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A Villainess for the Tyrant

Yoo Iran

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Volume 1

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Translation by David Song

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Kiss Me, Liar

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Chapter 1

A Hell of a Wedding

She wasn't going to stand for this.

Cecile gnashed her teeth as she glared out the coach window at the beautiful and vast white castle peering over yonder. The maids sitting across from her, meanwhile, were at a loss for what to do, but that failed to matter. She was so furious that she refused to spare them a glance.

Gazing down at the outfit she wore, she took in her finely woven lace bridal veil, her white silk gown—smooth enough that one's hand could simply slide off it—and the array of sparkling crystalline pearls that composed its hem.

Yes. She was dressed for a wedding.

Cecile was moments from her marriage, but she wasn't happy in the slightest. The closer she got to the castle, the tighter the illusory vice upon her throat seemed to get. A band awaiting her arrival began to play once her coach passed through the city gates, yet despite the undeniable beauty of their performance, their music echoed through her ears like a funeral march.

If she were to go inside that castle... she'd surely die.

The instant this thought crossed her mind, Cecile's face grew even paler. "Save me..." she muttered, incapable of stopping herself from unconsciously begging for help.

The maids across from her didn't inquire as to what she meant. They merely nodded, comprehension and pity upon their faces. "We'll die if you run away," one of them said in reply.

Cecile remained silent because, come on. Would it have hurt for them to comfort her even a little?

She renewed her audible teeth grinding and shot a glare at the bouquet she was holding. Why? The reason was simple: there was a big problem with her husband-to-be, Emperor Estian.

Why did she have to marry him?!

He may have been her groom, but he was a horrible, insane tyrant and that was a fact. Honestly, he was such an awful guy that no one would even be surprised if he chose to murder his bride on their wedding day. How did things end up like this?

Cecile recalled the past month.

*

Cecile was the illegitimate child of the king of Navitan. In a drunken stupor, the king had bedded a maid and as a result, a child bearing the characteristics of the Navitan royal lineage was born. She was the spitting image of royalty. With beautiful platinum blonde hair and green eyes, the king had no choice but to acknowledge Cecile as his own.

That didn't mean he had to love her, however.

Her mother passed away shortly after she was born, so she was sent to a royal villa at a corner of the palace. The intention was that she'd grow up there, but although she was educated as a princess, the education she received only covered the bare minimum required of her and she was treated no better than a maid in comparison to others of the same title she bore.

Still, she didn't feel wronged. At the very least, she was glad that she was even so much as acknowledged as a princess in the first place. Had she not been acknowledged, she would've been cast out as an infant. In a way, she had lived comfortably with what she had been given. The king never called for her and nothing really happened as she spent her time idly within her villa. It was a life of eating, sleeping, and playing without having to labor. The days dragged on and on, and it was a bit of a tedious and repetitive lifestyle, but it was still better than suffering.

Occasionally, Cecile would offer her mother flowers, placing them upon the grave located in a corner of the villa. "Mother," she'd murmur, "I'll

just keep on living like this until I'm sold off to some old, rich military aristocrat as his wife, won't I? That's how it always is in the books."

All she knew of the world existed inside books she had read because she could not freely travel outside. Even then, the books were mostly brought in by her maids. If her mother had been alive to hear her, however, her mother would have begun to holler. "That's because all you read are romance novels!" she'd cry, smacking her on the back.

But the dead have no words to offer, so Cecile was left to murmur on alone.

"I'm not living a fairy tale, though," she mused. "I'm sure there's no chance the husband I'll eventually be forced to marry would turn out to be a northern grand duke who's cold but actually gorgeously handsome and devoted solely to his wife..."

She had read the novels her maids enjoyed, learning what end was to come for a princess in her position. Illegitimate princesses were unloved despite bearing all the characteristics of the royal family; therefore, they were excellent products to be guiltlessly sold by their kings.

If she had been born ugly, however, perhaps she could have been afforded some more security. Once, she had clung to a mirror, peering at her reflection. "So unnecessarily pretty!" she cried. She was lovely to behold, even if she were saying so herself. Alabaster skin with plump red lips, willowy limbs, and green eyes akin to a vibrant forest beneath the summer sun. She would sell high without a doubt.

She was the pretty one, so how come the king was the only one who would benefit in the end? Looking in the mirror sometimes irritated her. Still, harboring such thoughts did not mean she did not appreciate her beauty, at least. Or that she wanted it gone.

In any case, Cecile's days passed aimlessly by until one day some attendants from the main palace suddenly barged into her villa. They claimed that the king had called for her and they practically dragged her away with them. "Come right this instant?!" she echoed, incredulous. "Hang on! Let go, will you?! Why are you doing this?"

“You will know upon arrival,” an attendant told her. “It will be something good.”

Yeah, right. If it was something good, why were none of them capable of looking her straight in the eye? Just as she had expected, her father, the king of Navitan—whom she was meeting for the first time ever, by the way—spouted nonsense at her immediately upon laying eyes upon her.

“Congratulations,” he said. “Your marriage partner has been decided!”

He was acting as friendly as if he had just spoken to her yesterday. At that, Cecile politely issued him a formal greeting, exasperated. “First of all, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Father,” she droned. Despite the fact that she had waited for twenty years since her birth to finally speak to him, she felt no joy, affection, or anything else of the sort. Nothing at all.

How is it that they did not resemble each other in the slightest? Apart from his platinum blond hair and green eyes, her father looked like a complete stranger. Perhaps her mother, whose face she had similarly never seen before, was who she took after. Maybe she had been an amazing beauty.

“You mentioned a marriage partner?” Cecile continued.

The king nodded. “That’s right. My heart’s been aching with worry that you’ve yet to marry despite being of age, but—”

“Oh, like hell it was,” she muttered.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. Please continue.”

He coughed, clearing his throat. “As I was saying, I was searching far and wide for a suitable groom when I happened to receive a fantastic proposal letter.”

Really now, who on earth was the sender to cause the king to make such a big deal out of it? She waited for him to speak, her expectations rather bland. She didn’t think she’d be startled by whatever name he had up his sleeve.

“To my utter surprise, the letter was from...”

“From...?”

“Emperor Estian!” he exclaimed.

A horrific scream immediately tore from Cecile’s mouth at the revelation. She hadn’t braced herself enough, apparently. Like, what? Emperor Estian? Huh?

The king laughed aloud. “You must be so happy that you’re screaming with joy!”

“N-N-No—h-hold on a second—”

“For you to be so thrilled you’re even stuttering... Oh, what a relief! Now then, prepare to leave for the Empire at once and—”

“Are you nuts?!” Cecile shrieked. She suddenly didn’t give a damn who she was talking to, king or not. “Why don’t you just kill me now, instead?!” She had prepared herself for an eventual arranged marriage to some opportunistic nobleman, but not this. After all, she knew who Estian was. He was a notorious tyrant and a man dubbed as the continent’s greatest madman.

As soon as he ascended the throne at the young age of sixteen, he personally lopped off the heads of countless relatives, sparing no one, whether they were from the maternal or paternal side of his family. He convicted them of treason and hung the heads he cut at the entrance of the imperial palace as if to purposefully exhibit the gruesome sight to the masses, intent on striking fear into their hearts. One official bravely denounced him as having committed a grave moral transgression, but he didn’t even blink an eye as he captured the official and the official’s family, seeing to their end.

“You wouldn’t have dared to speak in such a way had you tasted the poison I had taken. So, I had it prepared. I fed your firstborn son a dose,” Estian had said. The official paled at the words, blanching dreadfully. “Why the face? It almost looks as if you know how painful the poison can be.”

“Y-Your Majesty, I...”

The official could hardly speak. Meanwhile, his eldest son writhed on the floor, bleeding from every orifice in his body until he eventually died. It was then that Estian tossed the official's second son a sword and a bottle of the same poison his brother had just suffered from, saying, “Make your choice. Kill your father and live, or take the poison and die.”

The official's second son took in the sight of his brother's corpse and picked up the sword. Stepping forward, he stabbed his trembling father. The official crawled helplessly along the floor, impaled upon harsh steel, but Estian gazed down upon him indifferently.

“It appears he still breathes,” he said, his voice low, “so feed him some of the poison as well.”

Hesitant, someone protested weakly. “Your Majesty, that...”

“A fine way to die, wouldn't you say? Knowing firsthand the potency of the very same poison he had ordered.”

With that admission, people had come to realize that the official crawling at the emperor's feet had once sought his life. From then on, the voices of dissent that once riddled the empire vanished. Following his succession, the emperor became a frenzied warlord, waging battle as if all of the world's nations were the bane of his existence. A decade later, there wasn't a single country out there that wouldn't kneel beneath him.

Naturally, that was also true of the kingdom of Navitan. Be that as it may, however, one must still wonder: why? How come?

“Wh-Why the hell would Emperor Estian send a letter proposing marriage to a tiny country like this...?” Cecile asked. She simply could not comprehend it. The continent was packed with other countries he could order a wife from, so why pick Navitan?

“Tiny?” the king exclaimed, completely missing the point. “Our country of Navitan is most definitely—”

“Yeah, okay, whatever. Why did he send the letter?!”

Cecile's mighty shout effectively cowed the king, reducing him to stutters. "Th-That is to say..." He trailed off, handing her the letter of proposal stamped with the emperor's crest.

She took it and began reading only to erupt mere moments later, astonished and disbelieving. "I had harbored no plans for marriage, but I have to get married anyway because people are getting up to no good since I lack an heir?" she read aloud. "And he chose the country to send this letter to by lot? And this, what's this? 'Send me a healthy princess capable of bearing children well since I need a successor'? What does he think I am?! His broodmare?!"

"In-Insolence!" the king interjected. "That's a letter from the emperor himself! Watch your mouth!"

"You think I care about that right now?!" She hurled the letter to the floor in fury. The king immediately rushed to pick it up, carefully handing it over to the head chamberlain afterwards.

"Regardless, with things being as they are, you must go. I feel relieved to hear your voice so full of vim and vigor. Here." The king began to signal his attendants. "What are you all doing? Prepare for the princess' departure!"

"What?! Since when have you ever treated me like a princess?!" Cecile protested.

"Since today!"

Heeding the king's commands, attendants scurried to Cecile's side, taking hold of her and pulling her with them. On her way out, her brothers and sisters—whom she had never met before, either—waved farewell as they stood off to the side, watching her go.

"I love you, Cecile!" they said. "We shan't ever forget you!"

"I'll remember you, Cecile!"

"It was nice knowing you! Let's never meet again!"

"I'll take good care of your corpse!"

Cecile seethed. Remember her? What? She didn't even know who they were! And even after putting that fact aside, was any of that what someone would say to their half-sister after finally meeting them for the first time? Why didn't they all just curse her instead, for crying out loud!

As fellow princes and princesses, they all had green eyes and platinum blond hair almost eerily identical to Cecile's, yet they cheerily bid her farewell as she was dragged away against her will. So, of course, she flipped them all off.

*

That had been a month ago.

Eventually, Cecile was brought to the Empire. There, she stayed at a mansion near the imperial palace to study the empire's etiquette and history for a month. Her studies covered things ranging from the emperor's likes and dislikes to even as far as matters regarding the bedroom.

All her tutors were wrought with sympathy. "I pray that you survive," they told her. When the day of the wedding finally arrived, they saw her off, dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs as she climbed aboard a coach. No matter how she looked at it, the sight they made was less 'sending a bride to her wedding' and more 'sending a hearse to a funeral'.

She wasn't dead yet, but, well... She would be soon. She had listened to many stories about Estian while staying in the mansion and for the most part, they were about how often he murdered people. Sometimes she'd hear talk about how curious the Empire's citizens were as to how long she'd last before he would kill her, too. How many days would Cecile, the emperor's newfound wife-to-be, survive?

As she was lost in thought, the coach came to a stop at last. Imperial attendants opened the door of her coach, revealing the striking spectacle beyond it. Cecile sucked in a sharp breath. Countless soldiers were

positioned in an impressive array alongside a long red carpet as petals danced in the air.

To think she'd march to her death amongst such extravagance... She felt herself boiling with further anger. She had lived quietly up until now, all cooped up in her royal villa and prepared for a life where she'd be sold off, but still, wasn't it too much to just leave her to die? Ire shot through her every pore as she thought of the kingdom of Navitan. After washing their hands of her, they just picked their nice, comfy lives back up, huh? Wasn't that right?

If she was going to die anyway, she wasn't going to roll over quietly. It would be fun to take some people along with her. Enough to stave off the boredom she'd feel on the road to perdition, at least.

Since they couldn't be together in life, then let them meet again in death. This she swore to her precious father and her dear half-siblings.

"Princess Cecile?" an imperial attendant called, confused. Since she wasn't getting off the carriage, they had to try for her attention. "His Majesty is waiting. You must hurry."

A corner of her mouth curled up. Well, she was going to die anyway, so why not raise a little hell? With an air of firm determination, she parted her lips to speak.

"No," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I said I don't wanna."

"Wh-What do you...?"

Cecile beamed at the bewildered attendant. "I'm not taking a single step out of here until His Imperial Majesty comes and picks me up himself."

And thus began her quest for madness.

A very long time ago, Cecile said something to her maids at the royal villa. “Someday, I wanna do something that’ll make others think, ‘Is she crazy?’ at least once,” she began. “Whatever happens after, don’t you think that’d be fun?”

She had pondered over several ideas pertaining to this concept at the time: switching up the signs in the royal palace so they’d all be incorrect, ordering lots of different kinds of food only to take a single bite out of them, walking around wearing winter clothes on a midsummer’s day... None of what she imagined involved putting her life on the line, yet, here she now stood: lobbing absurdities at the emperor in a bid for a swift death on her wedding day.

As soon as she began to truly register the words that had passed through her lips, her heart began to hammer wildly in her chest, practically slamming itself against her ribcage. It was yelling at her. “Are you nuts?” it seemed to say. “What have you done?!”

“I’m sorry, Heartie, dear,” Cecile thought in reply. “Must be tough being you when Brainie and Mouthie are so insane.”

This was the first time she had ever had to offer her own heart condolences, and as she lamented the fact, she surveyed her surroundings once more. The attendants and knights who had been near her just a while ago were now gazing upon her with eyes of combined compassion and pity. The look was identical to the one the people of Navitan would adopt after catching sight of her. It foretold of the life awaiting her if she were to quietly do as she was told today.

If she had a future, it’d involve being married to a man whom she held no fondness for. She would spend nights with him and days tip-toeing upon thin ice around him simply to keep her neck upon her shoulders. Then, when her breath would finally leave her, she’d be buried somewhere without a care. With no one to care.

It was her mother’s fate. The very same, with no one besides her forgotten daughter left to lay flowers upon her grave.

Cecile didn't want to live that way.

The tutors who had spent the last month teaching her also told her, in detail, of how many people the emperor had killed so far, as well as how he killed them. Listening to their accounts, she realized that her life must've been akin to a fly in his eyes. Actually, no. It must've been even worse. At least a fly could fly away!

It was better to go out with a bang than to live in constant fear of death. She thought about what people might say about her after she was buried today and came to the conclusion that, at the very least, her death would leave more records behind than her mother's.

*

"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

The astounded voices of the ministers rang throughout the cathedral where the emperor was currently present, awaiting his new bride. They stared disbelievingly at the attendant who had brought the news, flabbergasted at what had just left the attendant's mouth.

"S-Spoken word for word," the attendant nervously reiterated, "Princess Cecile... Has declared that, as per Navitan custom, she will not move a single step until her groom, His Majesty, comes to escort her in person." The attendant paused. "And..."

"And?"

The contents of this message so far sounded dumbfounding enough, yet there was still more to it? It was all so ludicrous that it elicited another rising octave of protest from the surrounding ministers. In fact, the pontiff standing behind them had already begun to make the sign of the cross for Cecile, looking to the heavens as he whispered, "O Lord, I pray that thou embrace the soul of thy poor child now coming."

The attendant continued to stammer. "Th-That is to say..."

“Speak, will you?!” the ministers urged.

“Furthermore, she asked, as per Navitan custom, for His Majesty to carry her into the cathedral in his arms!”

The ministers could not suppress their thoughts in the end. “Huh? Is the princess out of her mind?” they cried. “Asking whom for what?!” Faces pale, they chewed over this development. As a mere princess from some small, backwater country coming to marry the emperor of their powerful empire, it was only right for her to consider everything an honor and simply do as she was told, yet she dared to issue such a demand? Going as far as to have the emperor come escort her himself? And have him carry her in, at that?

Their temples began to throb. At first, they had been relieved that no blood would be spilt as today was an auspicious occasion of holy matrimony, but they did not expect things would turn out like this. At this rate, they’d see the bride’s blood spilt before anything had even begun. None of them expected the bride to bring this upon herself.

Surprisingly enough, the attendant continued, still just as anxious as before. “A-And...”

“Are you saying she still has more to ask?”

“That was only the beginning.”

They paused. “What?” Only the beginning? Those two requests were ridiculous enough on their own, but there was even more?

The attendant looked plenty agonized himself as he stood before the shocked ministers. He had to shut his eyes tightly to compose himself first before he opened up a list and began to read from it. “As per Navitan custom, she has requested for the flower petals being thrown around to be changed from white to red. And, also as per Navitan custom, male attendants are to wear red hats, female attendants are to wear red floral crowns, and...”

The never-ending litany of demands leaving the attendant’s mouth finally pushed the ministers to their limit. They exploding, shouting,

“Enough! Navitan this, Navitan that! Is the princess unaware that this is the Empire?! Here in the Empire, we follow Empire laws, Empire this, and Empire that! What gall she has, raving on about following such customs!”

“Ah, regarding that...”

The ministers paused. “That’?”

The attendant gulped. “I’m sure His Majesty won’t be so petty as to reject these minor requests, seeing as how I’ve come such a long way,’ she said.”

At this point, the ministers couldn’t even keep their astonishment up anymore. They had asked for a bride for their emperor, but instead they had gotten a psychopath. Never before had they born witness to such a novel means of declaring war. In the minds of the ministers, the kingdom of Navitan had just been added to the list of countries that were eventually going to be razed down. They burned with enmity despite having never visited Navitan even once.

At that moment, a low voice silenced them all at once. “Are there really such customs in Navitan?” it said.

The ministers turned toward its source. Right before the altar was an expressionless young man, standing tall in a white tuxedo. Estian, ruler of this nation, remained quiet unlike his floundering ministers. He seemed lost in thought.

They renewed their squawks. “Your Majesty!” they began. “What does that matter? You need only give the word and your loyal subjects will behead that lunatic outside before setting off immediately to obliterate the whole of her tiny kingdom!”

The knights present knelt, their swords rattling by their hips. “Pay no heed, Your Majesty!” they assured Estian. “Their country will disappear as of today, and as such, their customs will also become nothing!” After all, how many countries had their swords felled at the order of the emperor? One more could surely be added to that count.

Estian gazed down at a minister who had also knelt before him and clicked his tongue. “Didn’t you say to keep wars limited to three instances a year?”

“Upon careful consideration, I believe four times will also be fine,” the minister replied.

“Is that right? Then I shall initiate war with the dukedom of Etia next month. Adjust my schedule accordingly,” Estian said. He had made the declaration as casually as one would when deciding on what to have for dinner. Then, he began to walk away.

“Your Majesty! Where are you heading?”

“What do you mean ‘where’?” The corner of Estian’s mouth curled up slightly. “It’s only right for a generous groom such as I to accept the requests of my bride after she’s come such a long way, is it not?”

The ministers’ screams died in their throats as they beheld the emperor’s expression. He had smiled. They hadn’t seen him do that since his coronation.

*

Right or left? Cecile was lost in thought as she listened to the band’s music and the ambient sound of flower petals floating through the air, wondering what direction her head might roll once it got lopped off. The doubtlessly enraged emperor was bound to give the order eventually.

As she waited for the verdict, bathing in the now-furious gazes of the other people around her, she yawned in boredom, covering her mouth slightly as she did so. The malignant looks sharpened after the yawn, satisfying her immensely. Inwardly, she wanted to cry out to them: “Hate me more, please! Hate the Navitan princess!”

Reading the current situation, it honestly seemed like even without her acting any further, Navitan had already secured itself the top-most spot

on the Empire's doomed list. Such scary looks they gave her! Everyone was exceedingly displeased with her after causing this uproar, that was for certain. Nevertheless, regardless of the vitriol in their eyes, Cecile didn't feel the slightest bit remorseful.

Her emotions surprised her, actually; despite essentially dragging a country straight to its ruin, she didn't feel an ounce of guilt. "Me thinks that I've been born with quite the talent for being a bad girl," she mused to herself. Alas, what a shame it was to have discovered such a talent so late in life. Awakening her genius upon her death day meant she didn't have any time to flaunt this newfound ability of hers.

She plucked at the petals of the bouquet she held in her hand, taking each one by one. Making up all those customs definitely had her stretching things a bit, but she had spoken without fumbling even once. She had lied to the attendants with a perfectly straight face. Honestly, her tongue was basically made out of pure silver. Nothing but nonsense left her lips and she blamed every bit of it on Navitan for added authenticity.

How did the emperor feel about her home country after the attendant delivered her demands? Surely, his face had to have contorted more and more every time he heard the kingdom's name.

Stretching, Cecile gazed at the cathedral's shut doors. Then, she cupped her chin, resting her head in her hand. Her maids hemmed as if to protest her bad posture, but she paid them no mind. Maybe she should consider writing a will now that she had nothing else to do?

On second thought, she shook her head. She had no family or relatives to receive the will, anyway. Besides, even if she did, she didn't have anything to leave in their possession. Perhaps her will would go to the emperor if she died after being wed? He'd legally be her family by then, after all.

The thought brought her a tinge of regret. She probably should've raised hell after the wedding, that way she could've written a bratty will, too.

Suddenly, the cathedral doors opened and through them came a man decked in a white tuxedo. He began walking toward her coach. Cecile

didn't even have to ask who he was because the knights knelt in salutation and the people that had once been throwing petals in the air knelt down, pressing their foreheads to the ground.

This had to be the emperor.

Cecile fixed her eyes upon him and gulped nervously. She instinctively scanned him, searching his form for a sword that might've been affixed to his side. Noticing that he hadn't carried one, an involuntary breath of relief escaped her lips, making her chuckle in self-deprecation. Even after making all this mess, it turned out that she still wanted to live.

Maybe his sword was too precious something like this. Maybe he'll borrow some random knight's sword instead.

She shook her head. No, that couldn't be it. Considering all the stories she had heard about him, he could probably just kill her with his fists. Apparently, in the midst of war, he had once killed an enemy with his bare hands after his sword broke. He was born with herculean strength, or so they say.

Estian's inhuman strength was another reason why people feared him, but, of course, she always thought that accounts of it must've been exaggerated. How could it be possible to punch through another person's body with one's fist alone?

As he drew closer, Cecile was able to examine him better. Then, her eyes grew wide. "Eh?" she squeaked. He had smooth black hair and equally dark eyes. Sloe-eyed and expressionless, he gave off a sharp, severe impression. However, that last bit didn't matter all of a sudden. When he came to a stop before her at last, her lips parted of their own accord. "Hello, beautiful," she murmured, entranced.

She hadn't heard about this? Like, whoa. She felt utterly bewildered. Never had she entertained the thought that he could've been handsome.

