sight certainly brings back memories, hm?

She sighed softly remembering her life from five centuries prior. All the while being careful not to let Noah see the trickle of sweat sliding down her neck.

"I sent Master Karlheinz a message via magic. It was short, but it should have conveyed to him the urgency of the situation," Noah suddenly said, startling her. She hadn't expected him to do that.

"I was actually thinking of asking you to do just that. You're incwedible, Noah. You were able to pass through the barrier, hm?"

"Albeit by force... Though I'm not sure we'll be able to receive a reply right away."

Shimmering letters appeared in the palm of his hand. It was a method of transmission that sent words by magic, but some of them seemed to be missing letters, presumably having lost their way when passing through the barrier created by the curse.

"Will destroy...barrier...from outside...need time..."

Though Karlheinz's message came to her in fragments, Claudia understood

the crux of it.

"We are in a castle where the country's most elite magicians work. So long as they can break through the barrier, we can manage with their aid from outside it."

"I'll tear at it too. If I apply pressure from the inside, we can destroy it faster
\_\_"

"I'm sorry, Noah." Claudia sighed quietly even as she smiled. "I don't have enough strength for you to do that. The curse, it's..."

She exhaled deeply. At that moment, the pitch-black haze stuck to the ceiling turned into a droplet and began to fall, almost oozing viscously.

"Princess!"

A beat of silence from her and then—

"Burst."

With a *pop*, the black drop exploded and scattered. The black thing writhed on the floor, as if in pain. But the black haze covering the ceiling created more droplets to rain down on the hall below.

A curse that specifically attacks the defenseless—it won't detect the children behind the barrier I created. As for me and Noah, who are outside of it, we share the same reservoir of power, so it will attack us both equally...

Claudia filled her lungs with air before saying, "The haze must be kept at bay until Karlheinz breaks through the barrier. Are you pwepared?"

"Leave it to me."

"I'll disperse it. You provide support, Noah."

And with that, she thrust both hands out in front of her. Having slipped out of her control, the cursed haze transformed into countless snakelike forms that raised their heads menacingly. When they bared their fangs and lunged at them, Claudia had a chant at the ready.

"Freeze."

The black haze froze before her with a loud crackling sound. His timing

matching hers impeccably, Noah stepped forth with sword in hand. The blade he'd manifested through the power of magic sliced through the frozen haze. The shattered ice dissipated, sending up black vapor.

"Do your best not to inhale the haze. Next, to our right!"

His only answer was a grunt as he once more slashed through the haze she'd frozen. Both his movements and the speed with which he brandished his sword were dramatically faster than days before.

Thanks to Karlheinz, yes? His growth truly is astounding.

Sweat trickled down her cheek even as her lips curved upward. They eliminated the attacking haze one after another.

"Whoa!"

She heard one of her brothers scream from behind the barrier she'd created. Claudia turned around immediately and cast a spell in their direction.

"Lightning."

At the same time Ehrenfried sucked in a harsh breath, a bolt of lightning raced through the darkness. With a sizzle, the haze that tried to wrap around her barrier fell.

"Claudia! You really can utilize magic...!"

The curse has started reacting to the children. And my barrier is starting to fall apart.

She didn't feel any depletion of her power. But the output was crucial and her body was complaining of its limits. Though she had pretended to be fine so that Noah wouldn't notice, controlling the curse required a constant flow of magic from her. Just once wasn't enough. Claudia had been attacking while simultaneously suppressing the curse this entire time.

How nostalgic. This stinging, painful sensation in my heart.

It hurt just to breathe. If she blundered now, she was afraid she'd collapse on the spot. Of course, she didn't make such an unseemly display of herself. Instead, she continued controlling her magic elegantly. I'm more worried about Noah than myself.

Noah was a bundle of talent. Possessed of a colossal amount of magical energy, he was gradually mastering the art of magic and improving his swordsmanship too. Even so, he was still only a boy of nine.

"Ngh...!"

He slashed through the haze that her magic defeated. But his breathing steadily grew rougher and his still-thin shoulders began to rise and fall painfully.

He's inexperienced with long battles that involve physical combat and magic simultaneously. I have to make sure he isn't injured. I have to make sure he doesn't die...

She could tell that the barrier covering the hall had been cracking for some time now—probably in response to Karlheinz, who was trying to destroy it from the outside. It wouldn't take much longer for them to succeed and come to their aid.

But...we will be cutting it quite close, won't we?

Claudia thought calmly while blasting away the curse in front of her. If she reached her limit, the barrier protecting the children would break. The curse she had been suppressing would rejuvenate and devour the magic of anyone in the area.

Transforming myself into my adult form won't amount to much either, since the vessel will still be a sham.

She couldn't risk endangering either Noah or the children behind her. The truth was, she had wanted to shut him behind her barrier along with the others. However, Claudia had known she couldn't protect everyone on her own, so she'd left him on this side of her ward. Still, she wouldn't allow him to become further entangled in this.

Think. Calculate the most efficient output, a way to fight that still leaves this body useful...

Her heart pounded hard. Even taking small breaths made her lungs feel like they were on fire. Through it all, she didn't let any of this show on her face as she cast another spell.

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"Hellfire!"
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A loud roar, followed by a violent blaze in front of her. The snakelike black haze writhed seemingly in agony. Noah cut its head off and kicked the rest of it far away.

Just a little longer. All I have to do is incinerate the remainder.

Immediately after, a rough cough escaped. Unable to bear the sensation, Claudia covered her mouth with her palm.

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No... I can't let him...see me like this...
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But that proved difficult because when she coughed again, she saw red speckle the spaces between her fingers.

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"Ngh..."
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The crimson droplets spilling from her lips splattered her dress and the floor.

Oh, good grief.

The copious amount of blood clearly indicated there was something wrong with this body.

There's nothing I can do about this...

Noah gasped in shock when he saw the blood she'd coughed up. "Princess!" he yelled, voice laced with worry.

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"Noah! In front of you!"
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"Hrgh—"
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He'd shoved her behind him to protect her and stopped the attacking snake head with his blade. It was a miracle that the sword hadn't been knocked away when struck from that angle. Noah swung his sword wide and pushed it away, but at the same time, all the black haze started to fall from the ceiling.

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"Shit ...!!!"
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After splashing thickly onto the floor, it squirmed slowly, gradually transforming itself into a shape of some sort.

By this point, Claudia had collapsed and sat on the floor, wheezing with her mouth covered. The children behind her shouldn't have been able to see. Nevertheless, they seemed to realize something was wrong.

"Claudia?! Hey! Are you okay?!"

"Your body...! It can no longer sustain your magic because it's reaching its limits!"

Noah grimaced and held a hand out to her.

"My lady, fall back! I'll stave off the curse until Master Karlheinz breaks the barrier...!"

"Tee...hee!" Despite her breaths coming in pants now, she did her best to laugh calmly. "I'm fine, Noah."

