

## CONTENTS



The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess

Prologue

Chapter



Chapter



Chapter

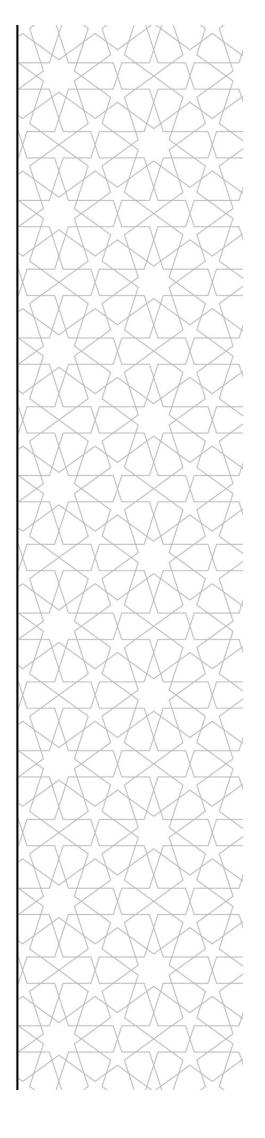


Chapter



**Epilogue** 

Special Story The Guardian of Sleep Is...



## **Table of Contents**

- 1. Cover
- 2. Color Illustrations
- 3. Prologue
- 4. Chapter 1
- 5. Chapter 2
- 6. Chapter 3
- 7. Chapter 4
- 8. Epilogue
- 9. Special Story: The Guardian of Sleep Is...
- 10. Afterword
- 11. Bonus Textless Illustrations
- 12. About J-Novel Club
- 13. Copyright

## **Prologue**

The year Noah met her, Claudia was six years old.

One day in the past, she was resting her head on his lap.

"You see... A curse, in other words, is also a strong wish," she explained.

"A wish?"

She blinked sleepily in response to the nine-year-old boy's question. The fire crackled in the hearth in front of the couch. Though he had suggested she sleep in her bed, she had insisted on remaining by the comforting warmth of the hearth, so he diligently performed his duty as her pillow.

Sometimes, his mistress was even more childish than Noah himself, despite her soul being around eighteen. Above all else, though, she was the legendary witch, and although she was in the body of a young girl, her expression was always startlingly mature, something he had long since grown accustomed to.

"Yes," Claudia replied softly even as she dozed off intermittently. "For example, one wishes to obtain as many riches as possible. Or make the person they love their own. Perhaps even...kill someone they despise..."

He said nothing as his thoughts turned to his uncle. After killing Noah's father out of hatred, the man had chosen the boy as a substitute for his revenge. The slave contract to which he'd forcefully bound Noah could then be considered a type of curse, at least according to Claudia.

Noah reached out and brushed his hand over her milk-tea-colored hair. His intention wasn't to soothe a small child but to act dutifully as her manservant. It was his way of preventing her fine hair from tangling if she fell asleep on his lap.

"Princess, what you're describing sounds less like a wish and more like greed. Am I wrong?" Noah asked while slowly combing his fingers through her tresses.

Roused from her drowsiness, Claudia opened her eyes wide, and she tittered

as she stared up at him. "No. A wish is, without a doubt, born of greed." She took his silence as a cue to continue. "But the two may yet feel unrelated to you, Noah..." She trailed off with a delicate yawn.

He sensed she was implying he wouldn't understand because he was still a child, and he sulked at that realization, not bothering to hide his reaction. Looking back upon that moment now, he acknowledged his sulking was in itself childish.

Claudia must have laughed even harder because she found his behavior amusing. "A wish is buwied deep inside a curse."

"Then...you're saying even the queen consort had one when she used her own daughter to try to kill you?"

"Indeed. In a way, her wish was pure and clear."

Even though Claudia was magnanimous toward the person who had attempted to hurt her, Noah thought the woman's actions to be unconscionable and intolerable.

"If she had succeeded in killing you, I would have cursed the queen too."

"I disagwee. You're honest, strong, and always aiming for the light."

"My lady..."

"Tee hee." She beamed cheerfully at him and stroked his cheek with her small hand.



"Remember this, Noah..." She spoke in a voice laden with sleep. "When a person's wish breaks, it leads to a curse. Because...curses are made of what were once known as wishes..."

He said nothing in response. Her hand slowly fell away from his face as he heard her breathing relax into the soft sounds of sleep.

"If someone's wish becomes a curse meant to harm you..." Noah brushed her cheek lightly before he continued in a quiet whisper, "...then I'll smash it to pieces no matter the form it takes."

He'd made that promise two years ago. *Two whole years* had passed since he and Claudia first met. Curses still made themselves known in many parts of the world, and each time one showed itself, the two of them set out to destroy it.

"You've grown stronger again, hmm, Noah? Good boy, good boy." Eight years old now, Claudia still looked younger than her physical age due to her dainty figure. She grinned as she commented on his progress. As usual, her tone was what one would use to praise a young child.

"Not nearly strong enough."

With those words hanging in the air, he held on to the sword he'd created through magic.

I swear... I swear I'll become strong enough to protect you.

Searing the words into his mind, Noah moved to her side and began walking forth.

## **Chapter 1**

Claudia had the body of a small child, so it didn't seem out of place for her to act like one. In fact, she believed one should proactively take pleasure in such behavior. Although she just so happened to be living her second life, in reality, people were granted only one life to live. Childhood would never come again. So, instead of rushing to become an adult, she thought she should enjoy it at a slow, relaxed pace, one that would allow her to take naps along the way.

"Mmm..."

Her mouth opened wide in a yawn as she awoke, surrounded by fluffy, adorable stuffed animals on the bed. They had all been gifts that she had found herself unexpectedly fond of.

The sunlight streaming through the window warmed her on the enormous, plush bed. Such a soothing environment invited one to slip back into the realm of sleep again, so without opening her eyes, Claudia decided to fall back into the world of dreams once more. Before sleep claimed her completely, she reached out for the closest stuffed animal with the intention of hugging it tightly as she drifted into another nap.

However, instead of the fluffy texture she had anticipated, she felt the fabric of a shirt brushing her forehead.

"My lady."

"Nnngh..."

An exasperated, strained voice came from above her. "Please wake up. The day has already begun."

Noah wound his arms around her and helped her sit up, forcing her awake. Claudia shook her head vigorously in protest, pressing her forehead against him.

"Nooo... Just a little longer."

"Absolutely not. Have you forgotten your father has summoned you today?" Now that she sat upright in her bed on her own, he stepped away from her before continuing matter-of-factly, "Besides, I'm not a stuffed animal."

"Noooaaah..."

Claudia resembled a tiny bundle of sheets as she sat on the large bed. Rubbing her eyes sleepily, she called to her manservant, whose displeased expression was at odds with his detached tone.

\*

After getting out of bed and washing her face with clean, clear water, Claudia sat down in front of the dresser. "I dreamed of you today, you know."

Noah met her comment with silence.

"Though I suppose it might be more accurate to describe my dream as one of the past. Do you remember the uproar Queen Irmela and my sister, Emilia, created with the curse they cast two years ago, not long after we met? Well, I dreamed about the time I was trying to choose an outfit for you to wear. That was when Father said you would be conferred with special honors."

"How...nostalgic."

"Tee hee."

She chuckled softly at the notion of the eleven-year-old even using the word. Through their reflection in the dresser's mirror, she watched him focus on the task of styling her hair as he stood behind her.

"You haven't grown much in the last two years, Noah, and despite being tall for your age then, for some reason, you seemed so small compared to now."

More silence.

"Your cheeks were plumper and your hands smaller. You were just so unbearably cute that I can't help but smother the past you with affection whenever you appear in my dreams."

"So...is that why it took you much longer than usual to wake up? Is that also the reason you tried to drag *me* into the bed as well?"

"Oh? Did I truly do such a thing?"

He said nothing. He simply scowled in response as his hands fell away from her hair.

"I'm finished."

"Thank you, Noah."

After combing her hair, he had sectioned a part on each side of her head to gather into two lovely braids. Long, thin ribbons wound intricately through the complex pattern. And thanks to his diligence in combing her locks every day, the rest of her hair hanging down was smooth to the touch.

The way Noah braided her hair was cuter than anything the lady's maids in the castle could manage. When she said as much to him, his expression composed, he replied, "I'm pleased my work is to your taste," and bowed politely.

"Now then, I think I'll wear the dandelion-colored dress today since it reminds me of spring. And I do so love all the ribbons on it, which means I should pick shoes laced with ribbons too."

"As you wish, Your Highness. Begging your pardon."

He took her hands in his, closed his eyes, then called upon his magic. Noah's magic spread from his fingertips, the sensation almost caressing. Particles of light whirled around Claudia's body clad in her white nightgown. With a crackle, the light covering her from her arms to her shoulders transformed into sleeves. Then her nightgown glowed faintly, starting with her collar as lace took its place. Just as soon as the rest of it changed into a vibrant yellow dress billowing around her, ribbons appeared at her waist.

White tights covered her legs, and the light encasing her feet turned into shoes of the same yellow hue. The glossy shoes, fastened with straps that crossed over her insteps, sparkled. The finishing touch was a lovely ribbon tied into a bow around her neck. And with that, Noah's magic disappeared.

"Will this do?"

"Tee hee. It's perfect, Noah."

While her reflection in the mirror satisfied her, she was even more pleased by her outstanding manservant's competence. Given her diligent teaching over these two years, he had gained a thorough understanding of the things that suited her as well as her own preferences. By now, instead of dressing herself using her magic, she usually let Noah handle such tasks. And yet, for whatever reason, the one thing he stubbornly did with his own hands and not magic was style her hair.

"Every time I see how splendidly you do your work, I always think to myself it was truly worth teaching you."

"I don't believe I'm deserving of such praise yet. Nevertheless..." His piercing gaze captured hers through the mirror. "I should be much more useful to you now than I was two years ago."

All she could do was blink in surprise at those words. "Don't tell me... Are you jealous? Of yourself, the one I saw in my dreams?"

Silence was his only answer.

"But that was two years ago, a younger you..."

His silence lengthened, speaking more eloquently than words could. A peal of laughter escaped her.

"Tee hee! My goodness, you are just so sweet! Honestly, Noah, you don't have to worry about such things, because who you are now will always be the cutest in my eyes."

"N-No, that's not...! That isn't what I meant. I was referring to my abilities as your manservant."

"No matter how old you are, you'll always be an excellent attendant, Noah. Come, I shall praise you, good boy that you are."

"My lady, please!" he grumbled, trying to stop her from patting his head. In an attempt to distract her, he reminded her of the day's most pressing business. "Never mind all that—we need to be on our way already. It's dangerous to keep your father waiting, considering he's the one who summoned us to the royal castle."

"Hmmm. I suppose you're right..."

She placed her index finger on her cheek and tilted her head in a childlike manner.

"Frankly, I see no need for me to even be there for the discussion. After all, a political marriage doesn't take into account the feelings of the ones compelled into it, so why should he care about mine in this instance?"

Noah's expression changed in an instant. After a beat of silence, he asked, "What did you just say?"

"Oh dear. Did Karlheinz not tell you?"

It was very unlike Karlheinz not to share information. Even as Claudia thought this, she informed the frowning Noah.

"The king has arranged a meeting between me and a prospective future husband."

He said nothing for several long moments before blurting out a single word. "What?"

The look on Noah's face was the darkest scowl she'd ever seen in their two years together.

\*

The country of Avianoia was known for its vast domain and abundant resources. Starting with its royal family, many of its citizens, nobles and commoners alike, possessed a great deal of magical power, so the powerful nation was blessed in that sense as well. And over these last two years, Avianoia had seen tremendous growth in one particular field—the study of magic.

"It's Princess Claudia!"

"Her Highness has concluded her audience with His Majesty! Prepare to receive her!"

The magicians in the hall cried out excitedly when the young girl appeared. She accepted their enthusiastic welcome, her meeting with her father having ended mere moments earlier. The conjurers surrounding her were no ordinary ones. They were in fact the royal magicians, the most powerful in the kingdom's

employ.

Claudia smiled cheerfully up at them. Then, her hand held in Noah's, she greeted them in a manner far more childish than an eight-year-old should.

"Hello, Miss and Mister Magicians!"

"Your Highness! It's been so long since we last saw you. We've been looking forward to your visit!"

They crowded eagerly around the dainty princess.

"Not to be too forward, but might you have time to meet? I would very much appreciate your opinion on the magical theory I presented to you last time..."

"But you know I don't understand difficult topics," Claudia replied. "Besides, all I told you last time were simple things like 'There are so many letters it looks like a painting. I think it will look even prettier if this part looks like this.'"

"And those words were exactly what we needed to open our eyes! Though your opinions are innocence personified, they are also precise, giving us insight we could not achieve on our own...!"

"Your Highness, I humbly request your counsel as well. Perhaps you would be so kind as to observe my experiment directly?"

"Princess Claudia! Please advise us on our research too!"

My goodness, look at this crowd.

While she commended their fervor for knowledge, at this rate, she wouldn't be able to move any farther. Just as the thought flashed through her mind, she suddenly found her feet off the ground.

"Noah."

Standing next to her, he had lifted her up in his arms, his face expressionless the whole time. With his arms wrapped securely around her, he sighed, then spoke.

"Though I sympathize with your desire to rely upon Her Highness's keen insight, I regret to inform you that urgent matters elsewhere require her attention."

The gravity in Noah's voice surprised the magicians. His obsidian eyes stared unflinchingly at the adults who outstripped him in stature. "Might you please make way for the princess?"

A chorus of gasps erupted. Instantly, the conjurers frantically split to the left and right. The throng of people dispersed and a red carpet extended toward the hall's entrance.

"Thank you very much. Now then, if you'll excuse us."

"A-A thousand pardons, Your Highness...!"

"Bye-bye, ladies and gentlemen!"

Cradled in Noah's arms, Claudia waved to them even as their figures faded into the distance. The conjurers conversed among themselves as they rubbed their chests.

"That Noah is as strangely forceful as ever, despite being a child himself..."

It goes without saying that forcefulness is part of Noah's nature...

The boy in question strode briskly down the corridor. She stroked his cheek and mused with a giggle, "Noah, you're in a bad mood, aren't you?"

"Not...really." Despite what he said, annoyance was plain in his voice.

"Hmmm. Are you certain?" Claudia patted his head soothingly in response.

"Don't... Don't you think it's too early for them to choose a fiancé when you're only eight years old?"

"Ah ha, so there's the rub. But, Noah, you're well aware of my goal."

She recalled the conversation she'd had with her father a short time ago.

\*

"Klingate evidently has a worthy heir."

That was how her father, King Volkhard, broached the subject as he sat in his throne, mentioning Avianoia's neighbor to the west. His red eyes glittering like garnets, the man still looked to be in his early twenties. If memory served right, he had turned twenty-nine this year, but his appearance remained utterly unchanged from their first meeting two years before.

"The crown prince is Lewis, an eleven-year-old boy. He possesses an outstanding aptitude for magic and ample reserves of energy to master it." Her father's cold eyes narrowed in amusement as he watched her. "What's more, they call him 'the greatest child prodigy since the dawn of time.' Fascinating, don't you think?"

"Father! Stop it!" Claudia deliberately puffed her tiny cheeks in childish anger. "I know there's something you want to do more than marry me off, isn't there?"

"Your Highness! You mustn't speak to your father so discourteously..." a retainer chastised.

"Let her speak. And you should know better than to behave with such insolence toward my daughter."

"F-Forgive me, my liege..."

The retainer bowed his head apologetically. Her father folded his arms and leaned back in his throne.

"Where was I? Right. Klingate's king is searching for a bride fit for the son he's so proud of. Somehow, he found out that you're participating in our country's research into magic, so he proposed we arrange a marriage meeting between the two of you."

"What an odd king. I don't remember doing anything so hard. Not even a little bit!"

"Hmph."

She beamed at him while tilting her head coquettishly. Watching her, Volkhard continued.

"Klingate's crown prince is unsuited for you. I have no intention of betrothing you to him. However..."

"You're exactly right, Father. Such an amazing prince would never marry someone like me."

"What nonsense are you spouting, child? You know very well it's the opposite. To think someone of his level is considered a 'prodigy.' He's reaching beyond his

station if he truly desires to make you his future queen."

Her father's lips curved in an icy sneer.

"Ergo—I want you to cut him down to size. Even if that means losing our alliance or starting a war."

Claudia contemplated his words in silence, a charming smile on her face. "Tee hee. Father, if I may..." She gave her usual line with her usual smile. "No!"

It was Volkhard's turn to ruminate in silence. His only response was an upward quirk of his lips. The longer their exchange continued, the paler his attendants grew.

"Your Highness, please, I beg of you to consider your father's words carefully...!"

"No, I won't. I don't want to. My older brothers always say everyone has to get along, you know."

Claudia tapped an index finger against her lips and stared up at her father.

"Father. Are you saying you can't get along with your friends even though you're a grown-up?"

"Your Highness!"

"Pfft. Ba ha ha ha!"

While his retainers panicked, her father finally burst out laughing, clearly enjoying himself.

"Good. I expected nothing less of my youngest princess."

My goodness, the temerity. Even though you view your daughter as nothing more than a pawn.

Claudia giggled, keeping up the act of a sweet little girl.

"But! I don't mind the idea of visiting that country. I would very much like to meet this prince who's sooo good at magic!"

"Hmm..."

"So, Father..." Her face lit up, she maintained her innocent facade as she

\*

"Klingate..."

After Claudia finished summarizing the situation, Noah muttered the country's name in a baffled tone, his expression conveying his dissatisfaction with the whole situation. Karlheinz, this nation's chief conjurer, sat on the couch across from her. They were in one of the castle's rooms, specifically Karlheinz's office. Noah had carried her all the way here.

While enjoying the fragrant aroma wafting off the rose tea Noah had poured, Claudia questioned him.

"Noah, do you understand now why I've chosen to help Father save face?"

He considered his words carefully before replying. "No matter what happens, my only duty is to act as you wish, my lady."

In contrast to his stormy expression moments ago, Noah's face was composed now. On the other hand, Karlheinz stared at Claudia somewhat suspiciously, since she hadn't discussed the matter with him beforehand.

"Your Highness, might I be so bold as to inquire why precisely you acquiesced to His Majesty's request regarding the marriage meeting?"

"Tee hee hee. Filial piety."

The man let his long silence speak for him.

"Goodness, Karlheinz. Of course, that was a jest. Don't you know me well enough by now to realize that?"

She took another sip of her delectable tea before she set the cup down—not on the table, though. No, it floated in midair. This rabbit-patterned teacup was her favorite. Staring intently at it, she continued softly.

"Evidently, the princesses of Klingate have fallen into an eternal slumber, unable to awaken."

Karlheinz inhaled sharply at her quiet announcement. "Unbelievable..."

"For these last two years, Noah and I have been gathering information on

curses scattered across the world. You should be well aware of this, considering how often you've aided us, Karlheinz."

Two years ago, one of this country's queens had used her own daughter to activate a curse here. The woman had been Claudia's stepmother, and the daughter, her half sister. That incident had been the catalyst for her and Noah's efforts in the time since. Now, hiding her true identity as a princess, she traveled to places afflicted by curses to erase them.

"Noah."

"Understood, my lady." With a nod, Noah explained to Karlheinz, "The first event occurred eight years ago. A princess, half sister of the current Klingate king, suddenly collapsed during a soiree."

"The news spread all the way here," Claudia added. She and Noah had learned of this roughly six months prior. "Officially, she's being treated for an incurable disease."

"But she hasn't awakened. Not once in these eight years."

"Her heart beats and she yet breathes. Even after years of eating and drinking nothing...she continues to live, albeit asleep."

Karlheinz kept silent.

"However, she isn't the only one. Beginning with her, the same thing has befallen a princess each year since. Eight women who suddenly collapsed one day, all of whom are still asleep."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't end there, Karlheinz," Claudia said. "All of them are of royal blood. All approximately eighteen years old and all beautiful without exception."

Karlheinz pressed a hand to his forehand and exhaled quietly. Then, he finally spoke, as if he'd reached a conclusion.

"Klingate is a major power, one which forged an alliance with Avianoia only two years prior. I must confess, I have wondered what brought about their king's sudden change of heart regarding the relationship between our nations, considering he had never before shown a hint of such aspirations..."

"He must have grown terrified, don't you think? After all, a disease with an unknown cause is spreading among the royal family. So, it's only natural he would desire to make an ally of a powerful nation instead of an enemy when the time comes."

"And you suspect this mysterious illness has to do with a curse, Your Highness?"

"Not just suspect—I know. It's too obvious. Which is exactly why I'm going." She bestowed a lovely smile upon him before asserting firmly, "Not only am I a young child fair of face and possessed of royal blood, I'm also the only one with the power to fight against curses."

Karlheinz grimaced. "Your Highness, I beg of you to reconsider."

"Oh my. Why would you say that?"

Claudia tilted her head adorably and twirled a strand of her silky hair.

"Objectively speaking, I believe I'm currently at the height of my beauty. Noah, what do you think?"

He paused before he answered. "It is as you say, my lady." Eyes closed, he spoke matter-of-factly. A response perfectly in line with his thorough education over these two years.

However, Karlheinz's scowl only deepened.

"You know very well I'm not referring to your appearance. I'm of the strong opinion that you should not endanger yourself by exposing yourself to whatever has afflicted those princesses."

"Pishposh, Karlheinz." Claudia narrowed her eyes as she gave him a sly smile. "Then, riddle me this. Can you think of anyone other than me who wouldn't be endangered when dealing with curses?"

He had no answer for her.

Claudia had been the legendary witch Adelheid in her past life. She was confident she knew more about dealing with curses than anyone alive right now. Her only weakness was her body's inability to keep pace with its consumption of magic.

"So, it's settled. I'm going."

To Claudia, curses represented an abomination that harmed everything and everyone she had wished to protect in her previous life.

"There is no need for something as repulsive as a curse to exist in the world in which Noah and I live."

In this life, she intended to do only the things she wanted to. She'd follow this creed to its end.

Realizing she could not be swayed from her decision, Karlheinz sighed in resignation. Though he knew nothing of her past life, by now, he deeply understood that she lived her life on her own terms. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking.

"Forgive my impertinence, Your Highness."

"Tee hee. Of course. In exchange, you will act as our guardian in Klingate, Karlheinz. Aren't you glad?"

"I...see."

She ignored his dumbfounded expression as she finished her tea. "Right, then, Noah, it's time to get ready. I'd like a charming hat and visiting dress, please."

"As you command, Princess. I'll be creating it through magic like always, so might I ask the day of your marriage meeting?"

"Today."

"I- What?"

In that moment, Noah's expression mirrored Karlheinz's. Claudia put her teacup down, bounded out from her chair, and then took his hand with a cheerful grin.

"Tee hee. Father is as tyrannical as ever, hmm? Because he thinks that everyone will obey his orders unquestioningly, no one will quibble when he hands them down on such short notice."

"My lady..."

The look on Noah's face said, You're no different. But her smile didn't dim at

all as she blithely ignored his silent protest.

"I don't know what the climate is like over there, so perhaps it's best if I change upon arrival. Karlheinz, I want you to hold Noah's hand too."

"Please wait a moment, Your Highness. Don't you think it's a bit unreasonable to simply take off like this?"

"Just accept the inevitable, hmm?"

"Save yourself the headache and give in, Lord Karlheinz."

The man's only response was a heavy sigh, the heaviest today. Then, resigned, he placed a hand on Noah's shoulder to prepare for their departure.

"I know without a doubt that you take after your father, Your Highness..."

"I have nooo idea what you're talking about!"

"We're leaving, my lady." Noah held out his other hand to her as if escorting her.

She laced her fingers into his with a giggle. Myriad thoughts spun through her mind as she surrendered to the magic that teleported them to their destination.

A strong desire exists at the root of a curse.

She had known this five hundred years ago too.

Beautiful princesses unable to awaken because of a curse... Then the one who cast the curse wishes for...

\*

The tower stood alone in a desolate place. One room on each floor. A luxurious bed with the finest sheets in each room. There, eight beautiful young women spent their days. Yet not a single one ever opened her eyes. All of them slept like the most exquisitely crafted dolls.

A ninth figure appeared in that tower. The grown man visited each room one by one where the women slumbered. When he entered the last room, the lantern in his hand sputtered out with a small crackling sound.

He stood there silently for a long time. Then he turned around and closed the door.

\*

In a corner of Klingate's royal castle, a young boy stood motionless in front of a closed door. He looked to be around eleven years old, well-dressed and tall but thin. His long eyelashes were the same silver as his soft hair. He knocked anxiously on the door.

"Brother. It's me, Lewis."

The boy smiled and spoke gently to the person on the other side.

"How are you today? If you're feeling well enough, perhaps tonight we could \_\_"

"Don't come in."

He frowned when the voice inside rejected him.

"Forget about me. Breathe the same air I do and you'll be infected with my ineptitude."

"Brother..."

"Even hearing your voice makes me dizzy."

Just when the boy's lips thinned in distress, he heard a maid call out to him.

"Your Highness, Princess Claudia of Avianoia will arrive soon."

"I... Thank you. I'll be there shortly."

When he smiled at the maid, the voice inside spoke again, the words and tone even more cutting than before.

"And the glorious prince is summoned. Well done, you, being needed by so many... So stop coming to this dismal place and go meet your future bride."

"But, Brother!"

"This country's successor—its crown prince—is you...not me."

The boy smiled sadly upon hearing those words.

"I'll come again, Brother. Please tell me if there's anything at all I can do."

Only silence came from beyond the door.

"After all, we're siblings."

The boy bowed facing the door before walking slowly down the corridor.

"A marriage meeting, huh?" he murmured softly to himself, giving voice to his true feelings, something he would never let anyone hear. "How utterly tedious it is to have to adjust my speech for children my age."

In profile, his face looked more mature than he actually was. An aura of resignation emanated from him.

"But I have no choice, as this is merely another aspect of diplomacy..."

Then the boy headed toward the hall where his prospective bride awaited him.

\*

The moment Claudia materialized, one of Klingate's mage knights raised his voice. "Princess Claudia has arrived!"

The king and his retainers were gathered in the audience chamber. The floor sparkled from the incoming rush of magic as her dainty feet touched down. Both her hair, tinged with traces of the transfer magic, and the hem of her light-purple dress fluttered elegantly.

Upon arriving in Klingate with Noah and Karlheinz, the trio had needed to complete the formalities and prepare themselves before entering the castle. Now, Noah, who had teleported to the audience chamber ahead of her as her escort, took her hand to support her. She laced her fingers tightly into his and took her first step forward on the red carpet. When she did, Karlheinz, who had also headed here first like Noah, announced her arrival to everyone assembled.

"Your Majesty, allow me to present the second princess of Avianoia, Her Highness Claudia."

"Pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty!" With that introduction, she released Noah's hand and curtsied to the king. "Thank you very much for inviting me."

Holding the hem of her dress in an impeccable curtsy, she was the very picture of elegance. And yet, her mannerisms held the charm of a young girl. So

to the adults in attendance, the smidgen of composure in her expression made her all the more delightful.

"My name is Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz, and I'm eight years old!"

"I'm glad you came. Raise your head, Princess Claudia."

Accepting the king's words, she straightened her spine once more. Her proper etiquette prompted the powerful figures in the room to murmur in admiration.

"What a lovely royal, despite her youth."

"Very well suited, indeed, for our Prince Lewis..."

Her lips curved faintly in amusement as magic brought those voices to her ears.

They truly think they are the ones who can choose.

When she looked up, she found this country's king standing a few paces ahead of her. Older than her own father, this man seemed to be in his late forties.

My prospective husband is the eleven-year-old crown prince. Then, I take it he was born to His Majesty in his later years...

Without revealing a hint of her thoughts on her face, Claudia tilted her head fetchingly. "Your Majesty, where's the prince who will be my friend?"

"Friend, you say? Ha ha ha!" After a burst of cheery laughter, the king stared down at her with interest. "I see, I see. Friend, eh? Avianoia's princess is nothing if not adorable."

"Please excuse Her Highness. She is yet a child..."

"I don't mind, Master Karlheinz. My own son is much too mature for his age, so an honest, innocent young lady like her is the perfect match to be his future consort."

Karlheinz's heavy silence and Noah's pointed stare prickled at her. However, Claudia's nonchalant smile didn't waver.

"Princess Claudia, won't you spend some time with my son Lewis?"

"Of course! I'll play with the prince!"

"Heh. Ha ha!" The king let out another raucous laugh before calling out to the door behind his throne, "Lewis, enter."

"Yes, Father."

And so, a young boy appeared. She narrowed her eyes just the slightest bit as she stared at him.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Princess Claudia."

His hair glittered like spun silver, and his beautiful features appeared vaguely androgynous. Though tall for his age, he possessed a slender build. There wasn't much difference in height between him and Noah, who was also eleven, but Noah's shoulders were much broader and sturdier, just like the rest of him.

Hmmm... Fascinating.

Claudia hadn't narrowed her eyes because of the boy's smile, which looked far too adult for an eleven-year-old. No, it was the unexpected color of Lewis's eyes.

"My name is Lewis Henry Klingate. Begging your pardon, but...are you not tired from your long journey?"