Why did she just assume he'd be ugly? No one had ever told her that he'd look hideous, so why did she end up expecting him to be?

Then, the reasons as to why struck her. For starters, she had never seen

a portrait of him before. Nobles would usually leave piles upon piles of portraits depicting themselves in a variety of poses upon every new commemoration they underwent. It could get bad enough that they'd even have to build a separate mansion just to store them all. If nobles acted like this, then royals—no, imperials—had to be much worse, right? But she had never even heard tell of somebody seeing a portrait of him.

Come to think of it, portraits were actually supposed to come along with the letter of intent when sending marriage proposals. One should never send a proposal without one, but the king of Navitan had never presented anything of the sort to Cecile. In other words, it probably didn't exist, because he surely would've gone, "Behold! Does he not look marvelous?!" if he had it on hand. Although, she would've just insisted it was all a scam if that were the case.

Secondly, no one had talked about the emperor's appearance. When she combed through her memory for anything related to his looks, all she recalled were words describing the 'bloody devil of the battlefield' and the 'god of war's incarnation'.

The god of war was ugly, though. The mythos surrounding him depicted him as heavily scarred and disfigured. If people sang about Estian resembling such a deity, how could anyone expect him to be such a beauty?

Well, it was partly her fault for not asking. She hadn't had the tiniest interest in the emperor as an individual, so she never asked about the color of his hair or how he presented himself. Not even on the very day of her wedding did she think to do anything about it. Nevertheless, shouldn't someone have given her some sort of heads up at least once if he was actually this gorgeous?

Cecile discreetly wiped away some saliva peeking from the corner of her mouth as she took in another look of the man before her. Still lookin' good. So good, in fact, that if it wasn't for the situation she was in, and if he wasn't the emperor, she would've invited him to have a seat beside her. Then, she would've asked for his name and his address while she was at it. Maybe not-so-accidentally accidentally grab his hand or something...

Oh, come on. Really? Someone this hot was the worst tyrant in history?

The cognitive dissonance was getting so bad that she began to suspect the rumors about him were all mistakes somehow. He looked more like he'd belong on a theater stage than a battlefield.

While Cecile was stuck ogling Estian, he began to speak. "The tutors who were assigned to you."

Confused, she tilted her head. What about them?

"I should kill the lot of them," he finished.

Those words were freezing water, right then and there. All over her head. They jarred her right out of her trance. He might've been gorgeous, but he was still the notorious emperor, and he was definitely going to kill her.

"Wh-Why would you..." she began, but right as she was going to ask what her tutors might've done to deserve such a thing, he stepped closer to the coach and leaned in. Reaching out to take her arm, he pulled her toward him, leaving her no time to even scream in surprise as she felt herself begin to fall forward at the behest of his powerful strength. Reflexively, she squeezed her eyes shut tight, bracing for impact with the ground. Much to her surprise, however, it felt more like she had begun to twirl in midair. "Eh?" When she opened her eyes again, she found herself in Estian's arms. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Incredulity displaced her surprise. A bridal carry all of a sudden?

"Didn't you say this was one of Navitan's customs?" he prompted. "I'm doing as you wished. What's so strange about it?"

"You won't kill me?"

"Why would I?"

Cecile blinked. "I was merely brought here from a minor country to give birth to an heir. I was chosen by lot, yet I began to spout nonsense about having you pick me up and personally escort me inside. I even demanded you change the color of the wedding flowers."

Before replying, he took a moment to simply stare at her. “I chose by throwing dice, not drawing lots,” he said eventually. “Ah, and not by number, either. I just settled on whatever county the dice rolled on.”

That rendered her speechless. Whatever the case, his choice was made without any tact whatsoever, wasn’t it? Too dazed to do much else, he managed to carry her into the cathedral before she knew it.

She turned her head to look around, and things were just as she had expected them to be. If the looks people gave her outside were bad, the looks on the faces of everyone here were practically akin to daggers being thrown in her direction. The keen edge on the gazes of some of the more notable gentlemen—who were clearly ministers of the empire—were harsh enough to make her skin prickle.

Well. Okay. She thought the emperor would be the one reacting to her like this. What was going on?

Despite the menacing atmosphere, the emperor made a beeline for the altar. Then, he looked to Cecile. “In Navitan, is the groom required to hold his bride throughout the entirety of the ceremony?”

She hesitated. “No...”

There were never any customs about grooms escorting and carrying their brides into the church at all to begin with. It was merely something she came up with because it had been a tradition portrayed in one of the romance novels she read some time ago with her maids back at her villa.

Things were going a little differently than what she had expected.

*

The wedding was over in the blink of an eye.

“Have all the ceremonies finished within ten minutes,” Estian ordered.

“But that's impossible, Your Majesty!” the pontiff cried, looking on the verge of tears. What kind of wedding gets finished in ten minutes? “Even

if the proceedings are reduced to the bare minimum, prayers would still need to be given and hymns still need to be sung, so how—”

“Then just pray fast and sing faster.”

The pontiff fell hopelessly silent. “Are you not capable of this much?” the emperor’s gaze seemed to ask. All the pontiff could do was gape in response.

“Why? Can’t do it?” Estian prodded. Then, he shifted, looking away from the pontiff so he could point to the high priest behind him. “You there. You look like a man who can pray and sing well enough.”

The man in question startled. “Yes?”

“You look like you can pray and sing pretty fast, too.”

“Y-Ye... Yes?”

“You’re the pontiff from now on,” Estian declared. “Well, what are you just standing there for? Both of you, swap clothes.”

And just like that, the pontiff was replaced. The priest who succeeded him managed to work a miracle, chanting all the necessary prayers and singing all the hymns in an impressive nine minutes. He collapsed right afterwards, though, because he was long past breathless by then.

The wedding ended and around thirty minutes later, Estian was sitting in his office. The imperial palace, visible through the windows, was still decorated beautifully for the wedding, yet the groom-turned-husband felt not a stir in his heart.

So. It had begun.

It was a publicly known fact that he had only went through with the marriage to silence the officials that had been pestering him about it. However, although he had done it to ease a disturbance, he had a feeling that it would bring about an even greater one in the coming days. His work had always been the same up until now. Most of the time, he’d just take care of state affairs and wage a casual war from time to time. Those two things managed to compose his daily routine on a consistent basis

ever since his enthronement. Today had been the only day to differ.

‘Cecile’, was it? Her name, that is. He had heard one of the officials standing next to him mutter it on and on. Pulling a document from one end of his wide desk, he began to read it.

Around that time, someone knocked upon the door. “Enter,” allowed Estian.

The door opened and Kane, the imperial knight commander, entered the room. He was a knight of strong build and Estian’s right hand.

“Regarding that order of yours from a while ago...” Kane began.

“Which one?”

“The one about the tutors who had been in charge of the princess’ education.”

“What, you’ve killed them all already?” Estian asked. “Were they that close to each other?” He had ordered their deaths because Cecile had called him handsome as soon as they met. This indicated that those so-called tutors hadn’t taught her about how he utterly despised talking about his looks.

It wasn’t because they forgot, either. No, it was clear they omitted that fact so that Cecile would earn his ire and invite her death.

“No, Your Majesty,” Kane said, shaking his head. “I was preparing to act when I suddenly received word that they were already dead. Suicide by poison.”

Estian nodded, unmoved. He had seen this coming. If they were caught alive, then the culprit behind them would have been revealed. They were either taught to off themselves before it was too late, or they were forced to do so. “Unsurprisingly, it appears a company of connivers have made their move,” he said.

“Was this not by your design?”

“Why do you assume so?”

“Because, you would have been closely monitoring everything

otherwise. You were apparently all too indifferent to the wedding procedures, were you not? That's why the enemy snatched the opportunity up despite the suspicions they might have held. What a great bite this was from the start," Kane mused. "Ah, how was the new empress? Did she look well versed in the sword? Or poison?"

Kane's curiosity had Estian sorting through what he could recall of Cecile. Versed in the sword? It would've been remarkable in and of itself if she could even lift one with her dainty arms, let alone swing one with expertise. Poison? Possibly, yes. He didn't sense the dark vibes characteristic of someone who wielded poisons on her, though. In fact, it felt like just a touch of it would be enough to make her keel over and die.

"I don't know about that," Estian settled on saying. "She was just pretty."

Kane looked astonished. "Pardon?"

Estian remained indifferent to Kane's reaction, opting instead to resume reading the document he had been prior to the knight's entrance. It was a report regarding the woman in question. It contained detailed information as to Cecile's status as a princess, how she lived, and even whom she had come into contact with following her arrival in the empire.

"Predictable," he murmured. Be it the tutors who had educated her after coming to the empire or the maids who frequented the mansion she stayed at, there wasn't a single person listed who wasn't suspicious.

It was so suspicious that she may as well have been their mastermind. It was a reasonable conclusion to come to after noticing how she had practically been swarmed by nothing but questionable people from the beginning.

Nevertheless, Estian easily perceived the scheme at the root of it all. The situation was perfectly set up so that if anything were to happen, Cecile and the kingdom of Navitan would take the blame for everything.

Estian put the document down and closed his eyes. For some odd reason, a flashback of Cecile looking upon him seemingly fearlessly, saying, "Hello, beautiful," kept disrupting the state of order in his mind. A

wave of irritation rushed through him at the unfamiliar sensation.

The plan was to bring in a suitable woman and smoke the culprits out. It would've been even better if they wrung their own necks.

What he got wasn't a 'suitable woman', though. Instead, he got something a little stranger.

"Hell if I know," he muttered to himself, leaning against his chair. "Whatever. I'll finish what I need to do today."

"And your schedule for the day is...?" Kane trailed off.

"I got married."

Realization dawned on him. "Th-That means—"

"Yeah." Annoyance spread across Estian's face. "Uninvited guests will come calling."

Kane fell silent.

"Well then? If you're done reporting, leave," Estian continued. "Today you're responsible for the security in the empress' palace. It'll get a little noisy after dark, but play deaf because I'm going to have an absolutely incredible night."

Kane stiffened. "Un-Understood," he stuttered.

After he left, Estian opened a drawer in his desk. Inside it, there were dozens of daggers neatly arranged side-by-side. He picked the sharpest one out of them all and placed it on the desk's surface. If things were going to play out as he predicted, tonight was going to be pretty hot and wild.

*

When was the emperor coming?

After the wedding was over, Cecile was immediately surrounded by imperial attendants and they led her to the room she was currently

waiting in now. When they had first arrived, the attendants bustled about, getting her changed, washed, and ready for the night. By the time she had regained her senses, she was left all alone in the large room.

The room was far bigger and more luxurious than anything she had ever seen in the Navitan royal palace, but it wasn't the only thing that oozed with extravagance. Be it the bed—so wide one could probably roll ten consecutive times on it without falling—the table, chairs, or vanity, there wasn't a single thing sitting around that didn't scream 'premium'.

Upon the table sitting at one side of the room was a veritable mountain of fruit, other foods, and alcohol. The arrangement was pleasing to the eye, but the quantity was simply tremendous. There was so much there that one could even mistake this room for a banquet hall.

Cecile drew near the plate of fruits, peeking around cautiously despite knowing that there wasn't anyone around, and cautiously took a bite out of a neatly sliced orange. The refreshing sweetness seemed to erupt in her mouth as the orange's juice rejuvenated her tastebuds. Her mouth had grown dry from all the tension she had been under.

"Yum," she hummed. Back when she was living at her royal villa, fruits were a luxury that she could only have during large events. Navitan was a country with a poor climate, so fruit supplies were mostly dependent on importation. It pained her because she was rather fond of them. Once, she had valiantly attempted to grow a fruit tree in the garden of her villa together with her maids, but it hadn't been a very successful endeavor. Still, all this wasn't to say that she hadn't had any fruits at all. She snuck into the main palace's greenhouse to loot its treasures plenty of times in the past.

Soon enough, she was gobbling up fruit after fruit as she savored the nostalgia of her fruit-scarce upbringing. Suddenly, however, something occurred to her and she paused. Estian wouldn't grouch about her eating first, would he? Just a little while she waited for him?

The thought brought the emperor's face to mind. Along with it came a question she had forgotten in the fever of her impromptu feast.

Why didn't he kill her?

She had heard his officials crying for blood in the distance as the attendants hauled her off following the wedding's conclusion. "We must wipe out the kingdom of Navitan!" they cried. "I'm ready to wage war this very instant! I'll burn them off the face of the earth!" they seethed. "They sent us such a crazy woman—simply outrageous!" they hissed.

"Yes, my sentiments exactly!" Cecile thought to herself in response, silently cheering them on with fervor. "Smash 'em up good!"

For a long while, she puzzled over why the emperor hadn't decided to kill her on the spot back then, but she just ended up giving up on speculating, flopping herself onto the bed. The pleasantly springy mattress felt like heaven against her form, and the soft bedding felt like bliss against her face.

She might actually enjoy being an empress if it meant living like this. She couldn't help but bubble with joy, lying on a cleanly kept bed after a meal of tasty fruits. Before the wedding, her entire mood consisted of the sentiment that she might as well just die, but now the thought was fading at such a heightened speed that one might even consider her shallow.

A moment later, however, Cecile's face grew dark once more. What was the point of having such thoughts now? The deed has already been done. While she didn't know why the emperor spared her for the time being, her fate was nonetheless set in stone.

She returned her gaze to the same table of refreshments from before. Her eyes zoned in on the considerable array of bottles placed next to the still-mountainous pile of food. Heading back over to uncork one of them, she took in the heavy fragrance that wafted out of it.

She didn't know much about wine, but this had to be expensive. The bottle was in a stylish wine bucket that looked to be made of silver, so it definitely had to be out of the ordinary. Taking a silver cup out from within the bucket and filling it up to the brim with wine, she took a sip.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. It was very strong. Her throat had begun to burn the moment she swallowed. "Wow, this stuff is no joke." Blinking slowly,

she felt the world start to spin around her. The heat of the alcohol was already spreading throughout her body before she had even placed her lips upon the cup a second time.

“Mm?” She rubbed her eyes. The room was starting to blur. What was this drink? Could alcohol get you instantly drunk like this? Was there a type out there that could do that? Wasn’t that usually what drugs did, not alcohol?

Hang on. Drugs?

She went over the changes occurring to her body again: her mind was growing hazy, her body kindling with heat. Her easy breaths had turned into labored pants. She vaguely recalled having heard about a drug that induced such symptoms. Where, though?

Oh, right. From the books she had been reading with her maidservants.

The titles flashed through her head: ‘A Hot Night’, ‘Forbidden Love is Always Sweet’, ‘The Lark Cries: Touch of Obscenity’, *etc.* Every single one of them were Books That Must Not Be Named. They were wrought with plot devices taken from a bible of clichés that set the lovers within them on an express track to the bedroom, free of any tedious narrative development...

Cecile flung the cup in her hand away, aghast. “Was this an aphrodisiac?” she gasped.

Aphrodisiacs. What kind of drug were they? Well, they were something that instantaneously burned reason away within the flames of desire—the sexual sort of desire, of course.

“Those sickos!” she cried. “Why the heck would they put something like this here?!” Her tongue doled out curses of its own volition. She tried to stick a finger down her throat to induce a gag response and vomit out what she drank, but it was already too late. Her strength quickly drained from her body.

No. Not like... this...

She swayed as she moved, dropping flat onto the bed. As her

consciousness began to fade, she wondered why something like that misleading drink was even here at all.

Damn that emperor. Was he planning on using it tonight? She couldn't think of any other explanation for it. However, for some reason, she felt a hint of pity for him amidst her anger. So what if the guy was handsome? He couldn't even get it up without using drugs...

Her thoughts continued along that vein as her eyes gently floated shut. When she came to her senses once again, the world felt as if it were shaking.

What the—

Why was this happening? Hang on, where was she again? Why was she like this?

Fortunately, she eventually managed to recall what happened before she collapsed despite her dizzied state of mind. Curses escaped her in a burst before she could help it: “That bloody goddamned emperor!”

“I get that a lot, yes, but it's been a while since someone's said that to my face,” came a voice. “How novel.”

“Eh?”

Cecile's eyes shot open. Suddenly, the emperor's handsome face entered her field of vision. He was gazing down at her. His black hair embodied the night sky and his equally black eyes held an unfathomable darkness within them, promising a mystery hidden deep within their depths. She thought he was plenty attractive when it was bright out, but she hadn't expected him to look even more stunning amidst the dim of an enclosed room.

That just wasn't fair.

She continued to ogle him blankly, but then when her line of sight began to shift downwards, she startled. “What the—why are you completely naked?!” she blurted, bewildered.

“Not completely,” he said calmly. “I still have my pants on.”

Cecile finally realized why the world felt like it had been shaking moments ago: the emperor had climbed aboard the bed and had begun to take his clothes off. Turning her head, she could spot the clothes he had been wearing lying scattered to the side, proving her theory correct.

Meanwhile, Estian picked up an article of clothing that had fallen and tossed it off the bed. It should have fluttered down nearby, but instead she watched it zoom past and slam right into the wall. He swept his well-groomed hair back, somehow nonchalant despite displaying a feat that definitely wasn't possible without a fair amount of strength.

She observed him with a hazy mind. He had good looks and a good body.

At some point, she decided to put off thinking for a while and just enjoy the superb sight in front of her. Lean muscles on a tanned body. She remembered how his muscles shifted, how the veins on his arms stood in stark relief as he threw that piece of clothing, and she gulped at the memory.

Hah... How did he know she liked this kind of figure? What she saw before her was the ideal, a physique that every male lead portrayed in the novels she read with her maids had. Back then, she and her maids had all sighed together, lamenting reality and the fact that handsome men tended to have lousy figures whereas brawny men tended to have lousy faces. Where in the world could one ever find a man possessing both qualities, they asked, yet here he was! This was where he had been hiding.

If only Cecile could take him with her to show her maids at the royal villa...

She stared thoughtlessly for a bit longer. Then, finally, a hint of reason struck her. "Wait a second. Why are you on top of me?" she asked. She was happy with him being half-naked and all, but why was he being half-naked on top of her?

He took a brief moment to think over the question before replying. "Why, would you prefer me on the bottom? Is that how you like it?"

"Uh, no? That isn't the problem?"

“Then what is?”

Her mouth seemed to take his questions as an excuse to spew her thoughts liberally. “For starters, I think feeding a person an aphrodisiac has to count.”

The emperor’s expression stiffened at her claim. “An aphrodisiac?” he asked.

“Yes, an aphrodisiac. Just how cowardly do you have to be to put something like that in here? Only scum would resort to such a thing. Those who do should all be put down,” Cecile said. Judging by how impulsively she was talking, perhaps her heart was urging her to die tonight, seeing as how she had survived the day. Even as she continued to speak, however, she marveled at how daring she was being in the face of her grim reaper. “I’ve known that such drugs existed, but goodness gracious! I didn’t expect an emperor to resort to them.”

“Hold it. I think you’re misunderstanding something here,” Estian began, but she shook her head.

“You don’t have to make excuses; I’m the only one who knows, anyway—oh, wait, maybe the servants who prepared it might know, too. Oh dear. But, still!” she insisted, a torrent of thoughts gushing out of her. “Sex without consent is a crime, you know? So are aphrodisiacs!”

He lifted himself off of her as she spoke and walked over to the table. He glanced at the bottle Cecile had opened. “So, you’re saying that you drank this and you’re suspecting it’s an aphrodisiac?”

“I know that it’s not alcohol. What sort of drink makes your body all weak and knocks you out just like that?”

“Well, you’re right. It’s not alcohol.” Oh, she knew it! Right as she was about to let another wave of curses loose, however, he said one last thing. “It’s a truth serum.”

A pause.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a truth serum, I’m telling you,” he repeated. “A very clean one at that, too. Why were you drinking this? I was only going to use it if things got troublesome.”

Cecile was struck dumbfounded at this revelation. Why, oh why, would anyone put something like that here of all places?

“Truth serum...” she echoed. “Were you going to use that on...”

“No, that wasn’t my intention,” Estian began, but then he narrowed his eyes. Suddenly, he shot a glance at the wall of the room before striding over to the bed and positioning himself on top of Cecile once more, pinning her down.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

“What I must do,” he answered apathetically. Then, he flipped her over so she lay on her stomach, roughly grasping her shoulders.

“Ah!” Cecile yelped at the sudden pain she felt shooting through her shoulder muscles. Lately, things have been hectic for her—especially given the wedding preparations she had to undergo—so her body was rigid and riddled with tension. Also, because she slept with bad posture after getting knocked out by the truth serum, her neck had been aching ever since she opened her eyes. Therefore, when the emperor pressed his fingers against her knotted muscles, he managed to elicit some screams from her.

“Agh!” she cried, her voice escaping her in an involuntary moan. “Hah—s-stop!” Before she knew it, she had wriggled under the bed covers. Under cover of darkness, she twisted in place, struggling to avoid his persistent touch and whimpering all the while. “N-No! Not there! Stop—stop it! Ah!”

“Stay still, will you,” he ordered.

“No! Knock it off!”

Every time his hands moved upon her body, intense sounds would escape her lips. The odd sensations wrung a tear from her eye, but then she realized something: it... actually felt pretty good?

While it initially hurt because the emperor only seemed to be targeting muscles that were particularly badly knotted, what came after felt liberating. In what seemed like no time at all, her previously sore neck now felt perfectly fine. As soon as she understood that what he was doing wasn't really all that bad, she ceased her struggles and entrusted herself to his touch.

"Ahn! Th-There...! Ah! A-A little—little more!" Cecile moaned, shivering and squirming beneath the combined pain and euphoria he brought her. At that moment, though, certain odd things about their arrangement struck her: a dark room on the first night of their marriage, their bodies curved together beneath the sheets, the sound of her keening voice echoing amidst the quiet...

Wait—hold on a second. Wasn't this the perfect equation to give someone the wrong idea?

Suddenly, she caught the glint of a razor-sharp blade in the darkness. Estian had produced a dagger from somewhere.

What? Was he going to kill her now? For all her death-inviting antics, she still feared the approach of her demise. When the emperor moved, jerking like a bolt of lightning, Cecile tried to scream, but everything happened all too quickly. She hadn't even been able to register anything. All she could tell was that she had been sent flying, tumbling away from him along with the bed sheets, and that the dagger that he once held had been viciously thrown.

A shriek resounded through the room, scaring Cecile into shrieking along with it. It wasn't a voice belonging to the emperor, and sure enough, after she tumbled onto the carpet with a dull thump, she turned her head and spotted the source of the shout. The sight brought another scream tearing through her throat.

There, crumpling like a ragdoll, was a man with a dagger lodged right in the middle of his throat. Blood wept from his wound. "M-Must—complete—the mission—" he gurgled. He still wasn't dead yet, but he was getting there. "Must kill... Princess Cecile..."

He lifted his hand into the air. Nestled in his trembling grip was a dagger as sharp as the one piercing his throat, and it was aimed directly at her. Frozen in place, she couldn't even compel herself to dodge the coming blow. She merely stared at it, wide-eyed.

Her mind was a cluster of thoughts. She was going to die. Why her, though? Why not the emperor? Wouldn't one usually think to aim for the emperor instead? Why was he going for her when she hadn't even done anything wrong?