The mass of black haze throbbed like a humongous heart. If the curse had a will, perhaps it yearned for life? Because even five hundred years ago, she had personally seen the curse occasionally take on the form of some kind of living thing or monster, including the snake form.

And now, it tried to transform itself into a dragon bearing massive wings.

"I can heal a twifle like this easily afterward. I'm fine. I can keep going."

"Please don't underestimate me...!" Sword pointed at the dragon, Noah shouted at Claudia as she tried to stand up. "Did you really think I couldn't tell how much pain you were in?!"

His words truly mystified her, and her breath caught in her throat.

No...I don't have the time to dwell on this.

Claudia immediately redirected her attention away from Noah. The coughing hadn't stopped, and neither had the blood.

I mustn't listen to him...

Her head spun. If she let her guard down even a little, she would lose consciousness.

Right now, I need to focus on the curse and crush it.

"I'll fight. So please, take shelter inside the safety of the barrier...!"

The curse is imitating a dragon's characteristics through its transformation.

That means under the chin, where a dragon's scales are, there should be a core storing the magical power it received from Emilia.

"I'm begging you, my lady! Fall back!"

I'm going to...use my magic for Noah and the children... Once more should be easy enough to set the core ablaze, hm...?

The black haze continued molding itself into a dragon. Sometimes, the silhouette fell apart, scattering the curse across the floor, but the parts crawled back to its main body and regrouped fast.

"Princess, please...!"

Hurry. I have to hurry.

She lurched up on shaking legs, and even with her mind growing increasingly clouded, she thought, *It doesn't matter...if my body breaks...so...* 

Just as Claudia faced her palm toward the black dragon...

"Princess!!!"

The force of his scream jolted her, clearing the fog in her brain. Noah stood in front of her, his hand gripping her wrist tightly. He was normally so calm. She'd never heard him like this before.

"Release me," Claudia commanded with bloodstained lips. Since the curse was still in the midst of its transformation, she had no idea when it would finally act. "I'll make quick work of destwoying that curse, so be a good boy until then."

"Don't give me that crap."

"Noah...?"

He scowled down at her, quietly seething with anger. "I'm your manservant."

She made a puzzled sound in response. He should be angry. Why, then, did he look so sad? Even as the thought ran through her mind, she stared up at him in a daze.

"I swore to live for your sake—that I would stay by your side because without

you, my life would lose all meaning."

"My sweet disciple... Did I not tell you how much potential you have?"

"I want to live for you, even if it means throwing all of that potential away."

Claudia gasped softly at the sincerity in his voice. All things considered, this was neither the time nor the place for such a conversation. She knew this, but her thoughts wavered and her words tumbled out unbidden.

"No." Even to her own ears she sounded like a very young girl. "No. Absowutewy not."

"Princess."

"I...don't want you to die."

Noah's gaze overlapped with those of her disciples five hundred years ago. Her beloved disciples, more important to her than anything, whose lives she had wanted to protect even more than her own.

"There were so many of them. I managed to protect most of them." Her tiny lips twisted in pain. "But...I couldn't protect all of them."

He made a sympathetic noise.

"I didn't want...even a single one...to die..."

She knew Noah felt the same way she did. He fought out of a desperate wish to ensure she lived. But she would rather leave someone behind than be left behind herself.

So, Claudia smiled. "I only do the things I want to do."

"Then all the more reason...!" Noah dropped to one knee on the floor and looked directly into her eyes. "If you're going to pretend to be greedy, at least choose *everything*."

She didn't follow.

Her blood had stained his clothes. She stared at the spots detachedly, as if they had been the work of a stranger. Noah's expression was oceans more pained at the sight of her blood.

"You don't have to give up on anything."

She swallowed audibly upon hearing his words.

"Choose the path where you protect everyone here and don't let me die. Above all else, you should choose the path where you live for *yourself*."

"Noah?"

"If you want me to live, please promise that you'll live a long life too." His obsidian eyes pierced through her. "Do you really think a dog can live properly if he loses his owner to death?"

Claudia locked her eyes intently on him.

"I'm prepared to be your servant for the rest of my life. Which is why I ask you to do the same as my mistress."

"Such a naughty boy... Let go of my hand at once and listen to what I have to say..."

"No. I won't let you escape. I'll protect you, no matter what happens." His expression reminded Claudia of both a petulant sulk and an earnest plea. "Because...you're my princess..."



He made her catch her breath again, speaking to her as if he was gazing upon a precious treasure. It was what one might call a kind of possessiveness. His attitude told her he wouldn't allow her to throw her life away selfishly, never mind how much younger than her he was in terms of his soul. Claudia listened to Noah's plea with a dazed expression.

"As long as you need me while you're still alive, I'll never die and leave you behind." He wiped the blood from her lips with his thumb. "This I swear to you. And that's why...I'll grow stronger." He grasped her shoulders and pressed his forehead into her chest. His voice came out as a murmur. "Please let me stay by your side."

She didn't know what to say. All she could do was blink slowly. In the span of a second, countless memories rushed through her mind.

"Please, we beg you. You alone must survive."

"We don't care if we all die as long as you live, Adelheid."

"For your life, we will do anything."

Their words had left her feeling bereft for the longest time. Not so with Noah, though. He didn't just want her to live, but he also promised to stay by her side.

"You'll...be with me forever?"

Claudia gently ran her fingers through his soft, black, unruly hair. When she did, he raised his head and gazed directly into her eyes with his obsidian ones.

"Forever," he repeated. "Because I realized that's what you wanted."

She lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Noah stood up and faced the haze that had almost completed its dragon transformation.

"If you want me to use magic, order me to flaunt it, not to present me to His Majesty."

"Noah..."

"And not as a disciple you're proud of, but as your manservant."

His hands stained with her blood, he readjusted his grip on his sword and squeezed the hilt tightly before making a clear declaration. "That's all I need.

Nothing else."

After a pause, she giggled a little "tee hee." Her face lit up. She couldn't help it, not when she thought his desperation and fervor were both courageous and charming. She felt so positively tickled that for a moment, she forgot the pain in her chest, the overwhelming nausea, and the agony in her head threatening to erase her consciousness.

"How passionate you are."

She used the back of her own hand to wipe the blood from her mouth and slowly stood up.

"You win. As your mistress, how can I reject my servant's honest plea?"

Strangely, her body felt considerably lighter. Even though she should have been reaching her limit, Claudia realized she was fine. She could still keep going. Joy, a simple emotion but unmistakably present, made her eyes sparkle.

"Let's make a pwomise. I will share all of my pain only with you. So...since I swear to no longer bear my burdens alone, will you in turn suffer and hurt with me?" Then she placed her palm on the left side of Noah's back, the point closest to his heart. "My splendid manservant."

He made a startled sound in his throat. A beat later, he spoke, his voice almost a whisper, but clear nonetheless.