The color of a person's eyes indicated the nature of their magic. Red eyes, for example, meant one specialized in flame magic. Gold, light magic. Although Claudia used magic to disguise her eye color as gold, in truth, her eyes were the seven colors of the rainbow because she could control all varieties of magic.

This child, too, has such incredibly unusual eyes, hmm?

The lower half of his eyes was a fiery ruby red, but the upper half reminded her of the lapis lazuli color found in the ocean's depths. The gradation from blue to red created a striking contrast.

If he's managed to master both types of magic at this age...then I can understand why he's called a magical prodigy.

Claudia beamed even as that thought ran through her mind. "Your Highness, I'm not the least bit tired. I feel full of energy!"

"I'm relieved to hear you say so, for even the use of teleportation magic does not reduce the great distance between our two nations." "Actually, actually! We flew here in a poof using Noah's magic!" And then, with a dramatic gasp, she covered her mouth with both hands.

Lewis stared at her, looking puzzled. "Is something the matter?"

"I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I forgot I should be speaking like a proper young lady."

"Ah, I see..." Nodding in understanding, Lewis turned around and addressed his father. "Father, I think it best for both parties to feel relaxed when meeting each other for the first time as marriage candidates."

"You have the right of it, my son."

"Then let us dispense with the formalities henceforth." Lewis faced Claudia once more. "Your Highness, there is no longer any need for you to speak like a 'proper young lady.'"

"Truly?"

"Perhaps I should also speak more informally. Therefore...you don't have to apologize like you did earlier, all right?"

She sighed in relief before beaming at him in gratitude. "Thank you, Your Highness!"

"Ha ha ha. Call me Lewis."

"Lord Lewis! And you can call me Claudia!"

He smiled at her then, his gaze protective.



Even as she maintained the ruse of cherubic innocence, her thoughts churned.

He really is quite mature. Noah is also levelheaded but in a different way, on account of his personality.

She turned around to look at her manservant and discovered him frowning just a bit. When their eyes met, he took a deep breath, then schooled his features into a calm expression.

Right at that moment, the king, who'd been watching her thoughtfully, gave a suggestion as if it had suddenly occurred to him. "Lewis, why not take a stroll in the garden with the princess?"

"I looove pretty flowers!"

Claudia's childlike behavior charmed the surrounding adults. Their warm, solicitous gazes clearly conveyed their impression of her as a "harmless young child."

Amid all this, Lewis was the only one who looked troubled for the briefest moment.

"Father. You see, the only garden with flowers blooming is...well, Brother's."

"Oh...I see."

The king's melancholy sigh and Lewis's reaction made her realize something.

He has an older brother...

That meant Lewis was not, in fact, the king's first son. Nevertheless, the boy in front of her was this country's crown prince, its next king. The fact that her father hadn't mentioned this truth made the wheels in her mind turn even more.

The victims of the curse are young women of royal blood. And the curse originated eight years ago. Depending on how old this brother is, it may be worth investigating this environment.

Claudia blinked gently as she continued thinking.

The older prince...will be...in the only garden on these castle grounds where

flowers bloom.

The king provided an alternative. "Then how about the pond, Lewis? It's an excellent opportunity to test the new rowboat."

"We would have to be extremely careful near the water. If an accident were to occur, we would not be able to face the nation of Avianoia," Lewis cautioned.

"Fair point. Then perhaps the library?"

"I'm afraid our collection of children's books is lacking."

"Ahhh, what a pickle... Princess Claudia, is there any sort of amusement you'd like to enjoy in our country...?"

"Hmmm..."

A yawn escaped and she covered her mouth as she listened to father and son converse. A beat of surprised silence blanketed the audience chamber. From the corner of her eyes, Claudia saw Karlheinz's startled expression.

"Your Highness, never say—"

However, she paid no attention to such a trifle. She rubbed her eyes sleepily, then stretched her hand toward her manservant, who stood patiently by a wall.

"Noooah..."

Just like Karlheinz, Noah made no attempt to hide his apprehension. But unlike Karlheinz, Noah knew when to give up, and he was much more obedient to boot. He simply sighed quietly and walked toward her, his attitude telling her he knew exactly what she was up to.

He picked her up as usual. Claudia clung to him, closing her eyes. Lewis and everyone else in the hall stared in surprise.

"Claudia?"

"Ngh..."

She didn't reply even when Lewis said her name. In response, Karlheinz pressed a hand to his forehead.

"My humblest apologies to both of you, Your Majesty, Your Highness." He accompanied his explanation with a deep bow of his head. "I regret to inform

you that...it is now time for Her Highness's afternoon nap."

Silence stretched once more for several long moments. And then, without warning, the hearty laughter of Klingate's monarch echoed throughout the audience chamber.

\*

```
"My lady... My lady."
```

"Ngggh..."

Claudia rubbed her forehead sleepily against Noah as he gently patted her on the back.

"I've prepared your bed for you, so please rest at your leisure here, Princess."

"Nooo..."

Giving voice to unreasonable, selfish thoughts was leagues more fun than she could have ever imagined in her past life. She clung even more tightly to her manservant and deliberately heightened his discomfort.

"I'll sleep in your arms... You can sleep...in the bed, Noah..."

"It's deeply inappropriate for me to use your bed, my lady."

With her face buried in his chest, Claudia silently cast a spell instead of replying. It was an exceedingly simple bit of physical magic designed to push him relentlessly toward her bed.

"Urk..."

Unable to resist, Noah staggered backward and tumbled onto the sea of sheets with her still in his arms.

"P-Princess, please!"

"This is your bed now, Noah. And you are mine."

"Shite... You're incredibly and illogically stubborn at your sleepiest!"

The abject strain in his voice silently rebuked her to fix this nasty habit of hers. As for the girl in question, she mumbled sleepily from atop Noah.

"Well...it's surprisingly tiring to maintain this childish act..." Her words trailed

off as she yawned.

"Then why not just be yourself?"

Despite his suggestion, she fully believed her strategy to be a legitimate one to succeed in this life. Behaving in such an extremely childlike fashion meant others underestimated her. It suited her purposes *very* well to be thought of as weak and insignificant. She recalled Noah's reaction when she had explained all this to him before. His expression suspicious, he'd responded, "The truth is, you're just enjoying playing at being a child."

Noah's a good and clever boy, which is why he understands his mistress so well.

He sighed in resignation, then relaxed into the bedding, giving up on getting up. "So. Prince Lewis apparently has an older brother, huh?"

The conversation in the audience chamber earlier had raised doubts in his mind too. He continued speaking in a thoughtful tone.

"The last time we were in Klingate to investigate, the citizens unanimously extolled Prince Lewis's virtues. No one spoke a word of an older brother."

"Mmm..."

"Does this mean that the position of crown prince was given to the most talented prince among the heirs to the throne?"

Clearly, the situation niggled at Noah's mind—perhaps because it brought back memories of what had happened between his own father and uncle. Dozing on top of him, Claudia questioned him while yawning daintily.

"Shall we consult Karlheinz...?"

"A message actually just arrived from him."

Softly glowing letters entered the guest room through the window. Noah captured the characters with his hand, then read the words projected on his palm.

"It's the results of his preliminary investigation. The older brother's name is Stuart, and he's holed himself up in his room for eight years now. He hardly ever comes out. Eighteen years old." The first of the princesses in this country had fallen asleep eight years ago. If the older prince was eighteen years old, then he was old enough to remember what had happened back then.

"What's our next course of action, Princess?"

"Mrgh..."

Claudia opened her eyes and blinked sluggishly a few times before yawning again. Then she slowly lifted herself up into a seated position on Noah's stomach. She spoke while rubbing her eyes.

"I finally...feel awake."

"I'm glad to hear that. Might I humbly request then that you move your person off mine...?"

"A one, and a two..."

On the heels of her words came a light, popping sound, followed by an explosion of smoke indicative of advanced magic. His only response was a muffled exclamation. The cloud covered Noah and Claudia, briefly concealing their figures. Though it cleared almost immediately, his expression remained stiff.

"Wha...?" he said, befuddled. Likely because of her transformation into her adult form.

She looked to be around sixteen years old, her limbs long, slender, and well suited to her figure. Her chest jutted out voluptuously now, her silhouette nipping down to a petite waist before filling out again into soft curves below. Her lustrous pale-brown tresses had lengthened, the ends now hanging down by her hips. Small, rose-colored lips complemented her large eyes with their creased eyelids. The dress she wore was a mature, lacy, black affair.

Claudia saw her own reflection in his obsidian pupils.

"My lady..."

As for Noah, who grimaced in consternation, he, too, was in his adult form, appearing roughly nineteen. Now a young man, his features were even more masculine. His incredibly tall stature fit well with his wide shoulders and rugged

build.

He showed no signs of strain even with her adult self weighing him down, still seated atop him. And yet, his expression was terribly pained when he asked, "You're up to no good again, aren't you?"

"Goodness, such cheek." With her right hand planted next to his head on the bed, Claudia stared down at him. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear with her left hand. "I am, after all, the reincarnation of the legendary witch. So, naturally, that means I am *always* up to no good. Our child forms are awfully inconvenient in this particular case. Because should we be discovered during our investigation, people would know it's us straightaway."

In response, Noah pressed the back of his hand against his eyes and sighed deeply.

"Honestly...what am I supposed to do with you...?"

"Tee hee hee."

She grasped his wrist and pored over the words floating on his palm. Below the written message, Karlheinz had included a rough sketch of the castle grounds based on his own observations of the area.

"Right, then. Off we go, Noah."

Instead of replying, her sullen manservant startled Claudia by suddenly sitting up using only the power of his abdominal muscles before wrapping his fingers around her wrist. All she could do was gasp.

"As you wish, Princess."

With that, he activated his teleportation magic. The next moment, she blinked at the sensation she felt on her skin at their new location.

"A garden of...ice and snow?" Her murmur created a white puff of air.

Next to her, Noah surveyed their surroundings as well. Despite the season being spring at the moment, the space around them was blanketed in shades of silver and white. Evidently, it used to be a rose garden. But both the briars and the blooming red roses were frozen. Encased in their armor of ice, the vibrant blooms seemingly stared fixedly at them.

"Winter rules this garden thanks to magic, hm?"

Noah uttered a short incantation with his hand pressed to her back. The magic gradually fashioned a white fur cloak, lush and velvety, to settle around her thin spring dress. Wearing the outer garment naturally, she began walking through the snow-white garden.

His eyes vigilant as he accompanied her, he asked, "Do you think a powerful mage is responsible for preserving the garden in this state?"

"I do. But whether they are a sensitive sort or a daring one is anybody's guess."

She looked back on their footsteps. The indentations left in the snow by a large man and a petite woman disappeared before their very eyes. Noah frowned thoughtfully at the sight.

Not a single footprint could be found in this snowy garden. However, that wasn't because the two of them were the first to step inside here. No, some mysterious mechanism made it so that any footprints vanished.

"I don't sense anyone..." Claudia commented.

"Nevertheless, we should be careful. It's possible someone may be using magic to block their presence just as we are."

In these two years, Noah had become quite adept at handling any situation. Pleased, Claudia smiled before resuming her stroll, her feet crunching on the snow.

The snowfield and frozen flowers glittered under the light of the sun. Even their frosty breaths sparkled like diamonds before dissipating.

"What a gorgeous garden."

Noah kept his silence.

Then, a moment later, from a few paces ahead, he silently instructed her to halt by raising his right hand. She, too, saw the reason for his wariness—an enormous painting covered a fair portion of the castle wall at one end of the garden.

The work of art ensnared her. It should have felt flat considering the surface it

was painted on, but its strangely three-dimensional effect created the impression that the subject of the painting actually existed. She could practically *feel* the warmth and softness, the hint of a glow.

Despite its almost ethereal beauty, the painting's motif itself explained Noah's caution.

"An image that depicts lovely princesses fast asleep, hmm?"

He said nothing as he continued glaring at the painting. All the princesses' eyes were closed.

A few beats later, Noah finally spoke even as he stood protectively in front of Claudia. "It doesn't seem like it was made using magic."

"I agree. Someone most definitely painted this expansive mural by hand."

"Who? And why?"

"A painting as beautiful as this one would normally be considered a masterpiece. However..."

At that point, both she and Noah simultaneously focused their attention on a singular spot.

A scream echoed immediately after.

"Aaarrrgggh!"

The two of them listened in silence. Clearly, the owner of this garden had returned. Sword in hand, Noah remained in front of Claudia as if protecting her was the most natural thing in the world. She touched his back and peeked from behind him.

"Oh my, what do we have here?"

A lone man cowered on top of the snow. His hair was silver. He was tall, even for a man, but awfully thin. That was all anyone could glean from his crouched, rounded posture.

"Wh... Why are there people in my garden...?! Inconceivable. This is inconceivable...!"

Frowning, Noah said to Claudia, "Please step back. He was using magic to

erase his presence. It's no wonder we remained unaware of him until just now."

"Indeed, an impressive display of power."

Whenever they conducted their inquiries without permission like this, they always used magic to make themselves undetectable. Of course, the magic didn't actually make them invisible. If spotted, they wouldn't be able to hide themselves, so Claudia and Noah did their utmost to keep watch of their surroundings and hide should anyone draw near.

Unfortunately for them, the master of this garden had almost completely erased any trace of himself, which explained why they couldn't deal with him until he saw them. It had been the correct choice on her part then to transform them into their adult forms just in case.

"Leonhard," she said, using Noah's original name. "Noah" was the new one she'd given him. In his adult form, she often called him "Leonhard" as an alias. "First, we need to apologize to him."

"Understood," he replied after a pause.

Still holding his sword at the ready, he walked toward the man curled up on the ground. "My sincerest apologies. We're traveling the world for various reasons, but we seem to have found ourselves lost in this place after our transfer magic failed."

This was the excuse they had prepared for exactly such situations, and they had used it often over these last two years. But the owner of this garden showed no signs of having heard Noah. He remained crouched, trembling as he clutched his head.

"Why...? How...? I erected a barrier, so how did people wind up here? No... Wait, I think I know... That must be it...!"

Noah made a questioning sound in his throat at that.

Then the man spoke again, his voice sounding strangely firm now. "This is just like everything else! It's all because I'm a dimwit, unfit for life, and unimportant...!"

Noah's expression then said more than any words would have. The look on

his face conveyed both confusion and a hint of disgust as to why the man would come to such a conclusion, and so confidently at that.

As for the man in question, he shrunk in on himself even more as he embarked on a rambling monologue.

"From an outsider's perspective, my barrier might as well be made of paper, eh... I'd wager it's not that the castle's folk *can't* approach but that they're being considerate of me and *pretending* they can't... In which case, was I honestly fool enough to think I could fend off intruders with my measly magic...? How humiliating... My very existence is a joke..."

Still silent, Noah retreated just the slightest bit.

"So the ominous feeling I had this morning the moment I woke up turned out to be right. First, I dropped my palette on the carpet. Then, when I tried to clean up the mess in a panic, I crashed into the side table and the vase fell, shattering into pieces. After which I couldn't stop sneezing from all the pollen that scattered everywhere. All of these were harbingers designed to force me to confront the fact that I am ashamed to exist..."

What a series of unfortunate events. The more the young man spoke, the faster his descent into despair became.

"Rubbish like me should just disappear. Yes, I'll dig a hole and build a house inside it... A place without sunlight is the perfect one for someone like me. It was absurd in the first place to be endowed with a room fit only for proper human beings..."

"Leonhard, help him up."

"As you wish, Lady Adelheid."

"Eeeeeek...!" A feeble scream escaped from the man the moment Noah firmly pulled him upright. "L-Let me go, please let me go...! It's impossible for me to show my face to others in a bright place like this! Nooo..."

"What now, my lady? I'm certain you've already guessed his identity by now."

"I simply have no notion of what you mean. Now, secure him in a stranglehold."

"Understood."

"H-H-Help me... Help meee..."

Possessed of the same silver hair as Crown Prince Lewis, the young man immediately covered his eyes with both hands, leaving only the lower half of his face visible. Based on what little she could see, he was likely a handsome fellow. Violent shakes rattled his body. She doubted that huddling in the snow was the only reason for his shivers.

Claudia walked toward the man in Noah's hold and peered up at him.

"You must be the lord of this garden. We're sorry for startling you. Will you forgive us, since we're lost children?"

"Please, please, let me go...! Have you any idea how long it's been since I was last in the company of others?! And your voice definitely marks you as a girl! I can't do this! I can't do this!"

"Then perhaps you'd be more comfortable talking to Leonhard?"

"Men are just as impossible for me to deal with as women!"

Noah exhaled heavily and stared pointedly at Claudia. "What do you suggest we do now, Lady Adelheid?"

"Hmmm, excellent question..."

Adelheid, her name in her previous life, was her alias here when in her adult form. The man's shoulders twitched in reaction when he heard it.

"Did you say...Adelheid...?"

He slowly, fearfully opened his eyes. And for the first time, she saw their color.

Silver—like diamonds.

This hue, too, indicated magic of an unusual nature.

The moment he saw her, his eyes, which he had so obstinately kept shut until now, widened. "Whoa." Then his murmur gave way to a shout, his voice the loudest it had been thus far. "The... The Ice Saint...?!"

Noah narrowed his eyes.

Meanwhile, the suddenly excited man lauded Claudia with compliments.

"Translucent, pale skin and a snow-white cloak! Fine, silken hair reminiscent of a running stream and a heavenly visage that dazzles the eye! Not to mention the artistic lines of your figure...! Everything about you is so unearthly that you must be a saint sent by the divine to this garden...!"

"Oh me, oh my. You'll make me blush."

"Oy, don't think you can approach Lady Adelheid so casually."

The young man knelt in front of her and offered his most fervent prayers, though he practically yelled them at her.

"My name is Stuart Hayden Klingate and... Actually, please forget that!

There's no point in a worthless louse like me introducing himself to a saint...!!!"

"Stuart."

"A-Am I dreaming, or did the saint actually say my name...?!"

Though his fringe covered part of his eyes, Claudia saw the tears of gratitude welling in them. In a word, his face was a sight. While Noah continued glaring silently down at him, her conjecture turned into certainty.

This youth is Lewis's older brother and this country's first prince.

Moreover, this garden was his playground.

"Lady Saint... Um, i-i-i-if it pleases you, won't you rest here for a bit before taking your leave...?! I-I realize I'm making an impertinent proposal, but...! But I simply wish to etch the sight of you in m-my memory...!"

"Lady Adelheid." His posture protective, Noah whispered to her, "I believe we should do this another time."

He knows perfectly well that I don't have enough magical energy to spare, hmm?

Claudia giggled under her breath. She had been expending quite a bit of her magic up until yesterday to carve out time for today's marriage meeting. Though she'd fallen asleep earlier, it hadn't been a particularly restful nap, so her magic had yet to recover properly.

"I think you're right... Lord Stuart, my apologies. We're no longer lost now that we know our way home."

"No, surely...!"

Nevertheless, we may need to return here again as part of our investigation. So it would behoove me to schedule our next visit now.

With that in mind, Claudia addressed him again. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to call upon you again here..."

"Just a bit longer!"

She gasped in surprise for his shout, the loudest until now, echoed throughout the snowy garden.

"Please, I beg you to let me behold your countenance for a bit longer! Ten minutes! No, five! Even a second is enough, so please spare me a little more of your time...!"

Stuart stretched his hand toward her, and what she saw then jolted her. Thick ice covered his fingertips. Even as they froze the air around them with a crackle, he tried to touch her hand with his own.

"Please, let me make you a part of my painting..."

"Lady Adelheid!"

The moment Noah tugged Claudia toward him, he activated his teleportation magic. Stuart's ice-covered fingers never reached her.

The next few moments whizzed by in silence. When she opened her eyes, she found they were in her guest room. And she was still within the circle of Noah's arms.

"Hmm... That painting we saw, Stuart painted it himself," she commented idly from within his snug embrace. "He may not be as accomplished as Lewis, but Stuart is a magician in his own right. The proof lies in both how we couldn't sense him until we saw him and the wintry state of that garden..."

Silence from her manservant.

"Noah?"

Claudia looked up at him then because he showed no signs of releasing her anytime soon. When she did, his gaze collided with hers. From this close, the anger burning in his obsidian eyes was plain.

"That man..."

He gently took her wrist, the one Stuart had tried to grasp. The way he held it in his hand was both careful, like handling the purest object, and forceful, like he was suppressing some unknown emotion.

"He tried to touch you, Princess."

She didn't know what to say in response, so she merely chuckled lightly. "You needn't fret so." Speaking in a soothing tone, Claudia did her best to pacify Noah in his adult form. "I'm not hurt. You know that too, don't you?"

"I would never allow you to come to harm. The thought alone is outrageous. More than that, though, I can't forgive the man who thought he could lay a single finger on you."

His other arm remained curved around her waist, his hand resting on her back. From his perspective, her soft, slender frame must have seemed infinitely fragile.

"I exposed you to danger and that's my fault. Please allow me to rectify my blunder by returning to him. I promise I'll handle him right this time."

"But you were such a good boy, Noah. I can't fathom how exactly you'll 'handle' him now."

"You plan on seeing him again, don't you, my lady? Then I need to teach him a lesson in advance to make sure he never again acts so strangely in your presence."

The anger, quiet but deep, still smoldered in his obsidian eyes. His hold on her remained firm as he declared earnestly to her, "You are my princess."

Those words left her speechless. The powerful emotion in his gaze staggered her. If she ordered him to, Noah would even destroy the very world using his tremendous magical energy and talent. He was prepared to eliminate any of her enemies, including the prince of another country.

"Your Highness." Though his voice was grave, a tinge of sweetness lurked somewhere in it. He peered intently down at her as he continued. "Please say yes."

"Noah." Claudia responded to his entreaty with her own intense stare. After a short pause, she huffed a quiet laugh and reached up to his head. Then, in a particularly sweet and soft tone, she scolded her faithful manservant.



"No. Absolutely not."

When she stroked his black hair comfortingly, he scowled in displeasure. Until a moment ago, he had been doing his utmost to convey a calm facade. Yet now, he didn't bother hiding his rancor.

"We're outsiders, trespassers, while Stuart is a prince of this nation. Though there's much to be concerned about, cornering him at this stage would be premature."

Noah hung his head in response.

"You're normally so mature, but you're ever so childish when it comes to me, hmm?"

"Well..." He stopped, unable to deny the charge. His behavior was only natural—despite his appearance now, he *was* only eleven years old.

"My adorable manservant. Unfortunately, I can't approve your plea just yet. So be patient."

"My lady."

"Did I stutter?"

He said nothing while she continued patting his head like he was a good little boy. Then, he finally ground his teeth together and closed his eyes with a grimace.

"As you wish, Princess."

"Good boy."

Beaming, she trailed her fingers down to his jaw and gently forced him to look at her.

"Tee hee. I believe that's enough scolding for today since you were only trying to protect me."

"Please... Don't tell me this is what puts you in a good mood..."

Noah loosened his arms from around her. Now that he was feeling calm enough for self-reflection, discomfort colored his expression as he realized everything he'd just said and done. And upon closer inspection, she noticed his

slightly reddened ears.

"I...apologize for holding you without your permission."

He was fine holding her in their child forms, but he was careful about being too close to her in their adult forms.

"Oh, I don't mind, since you did so for my sake."

"Regardless, it was improper of me to pull you into my arms so carelessly, and I shall reflect on my actions."

Goodness, he's not looking at me at all now.

Even as she tittered, Claudia remarked to her loyal manservant, "You are, in fact, on the mark about my decision to inquire after Stuart again. However, that is for later. What's important now is nap time."

"Understood. Then please return to your eight-year-old form first."

At his request, she looked up into his jet-black eyes. "Ah, yes, because you still can't use the magic that allows me to transform us into adults and revert us to children."

"It is an advanced spell, after all... However, it won't be long before I learn it and can show you myself."

"I'm looking forward to it..." Her words trailed off as a small yawn escaped the sleepy Claudia in her womanly guise.

"Would it be terrible manners to slip into bed immediately after coming in from our jaunt outside...? I'm much too sleepy for a bath, so I want you to cast cleansing magic on me, Noah..."

"Again, please return to your original form, and then I'll do as you ask... My lady, wait!"

And so, in order to recover a modicum of her magical power, Claudia enjoyed a nice long nap until they were summoned for dinner.

\*

"A saint... That was most definitely a saint..."

Stuart, the first prince of Klingate but not its crown prince, mumbled to

himself, alone in the garden of snow. He heard a knock on the floating door, which connected to the world outside the barrier and also acted as the entryway to it, followed by the sound of Lewis's voice.

"Brother... Brother, it's me, Lewis. I wanted to pick up where we left off earlier. Won't you please leave your room tonight at least and join me for dinner...?"

"So bloody persistent..." His dull gaze strayed to the door. "Brother. You would still call me Brother? After everything? Enough already..."

Then Stuart grimaced as a sharp pain lanced through his head. "No... Don't think. Don't listen. All you have to do is to think about beautiful things... Yes, like my saint!"

He sighed deeply, recalling the young woman who called herself Adelheid, the same name as the legendary witch.

"I can't believe something so beautiful exists in this world... At the very least, I want to keep that beauty by my side..."

"Brother."

Without answering Lewis's plaintive call, Stuart gazed up at the enormous painting on the wall. He fixed a stare on the women in it.

"Then, in order to keep the ethereal saint by my side, I must..."

## **Chapter 2**

Lewis and Claudia's marriage talks would take place over a span of ten days. The existence of teleportation magic meant she could return home every night instead of staying in Klingate's castle. However, since the marriage talks were simply a pretext for her true goal here, Claudia had decided to remain in Klingate for the entire duration of the discussions.

Today was the second day. With her hair fastened into two ponytails, a large ribbon decorating each, she now walked daintily in the garden under the light of the afternoon sun.

"Lord Lewis, look! Look!"

Beaming, she turned around to see Lewis with his head tilted curiously and a gentle smile on his face.

"What is it, Claudia?"

"There's a ladybug here! It's so tiny and awfully cute."

He stared at where she pointed and nodded thoughtfully in agreement. "You're right, it *is* cute. Judging by its size, I'd guess it's male."

"You mean he's a boy? How do you know?"

"Male ladybugs are smaller. Look, this one over here is definitely female."

"Wooow..." She gazed up at him with sparkling eyes. "You're an expert on ladybugs, Lord Lewis!"

"Ha ha. Not at all. Whenever I have time, I enjoy reading whichever illustrated manual is within reach."

"Do you like books? One of my brothers loooves to read too, so you both can be friends!"

The maids in the vicinity watched warmly over the charming tableau Claudia and Lewis presented. Noah, acting as her escort, accompanied them quietly from a short distance away.

The king and Karlheinz stood at the garden entrance, engaged in diplomatic matters while keeping an eye on them.

"Princess Claudia has become quite attached to Lewis. She's a genuinely guileless child, eh?"

After a long beat of silence, Karlheinz replied, "Indeed."

The king evidently assumed the other man's lack of emotional expression as his nature. Unbothered by it, he continued. "I believe we can leave the children in the very capable hands of the maids and that young boy. So, why don't we shift ourselves over there, and you can regale me with stories about the great strides Avianoia is making in magical technology?"

"I would be glad to share any knowledge that I am able to."

Karlheinz spared Claudia a brief glance after his quiet response. Then, the two men left the garden.

He's taking the king away, just like we planned, she thought. It should be a simple enough matter to fool the maids as well.

She called out to Lewis while pretending to chase after a butterfly. "Lord Lewis, come here! Let's make a secret hideaway."

"What an intriguing idea. How can I help?"

"Miss Maids, no grown-ups allowed! Only children in our secret hideaway. Noah, you come here too!"

The maids nodded, chuckling softly at Claudia's high-handed attitude. A variety of magical safeguards were installed all around the castle for the children's protection, which was why the adults gave their own prince and the foreign princess free rein to play without worrying overmuch about their safety. Claudia couldn't have asked for more perfect circumstances.

Asking Lewis about Stuart is the most efficient way of learning about the elder prince.

Any intelligence Karlheinz gathered would mainly be from servants and bureaucrats. However, if she wanted to know about a prince who rarely left his domain, she could obtain more, and better, information from his younger

brother. Once the relaxed maids began chatting with each other, Claudia took the opportunity to stride boldly deeper into the garden, leading Lewis to a place hidden from adult eyes.

"Lord Lewis, I have a question for you."

But first, she needed to build more of a rapport with him, and conversation was the best starting point.

"Why do you read so many books?"

Lewis, closer to Noah than her on their walk, smiled shyly in response.

"Because of someone I admire."

"Oh, really?!"

"That's right. Learned and inquisitive, he's clever at using what he knows. A wonderful individual leagues ahead of me in life." Then he continued softly, "I wish I could have learned more from him while we still had the chance."

"You...can't talk to him anymore?"

"Ha ha. It's a bit complicated, but I firmly believe we'll be able to again someday... Although, I have to admit it makes me a bit sad that the opportunity to do so rarely presents itself."

Claudia listened in thoughtful silence. From his own inquiries, Karlheinz had discovered that Lewis was the only one who hadn't yet given up on his shut-in of a brother, Stuart. Every day, the boy unfailingly visited him.

Perhaps it was time to initiate the next phase of their plan. After she signaled to Noah with her eyes, she raced over the lawn on her tiny feet.