Despite the frightening storm of questions that flew through her mind, she couldn't bring herself to voice any of them.

Thwack!

Before the dying man could throw his dagger, however, his body was sent flying. In that instant, his blade fell from his hand and rolled onto the floor. Cecile heard a low snarl erupt nearby, suffused with haunting fury. "You dare..." Estian growled, and she realized that he must've kicked the assassin away.

He saved her just then, didn't he? Tossing her from the bed and punting the assassin away saved her life. He definitely had to have been trying to help her.

Suddenly, Estian lifted several more daggers from his belt and began to sling them toward the wall. Prone on the floor, quivering, Cecile was left to simply lay there as she beheld the horror that began to unfold before her eyes. Before, she had enjoyed reading thrilling scenes like this in novels, but experiencing it firsthand was another thing entirely. She never wanted to go through something like this ever again.

Thwock! Thwock! Thwock!

Loud, explosive sounds followed the daggers' impact on the wall, broadcasting the force they were thrown with. Embedded in place, their handles began to oscillate, shaking from their sudden stop. Before they could grow still, however, dark stains began to seep from around the blades. Dark red stains. Blood.

Pigs and cows and such were impossible to hide within the walls, so the only conclusion Cecile could come to was that the blood was human.

There were people in there? What the hell was up with this palace? How could people be hiding in places like that?

Estian approached the wall and kicked it violently. It fell apart with a crash, and what had been hiding inside slowly began to fall forward. Corpse after corpse slammed into the floor, each with a dagger embedded securely in their foreheads.

“So, this is all of them,” Estian murmured. “They sent fewer than expected.”

Fewer? Huh? Four daggers were thrown, three of which were embedded into the wall. That meant a total of four assassins, but he was saying that was just a few?

Cecile held her breath as he resumed his seat on the bed. The cogs in her head were churning anew. What should she do now? Tell him he did a good job and take her leave? Or did she have to help clear the bodies out? She gawked at the corpses, still too scared to move.

Then, he stood back up and strode over to one of the bodies, hoisting it up by the scruff. The assassin had been larger than Estian himself, but he bore the weight as if he was simply lifting up a doll, easily tossing it out through the window.

So, it was true that he possessed herculean strength. She really hadn’t wanted to confirm the validity of one of the rumors surrounding him like this.

After the emperor disposed of the corpse like he would throwing a pebble, a splash could be heard a few seconds later as if something heavy had crashed into the water. He proceeded to do the same with the rest of the bodies, coaxing three more splashes. With that, he had effectively emptied the room of assassins.

“Clean, just the way I like it,” he hummed to himself, dusting off his hands.

Cecile looked at the wrecked wall and the pools of blood lying around and fought off the urge to ask, “Clean how?”

Next, he sat himself in a chair by the table and called for her. “Come here and sit,” he said.

She shot up like a puppy heeding its master’s command. “Yessir!” she shouted. Then, she knelt before him in submission, but that made him frown for some reason. After seeing the look on his face, she planted her forehead onto the floor with an audible thump. “I apologize. I was impudent for holding my head up. Please forgive my insolence.”

Gone was her conviction to death. Witnessing all those people die right before her very eyes shocked her right back to her senses. She didn’t want to leave the room like those corpses did, and she didn’t want to end up floating alongside them, either.

She should’ve just behaved obediently! Revenge? What revenge? She was aware it was far too late for regrets now, but she wasn’t exactly dead yet, so she felt the need to at least try to get out of this alive. Despite her rampant thoughts, Cecile was still, her head planted obediently on the floor.

Then, his voice broke the silence from above. “What an unpleasant sight,” he said.

“I beg your forgiveness. Shall I go a little lower?”

With that said, she flattened her limbs against the floor. The thin seams of the dress the attendants had put on her earlier fell apart then, and before she knew it, her bare chest was grazing the carpet, her thighs becoming equally uncovered. However, she didn’t have the mind to worry about it at the moment.

She heard him let out a vague sigh. The sound made her wonder how best she could flatten herself even further. Should she just stick her face into the carpet? As she was contemplating her best course of action, though, he let out another sigh, this time noticeably deeper. “What I mean is...”

He grasped her by the waist with his sturdy arms and lifted her up with ease. “Uwah?!” she exclaimed, immediately tensing up. Her brain began replaying the memory of how he had lifted the assassin’s corpses and disposed of them. Was he going to fling her out alive?

Contrary to what she had been imagining, however, Estian carefully rested her onto the chair opposite him. It actually felt like the time he had carried her before their wedding ceremony.

Before she could wonder at his actions, he picked the bed sheet off the floor and wrapped it around her. “Much better,” he muttered, satisfied after having swathed her like a caterpillar. Did she look that worse for wear? How come he left her face out in the open? He hadn’t done anything of this sort to the assassins, and it seemed like he disliked the sight of their faces, so...?

“You’re finally ready for some conversation,” he continued. “Your condition a moment ago... seemed a little unfit for that, you see.”

“When you say conversation...”

“Right. Something where I ask and you answer.”

Wouldn’t one usually define something like that as an interrogation instead, though? She wondered, but then she pushed the thought away. Knowing that she needed to obey him for the time being, she fervently nodded.

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Estian inspected Cecile as she sat wrapped up in her pale cocoon, compulsively wondering if this terror-stricken person before him was the same woman who had made all those bold requests prior to their marriage. He first noted how her eyes kept flitting back and forth, driven by her nerves, but then he caught sight of the slight swelling on her forehead.

How utterly weak she was.

Judging from the tinge of red on the sore, it was apparent she was going to have a nasty bruise with a bit of a lump come the next morning. Oddly, and suddenly, inexplicably discomfited by the thought, he muttered to himself. "I should've cut their heads off before throwing them out, after all," he said.

She gave a muffled gasp. He watched as she curled in on herself even further inside the bedsheets, apprehension clear in the cant of her shoulders.

It looked painful.

Just a short while ago, he had deliberately massaged her shoulders and neck to deceive the assassins. He could still recall the stiffness in her posture and the feel of the tension that riddled her muscles. At the time, he had purposefully targeted the areas suffering the greatest burden, coaxing forth the moans he had anticipated she'd make.

Cecile had failed to notice at the time, but upon her first cry, he had flinched slightly, taken aback by an unexpected, yet indescribable and ambiguous, feeling. Was it because of the softness of her skin as it slid beneath his rough hands? She had been dolled up by some servants since this was to be their first night together, so every time she squirmed beneath him, overcome by sensation, a subtle fragrance would waft from her silky hair.

He had never liked perfume before, yet...

Well, to be exact, he held an aversion toward perfume. They numbed the nose, after all, and as someone who needed to constantly be on guard against his surroundings, he couldn't afford such a hindrance. Distractions had to be avoided at all costs, so at the time, Estian shook off the strange impulse that had struck him and continued to move his hands some more.

After experiencing so much cutting and killing in his life, he had acquired knowledge of human anatomy, of muscles and how they moved. Thus, he utilized his expertise to pressure locations that would entice the

strongest responses from Cecile. She kept moaning, and soon enough, he managed to sense some movement hidden beyond the walls of the room.

He was certain that the sounds of her labored breathing and frantic stirring had led them to believe that he and Cecile were indulging in each other, distracted by their enjoyment of the night. While he had been waiting all this time for them to make their move, however, he didn't find them welcome at all once they had arrived.

"If it weren't for those fools," he had thought, "then right about now, I..."

But then he stopped himself, surprised by his own suppositions. If there had been no assassins? Then what? He gazed down at Cecile as she gasped beneath him.

High, breathless whimpers slipped past her lips as she melted beneath his touch. Her clothing was disheveled and tears hung on the precipice of her moistened eyes. Her blonde hair was splayed across the bed, glimmering in the darkness of the room as her gaze shone like crystals beneath the lamplight. He was incapable of wresting his eyes away from her, and his thoughts began to circle through who she was.

She was the woman who had come from a distant country to marry him. According to the vow officiated by the newly appointed pontiff, she was someone who would forever serve as his companion in life.

She was his wife.

The moment his mind reached that point, he felt the blood rush to his face for the first time in a truly long while. Something, he had realized, was going wrong.

"Name: Cecile Franvier Navitan, correct?" he asked, severing himself from his ruminations.

"Yes," she answered.

"You were born from a momentary union between the king of Navitan and a maidservant working at his royal palace. Due to your platinum blonde hair and green eyes, you were acknowledged as a princess of the

nation, but you spent your entire life confined within a villa.”

“Yes.”

“While you did manage to receive some basic education there, the only company you had were your maids, and it had been a hobby of yours to join them as they read their romance novels, correct? Your favorite stories mainly involved poor beauties doomed to be sold off that were eventually rescued by a handsome knight, leading them into beginning a romantic relationship.”

She hesitated. “That’s right...”

“And most of them were adult novels, as well,” Estian continued. “The titles were—let’s see... ‘The Imprisoned Princess: Weeping at a Knight’s Love’? ‘Canary of the Eternal Cage’? ‘Secret Love Beneath the Attic’?”

Cecile blanched. “I was wrong,” she eventually managed. “Stop, please. Just kill me now.”

Forget about waiting for him to throw her out, she was ready to jump out of the window herself.

*

Cecile had been nervous as to what questions would come up when the emperor said he’d be interrogating her, but never in her wildest dreams did she think he would’ve gone so far as to mention the titles of some novels she liked. To top it off, they were all titles that she had always been too embarrassed to read out in the open. She used to hide under her covers when she wanted to read them!

Every time a title left his mouth, she wanted to bang her head against the wall. Alas, wrapped in a bedsheet as tight as she was, the best she could do was flinch on the spot.

So, this was what it meant to die from shame. She didn’t think it was possible to get this mentally exhausted without the use of actual torture.

“Alright,” Estian continued, “that’ll do for personal details. Now, on to what I’ve been curious about: why did you want me to come out and carry you under the pretext of nonexistent Navitan customs?”

She wanted to ponder over what excuse to give him, but then her lips began to flap against her wishes. “I wanted to drag the kingdom of Navitan down with me for selling me off—hup?!” She hurriedly slammed her mouth shut, startled, but it was already too late.

Why did it seem like her mouth had a mind of its own? Bewildered, her eyes flit about before landing upon a certain bottle discarded on the table.

No way...

Following Cecile’s gaze, Estian’s lips curved into a slight smile. “Yes, nothing to be surprised about,” he said. “The truth serum you took is rather potent. Try as you might to divert your words or refuse an answer, it won’t change the fact that you’ll speak nothing but the truth.”

She paled at his claim. He observed her closely before he spoke once more. “So, sold off, you say? You must’ve been very unhappy about having to come to the empire in place of one of the other princesses. Do you hate this marriage that much?” he asked.

“But of course!” she said. “Who would want to marry Your Majesty?”

His face hardened at her answer, tensing right up. The sight of his expression drove Cecile to tears inside, even as a sense of admiration suffused her. She had no idea where or how they made this serum, but it sure worked wonders. It plucked the truth right out of her.

Estian remained silent for a while. She took a peek at him and discovered his stiff expression seemed as if it were somewhat shocked. Of course, she knew that couldn’t be the case. It was impossible for the emperor to be surprised by something like that.

She still got the feeling that she had to comfort him a little, though. As soon as she thought so, however, words began flooding right out of her again. “I mean,” she began, “now that I think about it, not everyone might hate marrying Your Majesty. There might be some who will like it. I’m

sure those people were miserable after they realized they wouldn't be chosen by Your Majesty. They probably cursed at me out of jealousy for having entered the wedding hall."

A beat of silence. Then, "What kind of person do you believe would want to marry me?"

"Uh... The sort of person who would want to enjoy all types of luxury and pleasure without caring for the coming day? Someone who'd wanna go out with a bang?" she proposed. "Besides, what with Your Majesty's reputation being so rock-bottom and all, they probably won't be criticized for most of their villainy—"

Honestly, at this point, what she had drunk may as well have been a magic spell to bring this sort of response out of her. Truth serum? She wholeheartedly wanted to smack her mouth senseless, but judging by how it refused to filter a single thing she said, she probably didn't need to.

But she wasn't wrong, though.

There had to be lots of people in the world like the ones she described. No, there were sure to be heaps of them. They were just hard to find because the candidates for empress were usually empresses who had already lived a life of comfort. If they were to search for empress hopefuls from among those who were just a little more desperate, they might've struck the motherlode. Who knew, maybe there were actually other princesses like her out there who were born out of wedlock?

There might've been some who thought that instead of living a life of perpetual anxiety, wondering who they might be sold off to and where they'd end up, it was better to be daring and seek out the man who held the greatest amount of power in the whole continent.

While Cecile was lost in thought, Estian's expression had changed. He resumed his inquiries. "You don't seem to hold such desires," he prompted.

"Yes. I wanted to live a long and quiet life."

"I see..." Her instantaneous response rendered him mute for a moment.

Then, he asked, “What do you think of me?”

“You are the greatest tyrant of this era. You’ve formed rivers of blood and sculpted mountains of corpses.”

There was a slight lull before he gave his next response. “No... Not that sort of thing.”

“Then what, if I may ask?”

“I just want your first impression of me. What I mean is... Say you didn’t know me as the emperor. How would you think of me as a potential husband?”

For a second there, Cecile almost thought Estian had stuttered a little, but before she could examine the thought, her lips released their floodgates. “Oh, wonderful,” she said. “Your face may be striking on its own, but your body is the real killer. You’re not too pale, yet neither is your skin burnt by labor. It’s an ideal tone. On top of that, when I saw you throwing those daggers a while ago, I noticed you had better strength than any guy I’ve ever read about in books. You’re supposed to lack musculature if you’re handsome, or, if your muscles are well-developed, you’re supposed to look pretty mediocre, but who would’ve guessed you’d have both going for you!” she exclaimed. “A marvelous face and a marvelous body. Like, whoa. I give you 10,000 points out of ten. Then, I’ll add another thousand for having a nice voice. If you weren’t the emperor, I swear I would’ve snagged you up and given you a life of comfort even if it meant I had to work every hour of the day. Even at this very moment, if it wasn’t for our current situation, I would’ve laid you down beside me and stared at you for hours. Oh—with your shirt still off, of course.”

Silence.

This... This damned truth serum... This goddamned fucking mouth of hers... Was there any way for her to roll herself out the window? Maybe she’d find some peace of mind floating by those corpses out there.

As Cecile suffered from the aftermath of her tirade, a smile crept onto Estian’s face. “You don’t say...”

“Wh-Why did you ask me something like that?” she groaned.

His smile grew deeper. “I think... we need to keep talking for a little bit longer.” He opened up a bottle that had been next to the one she had originally drunk from and then poured its contents into a cup. “Drink up,” he said. “This is the antidote.”

“If you had it, then you should’ve given it to me from the start!” she complained, hastily drinking from the cup he brought to her lips. She simply could not permit herself to say anything crazier than she already had. She really needed to start keeping her mouth in check.

Before long, she began to feel like she had when she first started feeling the effects of the truth serum. The strength left her body and she swayed in her chair. Because she was sitting before the emperor, she tried desperately to raise her drooping body. She had to stay seated at the very least—wait—“Eh?”

Wide-eyed, Cecile suddenly found herself lifted into the air, just like she had been twice before. “You wanted to talk, though...?” she asked, baffled.

“Oh, but we will.” His voice tickled her ears. “After I tend to some unfinished business.”

Unfinished business? What business?

*

The servants of the imperial palace restlessly paced back and forth before the bridal room. Everyone was aware of the commotion last night. How could they not be? At first there were moans coming out of the room, but then there were screams followed by a smashing sound.

“He spared her during the wedding only to off her at night!” people were saying. As soon as the wedding had ended, rumors of the demands issued by Princess—now Empress—Cecile prior to the ceremony spread quickly throughout the palace. Everyone had assumed that Estian would

set out to destroy Navitan when next he had the time to spare. And, of course, he'd kill his new empress before that.

The next morning, the emperor had left the bridal room in a good mood, which was extremely rare. Upon witnessing that, the attendants made the sign of the cross and fell into a discussion once he was completely gone.

"Who wants to go in and clean up Her Majesty's body?" one of them asked. Naturally, no one raised their hand. In the end, they decided on picking who'd go through rock-paper-scissors.

"Isn't the loser supposed to go in?" said the winning attendant, a maid.

"You say that like it's a punishment," another attendant began. "It's an honor to have the opportunity of serving Her Majesty, so of course the winner should go."

Thus, hearts united, the attendants pushed the winner into the room. The winner sucked in a deep breath, pressing her hands against her thumping chest. She could never get used to the sight of the corpses the emperor left behind, no matter how many times she saw it.

Death came far too often within the imperial palace. There was a time when she had turned a corner in a corridor only to be greeted by the presence of a decapitated victim. Once, she had even found one of her colleagues—whom she had enjoyed working with until just the day before—floating face down in the pond.

There had been no need to look for the culprit behind the murders. When she had encountered the beheaded body, the emperor was there at the end of the corridor, wiping the blood off his sword. Concerning her dead colleague, a part of the emperor's office staff—which anybody could recognize—was floating alongside the body.

At first, she had been so scared that she had begged the head chamberlain to let her leave imperial palace right away, but he responded as he always did when attendants came crying to him. He shoved her contract in her face and said, "Work your three years before going or you'll be hanged." It was a means of summarizing the long-winded

conditions stated in the employees' contracts.

When she moved to tearily start unpacking her things, the head chamberlain told her that she'd be okay as long as she didn't get any funny ideas.

Returning back to the present, the maid knocked on the door. "Your Majesty," she announced, "I've come to assist." Then, as an aside she mumbled, mournfully, "In clearing away your body, that is..."

No sound came from beyond the door. Well, of course. How could a dead person reply to her? She inhaled deeply, then opened the door.

"Eh?" Contrary to what she had been expecting, she didn't smell anything particularly bloody. All she picked up was the scent of wine and fruit, the scent of the rose perfume that had been liberally applied onto the empress, and something oddly fishy. "Um..."

She began sniffing about, looking around the room for the empress' body, when she heard a thin voice rise from the bed. Turning around to check, she jumped, yelping in shock. A slender, white arm had slipped out from underneath the bed covers, beckoning for her to come forward.

"Y-Your Majesty!" she cried, on the verge of tears. "You—You're alive!" She was so relieved she didn't have to clear away a corpse.

At the same time, though, she felt quite puzzled. The emperor had spared the empress? Why?

Dashing over to the bed, the maid soon discovered the reason why, her face flushing a bright crimson after catching sight of the empress' state. Empress Cecile's lips were swollen and she had red marks all over her neck, shoulders, and arms.

The newlyweds seemed to have had a very busy night.

*

Cecile lay in a large bathtub staring blankly at the ceiling. Through the

mist, she could see a mosaic of small tiles, but its beauty could not capture her attention. She just remained there, dazed, for a good long while before her gaze slowly drifted to her arm. There, she spotted a red mark on it, making her squeal aloud. She immediately dunked her head into the bath water.

Alarmed by her outburst, the attendants waiting outside called out to her. “Your Majesty! Are you alright?” one asked. “We should be there serving you, after all!” another cried.

She hurriedly raised her head at their clamoring and shouted back, “No! Don’t come in!”

With that, their voices quieted. Cecile could hear them backing away again and she sighed in relief at their retreat. Then, she poked at a red mark on her arm, worrying at it with her finger.

“Ack—” she hissed, pulling back after it stung. The pain reaffirmed that what had happened last night was not a dream.

She did it. The words circled around her head. She fucking did it.

She blanked out again, simply watching the water drip from her hair. She had slept with him. With the emperor. It wasn’t anything to be surprised about since they had just gotten married, yet she still was. Why? Maybe because she couldn’t believe she was still alive? Or, rather, was it because...

“It was so grea—” She clamped a hand over her mouth. What? What was she about to say just now? She was certain that the truth serum stopped working after she took the antidote, so what the hell was that? Smacking her mouth for its sins, she settled back against the bathtub and recalled Estian’s last words before he had vacated the bridal room this morning.

“I wish to stay with you for longer,” he said, “but I have to deal with those goons I tossed out. I’ll finish as soon as possible, so just keep resting. After I’m back, we’ll pick up on where we left off last night. I should’ve done that first, actually, but I was too busy quenching my thirst. See you again soon.”

With that said, he pressed his lips against hers, leaving one last kiss. Having suffered throughout the entire night, she could only lie still and accept it. When she began to squirm out of breathlessness, however, he finally drew away from her. Despite having remained with her for so long, he took a brief moment to level her with a gaze that spoke of his reluctance to part with her before he finally turned and left.

Cecile thought of her maids back at the villa. “You girls told me novels were only novels,” Cecile wanted to tell them. What was it they used to say when they would lend her their books?

“Princess, this is all fantasy. Fantasy,” they insisted. “Men like this only exist in novels. Don’t you ever expect any real men to be this perfectly handsome, well-built, caring, and virile. No such man exists in this world! They all went extinct a long time ago! If you ever find even one of them out there, I’ll give you a gold coin!”

“I did,” Cecile murmured to herself. “I did find one.” And he happened to be her husband, at that.

Her face reddened at the thought.

Her husband...

Thinking of the emperor so possessively? Clearly, she had utterly abandoned her senses yesterday. How dare she claim the high and mighty emperor as hers? The emperor did all the possessing around here. He was bound to no one.

She was going to have to be really careful with her mouth.

She thought back to the officials at the wedding hall. They had seemed ready to rip her apart on the spot. If she were to ever voice such possessive thoughts, it wouldn’t be strange if they flew into a rage, bellowing, “You must punish that mouth of hers, Your Majesty! If punishing it alone is too bothersome, then by all means include the rest of her!” before subsequently boiling her alive. Cecile rubbed her arms at the chilling thought before looking beside her at the wall of the steamy bathroom. She then began to trace letters into the condensation with her finger.

‘My husband’.

After writing the words, she lay there giggling, enamored by the thought. Out of nowhere, however, she heard a low voice emerge behind her. “What are you doing?”

She shrieked. In her surprise, she ended up splashing water everywhere, which erased the words on the wall. Cecile peeked behind her and cried out, “Your—Your Majesty! H-How did you get here...?!”

“Where in the imperial palace am I not welcome?”

“Ah,” she deflated. “I see.” Realizing she had asked a foolish question, Cecile discreetly reached to the side for a towel. She had taken a look at herself before entering the bathroom, and pushing aside the marks he left on her body, her forehead, which she had slammed to the floor last night, had bruised black and blue. And it had a slight lump, to boot.

How embarrassing... And for some reason, she felt twice that embarrassment at the sight of Estian standing proudly before her. She needed something to cover herself up with, hence her reach for the towel, but as soon as her hand rested upon it, Estian shot forward before she could take it and tossed it far away. She heard it strike a flower pot in the corner of the bathroom, tipping it over.

“I-I’m sorry?” She didn’t know what wrong she might’ve committed to have him suddenly throw her towel away like that, but seeing the broken flower pot gave her the impression that she needed to beg for forgiveness anyway.

However, Estian shook his head at her apology. “It’s fine,” he said. “Next time, don’t cover yourself when you’re with me.”

“I understand, but I swear I don’t have anything dangerous on me. The attendants checked me over before I got in,” she said, remembering the conversation she had with the attendants before entering the bridal room the day before.