"As you wish."

"Thank you."

Still smiling, she pressed her forehead into his back.

Magical output depends on physical strength and mental stability.

Ergo...fighting for the sake of living with another will make it leagues easier to handle my power than fighting alone prepared to die.

If she had understood this five centuries ago, perhaps her country wouldn't have been laid to waste by the curse. She laughed derisively at herself for thinking such a pointless thing.

She banished the thought and imagined a magical formula in her mind before slowly reciting an incantation directed at Noah.

"Come. Come to me, inferno at the edge of the world."

The black haze finished its dragon transformation and unleashed a tremendous roar. The very air around them shuddered, and the children wailed in terror. Fortunately, her brothers cheered up the little ones.

"Rise from the depths of your blood, and become the cornerstone that casts out this evil."

She slowly and carefully wove the incantation, a long one for her. The length of a spell's incantation marked the amount of power put into it. The weaker a person's magic, the more of it they needed to infuse into the same spell. This explained why long incantations existed. Claudia's spells were short or silent because of her strong magical power. It was said that only a handful of people in history possessed enough power to invoke magic without chanting long incantations.

"Come. Come, inferno."

Someone like Karlheinz would have definitely understood the significance of Claudia chanting such a long incarnation. The thought pleased her.

"Grant your strength to my servant."

Noah sucked in a breath. Through her palms on his back, Claudia could feel his heartbeat.

The spell I cast is coursing through him because he's connected to me through the acolyte contract. Although the magical load is shared between us, I directed all the effects of the magical enhancement to him...

Pain lanced through her heart, but it was infinitely more bearable than her earlier agony. Noah too seemed to be fine. He didn't collapse, merely exhaling a short breath, and that relieved her enormously.

I had no idea magic could be used like this.

New paths stretched out before her now that she'd chosen not to carry the burden alone. Mustering up the courage to share her pain and suffering with someone she trusted might even allow her to gain the strength to accomplish anything one day. Noah had taught her that. Even as the realization delighted

her, she cast her eyes down.

"Go." She gave him a gentle push, and he stepped forth without hesitation.

The blade of his sword shone, leaving a white afterglow. Noah pointed the tip down and ran as far as he could until he reached his target. The dragon created by the curse trembled in distaste at his approach. It leaned back, bringing its wings together, and opened its mouthlike organ wide. With a roar, it unleashed a jet of haze reminiscent of flames.

"You must not touch it no matter what. Now, cut through it!"

She didn't need to tell him not to be afraid. Noah sped up resolutely. Though his frame was thin, he was able to shift his center of gravity quickly and nimbly. He jumped to the right, then immediately turned to the left, adroitly dodging the cursed dragon's breath.

Claudia chanted two short incantations, creating a light to illuminate his way. Simultaneously, she summoned an ice blade and sliced off one of the dragon's wings. Bellowing in pain, the massive black dragon flailed. It surprised her to see the haze capable of such an action considering it was only imitating the form of a living thing.

In the next instant, having closed the gap between himself and the dragon, Noah hacked off its right hind leg. The whole area was enveloped in the hissing sound of the cursed haze evaporating. With a loud *thud*, the dragon lost its balance. Even then, though, it immediately twisted its head and spewed more black flames.

"It's coming from the right! Don't dodge!"

"Ngh!"

He held his ground upon hearing her instructions. Behind him were the children protected by her ever-weakening barrier. She cast a spell to strengthen it before quickly erecting another barrier in front of Noah, protecting them all. The transparent and shining wall was nonetheless thick, and it kept away every last bit of the hazy emission.

Her heart throbbed painfully from expending so much of her power. But she ignored the stinging sensation and straightened her spine once more. Having

lost both a wing and a leg, the dragon's silhouette blurred, its surface rippling restlessly. The children inside the barrier screamed in terror at the repulsive sight.

"Shit. It's regenerating...!"

"It's vulnerable under its jaw. That is where the curse's core rests. Cut through it, Noah."

"Consider it done. Grant me your power to end this!"

Watching Noah charge forward again, Claudia chanted a spell right away. The curse's core was protected, making magic less effective against it. In which case, she simply had to slice off its limbs. She summoned massive icicles in midair, then plunged them into its remaining legs. Pinned to the marble floor, the curse dragon lost its shape even more. It spotted Noah nearing its neck and tried to blow him away by flapping its remaining wing. She continued her spellcasting.

"Bind."

Thorny vines appeared in the air and wound around the dragon to restrain it. It only took an instant to immobilize it, and the spell consumed a fair amount of her magical power. However, she had expected as much, and her action was enough to disrupt its center of gravity. Powerless, the dragon dropped its head to the floor. Claudia flopped down at the same time.

"My lady!"

"Focus on what's in front of you."

In short, she told her adorable manservant there was no need to turn around to check on her. Still, her words were different from before.

"Go. Don't stop. I'll protect everyone... Trust me."

Her words weren't meant to make him abandon her nor was she sacrificing herself. They were an order to ensure their future.

"Noah."

He grunted in clear acknowledgment of her saying his name.

The struggling dragon tried to raise its head. Showing not a trace of fear,

Noah lunged directly toward it.

"Lightning."

Claudia used magic to counter the dragon's head as it bared its fangs at Noah. With its throat on display, a red glow was clearly visible under its jaw. She said nothing.

The point of Noah's sword unerringly found its mark. His swordsmanship bespelled the children inside her barrier.

"Incredible... Both Claudia and that servant of hers are fighting off a *curse* of all things," Ehrenfried murmured, only half aware that he was speaking aloud. "Almost like...the legendary Adelheid and her disciples...!"

"Charge!"

The tip of his sword gouged and cut through the dragon's scales. He grunted softly from the effort.

Having lost its core, the dragon's body began crumbling violently. The black haze forming it howled as if in its death throes. It pawed at the floor aggressively one last time, raising its upper body high. Its mouth opened wide. Claudia, sitting down in exhaustion, was its undeniable target.

Wilhelm, her eldest brother, shouted from behind the barrier. "Claudia!"

But she only focused her glittering eyes on the dragon, the corners of her bloodstained lips turning upward. Without hesitation, she extended her hand.

"Princess!"

Noah had run over and lifted her up. He had even tossed his sword aside to do so. His limbs, which she had strengthened with magic earlier, seemed to move with such deftness, more so than usual. Held tightly in his arms, she laughed and cast a final spell.

"Farewell to you, abominable curse."

The cursed haze had grown even weaker with its core gone. Because of that, she could destroy the curse even with this spent body. She wrapped her left arm around Noah's neck and pointed with the index finger of her right, twirling it in a circle.

"Sepulcher!"

The moment Claudia chanted, the dragon's massive body stiffened. The black haze composing it disintegrated with a rustling sound as if the blossoms on an enormous tree shed their petals all at once.

"The curse is disappearing..." Noah muttered.