"I don't understand difficult things!"

"My lady, slow down or you'll fall down just like your brother did the other day."

The two of them had scripted their lines in advance, including the one he'd just spoken. Now it was Claudia's turn to reply with hers and she did so smoothly.

"You're wrong! Brother fell because he was reading while walking. Lord

Lewis! Don't you think it's only natural to go *splat!* right on the ground when you do something like that?!"

"Hmm, I do. After all, it's dangerous."

"And that's why I scolded him not to do that again. I'm more of a big sister to him than he's a big brother to me, you see."

"You mean at heart? Heh. What an interesting turn of phrase."

Lewis's chuckle sounded genuinely amused. His smile was sweet, everything a handsome young boy's should be. If girls of the same age had been here to witness it, they would have fallen victim to his beauty in that moment.

"But I love my big brothers, so all's well that ends well!"

"Is that right? I think it's wonderful you feel that way."

"Won't you tell me about your big brother, Lord Lewis?"

At Claudia's question, he pressed his hand to his cheek in thought. Several moments passed before he spoke.

"I would say he's the sort who doesn't realize how incredibly talented he is."

"Hmmm!"

Her deliberately disinterested response seemed to make it easier for Lewis to talk. He smiled ruefully and continued.

"Perhaps such words sound impertinent coming from me, since I'm his younger brother. However, I can't tell you much about his personality because he stopped leaving his room by the time I turned three."

"Do you love him?"

"I... I want to talk to him more, so much more. I want him to show me his magic too."

Lewis's ever-present, effortless smile faded, and he sounded almost as if he were talking to himself.

"Neither the children my age who would be my friends nor the teachers who came to teach me magic ever exceeded my expectations. After reading through all the books in the library, I found that every academic tome only contained

the same information."

"Lord Lewis..."

"It's always been this way. Whenever I asked to venture outside the castle, my mother forbade it. She was terrified I would catch some awful illness and never wake up from it... So, you can imagine how beautiful my brother's magic was to me the first time I saw it."

As the words spilled out, he seemed far older than his eleven years. However, what struck her the most was his sad expression, as if he'd given up on everything.

"I've grown tired of always waiting—only waiting."

Claudia didn't know what to say. For the first time since they'd met, Lewis voiced the truth in his heart. So she called out to her faithful manservant. "Noah."

"How may I serve you, my lady?" He scowled ferociously when he saw her sunny smile. "Don't tell me... You want me to use my magic, don't you?"

"Tee hee. What a good boy you are, Noah! You know me sooo well, hmm?"

Sighing, he pressed a hand to his forehead after correctly guessing her intention. She idly wondered how he would react if she pointed out that his mannerisms just now strongly resembled Karlheinz's.

"Lord Lewis, please hold Noah's hand."

"Claudia, I don't understand..."

"Hurry, hurry! Hold it tightly!"

"Begging your pardon, Your Highness," Noah said.

"What ...?"

Grimacing, Noah clasped Lewis's hand in his free one because Claudia held the other.

"Whoa...!"

Noah had used teleportation magic. When they arrived at their destination, a beaming Claudia practically bounced up and down in excitement.

"Goodness, that was fun, wasn't it? Noah's very good at this magic, you know!"

The boy in question kept silent.

"Th-This is..." Lewis swallowed audibly as his gaze swept over their new surroundings. "Could this be...the castle town?"

He was right on the mark. The royal capital stretched dazzlingly before their eyes, brimming with laughter and lively voices.

```
"Claudia... Why ...?"
```

"Tee hee. My Noah is amazing at teleportation magic!"

When she wrapped her arms tightly around his, her manservant stared down pointedly at her, for she was the one responsible for teaching him such magic. She merely feigned ignorance and turned a bright smile on Lewis.

"Lord Lewis, you must know that the outside world isn't scary at all, yes?"

He sucked in a quiet breath. Claudia held out both hands to him, as if inviting him to dance.

"So let's play together. Don't worry, none of the grown-ups will notice us."

"C-Claudia..."

"Noah, would you do the honors?"

"As you wish, Princess."

Noah uttered a short chant and touched Lewis. With a soft *pop*, the other boy's clothing transformed into something commoners would wear, allowing him to blend into the city. While Lewis gaped in surprise, Noah did the same to Claudia's dress. He also fashioned a hat with rabbit ears for her. She chuckled as he pulled it down firmly over her head.

"Come, Lord Lewis."

He made a questioning sound. His eyes, the color of dawn, shifting from azure to crimson, shone with anticipation of the unknown.

```
"All... All right..."
```

\*

At first, Lewis appeared clearly out of his depth, but he soon grew used to the hustle and bustle of the capital. His eyes sparkled at the sight of the fruits sold at stalls, and the medicinal herbs hanging from the eaves of storefronts piqued his interest. He was clearly enjoying letting his curiosity run free. He seemed particularly engrossed by the sight of children around Claudia's age playing by the side of the streets.

"Lord Lewis, look, look. This candy is fluffy and stretchy!"

"You're right... Amazing. Do you think it's a foreign product?"

"Oh, oh, how lovely and glittery this candy is! The rabbit looks just like my hat!"

"Such refined technique. Seeing so much detail in confections this small makes me wonder if they can make something bigger and even grander."

Claudia made a pretense of being curious while leading Lewis around safely. In truth, it was her second time visiting this avenue. When she had first learned of the curse of the sleeping princesses, she and Noah had conducted their initial investigation around this area, so as a tourist, she knew it well.

"Claudia, what do you think is over there...?"

"Instead of imagining what it could be, why don't we actually go see for ourselves, Lord Lewis?"

She smiled, pleased to see him grow assertive little by little. Noah followed a few paces behind them. He cautioned her now. It was hard to tell whether his expression was genuine or an act.

"My lady, calm yourself or you'll trip and fall."

"Heh. Don't worry, Noah. I'll make sure not to let go of her hand while we walk."

"Under...stood. Thank you, Your Highness."

"Lord Lewis, hurry!"

Just then, Claudia very casually glanced at Noah.

Though I want to learn more about Stuart, after listening to Lewis's story, I simply can't leave him alone either. So I'll prioritize him for now.

She and Noah had discussed their strategy the night before, after the formal dinner banquet.

"Based on the color of Prince Lewis's eyes, what do you suppose is the nature of his magic?" Noah asked as she sat on his lap in her nightgown she'd changed into after her bath so he could comb her hair. He had created a warm wind using magic to dry it earlier, and now he methodically smoothed her tresses with a thick-bristled brush. His motions were so soothing, her eyes were already at half-mast when she replied in a sleepy voice.

"Magicians with two-tone eyes can either have heterochromatic eyes, where each eye is a different color, or they can have a gradient like Lewis's. In either case, they generally excel at two types of elemental magic. However..."

She hesitated then, swinging her legs atop the chair that was Noah. After marshaling her thoughts, she resumed her explanation.

"Those magicians with heterochromatic eyes have complete control over their individual magics. On the other hand, those with the gradient version can *mix* their magics skillfully. Control is difficult, but if they can master their powers, not only will they be powerful, but they can also produce unexpectedly complex results."

"Hmm... Prince Lewis's eyes are a combination of a fierce red and a calm blue. As far as magical properties are concerned, doesn't that indicate opposite elements?"

"Indeed. Which makes me believe he's held in high regard precisely *because* he can wield both adeptly." Claudia yawned before continuing in a mumble. "Magicians with dichromatic eyes were rare even five centuries ago. I myself observed them up close but only because a disciple of mine happened to be one."

Whenever she spoke of her former students, Noah's expression always looked

a bit complicated and a smidge sullen.

"Tee hee. Is something the matter?"

"Well...it just feels like my bond with you will never be the same as the closeness you shared with your former disciples."

"But you're one of my adorable disciples too, and my manservant, no less."

Even though her response was matter-of-fact, it only made the look on his face more strained. To her, this, too, was another charming facet of him, one she knew he wasn't aware of.

"I can certainly understand why Stuart would feel inferior when his brother, seven years his junior, is so accomplished. And yet..."

"And yet, Prince Stuart's attitude is a bit too extreme."

Noah finished Claudia's thought, recalling Stuart's lack of confidence in himself. Or perhaps he was thinking about the older Klingate prince worshipping her as a saint and his attempt to detain her in his garden. Perhaps both.

"Even if he *does* feel inferior, I very much doubt it's the only reason for his attitude."

She absentmindedly wound a tuft of her now silky hair around her finger.

"You know...one thing clearly bothers me."

"And what might that be?"

"Weeell, Noah..."

She turned around and answered him softly.

That was how last night came to a close.

\*

"Okay! We'll rest here!"

Claudia raced toward the bench on the riverbank and hopped up with a huff. She sat smack-dab in the center, then patted the open spaces to her left and right, inviting the two boys.

"Lord Lewis, Noah, hurry!"

"I'll purchase beverages for you both at the shop over there."

"Then you come here, Lord Lewis!"

Lewis's lips curved up a little at her imperious summons before he sat down to her left. "We walked a lot today. Are you sure you don't need a nap?"

"Tee hee. I'm not sleepy yet."

She said it proudly and beamed up at him.

"Thank you for trying so hard for my sake at the game stall! You were so close to hitting the stuffed toy with a ball."

"Ha ha ha... I'm a little embarrassed when I think back on how many attempts I made."

"Both you and Noah kept saying, 'One more try. Just one more try,' over and over again."

"Make that...quite embarrassed..."

Lewis, ever the mature boy, flushed now.

The game had involved knocking prizes arranged on shelves down with a ball, and he'd been carried away by his enthusiasm. However, he'd been in good company because Noah's reaction had been the same. Claudia's shoulders shook with laughter as she thought back to both boys' frustrated expressions as they had struggled to knock the toys down.

"Lord Lewis, thank you for playing with Noah."

"Of course. But...why so formal, Claudia?"

She could see her manservant off in the distance buying drinks for them at a stall. A smile bloomed on her face as she watched his tiny figure.

"He always works so hard. Even though he's still a child, every day he studies, practices, and trains to protect me."

"Yes... I see his efforts too."

"But! I want him to play too, lots and lots."

Now she looked up at Lewis seated next to her.

"Not just him, though. I want that for you too, Lord Lewis!"

He gasped softly at her words and his eyes widened. Her bright smile didn't waver.

"You seemed so dispirited and sad, and that's why I thought how nice it would be if you could play and enjoy life freely."

"I... Thank you."

He cast his eyes down with a wry twist of his lips that was much too grownup.

"Unfortunately, there are things I must do. Time is finite, and I simply can't afford to waste a moment of it. Especially because I have a promise to fulfill..."

At that moment, a little girl passing by exclaimed excitedly, "Sissy, look, look!" Eyes sparkling, she pointed up at one of the roadside trees. "Aaall of the other flowers are white, but that one is pink!"

"Wow, you're right," the girl's older sister replied with a laugh. "Maybe because of Lady Adelheid's magic!"

The young, chattering sisters went on their merry, innocent way. With a tilt of her head, Claudia posed a question to Lewis.

"Lord Lewis, is this 'Lady Adelheid' a witch who died a long, long time ago?"

"She is. In this country, anytime something good happens, it's a tradition to think of it as being protected by her magic."

Claudia exhaled softly, making sure he didn't notice.

I forgot... This nation has always strongly believed in Adelheid.

Five hundred years ago, when Claudia was still Adelheid, there had been quite a few people who had sought to worship the witch. As a magical prodigy, she had revolutionized magical theories at their roots, thereby creating today's foundation of magic. And as a result of creating new magics one after another, she had once even been treated as a god. Even with the passage of time, there still remained places and peoples who deified Adelheid. Claudia had learned

this from her travels to countries all over the world over these last two years.

"Apparently, the first king of our nation was one of her disciples."

"Hmmm. What was his name?"

"Ha ha. No one remembers. After all, it's been five centuries."

"You don't saaay."

As she swung her feet back and forth, one thing became crystal clear.

Stuart reacted the way he did because I used Adelheid as my alias.

The moment Noah had said the name, Stuart had lifted his head to look at her. At the time, she'd thought his reaction a product of her imagination, but her intuition turned out to be right. Though his reaction was an unexpected miscalculation on her part, she now realized she simply needed to create a strategy based on this newfound knowledge. It would likely make things easier moving forward.

While these thoughts sped through her mind, Lewis murmured quietly, "There's no point in clinging to legends."

"Lord Lewis?"

His expression was the same as it had been when he had expressed how tired he'd grown of waiting earlier.

"As if Lady Adelheid's magic is responsible for something as trivial as the color of a flower differing from its mates. Lady Adelheid might have been a great witch, but it's meaningless to seek the phantom of someone who died five hundred years ago... Because what matters is those alive *today*."

Then, with a startled jerk, he covered his mouth. "I'm sorry, Claudia. Pretend you didn't hear any of that."

"Why?" Giggling, she made the hem of her dress flutter with a kick of her feet. "After all, I feel the same, you know."

"Claudia..."

"Everything fun and wonderful belongs to the people living in the present. Just like spotting a flower set apart by its unique color, we can find and enjoy

different miracles in our daily lives. All because of our open hearts and minds. Don't you think so too?"

She bounded down from the bench, then spun around with a smile at Lewis. "You are absolutely right, Lord Lewis."

His only response was a choked sound. His face twisted as tears welled in his eyes, and he covered them with a hand. A breeze ruffled his silver hair. "Once, long ago, someone said the same thing to me."

"Then that makes us birds of a feather for believing in you, doesn't it?"

"I would say so, yes... It's so strange too, since you're both nothing alike."

"Tee hee."

She suddenly turned around to find Noah walking toward them with the beverages in hand. "Oh no! I knew the silly boy wouldn't buy one for himself."

Even when she insisted he enjoy snack time with her, he often refused—and quite firmly at that.

"I'm sorry, Lord Lewis, but I have to scold him. Noah, you bad boy!"

And she promptly rushed off on tiny feet. Lewis watched her departing figure with a dazzled expression.

"It... It really *is* strange. They have nothing in common, so why does she bring back so many memories?"

His whisper was so soft no one could have heard it. Pink stained his cheeks as he covered his mouth with both hands and muttered to himself.

"Claudia... My future bride..."

\*

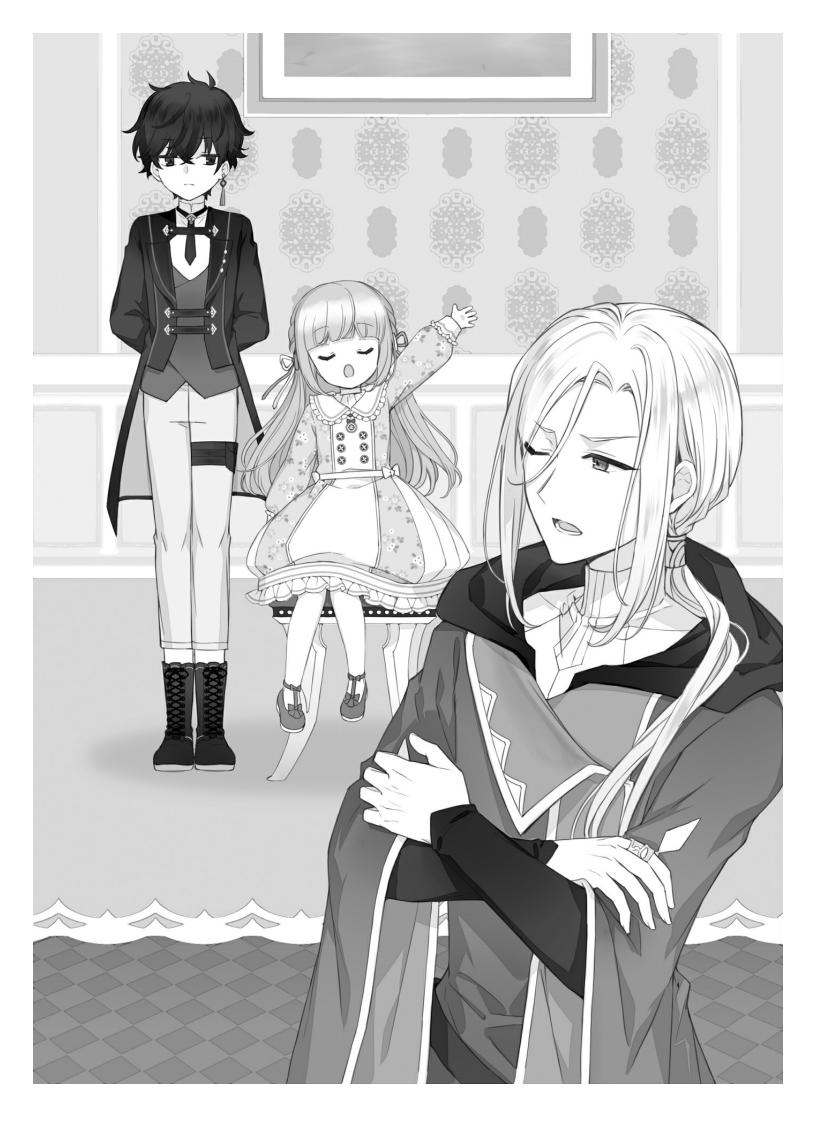
Several hours later, they were back at the castle.

"Your Highness, please take a seat over there. Noah, stand behind her."

"Oookay, Karlheinz."

Noah silently did as instructed. As for Claudia, she plopped herself down on the chair and raised her small hand obediently in front of Avianoia's chief

conjurer, whose aura said she was in for a scolding.



"I suppose I should praise you for your prompt response..."

Karlheinz, ever loyal to her, looked deeply vexed. Of course, there was a good reason for that—he had found out about their escape into the castle town.

"Your Highness, you have no notion of the chill that settled in my bones when I realized you had vanished *and* taken Prince Lewis with you. I immediately distracted His Majesty, but...you should be well aware of the commotion your flight would have caused had you been discovered."

"I couldn't help myself. I simply had to go outside..."

Her dewy eyes...made not a lick of difference in Karlheinz's stony expression. He knew her true character, so it was only natural he wouldn't be swayed by her act.

"Your Highness..."

"Don't fret so. You know I wouldn't have done that if we didn't have something to gain. Moreover, I wasn't worried about my safety, not with Noah by my side. And besides..."

She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the outstanding chief conjurer who stood before her.

"I had full faith in you. I knew you would handle the situation for us superbly so long as you remained in the castle."

"Well..."

"Thank you for doing such a splendid job, Karlheinz."

She beamed at him and in response, he hung his head with a deep sigh.

"You know as well as I do that Noah and I are incapable of pressing you when you confer such praise on us... Your Highness is truly not one to be trifled with..."

"Tee hee. I dragged Noah along on my selfish whims, so be a dear and refrain from chiding him."

"Not at all, my lady. Ultimately, I chose to accompany you of my own free will."

Claudia patted her manservant's head as such a good boy deserved. Then she picked up a nearby cushion, squeezed it to her chest, and swiftly broached the topic at hand.

"I've narrowed down all the individuals we should investigate related to the curse targeting this country's princesses. Noah, do you remember the name Stuart reacted to in the snow garden?"

"Yes. As if I would forget."

She continued, thoughts of her previous life on her mind. "The name of the legendary witch is the key to this thing."

"Adelheid?"

The name startled Karlheinz. Meanwhile, Noah narrowed his eyes without comment.

"We are speaking of the same legendary witch of five centuries past, yes?"

"Karlheinz, are you knowledgeable on the subject of Adelheid?"

"I've read all of the grimoires and other works she left behind on the study of magical theory. However, I hold no interest in Adelheid herself, so I admittedly know very little about the woman."

"Tee hee hee. That's just fine."

"Hmm?"

Without responding to his curious gaze, she rested her chin on the pillow in her arms.

"Since her death, Adelheid has been revered as a special figure in certain parts of the world. Much of this can be attributed to her contemporary disciples spreading the word of her life and work."

Her sweet students had evidently embarked on journeys across the world after her death and the war. They had accomplished a great many things thanks to their talents. Based on the information Claudia had been able to gather, one had become a king, another had become the head of a magical organization, and a third had built a church.

For example, there was Reinard. The founder and first king of Lemilsia, Noah's former home, the man was also her manservant's ancestor, on top of being Adelheid's most outstanding pupil.

"My lady, didn't Prince Lewis mention that this country's first king was also one of Adelheid's disciples? Though I find it curious that His Highness didn't know the man's name."

"Indeed... Indeed, he did, and I agree."

An image of a certain young man surfaced in her mind at that moment.

"I really do think I must see it with my own eyes."

"See what exactly ...?"

Claudia mumbled an answer to Noah's question.

"Why, the current situation, of course."

"The current...situation...?"

His expression said, I know what you're saying, but I wish I didn't.

"I'm well aware we can't teleport right now anyway. After all, teleportation magic only works if one has been to their destination before, knows the layout of the site, or has a clear image of the place in their mind. None of us are familiar with the location either..." She trailed off, almost muttering to herself now.

"No. No, you can't be serious, my lady."

"Noah, Karlheinz, I have a favor to ask, so please listen." She rubbed her eyes. "As soon as our preparations are complete, we'll search for the sleeping princesses. They *must* be hidden somewhere on the castle grounds."

They both let their heavy silence speak for them. And then Noah and Karlheinz sighed deeply in unison at her casual proclamation to trespass.

\*

"Please, won't you let me go alone, Princess?"

"Goodness, Noah, how many times do I have to say 'no'?"

She was in her bed down for her nap, and now she stared up at Noah, who sat in the chair next to her. Her tone was conciliatory. "I am the one who wants to look into this directly, so it makes no sense for me to stay behind. Understood?"

"But it's too dangerous. As you yourself said, you have too much in common with the curse's victims, chiefly, your royal blood and youth." Frowning, Noah rearranged the plush animals surrounding her on the bed. "We simply can't predict what could happen in a place where the victims lie."

"Should the curse attack me, that creates a shortcut to the solution for us. We'll be able to end this without hunting for answers."

"My lady." Though his voice was quiet, it carried weight. "If you don't want me to destroy this city, I request that you cease thinking such things."

She returned his earnest gaze with a thoughtful one of her own before her lips suddenly stretched into a smile.

"I shall make sure to command you when I want you to do that. So be a good boy and wait until then, hmm?"

His eyes slitted in frustration, and then he sighed softly. "A message came from Prince Lewis earlier. 'I enjoyed myself today. I hope we can spend time together again soon."

"Oh...my." Claudia blinked in surprise at the unexpected request. "I wonder if he means another jaunt in disguise."

"I...think so."

"It seems I taught Lewis a naughty way to entertain himself. I'll have to take responsibility for that..."

Her words trailed off as she yawned. Pulling the closest stuffed animal toward her, she pondered in silence. As for Noah, he looked somewhat displeased.

"Will you continue with this arranged marriage business?"

"Tee hee. Without it, we certainly can't stay in Klingate indefinitely, right?"

"Even though...His Highness seems to have taken a liking to you?"

"Hmm, fair point..."

She hadn't discussed it with Noah, but he must have gleaned the truth based on his observations.

Ever since our conversation this afternoon, Lewis's attitude toward me has undergone a sea change.

Of course, he had been gentle until then too. However, he had behaved in a manner befitting someone older engaging with a young child. But that was no longer the case. He not only held her hand to prevent her from falling, he also kept a watchful eye on her feet. When she thanked him, he smiled in delight.

"Don't worry... It won't be long before we see results..."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrgh..." Blinking slowly, she explained to Noah, "There's something distorted about the magical energy drifting in this castle... I sense a hint of a curse, yet it's cleverly masked."

"So it's unclear even to you, my lady?"

"I think whoever controls this curse must excel in warding magic... Still, I have no doubt we're in the midst of a vortex..."

Another yawn. Her eyes finally grew heavy with sleep. Despite brimming with magic, her small, eight-year-old frame couldn't handle it constantly, so a nap was necessary.

"Noah, send Lewis a reply telling him I would love to play with him again."

He took a moment before responding, "As you wish, my lady."

"Good boy."

Claudia beamed at him before she closed her eyes and let sleep claim her.

He gently scooped up a lock of her hair spread out on the bedsheet. He held the strands as if they were the most precious things in the world, then let go just as quickly. Noah glared down at his palm, disgusted with himself for daring to touch his mistress. A moment later, he angrily curled his fingers into a tight fist.

"Time to wake up, Adelheid."

"Mm...?"

When Adelheid slowly opened her eyes, she saw a sandy beach. Waves lapped gently. A white chair stood in the shallows. She was sitting in it and had been dozing until this moment. The ocean dampening her toes was so blue it looked like melted lapis lazuli. As the tide went in and out, a salty sea breeze waved the hem of her white dress in the air, making it look like a jellyfish swimming in the water.

While she stared at the scene in a daze, the same voice said her name again from next to her.

"Adelheid."

She looked over her shoulder and found a young man standing at the water's edge. "Reinard..."

The young man with the black hair and obsidian eyes was her first disciple. Though a year younger than her, he towered over her. Broad shouldered and muscular, he never failed to make every passing woman take another look with his masculine beauty.

Reinard strode toward her, his feet splashing through the water. He looked down at her with a sudden smile.

"Still not fully awake yet? You're looking quite defenseless, which is unusual for you."

Then he gently tugged on Adelheid's wrist as if escorting her. She let him pull her up while covering a yawn with her other hand.

"I...was dreaming. Perhaps I should sleep a bit longer."

"Are you joking? You're not actually planning on enjoying a nap until the sun sets, right? If you don't stay awake, you know the other disciples will harangue me with their complaints of boredom."

"That's because you're akin to their elder brother. As such, you should be a dear and look after them, Reinard."

"O Great and Powerful Adelheid, Witch of Legend, unfortunately I must

decline as the burden is too much for me to bear."

Even as he casually made the chair vanish, he carefully guided her so she wouldn't stumble.

"Sewell's holed himself up with his research. He refuses to come out no matter how much we ask him to, so can you at least cast your healing magic on him and make sure he lives?"

"Hmm, should I ask him to come out, then?"

"No. That'll just have the opposite effect. He's desperate to have you acknowledge him, which is why he's like this at the moment."

Sewell was a young man Adelheid had found and accepted as her disciple a few years ago. He'd been a boy when they first met. Despite his height and adult appearance now, his habits from then still remained.

"A shut-in as usual, hmm? He demands too much of himself and thereby ends up cornering himself. He's more than talented enough as a magician, not to mention a hard worker. I just wish he would have more confidence in himself."

"Don't underestimate us, Adelheid. The reason we, your disciples, strive to master our respective paths is because we want to help you. That includes Sewell."

She merely narrowed her eyes in response. Two sets of footprints marked the white sand. Reinard continued talking.

"He's been persecuted his whole life. So he'll spare no effort in repaying the debt he owes to you for saving him."

"To the point of fatigue, never leaving his room?"

"Forgive the enthusiasm that makes him a bit of a recluse."

The waves sounded distant now.

Such a nostalgic dream this is.

Even as the quiet thought drifted through Claudia's mind, she listened attentively to the dear, familiar voice from her life as Adelheid.

"I'm sure it won't be long before he unveils his incredible discoveries. There's

nothing his talent with warding magic can't accomplish."

"Yes... Yes, you're absolutely right. I can't wait."

In the end, though, Claudia never had the chance to see Sewell's magic in its final form. Because she died alone, leaving behind her disciples. She never regretted that. But she could say that her only regret was having no way of knowing how they had spent their lives after.

In the course of her life as Claudia, she would only occasionally hear the names of her beloved disciples. For example, in the corner of a grimoire. Or as the rulers of various countries. Every time vestiges of her pupils surfaced, a riot of emotions surged within her chest, like the tide rolling in and out.

\*

It was the afternoon of her third day in Klingate, the day after their secret escapade in the capital. The adults around them, including the king and maids, seemed surprised when they saw Claudia and Lewis, likely because of the young prince's change in behavior toward her since yesterday.

"Claudia, come here."

He indicated a white sofa with a floral pattern. He picked her up and gently settled her on top of it. After he sat down next to her, he pointed at the tea set and cakes on the table in front of them. Then, with a smile, he asked her, "Which one do you want to eat? I had a pastry chef prepare a variety of cakes you might like."

"I love cakes with lots of fruits!"

"In that case, why don't we start with the strawberry and peach tart?"

The slices that the maid served them looked like triangular works of art. The layers of pastry, cream, and fruit worked together in beautiful harmony. She tasted the sweetness of the strawberry and peach and the mellowness of the cream that enveloped the fruits. Enjoying the flaky mouthfeel of the delightful pastry, Claudia beamed at Lewis.

"This is so incredibly delicious! Thank you, Lord Lewis!"

"I'm glad to hear that."

His lips curved up when he saw the pleasure on her face.

"It gives me joy from the bottom of my heart to be able to see you smile... I'm happy just being by your side."

The maids nearby whispered cheerfully to each other at the sight of him.

"His Highness has grown quite fond of Princess Claudia, hmm?"

"This is my first time seeing such a look in his eyes. He never gazed at any of the other young ladies of Klingate or foreign princesses in the same manner when he had tea with them."

"He's always been kind to girls, and at just eleven years old, he is ever the gentleman. But..."

The maids directed their attention to Lewis's profile, the perfect example of a handsome young boy.