“Why are you putting me in nothing but these revealing clothes?” she had asked. “Don’t you guys have anything that covers me up a little

more?”

Elegantly, the attendants replied, “We never know what you could be hiding,” before telling her firmly that they had no such clothes available for her.

This exchange was why she had assumed the emperor was likely concerned with security at the moment, so she jumped up from the bathtub and held her arms high in an appeal for her innocence. Her breasts were out on full display, and she had sprayed water everywhere, but she had already stopped caring about such things. She had shown him every nook and cranny of her last night, anyhow, so what was the point in hiding now?

Estian bit his lip at the sight of her and began to search for something. Spotting another large towel, he picked it up and tossed it over to her. “I changed my mind,” he said quickly. “You can just cover up.”

Cecile didn’t know what to say in response. He’d say one thing one moment, then something else entirely the next. Apparently, he had judged that her claims were genuine and she had nothing on her. Uncertain as to when his mind would change again, she quickly took the towel he offered her and wrapped it around her body.

Suddenly, he extended a hand. When she stepped back on impulse, startled by his abrupt movement, his hand froze.

“I was only trying to see where you were hurt. I saw the court physician waiting outside, but I thought it’d be best to have a good look myself first,” he explained. Then, he extended his hand once more, carefully resting it upon her forehead. She allowed the touch, and his cool skin felt at odds with the heat she had bathed in. It struck her that if he ever chose to squeeze her head in with that monstrous strength of his, she’d be saying goodbye to the world at that instant, and the thought was worrying. Although she was wrought with tension beside him, his touch remained unexpectedly cautious. Gentle.

“It’s become more swollen than it had been this morning,” he observed. “The bruise has worsened, too.”

She couldn't figure out why the emperor was interested in her injury even as she listened to him mutter.

Oh, maybe...

Before she had entered the bathroom, she heard the attendants all gasp after seeing her. They probably thought the injury on her forehead had been caused by the emperor. Well, that explained it, she supposed. He must've wanted to take a look, affronted by the false allegations stacked up against him. He had been labeled an abuser out of the blue, after all.

"I'll be going, then," Estian said next.

She grew wide-eyed. "What?"

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I was just wondering if you had visited because you had something to do..."

"I've done what I came to do." His finger pressed ever so softly against Cecile's forehead, his movements tender. "All that's really left is to do some dicing."

*

Kane felt like something was going wrong. He had arrived at the emperor's office that morning only to discover that Estian was nowhere to be found. Never—not once—had the emperor arrived later than Kane to his own office before, so Kane just stood there, bewildered at this unprecedented occurrence.

That was when Estian entered the room at last. Somehow, though, he seemed different than his usual self. He was supposed to be in a gruff mood after having to face all of those intruders last night, yet no such signs of displeasure could be found on his face.

Kane questioned him cautiously. "How was your evening, Your Majesty?"

There were four assassins. There had been no intrusions within the imperial palace for a while, yet they attacked on the wedding night as if they had simply been waiting.

“A bit... Strange,” Estian replied.

Kane nodded with an understanding expression. Upon further investigation, it had been revealed that all four of the assassins were completely unrelated to each other. Four people sent by different entities each? Something like this had never happened before. “I understand. It must have been your first time experiencing such a thing,” he said.

“Was smaller than I thought, for starters.”

“Is that so?” Had one of the assassins been small? The bodies floating in the pond didn't seem all that small, though?

“And softer than I imagined, too.”

Kane's face contorted oddly. “Pardon?” he asked. What in the world? Softness in regards to an assassin? He had no idea what Estian was talking about. Had it been easy to stab one through the belly or something?

Estian abhorred coming into contact with others, but that was an inevitable thing considering how he had been raised. His aversion extended so far as to prevent Kane—a long-time faithful subject—from standing beside him except when absolutely necessary. Yet, knowing this, he had touched an assassin? And the touch felt soft? The assassins were, without a doubt, middle-aged men, so where could the softness be found?

A dangerous picture gradually began to form in Kane's mind as Estian continued to speak.

“And even prettier in the night as well,” Estian added.

“I'm sorry, Your Majesty but who might you be talking about?” Kane asked cautiously.

“The empress, of course. What? Who did you think I was talking about?”

“An assassin.”

Estian scoffed. “Are you mad?”

No wonder he felt like something was off. Just as Kane was about to sigh in relief, he paused at the precipice of an important realization.

Hang on. Was the emperor calling the empress small and pretty?

The shock came late. While Kane was gaping mutely like a fish, Estian sat down at his desk and signed several documents. Then, he suddenly stopped writing, rising back up from his seat. He walked towards the door.

“Your Majesty?” Kane asked. “Where might you be heading?”

"Going to see someone."

Kane didn't ask who. Estian left and a long time passed before he came back. The moment he entered the office, Kane caught the subtle scent of roses and blood wafting from him. “Where have you been, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“I met with the empress. Then, I remembered an assassin from yesterday, so I diced him up a bit.”

“How in the heavens did you end up thinking of cutting up an assassin after meeting with Her Majesty?”

In answer, Estian threw something that he had been holding at Kane. Kane instinctively caught it and his eyes grew wide upon realizing what it was: a small metal engraving coated with bits of blood and flesh. “This is...”

“I opened up the body and found it inside,” Estian explained. “You know what the mark on it is, don't you?”

“This is the mark of the Holy Kingdom's zealots, is it not?”

“That's right.”

Estian's eyes radiated cold murder. The first assassin that had begun the attack last night had targeted the empress, not him. Why?

“I’ll have to find out why the hell the Holy Kingdom sent an assassin, and why they sent one after the empress instead of me,” he declared.

*

After Estian appeared and disappeared like the wind, Cecile left the bathroom. The servants that had been waiting immediately hauled her off to start dressing her up. After that was over, they led her to another room.

“This is?” she asked.

“Your residence, Your Majesty,” an attendant answered. “It’ll be where you’ll stay from now on. Worry not for any intruders. Seeing that His Majesty has done some cleaning recently, things will be comfortable for the time being.”

What on earth did the emperor clean? And why only for the time being? Did that mean it would once again become dangerous after a while? Cecile chewed over her questions as she walked with the attendants. Something was strange, though. One door was opened, then another door after, and then another door after that. She walked, walked, and walked some more. Cecile, tired of walking, ended up breaking first. “Uh, when exactly are we getting to my room?” she finally asked.

An attendant met her with a look of confusion. “All the rooms since the first door we opened belong to you, Your Majesty. Is there a problem?”

Cecile paused. “No... It’s—It’s nothing. Carry on.”

Even after that, the attendants continued walking for a long while, informing Cecile about the rooms as she reached them. “This here is the Room of Glory,” they said, “and over here is the Room of Blessing. Right there is the Room of Prayer,” and this here and that there, and that this and this that... There was seemingly no end to the explanations, so Cecile’s nodding grew increasingly half-hearted by the minute. They traveled like that for two hours until, at last, the attendants came to a stop.

“Is it over?” Cecile asked.

“No. This was only the beginning.”

She grew faint at the reply. What kind of indoor tour takes over two hours to complete?! Her legs were beginning to feel sore. Besides, she felt all languid after bathing, but her biggest problem was that her body demanded rest after suffering through everything that had happened last night. “I’ll see to them on my own,” she said. “You may all return.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

After the attendants left, Cecile looked back at her place. “Isn’t this a palace?” she mused aloud.

She had barely managed to reach the first living room after having to go through five doors. Beyond that, though, was a beautifully decorated garden that stretched out endlessly. In the garden was a pond where swans swam leisurely, and by the pond were rabbits hopping over for a drink. To the side of that grazed some deer, even. It was truly a picturesque sight.

“Being the empress really is great after all,” she mumbled. After gazing upon that peaceful scenery for a while, Cecile headed over to find a bed. She felt sleepy.

She had lain with the emperor until morning. Their coupling had been so intense that, somewhere around the crack of dawn, her voice had gotten too hoarse to cry out any more. It had gotten a little better, but the scratchy itch in her throat was still there. She massaged it for a bit before looking at the plate of fruits by her bedside. She reached out to take a well-ripened bundle of grapes and popped one in her mouth. The cool grape burst on her tongue and she closed her eyes to savor the refreshing sweetness that suffused her mouth.

Fruits were always good to have indeed, she thought. She was happy that she could now eat them every day. Eyes still closed, she fed herself another grape. So good.

These luxuries only extended as far as her life did, though. She thought

back to the assassins last night. Even if the emperor had no intention of killing her, she was still in a dangerous position.

She was angry and resentful every day on the way here from Navitan, grinding her teeth, and yet... now she couldn't care less about Navitan. All sorts of things had occurred in the space of a day, yet she had found calm after going through it all.

Why, though? What changed?

She mused over this for some time, but then drifted off into sleep before she knew it.

*

What later roused Cecile from her slumber was somebody's gentle touch. Their fingers hovered by her forehead before sliding down her face, but she unconsciously frowned at the ticklish sensation and shook her head. In response, their touch traveled down her jaw and over to her shoulders, slowly massaging the nape of her neck. She hummed in satisfaction. She didn't know who this was, but they were helping to ease the stiffness from her form.

Still half-asleep, she let slip a heartfelt admittance. "Wish I could live like this every day," she breathed.

The strange phantom responded to her wishful request, muttering, "Like this?"

She hummed in assent. "Eating lots of fruit... Having someone massage me where it hurts..."

"Is that all?"

Somehow, it felt as if the questioning voice had grown a little sharper. Its hands drifted a little lower, brushing by her shoulder blades and hanging there as if considering whether to continue the massage any further. This left Cecile pining for more. She hesitated slightly before

continuing. “And... If I had someone to sleep by my side at night... Life would be perfect.”

She was never one to fear solitude, but she had always felt a sense of emptiness in her lonesome. When she woke up this morning to find someone there beside her, relief, rather than surprise, had visited her.

Perhaps she had given the correct answer. The hands ceased their judgement and proceeded to press exactly just where she wanted as if to praise her for her honesty.

“Nng!” she groaned. The mix of pain and liberation awakened Cecile's mind. Wasn't she in her room right now? And this voice—these hands... Didn't they belong to...

She awoke, startled. “Your Majest-heck?!” She jerked up after her phantom's identity dawned on her, but Estian was quicker. As if he had foreseen her reaction, he pressed a finger to her forehead, stilling her.

“You've awoken?” he asked. Then, he laid her down again before lowering himself over her, his voice falling into a whisper by her ear. “From the sound of things, it seems like you have everything you wished for.”

“Y-Y-Ye—Yes,” Cecile stammered, nodding frantically. “I think so, too.”

“So, what are you worrying for?”

“I feel like the remainder of time I have left in life will be a bit short.”

Estian nodded. “You're not wrong. It isn't well-known, but before you became empress, other women were pushed into the imperial palace by ministers serving under me as well as royal families from other nations. They wanted me to take those women as my own even if I didn't choose to crown them alongside me.”

Cecile ears pricked up. This was the first time she had ever heard of this.

“The first woman who came died the next day and the second woman who came died a week later,” he said. “The third woman who came lasted a month, but she died by the end of it. I killed the first woman, but the

second and third I had left alone. I didn't care whether or not they died, and someone eventually killed them.” Estian paused for a moment, and Cecile immediately took the chance to ask about what had been bothering her.

“Did you sleep with all three of them?”

He cocked a brow. “That concerns you more than their deaths?”

“Yes.”

He wasn't the only one who thought her priorities were a little odd just then. She did too, but perhaps staying at the imperial palace was gradually affecting her, making her a little weird. Estian chuckled at the immediacy of her answer. “You're a bit of an odd one,” he said.

“It's because I lack a proper upbringing.”

“That doesn't matter. What matters is that you're to my liking.”

“I'm honored, but...” she trailed off.

"But?"

Her voice lowered into a slight mumble, barely audible. “You still haven't answered my question...” she pouted.

Estian laughed a little louder. “I didn't.”

“Excellent,” she beamed. “How perfect!” She clenched her fists in victory. Right before her eyes existed a man right out of one of her romance novels: a total stallion who was sweet at night, possessed both wealth and power, and—while he did have a few screws loose in the head—they were even each other's firsts.

“Don't know what you mean by perfect, but I'll take that as an honor,” he said, bemused. “In any case, I've taken a liking to you. I don't welcome the thought of having to do away with your corpse for some reason, so I'm going to teach you how to survive in a place like this.”

He caressed her face with his hand for a moment before he spotted the bundle of grapes she had dropped by her side. He picked a grape and drew it to her mouth, slowly pushing it between her lips. The grape burst

beneath her teeth and gushed, releasing its flavorful juices.

Cecile grew languid again, mollified by the sweetness. Estian took in the look on her face with satisfaction as he licked the nectar off his fingers.

He hated grapes. The first poison he had ever been fed had been contained within green grapes like the very same kind he had just fed Cecile, yet, for some unspoken, unknown reason existing within the moment, the taste failed to disgust him this time. It was almost delicious.

He bent closer, whispering into her ear once more. “Your means of survival within the imperial palace is...”

“Is?” Cecile echoed him pitifully. What in the world did she need to do?

The answer, however, was wholly unexpected. “To gain enough notoriety that you’d overshadow my own reputation.”

Her eyes grew wide in surprise. “What?”

What did he just say?

*

At the same time, in another corner of the continent...

The Holy Kingdom, unlike other nations of the continent, was a city-state surrounded by white walls whose people served God, aloof and set apart from the laws of the secular world. There, located in the deepest part of the kingdom, was a sanctuary where the saintess, the messenger of God, resided. Deeper still, reaching the very heart of the sanctuary, stood the saintess in question, offering her daily prayers.

Or, that was what she should’ve been doing, at least. Today, however, the saintess was standing on the kingdom’s white castle walls. A cold voice drifted from her lips. “So, you failed,” she intoned.

A man knelt before her, bowing. “Forgive me, Saintess.”

She shook her head at his apology. “This wasn’t the only chance we had.

We still have an infinitude of opportunities.” Her glinted with an unreadable emotion. “Opportunities for this world to follow its ‘intended path’.”

“Everything will happen in accordance with the future you have foretold, Saintess.”

She nodded. “Go back. I will call you again once you recover.”

“Understood.”

The man withdrew, and, now alone, the saintess began to hiss under her breath. “Fuck. Why can’t any of these fools do their job properly?”

If someone were present to listen in, they might very well have fainted. Who would’ve imagined that the most virtuous person in existence would be using some of the secular world’s crudest terms so naturally? She continued grumbling. “Why did I end up possessing the saintess instead of the villainess?! This girl’s a supporting character riddled with penalties! She can’t even make any careless moves!” she huffed in anger, flinging her fists into the air.

As she did so, blue cracks appeared where there should have been nothing, sprawling as if on impact from the force of her blows. They indicated the presence of the barrier surrounding the Holy Kingdom. Its purpose was to protect the saintess, but while it kept her safe, it also prevented her from leaving, effectively confining her within the kingdom.

She muttered to herself as she gazed at the barrier. “He’s my male lead,” she swore, gnashing her teeth. “Mine, I say!”

She had been a writer, the author of the novel ‘A Villainess for the Tyrant’ in another universe. She had crammed all her greatest preferences into the book’s male lead, the tyrannical Estian. He was handsome, well-built, ill-humored, the emperor, in possession of a painful past, raven-haired and black-eyed, etc., *etc.*

As a random added bonus, she even vaguely recalled making it so that he hated grapes.

Anyway, the plotline of the novel was simple: the female lead would

possess the body of Cecile, the empress. Meanwhile, Estian, who had no interest in his wife until that point, would suddenly develop an interest in her due to her unexpected change. They would eventually fall in love and, ultimately, live happily ever after.

Thus, when she, the author, woke up to find herself in the world she created, she had first cried with joy. When she realized she had become the saintess, however, her cries had turned anguished. “My novel, my male lead. Why has it all become someone else’s?” she had sobbed.

Unbelievable. Possession was something that had to happen to a villainess. How else would those around her feel the charm of her change?! There wasn’t a single good thing about taking over the saintess. Hers was a life of daily prayers and sustaining herself on one meal a day—essentially partaking in something no better than a continuous fast—all while living on some remote territory isolated from the rest of society.

Goddamn. She just had to make the setting like this, didn’t she? She couldn’t meet anyone unless she escaped this barrier!

She couldn’t meet Emperor Estian or Imperial Knight Commander Kane, and she couldn’t meet Mage Lord Richard, who was supposed to appear later on in the story, or Imperial Prince Ruin, who lived in the far south of the continent, either. The thought of remaining imprisoned in the holy kingdom, unable to meet her creations, the men of her dreams, pained her immeasurably.

“No,” the saintess lamented. She was supposed to possess the villainess’ body, change the tyrant’s ways, and enjoy some deep platonic love with the supporting male characters, yet everything was flying far from her grasp. Flying far, far away.

“I won’t stand for this,” the saintess hissed, uttering the same words a certain somebody else had used sometime elsewhere as she glared in the direction of the empire. “He was mine...”

Out of all the features she had given Estian, her favorite was that he was a virgin, but apparently, he had already married Cecile? Moreover, according to her informants, the emperor had already slept with her? The

saintess' breathing grew harsh and ragged. She exhaled forcefully. "Fine," she ground out. "I can give up one of my favorite tags. I'm rather generous, after all." Within the rankings of her heart, she demoted the keyword 'virgin' and promoted 'virile' in its place. She could just favor a different tag more instead.

The saintess recalled a character trait belonging to Cecile. She was a woman from a petty kingdom who had nothing going for her but a pretty face, and eventually she became intoxicated by the power given to her, freely indulging in luxuries and wicked acts.

Fortunately for the saintess, however, she was the original author of this 'story', so she knew how to change whomever she would end up possessing. Cecile had to die first. In order to take over her body, it would need to be an empty husk, first.

Recalling this fact, the saintess resumed clenching her fists. "Wait for me, Estian, my male lead!" she cried. "I'll possess the villainess' body and make you mine no matter what! I swear to return this world to how it should be!" she vowed. In her fervor, she launched her fist at the invisible barrier once more, making the blue crack in the air even larger than it used to be.

"Eh?"

The crack began to spread—the barrier was breaking. Now that she thought about it a bit more, all the previous saintesses only safeguarded it. There hadn't been any previous precedent regarding trying to break it. She feasted her eyes on the sight of the collapsing barrier, ironically destroyed by the one it was meant to protect.

"This is the power of love!" she shouted, excited.

If the barrier had a mouth, it surely would've called her out on her bullshit, but sadly, that wasn't the case. Once it was gone, she immediately leaped down the castle wall, landing with ease upon the ground due to the holy power she wielded. Spreading across her field of vision, a white forest greeted her newfound freedom. She would have to pass through it and several other countries to reach the Empire, but she

remained undaunted.

Determined, she broke out into a run. To the Empire. To her man.

“Love will save the world!”

A bird disturbed by the saintess’ cry flapped its wings irritably at the noise and took off into the air.

*

“To gain enough notoriety that you’d overshadow my own reputation,” Estian said, and Cecile almost couldn’t comprehend it.

A moment later, however, she replied, face solemn. “Not just anyone is capable of such a tremendous feat, Your Majesty.”

Estian paused, a beat of silence descending between them. He couldn’t tell if that was a compliment or an insult. “Would it really be that difficult?” he eventually asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m that infamous?”

“I believe your fame extends beyond the heavens, Your Majesty,” Cecile explained, eloquently replacing ‘infamy’ with its softer alternative, ‘fame’, in her reply.

Somehow, her matter-of-fact attitude made him feel a little indignant. “It can’t be as bad as you say.”

“Your Majesty need not be so modest. Children born on this continent learn your name before they do their mother’s. What’s more, if you were to ask any passersby whether they knew more about the sea or about His Majesty, ten out of ten they would answer the latter.”

He became quiet once more, feeling somewhat odd even though her words could technically be interpreted as praise. “But, if you try hard enough, you, too, can somehow...” He trailed off. Alas, he couldn’t come

up with a reply to her silver tongue. For some strange reason, no argument in his favor came to mind. Oh, how he felt it. Her words pricked at him as if they held a physical form.

On the other hand, Cecile's anxiety began to grow as she watched him at a loss for words. Was he unaware of how outrageous his past deeds were?

Cecile recalled some of the most exceptionally infamous accounts from his chronicles of madness. "What power could I possibly have at my disposal that would be enough to overshadow Your Majesty's achievements, such as when you reduced the entire Forest of Igillith to ashes, scattering salt over its land for ten months and essentially rendering it nothing more than a swath of barren waste?" she began. "Or, like that time you led a vast army to raze the wheat fields of Jaden's Plains, annihilating every last seed of wheat for that year? What of the Port Catanza and how you destroyed each and every ship sailing there, reshaping eleven duchies' western maritime trade routes and rendering them bankrupt? You hadn't lost a single drop of blood, either. You mustn't tell me that I can't surpass you simply because I'm just not trying hard enough, Your Majesty."

After having said all that, Cecile understood anew that the emperor had committed many horrific deeds. Aside from what she had already mentioned, there were also accounts of Estian demolishing several countries, wrecking the imperial palace, and killing all his relatives, too. It would've been a bit peculiar to include these cases in her report of Estian's fame, however, so she shut her mouth and spoke no further.

Her reply to the emperor's suggestion to simply try harder had Cecile glaring at the grapes next to her. Strange. It didn't seem like there was truth serum in the grapes, so why did her mouth shoot off on its own again?

She took a moment to mull it over. Was it because she just woke up? That was likely one of the reasons. Was it because it felt good getting fed fruit? That was also another likely reason. Still, that didn't change the fact that she had been attacked by assassins at night and nor did it change the perilous future awaiting her.

So, why was her tongue wagging so freely?

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sight of Estian's face, firm and silent.

How handsome. It reminded her of what she secretly wrote on the bathroom wall earlier in the day. 'My husband', she had coyly claimed.

The moment that memory floated to the forefront of her mind, Cecile realized why she was being so open with him. This man was her husband. Although she couldn't go around telling people that in public, he was her spouse on paper: signed, sealed, and delivered.

She finally had some family.

Her mother had passed away early and the king of Navitan, her so-called father, had left her neglected in a forgotten villa. No one among the Navitan royals had ever visited her even once. It was like they didn't know she even existed. The only ones by her side were her maids, but even they kept their distance, giving her a firm word of advice.

"This may sound cruel to you right now, Princess," they told her, "but we are not your friends. You mustn't think of us that way. Someday, you will have a family, but that will not be us."

At the time, she had nodded in response, her eyes full of tears. She knew that they had only said what they did because they meant well for her, so she took it to heart.

Cecile picked up the bundle of grapes and chose one of the ripest among them for Estian to taste. She wanted to share what she liked best with this man, too. It was the first thing she wanted to do upon gaining a family.

Estian, however, froze at her sudden gesture. Who in the world could dare to put food in his mouth? And, furthermore, a grape of all things? He loathed grapes for they were tainted by the memory of his first poisoning.

The juice he had briefly tasted from what trickled from her mouth moments ago was so very sweet, though.

Perhaps this, too, will feel different, then...

He tentatively accepted the grape at Cecile's fingertips, hesitating only fleetingly before crushing it between his teeth and releasing the flavor within it.