"It's not over yet," she warned.

The floor was still covered with splatters of the black haze that most definitely pulsated. Though the main part of the curse had vanished, pieces yet lingered. Just as she attempted to eliminate those traces as well, Claudia coughed again, her tiny body shaking with the sudden spasm.

"My lady!"

Her face scrunched in pain as the blood, albeit less than earlier, spilled from her lips. Thanks to Noah, she'd been able to rally and stabilize her magical output. But that didn't mean the damage her body had sustained had been healed. Frantic, Noah rushed to set her down.

"I'll do it. Please stay behind me, Your Highness."

"Silly boy. You're at your limit too."

There was no way she wouldn't have noticed his shaking arms when he'd initially picked her up. Even then, he tried to argue with her.

"Someone has to fight here. In which case, it should be me—"

"Don't worry." She smiled reassuringly.

Suddenly, they heard a loud cracking noise, like the sound of glass shattering.

"Is it him...?"

Shards of light rained down, twinkling brightly as they fell. Immediately after, the remnants of the curse were burned away. The powerful blast of magic had come from an individual outside the barrier, one whose presence she'd sensed this whole time.

"Your Highness, are you all right?!"

Claudia took a moment before responding. "Karlheinz."

She practically breathed his name. Having broken through the barrier, Karlheinz took stock of the situation in a single glance and started giving orders to the magicians he'd brought with him.

"Aid the princes as well as the other children! I'll heal Her Highness and her servant. I want all high-ranking conjurers to verify that no traces remain of the curse."

"Yes, sir."

I expected nothing less of the castle's magicians. Talented folks who are capable even in circumstances like this.

That idle thought drifted through her hazy mind. Noah was speaking to Karlheinz, who'd rushed over.

"The princess used too much of her magic, so she's been coughing up blood..."

"Your Highness. Your hands, please."

Karlheinz took her hands in his and began casting healing magic on her. Noah watched in frustration, unable to perform such magic yet.

"Nghhh... Karlheinz... My sister...in the courtyard..." Claudia murmured.

"Lady Emilia?"

"She's sleeping inside a small barrier the princess erected. Her situation is a bit complicated because of the curse," Noah explained in a whisper.

Karlheinz must have surmised what had happened from that. In the next moment, a shout came from the hall's entrance.

"Your Majesty, stop! You cannot enter yet...!"

"Release me...! Ahhh. Ahhh, Emilia...!!!"

Irmela the queen consort had arrived. Agitated, she shook off the magicians trying to restrain her.

"Please, Your Majesty, you must leave!"

"What have I done...?! Even begging for forgiveness won't be enough!" she cried.

Noah was telling Karlheinz everything that had happened in here. From the state of things, Irmela had likely deduced that the curse that was supposed to have targeted only Claudia had failed, endangering many of the children in the hall.

"I do not care what becomes of me! I'll accept any punishment! Take my life if you will! Just save hers! Please, I beg you...!"

Such a heartbreaking cry, Claudia thought as sleep pulled at her. The voice of a mother...worried about her daughter, hm...

She closed her eyes slowly. Continuing to heal Claudia, Karlheinz addressed the queen consort in an indecipherable tone. "Your Majesty, we magicians will question you shortly. As such, it may not be possible for you to meet Princess Emilia once she has awakened."

His words rendered Irmela speechless. How painful it must be for a mother racked with concern for her daughter to not be able to know whether she was safe. Claudia's consciousness blurred even more at the thought. At this rate, she didn't think she could fashion a proper reply. I'm so sleepy... But I can't fall asleep just yet. I have to stay awake for a little longer...

Holding Claudia in his arms, Noah asked, "Master Karlheinz, the princess...?"

"Be at ease. She'll feel better soon. Although...you're looking quite the worse for wear yourself."

"I don't matter. She does."

"Mrgh..." Claudia mumbled in displeasure, not at all surprised by Noah's response. "No, Noah, you must..."

"Princess."

"You're the one...who pwomised...to stay by my side...forever..."

She tried to touch his cheek, her hand making a light smacking sound in her groggy state.

"Yes, but—"

"You must tweasure yourself as well. If you insist on declaring yourself as belonging to me, I will not allow you to neglect yourself."

Her petulant tone seemed to make him uncomfortable, as he did not reply. Claudia reached out to him with both hands and stared into his obsidian eyes. "My adorable manservant."

He had fought desperately to live by her side. She hugged him tightly as this truth settled in her.

"My...Noah."

A strangled sound escaped him.

The name "Noah" meant "rest." She had met him in that forest, and the name had been born from the playful idea of wanting a dog, so she had named him after what she sought. In her previous life as Adelheid, she had been in no position to seek rest from others. She had intended to free him soon anyway, which was also a reason why she gave him the name. And yet, Noah gave Claudia what she wanted with boyish, straightforward sincerity.

"Princess..."

Hearing his discomfited tone displeased her because clearly, he still didn't understand.

"Bah. Enough. Hng... Put me down. Noah, you must also hurry up and accept his healing..."

"F-Fine. I understand, all right! I get it!" He corrected his hold on her as she squirmed restlessly in his arms. "I'll let him heal me. But I'll put you down later."

"Whyyy?" She drew the word out in her grumpy sleepiness.

Noah answered with a straight face, "Aren't I the only one allowed to 'hug' you, as you put it, my lady?"

His words surprised a small squeak from her. "The only one who can hug me is Noah." He was throwing the words she'd said to her father only yesterday back in her face. Though he'd been scowling at the time, obviously, he had actually paid close attention to her words.

"I won't release you until I've taken you somewhere safe."

He said that with a smile, his eyes narrowed as if challenging her.

"Incowwigible boy."

There was no lie in her words. That was how she truly felt upon seeing his expression. Claudia let out a small yawn before burrowing into Noah's arms.

"I want to sleep... Karlheinz, take care of Noah, hm...?"

Her pain eased rapidly thanks to his healing magic. That combined with a heavy fatigue made the sleepiness attacking her hard to resist. Finally unable to even utter any words, she pressed her forehead into Noah's chest. Resigned, he patted her back gently.

"Rest well, my lady."

Good night, Noah, my safe haven.

And then Claudia fell into a deep, deep sleep.

### **Epilogue**

Two days had passed since the turmoil caused by the curse.

"And then, and then! Emilia let me touch her neckwace. I felt a little zap! In my finger! That's how I can use magic now!"

Claudia beamed at her audience. She wore a frilly dress, and Noah had braided her hair. The country's top scholars of magic surrounded her, all showing similarly troubled expressions. Clad in robes symbolic of their authority, they displayed various reactions to her news, for example stroking their mustaches thoughtfully, tapping their chins meditatively, and groaning in consternation as they stared down at Claudia.

As for her father, King Volkhard, he sat in his throne in front of her and watched her with an amused gaze.