"But when His Highness is in Princess Claudia's company, he's the epitome of a fairy-tale prince."

Isn't that the truth...

Even as she pretended to play the ingenue, thoughts flashed through Claudia's mind as she stuffed her cheeks enthusiastically with cake.

I, for one, did not anticipate Lewis's behavior changing this drastically.

In this moment, she keenly felt the reality of the world overflowing with the unexpected.

Lewis cocked his head quizzically and peered into her face. "Claudia, would you like me to feed you?"

"Nooo, thank you. I can feed myself!"

"Are you sure? Then eat as much as you like. Everything here is for you."

She stared up at him.

"Won't you help yourself too, Lord Lewis? These cakes are sooo scrumptious."

"I'm fine. I... Just watching you eat with gusto is enough to make my heart

melt. I simply can't stop smiling."

Oh me, oh my.

The maids practically swooned at the sight of Lewis's beaming face. In response, Claudia blinked in a deliberately childlike manner.

Well, this is worse than I thought. Now what do I do?

When she sneaked a glance at Noah, who stood silently at attention in a corner of the room, she found him scowling fiercely. But the moment their eyes locked, he composed himself and looked down.

"Once you finish eating, I'll read a book to you."

"Yaaay! Thank you, Lord Lewis!"

"Claudia. I would do anything for you." Then his gaze focused on her mouth. "You have some cream on you. Hold on, I'll wipe it off."

"Don't worry!"

She summoned her manservant with a grin.

"Noah. Noooah!"

"Yes, my lady."

He walked briskly toward her and knelt by her feet. After using magic to produce a handkerchief, he gently wiped the dollop of cream from the corner of her mouth.

"Mpf! Good boy, Noah!"

"I only did your bidding. Henceforth, please eat more neatly. We wouldn't want you to display poor manners in His Highness's presence, would we?"

"It's fine, Noah." Smiling ruefully, Lewis continued calmly. "I want her to be herself with me. Would it be too bold of me to assume she's allowing me to spoil her when she's like this?"

"I...beg your pardon, then." Noah bowed to Lewis before returning to his corner.

Watching him, the prince remarked to Claudia, "He truly is a faithful

manservant, isn't he?"

"Yes! He always en-dea-vors in all kinds of ways for my sake!"

His training with magic and the sword, his practice at styling her hair. Spells to fashion clothes for her and more. Noah hadn't stopped working hard these last two years.

"For example, I hate vegetables, but..."

"Heh. I had a feeling you did."

"He thought that if *he* cooked the food, I wouldn't leave any vegetables behind. So, he studied all sorts of recipes and techniques, and now his are the only meals I eat every bite of."

"I see. It's clear to me that you trust and cherish him deeply, Claudia."

Then Lewis whispered quietly to himself, "Which means I need to strive as well."

\*

With his magical sword gripped between his hands, Noah lunged without hesitation toward his teacher under the afternoon sunlight. They sparred in intense silence.

Until he reached his full height as an adult, his small size would be advantageous, despite his inexperience. Noah lowered his center of gravity and aimed for the man's jaw, a weak spot in the human body. However, his diagonal slash from below didn't have a chance to land because Karlheinz shifted backward the slightest bit.

Noah's sword skimmed just under his teacher's chin. Before Karlheinz could knock it down with his own, Noah quickly deflected it, dispersing the force in the man's swing with his block. He further closed the distance between them. This time, he pointed his hilt instead of his sword tip at his teacher. Noah tried to strike him in the pit of his stomach, but Karlheinz grabbed his wrist almost immediately.

However, Noah used that to his advantage as well. He twisted his wrist out of the man's grasp and used the momentum to grab Karlheinz's arm. Caught by surprise, Karlheinz grunted as he lost his balance. Just as he tried to force his teacher to the ground, Noah found the tables turned back against him when the chief conjurer flipped him upside down swiftly. He groaned when he landed on his back. By the time he realized what had happened, Noah found the man's blade pressed against his throat.

With a calm expression, Karlheinz remarked, "You know, you fought bravely despite your concentration being clearly shattered."

In answer, Noah closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. He took a moment before he said, "Thank you very much."

"I'd wager the day isn't far when you'll surpass me. For the time being, I suggest you focus on strengthening your upper body in your training."

Noah rose and bowed his head at Karlheinz. He erased the magic sword while replaying their bout just now in his mind to analyze the cause of his defeat. Meanwhile, Karlheinz tossed a towel to him.

"I'm assuming this is about Her Highness?"

Noah frowned before quickly smoothing out his expression and responding dispassionately. "I...suppose. But my worries are my own. I know very well she's capable of protecting herself."

"Oh, is that so?"

"And as far as her being betrothed..."

Noah knew Karlheinz had his own thoughts on that matter. Anticipating the man's comments, he defiantly took the initiative himself to broach the topic.

"Well, that's *her* decision. Whatever future she chooses of her own volition, my role is to support her. Nothing more, nothing less."

"When it concerns matters of matrimony for royalty, those involved are rarely asked for their input. All the more so for a princess."

"You're wrong," Noah retorted, fingers tightly squeezing the towel.

"Regardless of the circumstances, my lady would never agree to a political marriage, so...if she chooses to have Prince Lewis by her side, that in itself speaks to her own resolve."

Karlheinz reflected on those words, saying nothing in response.

From the moment Noah chose to cast aside his true identity and live as Claudia's servant, he had lost the right to meddle in her affairs. He knew this truth and had prepared himself for it.

"Besides, what worries me isn't anything along these lines, Lord Karlheinz. I... I think she's hiding something. *That* is what troubles me."

"Her Highness is always secretive, which is nothing new. After all, despite her unfathomable power, she hardly ever reveals it."

Even so, Noah pondered in silence.

My lady has many secrets, but they all concern people other than me.

Noah was well aware of this. Claudia only ever confided her secrets and lies to him. That was precisely why it bothered him on the extremely rare occasions she *did* keep something from him.

Karlheinz sighed as he stared down at the brooding boy. "Hmm... If *you* think something is wrong, then something must be."

"Lord Karlheinz, I..."

Noah paused then. Karlheinz had, of course, noticed a particular presence as well. The two turned around at the same time. In this corner of Klingate Castle, a lone figure emerged from behind a hedge that marked the edge of the garden.

"Hello, Noah."

"Your Highness."

It was the silver-haired boy with eyes the color of daybreak, shifting from blue to red. Prince Lewis smiled gently at him and strode briskly toward him.

"Lord Karlheinz, hello to you as well. I apologize for interrupting you both."

"Think nothing of it, Your Highness. Pardon us for making such unseemly displays of ourselves during our training."

Noah followed Karlheinz's lead and bowed his head too. Lewis, however, only chuckled ruefully in response.

"Please, raise your heads. I'm the one in the way here, so pray don't concern yourselves."

"Rest assured that we just finished the day's regimen," Karlheinz said. "If you're searching for Her Highness, she's currently taking a nap. Perhaps I could be of assistance?"

"No. I came for Noah, not Claudia."

Noah quietly lifted his face at the unexpected mention of his name. "How may I help you?"

"After Claudia and I talked, I realized I wanted to ask you a favor. For you see...she praised you as an incredibly strong magician." Lewis's gentle smile didn't waver as he spoke. "Won't you pit yourself against me, Noah?"

"Do you mean in a match?" Baffled, Noah narrowed his eyes. There had been no hesitation whatsoever in Lewis's words.

"I'm learning swordplay as well and I'd like to test my skill against yours in a bout."

Though he was a bit surprised, Noah didn't let it show on his face. The first thing he did was ask his teacher, who held the authority as the adult chaperone for their entourage on this visit to Klingate.

"Lord Karlheinz?"

His hand still on his chest as he stood at attention in the presence of the prince, Karlheinz answered calmly, "I have no objection since the request comes directly from His Highness himself."

"Thank you very much. What do you say, Noah?"

Only one choice lay before Noah now that Karlheinz had given his permission.

"I'll seek Her Highness's approval next and return shortly."

Lewis's eyes widened ever so slightly before a soft laugh fell from his lips. "Claudia is asleep, yes? I don't intend our fight, such as it is, to be something grand. I simply ask for a bit of your time in indulging my selfish whim..."

"Be that as it may, Your Highness..." Noah returned the towel to Karlheinz and

continued in no uncertain terms. "My soul, my body, everything that I am belongs to the princess."

Lewis made a surprised sound at the declaration. Evidently, Noah wasn't the one in charge of his own freedom.

"I simply cannot use Her Highness's property without her permission.

Therefore, I hope you understand this is the only way for us to proceed if you're earnest about our bout, Your Highness."

He executed a neat bow at the end. Lewis's exhale indicated he did, in fact, understand.

"I...see." As a royal, it would have been perfectly acceptable for him to take offense at such words uttered by a mere servant. Instead, the young prince apologized for his impoliteness. "Forgive me for saying something so impertinent when I had no notion of the relationship between you and Claudia."

"There's no need at all to apologize, Your Highness."

"Oh, but there is. I'm asking you to act on my behalf. Ergo, it falls on me to ask for her permission on this matter. I'll go."

Rather than losing his temper, Lewis acknowledged Noah's words and acquiesced to his judgment.

"Well then, shall we reconvene at a later time to avoid waking Claudia from her nap?"

Noah didn't reply right away as an image of Claudia, her lips pinched in a feigned display of displeasure after an enjoyable nap, surfaced in his mind.

"Goodness, Noah! How could you not rouse me from my nap when something interesting is happening? You naughty boy. You become the star of the show every time I leave you alone. Moving forward, I believe I shall drag you into bed with me when it's my nap time. That should solve all of our problems, don't you think?"

Though the scene played out in his head, he could nevertheless vividly recall her voice. He exhaled quietly and murmured, almost talking to himself, "I'm

under strict orders to inform Her Highness of such events without delay, even if they hinder her slumber."

Lewis made a questioning noise in reply before the light dawned in his eyes. And so, the two boys, accompanied by Karlheinz, headed to the guest room in which Claudia slept.

\*

Awake, Claudia sleepily rubbed her eyes even as she listened to Noah. Lewis and Karlheinz were waiting outside in the corridor. Once he finished telling her everything, he waited expectantly for her response. Her eyes, a veritable rainbow of colors like crushed jewels, twinkled enthusiastically.

"How marvelous!"

Gah...

Noah grimaced inside at the sight of her blindingly happy expression. As for the girl herself, beaming, she picked up the cup of tea he'd prepared for her.

"You're always training with me and Karlheinz—or my brothers on occasion. I dearly wish for you to gain all sorts of experience, so yes! Do your best in your bout against him."

"As you wish... Thank you very much."

"I think I'd like to wear a large hat while I spectate! Perhaps I should take snacks as well. I would wager Karlheinz is also looking forward to seeing his favorite pupil test his mettle against a new opponent."

"Princess." Noah glanced briefly over his shoulder to the closed door. Karlheinz and Lewis were supposedly still waiting on the other side.

"I intend to lose, so I don't think you'll enjoy yourself watching us."

But he remembered something then.

Prince Lewis is a marriage candidate for Her Highness. In order to determine whether he'd be a suitable fiancé, she must definitely want to see his magic.

Dark emotions clouded his heart, but his expression remained composed. He knew his place as a servant, and it wasn't one from which he could counsel her

on the things she wanted to experience for herself.

Claudia moved the teacup away from her lips and questioned him, lost as he was in his thoughts.

"Oh dear, why would you do such a thing?"

He twitched when he realized her clear eyes watched him steadily. Then he responded quietly, "He is a prince to whom you may find yourself affianced. It simply wouldn't do for a manservant such as myself to behave improperly during our bout."

"Goodness, how boring. If you're going to do this, I see no need for such tactless reserve. As one who serves Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz, the second princess of Avianoia, you have a *duty* to give the fight your all."

She made the teacup disappear using magic and bestowed a lovely smile upon him. "You have my permission to win, my Noah."

Power surged inside him, making him shudder. He curled his fingers into tight fists. Her words always gave him the push he needed. Noah expelled a short breath before lowering his head deferentially.

"I'm grateful for the honor you've conferred, my lady." Then he knelt on the carpet and swore to her. "You won't regret this. My victory will be for you."

She chuckled in delight. "What a good boy. I look forward to it."

\*

After their discussion, Noah had made his preparations, including a change of clothes, to present himself as impeccably as possible in front of the prince. Now he stood in the place where the two of them would spar. The training area, located in a corner of Klingate's royal castle, was a grassy space surrounded by hedges. He took a deep breath, readjusting his gloves. An excited Claudia was nearby hugging a plush toy dog.

"Lord Lewis, you know how to use a sword too?" she asked.

"I've done my fair share of practice, but I wonder if I have a talent for it. I'd say I'm more accustomed to using magic."

"Oh! It's dangerous, so make sure to cast warding magic, all right? On both

yourself and Noah, please!"

Lewis chuckled and nodded. "I'll do just that. My warding magic isn't quite up to snuff yet, but it should do well enough... Noah."

A flash of light encircled Noah. It molded itself into a barrier before vanishing almost at once.

"This brand of warding magic blocks physical attacks. I've cast the same thing on myself, which means neither of us need restrain ourselves, hmm?"

"I...am very much obliged by your consideration."

Regardless of Lewis's and Claudia's opinions, hurting a foreign prince in a fight would cause serious trouble. However, if Lewis himself was to create a barrier for both of them, then any resulting injuries would be because Lewis, renowned as a magical prodigy, had failed to erect a proper barrier. This should prevent any public outcry in the event of an unforeseen incident.

I don't know why Lewis even suggested this match. But...

Eyes closed, Noah inhaled deeply. As he slowly released his breath, he opened his eyes and stared intently at the other boy.

My lady instructed me to give it my all, and that's exactly what I'll do.

He cast a short spell to generate his sword. Lewis's eyes widened at the sight.

"Incredible. You can produce something from nothing with so few words?"

The truth is, I don't even need to say the incantation.

But he had deliberately said it aloud because casting his magic silently would attract unwanted attention in this particular situation.

Since the era of Adelheid five centuries prior, not a single person had existed in this world capable of casting magic without chanting.

He faced Lewis and bowed as protocol dictated, the way Karlheinz had taught him.

"Whatever the outcome of this bout, I thank you for the opportunity."

"And I as well."

Lewis, who'd accepted the sword proffered by his servant, bowed to Noah in the same manner.

With her stuffed toy on her lap, Claudia sat on an outdoor chair under the shade of a white parasol. Her eyes on them, she cheered, "Do your best, Noah!"

Of course I will, considering you ordered me to.

Lewis held up his slender blade and smiled at Noah.

"At your leisure...is what I'd like to say, but would it be easier on you if I attacked first, hmm? En garde, Noah."

He immediately rushed toward Noah on light feet. Noah sucked in a startled breath at how instantaneously he'd closed the gap between them.

He's fast.

A whoosh of air and a split second later, Noah found the tip of Lewis's sword before his very eyes. He swayed back to evade it, then parried the blade from below. There was a metallic *klang*, followed by Lewis quickly retreating.

Noah swiftly recovered his balance and used that momentum to raise his sword high. Since Lewis had already taken a high guard stance, he swung his blade down without hesitation.

"Ngh...!"

Klang! The two swords clashed again. The shock of their blows wasn't very strong because of their childish strength. But they both made up for the lack in physical strength with the lightness of their bodies, which allowed them to move nimbly.

Noah shifted his center of gravity and deftly pulled his sword back. He thrust at Lewis once more, then another time. The smiling prince parried each of his strikes even as a slight frown formed on his face.

"Such precise swings..."

I can say the same of you.

He had waited for the right moment to swing his sword, but Lewis easily deflected his blade. As expected of someone who challenged him in

swordsmanship—magic wasn't the only skill in which he excelled.

He isn't using cheap tricks. His talent with the blade is real. He has technique, and his reaction time is almost instant.

Noah regularly practiced his swordsmanship with his teacher, Karlheinz. Sometimes, Claudia's eldest brother, Wilhelm, would accost him and refuse to let him go until Noah sparred with him to Wilhelm's satisfaction. However, Karlheinz handled most of his training, so it was a refreshing change of pace for him to duel Lewis, who was neither a curse to deal with nor his usual opponent.

What would happen if I tried something different?

He waited until Lewis lost his balance to deliver a strike close to a thrust.

"Ngh!"

Lewis dodged at the last second and clamped his hand around Noah's wrist. Just as he was about to swing his own blade down on Noah's wrist, Noah wrenched it from his grasp. The moment Lewis realized he couldn't hold Claudia's servant down, he changed tactics. He immediately leaped back to create distance between them. His ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances fascinated Noah.

He's good at this... Very good.

Claudia's oldest brother would sometimes adopt an experimental strategy out of a desire to "test out my plan just once," even if it meant throwing away the possibility of winning. Then there was Karlheinz. Perhaps because he was an adult, he didn't feel the need to be so obsessive. And the judgment Lewis had demonstrated just now seemed closer to Karlheinz's calmness than to Noah or Claudia's brother, who were both around the same age as the prince.

I'd like to draw this out and see more of what he can do, but...

Noah exhaled sharply before going on the offensive for the first time. His sudden lunge startled Lewis.

I have to make my move before the princess grows bored.

He quickly rushed within arm's reach of Lewis and readied his sword. When he tried to drive its hilt into Lewis's solar plexus, the warding magic created a barrier made of white light and blocked his weapon at the last second.

"Ugh..."

Even so, Lewis felt the impact of the attack spread throughout his body. While the prince grimaced, Noah took only a half step back. Lewis shouted when he realized what was about to happen, but it was already too late.

"No...!"

Noah's blade arced toward his neck.

"Enough. I declare the match over."

At the sound of Karlheinz's voice, Noah abruptly cut off the momentum of his swing. His sword stopped just before it would have activated the warding magic.

"Thank you very much," Noah said after a long pause.

A bead of sweat rolled down Lewis's temple. The prince exhaled mightily and smiled. "You really *are* strong, Noah."

"I... It was an honor for me as well to face you in combat."

Noah lowered his sword too before bowing his head deeply. That was when he realized he gripped his sword much more tightly than necessary. Evidently, he had been more absorbed in the fight than he'd thought.



"You're both amazing!"

They heard the sound of tiny hands clapping, followed by Claudia herself skipping toward them on her dainty feet. When she reached them, Noah knelt before her. She rubbed his head.

"Good boy, Noah. Very well done, indeed."

He closed his eyes in silence, basking in her words. "Though I'm undeserving of such praise, I nevertheless thank you for it."

"Tee hee." She spun around and walked toward Lewis next. "Lord Lewis, you were incredible too!"

"Ha ha! Yet I'm no match for Noah. I fear I've shown you an unattractive side of me."

"No! Not at all! Listen to this. The only one in Avianoia who can fight Noah for more than a minute is Karlheinz!"

"Truly? All the more reason for me to devote myself diligently to swordplay." Then he, too, knelt down and took her hand with a smile. "Will you support me in my endeavor, Claudia?"

"I will! Good luck, Lord Lewis!"

"Thank you."

Lewis's smile broadened, like a flower blooming. The happiness in him seemed to well from the bottom of his heart. He stared at her fondly, as if having finally obtained the greatest treasure he'd been awaiting impatiently for years.

Noah couldn't help but watch the tableau play out in brooding silence.

A few seconds later, he came to his senses with a gasp.

"Noooah."

He took a beat to respond.

"Yes, my lady?"

Claudia had come back to him and now held out both hands. Understanding

her unspoken demand, he picked her up, for Noah's duty as her manservant was to fulfill her wishes.

With her head now a smidge higher than his, she peered down into his face.

"Princess?"

She didn't respond.

The hue of her eyes now was an extremely pale gold, the color of citrine. She usually concealed their true shade, the same one as the legendary witch she'd been, while playing the role of a young child. But sometimes, he caught glimpses of the captivating woman on her face, an expression she couldn't always hide.

And this was one of those moments.

With the sun casting a halo on her from behind, Claudia observed him thoughtfully before an obliquely meaningful smile spread on her lips. "Hmmm..."

"Dare I ask...?"

He wondered what exactly she was thinking as she studied him. Despite his desire to ask, her expression wasn't one an eight-year-old princess would show. Noah decided they couldn't have this conversation in front of Lewis, so he proposed the following instead to Claudia.

"My lady, the weather is warmer than we anticipated today. Might I suggest you change into a more suitable dress?"

With this, they could excuse themselves for a short time from Lewis's company. She gently stroked his head, like she was praising him. However, a moment later, she shook her head.

"Nooo! I won't change!"

Noah made a confused sound in his throat and put her down on the ground when she gestured for him to do so.

"I'm going to eat more cake with Lord Lewis!"

"Oh? Well, I'm glad to hear the confections were to your liking."

"I was sooo full earlier, I couldn't eat any of the chocolate cake. But I will this time!"

"Ha ha! Excellent choice. I'll have my staff prepare it right away. Noah...you should join us too."

Noah inclined politely at the gently smiling prince.

"I appreciate the sentiment. However, I will assist with the teatime preparations."

He narrowed his eyes at his mistress's profile as she cheerfully sang about cake.

\*

"No... No, no, no, this is all wrong!"

In the frozen, silvery garden, Stuart mixed paint in a frenzy. Doing it this way damaged the brush tips. He knew it, but he had no real target for his frustration, so his irritation triumphed over reason.

"There's nothing remotely lovely about this. It's so far from perfect..."

A large wall depicted the figure of a lone woman. Hair the color of milk tea and pale-gold eyes like liquid honey—the image of her was seared into his mind, haunting him relentlessly.

"Lady Adelheid..."

Just the simple act of whispering her name elicited a surge of joy and power from deep in his heart.

"A transcendent beauty such as hers is exactly what my garden needs. And yet... If only I can finish it this time, then perhaps I can be saved. Alas, this just won't do."

He clutched his chest where his heart lay through the layers of clothing covering him.

"My skills aren't enough to lock Lady Adelheid away in the painting."

Then his vacant eyes flickered, gazing at somewhere far away. Somewhere that wasn't here.

"Lady Adelheid... I beg you to grant me salvation..."

## **Chapter 3**

Once the formal dinner ended in Klingate, Claudia and Noah accompanied Karlheinz when he used his teleportation magic. His destination was Avianoia, Claudia's homeland. While Karlheinz had returned to report to her father, her aim was different.

"Brothers, Sister, I'm hooome."

"Whoa! Claudia, where'd you come from?!"

Her sudden appearance startled her eldest brother, Wilhelm. His eyes widened at the sight of her peeking in. Their father called this place the "children's room," which her brothers and sister used whenever they played inside the castle.

All three of them seemed to have gathered inside after dinner ended. Her older siblings sat around a large table. Wilhelm stood up from his chair and welcomed his youngest sister, who had come to visit them at this hour in the night.

Now twelve years old, Wilhelm was even taller than before, taller than Noah too. By all appearances, he would fill out even more as time passed. Since he spent every day outside training in the use of magic, the sun had darkened his skin a bit despite his magical protection.

A fierce resolve shone in the almond-shaped eyes of his well-sculpted face, yet this boy overflowing with a strong sense of justice showed the utmost kindness to those younger than him. He had crouched down to put himself at Claudia's eye level as she peeked into the room.

"What's the matter? Aren't you supposed to be in Klingate until next week?"

"Listen, listen. I reeeally wanted to see my beloved big brothers and big sister after Lord Lewis played with me."

"Claudia..."

"So! I came to see you before bath time!"

She felt Noah's pointed stare from next to her as she answered Wilhelm with the cutest expression she could muster, but Claudia ignored him and continued her performance as the perfect ingenue.

"Ahhh, I understand now. You were lonely without us? You're still such a child, Claudia, even though you're already eight years old. Everything is fine over there, though, yes? No one's bullying you? Tell me straightaway if anything happens."

"Tee hee hee. Don't worry! Lord Lewis is very kind!"

Her older sister sighed when she saw Wilhelm affectionately rub Claudia's head. "You understand nothing, Brother."

"Big Sister Emi!"

Claudia's older sister, Emilia, idly ran her fingers through her red hair as she gazed at their eldest brother.

The girl, eleven years old just like Noah, used to wear her hair in ponytails. About a year ago, though, she had switched to a more mature half-up, half-down coif. The new style looked particularly charming on her naturally wavy hair as it created a lovely balance between the neat braid and the soft, flowing locks.

Whenever she blinked, her long, sloping eyelashes swept down languorously over her eyes, giving her an ephemeral aura. Coupled with her breathtaking snow-white complexion, she had grown into a gossamer beauty. Nonetheless, the words spilling from her rosy lips were a testament to her strong-willed personality.

"You do realize this is *Claudia* we're discussing? It stands to reason she has Klingate's prince wrapped around her little finger."

"Emilia, you hypocrite. Out of us all, *you* are the one who spoils her the most..."

Wilhelm spoke only the truth. When once before she had ostracized her younger sister and even tried to kill her, Emilia now doted on her unreservedly.

"Of course. How could I not when she's so adorable?"

"I think you're the cutest, Emi!"

"Oh, stop it, Claudia..."

Emilia bounded off her chair and rushed to Claudia to scoop her up into a tight hug.

"In any case, I'm worried. Since you're such an angel, there's a chance the nation of Klingate will simply decide to keep you and never let you return..."

"Emilia, please, as if something so wildly unrealistic would ever occur."

"Don't you dismiss me, Ehrenfried."

Utterly disinterested, Claudia's second-oldest brother propped his chin on his hand and arranged the playing pieces on the table. His gorgeous golden hair rippled at the slightest movement. The same age as Emilia and Noah, he seemed a bit miffed that not only was he *not* as tall as Claudia's manservant, he hadn't even surpassed their half sister in height.



However, his slender frame and delicate features merely further emphasized Ehrenfried's intelligence. His magic research, in a field different from Claudia's specialty, was well regarded, and he'd received offers to study abroad from many countries. He hadn't yet accepted any of them with his reason being "I'm weighing the most advantageous choice for our nation." But to her, it appeared as if he simply didn't want to be parted from his siblings. Despite that, when in their company, he frequently acted indifferent.

"The people of Klingate aren't imbeciles. Regardless of Claudia's charm, it's a given they'll show the utmost courtesy to her so as to avoid making an enemy of our country," he said.

"You don't know that for certain! For all we know, their prince may be an outrageous villain who imprisons Claudia by placing her into a magical sleep!"

Noah did his very best not to let his shock show on his face. Emilia jabbed a finger in his direction.

"Noah! I'm sure you of all people understand what's at stake, so make sure to protect Claudia, hmm?"

"Of course. Even if it means my own life."

"Excellent."

The Emilia of today had evidently relinquished her romantic feelings for him. When Emilia had been allowed to visit her mother, the former queen consort, Claudia had stealthily followed, wanting to see for herself how her older sister fared. She hadn't lingered too long, but the few moments of observation had been enough to tell her that the girl was well as she spent her time laughing with former Queen Irmela. She'd quietly left them alone once she'd satisfied her curiosity.

Thanks to the information we obtained from Irmela, we've been able to locate all manner of magical instruments in countries around the world used to deploy curses. All that's left is for the various peoples themselves to recover steadily from each curse's brainwashing.

Even as the thoughts whirled through her mind, Claudia said, "Noah, let's sit. Come here!"

"No, thank you. I'm fine where I am."

"Don't be like that, Noah. No need to literally stand on formality when the adults aren't around," Wilhelm insisted.

"Thank you very much for your consideration. However, should something suddenly occur, I won't be able to defend Her Highness from a seated position."

Wilhelm's eyes widened momentarily at his response, and then he grinned. "All right, I'll respect your wishes. Claudia, can you sit by yourself?"

"Booo... Noah, you stubborn blockhead!"

Claudia's right cheek puffed huffily as she lifted herself into a chair. She'd deliberately chosen the one next to Ehrenfried's because he was the real reason she'd returned to Avianoia.

"Brother Ehren, Brother Ehren. I have a question for you! Lady Adelheid had looots of disciples, right?"

"She did indeed, Claudia."

Ehrenfried was incredibly well-read when it concerned magic. One of his favorite topics was Adelheid. He knew more about the woman and her legacy on the world after her death than even Claudia herself.

Earlier this evening, she'd been talking to Noah about this very subject while sipping tea in her guest room in Klingate Castle.

"One of my disciples, a young man, excelled at warding magic."

She'd dreamed about him only yesterday.

"His name was Sewell. He had silver hair and was prone to shutting himself in his room."

"Silver hair..."

"Stuart's garden reminds me of Sewell. The barrier he erected to protect his domain was impeccable, and Stuart himself perfectly erased all traces of his presence."

"Well, concealing yourself falls under the category of warding magic, doesn't

She nodded and gently shook her teacup, watching the little ripples on the tea's surface. "Lewis said that Klingate's first king was one of my disciples. Yet he also mentioned no one remembers his name."

"And you believe this Sewell is the one?"

"I wonder. Either way, I want to know the truth of his identity. For if he was the founder of Klingate, then that would make the sleeping princesses his descendants."

Memories of her pupils surfaced in Claudia's mind then.

"Even now I can recall each of their magical natures perfectly. And I think the best way to awaken the princesses from their slumbers is to use their own magic to help them."

That conversation had led her to this visit with Ehrenfried.

"Ehren, did you know, did you know? That Klingate's first king was one of Adelheid's disciples!"

"Wait, really? Are you sure, Claudia?"