Oddly enough, it tasted pretty good. Never had he imagined he'd be able to eat a fruit he had not—no, could not—eat for the past twenty years. And to change in just an instant, at that! As he swallowed the grape, a smile blossomed across Cecile's face. The sight of it prompted Estian to call his schedule to mind. He had to inspect the knights, hold a meeting with his ministers, and so on and so forth.

All of no consequence.

Well, these matters of 'no consequence' were affairs which he had never once skipped since the day he had been enthroned as emperor. So, why did he feel like they'd be worthless today?

It wasn't like it'd be a big deal to skip out on them just this once.

Kane would've begged to differ had he heard Estian's thoughts. He would've jumped up and down, crying, "But it is a big deal!"

Regardless, Estian gently bit down on the fingers Cecile still kept lingering by his lips. She flinched briefly and seemed ready to draw back, but in the end, she didn't pull away. Rather, she began to caress his face with her free hand as if to challenge him to do more.

Estian's eyes fluttered shut at the sensation. It didn't feel bad. In fact, he actually wanted to continue to enjoy the feeling.

This made Estian certain of one thing: Cecile just might be able to do it.

"You don't have to achieve the same feats as I have or do anything harder than what I did. You'll be able to climb above me rather simply," he said.

"How?"

Estian laughed. "Like so."

With that said, he lifted Cecile by the waist, gripping her with both hands. All of a sudden, the world spun in a circle for her and she realized

that she and Estian had switched places.

“Y-Your Majesty!” she exclaimed. Finding herself on top of him in the blink of an eye, she flushed. By ‘climb above’ him, he meant it in a literal sense?

“How about it? Simple, right?”

She didn’t respond. “Are you kidding me?” she had almost exclaimed, but fortunately she had guarded herself well enough not to.

She was contemplating how she should reply when Estian drew her into his embrace. “Do you think anyone else in the world has ever climbed on top of me like this?” he whispered. “You’re the first.” He raised a hand to brush back her hair. “You only need to do one thing: become the master of this infamous emperor and have him at your beck and call. That’s all you need to do to raise your name above mine. Become a villainess who holds power over the worst tyrant of all time, and everything that is mine will become yours.”

Their eyes met in an intense exchange. Moments later, she voiced, at last, something that had been on her mind for quite a while. “That’s a very attractive thought,” she said, “but I’m having trouble understanding how it’s going to save me.” Like, do bad things in order to survive? Shouldn’t it actually be the opposite? “Wouldn’t I end up being hated by people for my villainy?”

“That’s a given, but there are some people who hope for that to happen, and some of those people happen to be my enemies.”

As the conversation began nearing more complicated territory, Cecile tried to dislodge herself from her position atop Estian. She couldn’t shake off the feeling of needing to assume a proper stance with a paper and pen in hand, jotting down notes as she listened, so she tried to do so, but his hands caught her by the waist as she was about to climb down.

Thanks to that, Cecile had to remain in a terribly irreverent pose while she continued to listen to him.

“You can wreak vicious havoc and my people won’t be able to do a single

thing to you. Those who hate me, meanwhile, will no doubt cheer you on. They don't want a wise, virtuous empress by my side. A kind and caring empress won't be good for their plans, you see, because they're always sniffing around for an excuse to hound me."

Now she was beginning to understand why he was urging her into committing such misdeeds. He wouldn't complain the slightest over whatever mess she would cause because, in fact, he'd just praise her for doing well, and anyone looking on from the outside-in would assume he was hopelessly enamored by her. They'd spread the word. Even tales of wrongdoings she had no part in would likely begin to spread as well, inflating into greater exaggeration with every ear the rumors would reach.

The emperor's adversaries craved a weakness within him. An empress who committed evil acts would undoubtedly appear to be a fine weakness for them to latch onto, indeed. Therefore, they'd leave her be until the moment they were ready to strike. In any case, she'd be safe until then.

"I understand," she said. "I'll do my best to raise hell." What other choice did she have if that was the only way she could survive?

He nodded at her. "That's the spirit."

"Do you think I can do well, though?" she asked worriedly.

"You can. You have the talent," he answered firmly.

She paused. "The talent... To become a villainess?"

"Yes. One could even say you're overflowing with talent merely by witnessing how well you can talk before me. The three other women who came before you couldn't meet my gaze even once, much less speak to me properly."

"But, saying I have the talent for wickedness with just that alone is a bit..."

Hearing Cecile's somewhat disbelieving tone, Estian pulled at her arms. Her body swayed above him before falling to his chest. He liked the soft feel of her against him. "You're not perfect, of course. You'll need some practice."

“Practice...?”

His lips curved into a dangerous smile. “We’ll start practicing with the time I have left.”

Chapter 2

All for the Empress

A commotion stirred the imperial palace. Be it court officials, knights, or attendants coming and going, they all shared a common topic of interest.

“I hear His Majesty is absolutely besotted with Her Majesty the Empress?”

A week had already passed since the shocking wedding of the emperor. On the wedding day, those who witnessed the bride claiming she would not budge until the emperor came to escort her had all shared the same thought: “Would you please just off yourself quietly if you've got a death wish?”

However, contrary to everyone's expectations, the woman survived to become empress and, surprisingly, she remained alive until the next day. That wasn't all, either.

The emperor, who had always been indifferent to women, spent the whole night in the bridal room, and, according to hearsay, he went to visit the empress whilst she was bathing the very next day. It was almost as if he couldn't stand being away from her for even a moment. After that, the emperor ordered one of the most beautiful palaces in the imperial palace to be given to her instead of the room that had originally been prepared for him. From then on, the emperor confined himself in that palace and didn't come out.

The attendants who entered the palace every day to deliver meals and clean up would come out with reddened faces, but there were rules forbidding anyone from speaking of anything they might've witnessed, so those who entered could not tell of what they saw. The bed sheets and ruined clothes they carried out spoke volumes in their place, however, hinting at the ongoing pleasure occurring within the palace walls.

One day, an attendant took a letter they had received from the emperor and delivered it to Kane. As soon as he was done reading it, he tried re-

reading over and over again, even trying it sideways, upside down, and exposed to a lit flame. Realizing there was no secret code hidden within it, his face was written with disbelief. The contents of the letter, however astonishing, were simple:

"Let everyone rest until the end of my honeymoon."

The knights who were preparing for an inspection parade and the ministers who were preparing to hold a meeting were rendered speechless at this unprecedented development. The emperor taking a few days off? Unheard of.

This had never happened before. Long ago, upon the day following Estian's enthronement, he had propped the head of his half-brother—whom he had beheaded for treason—on his desk and went right back to work. That was the sort of man he was. On that day, some court officials caught the emperor signing papers by dipping his pen in the blood flowing from the severed head he kept beside him. They did not dare to suggest he rest.

In any case, that was the emperor they had all come to know, so naturally everyone had just assumed he would keep attending to national affairs, honeymoon or not. Therefore, when all the court officials arrived at the imperial palace as per usual, they were astonished to discover that he was going to rest. And not just for a day, either, but for a whole week!

"What sort of person could Her Majesty the Empress be to inspire His Majesty to act like this?" they asked amongst themselves.

All they knew of her was that she seemed to have gone mad on her wedding day. Her face hadn't been very visible during the marriage proceedings due to her wedding veil, but the faint outline of her face that could be seen seemed to be that of a rather fine beauty.

"She did seem rather pretty, but..."

The more people talked about her, the more they realized they knew nothing of her.

The empress had been staying at her palace for an entire week, but she was finally going to make her first official appearance today. Court officials gathered in the central hall of the imperial palace for the occasion, fixing their eyes forward with tension wrought plain upon their faces. These men—usually too busy inching back in fear at the mere thought of meeting the emperor’s eyes—were now fueled by some limited-time courage to approach the view directly before them head-on.

Soon enough, trumpets announcing the emperor's entrance could be heard. All the officials straightened their posture and lowered their heads respectfully at the sound.

Regardless of however many odd things had happened recently, the long-time fear that had dominated them this entire time drove their bodies to move of their own accord. Two pairs of footsteps could be heard approaching the officials as they bowed. They had always been accustomed to the sound of only a single pair of footsteps, so this moment had them realizing anew that the emperor had wed and invited an empress to stand beside him.

“Raise your heads,” he commanded.

The officials obeyed as if they had been awaiting his command. As soon as they straightened back up, their gazes immediately focused on the person standing by the emperor’s side.

“Goodness!”

“Oh!”

“My word!”

The officials burst into a litany of exclamations. Differing from the wedding ceremony, the empress wore a golden crown instead of a wedding veil, and she now gazed out at them.

Was she always this pretty?

Upon seeing the empress standing there with a faint trace of a smile upon her lips, they were dumbstruck by her beauty. Her bright platinum blonde hair evoked the image of sunlight shining beyond a canopy of falling leaves and it was carefully braided so that every strand lay nestled in an elegant bun. Beneath her silken hair shone a pair of brilliant dark green eyes reminiscent of an early summer forest blinking beneath a fluttering fan of long, dainty lashes. There was even a subtle hint of a blush coloring her clear, flawless skin—a necessary thing present as if to warn the world that she wasn't a doll but a living, breathing human being.

It was unknown as to what care she received and what meals she had been fed, but with her clear complexion and youthful aura, the empress appeared vibrant and full of life.

Estian began to speak. "As you are all aware, I have accepted an empress," he announced. "I trust that the loyalty you have afforded me up until now will remain unchanged, extending as well to my other half."

Every member of the court lowered themselves to one knee and directed their shouts toward Cecile. "We pledge all our loyalty to Her Majesty the Empress!"

After their powerful declarations, they awaited the empress' reply. Almost all of the empire's court officials had sworn loyalty in disciplined unison. It was a spectacle that caused the hearts of all the servants in the back to race.

"You may rise," the newly crowned empress said, her voice ringing out clearly and beautifully. The officials stood up at her bidding, each feeling a bit relieved inside. She had seemed to be a bit touched in the head during the wedding, but thankfully she seemed to be okay now.

That was when it happened. As soon as they relaxed their guard—as the officials were waiting for her to deliver further statements—the empress whirled around to face the emperor, asking, "So when will you be showing me what you promised, Your Majesty?"

She suddenly linked arms with Estian and began to speak in fawning, flirtatious fashion. The officials were flabbergasted. The emperor was

thoroughly repulsed by physical contact from others. That was why—unlike the previous emperor and other noblemen—he did not allow any attendants into his room or allow them to assist him with their services. Even Kane had to maintain at least a couple steps away from him when accompanying him, yet the empress simply began to freely cling onto his arm? No one paying heed to the spectacle doubted that she would be decapitated on the spot.

Contrary to their expectations, however, Estian didn't. He just embraced her, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Didn't think you'd be asking for it already," he said calmly.

"You've just been repeating the same things since even before we got here, haven't you, Your Majesty? You said I'd be surprised upon arriving here, and I sure am, but I don't see a single thing you mentioned. Did you lie to me?" she pouted. "You told me I'd find the Empire's greatest treasure."

"Can't you see it before you? These officials are that treasure."

The officials in question were struck with nausea at the emperor's claim. Beg pardon? 'The Empire's greatest treasure'? Wasn't he the one who had asked them if they were prepared to hang upon the imperial palace's walls in twelve separate pieces each if they failed to prove their worth?

"You see, they devote their blood, body, and soul to their work, toiling like dogs in the truest sense for our nation," Estian continued.

Oh, but of course that's what he meant. The sickening feeling in their bellies finally settled down upon hearing the chilling explanation he provided. That was more like him.

Quietly, however, they bemoaned their fates with a choking surge of sorrow. Who would've imagined that they would live the kind of life where hearing this kind of abuse afforded them relief?

They wanted to go home.

Just as the officials began to ponder upon the subject of life, questioning where their lives were heading, they heard the empress'

sullen words. "You know this isn't the kind of treasure I wanted. I want to go back now."

"Oh, dear," Estian said. "How impatient you are, my empress."

The discomfort the officials felt reignited deep within their guts. They had been thinking this for a while now already, but it seemed like the emperor and empress were in a world of their own somehow. The kind of world that one might come across in a romance novel, full of pink warmth where lovers had eyes for none but each other. Above all, however... Was the emperor ever a man capable of speaking in such a caring manner?

Showing not the slightest bit of interest in the astonishment of his loyal subjects, the emperor took his empress fully by the waist. "But that's also part of your charm. It can't be helped, then," he said. Next, issuing a command: "Men. Bring the items I had requested earlier."

Soon after Estian's order, an attendant entered, respectfully carrying a red cushion with something placed on top of it. He wasn't the last one to enter, either. Dozens of attendants lined themselves along the hall and knelt before the emperor, reverently raising their arms to display what they had brought.

"What are all these servants doing?" someone asked.

"Heavens, aren't those all priceless treasures belonging to the empire?" asked another. "Isn't that the diamond necklace the owner of the Regias Mines presented to the emperor two generations ago?"

"Look over there! Piot's Ruby! My God, I've only ever seen it in books!"

The people gathered in the hall all began to grow excited upon realizing that the items being carried in by the attendants were all important imperial treasures. Each and every one of them were legendary items that deserved volumes of books written about them.

"Wait a second. Why were these things prepared again?"

"I... I'm not sure?"

As their excitement settled down somewhat, they all began to wonder:

why on earth were these jewels taken out of the treasury and brought here?

*

A line of jewels continued to be carried in by attendants. Cecile gulped dryly at the sight. She chanted a mantra of encouragement in her head: “I can do well. I can do well. I can do... do well, my foot!”

She had practiced over the past few days for this moment, but looking at the dazzling pile of jewels before her, she felt like her heart was shrinking in on itself. How much was that gem over there worth on its own? Just as she looked around, desperately not trying to look too out of her element, a ring with a large emerald embedded in it caught her eye.

She fixed her gaze upon it. That must’ve been the one. The Emerald of Aled.

That ring was the most famous piece of jewelry amongst the treasures belonging to the imperial family. How could it not be? It had been gifted to the founding emperor long, long ago by an elven king back when forest elves still roamed the continent. It was a legendary jewel whose history alone could compose a hundred volumes.

And what she was going to do with it from now on was... God. She felt faint at the thought. She was about to do something absolutely crazy—something no one had ever dared to do since the nation’s very founding.

As Estian lifted the Emerald of Aled up from its seat and brought it before her, Cecile trembled violently. Then, he raised his voice for all his subjects to hear. “Empress, the moment I looked into your eyes, this gem came to mind, for they share the same beautiful color. I intend to use this as our wedding ring. From now on, this is yours,” he said. “Now, your hand.”

She did as he asked, holding out her hand for him to take. Gasps could be heard echoing around the vicinity from wide-eyed onlookers. The

Emerald of Aled belonged to the imperial family and it was a precious heirloom that had been passed down only from emperor to emperor, yet he was going to give it to the empress as a wedding ring?

Estian slipped the ring onto her finger. It made for a beautiful sight—so much so that if they weren't the emperor and empress, and if the ring on her finger hadn't been the Emerald of Aled, someone might have whistled. People might have cheered, wishing them a happily ever after.

The officials were torn as to whether they should yell out in opposition—"You mustn't!" they ached to cry—or if they should initiate a round of applause. Amidst their hesitation, however, one brave man amongst them strode forward, having made his resolve.

Unfortunately, before he could open his mouth, Cecile made her move. She grabbed the ring on her finger and pulled it off. Then, she hurled the precious Emerald of Aled onto the floor with all of her strength.

Cling!

The ring struck its mark, making a clear and beautiful sound. She had put so much force into her throw that the ring ricocheted with furious speed, rising so high it nearly reached the ceiling. The eyes of everyone present moved up and down, up, up, and down, following the trajectory of the ring as it zoomed past. Eventually, bouncing on the floor one last time, it landed inside a nearby ornamental vase. The vase shook in its perch with loud clunking sounds as the ring bounced within it.

It was a very neat finish. The people watching clapped and cheered despite themselves. "Bravo!" they yelled. "It went in!"

Then, they realized what had happened. The dawning awareness brought with it horrified astonishment as they next watched an attendant running toward the vase, their face dripping with tears. The cause of all the noise inside the vase soon became clear, and everyone present to witness the proceedings experienced firsthand how genuine shock could render a person thoroughly mute.

Silent screams filled the hall. Everyone was so quiet that one could hear an insect crawl. Amidst this terrifying atmosphere, the sound of the ring

still rolling around in the vase cracked like thunder in their ears. The truth struck them painfully.

The empress...

...had flung...

...the greatest of all imperial treasures...

...to the floor.

Their heads slowly swiveled over to look at Cecile, who tried desperately to withstand their gazes with all her might. She then uttered the line she had been practicing thousands of times in the past few days back at her palace. “Oh my. The ring was so small it must’ve gotten blown away by the wind.”

“Wha-What in...”

Everyone gathered in the hall doubted their own eyes. They rubbed at them, pinched the back of their hands, and slapped the cheeks of the person beside them. When people began to react in anger, they knew that this was most definitely not a dream. What they saw—the Emerald of Aled being treated as if it were nothing less than a pebble found on the street—had been real.

“What—what in the world?!” One of the officials in the front let out an anguished wail. He hastily rushed to the vase containing the ring and gave it a shake. A fairly weighted sound rang from within.

Several people collapsed, landing on their knees. The Emerald of Aled was like a testament to the history of the empire. The ring was around two inches in length, yet—what? It was small enough to get blasted by the wind?

“Really...” Estian murmured, and his voice snapped everyone back to their senses. They held their breath at the look on his face, at the way his voice seemed to lower in tone. He stepped down toward the vase being held by the official and pulled the ring out.

Having him near, the official called out to him. “Y-Your Majesty! The

Emerald of Aled cannot possibly be so light! Her... Her Majesty has..." He trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to claim that Empress Cecile had gone mad out loud, so he left the sentence unfinished.

At that moment, however, Estian's hand moved, ripping through the air to hurl the Emerald of Aled across the hall at what could honestly have been the speed of light. It zipped between the audience and flew right into the opposite wall, crashing with a fierce crunch.

The sound of the collision could further be described as akin to that of slamming some hard wood with a firm hammer, and everyone could see the crack in the wall it left behind. The ring was embedded firmly in the center. The emperor took in the sight and nodded understandingly.

"As the empress has said, very light indeed," he declared.

Silence once more.

No official had the nerve to ask, "Light how?" so while they were all at a loss for words, Estian walked over to the rest of the jewels the attendants had brought in. He picked up a necklace adorned with a ruby the size of a child's fist.

"That's Piot's Ruby!" someone gasped.

Next, he picked up a bracelet that boasted an azure sapphire.

"Ahh!" came another shout. "That's the Celceta of Eternity!"

Every time he took one of the treasures, the officials cried out their names in surprise.

"The Star of Regias!"

"The Dark Emperor's Eclipse!"

Every name held meaningful positions within the annals of imperial history, so whenever someone would call out a name, it was like they were all working together to answer some history questions. By the time most of the names they knew had been called, a veritable mound of imperial jewels had been piled over Estian's arms. After taking them all, he walked over to Cecile. Then, he had an attendant stand at the side to help hold

onto what he took.

“Ugh!” The attendant staggered with a groan. Before long, his face grew red and sweat began to trickle from his forehead from the exertion. “How heavy!” the attendant sobbed inwardly, fearful of voicing the thought aloud. He hadn’t noticed at first because the emperor had carried them with ease, but he should’ve known. How could an armful of gemstones and precious metals possibly be light?

Regardless of how the attendant struggled, however, Estian only had eyes for Cecile, who wore a look of indifference and serenity. It was as if she were oblivious to what was going on.

He knew she must’ve been shaking on the inside, though.

Last night, she had clung to him in trepidation. When he presented her with the plan, she jumped in fright at the thought of handling and throwing such precious items. “Your Majesty, I can’t do it!” she had whimpered. So, he gave her two options: dying, or disrespecting a few pieces of jewelry.

She didn’t hesitate to change her tune. “I have strong arms! I can throw a good pitch!” she promised.

Although, he didn’t actually think she would have strong arms. He thought she had been saying it just to say it, but when he saw how the ring ricocheted across the room, he had to give her some credit. She had certainly spoken the truth.

*

The two of them had confined themselves to the empress’ palace to practice for today. Despite considering it training, though, it mainly consisted of Estian telling Cecile what she had to do and her clinging to him with teary eyes, crying, “I can’t do it—I won’t do it! Save me, please!”

Still, despite all her bawling, she did well when she set her mind to it, he

thought. Was this what people called strength in actual practice?

“Will you give me your hand, Empress?” he asked.

In response, she held her hand out with an elegant flair. He took it, discovering that she was quivering ever so slightly. Yet, regardless of how well she feigned composure, she was still very scared.

He picked up a sapphire ring from the height of the mound of jewels being held by the attendant and slipped it on her finger. It was a loose fit, though, because the ring was too large.

What on earth was the emperor up to? Everyone gaped as they focused all their attention onto him. He didn’t mind them in the least, however; he leisurely continued to do as he wished.

Next, he picked out a long necklace of thick pearls and rested it upon her shoulders, wrapping it round and round her neck. He then took off the small earrings she was already wearing and replaced them with a new pair that had been adorned with a large spinel on each piece. After that, he put a bracelet on her, and then another necklace. Estian decorated and adorned Cecile with every piece of the jewelry he had brought out. Dozens of necklaces were wrapped around her neck and numerous bracelets were hung on her arms. So many brooches were fastened to her dress that the dress itself could no longer be visible.

It was as if she had become the attendant instead and all the onlookers quietly watched her transformation. Meanwhile, her expression began to stiffen due to how heavy all the jewelry was getting. Although everything had been spread throughout her figure so as to better distribute the weight and lighten her burden in a way the attendant hadn’t been fortunate enough to benefit from, she was still pretty uncomfortable.

After finally adorning Cecile with the last piece of treasure, Estian took a step back. His gaze seemed as if he was admiring his own work. “I believe this is enough to prevent anything from being blown away by the wind, my empress. Will this suffice as a good wedding gift?” he asked.

Hearing him, people began erupting in sighs en masse. He had given the empress everything. This was wholly unprecedented. Even the

emperors who were said to have been even madder than Estian hadn't done such a thing before. The imperial minister of finance, who occupied a corner of the central hall, collapsed with a cry of shock.

"How much do you think all that's worth?!" he must've fumed. "That's enough to buy over most countries—no, more! Putting even that aside, they're cultural assets!"

Everyone looked at the empress, awaiting her verdict. Who in the world could possibly feel any discontent after receiving so much? They expected her to be delighted, tripping over herself to thank His Majesty for his favor.

That didn't happen, though. Not a trace of joy could be found on Cecile's face. Rather, her expression looked even stiffer than before. What else was she going to say this time? They waited for her to react, their sweaty hands clenched into tight fists.

"I thank you truly for your generosity, Your Majesty. But..."

But? They dreaded the next few words that would leave her lips, and they were right to. The words far exceeded what their imaginations could conjure.

"Don't you think wedding gifts would be better if they were new?" she asked coyly.

And thus, all the physical representations of the imperial family's entire legacy were—in but a single moment—reduced to nothing more than secondhand baubles.

Feeling the atmosphere of the hall dip into something even more freezing than the plains in midwinter, Cecile forced her wobbly legs and drooping neck to stand straight. It felt like her neck was going to break! The emperor had put so many necklaces around it that she couldn't even lower her head. And as for her arms? Trying to move them was like trying to lift a sack of wheat with a finger. If anything, she was fortunate that there were no crowns or anything of the sort among the treasures. She really would've toppled over onto her rear-end if something like that had been stacked on top of her head.