"Y-Your Majesty, we simply have no idea how Princess Claudia suddenly acquired magical powers..."

"We went through every document we could find, but there is no precedent. Therefore, we ourselves aren't sure what to make of her case."

"The only explanation we can think of is that Her Highness is right. When she tried to stop the effect of the curse, her latent magical potential must have activated for the first time."

Volkhard's smile was closer to a sneer as he listened to the fearful scholars' explanation. "Huh. Her magic was activated for the 'first' time, you say?"

"All five of us gathered here agree...! So we humbly ask you to spare our lives..."

The way they bowed so deeply, they might as well have been begging. Volkhard's derisive smirk widened as he addressed Claudia.

"Tell me, Claudia, what do *you* think? After all, magic is supposed to be something we have a fixed amount of from the day we're born to the day we

die. Yet here we are, with the foremost scholars of our nation unanimously claiming that your magic 'awoke from its dormant state after coming into contact with the curse.' What *am* I supposed to make of this?"

One of the scholars gasped audibly in fear.

"Father, you silly goose!"

Claudia tilted her head quizzically and blinked her adorable eyes as she stared up at him.

"You know just like eberyone else that I couldn't use magic before. I put my hand—splat!—on the cwystal, but nothing happened. You made eberyone watch too. Don't you wemember?"

"Hmph. Well, you're not wrong."

"But now I have magic, right?"

Just moments earlier, Claudia had undergone another magical reevaluation. Unlike the one that had taken place a few days ago, the results of which had declared her "magicless," this time, the crystal ball confirmed the existence of magical energy within her. However, she couldn't risk revealing her true score. Too high of a number would prove terribly inconvenient, so she had been careful to adjust the number. She had decided on a value less than her brothers' and sister's by a small margin, but a good deal more than the average person's. Ergo, the new result overturned the one from the previous appraisal, causing an uproar among the nobles, which in turn led to summoning the scholars.

"I didn't have magic before, but now I do, and I can use it. So, these uncles are suuuper cowwect, you know?" She looked up at the scholars and bestowed an adorable grin upon them. "I don't think a single one of them is wrong."

"Thank you so much, Your Highness...!!!"

Eyes wet with emotion, the scholars all genuflected in front of her. They gazed upon her like she was their savior, which might have indeed been the case, because they had no idea what they might be in for if they offended Volkhard.

But the king wasn't interested in them. After smiling again, Claudia quickly changed the subject. "Don't you think so too, Karlheinz?"

Eyes cast down and face impassive, he nodded as he stood next to her father's throne.

"Yes, Your Highness. I too wish to endorse the scholars' viewpoint. However...I defer to His Majesty's judgment on the matter."

"Irmela will be executed regardless. It doesn't matter now whether or not Claudia possessed magic at birth. Nevertheless...if that's the case, then..."

She had been right about her father's goal being to expel Irmela for the crime of hiding Claudia's magic.

Be that as it may, this curse incident makes her past wrongdoing seem like child's play in comparison.

Irmela might have had a subconscious premonition that Claudia wasn't actually a dismagus. By sucking her magic and transferring it to Emilia, she had tried to make her own lie true. However, the consequences of her actions proved almost catastrophic when she had endangered not only the children of the aristocracy, but her own daughter, a princess, as well as the two princes in the royal line of succession. As a result, Irmela would receive her due punishment. And in all likelihood, Emilia wouldn't escape with impunity, regardless of the fact that her mother had coerced her into activating the curse in her place.

With all this in mind, Claudia peeked covertly up at Karlheinz. She remembered the events of yesterday.

"The queen consort might have been affected by some sort of curse."

Claudia had fallen into a deep sleep in her room in the castle after recovering thanks to Karlheinz's healing magic. When they met again after she woke up, that was the first thing she said to him.

"It might not have started now either... For example, it might have begun six years ago when I was banished. If a curse had powwuted her mind, she might not have realized that exiling me would end up becoming a noose around her

neck."

"Perhaps. However, at the very least, I personally never sensed any sort of bewitchment cast on Her Majesty."

"I haven't either. Even so."

Noah stood behind her chair, braiding her hair. She stared at Karlheinz's reflection in the dresser mirror.

"I strongly believe it would be better to monitor her instead of expewwing her from the country."

Karlheinz mulled over her response in a thoughtful silence.

"Because the fact is, a cursed debice found its way into her hands. I know a merchant brought it to her, but who was he? What do we know of him?" Claudia continued as she swung her legs. "If the curse brainwashed her, then she, too, is a victim alongside Emilia. In which case, this might be a hawbinger of truly awful things to come."

"Do...you really believe that's a possibility?"

"Tee hee. Now, why would you ask me such a thing?"

Karlheinz sighed in response before replying. "I thought perhaps you might be feeling merciful toward Queen Irmela and Princess Emilia."

"Pehwish the thought!"

Though Claudia laughed, Noah, still styling her hair, gave Karlheinz a look conveying his agreement.

"I don't give a fig what happens to those two," Claudia continued. "Don't misunderstand. I'm feeling neither angry nor sympathetic."

"Your Highness..."

However...

Despite her clouded consciousness after activating the curse, Emilia had still acknowledged Claudia as her younger sister. As well, Irmela had completely lost her head in her worry over her daughter, screaming and crying as she had.

The Adelheid of five hundred years ago didn't have a mother or an older

sister. And though her disciples had been family to her in all but name, she had spent her life being respected and essentially worshipped by them. It had only been natural for her to be curious about the concepts of siblings and parents.

"I abhor the very existence of curses, which is why I want to eliminate them. Ergo, I'd like to avoid Father executing or exiling them."

So she'd said, and Karlheinz had listened to her wish. Now, on her behalf, he counseled her father sitting on his throne.

"Your Majesty. I have a few ideas on how to deal with the queen consort and the first princess. I hope you will grant me the opportunity later to speak to you in more detail."

"Hm. Very well. I suppose I can spare some time to discuss how to dispose of garbage."

And I will seriously need to address how to deal with this father of mine sometime soon...

His garnet-colored eyes looked down on Claudia. She beamed back at him. "Father, may I leave now? There's cake in my room, and I'm oh so beeery hungry!" She pressed a hand to her stomach dramatically.

"Fine. You're excused. We have plenty of time for long father-daughter chats since you'll be staying in this castle for some time yet."

"Mmmmmmm. I don't want to. Beshides, I'm going back to my tower soon."

The scholars watched her in concern, their faces pale on account of her unreserved manner of speech. But her father merely laughed in amusement, so it didn't seem her life was in danger at the moment.

"That reminds me. I heard something very interesting from Wilhelm and Ehrenfried. Would you like to know what it is?"

"Ooooh, tell me, Father, tell me!"

She had turned away to leave the throne room, but she spun around when he said those words to her.

"It's about your servant. The boy with the obsidian eyes. They said he

performed superbly."

She said nothing.