She beamed in response to his wide-eyed stare. "It's true! Lord Lewis himself told me!"

"Wow..." Ehrenfried pressed a hand to his mouth, his attitude a mixture of frustration and excitement. "Claudia, that might be a secret of their royal family."

"What do you mean?"

"At the very least, none of the literature I've scoured mentions anything about Klingate's first king being Adelheid's disciple or any of them winding up in that part of the world...!"

Wilhelm, chin braced in his hand on the table, frowned when he heard his brother's explanation. "Isn't this Lewis person just lying, then? To show off in front of Claudia."

"It's possible. But all the rumors say he's a sensible, intelligent prince. I can't really see the merit in lying on purpose..." Ehrenfried said. He turned to Noah, silently asking him for his opinion.

Noah obeyed. "I also think there's little need for His Highness to lie in such a way. Although, one thing has been bothering me based on what the princess told me."

"Go on, Noah. Tell him."

"The rumors are correct about his wisdom and intelligence, for he excels academically too. With that in mind, then...would someone like him actually say he 'forgot' the name of his country's first king?"

"That's...hard to imagine, isn't it?" Ehrenfried commented thoughtfully. "I could understand the general populace not knowing, but a prince, a direct descendant of the man? Doubtful indeed."

"It would make sense if he was deliberately concealing the information instead of having forgotten it. Therefore...your speculation about it being the royal family's secret doesn't seem so far-fetched to me..."

When she heard Noah's remarks, Emilia's expression changed.

"Claudia! You mustn't tell anyone what Prince Lewis told you. Otherwise, something terrible may happen to you as a means of silencing you!"

"Noah and I will protect her so nothing like that happens. Right, Noah?" Wilhelm said.

"Of course, Your Highness," Noah replied matter-of-factly.

Hmmm...

Claudia pondered to herself as the others erupted into conversation, making a fuss over her.

Even Ehren doesn't know if Klingate's first king was a disciple of Adelheid's, much less which one... As expected, the more I think about this, the deeper the mystery grows...

Then she exhaled deeply.

But it's clear what I ought to do.

Climbing down from her chair, she spoke to her brothers and sister. "Down we go! I'm sleepy, so I'm going to go now!"

"Make sure you bathe first, Claudia. It's only good manners."

"Noah will make me squeaky clean with his magic! Ehren, I challenge you to a race. Who can find the first king's name faster? Will it be you? Or will it be me?!"

Then she skipped to Noah and waved at her siblings while clinging to his arm.

"Goood night!"

"Claudia, you little hoyden, there's no need for you to rush like this," Wilhelm protested.

"Please excuse us."

Noah lifted her in his arms and chanted the command to activate his transfer magic. Instantly, they returned to her guest room in Klingate. Despite obeying her command without question, he was still surprised by her sudden action.

"Princess, what in the world...? No. No, don't tell me." He frowned unconsciously as he seemingly surmised her intent. "You...want to do this *now*, don't you?"

"I expected nothing less of you, Noah. Not only are you exceedingly clever but also exceedingly perceptive."

"Ugh."

A light *pop* sounded, and then smoke filled the space around them. Once it dissipated, they stood there in their adult forms.

"The truth is, I actually determined the princesses' exact location some time ago."

"And...your plan is to infiltrate it in these forms?"

"Well, it would certainly create diplomatic issues if we were discovered in our original ones. Can you imagine the fallout of an Avianoian princess and her manservant skulking around because they wanted to meet Klingate's sleeping

princesses, whose very state is a blot on the country's existence?"

Chuckling softly, she placed a long, slim finger on her lips in a shushing gesture. Noah pressed a now adult-sized hand to his forehead with a deep sigh.

"You know Lord Karlheinz will scold us for leaving without him."

"Oh, he'll only be angry with me, so don't you worry on that score, Noah."

When she smiled sunnily at him, resignation settled over his face.

"No... No, I'll take the blame with you. Because, in the end, I followed you of my own free will."

"Tee hee."

\*

Claudia removed her gloves to use her teleportation magic and linked her bare fingers with Noah's. He stared down awkwardly at her as they stood there face-to-face. Even as he questioned her, he couldn't look her in the eyes.

"Tell me—when and how exactly did you discover the victims' location?"

"Tee hee. Wouldn't you like to know?" She giggled as she stared up at him and interlocked their fingers tightly. "I'll explain the theory to you later. Now then, let's be on our way."

Their bodies floated as the magic activated. In the next moment, Claudia and Noah found themselves in a place inside a barrier.

"This is..."

Noah looked up at the building in front of them. Made of stone, the tower standing alone in the night appeared quite sturdy. From their vantage point directly below, the top of the tower was far, far above. A frown marred his brow as he counted the number of windows.

"Ten floors. That's incredibly tall."

"Well, our tower home stands at eleven, which means I win."

"What precisely are you competing against...?" Once he touched the stone wall, he said, "It doesn't appear to have been made through magic. Human hands built this tower."

"You truly are an outstanding student, Noah, to be able to discern that much."

"I wouldn't want to bring shame on you as my teacher, so it's only natural that I study diligently."

Though he spoke candidly, only a bit over two years had passed since Noah became her manservant. His remarkable growth over such a short period of time was proof of his decidedly extraordinary effort and talent.

"Might you make a light? Then we can go inside."

"Understood," he said with a sigh, not wanting Claudia to step foot inside the tower. However, this particular manservant always carried out her wishes faithfully.

"I'll lead the way. Please make sure to save your energy, my lady."

"I leave myself in your capable hands, Noah. Off we go now."

She took one of the lanterns he produced. He undid the lock on the door using his magic, and they quietly slipped in.

It was ice-cold and pitch-black inside the tower. Standing in front of Claudia, Noah raised his lantern. Aside from the red carpet illuminated by the light, the interior was barren.

"It seems there's nothing on this floor, hmm..."

Her voice echoed just a bit. While Claudia and Noah showed no discomfort, some might have found the atmosphere incredibly ominous.

"I see stairs over there," he observed. "Would you mind if I took your hand?"

"Of course not."

She reached out to him as they headed toward the spiral staircase farther in.

"Please watch your step, my lady. Slowly, now, slowly."

"Tee hee. Thank you."

Even as she smiled at her worrywart of a servant, they quickly reached the second floor. But then he abruptly stopped in front of her, making it impossible for her to continue onward.

"Noah?"

Silence from him. She took a peek from behind his broad back.

"Oh, dear."

A humongous carpet covered the floor, same as the one on the first floor. What made this scene different from below was the furniture and the person atop it. However, the lone individual didn't notice them, cry out in surprise, or speak to them.

Because she was sleeping in a canopied bed.

"Noah."

Although he still said nothing, he understood her unspoken command to let her pass. He sighed quietly and squeezed her hand tightly in his. The way he held it told her more than words could of his determination to stay with her no matter what. Charmed by his attitude, she led him to the bed.

"Goodness... What a lovely princess."

The woman appeared to be around eighteen years of age and had thick, silver hair. Long eyelashes and a high nose bridge. Small lips and smooth contours. Her beauty was clear even in sleep. If not for the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, she could have been mistaken for an exquisitely crafted doll.

"I wonder if this is the princess who fell asleep first, eight years ago." Claudia stared quietly down at her. "Well...this is certainly a powerful curse, hmm?"

The innocence in her sleeping face broke Claudia's heart. She hoped all the princesses' dreams were at least happy ones.

Frowning, Noah held the lantern high in his right hand while touching the bed with his left.

"The sheets are dry. I can't feel any moisture in the air either. Klingate is supposed to be more humid than Avianoia during this season. Considering the closed-off state of this stone tower, I'm inclined to think that someone visits regularly to change the sheets and whatnot."

"Unlike you, who always change my bedsheets every time I take a nap, and not just during humid periods."

"I use magic, so it isn't a particularly taxing task. Not to mention it's only natural that I would want you to rest in the most comfortable conditions, my lady." He tightened his grip on the lantern before continuing. "It makes me wonder if whoever is taking care of things here is doing so for the same reason as me."

"Well, it certainly is hard to imagine maids traipsing in and out of here. This situation is one the royal family would not want exposed to the outside world. After all, I heard rumors of this curse by attending banquets open only to royals from around the world."

Claudia had taken on her adult form for those social functions.

"Since we were able to learn of this curse, it must have been difficult to suppress every bit of hearsay and gossip. Even so, it still isn't widely known." She knelt by the bed. "I'm sorry. I won't touch you for very long, all right?"

Uttering those words softly, she gently cupped the sleeping woman's cheek.

"I sense Sewell's magic."

Noah sighed at her murmur. "Then your guess was on the mark about this country's first king."

She paused for a long moment before saying anything more.

"As a general rule, the only way to forcibly lift a curse is to destroy either the magical instrument of the curse or an embodiment of the curse itself. However, if I can successfully connect my magic to Sewell's, I may be able to use it to wake them up."

Claudia closed her eyes and searched for the thread of his magic.

"Sewell."

An image of him surfaced in her mind. She called to him, waving her hand invitingly. The silver-haired youth turned around. Just as he reached out toward her, his gesture mirroring hers, it happened.

She gasped. Something repelled her with a *snap*. Claudia jerked her hand back reflexively and blinked repeatedly. Noah had pulled her toward him immediately. He scrutinized her now.

"My lady, were you just...?"

"Yes. I was rejected."

With that mutter, she gazed down at her own fingertips. The stinging, faintly numbing sensation was concentrated near her nails.

Sewell's magic rejected me?

When she narrowed her eyes, Noah gently wrapped his hand around hers.

"Noah."

"Does it hurt?"

His earnest expression affected her deeply. It told her that his worry and care for her came from the bottom of his heart. Noah's rugged, manly fingers carefully stroked her smooth fingertips, almost like he was tracing them.

"I wish I could use healing magic."

Healing magic had also been a weak point for Reinard, his ancestor. Both his and Noah's obsidian eyes reflected their affinity for dark magic, which made them incompatible with light magics such as healing and protection.

He looks like a sad puppy.

Claudia tittered and patted his head. "I'm fine, Noah. It doesn't hurt and even if it did, 'tis trivial."

"So you say." His jet-black eyes gazed down straight into hers. "But...it seemed to me as if you were in pain."

She closed her eyes briefly before replying, "It wasn't pain but sadness."

"I...am here for you."

A smile bloomed unbidden at his words. "I know. And that's why I'm fine."

Two years ago, he'd promised to always stay by her side. Noah had stayed true to his word since then. Now she squeezed his hand and tilted her lantern in the direction she wanted to go.

"Let's go to the next floor. There may be another woman I can awaken."

After that, the two of them climbed to each floor to verify her theory. The

refreshingly beautiful princess on the next floor had silver hair that skimmed her shoulders. Claudia could feel Sewell's magic from her as well. But this time, too, it rejected her, and she failed to wake the princess.

The same happened with the third and fourth princesses. And nothing changed after their arrival on the ninth floor where the eighth slumbered.

"This isn't working, is it? I can read the flow of his magic, but I can't seize it."

"Do you think there's some sort of ward in place?"

"Something similar, I believe, but strictly speaking, it seems different."

Noah stared at Claudia protectively as she mulled the problem over in her mind.

The sleeping girl, around sixteen years old, was Lewis's relative who belonged to a ducal lineage. Her falling into slumber six months ago had triggered the rumors of this country's curse, which had reached Claudia's ears.

"Apparently, all the girls and young ladies of royal blood in Klingate are afraid. They know not if or when they'll be the next one afflicted by the 'illness.'"

"So, who knows this isn't an illness but a curse that casts its victims into an eternal sleep, making them no better than dolls...?"

"I would imagine only His Majesty and the few he trusts. And of course, the caretaker of this tower..."

Noah went on high alert then, silently pulling her behind him protectively. He immediately produced his sword and held it at the ready. With a crackling noise, ice began to form in front of him.

"This is..."

In the blink of an eye, the mass of ice grew so large it almost reached the ceiling. Claudia, too, looked up at it.

This wasn't normal ice. Sporting legs, a torso, arms, and a head, it was a brutish ice sculpture.

"An ice golem."

The minute the words left her lips, the golem turned toward them and raised

an arm.

"The impact will be tremendous if it lands a hit," Claudia warned Noah as he held his sword at the ready. "Wait a moment, Noah. I'll cast warding magic on you."

"I don't need it." His tone changed then, becoming almost casual. "I just have to make sure it doesn't hit me."

He closed the distance between himself and the golem in a single bound. Aiming at Noah, the thing swung its arm, made of interlocking blocks of ice. The powerful strike came from far above his head. He managed to dodge the blow just in time.

Noah lifted his left hand as he maneuvered in an erratic pattern and unleashed a spell on the golem.

"Hellfire."

Fire erupted with a *whoosh* from a spot on the stone floor. Although the golem flinched for a second, it quickly recovered and stomped on the blaze. Scorching a massive ice sculpture didn't mean it would melt without a trace. Evidently, that wasn't Noah's aim anyway.

Does the golem possess intelligence?

In the next moment, the golem jerked its face back up, almost like it had come to its senses. Distracted by the fire, its weakness, it had taken its gaze off Noah, which was a mistake. Did that mean the golem was self-aware?

Noah launched himself off the stone floor and landed on its arm. It reacted immediately by trying to capture him with its free arm. Noah jumped again, easily evading its reach, then brandished his sword in front of the golem's head. He slashed at it, his blade horizontal.

Its attempt to grab Noah had already knocked it off-balance, so when its head flew off, it completely collapsed. *Boom*! The ice monstrosity crashed to the floor with that tremendous sound.

Noah landed on top of it, pointed the tip of his sword down, and plunged it into the golem's back. Thin cracks formed in the ice, shattering the thing into

pieces.

"Well done, Noah." Claudia clapped while he readjusted his grip on the sword.

"I still have a long way to go."

"Oh, pishposh."

Then she pointed her finger and twirled it. Suddenly, what had previously appeared to be just part of the stone wall peeled off, and a human appeared from within.

The golem had not in fact possessed any intelligence. Someone had been controlling it.

Upon seeing his silver hair, Noah murmured his name out loud: "Stuart."

"Eeek...!"

Stuart, Lewis's older brother and the master of the ice garden, crouched on the floor with his head clutched in his hands. His voice trembled as he spoke from his curled-up position.

"That voice... Are you the same one who trespassed...?! Why do you know my name...?!"

Instead of answering, Noah only grew warier, even more so than when the golem first appeared. "I'll handle him. Please withdraw, my lady."

"No. I'm staying."

Stuart's shoulders twitched the moment Claudia spoke. "Th-That beautiful voice...!"

Stuart lifted his face as Noah scowled. Hidden as she was behind him, Stuart shouldn't have been able to see her. The young man in question gazed at their feet.

"Those feet...! Slender ankles, pale skin. I know it's you..."

"Tsk."

Noah charged forward with his sword at the ready.

In the weak light of the lantern, the euphoria on Stuart's handsome face was clear. "My saint, Lady Adelheid...!"

Noah's sword slammed into the stone wall by Stuart.

"Gah!"

The elder prince of Klingate cowered as the wall shattered. Noah had likely meant his attack to only intimidate the young man. He jabbed the point of his blade at Stuart.

"Don't look at my mistress with those disgusting eyes."

"You... You invade my garden and then you do the same to this tower. Moreover, you have the nerve to tear me and Lady Adelheid apart again and again...!"

Muttering darkly to himself, Stuart chewed in frustration on his thumbnail.

Claudia sat down on a corner of the bed after politely informing the sleeping girl she would do so. Then she spoke to Noah's back.

"Leonhard, seize him without hurting him."

"Do I really need to be so considerate?"

"Good boys obey their masters' commands. Is that understood?"

He replied to her gentle chiding in a low tone, "As you wish, Lady Adelheid."

"Don't! Get! In! My! Way!"

Stuart raised both of his hands in Noah's direction, palms facing outward.

"Steel, protect me!"

With a *shing*, a wall of light appeared in front of him. The incredible density of his magic impressed Claudia.

A solid barrier despite the short incantation.

The precision of his magic definitely reminded her of Sewell, her disciple once upon a time.

Stuart's ward repelled Noah's sword swing. Lightning crackled around his blade, forcing Noah to squint against the brightness.

"Ha ha! You didn't strike me! Blocked by a barrier made by someone you despise! Serves you right...!"

Noah leaped back and regained his balance. His silence told her the wheels of his mind were turning. Stuart could tell he was at a loss in terms of strategy, which made him sigh in relief.

Then he turned his eyes back to Claudia, his voice agitated.

"Lady Adelheid! Please find it in your heart to forgive me for being such a shameful blight upon your eyes... No. No, it's impudent of me to even ask for your forgiveness. On the contrary, it would be the height of sin to even hope for you to punish me...!"

Noah glared quietly at Stuart. "Vermin like you have no right to speak to her."

"I know that better than anyone! Alas, I shall never again be blessed by such an opportunity, abandoned as I have been by fortune Herself. So even if I incur my saint's hatred, I simply can't let this chance slip through my fingers...!"

With those words, Stuart raised both hands again, palms pointed toward Claudia and Noah.

"Steel. Isolate."

The moment Noah sucked in a sharp breath, a light barrier formed in front of Claudia.

"Oh my."

She and Noah were now separated. Still seated on the bed, she gingerly stretched one foot forward. She felt a hard sensation when she brushed the tips of her toes against the barrier. Evidently, she was now trapped inside it.

Noah narrowed his eyes as he, too, came to the same realization. His hold on his sword remained firm.

Stuart pressed a hand to his chest, joy radiating from him.

"Now no one will stand in my way. I can finally gaze upon your beauty from nigh..." He took a step forward and murmured as if offering a prayer to the divine. "Please wait. I'll teleport myself to you right now..."

"Hmmm..."

Claudia pressed her index finger to her lips and tilted her head like a young child would.

"You've gone and done it now, Stuart."

"M-My name...!" He clutched feverishly at the fabric covering his chest. "And to address me without any titles! Though the honor is wasted on me, I nevertheless thank you. Please, won't you let me hear more of your voice...?"

Noah acted the moment Stuart tried to take another step.

"You don't say?"

His eyes were dark with rage as he pointed his sword at the prince. Stuart must have detected the sinister magical energy swirling in the weapon because his face paled in terror at the unfamiliar sight.

"Do you know why this child didn't break through your barrier earlier? Because I told him not to hurt you, and he obeyed my order."

"Y-You're lying... Perhaps he could have transferred himself inside my barrier, but *breaking* it? No, impossible. Absolutely, completely impossible. This magic is said to be our bloodline's magnum opus, passed down in the royal family for generations. Unthinkable..."

As he stood in front of Stuart, who muttered unintelligibly to himself, Noah raised his sword high. The skillful sword techniques he learned from Karlheinz every day and Claudia's instruction in the intricate use of magic were irrelevant in this moment. The only thing driving the vast quantities of magic pouring into his blade was a simple, overwhelming desire to destroy something, anything.

"Come out. Now." Noah's guttural voice matched his predatory gaze.

"It's a fatal mistake to show this child even a sliver of the potential to harm me," Claudia cautioned.

Stuart could only mewl pathetically in response.

Showing no hesitation, Noah thrust his blade through the barrier.

"Because if you do, my sweet manservant turns into a bad boy."

The next instant, Stuart's barrier shattered like a thick glass pane.

"Ngh...!"

Stuart reached out desperately for Claudia as he moaned in pain. However, she remained unmoving on the bed, her posture elegant. She only smiled at him.

"Lady...Adelheid..."

With that whisper, he crumpled to the stone floor.

Unimpressed by the sight, she eyed her servant's back.

"Oh, Noooah?"

Instead of replying, he slowly turned around. An awkward air cloaked him, perhaps because he realized he was in for a scolding. His attitude was akin to that of a guard dog who had knowingly disobeyed his master's command. She waved him over and forced him to kneel when he stood in front of her.

"Now tell me. Where has my good boy gone?"

He answered her deliberately pointed question with an expression vaguely reminiscent of a sulk.

"I...am very much still your 'good boy.' Just as you commanded, I didn't put a single scratch on Stuart."

"He's unconscious from the impact of having his barrier forcibly destroyed. I wouldn't exactly call that unhurt."

He frowned as he struggled to find the right words for her retort. Then, Noah finally lowered his head and murmured in a sincerely repentant tone.

"I am truly sorry."

She contemplated him in silence as she stared down at his hair whorl. Despite his lack of expression, he was very obviously dejected.

If I let it show on my face how utterly adorable I think he is, it won't do any good for his education...

She covered her mouth with one hand.

Goodness, what a conundrum. But he's just so damnably cute! Somehow, it feels like I can see the ears and tail of a downtrodden pup. Nevertheless...

Nevertheless, she must harden her heart right now. She fashioned an angry pout and folded her arms under her voluptuous chest.

"Your improved control over your magic is wasted by your lack of control over your emotions. Therefore, I bid you to remain loyal to the very end since you're already working so hard to be useful to me."

"I... It is as you say, my lady."

"As a punishment, you will have to endure being patted by me in your adult form. Understood?"

Noah tried to say something, but he thought better of it and silenced himself before slowly offering her his head. He despised being petted when they were both in this form. And that was exactly what made it a special form of punishment.

His hair now was coarser than in his original child form. Though she enjoyed stroking his soft hair, the springy texture in his current form had its own unique charm. She thoroughly delighted in spoiling him like this too.

Claudia smiled brightly as she enjoyed herself. "I see you've returned to your usual well-behaved self, Noah. Good boy, good boy."

"Ngh... My lady, if it pleases you, isn't this enough?"

"Not at all. Right, then...what should we do about Stuart?" While continuing to pat Noah with one hand, she stared at the unconscious youth. "We need to handle this tactfully, considering he's the prince of another country."

He met her remark with silence.

Even if they disguised themselves as adults and tried to move in secret, they would still be suspected. After all, as far as everyone was concerned, Claudia and her little entourage were still in Klingate on an official visit. If Stuart told anyone about this incident, there was a good chance doubt would immediately be cast on Claudia and Avianoia.

"Be that as it may, Stuart saw us in our adult forms on the very first day. But

that didn't pose much of a problem since his nature as a shut-in means his interactions with others are few and far between."

"However, even he won't remain silent about this hostile exchange."

Noah bowed his head again after saying his piece.

"Forgive me. This is a result of my failure."

"It's fine. I was considering simply forcing him to sleep and spiriting him away should he resist. Hmm... All right, I've made my decision."

Claudia stood up and crouched by the unconscious prince. Closing her eyes, she silently verified the magical energy flowing in him. It was the same examination she'd conducted on the princesses. After carefully tracing the magic, she slowly opened her eyes.

```
"I knew it."
```

"My lady?"

She stood up and shook off the skirt of her dress since the hem had brushed against the floor. Noah immediately walked to her side and used purification magic to restore the fabric to its pristine state.

"I want to talk to him, but I think it will be a while yet before he wakes."

"Then...what do you suggest we do? If healing magic doesn't work, we could dash cold water on his face."

"Healing magic won't do as he isn't physically hurt. We must also avoid magic that can be misconstrued as offensive magic, just in case we're exposed. So, our only option is..."

Claudia's lips curved prettily as she stared up at Noah.

"Abduction. What do you say?"

A long pause and then...

"What?"

\*

Evidently, it was a tradition in the country of Klingate to eat breakfast

together with family, even for those of noble birth. During her stay here, Claudia had taken to enjoying the morning meal every day with the members of the royal family in their luxurious dining hall.

This morning as well, she sat across from Lewis at the dining table. When the king was the last to enter the room, everyone greeted him accordingly.

"Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Lord King!"

"Yes, yes, a good morning to you both, Princess Claudia, Lewis."

Smiling, the king sat down in the chair his servant had pulled out for him. Then he addressed Claudia.

"Now, tell me, Claudia, did you sleep well last night too?"

"I did! I was sooo sleepy after eating dinner that I slept like a log! Isn't that right, Noah?"

"Indeed. I can personally attest to the princess's deep, restful sleep," he replied quietly as he stood by her side.

The truth was, they'd been awake late into the night, maneuvering behind the scenes. But that was a secret.

None the wiser of their escapades, Klingate's king naturally had no reason to doubt their words.

"Excellent. Lewis, I hear from my retainers you dedicated yourself to your swordplay and magical training as usual this morning. Well done."

The king's sunny expression was that of a good father. Lewis seemed positively tickled by his father's praise, but when he replied, he did so calmly, with no hint of conceit.

"All in a day's work, as they say, Father. Besides, my defeat at Noah's hands yesterday means I must strive even more if I am to win against him next time."

"Ha ha ha! I certainly would have enjoyed getting a close look myself at Claudia's outstanding manservant. I wager you put on quite a show, eh, Noah?"

"You honor me with your words, unworthy as I am of them, Your Majesty."

The king nodded in satisfaction before instructing his staff. "All right, let us eat. Ah..." He sighed quietly then, his sad gaze lingering on the empty seat next to Lewis. "I see Stuart won't leave his room today either."

For a moment, silence settled over the table. Noah glanced covertly at Claudia, who beamed happily as she pretended to be oblivious.

"Lewis, how did Stuart seem to you this morning?"

"As usual, there was no response from him. Since Brother has a tendency to stay up late, he's likely still asleep at this time."

Of course, he didn't answer you.

The thought flashed through Claudia's mind even as she said the prayer before meals.

Because Stuart isn't in his own room today. No, he's in Noah's.

And he'd been asleep since last night, when they had "kidnapped" him after Noah had rendered him unconscious.

"Right, then, we need to carry Stuart out of this tower and hide him. Goodness, look at those awful dark circles under his eyes."

A thoughtful hum resonated from Claudia as she scrutinized Stuart's face. It turned out his ever-present hangdog expression and hunched posture weren't the only reasons for his aura of unhealthiness.

"From the looks of him, I don't think he's been able to sleep well for a very long time. Perhaps I should help him with a bit of healing magic?" Claudia pondered.

"Such compassion is unnecessary in this case. If lack of sleep is the issue, why not simply let him rest now, considering his state?" Noah suggested.

"Hmm, fair point. Then I'll cast sleep magic on him instead. Here I go!"

"My lady, where should we move him?"

Noah looked rather displeased. With an "Oh, yes, good question," Claudia mulled it over while staring up at him.

"Regardless of Stuart's reclusive disposition, it's probably best we don't take him too far from the castle. So we'll move him to my room and let him rest there for now."

Noah scowled ferociously in response, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking.

"I have a room in Klingate Castle as well. We'll keep him there instead, Princess."

"But you were furnished with a servant's quarters, Noah. Won't he be in the way in the smaller room?"

"That should pose no problem whatsoever. I'll take him to my room."

Then Noah grabbed Stuart by the scruff of the neck and off he went. Claudia trusted him to do the job right.

When I asked Noah to check on him early this morning, Stuart was still fast asleep. I'll ask him what we need to know once he's awake.

Earlier, after telling Karlheinz the gist of what they'd done, his face, usually expressionless, had gone pale as he'd pressed a hand to his forehead.

"Lord King! Lord Lewis! I have a question," Claudia began. With breakfast over, their plates had been cleared from the table. While blowing daintily on her tea to cool it down, she now innocently asked, "Why won't your big brother come out of his room?"

The king looked slightly troubled upon hearing her words. Just like they'd decided beforehand, Noah interjected, pretending to chide her.

"My lady, you mustn't ask such rude questions."

"I don't mind. If the marriage talks go well, Claudia will become a member of my family. So 'tis only natural she'd be concerned about one of us, eh?"

"I looove my big brothers, so if Stuart becomes my big brother too, I want to get along with him!"

Klingate's king nodded, clearly pleased by her declaration. "Having said that...Stuart himself has never told us why. However, even without asking him

directly, I may have an idea."

"What do you mean?" she inquired.

"I would say it happened when he was around ten years old. Lewis was only three then and came down with an awful fever."

When she turned her eyes on the prince in question, an affectionate, albeit strained, smile stretched his lips.

"I don't actually remember much myself..."

"The fever was so high, even our best magicians' healing magics proved useless. At one point, they said you might not survive, and the news practically shattered your dear mother, who was still alive then."

The king closed his eyes in remembrance while sipping on his tea.

"Back then, Stuart often looked after you like a good elder brother does, Lewis. The day before the fever attacked you, the two of you had been playing in the gardens when a sudden downpour fell. Your mother, overcome in her grief over your illness, railed at Stuart for allowing you to get soaked. She cut him to the quick when she said he'd failed as your older brother."

Claudia imagined what it must have been like for the ten-year-old Stuart to be lambasted in such a way.

"He must have been in so much pain," the king continued, "both because he blamed himself for placing you at death's door and his mother's harsh rebuke shook him... After you recovered, Lewis, he spoke to you only once. Ever since then, he's rarely left his quarters."

"Brother..." Lewis murmured sadly as he put his teacup down on its saucer. "This is my fault."

"No, it isn't, Lewis. I said it before and I'll say it again. You are not at all responsible."

I see now... Claudia blew gently one more time on her black tea as she thought to herself, That was almost certainly the catalyst.

While she was still deep in thought, one of the Klingate servants stepped forward to speak to the king.

"Your Majesty, it is nearly time for you to take up your official duties."

"Right, then, off we go. But first...Lewis, make sure you show the finest hospitality to the princess today as well."

"Yes, Father."