Cecile looked to Estian beneath increasingly unbearable weight. So far, things were going as planned. She had to do well until the end. She feared the punishment that would befall her if she didn't. He might do that again.

He would press his hands all over her and she would moan and pant upon his every touch. Whenever he massaged her, he wouldn't stop kneading her shoulders, hips, thighs, and so on. No matter how much she pleaded, he'd keep going until she'd be on the verge of tears. It did feel good afterward, but why did it have to hurt so bad at first? The pain could reach levels intimidating enough to make her confess to nonexistent sins. Was it actually a new form of torture all along?

It wouldn't end there, either. Cecile's face reddened at the thought. By the time she'd be in tears, begging for forgiveness and promising greater effort, he'd start bullying her with a certain something other than his hands. All night long. He wouldn't stop no matter how much she'd plead for him to, and every time it happened, she was reminded once again why he was indeed a tyrant of a man.

Well... She did like it, though.

As Cecile tried to keep herself steady despite all the things piled atop her, Estian took hold of her left hand and drew it to his lips, laying a kiss upon her knuckles. "I see," he said. "Then, after conquering the kingdom of Tetin next week, I'll bring you the gemstone they consider the pride of their nation. Apparently, it's still uncut and unpolished, so we only need to process it after taking it. It's a large peridot named the Forest of Tetin, isn't that right?"

The ambassador of Tetin collapsed upon hearing such an abrupt declaration of war.

"I'll capture it to make a ring worthy of your beautiful fingers. Will that satisfy you?" Estian continued.

With a joyful heart, she finally recited the last line she had practiced extra hard for. "Thank you, Your Majesty. And I'm telling you just in case, but..." Cecile desperately attempted to re-enact the smile she practiced. "I

have ten fingers, you know, and the latest trend is wearing three on one.”

In short, what she was saying was: loot 'em good.

As chaos began to descend upon the hall at her statement, the Emerald of Aled fell out of its crack in the wall and dropped to the floor. Everyone was too distracted by what was unfolding before them, though, so nobody noticed the noise it made as it dislodged itself. After the event was over, an attendant sprinted over in tears to recover the Emerald of Aled.

Why in the world would anyone throw something so precious? The attendant worried about the jewel. It wasn't scratched anywhere, was it?

Carefully, he picked up the jewel... Only to drop his jaw.

"It... Broke?"

*

A mournful wail echoed throughout the empress' palace. Estian, perplexed by Cecile's despair, patted her on the shoulders. "Stop crying," he ordered her. From his perspective, the gesture was meant to console her, but she merely wept all the more sorrowfully.

She buried her face in her arms at a table, her shoulder shaking with her heaving sobs. He was at a total loss. Up until now, there had only been two circumstances where somebody would cry before him: in fear, or in fury. Every time, the method to cease their sniveling had been simple. Just cut them down until they stop making any noises.

Being fond of the quiet, he favored this method to keep his surroundings serene, but Cecile, however, was neither fearful nor furious, so he couldn't employ his tried-and-true method against her.

"I'm telling you to stop crying," Estian commanded once more. She jerked her head up. Wiping at her tears and runny nose with the sleeve of her dress, she responded with a hoarse voice.

"Wouldn't Your Majesty... cry as well... in my shoes?" she asked,

hiccupping slightly.

“Do you need to cry so much over a piece of jewelry?” he retorted, perplexed.

“But it’s not just a piece of jewelry! You’re being like this since you think it isn’t your business, aren’t you?” Cecile yelled back, flipping open the book she held beside her. During her training for her debut, she had received a book regarding jewels so she could get a rough idea about them. The title of the book read ‘Finest 100 Imperial Jewels’.

She flipped to the first page of the first chapter. On it was a beautiful illustration of a jewel along with its name. ‘The Emerald of Aled—the greatest treasure of the empire,’ the page read. She pointed to a sentence a little below the illustration. ‘To those who think to treat the Emerald of Aled without care—remember what lies within it.’

Estian ground his teeth upon reading the phrase. “Whichever bastard wrote this... I’ll have him thrashed to hell and back tomo—no, tonight,” he swore to himself. He glanced at the ring lying on the table. What was once the greatest treasure of the empire now remained cracked like broken glass.

*

After introducing Cecile to his loyal subjects and returning to the empress’ palace, Estian found Kane looking for him with a troubled face, saying, “I was told the Emerald of Aled was cracked?”

Estian went to bring the jewel over without giving it much thought, but when Cecile saw the Emerald of Aled in his hand, she screamed and almost swooned on the spot. “It—It can’t be... Because I threw it—”

“I think my throw caused more damage, though?” he said.

Her expression lightened up slightly hearing his admission, but the moment he put the Emerald of Aled into her shaking hands, her knees

gave out again. “This—this can’t be...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Can Your Majesty not feel it? It became lighter! So light it really could be blown away by the wind!”

Estian picked the ring back up again at her outburst. What was different about it? He tried tossing the ring into the air once, but he couldn’t feel any difference in weight. “I can’t tell what changed.”

“You really can’t?” When she realized he wasn’t joking, Cecile began to turn deadly pale. She bolted into her room and searched the bookshelf. “I definitely put the book here somewhere.”

Soon, Cecile found the book titled ‘Finest 100 Imperial Jewels’ once more and began reading it. It didn’t take long for her to find the part she was looking for:

“...The Emerald of Aled is known to be a gift from the king of the elves, but think about it: when the empire was founded, it was built upon where the lushest of the elves’ forests were located,” the entry read. “Elves were inclined to snap the neck of a human for breaking even so much as a single tree branch, so why would they ever feel foster good will toward the empire’s ruler? Why, then, would the elven king offer a gift?

“Upon perusing records of the era, it has been said that the king of the elves flung the Emerald of Aled at the emperor from a very far distance away. In my opinion, the founding emperor’s simple-minded nature undoubtedly led him to assume that what the king threw at him was a present. Not so long ago, while I was deciphering the remaining records of the elves that have since fled this continent, I discovered what appears to be the king’s diary. The contents are as follows:

Year xxxx, xx the xxth.

The weather is clear.

Today, some human man came to the forest. He looked too ugly to even kill, so I let him be.

Year xxxx, xx the xxth.

The weather is raining.

Today that ugly human came into the forest again. He's screaming about looking for me, but what am I, his dog? Does he think I'll just come when he calls? Who the hell was he to tell me what to do?

Year xxxx, xx the xxth.

The weather is snowing.

The human left me a letter. I had someone who understood his language read it aloud, and apparently the human had built a castle within my forest. And he's telling me, 'Let's get along well as neighbors.' Son of a bitch! Get off my property!

I plan on requesting that he move out in an extremely violent and brutal way. Looks like my tools will finally be tasting blood after a long while. Heheheh.

Year xxxx, xx the xxth.

The weather is...

Damn. He's bloody strong for an ugly stinker.

Year xxxx, xx the xxth.

What does the weather matter right now?

I intend on throwing it at that human bastard. Yes, *it*. The thing we all fear. What our ancestors before us sealed away. I cannot for the life of me think of any other solution. What's inside will escape after the seal breaks and will follow the seal breaker for life.

It's your turn to suffer, human.

"The last record was written two days before the emperor was said to have received a gift from the elven king. Judging from this information, the Emerald of Aled is a jewel that contains something that even the king of the elves feared. It was much more of a curse than a blessing..."

As she read through the book, Cecile had an increasingly ominous

feeling that whatever had been contained within Emerald of Aled had gotten released for sure, and she had definitely been the one to break the seal.

*

With a slam, the door to the emperor's office opened. Kane greeted Estian as he entered. "Ah, Your Majesty. Welcome. Has Her Majesty calmed down a little?"

"No. She was crying so much she couldn't breathe, so I just left after knocking her out."

Kane didn't know what to say about that.

"Anyway, enough about that," Estian continued. "What's the status on their movements?"

Kane's expression hardened at the change in topic. "It's going according to our anticipations. It appears today's events were beyond their expectations and they were scandalized enough to gather themselves in quite a hurry. Thanks to that, tracking them was simple. Here's a list of those who've gathered today. There must've been a great many willing to take part for them to hastily rent the banquet hall of the largest hotel in the capital."

"Let's take a look, then." Kane passed Estian a document. On it was a densely packed list of names, all of them belonging to those who opposed him, the emperor. "Right," he nodded. "So, what's the story?"

"One we all know. The nobles that had gathered questioned the current state of the affairs and discussed how their mad emperor was now smitten with an equally mad empress. 'Birds of a feather flock together, but the new empress looked very pretty indeed. Why, if I was only ten years younger,' one of them said, and—Your Majesty... are you alright?" Kane asked, pausing after noticing Estian's reaction. "Did one of your armrests just break?"

“I’m fine. Who’s the bastard that driveled on about wanting to be a decade younger?”

“He is known as Viscount Devua.”

Kane made the sign of the cross in his heart upon witnessing a murderous storm brewing in Estian’s eyes. It looked like the world will soon be bidding farewell to a certain viscounty tomorrow. “In any case,” Kane continued, “near the end of their meeting, their main topic of discussion transitioned to Her Majesty’s upcoming lady-in-waiting.”

Electing her lady-in-waiting was the second thing Cecile needed to do as an empress. Naturally, she wasn’t close with any young ladies of noble descent eligible for the role, so she would have to choose someone through an examination. It went without question that members of the faction opposing the emperor would undoubtedly mix themselves into next week’s upcoming selection.

“All sorts of rabble will come meddling, no doubt,” Estian murmured.

“Indeed. Still, as Your Majesty has predicted, rather than dropping in with the intention to kill the empress immediately, it appears their plan is to play to her whims while siphoning information related to you.”

“I see.” Estian breathed a slight sigh of relief. The dissenters were moving as he had hoped they would. “Looks like their cries will be filling the palace next week.”

His lips curved into a smile.

✱

At the same time, within the empress’ palace...

Cecile looked as if she had quietly fallen asleep on a spacious bed, but she had, in truth, fainted.

Worried for her health, Estian had targeted a spot that would hurt the least and cleanly knocked her out. Afterwards, he meticulously stripped

her down to her innerwear and snugly wrapped her with blankets. If he had to knock her out, at the very least he wanted her to lay in comfort.

After he left, a small cluster of green light began to form above Cecile. The light gradually grew in size until it began to take on human form. They weren't exactly human, however. With long green hair, green eyes, green lips, and even green nails and green clothes, the entity looked more like a small doll doused in green paint.

They looked about the room before spotting the cracked Emerald of Aled. Immediately, they approached the gem. "My house... I still had 248 years of installments to pay..." they mumbled grievously.

Wiping away their runny nose with the back of their hand, they turned their head and spotted Cecile lying unconscious on the bed. The green entity flew before her and reached out a hand, calling out to her.

"Wake up, lowly mortal."

*

Cecile looked around, searching for the source of the voice calling her, but she couldn't see anything, her surroundings doused in a thorough absence of light. She realized she couldn't even see her own hand.

Was she dreaming? The voice speaking to her sounded far too vivid for it to be a dream, though.

"Hearken, lowly and vicious mortal," the voice rang once more. Cecile could sense something in it. Whoever this was sounded pretty angry. It was trembling a little more than the first time she had heard it, almost as if the speaker was tearing up a little.

Was it really talking to her? Rather, who was it that was so upset with her? She was in the midst of further contemplation when the voice demanded her attention again.

"You lowly, vicious, and violent human!" it shouted. "Will you wake up

already?! How long will you sleep for?!”

Suddenly, she went flying, landing in a thump with a scream startled from her throat. Her eyes tore open and she found herself having fallen from the bed. She kept tumbling, rolling over and over without cease until the wall broke her momentum.

Wait, why didn't any of this hurt? Feeling puzzled, Cecile noticed the bedsheets spread out before her, ending by her side as if she had been unraveled from them like a scroll. Oh. She had rolled herself in...

No—didn't she faint? Her last conscious memory definitely had to be Estian asking, “Do you still intend on crying?” to which her reply had been, “Yes. I'm going to be crying for at least another day or so.”

At the time, it seemed like he had nodded understandingly before moving forward to approach her. That was when her memory cut itself off. No further details came to mind beyond the sharp sensation of something hitting the back of her neck.

“Your Majesty, you meanie,” she pouted. How could he knock her out just because he didn't want to hear her crying? Tears began to well in her eyes anew as she rubbed at her somewhat aching neck.

Just then, something unexpected entered her field of vision. A cluster of light floating in the air a few feet away from her—something anyone would clearly be able to tell wasn't exactly human—began to speak. “Fork it over,” it said.

She gaped. “What?”

After catching sight of the light, she had braced herself for a deeply memorable moment, taking in its mysterious and holy aura, but then all she got instead was some abrupt and menacing statement. It almost sounded like a street thug.

“I said cough up the cash.”

“What the...?” What was this about, all out of the blue? Why was an unknown mystical entity suddenly asking her for money? “First of all, who are you and why should I—owie!”

Out of nowhere, something flew toward Cecile's forehead and collided with a smack. The object bounced to the ground, revealing it as the Emerald of Aled.

“If you have a conscience—no, if you have even a shred of morality left in you—you wouldn't pretend not to know what this is, would you, now?” the light asked.

How could she not know? It was the very reason she had been crying until her husband knocked her out. The jewel must've cracked, releasing that strange green entity floating in the air.

Cecile instinctively realized that this green figure was probably the being that the elven king had been said to fear. She was about to move further away, but then it occurred to her what the entity said to her.

‘Cough up the cash’? Not ‘I’m going to kill you’?

*

Located by the Empire's borders was the city of Manoka, the greatest embodiment of luxury, pleasure, and desire on the continent. In Manoka's biggest casino and hotel, Bessia, a commotion was taking place.

“All in.”

At a gaming table in the center of the casino hall, a woman leisurely pushed all the chips she had in front of herself, laying them on one number.

“Ooh!” The spectators around the table clapped and cheered. “All in!” they echoed.

At the same time, however, the dealer and the hotel manager standing beside him both paled, their complexions turning ashen. No one could blame them; the chips piled onto the table all amounted to an unprecedented sum within Manoka.

“Platinum chips were made to be symbolic!” they sobbed to themselves.

“They weren’t supposed to be used!”

Cold sweat trickled from the manager’s forehead as his gaze darted between the gaming table and the platinum shining on top of the mountain of chips. The woman had bet everything on a single number. If she got it right again...

The odds of winning were 35 to 1 when betting on a single number. The manager did not need to count the sum of the chips to know—the casino would go bankrupt if the woman won again. The casino of Bessia, which boasted of rich histories and traditions, would fall into the hands of an unknown woman who had wandered in overnight. The spectators, who didn’t give a rat’s ass about the manager’s concerns, happily chatted behind the woman.

“Amazing! How many games has it been already?” one asked.

“I don’t know. They say she’s been winning ever since she sat down!”

“Looking at the manager’s face. This doesn't seem like a rigged show, either... Who the hell is she?”

A languid smile spread across the saintess’ face as she lifted a glass of champagne before her, listening to the background chatter.

“Who, you ask? The noblest person alive. The person closest to and most beloved by God, that’s who,” she answered them, internally boasting.

She looked at her hand. A blue light invisible to others—the light of blessing—fleetingly circled it before disappearing. She, the embodiment of holy power, was able to use this light however she wished. In other words, it was all too easy to manipulate a roulette ball.

Meanwhile, the dealer rang a bell to perfunctorily announce that time was almost up for placing final bets. The saintess had long since dominated the gaming table, and as she awaited the final call happening soon, sipping on her champagne, she noticed a hot gaze leveled upon her. A neatly dressed man had been standing to her right, a deep look in his eyes. The saintess swiftly scanned the man and processed her results.

Face: 8 points; Body: 8 points; Style: 9 points; and a bonus 5 points for his sensuous gaze.

In total: a pass with a total of 30 points.

After pressing a stamp of approval on the scorecard of her heart, the saintess smoothly winked, returning the man's gaze. She raised her glass as if telling him to try and seduce her, to which the man responded by drawing in close and making his play...

"I haven't seen you around here before," he casually stated.

Of course he hadn't. That was only natural since she had been living in the holy kingdom up until just recently. She called over a waiter, asked for another glass of champagne, and handed it to the man before replying.

"I don't much like being probed that way," she said, echoing a line from the main character of a spy movie she frequently watched before transmigrating into this story.

She must've watched it as much as she did knowing a day like this would come.

"Ah, if my curiosity toward your beauty has offended you, I would like to offer you my sincerest apologies. Would you give me the honor of doing so?" The man smiled, undaunted by her refusal.

Well, well. He was more of a smooth talker than she had expected. The saintess slowly held out a hand, and the man gently kissed the back of it before cleanly taking his leave. As he was about to go, she drew him back with a beckoning finger. "I like a warm bed. Understand?" she whispered into his ear. "Room 1801. 10 o'clock."

The believers of the kingdom would have fainted if they heard her speak in such a way, but that was not of her concern. They were not here, after all. The man continued on his way with a satisfied expression at the whispered message. The saintess watched him go as she ordered a stronger drink from a waiter passing by. She felt the need to warm up in advance to burn the night away.

This sort of life wasn't so bad, either.

It had been utterly simple to crown herself the queen of the casino after she arrived this morning. She was overflowing with cash and full of attraction. No need to hurry. It would've been fine if she were to be a little late taking back Estian since he was already married. The best way to deal with a sorrowful heart following the loss of a man was to be comforted by another, was it not?

Besides, the saying went that sharing one's sadness made it easier to bear. It had to be a given, then, that the more people there were for her to share with the easier it would become.

The saintess made a list of the men who had approached her today. Seven in total. That number felt just right. She wiped away the saliva that had dripped a little from the corner of her mouth and looked at the gaming table. The number she had bet on was seven. She figured that if she was going to bet, that'd be the best choice.

The dealer announced the start of the game and the roulette ball began to spin rapidly, making noises over the board as it went. The eyes of those watching flicked from side to side, tracking the ball as it started to bounce around.

Should she use a bit of her power?

The saintess put her hand into her pocket. Just as she had always done up until this point, she merely needed to use her holy power again. The moment her fingertips began to glow with a blue light, however...

"Kaugh!" Suddenly, she began to cough up blood, falling down.

"What's going on?" cried an onlooker.

"Someone's collapsed!"

Everyone was surprised by the sudden outburst. A commotion followed in the hasty search for a doctor.

The saintess mumbled to herself, looking at her trembling body. "Wha-What's happening to..." Was the alcohol she drank earlier poisoned? No, they'd be useless on her; according to the saintess' character profile, she was immune to them.

Then, what on earth...?

Suddenly, it hit her. She recalled a particular feature she wrote into the story a long time ago regarding the saintess: "Holy power will lash out if used for personal gain."

As she struggled, the roulette came to a stop. The dealer confirmed the roulette board and brought the manager in for a squeezing hug, screaming with joy.

"18! 18! 18!" he cried victoriously.

*

"Please be on your way already!"

"I hope you never come again!"

The saintess was practically dragged out of the hotel, enthusiastically seen out by the dealer, the manager, and their guards. The hotel staff embraced one another in delight as they disappeared back inside, feeling as if they managed to make it out alive from the brink of death. After flipping the hotel off, the saintess began to move with plodding steps.

"Why did I put a detail like that in?" she complained to herself, biting her lip. She had been undone by her own design. If she had known things would turn out like this, she would've written something about vomiting money every time she coughed or made creating chunks of gold a holy power.

In any case, it was no use grieving over it now. Just then, as she was plodding along, she saw a woman come out of another hotel. Anyone would've been able to recognize her as a young noble lady.

"Goodness gracious, Lady Irene! How can you think of going at this time?" a woman companying her asked.

"What are you saying, Nanny?! The woman His Majesty married turned out to be a villainess! It's unacceptable! As His Majesty's childhood

friend, I won't tolerate it!"

His Majesty's childhood friend? Irene? The saintess' eyes widened.

Irene. One of few people who knew of Estian's past; a woman who claimed to be his lifelong friend. In the novel, Irene was the name of the antagonist that bullied Cecile after she had been possessed by the female lead.

"I'm heading for the capital this instant! I have to open His Majesty's eyes! So, fetch a coach alrea—what?" Irene paused, looking down. "Who are you?"

The saintess had grabbed Irene by her skirt and, seeing that she had reacted with a glare, respectfully knelt down on one knee. "Milady," she began, "do you happen to require a maidservant who'll obey you without question and can carry out whatever secret tasks you may need?"

She asked because she knew that this was the sort of person Irene was looking for at present.

*

Cecile was starting to fully realize why the king of the elves had feared the entity within the ring.

"So, what I'm saying is: the one who named me Aled was the first elf ever born," the entity described. "I'm like a shadow of his. Or, rather, an alter ego, should I say? I lived my whole life with him. He was the only one in this world that I knew, after all. Honestly, though, the only other creatures around were humans and beastfolk and such, and they looked so ugly I didn't want to talk to them at all. Humans like you wouldn't know, but elves are very delicate beings and, mind you, the sight of ugly things can inflict mental wounds upon them. It's why we only lived amongst our own kind within the forest. Anything that wasn't beautiful lived in sin. Sometimes, those humans would come up with some of the most ridiculous nonsense, comparing similarities like how we had two

eyes, one nose, and one mouth just like them, but if we were to go by something like that, wouldn't it be right to conclude that all you humans are exactly the same? Anyway—hey, are you sleeping?”

Cecile jerked up, straining to focus her eyes and wipe the drool off her mouth. “No, sir, I didn't sleep!” she said.

Still, she began to slowly doze off again after Aled resumed talking. Someone, please save her...

She pinched her thigh. It had already been four hours. During all this time, Aled had gone on and on about themselves without taking a break, regaling her with how they were born, what their name was, what kind of being they were known as. While, yes, she could at least handle that much, she began to wonder why she still had to keep listening after they began to recount a story 851 years ago about how after somebody planted three trees in an elven village, they counted and discovered a grand total of 18,376,261 leaves amongst the branches.

She tried to stop the sidetracking and steer them back to the topic of reimbursement a few times, but her every attempt was met with a glare from Aled. “Did you just cut me off?” their raised brows seemed to ask. Fixed with such a fierce look, Cecile could only shrink back again and tell them to please, continue.

Now, she knew: never-ending rambling. That was the power belonging to Aled that struck fear into the elven king's heart.

When was Estian coming back? She needed him now more than ever, yet he was off somewhere doing who knows what. He usually made his appearance whenever night fell, but there had been no sign of him coming even though the night had long-since deepened. She wanted to ask him to take her place for a moment so she could go cover her ears by some quiet corner.

Minutes passed of Cecile repeatedly pinching herself all over to try and stay awake, until Aled, fortunately for her, eventually turned the subject back to what she had been waiting for.

“...So, I signed a contract with the spirits and bought that gem.

Someone like me couldn't possibly just live in anything, don't you agree? Thankfully, the spirits offered me a fixed interest rate. As you might know, interest usually never ever go down, and at the time, the spirit realm's economy was extremely unstable. All the investment advisors I met with back then were expecting a continuous rate hike."

Cecile nodded, unexpectedly gaining the knowledge that even spirits carried out financial transactions.