"Though you supported him with your magic, he apparently managed to subjugate the curse almost entirely on his own. Is that right?"

During that battle, given the children's position behind the barrier, it would have been impossible to tell which of them used what magic, allowing Claudia to take advantage of the situation to attribute most of the magic she'd chanted at the time to Noah. And in fact, as he was now, Noah could use all of the spells she'd cast. Meaning it wasn't a complete lie on her part. The children experienced something frightening, so after a little linguistic guidance from Karlheinz, they became convinced that "the servant boy had fought alone."

This was an old trick Claudia knew and one she often employed in the village near the tower. So while she had been unconscious—er, rather, asleep—Karlheinz and Noah had done the necessary as usual.

"That's right, Father." She beamed in agreement. "Noah is very stwong. And amazing!"

"He is indeed, which is why I think it's a waste to use such an outstanding magician as a mere manservant."

She kept silent.

"What say you, then, to releasing him from your service and gifting him to me?"

Her father's enigmatic grin made it impossible to tell whether he was joking or serious.

"Mmm..."

Karlheinz watched over her quietly.

Claudia answered him bluntly, still beaming. "I saaay...no!"

The king lapsed into a heavy silence. She had refused him clearly, the same as she'd done when he'd asked to hold her a few days ago. Volkhard's eyes widened momentarily before he barked out an amused laugh.

"Noah is mine. Although I *did* think a widdle bit about giving him to you, Father..."

"Ha. Meaning you changed your mind?"

"I did! I won't give him to anyone."

At the very least, she wouldn't give him up as long as Noah himself wished her not to.

"He's my very impohtant tweasure, that's why."

Now Volkhard was the one to say nothing.

Claudia waved to him. "Bye-bye, Father. I'm going back to my tower after I eat my cake, so farewell for now."

"Ah, hold on. Before you return..."

Claudia ignored her father's voice and raced down the red carpet. After using all her might to push the imposing double doors open, she turned around to wave at Karlheinz and the scholars too.

"Bwa ha ha! She's the only one who would so willfully not listen when I tell her to stop."

"Yes... Yes indeed, Your Majesty."

Smiling, Karlheinz bowed to her. Once the doors closed behind her, she stepped out into the hallway where Noah waited.

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"Noah, pick me up!"

"My lady..."

He looked exasperated at the sight of Claudia with her hands stretched out demandingly. The magicians guarding the doors chuckled quietly in amusement. Noah seemed hesitant, then reluctantly reached out and lifted her into his arms.

He questioned her, carefully speaking quietly so that no one would overhear. "Haven't you been acting more 'childlike' than usual ever since we came to this castle?"

"Noah, you silly goose. I am a child."

"Ugh..." He could only release a long-suffering sigh when she answered him with her most adorable expression.

In high spirits, Claudia waved and said "bye-bye" to the conjurers too. Once they turned a corner in the corridor and she determined no one else was around, she chanted. And they were transported to her private chambers in the castle in the blink of an eye. Used to her antics by now, Noah set her down.

"I'll have you know that acting too young is just the right tactic. Moreover, pretending to be a young child means less trouble."

"Well, I imagine your father and Master Karlheinz have seen right through you."

"Hmmm, I'm not so sure about my father. I believe he thinks I'm simply a child with a vast amount of magical power, which frankly surpwises me. It feels almost as if he holds me in contempt, as if he thinks he can deceive me anytime he wishes to."

If that truly was the case, it worked in her favor. However, Noah was still frowning as he set the room's table for the cake.

"You seem dissatisfied, Noah."

"Of course I am. I don't like the idea of anyone looking down on my mistress, even if the person in question is your father."

"Tee hee."

His words suddenly reminded Claudia of something that happened a few days ago. Noah had been in an awful mood the day of her first magical reevaluation. She'd thought it was because of her performance to pique her father's interest in him, but now she realized the other reason had to do with her being ridiculed relentlessly.

"Don't you know by now I don't care a whit about such things?"

"I do. I also know that I'm just a brat getting worked up about your intentions all on his own."

"Well, when you put it like that... If someone were to say awful things about

you, Noah, I'm certain I, too, would become far angrier than when they spoke poorly of me."

He froze then, the expression on his face awkward. On the surface, his expression might appear hard to decipher. But Claudia knew the truth—he hid his embarrassment behind his scowls.

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"Tee hee hee hee."

"Gah... What is it now...?"

"Oh, nothing at all."
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She took a seat at the round table situated by the window. Noah placed a plate of cake in front of her and she waited for him to pour the tea with her chin resting on her hands. But as she sat there, bathed in the sunlight, a gentle drowsiness overcame her.

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"Ahhh..."
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She yawned delicately. In truth, she was only eighty percent recovered. The damage to her body had been completely healed, so nothing hurt physically. However, she had yet to regain all the magic she'd used, but she expected that problem to resolve itself in about a week or so. Besides, the store of magic she *did* have even now rivaled the total of a few hundred ordinary magicians.

Knowing all this didn't change the fact that she was still sleepy. Just being in a slightly warm place or cuddling against something soft made her fall asleep right away. Noah understood and paused in the middle of preparing her tea.

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"My lady, would you like to rest?"

"Mmm..."
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"Your brothers visited during what should have been your nap time. It's no surprise you're tired."

He was exactly right.

Wilhelm and Ehrenfried had been shocked to learn Emilia was involved in the curse, and they hadn't left her side until she opened her eyes. However, upon waking, the girl had been placed under house arrest on their father's order. At present, Emilia's wet nurse stayed with her in Irmela's stead, providing a

comforting presence.

Earlier in the afternoon, the two boys had visited Claudia to cheer *her* up this time, bearing a letter from Emilia. Though the wool had been pulled over the younger children's eyes regarding the "magicless" girl's use of advanced magic, it went without saying that her brilliant brothers hadn't been so easily fooled.

However, intuiting that things weren't as they seemed, they had spoken to her in whispers so that the magicians escorting them wouldn't hear.

"Claudia, you're keeping a secret, aren't you? But don't worry, we won't tell a soul. Count on it."

"Wil..."

It had honestly surprised her when Wilhelm said that. And then Ehrenfried nodded vigorously in agreement too.

"I'd love to know more about your magic, but I'll leave the questions for another time. After all, Karlheinz said rest is the best medicine, and you need it."

"Emilia wrote a letter for you, so be a good sister and read it...is what I'd like to say," Wilhelm said. "If you're angry, don't force yourself to read it. There's no rule that says you *have* to forgive someone just because they apologized."

"Despite what Brother is saying, he's actually sincerely concerned about both of you. Though Emilia blundered badly, she's still our younger sister, just like you. And *you* protected us."

"Ehren! You cheeky little...! B-But...he's not wrong. I hope you know you can tell us anything, Claudia."