"Claudia, enjoy yourself at your leisure. Farewell for now."

After the king exited the dining room, Lewis said with a rueful grin, "I'm sorry, Claudia. Hearing all that must have made you sad, hmm?"

"Nooo. I'm fine!"

"I... Thank you for thinking of me." He shut his eyes and when he spoke again, it sounded like he was trying to convince himself of something.

"Despite what my father said, I still blame myself for the pain my brother carries in his heart. He was only ten years old at the time, yet he had to watch me teeter on the precipice between life and death while enduring our mother's censure. How terrified he must have been..."

He anxiously wrapped both hands around his teacup then.

"I desperately want to look into his eyes and tell him I'm sorry. I dearly wish for him to leave his room. I want him to have the freedom to research his magical specialty so he can reach its heights and teach me too. That is why I go to his room every day and try to talk to him through the door. And yet..."

A sad, lonely smile spread on Lewis's face. "Brother despises me—I know it. Perhaps...it would be more accurate to say he fears me."

"Lord Lewis..."

Just like his, sadness clouded her expression too.

"Don't look like that, Claudia."

"How could I not...?"

"Right, I almost forgot. I had my staff prepare lots of sweets again for you today. I hope you like them." Lewis called out to the servant who was waiting to refill their tea. "Will you ready the spread for us?"

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Noah, might I impose on you to lend them a hand...?"

Lewis sounded apologetic. In answer, Noah cast his eyes down and bowed his head.

"Understood. Please excuse me, my lady."

"See you soon, Noah."

Once Noah and the castle's servants left, Claudia and Lewis were the only two in the dining room. He spoke to her with a pained smile.

"Forgive me, Claudia. I might have just used an unfair tactic so I could be alone with you."

"Why do you want to be alone with me?"

"I wanted to tell you myself... I know this is still the trial period before the marriage talks are formalized, but I've already made up my mind."

Those striking eyes, with their spectrum of color from lapis lazuli to ruby, gazed intently into hers.

"Claudia, I want to be with you. You showed me a world I didn't know existed, led me to a future with words I never expected. For that and more, I want to cherish you from the bottom of my heart."

"I... Lord Lewis." She blinked incredulously. It was all she could do at the moment.

"You are, without a doubt, the person who changed my destiny." His eyes softened lovingly. "I...just wanted to tell you that. You don't need to say anything right now, Claudia."

"But..."

"Six days remain in your stay. So during this time, I'll do my best to become someone you can think of as more dependable than...no, at least as dependable as Noah."

He looked shy as the words rushed out of him, and then he cleared his throat to hide the feeling. "I feel awful for using such an excuse to have him leave the room."

"Lord Lewis, I..."

"You sit here and wait. I'll go help the servants. I should do that more often to learn the ways of the world."

Flustered, he stood up and rushed out of the dining room.

Alone now, Claudia drank her tea in a fashion very much *un*like a child, her eyes cast down as her thoughts churned.

\*

"Karlheinz, what sort of person do you think Stuart is?"

She sat in a chair in her guest chambers while eating the sweets that Lewis had gifted her. Karlheinz sat across from her. He pondered her question thoughtfully for a bit before answering.

"My impression of His Highness is of a withdrawn, self-flagellating individual with low self-esteem."

She had told him everything about her investigation with Noah: how they had teleported to the tower, the battle against Stuart not long after, and finally, spiriting him away after putting him to sleep. The chief conjurer had said nothing at all for thirty seconds, which had felt like an eternity. Then his only response had been "I believe I shall refrain from thinking about the incident until further notice."

Now they were in the midst of a strategy meeting in her room at Klingate Castle.

"He blamed himself for putting his younger brother in harm's way and likely felt he deserved their mother's castigation. The combined terror must have led him to lose respect for himself," Karlheinz said.

"The age difference between them doesn't matter. He was still a child, so to have his own mother criticize him for not looking after his younger brother is simply cruel, don't you think? It's no wonder his relationship with his family, and his brother in particular, is strained."

"I made indirect inquiries with the servants who have been here for many years regarding that time period. Based on what they said, after Prince Lewis

recovered from his fever, his talent for magic blossomed."

He took a sip of the tea Noah had poured before continuing dispassionately.

"While Prince Stuart remained locked away in his chambers because of his fear, public sentiment grew that his younger brother was more suited to be the future king. Once Prince Lewis became first in the line of succession, Prince Stuart's self-imposed exile in his own world only worsened..."

Karlheinz's ruby eyes stared into Claudia's.

"As for the painting you and Noah saw in the ice garden, the one depicting the women... I believe it more than hints at the likelihood of the elder prince being the master of the curse."

She stared silently at her own reflection on the liquid in her teacup. "Noah, what do you think?"

"That man is a deviant and a dangerous person we can't trust."

"Tee hee. Such a scathing sentiment."

"However..." Frowning, Noah paused before continuing. "I need to remove my personal feelings about him from the equation when considering whether or not he's the perpetrator... Furthermore, though I can't read his thoughts, I know to some extent how *you* think, my lady."

Those obsidian eyes truly seemed to see through everything about Claudia.

"And if I'm not mistaken, you don't think Stuart is the master of the curse, do you, Princess?"

Instead of answering him, she merely smiled.

"Your Highness, is Noah correct...?" Karlheinz sighed, his gaze watchful on her. Then he answered his own question. "He...is, isn't he?"

"I must stress that this is only a conjecture on my part. Just because I think this way does *not* mean it's logical."

"I disagree, my lady. Everything you say makes sense to me," Noah declared without ever taking his eyes off her. "I don't need anything else, even if it is correct."

Such resolute words. Anything Noah offered her, he did so with a pure and steadfast heart. He was always so touchingly frank, and even though Claudia worried that part of him would only endanger him, to her, there was nothing more dazzling.

"My cute Noah," she said after a long pause. Then she narrowed her eyes at him. "You really don't need to be that obstinate, so stop fretting."

"No, I—"

"Because you are the only one that belongs to me. No matter what happens." Her words startled a gasp from him.

She sprung down from her chair and went to stand by his side, extending a hand to him.

"Even if I'm wrong, even if I'm aware of my own faults... I'll keep you and you alone by my side, Noah, to help me fulfill my wishes. So there is no need to always put your faith in me."

"My lady..."

Noah said nothing more. And when she went on her tiptoes to pat his head, he knelt before her. Although he rejected her pats in his adult form, he was surprisingly honest about wanting such attention in his child form. As thanks for making it easier for her by bending down, she used both hands now and rubbed his crown repeatedly.

In the meantime, Karlheinz let out a slightly exasperated sigh. "So...this is the reason you sought my thoughts on Prince Stuart?"

"Indeed. Noah believes implicitly in me, so I wanted your objective opinion."

"Well, considering I, too, am one of your wholehearted allies, I would appreciate it if you wouldn't accept my opinions unquestioningly either."

"Karlheinz, I trust you completely as an adult who does his best to maintain neutrality in any given situation."

She beamed at him. Noah straightened, picked her up, and settled her back in her chair. Claudia sat back comfortably with both hands on the armrests before resuming.

"A curse is a strong desire. The master of a curse always possesses this."

"In which case, my lady...the person you're thinking of is..." Annoyance flashed across Noah's face before he could continue his thought. "The spell I cast reacted. Stuart is awake."

"Shall we go, then? I don't want him to see you, Karlheinz, so this is where we go our separate ways."

"Understood, Your Highness. However, may I remind you to kindly act in moderation?"

"Tee hee."

Grinning, she gave him several instructions. He left her room first to execute them.

"Now that Karlheinz is on the move too..."

She touched Noah and, with a *poof*, the two of them transformed into their adult forms.

"You...don't plan on telling Lord Karlheinz about these guises?"

"To be honest, this particular brand of magic is very unique and specific to the magical arts of five centuries past. Something for us to utilize only until we're truly adults."

Claudia twirled a strand of her milk-tea-colored hair and giggled at him.

"Right, then. Let's be off, shall we? To visit the master of the ice garden and golem."

Silence was his only answer.

\*

"Ugggh... Why won't this bloody thing budge...?!"

Stuart was smacking the door repeatedly in his desperate attempt to open it. He still hadn't noticed Claudia and Noah, who had teleported to this room.

"There's no give in the door *and* someone cast soundproofing magic...?! Aaahhh!!! Where in blazes is this place...?! If I don't escape soon, that ridiculously good-looking, black-haired fellow will try to kill me again...!"

"Oy."

"Aaaaaaahhh?!"

Stuart flinched violently the moment he heard Noah's voice. He whipped around immediately and his eyes went straight to Claudia standing behind Noah instead of Noah himself.

"L-Lady Adelheid...!"

"Don't move," Noah warned him.

The prince gasped in response.

Noah continued in a low, calm tone. His cadence was slow, meant to overpower the young man.

"Think of your life as forfeit the next time you try to do anything to Lady Adelheid."

Stuart whimpered pathetically.

"Do we understand each other?"

Stuart bobbed his head frantically, then slid down to slump on the floor with the door at his back.

"Uuuggghhh... Why me, why me...?" He covered his face with both hands and started mumbling. "Nothing would make me happier than to paint Lady Adelheid. I don't need anything else. And yet... No, it's only natural I'm being punished. I was impudent to think someone as lowly as me could ever draw her... It's no wonder then that I am doomed to this fate..."

"Stuart. Listen to me."

"Aaaaaahhhhhh! To hear my name upon the saint's lips once more...!"

Though Noah looked deeply unhappy, Claudia patted him reassuringly on the back before stepping out from behind him.

"I want you to help me with something. Will you?"

"No! Impossible! There's simply no way I'll be of any use to you, so with all due respect, I must decline! But this I swear to you! Once I've completed the perfect painting, I pledge to never look directly upon your visage again...!"

"If you help me, I promise to model for your painting."

"What?!" Stuart squeaked.

"Lady Adelheid..." Noah's tone when he said her name clearly conveyed his dissent with her proposal. She ignored him to continue her negotiations.

"I merely want to hear what you have to say, Stuart. Won't you listen to my wish?"

"Y-You want to ask me something, Lady Adelheid...?"

Her lips gently curved upward. "Yes. Tell me about your younger brother, Lewis."

Stuart's eyes widened.

\*

Under orders from Princess Claudia, whom he served, Karlheinz, the chief conjurer of Avianoia, was heading to the location she had indicated. He knew where the room was based on his inquiries. The only thing that surprised him, just a smidge, was the sight of a young boy standing in front of the door that should have been deserted.

"Hello, Prince Lewis."

"Lord Karlheinz."

Head tilted curiously, Lewis, who'd been knocking on the door, looked up at him.

"I can't imagine why a guest would be in this part of the grounds. Is something wrong?"

"Well, Her Highness was playing a game she calls 'hide-and-seek.' However, she was nowhere to be found. With permission from His Majesty, the maids, Noah, and I were searching for her."

"Claudia's missing? That's not good. I'll join you as well..."

"Noah has informed me that he's found her, and I was actually on my way back when I just so happened to be passing through here."

Karlheinz had devised this explanation ahead of time with Claudia. Lewis

rubbed his chest in relief upon hearing it.

"I'm glad she's safe. I wanted to play with her as well. Unfortunately, I have important lectures on magic that I always attend at this time, so..."

"Be at ease, Your Highness, for Her Highness is very much enjoying her time with you."

"I wonder... I hope so. It would make me incredibly happy if that's true."

As Lewis smiled bashfully, Karlheinz's gaze strayed to the door.

"Forgive me, but may I ask to whom this room belongs?"

"It's my brother's. I visit him several times a day, but I'm concerned because he hasn't answered at all today. He doesn't seem to be awake yet..."

\*

"You want to know about Lewis...?"

"I do, Stuart."

Claudia gently prompted the prince. He sat on the floor with his head drooping.

"I've heard plenty of rumors about your brother. But I want to know the person he is through *your* eyes. So won't you tell me?"

Keeping her tone as calm and gentle as possible, she questioned Stuart soothingly. Yet his attitude changed completely from earlier and he muttered unintelligibly.

"He...not..."

"Stuart?"

When she said his name questioningly, this time his answer was a bit clearer.

"That thing is not my brother."

His words stunned her into silence. Noah spoke on her behalf instead.

"Does this mean you hate Lewis so much you don't consider yourself brothers?"

"No. That's not what I meant at all... That's not the problem at all...!"

He covered his face with both hands again. With a death grip on his fringe, he haltingly ground out a few more words.

"I never had a brother."

"What ...?"

At the same time Noah frowned in confusion, Claudia looked down thoughtfully.

"I don't know when it happened, but before I knew it, he existed in this castle as a 'prince.' In truth, he's a stranger."

"Before...you knew it...he what?" Noah sounded utterly baffled now.

The more time passed, the harder Stuart squeezed his own hair.

"My mother never gave birth to another son. Not once, not ever. Then suddenly one day, the unknown child appeared, acting like he'd been a part of our family for years."

Claudia stared quietly at Stuart.

"False memories were implanted in both Father and Mother. 'He's a stranger,' I would plead to my parents. 'No one named Lewis existed here until now,' I would argue in an attempt to convince them. But my entreaties fell on deaf ears...!"

"I... That's..." Noah struggled to find the words.

"They'd point at this unfamiliar child and say things like 'What *are* you blathering on about? He's your brother!' and 'How can you say that when you were doting on him so much up until yesterday?!' They would only scold me. Bloody hell, I don't understand any of it... Why me...?"

Stuart looked completely lost.

"Or am I the one who's strange...?"



"It seems Brother refuses to speak to me today as well."

Disappointed, Lewis turned away from his brother's door. Then he smiled sadly at Karlheinz.

"Shall we return to the castle's main hall together, Lord Karlheinz...? Now that my study time is over, I'm eager to see Claudia again."

## **Chapter 4**

"He never...had a brother...?"

Noah repeated Stuart's words, his eyes on Claudia as she stared down at the prince.

"Lady Adelheid, could this be...?"

Instead of answering Noah, she crouched down in front of Stuart. Then, smiling gently, she murmured to the elder prince, her voice and words understanding, "I believe you, Stuart Hayden Klingate."

"Lady...Adelheid..." Tears spilled from his silver eyes as he lifted his face.

"You must have felt so alone because no one listened to you, hmm? But that's all in the past now. I'm here for you."

She spoke to him tenderly, as if melting his frozen heart, as if untangling the knotted threads there.

"Will you tell me, Stuart? Of everything you experienced in these last eight years?"

"Y-Yes...! Every... Everything! I'll tell you anything you wish to know...!"

Sobbing, Stuart nodded again and again.

"My saint... Lady Adelheid..."

Then the words burst out of him like a dam breaking.

\*

Until the age of ten, Stuart had lived in this country as its sole prince. Despite feeling the weight of the expectations that came with the role, his life had been a relatively good one. Studying statecraft had satisfied him, and he'd had his fair share of talent when it came to magic. More than anything, though, he had truly loved magic itself, with his specialty being warding magic, which could be used for national defense as well.

His father and mother had doted wholly on him too, sometimes peppering in strict discipline as needed.

But that life turned upside down on a winter morning eight years ago.

```
"Good morning, Brother."
```

```
"What...?"
```

When Stuart was ushered into the family dining room, his mouth dropped open in shock at the unfamiliar child who acted anything but. The boy's hair was the same silver as his own and his father's. However, his eyes didn't resemble those of anyone in the family, the colors running from red to blue. The child, who looked to be around three years old, beamed cheerfully at him as he called Stuart his brother.

Stuart took a step back and looked beseechingly at his father. "Father, who in the world is this...?"

"Stuart, what's wrong? Come, sit down. It's time for breakfast."

His father's expression was unperturbed, as if the child's presence were a matter of course. Stuart's gaze snapped to his mother, who nodded encouragingly.

"You're surprised by Lewis being at the dining table, hmm? Truly, it's fine, Stuart. Don't fret so."

```
"Mother...!"
```

Having found an ally amid this madness, Stuart sighed in relief at her reassuring smile and words. But her next words made him doubt his ears again.

"Our adorable Lewis is all better now."

```
"M-Mother...?"
```

A chill raced down his spine.

"And do forgive me for saying such horrible things to you, darling. I know very well you were only looking after Lewis as his elder brother, Stuart."

"What... What are you talking about...?"

"Lewis, thank your brother. While you lay in your sickbed, he visited you every day and held your hand while encouraging you to fight the illness."

No... No, I didn't.

Stuart's mouth opened and closed uselessly because he couldn't speak.

I never held his hand. I never went to his room. I've never done any of that. I mean, I don't even...

Slowly, awkwardly, he glanced at the child sitting across from his mother. Despite fear making him tremble, he needed to be certain he was actually there. The child who sat in a seat reserved for his family. The one whom both his father and mother so naturally called "your brother."

"Thank you very much, my beloved big brother."

I don't know who this is!

The beautiful, smiling boy was a creature who didn't exist anywhere in Stuart's memories.

When Stuart railed and refused to share the table with him, his father and mother only looked on with puzzled expressions. After he fled to his room in terror, his mother came to him and consoled him.

"This is my fault, isn't it? I was too harsh when I scolded you. I never should have blamed you playing in the rain with Lewis for his fever..."

Does Mother truly think he's her own flesh and blood?

"Stop fussing over him. You know how well they get on with each other. Stuart will cheer up soon enough, and things will return to normal. You'll see, dear wife."

I've been an only child since birth. So how...?

It didn't matter what Stuart said or how hard he tried to persuade them, everyone called the child named "Lewis" the second prince. Terrified of this strange, so-called younger brother, he continued avoiding him relentlessly.

"His Highness Stuart has lost all confidence in himself. How many months has he locked himself up in his chambers now...?"

No, no, no! That's not it! That's not why...!

"Even though they're related by blood, having such a talented younger brother must be an awful burden on him. I feel so sorry for him."

We don't share any blood. He's not my brother. This has nothing to do with feeling inferior and everything to do with the fact that an actual stranger has infiltrated my family as one of us...!

Yet his "brother," Lewis, visited Stuart every day.

"Brother."

He felt like he would lose his mind every time he heard the knock on the door.

"Brother. Won't you eat with us today?"

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

"You know, I had the privilege of seeing your magic in the garden the other day. I'm intrigued by the incredible barrier you erected. Nothing would please me more than to have you teach me as well."

"You have no right to call me 'Brother'!"

Because Lewis wasn't his younger brother.

Brother. Brother?! Don't call me that. And I know you know the truth too. You know we aren't actually siblings.

He had no idea what the creature who called himself his younger brother was thinking. He stole the role of cherished son from him, his place in the line of succession, even his way of life as the prince. So, Stuart chose the easiest path to survive.

The legendary witch, Lady Adelheid... She could do anything with magic. If she were still alive, she would surely free me from this inexplicable torment.

The beautiful witch would save him. Just imagining it made his heart feel strangely lighter.

I won't think anymore. No one believes me, and no one will listen to me.

Which is why I'll put up a barrier that he can't cross and lock myself inside it... I

know. I'll draw the world outside.

That was how he reasoned with himself after making his decision.

"Don't think about him... Don't listen to him. All I have to do is think about beautiful things..."

Since then, Stuart had spent the last eight years within the barrier surrounding his chambers and the garden gifted to him.

\*

Claudia ruminated quietly while listening attentively to Stuart's telling of his past. When he finished, the prince cradled his head in both hands as he slumped forward.

"He knocks on my door several times a day asking me to come out of my room. And each time he does, I can barely contain the urge to scream."

What an unimaginable horror that must have been for him.

There was a subtle change in the way Noah gazed at Stuart now. His voice was much graver than earlier.

"Knowing the way you are, then, why did you leave your room to go to that tower?"

Stuart answered him after a brief pause, "Six months after Lewis appeared, I heard Father's younger sister didn't awaken from her sleep." Then, in a whisper, he said, "She was like an older sister to me." He cleared his throat and tried again to speak in a normal register.

"Hidden as she is from the world in that tower while she sleeps, I saw myself, who couldn't leave my room, in her. But unlike her, I can move at will, right? So I decided if I'm to be stuck in here regardless, I might as well draw her as she was, full of life and laughter."

Noah and Claudia listened in silence.

"The tower's residents increased every year by one. And so too did the number of people I painted... No one else can enter that garden, which is why I made the wall into an enormous canvas. I immortalized them there because I thought... I thought if the sleeping women were surrounded by beauty, then

mayhap they too would dream of beautiful sights."

He stared down at his right hand with hollow eyes.

"Fearful of my 'brother,' I can do nothing. I'm scum, worse than useless. But I saw that as the only meaningful thing I *could* do. So, wanting to capture beauty, I practiced my art... And then you appeared before me, Lady Adelheid."

Stuart turned his silver eyes, glittering like diamonds, on Claudia.

"The children of this country grow up hearing fairy tales about the legendary witch Adelheid. You look just like how I imagined her to be. My very ideal."

"Tee hee. Is that so?"

With pain in his voice, he spoke quietly of what lay in his heart.

"You know what I used to think if Lady Adelheid lived in this era? That perhaps she would use her magic to expose the true form of this unknown 'Lewis.' That perhaps she would rouse all the sleeping girls and women from their eternal slumbers... Once I complete my painting of her, everyone will wake up, Lewis will disappear, and I can go outside again. At least, that's how I feel."

Frowning, Noah turned his head to look at Claudia.

"Lady Adelheid."

She sat on Noah's bed. Normally, when she did so in her adult form, he was quick to try and stop her. However, he kept his silence now.

"Stuart, tell me something. Are you the one who changes the princesses' sheets and tidies their rooms for them?"

"Sheets...?"

He cocked his head in confusion at her question.

"N-No, I'm not. To my shame, I truly am an insensitive lout, so doing anything like that wouldn't have even occurred to me."

"I see. Thank you for your honesty."

Stuart half closed his eyes as if savoring the happiness. At that moment, words written in light floated gently into the room from the window.

"Oh! Excellent timing."

Delivered via magic, the letter came from Ehrenfried, who had accepted her challenge. Claudia read aloud the contents shining on the palm of her hand.

"The name of Klingate's first king is Carlos." She looked at Stuart and questioned him with a smile, "Is that correct?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, it is...! Our ancestor's name is Carlos Craig Klingate. But why do you...?"

Ignoring Stuart, Noah rubbed his mouth thoughtfully. "Not...Sewell, then."

"Well, just like Sewell, Carlos was both a disciple of Adelheid and skilled in warding magic. The two men's magical dispositions were also similar."

Though the two hadn't talked much, they had each aspired to the other's level of magical precision. Claudia had mistaken the magic in Stuart's garden for Sewell's because of the strong resemblance to Carlos's. And the reason she'd been stuck on believing it was Sewell had to do with her dream of him.

"Now it makes sense. When I touched you in the tower, Stuart, I couldn't find anything in your magic indicating you're a descendant of Sewell."

Noah frowned, then said, "But what about the energy cloaking the princesses...?"

"I *did* feel Sewell's magic in the tower. However...the magic flowing in the princesses might not have been carrying *it*."

Stuart's eyes bounced in confusion between Claudia and Noah, who waited for her to continue. It seemed he had already figured out the answer himself.

"Sewell's magic is contained in the curse that put them to sleep."

Noah exhaled deeply. His gaze imploring, Stuart questioned Claudia in desperation.

"U-Um, Lady Adelheid! Are you saying you know Lewis's true identity?!"

"Stuart..."

"Sewell. One of Adelheid's disciples. Sewell... This is the first time I've heard his name. But based on what you just said, does this mean Lewis is a

descendant of this Sewell character?!"

Claudia could not know everything that had happened after her life as Adelheid ended five hundred years ago, which was why she didn't know how her sweet disciples had spent their lives after her death. She could only imagine the course of their lives from myths of founding nations and glimpses in the pages of literature.

But one thing I can say about Sewell is...

Just then, new words fluttered in through the window. Noah caught them this time and read them on his palm. Then he showed the message to her.

"Lady Adelheid."

Karlheinz had written only one short sentence—Preparations are underway.

"Let's be off, then. Stuart, thank you for the enlightening information."

"Lady Adelheid! P-Please. Please don't go..."

Noah quietly stayed Stuart's outstretched hand with his sword.

Claudia spun around happily to face the prince.

"Don't fret so. I'll be back. After all, I have a promise to fulfill as a model for your painting."

"That isn't the only thing I wish for...! You believed in what I said. You listened to me even though I'm rubbish! Please. I also want to stay by your side."

Noah, not Claudia, cast sleep magic on Stuart. His head lolled immediately. Noah caught him by the scruff of the neck and unceremoniously tossed him into the bed. Despite his obvious displeasure, he couldn't leave the prince to sleep on the floor. How very like her manservant.

"You put him to sleep again because he hasn't slept well in so long, hmm? I must say, his complexion looks much better today after sleeping through last night."

"I do not give a fig about this fool's health. Right... Let us go."

"First, we'll stop by my room. After we revert to our child forms, we'll talk until we're ready to go."

His eyes cast down, Noah politely took Claudia's hand and activated his teleportation magic.

\*

Five hundred years ago, Sewell, one of Adelheid's disciples, met her when he was a young boy. He was two years younger than her, making him sixteen when death separated them. Despite being a member of a certain country's royal family, he had been oppressed all his life—the reason being his unusual eyes, the hues ranging from blue to red.

"Mother kept me imprisoned in the castle for as long as I can remember."

He was only ten years old to her twelve when they first met and he tearfully opened up to her.

"'Just once, please.' Whenever I asked her, she would tell me of scary diseases in the world outside, but she was lying. The truth is, she wanted to hide me."

Sewell had grown his hair out to conceal his eyes. Even then, he dared not raise his head.

"After Mother died...I met my father for the first time. Do you know what he said to me? 'To think a prince with such repulsive eyes was born to our line. You were a mistake.'"

Adelheid crouched down in front of him and gently said, "Sewell, you won't reject me, will you?"

"How could you...?! Of course not! After all, you were the one who led me out of that dark room, Lady Adelheid..."

"Thank you. Look closely. Do you see? My eyes change color too, depending on the angle of the light."

He slowly, tentatively lifted his face and fixed his gaze intently on her eyes as she smiled at him.

"Oh...it's true." His next words slipped out without a thought. "Your eyes are so lovely, Lady Adelheid..."

"Tee hee. I could say the same of yours, Sewell."

She reached out to sweep back the silky fall of hair covering his face, revealing the eyes that shifted constantly between lapis lazuli blue and ruby red.

"Your eyes are the colors of sunrise and sunset. Beginnings and endings."

"Beginnings...and endings."

"I hope you can grow to love them... This I pledge to you—I will affirm you as much as your father denies you."

Then she stood up. "There is nothing whatsoever wrong with you, Sewell. You are *not* a mistake." Her voice rang out while she stared down at him.

He cried like a lost puppy, whimpering quietly. He sobbed until all his tears were spent, after which he never again cried in front of another.

Since that day, his thin arms filled to the brim with books and documents, he holed himself up in his room, forgetting day and night existed in his dedication to his magical studies.

"Lady Adelheid, I learned a new spell! Please wait so I can show you I've become even stronger than Reinard."

"I won't eat until I fully understand this theory... Wait, Lady Adelheid made dinner? Uuurk, then I suppose..."

"Look, look! This is my latest development in warding magic! If I can further perfect this magic, perhaps I can bring about results that will please the ever-so-kind Lady Adelheid!"

When she thought of Sewell, she could only remember how passionate he looked studying magic or his determination to stay by Adelheid's side. No other images came to mind.

\*

Back in her child form, Claudia explained the situation to Noah from her seat in her chambers.

"From the beginning, there were only two options as far as the master of the curse went—Stuart or Lewis."

"Did you come to this conclusion because all of the women who fell asleep

were of royal blood?"

"Indeed. This incident involves only members of Klingate's royal family. Moreover, activating the instrument of a curse requires a tremendous supply of magical power."

Klingate's king wasn't an especially powerful magician. In comparison, his son, Stuart, excelled in the magical arts.

"And those two factors inevitably meant whittling down the list of suspects considerably, correct?" Noah asked.

"Of course, the possibility always existed of other powerful royals. However, there was no mention of anyone else who could hold a candle to either Stuart or Lewis."

"So at the very least, that indicates no others possess magical energy in the amounts those two do."

Claudia appreciated how quickly Noah grasped things. She continued her explanation while idly swinging her legs.

"The moment I saw Lewis's eyes, I realized it was very likely he was Sewell's relative. Just as the color of a person's eyes attest to the nature of their magic and just as you have the same eyes as Reinard, it's entirely possible to manifest something inherited from an ancestor."

The difference between now and five centuries past was that eyes of an unusual color were no longer shunned. Though this knowledge gratified Claudia, it wasn't what concerned her.

"However, if Lewis is actually a descendant of Sewell, something's wrong."

"What do you mean?" Noah asked her as he stood in front of her.

She replied with a nod. "He simply can't be a child of Sewell's blood."

"But...wasn't Sewell's magic mixed into the curse's energy?"

Claudia leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"Lewis told me his mother kept him confined in the castle because she feared him being infected with some illness from the outside world. And when I told him I hated vegetables, he said, 'I had a feeling,' so matter-of-factly with a smile. Like he *knew*."

Noah listened in contemplative silence.

"The tower in which the princesses sleep is protected by an incredibly powerful barrier. It took even *me* a great deal of time to detect it, which is why I asked you to gather the materials."