"Therefore, I worked hard every month for the past 1,252 years. I only had 248 years left on my loan and throughout it all, I did my best to decorate the inside. But then you flung my place around!" Aled pointed at her in accusation, and she bowed down, lowering herself flat.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She had to plead first and ask questions later, after all.

*

Aled eyed Cecile prostrating herself with satisfaction. Good. She thought she was completely at fault.

In truth, the jewel hadn't broken when she threw it. Of course, it's true that her swing had an impact on it, but that wasn't enough to really damage it. When the emperor hurled it into the wall, however, Aled's home got decimated.

How was it that each and every one of this nation's emperors were so stupidly strong? Aled had intended on quibbling with the emperor at first, but then they decided not to at the sight of the sword by his belt. Why was a human in possession of a black steel blade after all of them were taken by the elves upon their departure? And how was he using it so well? It wasn't something mortals were capable of handling.

Black steel blades were the only thing Aled feared because they were the only things that could harm a spiritual entity. The swords—said to have been forged by collecting darkness during the continent's first era—killed

their surroundings just by being held in someone's possession. Their power was immense, affecting physical beings while also subjecting spirits to their untimely deaths upon the slightest scratch.

Still, putting aside whether he was really a human or not, that emperor didn't look like the talking type at all. Despite only getting a glimpse at him, Aled knew that he would prefer to draw his sword first, forgoing listening nicely entirely if asked for compensation.

Aled entered the smashed jewel and looked through the insurance policy they received after taking the loan. To the spirit's woe, damage via humans wasn't covered by the policy. That being the case, though, what were they to do? Who was to compensate for the losses they suffered? They were naught but a commoner trying to repay a 1,500-year loan.

It was then that Aled saw spotted Cecile as she sobbed from the belief that she had awoken an unknown spirit. It's her! She was the one! The solution to Aled's problems.

From the looks of it, the emperor seemed to treat her quite dearly. This was why they tried speaking to her only after he left the room.

Now, as she bowed deeply, Aled addressed her. "Well, as the saying goes: fair is fair. Seeing you so willing to compensate me, I'll let you off just this once if you pay me what's due."

"Really?" she asked.

"I need the amount of the loan I've paid so far as well as the remaining balance. Plus, recompense for the psychological damage I've suffered and the cost of what went into decorating and refurbishing the interior of my house," Aled explained. "To go into further detail, if we were to calculate this at a rate of 250 gold per month for 12 months a year, that totals to 4,500,000 gold since I bought the house on a 1,500-year loan. After taking into account my emotional distress as well all of the interior designing I did over 1,252 frugal years, that amounts to 10,000,000 gold. So, fork it all over. In full," they added.

Cecile blinked, wordless. She kept still for a second, just registering everything Aled said, before she crawled over to pick up the fallen

emerald. Then, she shot to her feet, walked to the terrace, and threw it out with all her might. The ring whizzed through the air toward a nearby pond, striking the head of a sleeping swan and bouncing off to strike the head of a duck passing by next to it before finally landing precisely inside a plate meant for tossing coins into.

Aled watched it all happen blankly, almost ready to give her a round of applause for the odd feat she had just accomplished. Before they could raise a hand to do so, however, it dawned on them what she just did. “You—you...! What have you done?!” they cried. “My house!”

Cecile beamed, her smile as radiant as the sun. “Sue me, then.”

*

It had gotten far too late. Estian had spent so much time with Kane discussing how they would prepare for Cecile’s lady-in-waiting selection that he failed to realize how night had long since fallen.

He hurried to the empress’ palace with hastened steps. Upon his arrival, the attendants on standby greeted him joyfully. “Your Majesty, you’ve come!”

From how flustered the attendant speaking looked, Estian could tell that something had happened. His tone dropped dangerously low. “I told you to immediately send word if anything happened.”

“I beg your forgiveness!” the attendant bowed. “But it was something rather difficult to tell Your—”

At that moment, the door to the empress’ room slammed open and out came Cecile. “This won’t do! Get me something—” she yelled, then stopped. “Eh? You’re here, Your Majesty?”

“What are you doing?” Estian asked.

She had accessories hanging from all over her body. Upon witnessing the state she was in, he turned to the attendant, who nodded with a face

that said, “This is why I didn’t say anything!”

Dressing up at a time like this? Estian turned back to Cecile in bewilderment for a moment, but then his eyes narrowed. “Why aren’t you wearing clothes?” he thought to ask at last.

“You’re the one who took them off, Your Majesty!” she replied.

Of course, he hadn’t taken them all off. She was wearing some basic underwear and a slip, at least. Still, even though all the attendants here were maids, he didn’t like them sneaking peeks at her. Estian took off his cloak and wrapped it around her with a flourish, taking her into his arms.

While he put his coat on her and picked her up to preserve her modesty, the most prevalent reason he had for doing so was that he just couldn’t take it any longer. Hanging gems on her earlier this morning had amused him at the time, but now, seeing her completely decked out while essentially half-naked had him almost groaning out loud. He initially planned on just heading to bed since he didn’t want to wake her if she was already resting, but... since she was apparently wide awake and decorating herself with gusto, he felt like it’d be fine to burn the night away after all.

As he was about to go inside their room, however, Cecile cried out to stop him. “You can’t!” She immediately struggled out of his arms and rushed to the maids.

“What is it that you need?”

“Jewels! Lots of them! Big ones!”

*

“How about thiiis...?” Cecile asked. She rubbed at her heavy eyelids with one hand as she held out a large ruby with the other. Piled in front of her were the jewels she had received from Estian during her debut, as well as some other jewels that she hadn’t brought back. She had a reason for this.

Aled had suggested an alternative solution to Cecile, who had simply lain down in defiance following his initial proposal. The spirit's suggestion was to hand over another home-worthy jewel if she could not pay up and, after hours of Cecile going through one gem after another, looking for Aled's new home, it was starting to get bright outside.

"No can do," Aled said, shaking his head at the ruby she offered. "That's a fail. The craftsmanship isn't delicate enough."

She buried her head on her desk in frustration. Estian, who was sitting across Cecile and watching her, stood up and brandished his sword before Aled. "How about you stop being fussy and pick one to live in already?" he said coldly.

"Hey, hey! Get that sword away from me! Goodness gracious, I'm about to be killed by a human! You'll be cursed for generations to come, you know! It's true, I tell you! We spiritual kind are experts in that aspect!"

"All the better, then, since I had no plans to have children."

Cecile's ears pricked at his claim as she lay on the desk, but Estian failed to notice. He held Aled even closer to his sword.

"Oh, come on! Let's talk it out, alright? Talk!" Aled pleaded, trying to shake themselves free. "My condition for my home-to-be is—"

"Shut it," Estian interrupted. "I've heard it five times already. Tell me again and I'll cut you down."

"You mean, five times only!"

Estian gripped the sword in his hand harder at Aled's retort. That was it. He really should kill this bastard.

Just then, Cecile lifted her head from her desk. A beatific smile hung from her lips. "Your Majesty," she purred.

He turned at the sound of her voice. Strange. The tone he heard just now was the cutest and most tender one he had heard her use yet. For some reason, though, she seemed angry. How could that be? She was just fine a moment ago, so what happened?

She rose to her feet, drew closer to his side, and clung to him by the arm. She had taken off his cloak upon returning to their room, so she was still in her innerwear draped in jewelry. Her attire had him swallowing, his throat dry. He immediately wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her toward him.

Just as he was about to kiss her, enlivened by the sensation of their entwined bodies, she took the initiative to draw closer, her breath warm against his ear. A thrill shot through him despite his confusion. She had never acted like this of her own accord before.

He wanted to kill Aled right that instant and then enjoy the rest of his morning with Cecile in his arms, but as soon as this thought crossed his mind, she donned a shy smile and stepped back, pushing him away. For the first time in his life, Estian learned what it meant to pine after someone.

Why? Why was she doing this all of a sudden when she had always done as he wished? He was going to voice this question aloud, but she beat him to it. “Your Majesty, I know what I want now,” she said.

“What... Is it?” He couldn’t comprehend why it had gotten so hard just to speak three syllables. His mouth was a desert. While he didn’t know what she’d request for yet, he knew he wanted to hand it over to her right there and then.

“You know that jewel you said you would bring to me, Your Majesty? The Forest of Tetin, was it?”

That was the name. Estian hadn’t really intended on bringing it, if he were to be honest. He had only claimed as such after a discussion with Kane, wherein they both decided it’d be best if they took some pre-emptive measures and heightened the pressure on Tetin since the kingdom had shown signs of rebelling.

Cecile leaned closer once more. “I want it. Right now,” she whispered. Her dulcet voice was so enticing that he couldn’t do anything but nod his head.

The empress' palace had been busy since morning, for the day of the empress' lady-in-waiting elected had finally come. The maids felt hectic; they had been dressing Cecile all morning. All kinds of dresses, ornaments, and cosmetics were lined up in the dressing room. Even those who were prone to indifference regarding these sorts of things would feel at least a little excited, but she was sitting in the middle of it all with a blank expression.

"Your Majesty, shall I raise your hair a little more?" one of the attendants asked.

"Do as you will," she answered.

"Your Majesty, how high would you like your heels?"

"Do as you will."

"Your Majesty, as for decorating the dress..." the maid speaking trailed off. The empress didn't look like she was listening.

A quick-witted attendant swiftly intervened. "Forgive us. We will decide on our own."

The faces of the attendants turned even stiffer and their hands moved even faster at the empress' attitude. She must've found all of this bothersome. Tension tightened the cant of their shoulders.

They just couldn't figure her out. She was a strange and curious empress. She had seduced an irritable tyrant into falling head over heels for her, charming him so that he had been unable to leave her palace. Then, upon her first meeting with the empire's officials, she had dismissed the imperial family's treasures as secondhand baubles. All of the attendants working in the palace couldn't help but think that they were serving under a total nutcase.

They all wrote their wills in advance. Some even looked into what would happen to their pension after their deaths. They exchanged information

and comforting words with each other, cheering one another on so that they'd try and live on to the best they could. No matter how far they through the records of past empresses, there had been none who had acted like theirs. Contrary to her perfectly normal appearance, she was someone who'd go insane even at large gatherings.

“Seeing how she was so rampant in front of the officials, it's no wonder how she'll treat us,” they had said, worrying for their futures.

It turned out that she didn't treat them very viciously, though. Still, that only served to make them all the more fearful. “Why on earth do you think she treats us so normally?” one of the servants wondered aloud, resting in the break room.

The maid next to her answered. “She doesn't even see us as people, that's why. Would you punish your hairbrush for getting your hair tangled?”

“So that's how it was!”

Cecile was locked in thought, unaware that a bunch of misunderstandings were piling up. She was angry. No, to put it in a somewhat more vulgar yet more precise way, she was fucking furious. The disquieting expression that ended up on her face unnerved the attendants, impacting the mood within the room. She spared them no mind, however. She was too preoccupied by what Estian had once said, the words replaying in her head on an infinite loop.

“All the better, then, since I had no plans to have children,” his memory echoed. A response to a potential threat upon his descendants.

She had snapped to her senses once she heard him say as such. One of the most prominent reasons he had accepted an empress in the first place was so that he could have an heir. It had been written in the letter of proposal sent to her father, and there wasn't anyone around that didn't know it. Giving birth to an imperial heir was practically her job. That's what she thought, at least.

That's why, regardless of how he acted and how she felt, she was relieved that he shared a bed with her every night. She felt reassured that

she would still be needed at least until her purpose as an empress was fulfilled. She thought he was working toward that goal, too.

But he never thought that way, didn't he?

Why did he keep her, then?

She brooded over the question, but she couldn't think of a satisfying answer. All she could be certain of, however, was that her life would be like a flame in the wind—flickering, in danger of being snuffed out—until she gave birth to his child the next few years. Hell, she didn't even have a few years. The entire imperial palace knew that he was sleeping with her every night. If there was no news of pregnancy within the next few months, she'd be showered by a hail of petitions asking for her disposal.

She had gone and cultivated dislike within the hearts of millions of people when it was already hard enough to earn favor as it was, after all. She had followed the methods Estian had proposed because he claimed they'd help her survive. Keeping death at bay through infamy sounded odd at first, but she endured, believing his assurances. If she could couple that with being the mother of the future emperor as well—or the mother of an imperial heir, if her child couldn't manage that—she would be safe.

However, he had no plans for a successor? What would she do then?

Tears welled in her eyes at the thought of how she had been fooled. All she had left now was nothing but her growing infamy. She'd be chased out before she could even truly try to survive.

All of this had been one reason she was upset, but... also...

An inexpressible wave of embarrassment and shame washed over her. She remembered the day after the wedding, recalled how she had giggled to herself as she had thought of him as hers—as her husband. Writing words on steamy bathroom walls and blushing after... God.

Now, she just wanted to head over to the bathroom and smash that same wall away. Her presumptions made her feel every bit the fool. Family? What family! A family wasn't necessarily made complete by having children, sure, but she felt awful that she had gone so far as to

fantasize about such an impossible future, laughing stupidly by herself. The thought made her want to die.

She was so glad she never mentioned anything out loud. Well, not like he would've wanted to listen, anyway.

Cecile sighed heavily, her heart troubled. Then, she looked at the mirror in front of her. While she had busied herself with her contemplations, the finishing touches were being made to her makeover.

She looked pretty, even if she did say so herself. She couldn't be afflicted with princess syndrome since she actually was a former princess, but her looks had only improved further after coming to the empire. Who even knew why her skin only seemed to grow smoother and her complexion better despite all the arduous nights she'd get put through? It was as if she were under a spell.

He definitely had to like her, though.

Several days ago, on the night she suffered through Aled's chattering, the moment she had heard the emperor's thoughts about the whole heir business, she had asked him to bring her the Forest of Tetin.

She had only asked to ask, speaking in the heat of her anger. She had done so deliberately because she had vaguely been aware of the fact that he had no real intention to take it. Absurdly, she even tried playing the coquette, something she had never done in her life before. If he had rejected her request on the basis of it being too difficult, she would've expressed her true feelings under the guise of a wry joke, asking him, "So, all that you've been telling me were just empty words, after all? Even though I'm this upset? I thought you held me dear."

The very next day, though, he really had gone off to Tetin.

She really didn't get him.

He seemed to care for her in his own way, so why didn't he want a successor when it would solidify her standing in society? Her makeover had distracted her, but she ended up sinking back into confusion all over again.

All of a sudden, Aled appeared in front of her with an expression that said, “Finally, I’ve solved the mystery!”

“I’ve been thinking it over for a few days now,” the spirit said, “and I think the emperor really is impotent.”

“Will you please shut up?!” Cecile snapped, shooting to her feet and yelling at Aled. Then, she paused, realizing that her servants were staring at her. Feeling awkward, she deflated. “It—It’s nothing. Continue as you were,” she muttered.

They continued their work as she had ordered, but she could feel them sneaking nervous glances at her. She closed her eyes. She had been wondering why Aled was staying quiet for hours at a time, only to crawl out of nowhere like that. Curiously, it seemed like the spirit was invisible to all her attendants.

“Didn’t I say I can read your thoughts?” Aled piped up once more. “Why scream like that?”

“Because I was surprised by your nonsense!” she told them.

“Why did you think it was nonsense? It was a valid conclusion one could reach after putting together everything he’s said and all that’s happened so far. I may not look it, but I’ve read lots of human novels. That’s why I know. An emperor can mate any time he wishes, right? Then, according to the genealogical preservation instincts of exceptionally strong humans, shouldn’t he already have at least a hundred children?”

“I’ll have you know, His Majesty told me I was his first!”

“Didn’t he just say you were the first to be on top of him? Doesn’t that mean there could’ve been many cases of the opposite?”

Was... Was that how it was?

Her mind fell into disarray once more at the point Aled had made. At that instant, an attendant approached her. “Your Majesty, it’s time to go now,” she told her.

Cecile nodded. “Right.” She tried to muster everything she had in her to

ignore the ever-chattering Aled and got up to head for the meeting hall. “Don’t talk to me from now on,” she thought.

“Don’t wanna. Why should I obey you? I was born to make noise,” they said. “Hey, you should really think about what I said again. I’m telling you; the emperor is—”

She just let their rambling go in one ear and out the other. Her mind was set on quickly finding a jewel she could use as their new home just so she could shove the darned spirit into it and get herself some peace.

*

Countless daughters of nobility were waiting within the halls of the imperial palace. Surprisingly enough, many had gathered to apply for the position of lady-in-waiting, even though every girl and her neighbor had shied away from the seat of empress.

The position of the empress’ lady-in-waiting wasn’t directly connected to the emperor, but it did come with the privilege of being informed of most matters within the imperial palace as well as the added benefit of obtaining a certain degree of nobility alongside the title of a court lady. That was why noblewomen who couldn’t inherit their family titles showed all the more interest in the position. It was the same for every noble house involved. No role better than that of a lady-in-waiting existed if one wished to observe everything at the center of the imperial palace affairs since it was a position close to the empress, whom the emperor was said to be smitten with.

There were also many with scheming thoughts that ran along the lines of, “Plus, there’s also the fact that His Majesty fell for the empress and even treated her well. If I find out what she did to charm him, then I can throw out the powerless first empress before a child is born and become the second empress. And there won’t be a third! Because I’ll kill them all!”

The fact that Estian hadn’t killed his wife despite what everyone had

assumed fueled the ladies with courage. Because everyone that had gathered were descendants of noble families, no one fell short in appearance, but some of them were dressed extravagantly in a display of their respective families' statuses and authority.

Elysia was one of them. She let out a small smile as she inspected her competition, pleased. She thought she was the best candidate present, and, objectively, she wasn't wrong. Be it her looks, her attire, or the noble house she belonged to, she was the most suitable person present to become a lady-in-waiting.

They wouldn't pick just one person, though, so she wondered who else would get picked. She scanned her surroundings, but then her eyes landed on something odd. There was a lady sitting off in a corner of the hall looking as nervous as a person could get. It was woefully obvious. She looked somewhat more rustic than others in terms of appearance, too, wearing a very large and heavy emerald brooch upon her chest.

Laughter escaped Elysia's lips at the young lady's unfortunately awkward attire. Someone acquainted with Elysia whispered to her from her side, noticing where her gaze had landed. "I hear she's the daughter of Margrave Kaniche. Her name is Tania, I think? I was aware that their land was located in some remote corner of the country, but it's a wonder as to why they sent his daughter as a candidate in that outfit. I suppose they thought slapping a large jewel on it somewhere would make it look alright. Poor girl."

Her tone oozed with mockery despite her seemingly sympathetic words, evoking further laughter from Elysia. Anyone with eyes would know not to choose a woman who looked like that as their lady-in-waiting. After all, anyone could see the brilliance of all the other women present. They hailed from all the best noble houses, including Elysia herself.

Tania seemed to notice the way people were looking at her. She dropped her head even farther, her posture drooping even more than it did before.

"Still, this will make for a good experience, wouldn't you agree? Returning to the distant backwoods where she came from after taking a

glimpse of Her Majesty the Empress is enough of an honor to serve as the proudest memory she'll make her entire life," Elysia sneered.

As the two were ridiculing Tania, the voice of an attendant rang throughout the hall. "Her Majesty is coming!" they announced.

All noise ceased that very instant. The women who had been waiting around stood themselves in lines and bowed in salutation as the empress entered through the doors. "All hail Her Majesty the Empress," they all greeted.

Cecile bid them at ease. "You may rise."

Elysia looked at the empress after lifting her head in accordance with imperial etiquette. The empress' beauty was one thing, but it was the unexpected aura she had about her that made Elysia observe her even more closely. The empress seemed very accustomed to this sort of situation. The kind where she took the lead amidst all of their attention.

Elysia had heard she had been a neglected princess, an illegitimate child of the king of Navitan, but...

While the empress might have undergone tutoring for a month prior to her wedding, there were some things that couldn't be accomplished without actual experience... and one of those things was a suitable air of authority. It was like how uncomfortable shoes had to be put on to learn how to properly walk within them, and how suffocating formal dresses had to be worn to grow used to their stifling feel.

If such was the case with clothes, then it had to be all the more so in the case of attitude. The empress exhibited an air of indifference, something that could only be accomplished by those accustomed to these sorts of events from a young age. That impassive face of hers seemed to say she wouldn't stand for any nonsense...

She was a formidable one.

As Elysia reflected upon herself for belittling the empress under the assumption that the empress had merely fascinated the emperor with a pretty face and some crazy antics, she corrected her posture. The empress

was walking in her direction, and she would soon spot Elysia and come to a stop. When that happened, she would greet—

But Elysia's thoughts had to stop there, because the empress' eyes suddenly lit up. She followed the empress' gaze. What was it? What on earth was it that caught her eye when she seemed so indifferent to everything just a moment ago?

Empress Cecile's footsteps quickened and she began to walk past all the ladies, heading straight for the very back of the line. "What is your name?" she asked, her voice bearing a hint of an excited lilt.

"I-It's Ta-Tania, Your Majesty."

Tania? That bumpkin from earlier? Elysia looked back in surprise. The empress' eyes were locked on the green brooch on Tania's chest. Elysia was not the only one who noticed.

The lady-in-waiting candidates all recalled what happened after the empress entered the imperial palace. The emperor had offered her all the jewels belonging to the imperial family, but she hadn't found it to be enough, so she told him she wanted something from the kingdom of Tetin.

Everyone in the hall came to the realization that to draw the empress' attention, they needed jewels. And big ones of good quality, at that.

*

The people of Tetin's royal palace all looked at the man who had entered uninvited. The garden behind the palace was praised as the most beautiful place in the entire kingdom, but no one gave a care for it at the moment; they were all too busy admiring the man's handsome face. He had black hair and black eyes and he had come with only a sword in hand, forgoing even wearing armor. He stood at the entrance of the hall connected to the back garden, sporting a somewhat disinterested expression.

Truth be told, even if his appearance would've proved a little lacking, he still would've drawn the attention of everyone present. After all, the sword in the man's hand was still dripping with hot blood.

“Kha... agh!”

Beneath the man's feet laid the kingdom of Tetin's knight commander. He was clutching his shoulder and groaning in pain.

Of course, the man in question was Emperor Estian.

He watched the blood drip from his sword for a moment before speaking to someone at the side. “You over there,” he called.

A servant belonging to the palace answered quickly, his face turning ashen. “Y-Yessir!”

“Take your clothes off.”

Everyone froze. What? Here? Right now?

Noticing their questioning looks and the odd atmosphere, Estian elaborated with a frown. “I meant take some of your clothes off so I can wipe away this blood.”

At that, the attendant quickly took off his upper garment and presented it to Estian in an extremely respectful manner. Estian promptly used it to wipe his black steel blade, drenching the garment in blood. Normally, this wouldn't happen when wiping down a sword, but his blade was no ordinary object.

As he tossed away the drenched piece of clothing once he finished using it, he wondered how much more of his blood—as well as the blood of an untold number of others—was still present within his sword.

“Emperor... You... What is...” the knight commander tried to wheeze out a few questions, but he was in too much pain. Estian responded by stepping harder on him. “Kuurgh!”

“You endure well for being such a worthless commander,” Estian said, ridicule dripping from his lips. “I'll praise you for that.” Next, he ground his heel down even harder, earning an irrepressible scream that

resounded throughout the entire area.