Once her brothers had left her room, she'd pored over Emilia's letter. It overflowed with apologies, her fear of losing her home upon Claudia's arrival, her mother's terror, and her desperation for her father to truly see his first daughter for who she was. Emilia had even written about how despite everything, Claudia hadn't hesitated to save her, which had made her older sister incredibly ashamed of herself.

There was something else—how she'd fallen in love with Noah. How she

deeply regretted trying to knowingly take him from her without even considering his own feelings. Emilia had written it all in a childlike manner. So, Claudia chose an amethyst crayon that matched the color of her sister's eyes when she penned her reply: "Sister, let's play together the next time we meet." That was all she wrote.

After all, she doesn't know...that I, too, ignored his thoughts on the matter and tried to decide his future myself.

She cast her gaze downward.

"Shall I carry you to the bed ...?"

"No. I won't sleep just yet."

Claudia shook her head in refusal. Then she blinked slowly before looking up at him.

"There's something more important I want to know. Noah, are you certain about this?"

"About what?"

"Choosing to live your life as my servant. So...are you sure about throwing away all of the other possibiwities for your life to stay with me?"

She asked this for his sake. Noah, on the other hand, resumed his preparations for teatime, placing the tea set on the table while looking at her with an exasperated expression.

"Even you're the type to obsess over the same thing twice, huh?"

Oh my. Is he being the tiniest bit impertinent? she thought, but she was too sleepy to say it out loud. Claudia watched him pour water over the tea leaves into the teapot to steep. She absentmindedly realized from his practiced movements how skilled he'd become at brewing and serving tea in only a month. Silently counting down the time, he answered her.

"If throwing something away helps you get what you want, that's a fortunate way to live."

He spoke ever so casually, like he was simply stating a fact of life.

"No matter what kind of possibilities the future offers, I want to live my life by your side."

"Noah..."

His direct, unwavering words practically blinded her.

The sunlight pouring in through the window brought back memories of what used to be: the people she'd left behind five hundred years ago, the days that would never return. Claudia narrowed her eyes, remembering it all. The earnestness in Noah's gaze now was unlike anything that had been in theirs so long ago. His eyes were filled with a determination all his own.

"Hm... I must make sure to reward you properly," she said.

He made a questioning noise and paused once more in his preparations to stare quizzically at her as she continued.

"If you hadn't helped me, I would have died a second time."

"Promise me you'll never make a choice like that again. Please."

"I promise, since I know you'll cry, Noah. Now then, let me present you with a gift for your efforts. Is there anything you desire?"

The question made it sound like she was talking to a small child, but she silently thought to herself, He might say, "I don't need a reward." Never mind that; I wish he would pester me for something.

However, he walked to her side, knelt down, and gazed up at her, answering with a question of his own: "Will you give me whatever I ask for?"

"Oh, what's this?" Though surprised at his unexpected response, she nevertheless giggled happily. "Tee hee. Of course. What do you want?"

His obsidian eyes stared into hers. "Please lavish me with all the praise you can think of."

Her eyes widened, and Noah continued seriously. "I told you all I needed was to stay by your side...but I have to admit I lied a little."

"Then...the truth is you want more?"

"Whatever you can give to me as your servant, I want all of it." His greedy

words struck her with his characteristic sincerity.

You're always so honest, hm?

She chuckled softly and began patting his head, smoothing down the unruly ends of his hair. He frowned as if the sensation tickled him, which only made her delight all the more evident.



"Good boy, Noah."

And then she returned his sincerity measure for measure when she spoke to him from the heart. "I was able to choose what I truly wanted to do because of you, my splendid manservant."

He sucked in a quiet breath. After a few moments of silence, he finally smiled happily at her.

Ahhh...

She had never seen him look so pleased and carefree until now.

He always acts so mature, but I'm glad to see he can still smile like the child he is.

For some reason, this newfound knowledge delighted Claudia. She ruffled his hair because she couldn't contain her joy. Of course, he started protesting, and she erupted into peals of laughter.

She decided she would take a nap with Noah after eating her cake. The sleepiness had simply grown too heavy. Then, after the restful nap, the two of them would return to the tower.

Even with this in mind, she spent a great deal of time praising Noah thoroughly, saying, "Just a little longer" anytime he wheedled for more.

To be continued...

# Special Story: The Cutest Is...

Fully recovered, Claudia was back in her tower, which contained nothing but her favorite, adorable things. Curtains in a soft rose-pink shade adorned her windows. A translucent canopy in purple surrounded her large, plush bed, atop which rested stuffed animals that served as huggable pillows. The chandelier glittered and sparkled. When the light was turned off, it looked like the walls and ceilings were covered in a starry night sky. In order to create such a space, she had used a little magic every day and had finally come close to achieving her ideal.

However, the thing that Claudia found the cutest right now was something that couldn't be created with magic.

"Princess..."

"Yeees, Noah?" she replied with cheer to his displeasure.

She sat on her sofa, swinging her little legs that didn't reach the floor. In front of her was her manservant, Noah, who stared unhappily at her.

"Please, I don't want to change into any more outfits. I'm begging you."

"No, no, we can't stop just yet," she declared, unwilling to acquiesce. She waved the magic wand in her hand.

On this day, Noah had been forced to wear all sorts of new clothes Claudia created using her magic. At first, he'd been obedient, albeit reluctant. But after an hour had passed, he became increasingly fed up, no longer bothering to hide his annoyance.

"I realize you might find this tedious, but you must be a good boy. For it is of the utmost impohtance that I present you at your absolute best by next Sunday." She giggled softly at the manservant she was so proud of. "After all, I cannot have you looking like riffraff when Father awards you a medal."

"I. Don't. Care. Though."

The sulkiness in his attitude was very much not a product of her imagination.

The recent fiasco at the night party put not only her elder brothers and sister in danger but also many of the children of aristocratic families. All her father knew was that Noah had fought off the curse alone. Although King Volkhard hadn't accepted the explanation unquestioningly, he had no choice but to take it at face value when Claudia and everyone else said as much.

As a result, Noah became the youngest person in the kingdom's history to be awarded an official military commendation. Which, for whatever reason, displeased the boy himself.

"I wasn't the one who risked my life and confronted the curse. That was you, my lady. The only thing I consider an honor is that you are my mistress."

"Pishposh. Have you forgotten that your life was in just as much danger? It makes me happier to see you pwaised than to have myself be on the receiving end."

He sighed, still pouting. "I'll endure receiving the medal for your sake, Your Highness. *However*, I've tried on more than enough outfits, so..."

"On the contwawy! Everything looks good on you, Noah, and therein lies the problem." Claudia giggled. Her servant just didn't know when to give up. "Now, remind me again who exactly was the one that told me to 'flaunt' my precious Noah?"

"Grr..." Unable to think of a retort, he simply scowled silently at her. She jumped down from the sofa and walked toward him.

"Bend down a bit, won't you, Noah?"