"Materials..."

He sighed softly when he suddenly realized what she meant by that.

"The warding magic that you had Lewis cast on me during our bout, right?"

"Correct. After your fight ended, I touched you to analyze the characteristics of his magic."

She slowly opened her eyes when she sensed Karlheinz's message dance into the room.

"It seems he's ready. Let's go."

Noah took a moment to answer. "Yes, my lady."

He lifted her up in his arms after she climbed down from the chair. Then, as the light of the transfer magic enveloped them, she let her mind wander back to five hundred years ago.

"There is nothing whatsoever wrong with you, Sewell. You are not a mistake."

Adelheid had said those words to Sewell once upon a time.

And Claudia had said something similar to Lewis.

"You are absolutely right, Lord Lewis."

To which he'd replied, "Once, long ago, someone said the same thing to me."

The next time she blinked, she found herself in the silvery white garden surrounded in ice and snow. Karlheinz stood next to a table that hadn't been there before. When he saw Claudia, he executed a sharp bow and stepped to the side, clearing the way for her.

"Thank you for your patience, Your Highness."

"I appreciate you preparing this teatime for us, Karlheinz."

Noah made a coat from magic and draped it gently over her shoulders after he set her down on her feet in the snowy garden. She smiled as she slid her arms through the sleeves.

"And...thank you as well for your hospitality, Lord Lewis."

"Claudia." A beaming Lewis sat at the table. "I'm so happy to receive your invitation. In Brother's garden, no less. Impressive."

"Tee hee. I'm happy you're happy!" She grinned back at him before turning to the chief conjurer. "Karlheinz, wait outside. I entrust things on that end to you."

He paused meaningfully, then said, "Understood. Noah."

"I'll do everything in my power to protect the princess."

Karlheinz nodded to him, then bowed to Lewis. After one last glance at Claudia, he vanished into thin air.

The only three left in the garden of snow and ice were Claudia, Noah, and Lewis.

Even in this situation, Lewis gazed joyously at her. "You somehow seem different now. Mature, mysterious. But I find that side of you charming as well, Claudia."

"Do I really? In that case, I don't mind if you relax and behave as you did in the past."

He narrowed his eyes at those words while Noah frowned in confusion.

"In the past...?" Then Noah gasped, his eyes widening. "No. It can't be. But you said Lewis isn't Sewell's descendant, my lady."

"He isn't. And yet, it's only natural the curse contains Sewell's magic." The snow crunched under her feet as she walked toward the table.

"Because he is Sewell. He's been alive for well over five hundred years, and here he is now."

Noah's brain had finally caught up at Claudia's revelation. She took his hand before facing Lewis again.

"Lewis. Or is it Sewell? Oh dear, isn't this a pickle? Which name shall I use?" Eyes wide, Noah stared at Lewis. "An immortal...?"

Noah's mutter was proof of the terrifying speed with which he came to grips with the situation.

"I knew it. You *are* my former disciple. Then I believe Sewell is the right name to use, hmm?"

Lewis laughed happily then. "I'm fine with either. As long as *you* call my name, I don't care what it is."

Noah scowled unhappily at the sight of Lewis. "Your Highness, you won't deny my lady's claim?"

"She exposed the truth. In which case, denial isn't really an option. Wouldn't you agree?"

Noah glared balefully at him.

"She is the only thing right in this world. And that's all that matters. I'm sure you of all people would understand this sentiment, Noah."

Lewis narrowed his eyes and chuckled as Noah hovered protectively over her. Then he fixed those very eyes, reminiscent of both the sunrise and sunset, on Claudia.

"I survived these five centuries to see you again. I made full use of my warding magic to keep my soul from being torn from my flesh, and I used other magics to remake my body constantly..."

"I understand. Then tell me what you desire." Claudia sat down in the chair Noah pulled out for her. She was ready for the tea party. "I need to know what it is in order to resolve this situation."

"You. You are my desire, Claudia. It took me too long to realize it, but realize I did."

The happiness on Lewis's face never dimmed as he tilted his head the slightest bit in a thoughtful fashion.

"I have to admit, it was strange at first... Whenever you smiled so innocently

in front of me, there should have been nothing of Lady Adelheid in you. And yet, you constantly reminded me of her. I wondered why."

Of course, she didn't resemble Adelheid. Claudia always made sure to play the role of a pure, bright child.

"But little by little, I began to understand. You were undoubtedly the one I'd been waiting all this time for."

His eyes shone with happiness as he stared at her.

"You are Lady Adelheid, the one who changed my destiny."

She didn't say anything as she thought back to what Lewis had said to her in the dining room when it had been just the two of them.

"You are, without a doubt, the person who changed my destiny."

Her lips curved upward.

"I did make you wait so long. But you yourself said, 'There's no point in clinging to legends,' when we heard those children who believed in Adelheid in the castle town. Do you remember that?"

At that time, Lewis probably gave voice to the truth in his heart without knowing that the Claudia sitting next to him was Adelheid.

"I didn't think you would say something like that if you were truly Sewell, so it took me some time to make up my mind about your true identity."

"You should know that my words weren't meant to make light of Lady Adelheid. She might have been a great witch, but it's meaningless to seek the phantom of someone who died five hundred years ago...because what matters is those alive *today*."

Lewis had said the exact same words during their outing in the castle town. Back then, she'd wondered what his intentions were in saying them, but knowing everything now, she finally understood.

"What matters is the future. In short, instead of dreaming about the miraculous resurrection of the long-dead Adelheid, it was important for me to reunite with the living one. So...I searched for your reborn soul."

Claudia sighed softly and leaned back in her chair. "The first princess fell asleep eight years ago... Isn't that right, Noah?" she asked as he poured tea for two. "What comes to mind for you when you think of eight years ago, Noah?"

He answered quietly, his hands busy. "I'd say the year you were born, my lady."

"Tee hee. Goodness, I'm almost tired by how much you think only of me. However! You happen to be correct."

"Wait. No. You don't mean...?"

Frowning, Noah seemed to realize what she left unsaid.

"Lewis. You've been watching since I died five hundred years ago, haven't you? Watching for a child to be born with the same soul as Adelheid's."

"I knew it... You *are* Lady Adelheid's reincarnation. No one else knows me like you do." He laughed and continued, looking like the perfect prince. "I studied all kinds of magic after you passed away. One of them was covering the entire world in a thin barrier that allowed the user to investigate the souls of the people inside it."

She contemplated Lewis silently. It did not surprise her when she saw Noah's eyes widen in shock. The spell he spoke of was one that would have been tiresome even for Adelheid because it required so much effort.

"It goes without saying that it consumed an awful amount of my energy. While I was doing everything I could to keep my soul bound in my body, no less. Though you have no idea how happy I was when I sensed your soul had returned to this world eight years ago. I'm not ashamed to admit I cried."

Lewis smiled bashfully, like he was regaling her with a tale of a minor failure.

"Then I lost consciousness and couldn't identify where exactly it appeared. I couldn't forgive myself for the blunder, but at least I knew you were here again! So I prepared and waited until the day I discovered your reincarnation."

"Prepared what...?"

"A very good question, Noah."

Noah warily placed a teacup in front of Lewis. Claudia was second because

the custom here was to serve your own lord or lady last during a tea party.

Lewis picked up his cup and sipped elegantly. He sighed in satisfaction before speaking again.

"First, I decided to become a part of some country's royal family. I knew that if Lady Adelheid was to reincarnate, she would do so in a babe bursting with stores of magic. That inevitably meant chances were high you would end up of royal blood, so becoming a royal myself would grant me the power to make searching for someone easy."

"And that's why you fabricated your status as a prince of this country, hmm?"

"A royal bloodline descended from Carlos's meant one that excelled in warding magic just like me. Our magical dispositions are also quite similar. I thought it would be easy for me to blend in as a member of the family even after brainwashing them through magic."

Then Lewis leisurely surveyed the ice garden.

"However, I did *not* expect an 'elder brother' who possessed a talent for warding magic so powerful that he even unconsciously blocked my brainwashing magic."

And that was likely why Stuart alone had realized Lewis's unnatural presence.

"Brother himself is still unaware of how powerful he actually is. I mean, just look at the warding magic in place in this garden. He's crafted his own perfect world and maintained it. Incredible... I wanted to discuss much and more with him, and I hoped he'd show me how his magic works too. Because I knew this beautiful warding magic would be useful as part of my plan for Lady Adelheid."

Lewis stared at the table.

"Having said that, the most important piece of the puzzle was missing—Lady Adelheid. I still hadn't found her. So I waited. God, the interminable emptiness of waiting. Day after tedious day."

Claudia fashioned her lips into a smile and questioned him.

"When we were in the city, your eyes tracked the younger children not as a future king observing his people but because you were looking for me, yes?"

"Though I knew I wouldn't be able to find you among that rabble, an unconscious part of me always checked. In the end, the one I was waiting for turned out to be the girl sitting right next to me. Funny, isn't it?"

Lewis's wry chuckle only made Noah even more cautious of him. Her manservant had apparently decided there was no longer any need to hide his animosity. "What do you want?"

"Me?"

"If your only goal was to find the princess so you could reunite with her, I don't see a reason to force people into an eternal slumber. Unless your plan is to put *her* to sleep so you can keep her by your side forever?"

"As if! It's vital for our loved ones to live and laugh. You can sympathize, right, Noah?"

The more honest Lewis was, the more disbelieving Noah looked.

Claudia sipped her tea and chimed in, "We met the princesses in the tower. They were all dressed very prettily. It's clear they sleep under the careful, attentive watch of someone."

"I'm incredibly happy to hear you say that."

"The signs were obvious since the sheets were religiously changed and the rooms kept tidy. All that must have required quite a lot of effort. Effort to keep them 'preserved' in their pristine beds. At least, that's how it felt to me."

A thought suddenly sprung in Noah's mind then and he said it out loud. "Because...you're going to use them in some kind of ritual."

In short, they were living sacrifices.

Claudia dropped her gaze to the black tea in her cup and commented idly, "They're all around eighteen, give or take a year or two. Those of royal blood possess vast stores of magical energy... The same as me from five centuries past, who just so happened to be a princess too."

He had gathered young women who fit the profile of Adelheid, the legendary witch.

Glaring at Lewis, Noah sounded furious. "The victims started appearing in the

eight years since you were born, my lady..."

Claudia kept silent.

Meanwhile, Lewis finished his tea, his face blissfully radiant.

"Did any of the hosts strike your fancy, Claudia?"

"What did you say to her ...?!"

Lewis carefully placed his teacup on its saucer as Noah moved to stand protectively by her.

"Tell me when you choose one you like. I'll transfer your soul into her whenever you're ready. Then you can live in the same eighteen-year-old body as you did five hundred years ago, with Lady Adelheid's soul."

"Is this a joke? Are you seriously discussing something so absurd with the princess?"

"Ha ha ha. I assure you, I'm quite serious. Would I have otherwise spent five hundred years bringing my plan to fruition?"

Claudia blew on her chilled fingers, her breath turning white in the cold air. Lewis watched her fondly and continued.

"The past eight years have taught me there's still much research to be done on fixing souls in place through warding magic. It doesn't matter how much care and attention I give them, the ends of their hairs split and their nails turn brittle. If only I could have borrowed Brother's magic, then I would have been able to preserve them perfectly. Alas."

She still said nothing.

"I'm sorry I couldn't prepare a perfect vessel for you. As for the body you're in now..." Lewis pointed a slender finger at her. "I can assure you that any one of the hosts I readied will be much more comfortable than that."

"Oh my. Why would you think so?"

"Because I see everything, Claudia. Trapped in such a young form, you can't even use a tenth of the power your soul possesses. Tell me, when you act freely as your true self, do you faint or bleed from the burden your magic places on

you? You do, don't you?"

Then Lewis muttered, barely audible, "That...is not Lady Adelheid."

In the next instant, the table placed between him and Claudia suddenly disappeared. Lewis had used his magic to erase it. When Noah tried to step in front of her, she stopped him with a glance.

"Lady Adelheid, you must be freed from all the fetters that bind you. And this time, those fetters include the ugly thing known as death. I won't let you be chained to it ever again."

"You son of a..." Noah growled.

"I can't wish for or seek anything from the one I lost five hundred years ago. But...Claudia, you're alive now. There's still time with you." Lewis stood up from his chair and knelt on the snow. "I have waited five centuries. Ever have I yearned for you all this time. If I'd let my mind wander for even a second, I feared I would lose it."

"My lady, don't listen to anything he says."

"The one who took her own life in front of her apprentices and left them all behind. Our cruel and beloved witch..."

"My lady...!"

His head raised, Lewis stretched his hand toward Claudia.

"I have come for you, Lady Adelheid."

"Sewell..."

His eyes almost closed in ecstasy when she said his name. Though he'd told her to use whatever she wished, the naked joy in his eyes told her he had actually wanted her to call him by that one.

Claudia was well aware she'd left him and the others behind five hundred years ago. Lewis's expression was that of a small, lost child relieved to finally be home again.

"Come, Lady Adelheid."

She stared silently at him.

"This time, we'll make sure you won't die as you transform into a free and perfect version of your former self...!"

A smile bloomed slowly on her lips. Noah's frown contrasted with Lewis's sparkling eyes. However, the hope on Lewis's face vanished instantly at her words.

"I...must reprimand you."

"I... What ...?"

Ever gentle but firm, she scolded him. "Bad boy."

A strangled sound came from him as his eyes widened in despair.

"But...why? Lady Adelheid..."

Looking back on their days together five centuries past, Claudia didn't think she had ever scolded Sewell, not even once.

"Why, because you did something naughty." She closed her eyes and sighed hugely. "You've caused trouble in another's home. You've *stolen* someone's life. How could I not scold you for this?"

"B-But, Lady Adelheid!" Lewis was deathly pale. Voice quaking as if from fear, he argued vehemently with Claudia. "Your reincarnation means you're once again fated to accomplish great things through magic! There's no doubt in my mind of this!"

"Sewell..."

"I've lived five hundred years believing in that. So, don't you think this new vessel of yours is inadequate to wield your power for the sake of the world's salvation?!"

"Sewell," she said more firmly this time.

"All you have to do is transfer yourself into one of the new hosts I've prepared for you. If you end up exhausting it, simply take up a new one. You can throw it away if you damage it! By doing so, you can forever remain the perfect Lady Adelheid..."

"Good grief, Sewell. Are you listening to anything I'm saying? Your ears do

work, do they not?"

There was no mistaking the ire in her tone. He gasped and flinched, his shoulders shaking violently. Never before had she gazed so coldly upon him.

"I think it's meaningless at this juncture talking to you about the princesses and Stuart, so I'll tell you what I want instead."

"Your wishes, Lady Adelheid?"

"I shall start with the first, which is...that I'm quite fond of this body."

At a loss for words, Lewis could only stare wide-eyed. Claudia paid him no mind as she took another sip of her tea and continued.

"I'm told I take after my mother in many ways. Her fair skin and her hair the color of milk tea. And I do so adore the way Noah braids my hair. Let's see, what else can I say...? I've grown a tad taller over these last two years, and I must say, I find the sensation of my body developing interesting. While it's true that I can't endure the burden magic places on me, I absolutely love sleeping in a soft bed after exhausting myself playing with magic."

"That... That can't be..." Still kneeling on the snow, Sewell muttered disbelievingly.

"Now, the second. I will never again serve as the witch who saves the world."

"You must be joking...! There is no greater role for someone as incredible as you, Lady Adelheid!"

"Yet I still won't do it. I decided that in this life, I'll only do the things I want to. The me who was known as the most powerful witch in history no longer exists."

Noah glanced meaningfully at her then, but she was undeterred as she pressed her point.

"Born anew as Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz, I fully intend to grow and live how I please. How can I not, when I'm so looking forward to the experience?"

"Lady Adelheid..."

She curled her fingers around the cup in an attempt to warm them, staring

down at the tea inside. Her eight-year-old self stared back at her in the reflection.

"This life of mine is *not* a continuation of Adelheid's. And so, I simply can't grant you your wish."

"No! I won't accept that ...!"

"I said what I said, and I meant every word. It doesn't matter how many 'vessels' you prepare for the sake of your Adelheid." Claudia made the cup disappear using her magic before she gazed down at Lewis. "Because that isn't what I want," she declared.

A wildness exploded in Lewis's eyes before he hung his head dejectedly and whispered to himself, "Something...is wrong. Yes, that must be it."

Noah frowned at the chill in his words.

"Something is wrong with this reality because Lady Adelheid would never utter such things... I know for a fact that each of the women in the tower bears traces of your attempts to remove the curse. Which, in itself, is strange. None of this makes sense."

Then his head jerked up as he gasped in realization.

"I know! Claudia, you're worried your soul will reject the new vessel after the transfer, aren't you?!"

"Bloody hell... You *really* haven't been listening to the princess at all, have you?" Noah grumbled.

"Fear not, Claudia. I won't deny the possibility of the women sleeping in the tower refusing you. But I've accounted for it by casting the pinnacle of warding magic to protect you!"

His desperate attempts to persuade her contained a feverish excitement. The certainty on his face showed he clearly believed this line of argument would work on her. She narrowed her eyes calmly while listening to him.

"My magic would *never* reject you, Claudia, so you have nothing to worry about. For I've spent these past five centuries learning much and more about magic just to make Lady Adelheid happy...!"

His words reminded her of days far in the past. What Lewis said was true—Sewell had indeed devoted himself diligently to his studies every day.

My heart... It feels like it's being squeezed.

Claudia pressed her palm to her chest as the memory evoked emotions that had long lain dormant.

Each and every one of my disciples was so dear to me.

"Lady Adelheid, you were my reason for living. I endured five hundred years, five *hundred* years, to finally see you again."

All I ever wished was for them to walk their own paths...

"And this time, I want you to live a happy life, Claudia. I would do anything for you. *Anything*. I love you...!"

Staring down at the ground again, Lewis clutched his head like he was on the verge of falling apart.

"So, please, I beg you to stop being so unkind and just say 'yes.' I inserted myself into this family, fooling them into believing me to be one of them. I put all those women to sleep. More and more have I done for you, but it will all be for naught if you say 'no'..."

"My lady! You mustn't listen to this monster!" Noah shouted.

I know. I understand now.

Sadness weighed heavily on Claudia.

"Even though...you're to blame..." Lewis muttered.

"You're right."

After all, *she* had been the one to abandon them. Even knowing how much they had loved her, even as they had clung tearfully to her, she had given her life in front of them.

"Did you truly believe your disciples would be able to walk righteous paths after such a parting with their beloved witch?"

Claudia knew Lewis was right. Just as she resigned herself to accept the truth of his words, help came unexpectedly.

"Stop it."

"Noah?" She blinked in surprise.

"Don't burden my lady with your ugly desires." His voice was low and dark.

Lewis turned to Noah. "When Lady Adelheid died, our futures died with her."

"Princess, shut your ears to his poison."

"And knowing that, she should have taken us with her..."

"Shut up. Or else, I'll..." Noah pointed the tip of his magic sword at Lewis.

"Noah, you understand my feelings much better than she does. Isn't that right?"

He marshaled his thoughts for a moment before answering quietly, "It's impossible for me to feel any sympathy for you after everything you've done."

"Liar. If you were to lose Lady Adelheid, I know you'd do anything in your power to resurrect her!"

"My lady wouldn't want that. She *doesn't* want that. The truth is...you knew that from the beginning, didn't you? You knew what you were doing was so awful that she would reject you."

Lewis's eyes widened at Noah's sharp rejoinder. "I...knew...she would...reject me...?"

"Or are you really that blind? You keep blathering about the magic you cast on the women sleeping in the tower, but...your so-called superior warding magic isn't the reason for their slumber."

Noah's obsidian glare bore into Lewis. "A curse is responsible for that."

"I... What...?" Lewis blinked sluggishly. "A...curse?"

He muttered the word like it was foreign to him.

"I triggered a curse...? I...won't deny the hardships I faced trying to keep those women alive and asleep. I just couldn't do it on my own. All I had was the magical device I stole from *them* five hundred years ago..."

"This is why I said I'll never sympathize with you. I'd never let myself fall so

low."

"No. No, this isn't possible. I would *never* rely upon a curse...! Cursed magic was the tool of the enemy we fought! It is the reason we lost Lady Adelheid. There's simply no way I would ever rely on such a thing... Arrrgh! And yet...!"

Lewis covered his eyes with one hand.

"And yet, I remember the feeling of offering my deepest wish when I reached out toward a silver choker..."

"Don't hurt the princess's feelings by pretending your affections are innocent. She's risked her life to fight curses, yet none of your actions are of someone who truly wants to protect her by reviving her."

With a fierce thirst for blood driving him, Noah practically spit his next words at Lewis. "No. Your actions stem from a desire to exact vengeance on her."

Lewis sucked in a soft breath, then exhaled just as quietly before once more tightening the leash on his emotions. He didn't let his agitation show again after that slip. The light disappeared from his eyes, only to be replaced by emptiness. His voice was cold and matter-of-fact when he spoke again to Noah, who looked contemptuously down on him.

"You have never lost her, which is why you're still able to hold on to your sanity."

Noah tightened his grip on his sword, and Lewis's rage continued to burn.

"Vengeance... Vengeance, indeed. You're right, I couldn't forgive her. Lady Adelheid left us, and my anger burned at her cruel act...!"

Noah turned to Claudia. "Do you understand now, my lady? You don't have to feel so hurt over what your beloved disciple did. Because he didn't do it for you, no matter what he says."

Claudia narrowed her eyes in response. Evidently, he already knew. He had sensed her sadness even as she had sat there elegantly, expressionless. He even knew that she intended to atone to Sewell.

"How merciless you are, Lady Adelheid. Have you any notion of the pain I've borne these five centuries...? For so long...!"

"Stop it!" Noah yelled.

"I hope you come to understand through my actions how heinous you truly are...! All of this happened because you threw me away. It's *your* fault those women's lives have been ruined! But if you don't wish for their sacrifice to go to waste, all you have to do is assent. For you are the only one in the world who matters to me...!"

"My lady, permission to cut Lewis down?!"

Her eyes focused on Lewis, she listened to his despairing cries.

"Once you enter a vessel I prepared for you, I can protect you so that you'll never again leave me. I will protect you. Don't you know how I've longed to see you again?! Lady Adelheid, you're my only light. Claudia...please. Commend me, I beg of you!"

The line between "Sewell" and "Lewis" started to blur as his words jumbled together chaotically. Slumped on the blanket of snow, he reached out forlornly toward her.

"My cunning...cruel...light..."

Simultaneously, icy fissures appeared on Lewis's snow-white skin.

"Ngh...!"

"What was that?!" Sword at the ready, Noah retreated warily to stand protectively in front of Claudia.

Staring down at Lewis's agonized form, she quietly replied, "Even five centuries ago, only a limited number of magicians were able to use the magic that allows one to change their physical age—Sewell wasn't one of them."

"Then, he didn't create his childish body through magic...?"

"He didn't have to become a child in order to infiltrate and brainwash the royal family. So, Sewell taking on the form of one wasn't intentional but force majeure."

"U-Ugh...! G-Gaaah...!!!"

Lewis curled in on himself and ground his forehead into the snow. Meanwhile,

Claudia continued flatly.

"Having forced himself to survive for so long means he hasn't been able to preserve his soul from wearing away. It seems to me, then...his body shrank over the many years to fit the dwindling remnants of his soul, essentially containing himself in a distorted vessel."

"That's...absurd! How is that even possible?"

"C-Claudia...!"

Even as pain twisted his face, her former disciple called out to her. Even as his fingertips crumbled, he reached out fervently for her.

"Look upon my magic, Lady Adelheid... Stay forever by my side, Claudia...!"

Magic reconstructed the fingers shattering like ice.

Truly distorted in every way...

A silver choker encircled his neck.

"If I can't make you mine... If I'm going to be left behind again...then I may as well use every means at my disposal, even if that means defying the natural order..."

"My lady. Please, give me permission to fight Sewell!"

"No, Noah. Your only task is to protect yourself. I forbid you from doing anything else."

She adjusted her cloak and sprung lightly down from the chair. "I shall be the one to reprimand that child."

"Aaahhh!!! Lady Adelheid!!!" Lewis screamed as the light of rapture enveloped him.

Then massive cracks split the frozen ground. Countless chains rushed forth from the frozen surface straight toward Claudia.

"Princess!"

The chains that seemed to have a will of their own sported magical shackles at their ends. They snapped at her everywhere like a ferocious beast baring its fangs. Her ankles, her wrists, then her neck. The chains immobilized her

completely. She narrowed her eyes as she stared down at her bound body.

"Lady Adelheid! Claudia...!"

A practical application of warding magic, hmm...

It was a very carefully woven spell. She couldn't break through it physically, much less magically. The chains wound themselves around everything nearby, including the icy trees and roses. Stretched as they were throughout the garden, they effectively caged her in.

Wherever the chains and shackles touch, my magic is being suppressed... If I don't do anything, the conflux of magics will render me unconscious in a few short minutes.

"Shite...!"

Noah seemed to have come to the same conclusion because he tried to grab the chains with his bare hands. She scolded her manservant for disobeying her orders.

"Stop that, Noah. Don't come any closer."

"But...!"

"Don't fret so. I can handle a bit of my magic being sealed for a short amount of time."

From the beginning of this life, her soul had been bound to an enormous amount of magical power this young body simply couldn't keep pace with.

I'll undo these restraints quickly...is what I'd like to say.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. These chains weren't woven using warding magic alone. If she tried using her magic to meddle, they immediately sucked her power and simultaneously tightened around her.

"Your magic will not break them. I uncovered and studied every last iota of what remained of your powers in my memory, and then I fabricated that barrier, tuning it to your magical wavelengths. Your magic *can't* fight against that warding spell, Lady Adelheid."

Kneeling on the snow-covered ground, Lewis gloated even as his breaths

sawed in and out harshly.

I certainly can't deal with this through ordinary means. On that, we agree.

Claudia smiled at Noah, who was clearly champing at the bit to tear the chains off with his sword.

"Noah? You'll wait like a good boy does."

"Yes, my lady," he replied after a long pause.

"Now then, Sewell, look at the mess you've made of the castle grounds. Yet another thing to tack onto your long list of naughty deeds, you bad boy."

She analyzed the magical energy in the chains. Where once the garden had been blanketed with snow and ice, huge gashes in the ground now disturbed the scenery. And the fault lay with her for destroying the garden's beauty since she'd chosen it as the location for this confrontation.

"Nevertheless, I made the right decision in hosting the tea party here in Stuart's garden. The wards here are so strong that even you couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary, Sewell."

Lewis made a questioning sound in his throat as he slowly lifted his head. His face contorted in disbelief, and then the chains binding Claudia glowed softly. He staggered painfully to his feet, and his voice trembled.

"Why? Why are my chains...coming apart?"

"Oh, Sewell, let me tell you something fascinating. The color of Stuart's eyes is as unusual as yours and Noah's. And just like your and Noah's magic, his is stubborn but pure. Would you like to know the color...? They're silver, like diamonds."

"For five hundred years, I thought endlessly how I could control your magic perfectly, Lady Adelheid. That warding spell is the result. There's no reality where I erred in analyzing your energy's structure!"

"Well...I suppose I'll just have to show you."

Claudia lifted her chin and focused her attention on one of the chains that formed her ersatz cage. Despite the shackles on her feet, she *would* reach it. She stood tall in her shoes, polished to a gleam, and closed her eyes before she

pressed her lips to the chain.

"N-No! No, it can't be...!"

With a loud *snap*, all of the chains shattered. Once she had transformed the glittering chains into ice crystals, they vanished into thin air like stars twinkling in the night sky.

"That's theoretically impossible. You shouldn't have been able to do that, yet you did. Inconceivable."

With a saucy flip of her milk-tea-colored hair, Claudia smiled calmly at Lewis. "I believe some would call this sort of thing 'diamond dust.'"

"Your beauty...truly knows no bounds...!"

His face full of loathing, Noah glared at Lewis. "Did you see that, you insufferable fool? Someone who genuinely acts in the princess's interests would never dream up a magic specially designed to confine her."

Her lips curved upward in amusement as she agreed wholeheartedly with Noah. Lewis had perfected his spell over five centuries. And over that long span of time, he had slowly but surely lost his mind.

I'm the one who left him behind... I'm sure that was the moment he lost his way.

Even as she pierced herself with that truth, Claudia said, "Many things change over the course of centuries."

"No... No, you're lying, Lady Adelheid."

"The same is true of me. Do you truly think my existence has been immutable since my time as Adelheid? The magic that flows in this body is something I received from my parents in *this* life. Claudia's life. And as Claudia I shall grow. Noah's magic is in there too."

The acolyte contract the two of them had formed meant they drew on a shared supply of magic. Over these past two years, they had lent and borrowed their respective magics on countless occasions, each time merging their magic with the other's. And that was undoubtedly different from the Adelheid whom Lewis knew five hundred years ago. So different, one could say they weren't

even the same person.

"It's all right... I don't mind if you've changed," Lewis whispered. "So long as you're alive. So long as you stay by my side for all eternity..."

"Enough. Say any more and I'll..."

"So long as you remain you!"

A small gasp escaped her lips, and her eyes widened as new chains burst forth from the ground. A thorny, black mist clung to them. The mist swayed like a living thing, and she knew beyond doubt its true form.

"Well, well. It seems the curse has revealed itself, hmm?"

The choker around Lewis's neck shone dully.

"So long as you are Adelheid, your essence will never change, Lady Adelheid." Standing there motionless, Lewis muttered to himself. "Even if the nature of your magic has changed, all I have to do is repair the ward to match it..."

"I told you to stop," Noah said. "That's not warding magic but a curse born of your resentment against my lady!"

"Noah, are you sure you want to stop me? At her core, Lady Adelheid is the same as she ever was." A corrupted light blazed in his eyes, the colors shifting from lapis lazuli blue to ruby red. "Someday, she'll leave you behind too."

"My lady!"

Lewis once more swung the cursed chains at Claudia.

Oh dear. This is not good. Not good at all.

His strongest desire was to control Adelheid so she wouldn't die. If these new chains captured her, she wouldn't be able to free herself like she had before. The earlier chains absorbing her power had already disrupted the flow of her magic.

It will be difficult to control my magic properly if I use it now. In which case...

She erected a barrier in front of her, blocking the chains' initial strike. Cracks appeared immediately in the barrier before it crumbled a few seconds later. However, those few moments gave her enough time to prepare what she

needed.

Noah gasped in surprise and his eyes widened at the sight of the unfamiliar object Claudia had made using magic—a slender sword. Sporting a transparent blade and hilt, the one-handed sword looked as if it had been carved from glass.

"I don't have much confidence in my sword skills, you know."

If you can't control your magic smoothly, simply use it as a sword instead to fight. She had taught Noah this and guided her former disciples with the same principle as well. Having said that, she herself didn't have much firsthand experience fighting with a blade.

"Now, then. Come. If you dare."

The chains, covered in the unpleasant black haze and slithering like snakes, shot toward Claudia from above, using the opening she had deliberately created.

"Please, Claudia, stay with me...!" Lewis pleaded.

She exhaled quietly, then poured her magic into the sword. Stepping back, she swung it with all her might, slashing from left to right.

"My lady!!!"

The chains froze, as if time itself had stopped. The next thing that moved wasn't the chains. Behind them, the castle wall facing the garden shifted diagonally with a loud *crash*.

"Wha...?" Lewis whipped around, astonished.

Claudia's slash had had a magical ripple effect. The wall crumbled, the shower of rubble hitting the ground.

"Goodness, it really is a challenge to apply the right amount of force, hmm?" "My lady..." Noah looked dumbfounded.

The broken chains fell to the snowy ground and writhed seemingly in agony. An unseemly sight, like a snake with its head cut off.

Lewis dropped heavily once more to his knees. Panting, he reached out to her. "Not yet... I cannot forgive you yet..."

Then he slowly sank down on the carpet of pure-white snow. Claudia strode briskly toward him and stood there in front of him. He rolled himself over then, perhaps to ease his strained breathing even just a bit or perhaps to have a clearer view of her.

It didn't surprise her to see the rifts in the pale skin around his throat, like a ceramic doll on the verge of crumbling to dust. The shining silver choker around Lewis's neck had entwined itself throughout his body as if taking root.

I don't think I can even force it out of him now.

Claudia narrowed her eyes as she stared down at him.

I might have to end Sewell's life just to destroy the instrument of the curse...

Lewis spoke in a shaky voice, his breathing shallow. "Why...did you leave us?"

"Sewell..."

He sounded tearful, like a lost child.

"If you were going to leave us like that...I wish you would have let us die with you. You don't know...how much we regretted allowing you to sacrifice yourself..."

*I...* 

Her small lips tightened.

I didn't want you to lose your lives too because of me.

So she had chosen to leave them behind instead.

This is my punishment, isn't it...? The spell Sewell cast to anchor his soul has become irrevocably intertwined with the curse's backlash, creating a situation wildly out of control. At this rate, if his body decays, his soul will remain trapped for eternity, forever in pain and unable to reincarnate...

The choker pulsed rhythmically.

If I can't save him, then I at least need to find a way to end this properly for his sake... Before time runs out.

Still holding the transparent sword, Claudia gazed down at him.

I have to be the one to kill Sewell.

With that thought, she concentrated her magic into her fingertips.

But Lewis's voice brought back memories of her life five hundred years ago. "Lady...Adelheid..."

The witch had led a solitary life in the woods because it had been her duty as the princess to protect her country and the world. And then her first disciple had appeared, vowing to stay by her side. Then the second had come, and a third. The more of them who had settled down with her, the more things she had held dear. She remembered those warm, happy days so clearly, even now.

"Lady Adelheid!"

Sewell was always...a hard worker who locked himself up in his room and studied late into the night.

When they first met, he had told her about his life spent confined in a forgotten corner of the castle because the very sight of him had disgusted those around him. She had taken him with her that same night. At the time, her disciples had numbered a mere six, and terrified as he'd been, all of them had slept together. Upon waking the next morning, his hair a tangled mess from sleep, Sewell had smiled happily at her.

Two years younger than me, sweet but stubborn at the same time.

She remembered scolding him for keeping at his studies despite his obvious fatigue. He had answered her honestly, his eyes determined.

"It doesn't matter how much I study. It's never enough. I'm willing to go to any lengths. Because I..."

Claudia slowly raised her sword.

"I want to help you, Lady Adelheid. The sooner, the better."

The Sewell in her memories was so very different from the Lewis gasping for air on the snow right now. Even so, this child had been her beloved disciple in her life as Adelheid.

"Ngh...!"

It will be too late if his body rots first.

"I can't forgive you...for passing on before us and leaving us with an end even more cruel than death."

So, I must kill him and destroy the magic device before that happens.

```
"Lady...Adelheid...!"
```

Claudia closed her eyes.

This is all because of my weakness, isn't it?

Then she lifted her eyelids and swung her sword, its point heading straight for his throat.

But something unexpected happened at that moment—another blade rushed toward Lewis. When the two weapons collided with a dull *klang*, she softly gasped a name.

```
"Noah...?"
```

He had disobeyed her command and plunged his sword into Lewis's throat before she could.

```
"Ngh...!"
```

A heavy silence followed Lewis's choked moan. A small barrier had been deployed in front of his neck. It just barely managed to stop Noah's sword. Still, the shaking point dug into the choker and blood, darker than black, began oozing out.

In her shock, all Claudia could do was question Noah.

```
"Noah... Why ...?"
```

Though she had expressly forbidden him from acting, he had disobeyed her order and turned his sword on Lewis. He'd never done anything like this before, notwithstanding the times when someone had tried to harm her.

"I wasn't even in any danger."

His behavior truly bewildered her. Instead of answering, he only frowned silently. He glared at his sword and the barrier that stopped it.

"Because...Noah understands my feelings..." Lewis gasped out.

The boy in question said nothing.

Meanwhile, hand trembling, Lewis grasped the blade blocked by his barrier.

"While you are still alive, this time I must remake you...so that Lady Adelheid can never die..."

Noah's silence only deepened.

"You, too, know this is the best path forward...because you won't have to fear losing her to death either..."

Noah grunted quietly then, the sound barely audible. The barrier staved off the choker's destruction even as his sword ground relentlessly against it. He held the hilt with both hands, using all his might to break through it. Both his arms and the blade shook from the strain.

Through his struggle, Noah finally grumbled, "To hell...with you..."

Lewis made a questioning, confused sound in his throat as Noah's deep anger overtook him. His quiet but obvious fury even startled Claudia. Noah enunciated every word directed at Lewis, like he was carving them into the other boy.

"I am afraid. I won't deny that. Even in this life, my lady is the sort who would choose to give up her own life if something or someone needed to be protected."

"Noah..."

Focused as he was, he didn't look at her even when she said his name.

"Yes, in a way, you and I are the same. If I lose her, I'll never be able to live normally again. I would simply withdraw from the rest of the world and waste away from a broken heart. I know that much."

"Ngh... Then..."

"Even so!" Noah exhaled sharply, cutting off whatever Lewis might have said. "The only thing I fear more than my own despair is the princess's."

Lewis's eyes widened in shock.

"No matter how dark my life becomes, no matter how bad things may become for me, as long as the same doesn't happen to her, I don't care about anything else. As long as she smiles happily at me, I can endure any amount of despair. It's not enough for her to just be alive."

```
"That's... You're..."
```

Blood dripped steadily from the hand Lewis used to grip Noah's blade and the point in his neck where the sword tip ground.

"So in the end, you and I are nothing alike." Noah continued while pushing his sword against the barrier. "Stop talking...like you know...anything...about me...!"

"Lies! I know your heart...!"

The light emitted by the barrier burned brighter. A black, serpentine haze rose from the cracks marring Lewis's hand.

"You do not even understand the true meaning of despair...!"

"Ngh...!"

Just as the haze tried to coil around Noah, the barrier guarding Lewis's neck shattered with a *klink*.



"What ...?"

Lewis's eyes widened in surprise as the point of Noah's sword bit into the choker. Noah, too, sucked in a startled breath, despite being the one commanding the blade. Because Claudia had pressed her tiny hands on top of his.

"Lady...Adelheid...?"

"I'm sorry, Sewell... And thank you, Noah."

The barrier had broken because of the magic she'd poured into Noah's sword.

"Noah worried for me because he knew how difficult it is for me to kill my own disciple. Nevertheless...it's *my* duty to grant you your final rest, Sewell, and I mustn't turn away from it."

"Ah..."

Lewis tried to speak, but only black blood spilled out of his mouth.

The choker glowed dully and pulsed as if in pain. That agony was reflected in the way the black, snakelike haze flowing from his body thrashed atop the snow.

"I can't forgive what you've done. Therefore, as the one who was your teacher, I'll take responsibility for your actions and see this through to the very last."

"Adelheid... Lady Adelheid...!"

"After five hundred years of delusion and violence, this is the only end I can give you... Forgive me for leaving you, Sewell."

Instead of taking the hand Lewis offered her weakly, she knelt next to him and touched his cheek.



"Lady Adelheid, I... I didn't want to hate you. I only wanted to love you forever. So how did it come to this...?"

"You...are the only one of my disciples I killed."

He let out a choked gasp.

She narrowed her eyes and continued gently, tenderly. "I know what I'm doing is awful, which is why I beg you not to forgive me. Free yourself from your guilt for hating me, and sleep. Sleep."

"Lady Adelheid..."

"And I shall never forget that I took your life with my hands."

Lewis's face crumpled then. His innocent, childlike expression made her feel nostalgic. For despite his utterly changed appearance, he was still the same boy she had known five centuries past.

"Ever cruel you are... Always so cunning and cruel..."

He clutched her hand on his cheek with his own and stared up at her as if dazzled.

"Even then...you're still my light..."

Immediately after he whispered that last word, a rent appeared in the silver choker.

She gasped when a tremendous amount of magic suddenly blasted out, sweeping over them like a violent gust of wind. The ground shook, and Claudia automatically closed her eyes against the onslaught. She felt Noah suddenly lifting her into his arms.

"Damn it, this magic...!"

"Yes...it's the recoil from Sewell binding his soul to his body."

Claudia gripped Noah's jacket tightly as he held her protectively. When she turned her head around, she saw Lewis's body starting to crumble slowly like a broken ice sculpture.

"His soul is no longer in there. Which is why both the magic and curse in that body have been unleashed, running amok."

"Can we contain it without causing more damage?"

"That's why I held the tea party inside the barrier while asking Karlheinz to wait on the other side. He's already detected the abnormality here and started strengthening and mending the wards."

Though the sky above them was a light blue, flashes like lightning began appearing throughout. It was proof that Karlheinz was closing the fissures in the barrier surrounding this space.

"It's high time for us to leave this place. I'm moving us."

"You're right... Thank you."

After agreeing to his suggestion, Claudia tried to look back at Lewis one last time. She wanted to sear the image of him, the one whom she'd killed with her own hands, into her mind. She felt like she wouldn't be able to forgive herself if she didn't.

"My lady."

She gasped when Noah squeezed her tightly, hindering her movements.

"Noah..."

"You said it yourself. His soul is no longer in that body, right?"

Her eyes widened a little at that.

"Then it's all the more reason for you *not* to punish yourself by gazing upon such a painful sight."

Instead of answering him, she slowly let her eyes drift shut. A moment later, she hugged him back fiercely.

"Let's go. We have to help Karlheinz."

"Your wish is my command."

In her mind, she spoke quietly to him as a warm light enveloped them.

I wish for your happiness in your next life.

It wasn't a spell or anything of the sort. Even the legendary witch she used to be could never use such great magic. Smiling ruefully at her own powerlessness,

all Claudia could do was pray and hope that would be enough.

## **Epilogue**

Noah knocked on the door of the guest room in Klingate Castle. When it opened, his teacher stood on the other side, his complexion awful.

"Her Highness has instructed me to pour you some tea, Lord Karlheinz."

"Huh... I'll take you up on that offer, then. Thank you."

Clearly exhausted, he likely hadn't slept these past two days. The women of the castle were absolutely captivated by his eyes, describing them as "cool, wise, and beautiful." But today, hideously dark circles lay under them. Naturally, the reason for his fatigue could be explained by the turmoil in the country's royal family after settling the issue of Lewis two days ago.

Noah entered Karlheinz's chambers and questioned his teacher while preparing the tea.

"How are the princesses doing now that they're awake again?"

"We finally finished examining the last of them this morning. Although there were some signs of stagnation in their magic and minor discomforts, there are no major health concerns. The biggest hurdle for them to cross will be how they acclimate to the world again after being asleep for so long, especially the princess who slept the longest, at eight years..."

"Not only are you skilled in swordsmanship and magic, but you also have a background in medicine... What in the world *are* you?"

Noah's frustrated words startled a huff of laughter from Karlheinz.

Under normal circumstances, Karlheinz had no connection to Klingate. However, soon after Lewis's defeat and the completion of repairs to the barrier, Claudia had given him the following explanation and instructions.

"Let me tell you the truth of what happened here, Karlheinz. Lewis was actually a conjurer from five centuries ago and not a real prince of Klingate."

"Wait... Please wait a moment, Your Highness."

"The princesses all woke up when both he and the curse vanished. Moreover, the people should no longer be under the effect of his brainwashing."

"Again, a moment, if you will. Please start with precisely what occurred inside the barrier."

"I believe this will cause a great deal of chaos, so be a dear and help them as much as you're able. Oh, and here is the story I came up with to explain this incident—a man and a woman defeated Lewis. The one who witnessed it all was this country's true and legitimate heir, Prince Stuart. You have your orders, so off you go now!"

"Your Highness!"

Claudia had forcibly teleported Karlheinz away then. Thinking back to the moment, Noah found himself feeling a bit sympathetic toward his teacher.

The fact that we can't tell him the whole truth, how Lewis's objective was Adelheid, which is why he'd targeted the princess since she was her reincarnate...

Unlike Noah, who knew everything, Karlheinz remained in the dark on a number of Claudia's secrets. He didn't know about her previous life as Adelheid. She had decided that in the event of an emergency, those who didn't know wouldn't end up embroiled.

Be that as it may, it went without saying that Karlheinz had already figured out the two of them were keeping secrets from him. Ultimately, though, he always carried out her wishes. Noah privately respected that part of him, but he would never say so out loud.

Now that they were all together again, Karlheinz leaned back in his chair and said with a heavy sigh, "His Majesty was the one most devastated by it all."

Noah listened in silence.

"To find out so suddenly that the prince he had been so proud of for eight years never existed while simultaneously being forced to acknowledge how

he'd ignored his true son all this time... I'm just amazed he didn't expire from the shock. Though he *does* look haggard, no better than an empty shell of himself."

Noah knew some of the recent goings-on in the palace thanks to the information Claudia had gathered using magic. He also knew that Prince Stuart had been the one to go to his bewildered father in his hour of need. For eight years, the young man had shut himself in his room and avoided any conversation with the king. This was the first honest conversation they'd had in a long time.

"This... This isn't the time to lock yourself in a stupor, Father...! A-As we're their family, we're the only ones wh-who can help my aunt and the others who just woke up after so long. We also have to do something about all the nobles agitated over Lewis's pretense. The ones who bear ill will toward us may use this opportunity to malign our name as royals weak enough to be brainwashed...!"

"But...I couldn't even believe you, my own son..."

"I-I...!" Without meeting his father's eyes, Stuart clutched at his sleeves and continued.

"I knew you and Mother still loved me even during my self-imposed confinement. I also knew you removed me from the line of succession out of concern for me. Even though I refused to leave my domain, you didn't want to pressure me, so you let me be. You never forced me to be anything but who I was despite my endless blathering about a 'brother who was a stranger.'

Despite my terror and the awful things I said."

"Stuart..."

"You regularly furnished me with the tools I needed for my art without ever saying a word... In that sense, I know better than anyone how much you and Mother both believed in me."

Then Stuart took out a letter from his breast pocket. Though no one in the castle knew who the sender was, Claudia and Noah did. She had written it and left it for him to read when he woke up in his own room.

"Besides, there was a saint who believed in me, believed in my words. And... And she told me to be a good crown prince who supports his father."

The king gasped.

After that, His Majesty had staggered to his feet. His first order had been to prioritize assisting the newly awakened princesses. He'd been hard at work since their conversation two days ago.

Using her magic, Claudia had done her best to repair Stuart's garden that Lewis had destroyed. But when she stopped by there briefly earlier, she had seen no signs that Stuart had stepped foot in it at any point in these two days. She had surmised he must have been incredibly busy as he made every effort to help his father.

"Once I interacted with him, I learned that His Highness is, in fact, an outstanding young man," Karlheinz said. "And an extremely reassuring presence for His Majesty too."

Noah placed the teacup in front of Karlheinz. "Here you are. These tea leaves will dispel your drowsiness and energize you."

"Well, well...what a pleasant surprise. I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Think nothing of it. This blend is one of the princess's favorites and I just happened to have some on hand."

Noah knew Karlheinz was set to return to Avianoia after this and report to the king, Claudia's father. He asked the question on his mind since it would be a while yet before his teacher could enjoy some genuine rest.

"Have you considered asking my lady to cast her healing magic on you?"

"I'm not in dire enough straits for her to expend her energy on me. That aside, I'm sorry I don't have the time for your swordplay practice."

"I can train just fine on my own without you, Lord Karlheinz."

Noah's tone was deliberately blunt. He wanted to convey that he had no need of the man's consideration. Karlheinz snorted quietly in amusement, then sighed anyway.

"I wonder how far Her Highness's calculations extend. Despite the cancellation of the marriage talks, my efforts here under her orders will still prove advantageous to Avianoia in an alliance with Klingate. I believe that His Majesty will soon issue an official directive similar to the one Her Highness gave me."

Karlheinz continued when Noah said nothing.

"Moreover, there's a very good chance of new marriage talks between Prince Stuart and Her Highness, despite the age difference..."

"Lord Karlheinz." After setting the teapot down, Noah stared quietly at him. "You should drink your tea before it gets cold."

"Far be it for me to argue with such sound logic. By the by, I believe I'll advise His Majesty that a political marriage with Klingate is unnecessary."

"Why are you telling me that? Besides, you already know my only intention is to adhere to her wishes. It's not my place to meddle..."

Noah trailed off as he realized his words fell on deaf ears, so he gave up on arguing with Karlheinz.

Bloody hell...

More importantly, Claudia would be waking up soon. Noah left Karlheinz's room to return to his mistress.

\*

Claudia returned to her room using transfer magic at the twilight hour. Immediately, she heard a knock on the door. She turned around to look at it.

It seems Noah's back as well.

"Come in," she said, then sat down on a settee. Noah entered, and surprise flashed briefly on his face.

"My lady...why are you in your adult form?"

"I went to see Stuart after I woke up. It's terribly important to provide support and praise commensurate with the effort one puts in, don't you think?"

Looking approximately sixteen years old now, Claudia hugged a cushion to her

chest. He pressed her for more information with a wary expression.

"Did you let him draw you?"

"Hmm? Oh, not yet."

He sighed quietly in relief, then walked over to her. "When you do, please make sure that I accompany you. Do *not* forget."

"Tee hee. Yes, yes, I know. Noah's princess would never do anything to worry him unduly."

"Such insincere words..."

It was less a matter of sincerity and more a problem of subjective interpretation, but she refrained from saying so.

"How did Karlheinz seem to you?"

"Tired, which isn't surprising all things considered, but fine nonetheless."

"I see. Perhaps I should cast a healing spell on him?"

"I already suggested that to him, but he was very firm in his refusal. Said he wasn't that exhausted."

"You're absolutely brilliant, Noah. Of course, Karlheinz is too."

Claudia's sunny smile and tone told him more than words could that she was clearly in high spirits. She gazed pensively out the window then, her eyes narrowing.

Outside, the colors of sunset stained the sky, shifting between a deep indigo akin to lapis lazuli and a fiery red resembling rubies. While she took in the sight, Noah knelt by her feet.

"Won't you change me into my adult form too?"

His unusual request surprised her, all the more so because it was rare for him to even ask anything of her.

"Tee hee. Of course."

Giggling softly, she touched him and cast the spell with a *puff*. Noah stood before her in his adult form, his eyes earnest.

"Noah? Whatever is the...?"

She cut herself off unthinkingly. Because he braced himself with a knee on the settee as he pulled her into a tight embrace. She stared wide-eyed from within the cocoon of his arms.

"Noah..."

"I'd like you to scold me for two things."

As close as they were, he murmured directly into her ears, "First, for touching you like this without your permission...which you can punish me for later."

For a moment she said nothing, before prompting him, "And the second...?"

"For disobeying your express order not to fight Lewis."

Her eyes crinkled at the corners in amusement. "You did that to protect me, did you not?"

He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to, because she knew he had seen through her hesitation at the time.

"I believed it to be my duty to end that child's life. I had to see it through, if only for his sake. But in the end...my hesitation proved disgraceful."

"My lady."

"Even so, your recklessness made me happy, Noah, so I won't be punishing you." She pressed her forehead to his chest and closed her eyes. "Now, the question is...what to do about you holding me like this?"

"Well..."

Though he'd said he was prepared to accept her punishment on this matter, he showed no sign of wanting to release her. On the contrary, he drew her even closer, his arms around her slender frame tightening.

"I would do anything to make you happy."

His words sounded less like a declaration and more like a vow. Perhaps one might even deem them a prayer. Noah wasn't finished, though. He spoke carefully by her ear, almost as if he wanted to carve the words into her very being.

"It might be presumptuous of me to touch on the wounds you bore five hundred years ago and the ones you may incur in the future. I also know I can't fill in the spaces for what existed between you and your disciples then. Even so..."

Noah's embrace should have been a protective one. It was. It was, and yet he leaned on her too, as if relying on her strength.

"Even so, just as I promised you two years ago, I won't leave you behind. Not ever."

"Noah..."

"So, please, I beg of you to command me," he pleaded.

His fingers sifted through the skeins of her hair hanging down her back as he whispered his next words.

"Command me to stay by your side."

For the briefest of moments, she frowned the tiniest bit. But before he even had the chance to sense her uncertainty, her lips softened into a smile.

He's always honest with me and I couldn't be more grateful for that.

Noah likely thought of himself as powerless. Except that was impossible. He could never imagine how much she thought of him as her salvation.

"I won't order you."

"My lady..."

She chuckled at the hint of pain in his voice.

"I won't order you—because I'll ask it of you."

He gasped in surprise.

Then she returned his embrace, mustering all her strength. In this adult form, Noah's back was wide and she fit snugly within his arms. Basking in his protective hold, she rubbed her cheek against his chest and relaxed into him.

A moment later, she uttered her small wish.

"Stay with me, Noah."

He said nothing for some time before he spoke slowly into her ear, his rough voice etching itself into her.

"I won't leave you even if you tell me to."

"Tee hee..."

Even she thought her laugh sounded strange. How was one supposed to react to such a frank declaration? And though she should be smiling, somewhere in the depths of her heart fluttered a sadness that felt like nostalgia. Without denying the feeling, she closed her eyes and recalled the beloved voices from five centuries past.

I can hear Noah's heartbeat like this...

The thought alone filled her with happiness. The feeling was so warm she nestled into him for a good, long while. And Noah stayed with her, stroking her hair gently, silently conveying his intent to protect and cherish her.



To be continued...

## Special Story: The Guardian of Sleep Is...

Upon her return to Avianoia from Klingate, Claudia was looking forward to sleeping in her own bed after so many nights away. Unfortunately, a storm raged outside. But what surprised her was Noah's begging.

"I... I'm afraid of thunder, so will you let me stay by your side until morning, my lady?"

Any way I look at him, he doesn't seem the type to fear thunder...

At the moment, she was drinking the tea he'd poured before her fastapproaching bedtime. She tilted her head curiously as she pondered why he would tell such a bald-faced lie. When Claudia finally hit upon a reason, she looked up at him. Unused to deceiving her, he awkwardly averted his gaze.

"I don't see why not. The storm is howling something fierce, hmm? You may stay with me all night."

"Thank you very much. I'll squeeze myself into a corner and do my best not to be a nuisance..."

"Absolutely not." With a giggle, she scooted off her chair and took his hand. "For you will, of course, sleep in the bed with me."

"Uh...!" Clearly agitated, he tried to stop her. "No. I can't. I simply can't. If you would just let me stay in the room, that's all I need. Really."

"I said no and I meant it. After all, it's a mentor's job to ensure her disciples get a good night's rest. The same goes for a mistress who cares for her manservant, hmm?"

Smiling wickedly, she looked back at him over her shoulder.

"I don't think I heard you?"

He scowled fiercely for a moment before giving in.

"As you wish, my lady."

After crawling into her bed, Claudia had dragged Noah in too. Now she rolled over and collided playfully into him as he frowned in thought. Giggling, she stared at him.

"Is something on your mind, Princess...?"

"Nooo. Not at all."

Raindrops splattered against the window at the same time thunder boomed. However, Noah remained expressionless.

He lied about being afraid of thunder for my sake, hmm... Because he knew I didn't want to sleep alone tonight.

Seeing Sewell off had brought back memories of her disciples from her old life. And Noah had lied in order to remain at her side throughout the night. She would have firmly banished him back to his own room for a proper rest if he'd been honest about comforting her, and he'd known that too.

Claudia decided to let herself be spoiled by her manservant, who always tried so hard in his devotion to her.

"Noah, can I listen to the sound of your heart?"

"Hrmm..."

He stared up at the ceiling for a few seconds, agonizing over his response, before nodding awkwardly.

"If that's...what you want."

She thanked him with a smile, then snuggled close to him. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and pressed her ear to the left side of his chest. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* The warm, solid beat of his heart reassured her.

"Noah, your heart's beating so fast," she said offhandedly.

"Um...it's just your imagination," he replied, slightly uncomfortable.

"Oh, really?"

She closed her eyes to focus on the sound. It had soothed her the other day too, when he'd embraced her.

"You know my magic runs through you here as well."

"Does it...?"

Claudia and Noah were bound by a powerful contract. Ergo, their shared magic circulated through every inch of their bodies, just like blood.

"However."

She squeezed a fistful of his clothes and rubbed her forehead against him, making a mess of her milk-tea-colored hair. Clinging to him, she whispered softly.

"That isn't the only reason I love your heartbeat, Noah."

He made a choked sound. She lifted her head and grinned at him.

"Thank you for worrying about me. If you don't mind...tonight, I'd like to sleep while listening to your breathing and heartbeat."

He answered by hugging her back just as tightly.

"I believe you already know, my lady, but I think it bears repeating."

Noah's voice was sure as he promised her anew.

"If there is anything I can offer to you, it is yours. Everything. All of it."

A blinding smile bloomed on her lips at his earnest words.

"Thank you, my sweet Noah."

He said nothing more. Even after she fell asleep, he continued stroking her hair, cuddling her close. And that must have been why she welcomed the dawn happier than usual.

THE END

## **Afterword**

I'm Touko Amekawa. Thank you so much for reading volume 2 of *The Legendary Witch*!

In this volume, Princess Claudia is eight years old, and her manservant, Noah, is eleven. Noah grapples with a complex web of emotions regarding her marriage interview. Then there's Prince Lewis, her potential intended. Not to mention Prince Stuart the shut-in. Each boy has his own interactions with her. I hope you enjoy their tales now as well as the glimpses into her witchy life five hundred years ago!

Kuroyuki-sensei did the illustrations this time around too! They capture the adorableness of this world as well as the charms of all the children, including Claudia and Noah, who have grown so much since volume 1, plus the new characters! I can't thank you enough for how cute they all look...!

To my editor—a million thanks for everything you've done for me not just in this series but in *The 7th Time Loop* as well!

And to all the readers! Your support brings me so much joy! Thank you very much!

As for the comic version by Nae Serizawa-sensei, it's set to debut in the spring of 2023. It's a really exciting adaptation and I can't wait for everyone to read it!

I'm looking forward to seeing you again in volume 3!











Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

## **Newsletter**

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

## **Copyright**

The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess: Volume 2

by Touko Amekawa

Translated by Kashi Kamitoma Edited by Carly Smith

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Touko Amekawa Illustrations by Kuroyuki

Cover illustration by Kuroyuki

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

<u>j-novel.club</u>

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2024