When she reached up toward his collar, he knelt on the floor without hesitation. Lips curved a smidge, Claudia set about retying the ribbon around his neck into a different tie-knot. She spoke as she worked, her cheery tone conveying her good mood.

"Because you look spwendid in everything, I can't decide what to have you wear. It makes me wonder if the clothes that perfectly capture your magnificence simply don't exist in this world."

"I think...you're going overboard with the compliments..." he refuted, albeit weakly.

She knew he was undoubtedly feeling embarrassed. Whenever he refused to meet her eyes, that was usually the reason.

"No, I'm not," she gently argued back, before continuing. "Of all the things in this tower, you are the cutest to me, Noah."

His only response was a shocked, strangled sound, and his ears flushed a bright red. "Please, don't call me 'cute.' Anything but that."

"Why? You truly are cuter than everything," Claudia said with the utmost gravitas. She patted his head comfortingly and went on.

"You're well-behaved, honest, and hardworking. No matter how much I sing your pwaises, you neither let it get to your head nor keep you from putting in every effort to everything you do."

This wasn't exclusive to Noah's diligence for studying magic and swordsmanship either. In order to be a manservant worthy of Claudia, Noah undertook a variety of challenges every day.

"If 'cute' isn't the right word to describe you, then tell me what you'd prefer. Hm?"

"Grr..."

The more she lauded him, the more complicated his expression became. That made him even cuter.

She narrowed her eyes in a smile. "Good boy, good boy."

He didn't say anything for a long time. Eventually, he uttered one word to break his silence: "Princess."

"My incwedibly cute Noah."

"Hrgnh...!" His scowl deepened as he took a step back. "This... This is too absurd! I just— Why— Argh!"

Frustrated, Noah tried again to speak when he saw Claudia tilt her head thoughtfully. "If you insist on using the word 'cute,' then...you're even..."

He froze and cut himself off. After staring intently at her for several moments, he frowned like he wanted to say something more—until he abruptly looked away. There was another long pause before he spoke again.

"It's time for me to prepare dinner. I'm off to buy the ingredients, so please wait patiently, my lady."

"Oh my." She giggled, knowing he would leave without her if she didn't say something. "I'll go with you, Noah."

"Un...understood."

She slipped her hand into his as he replied awkwardly.

"Ahem... Today, you most definitely will be eating all of your vegetables, so prepare yourself accordingly."

What an adorable way to retaliate.

His hand felt warmer than usual, almost hot. And she couldn't help finding it ever so cute.

THE END

### **Afterword**

I'm Touko Amekawa. Thank you so much for picking up The Legendary Witch!

This story starts off with a legendary witch being reborn and recovering her memories as a six-year-old princess. She has more than enough power to do whatever she wants, but she ends up forming a contract with a boy who becomes her servant, and she proceeds to live her life as she pleases.

As for Noah, he's nine years old in both body and mind, compared to Claudia, an eighteen-year-old witch inside a six-year-old's body. Despite him being at her mercy, they grow up fast thanks to each other. It would make me so happy if you would continue watching over them!

Kuroyuki-sensei drew the wonderful illustrations! The cute little Claudia and the captivating adult Claudia. The dignified Noah, both as a child and as an adult. Thank you very much for the charming character designs! I've been Kuroyuki-sensei's fan for a long time, so you can't imagine how overjoyed I was to find out they would be drawing my characters. I've been staring at the illustrations every day, starting with the cover!

Thank you very much to my editor for guiding me this far.

Lastly, thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the readers who care about this story! It's going to be adapted by Nae Serizawa-sensei into a comic in the near future! Please stay tuned for more details!

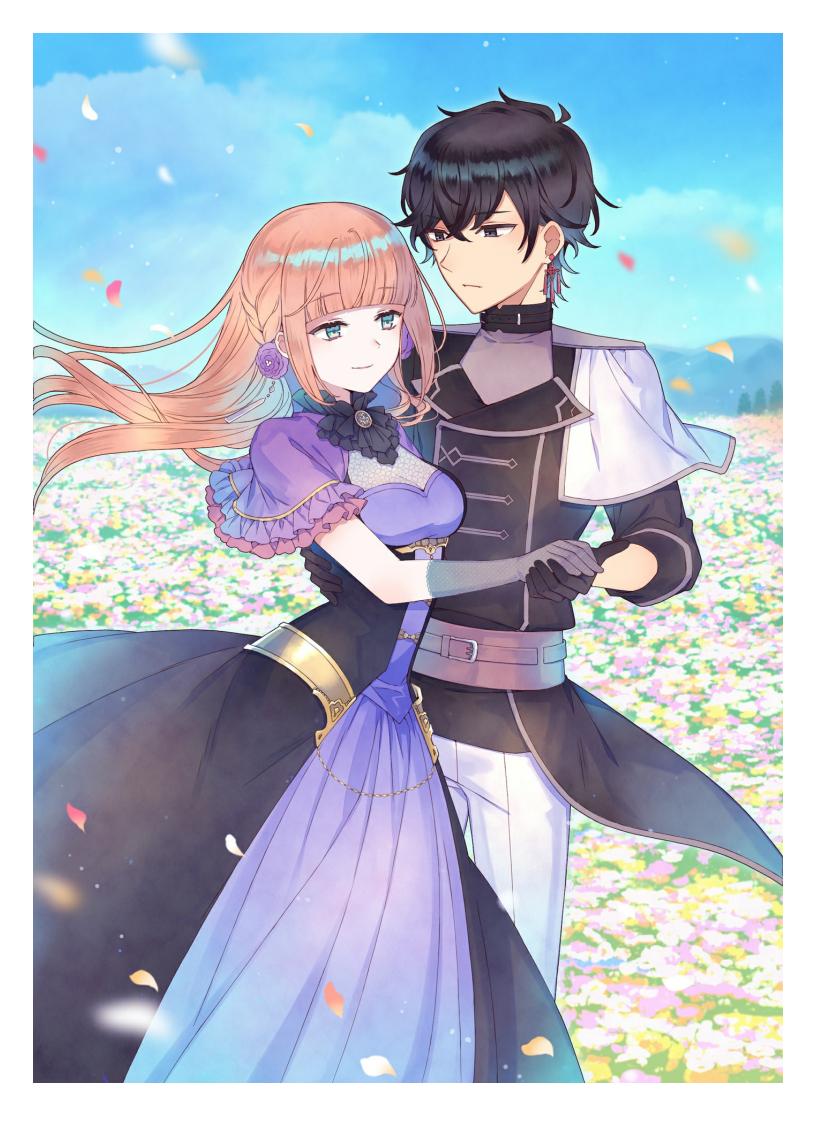
But wait, there's more! Volume 2 will be released sometime in the fall! I hope to see you then as well!

Thank you again so very much for reading. I hope you enjoyed it!











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The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess: Volume 1

by Touko Amekawa

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