Those watching could turn their heads from the sight plaguing their eyes, but they could not turn away from the screams that pierced their ears. The terrible sounds only ended after they heard the sound of a shoulder breaking. In the end, the knight commander could no longer bear the excruciating pain and passed out.

Shortly after his screaming ended, the king of Tetin came rushing in, breathless with exertion. He was holding a very large, beautiful green jewel in his hand. The Forest of Tetin.

Countless trees seemed to be contained within the green jewel. They could have been nothing more than a unique pattern, but the trees were shaking as if blowing in the wind.

“He-Here it is!” cried the king.

“I didn’t think you’d actually bring it,” Estian said, holding his hand out with a chuckle. The king handed over the kingdom’s most precious jewel without hesitation.

“You have it now, so take your feet off Ridel at once! Now! You promised to spare him in exchange for the jewel!”

“Ridel? That’s his name?” Estian looked at the unconscious knight commander beneath his feet. Then, he kicked him hard. With an ‘urk!’ the knight commander was sent rolling away.

“Ridel!” the king sobbed, dashing over to hold the knight commander in his arms. He bellowed for a doctor and attendants began rushing about frantically.

Estian lowered his gaze to the jewel in his hand. It bore a seemingly infinite forest within its depths, waving tranquilly. The Forest of Tetin indeed. Just as he had begun to feel satisfied upon confirming that the gem was indeed real, the king cried out in condemnation.

“You savage wretch! Breaking into another country’s palace for no reason and stealing their treasure—is this how a ruler of an empire should act? How are you any better than a lowly thief?!”

“For no reason, you say?” Estian sneered. “Skadia, within the inner mountain range of Javel,” he named. The king’s face paled. “I hear you’ve amassed quite the army there. An army of elites, at that. Thought I wouldn’t know? Thought a surprise attack bolstered by numbers would succeed? I know that every soldier’s weapon was coated with Celcita’s Silver, meaning that I’m your sole objective. After all, I’m the only one left in the world who can be harmed by that metal.”

The king turned his head away from Estian’s glaring black eyes, which, for a fleeting instant, had flashed crimson. It was not a color belonging to any human.

“Raising an army to attack me in secret. Is that not enough reason for me to raze this land to the ground and set it alight?”

His words caused everyone standing in the hall to haltingly step back. It was no comfort to them that the emperor came alone. After all, he had managed to come this far without suffering a single scratch. Then, he cut down their knight commander with a single strike. They could all feel it instinctually: the emperor was not a being they could dare defy.

“But, rest easy. I have no intention of doing so today,” he added eventually.

The king paused. “Why?” he asked cautiously.

“My empress awaits. I must hurry to her.” That rendered the king of Tetin completely dumbfounded. He was so stunned that he even began wondering if the emperor was joking with him. He looked pretty serious, though. “I only hope she’ll be satisfied with this.”

The king recalled what he knew of the rumored empress. From what he heard, she was extremely fond of gems, which was why that emperor over there had offered her all of the Empire’s most precious treasures. Apparently, she seemed to be a woman who couldn’t be satisfied with that alone.

The king’s face darkened. It was difficult enough dealing with a mad tyrant, but now he’d have to deal with the maniac who had that tyrant wrapped around her finger.

“Don’t make such a face. Now that I have this, I have no further business with Tetin. I’ve already sent my troops to Javel, so do kindly bury your men later. I’ll forget the matter concerning Skadia with this. And also...” Estian drew close to the king, whispering in his ear. “I’ll keep it secret that this knight commander you’ve got is just your son with his hair and eyes disguised. Given this much, I think you should have no complaints.”

The king gasped, his gaze whirling to meet Estian’s.

“You won’t ask how I knew, would you, now?” Estian’s eyes flickered crimson again. The king of Tetin bowed his head. He bowed not in submission but in gratitude, and Estian turned away at the sight. “A father who cares for his son, huh?”

It wasn’t a sentiment he could understand and nor would he in the days to come. Estian immediately turned to leave for the empire, certain that Cecile was waiting for him.

The very first person to welcome him back, however, was someone rather unexpected.

“It has been a long time, Your Majesty. May the Empire prosper in peace.”

“Irene?”

She wasn’t anyone whom he was particularly glad to see, but nevertheless, he couldn’t ignore her.

*

“It really is worse than what I’ve heard!”

The newspaper gripped in Irene’s hands was crushed with a cruel crunch. Watching her display of anger, the saintess inwardly clicked her tongue. Irene may be a character she made, but she had quite a dirty temper.

The saintess took a second to recall what kind of person Irene was.

As the only daughter of Earl Leven, a prominent scholar of the Empire, Irene was—to all appearances—a calm and neat person. A lady of good repute with excellent academic achievements and a great rapport with her peers.

She harbored some serious delusions about Estian, though.

She had grown besotted with Estian ever since her first brief meeting with him when she was young. When they were kids, Estian once received her help, which was why he had shown her greater patience than others. However, Irene mistook his leniency for love, believing herself to be his one true fated partner. She was convinced that she, as his childhood friend, was the only one who fully understood him and could serve as his lifelong companion.

What was her mindset centered on, again? Something about how Estian would realize how much she truly loved him only after meeting all sorts of women and learning how they didn't? She was a convenient character to write, but after seeing her in person like this, the saintess felt like she had a pretty nasty personality.

Such a typical, uninspired antagonist. And, what? She'll just forgive him for hooking up with whomever? Oh, how the saintess pitied her for her ignorance. She didn't know the charms of a virgin man.

The saintess supposed that she should be relieved that Irene was as simple-minded as she was, though. Thanks to that, it was easy to play to her mood and prepare herself for future events.

Pulling the crumpled newspaper from Irene's hands, the saintess gave her a new one before pointing to a certain column. "Why, milady, look here," she prompted. "It says that the capital's jewelers are enjoying a great boom in business because young ladies are buying jewels to gain favor with the empress during the lady-in-waiting selections. You'll be joining them as well, won't you, milady? After all, you'll need a worthy gem to catch the empress' eyes. Even if you are His Majesty's childhood friend, the ladies-in-waiting will be chosen by Her Majesty in the end,

so...”

The saintess stopped at that point and looked at Irene, only to see her face wholly resolute.

“No. I won’t resort to such a method.”

“But then Her Majesty won’t be interested in you.”

“I don’t need to be chosen by the empress because I’m...” Irene clenched her fists before continuing. “I’m going to ask His Majesty directly. I must go to the imperial palace and meet him!”

The saintess fell into thought as she observed Irene. The original storyline might’ve changed a bit, but the main events were still happening as she had written in the plot. A transient smile touched her lips.

Soon, the phantom beast awakened by Estian’s presence would appear within the imperial palace. And, as she had written, it would attack ‘Cecile’.

That was the moment of opportunity.

*

Estian looked at Irene. He could also see Kane standing behind her with a troubled expression. In truth, it would’ve been difficult for Kane to stop her and he had no reason to do so, either. After all, as far as others were concerned, Irene was practically considered Estian’s one and only ‘childhood friend’.

Well. Friend, was it? They were nothing of the sort, but seeing as he couldn’t explain their relationship to others, he simply allowed Irene to say as she wished. His silence was taken as tacit acceptance, naturally leading to the public assuming her words were authentic. Thanks to that, she was always well-received within the Empire. Although Kane had occasionally asked about whether or not he needed to take action against her, Estian merely told him to leave her be.

“What is the matter?” the emperor asked. “I received no word of you coming.”

“My! Your Majesty and I have no need for a particular reason to meet,” she said.

Normally, he would’ve given her some noncommittal response and moved on, but for some reason today she irked him a little. He wondered why he felt like this, but then he came to a realization upon glancing at The Forest of Tetin in his hand. He was eager to see Cecile and didn’t want his visit to be delayed. “In any case, we will talk later,” he said. “I must go to the empress first.”

Irene gaped in surprise. “Goodness gracious, Your Majesty. Were the rumors going around actually true? Wait. Is that The Forest of Tetin? Heavens, Your Majesty! You actually brought it?!”

He ignored her questions. “How about you just move aside?”

Cecile must’ve been dying to see him. What would she say after he brought her the Forest of Tetin? In any case, he knew that she would, without a doubt, properly carry out the role of a ‘villainess bewitching the emperor’, at least.

What did he tell her to do, again? Oh, yes. To come running, for starters. After that, he vaguely recalled that she was to give him a deep kiss in public—imperial etiquette could go fuck itself—and croon words of overt, passionate seduction in his direction. Even though he could predict Cecile entering his embrace only to grumble for him to ‘put a sock in that insufferable Aled’s mouth’, he could hardly suppress a good-humored whistle at the thought of her doing as he had asked. After all he had done, she should welcome him with open arms, after all.

What should he ask of her?

Fetching the Forest of Tetin was Cecile’s first ‘request’ even if it was because of Aled. Granted, Aled had awoken and caused this mess of a situation due some picky housing conditions, but Estian was ultimately the one who worked the hardest, was he not? A favor for a favor. There was no such thing as a free lunch.

It was with happy thoughts on his mind regarding what he'd ask her that Estian made his way toward the empress' palace.

Or, at least that was how it should've been. The moment he tried to take a step forward, Irene's feet likewise moved. When he stuck out his right foot, she answered with her left, and when he stuck out his left foot, she countered with her right. In other words, she was completely blocking his way.

Three times his attempts to move were thwarted. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

Unable to hide his exasperation, the murder in his voice had risen to a terrifying degree, yet she appeared completely oblivious to it all. "Oh, now there's the emperor I know!" She beamed. "You always had that look on you when you were young."

Other people present around them had already begun sweating because of the frightening aura emanating from him. Seeing her stand so nonchalantly before him like that, they whispered among themselves. "Is it because they're friends after all?" people asked, and so on and so forth.

It wasn't because he and Irene were friends, however. His patience was merely derived from the fact that he shared her blood and she likewise shared his, unbeknownst to her.

He barely managed to curb his boiling frustration. "Irene. Say everything you want to say as well as why you came to the imperial palace right here and now."

He did not want to express his irritation a second time, so he intended on listening to her full story here so he could order Kane to deal with the matter later. His uncharacteristic degree of tolerance for her was not out of fondness, but on account of Earl Levnen, who had endeavored to return his humanity to him in the past.

Irene grinned as if she had known he would listen to her. "I want to see Her Majesty the Empress," she said confidently.

At that, Estian answered in kind with a smile of his own.

“Drag her out.”

*

Tania took in her surroundings. It was easy to lose one's way in the vast and spacious palace of the empress, but nonetheless she was encoding the path she was currently taking into memory. After all, this was how to get to the empress' room.

Upon her arrival, the attendant standing outside recognized her and announced her presence. Tania clutched tightly onto the object in her arms and waited to be called on from the inside. Soon after, she heard the sound of a door opening.

“Tania!” Empress Cecile exclaimed.

“Y-Your Majesty!” She had expected an attendant to open the door, but out came the empress instead.

“You don't know how long I've waited for you since this morning. Come on in. Oh, and the rest of you may go back now. I want some time alone with her.”

The servants hesitated. “But, Your Majesty...”

“Did I not make it clear the other day? Do not disturb my time with Tania.”

The attendants were forced to withdraw upon hearing the empress' tone of voice, which was harder than it had ever been before. As they were about to leave, one of them spotted the large bag in Tania's arms. “Lady Tania, everything taken into Her Majesty's room must be inspected.”

But then, right as the attendant reached out for the bag, a high-pitched voice broke through. “N-No!”

“Your Majesty?”

“It's something I specifically asked her to bring. All of you, quickly take

your leave.”

“But...”

She raised her voice. “Quickly, I said!”

Seeing the empress now yelling with a reddened face, everyone hurriedly left for the outside. Even as the attendants left, though, their eyes briefly lingered on Tania’s bag. It appeared to contain something quite large and heavy, and she was hugging it tightly, almost as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

What did it contain?

This lady-in-waiting coming from the countryside was said to have caught the empress’ eye thanks to a large jewel she wore during the selection. That being the case, could it be that the bag contained...?

Oh, the poor thing. Was she commanded by Her Majesty to bring the rest of her jewels? Once the servants reached that train of thought, it all made sense to them. How could a plain girl from the sticks manage to become a lady-in-waiting otherwise? Bribery was always the answer. That bag surely contained every jewel that young lady had.

What a villainess she was!

And thus... the misunderstandings continued to pile.

*

After all the attendants withdrew, leaving only the two of them in the room, Cecile slumped to the floor. “Th-That was a close one,” she sighed.

“Your Majesty, are you alright?” Tania asked, worried.

“Mhm, I’m fine. I just felt faint the moment I thought I was going to be found out.” Now that everyone else was gone, Cecile immediately abandoned her formal attitude toward Tania and began to chat in a friendly manner. “By the way, how did it go with the things I asked for?”

“Worry not! I brought all of them!”

“Really? You’re the best, Tania!” She pulled her into a big hug and Tania giggled giddily in her arms. The attendants were likely unable to properly guess at what the bag truly contained.

*

A week had passed since Tania became Cecile's lady-in-waiting. Initially, she couldn't believe her good luck. The earldom of Kaniche—where she had spent the entirety of her life—was indeed as was the gossiping young ladies back at the lady-in-waiting selection had claimed. It was the most remote of remote rural areas.

One day, Tania expressed her unhappiness concerning this fact, to which her mother, Margrave Kaniche, had much to say about. “Was there anything I couldn't do for you here? I fed you what you wanted to eat and let you do whatever you wanted to do. Where do you even get off complaining when you don't know how blessed you are! They say there are children in faraway countries who are living hard lives, starving alone! You should know to be grateful for the clothes on your back and the meals that fill your belly,” she nagged. “That aside, did you do the homework I gave you? Did you finish a thousand swings with the sword? And didn't I tell you to shoot a hundred bolts a day?!” She shook her head. “I hear Carla from the neighboring province can already shoot a bee from over a hundred feet away!”

Tania plugged her ears at her mother's torrential reprimands. “Oh, there she goes again,” she sighed to herself. “I don't get why all the daughters of Mom's friends are good at using the sword, shooting the bow, thinking up new tactics, and hell, even talented in assassination.”

When Tania shut her ears, refusing to listen, her mother sighed heavily. Then, she resumed nagging. “That reminds me, I heard everything from the butler. I'm told you're practically sponsoring the neighborhood bookstore? Reading isn't a bad thing, no. But I can't bear to show my face

around for shame after hearing the titles of the books you've been buying! What? 'The Lark Cries: Touch of Obscenity'? 'The Duke's Love: A Hard Night'? 'Leash Me Eternally'? Your swordsmanship is such a mess these days because you're always holding on to these sorts of books! Why, I'll throw out every single one of them!"

"Mom, I hate you!" Tania cried.

The nag-filled days continued until her father returned from his trip to the capital.

"I've heard His Majesty has wed an empress," her father began during meal time. "Soon there'll be a lady-in-waiting selection, honey."

"Is that right?" Tania's eyes twinkled. "Mom, I wanna go there! I want to be Her Majesty the Empress' lady-in-waiting too!"

Her father smiled gently at her exclamation as he reached to take his wife's hand. "Honey, I don't think it's quite right to throw knives at the breakfast table," he told Margrave Kaniche. "And, Tania. What did Dad tell you?"

"Don't say anything that'll set Mom off when she's eating," she recited sadly.

At her daughter's answer, Margrave Kaniche massaged her chest to calm herself as she glared at Tania. "You spout such things despite knowing that? And you plan on becoming Her Majesty's lady-in-waiting?! Do you even know what that position entails?"

"Yes! It's a position where you can court a dashing knight while witnessing relentless veiled strife!"

"Didn't I tell you to read those romances in moderation?!"

That day, Tania got rebuked to the point of near death. While she was writing an essay of apology in the evening, sniffing all the while, her father came to visit. "Tania, I talked some with your mother and—"

"D-Did she say she'd feed me to the grizzlies?" she whimpered.

"No, not that. Your mother says she'll send you to the capital to join the

lady-in-waiting election.”

Tania, startled, said,. “What?”

According to her father's explanation, her mother thought she was misunderstanding reality. If she went, she would soon learn what utter hogwash those romance novels were after experiencing real life with nobles at the imperial palace. She thought it was a good opportunity to shatter all her delusions.

“But there’s no way Mom gave in so easily,” she said, disbelieving.

“Daddy tried his best. We’ll count this as our baby daughter's birthday present. Agreed?”

Of course, she agreed. In exchange, Tania was to promise her father she wouldn’t talk back to her mother. Also, she was to swing her sword 2,000 times and shoot 150 bolts every day.

Just like that, the time soon came and she arrived at the capital to participate in the lady-in-waiting selection. Thanks to her mother telling her that she’d only receive enough money to cover travel fees and food expenses, she had to make do with wearing the clothes and jewelry she already owned back at the castle, hence her markedly shabby outfit.

She didn’t really intend on becoming a lady-in-waiting, though. She knew her place. Leaving the earldom and getting to see all the places that had served as the background settings of her favorite romance novels was all she wanted to do. It was fun! After all, even if the empress ever thought to spare a glance at a country bumpkin like her, what fun could there be had in doing actual work as a court lady? It seemed like the empress’ personality wasn’t a joke, either, according to rumors.

She’d never get close to the empress like that, and neither would the empress show the slightest bit of interest in her, so it was impossible to become a lady-in-waiting.

...Or so she once thought.

Presently, Tania watched Cecile as the latter became thoroughly absorbed in reading the book she had brought. The bag which the

attendants had assumed to contain jewelry was in fact full of romance novels. She had personally chosen them, taking only from among the best.

After Cecile declared Tania to be her lady-in-waiting during the selection, they returned to her palace. Tania had cried out upon seeing the bookshelf.

"Oh! That's 'He Becomes a Beast at Night!'" she said, instantly recognizing the book even though it had been placed upside down to disguise the title. Following her instinctive and involuntary outburst, however, she clamped her mouth shut, glancing at the empress nervously.

Cecile had paled. "Everyone, out," she immediately ordered.

Soon, all the attendants left, leaving them alone in the room. Tania had begun trembling with nerves, clueless as to what the empress might've been thinking. However, instead of exploding in fury, Cecile had grabbed both her hands.

"You like them, too!" Cecile exclaimed, elated. "So do I!"

What next ensued was a conversation that roughly consisted of them both affirming their mutual interest in romance novels. It wasn't long before they came to know that they had found a kindred soul in each other. When Cecile mentioned it was hard for her to procure books like those, Tania told her not to worry, and today she had proven the authenticity of her claim. Everything she brought with her was at Cecile's behest.

"Tania, truly... It's like you were sent to me from the heavens," Cecile mumbled, her voice choking with emotion as she beheld all the books' titles. Tania scratched her cheeks shyly at the praise.

That was when her gaze landed upon a corner of the empress' room. There, she spotted the emerald brooch she had worn during her first meeting with the empress lying neatly atop a soft-looking cushion. It seemed different somehow. It was a stupidly large jewel to begin with, true, but it seemed to have gained an even greater shine after she gave it up. Despite the fact that it didn't look any newer, she felt as if it had

become full of light.

Well, she didn't have a problem with this, anyway. Her mother gave it to her to do as she liked.

Tania turned to look at Cecile again. Already, she was carefully putting the books on her bookshelf. Seeing how the empress was organizing them by size and color, hiding their titles with thick papers, Tania could tell her love for these books wasn't just a passing fancy only a couple days old.

"Thank you, Tania," she said. "I'll return them after reading them as quickly as possible."

"It's alright. You don't need to give them back."

"No, it's a given to return borrowed books. And it's only right to buy my own if I find them enjoyable," Cecile said, shaking her head. Tania almost nodded inadvertently, agreeing with every word. "From what Sir Kane says," she continued, "there's not much going on today. So, if it's okay with you, why don't you stay with me until evening before you go?"

The empress cupped her chin and smiled as she warmly suggested for Tania to stay, and Tania nodded in assent. She couldn't bear to refuse after seeing a smile like that. No wonder His Majesty was so smitten. She could empathize with the emperor despite never having met him.

Unaware of her lady-in-waiting's thoughts, Cecile picked up the strawberries her servants left her and took them to Tania. "Try some of these," she said. "They're strawberries grown in the imperial greenhouse and let me tell you: they're so delicious. Here, say 'ah'."

Tania opened her mouth to eat the strawberry being offered by Cecile, but as soon as she did—

Murder.

She felt murder in the air.

Instantly, she scrambled to her feet, but the source of the hostility was even faster, pressing a blackened blade against her throat. "Wh-Who...?" she tried to ask. Who was it that dared to enter the empress' palace to kill

her lady in waiting?!

Cecile, wide-eyed, exclaimed in surprise. “Your Majesty, what are you doing?”

‘Your Majesty’? Hearing those words, Tania shifted her gaze, laying her eyes upon the man threatening her. He had raven hair, dark eyes, and graceful features. He radiated an aura of immense intimidation that was by no means solely on account of his sword.

He shot a glare at Tania before snapping up the strawberry in the empress’ hand for himself. Only then did satisfaction color his eyes. “I have returned, Empress,” he said eventually. “Why didn’t you come out to welcome me? And, what’s this? Why are you feeding her by hand?”

Tania observed the scorching fire in the emperor’s eyes. She had heard that he had fallen in love with Cecile, but no, that wasn’t quite right. This was less ‘in love’ and more ‘totally whipped’.

*

“Whew, seriously...” The saintess scanned the imperial palace with a look of admiration. When she wrote it, she had summed up its description with a single sentence that read: ‘The imperial palace was the most beautiful and magnificent building in the entire continent.’ After that, she thought nothing more of it, yet that single sentence had ended up creating something so impressive. “4D is sublime,” she mused.

The word magnificent alone couldn’t do this place justice. The imperial palace was located in the north of the capital. Countless buildings both big and small were connected back and forth, resulting in something gigantic that almost seemed alive. In moments like the present where the sun was setting, the palace’s white walls were dyed red beneath the falling light as if it were another sun of its own.

The saintess popped the fried snack she was holding into her mouth as she took everything in. The crispy, well-fried bread and the powdered

sugar sprinkled on it composed the perfect blend of both taste and texture.

“Good thing I made it so that the best restaurants and eateries in the empire were clustered up by the front of the imperial palace,” she said, munching away at her snacks. She stayed like that for a long while, simply watching the sun. Only after finishing everything and pouring the leftover sugar and crumbs from the paper snack bag into her mouth did she finally turn away.

She read the name of the building before her. The Imperial Detention Center.

Shrugging, she made her way toward it. “I suppose I should go pick her up now that I’ve enjoyed myself enough,” she said.

*

“Milady!”

Irene turned to her newest maid. She was running over with a face that told her she was happy to see her. “Hey!” Irene cried. “Why did you only come now?!”

While she had been feeling terribly upset all day long, excitement was written plain as day on her maid’s face. Moreover, she even had something that looked like snack crumbs stuck by her mouth. The sight of it all annoyed Irene to the point of screaming. “Why did you take so long?!”

“Did you forget?” the saintess asked. She readied herself to quote Irene word-for-word. “Milady said, ‘You won’t be able to enter the main palace with your lowly status anyway, so wait for me in the outer lobby. Actually, just head out and play while you wait. It’s been a while since I met His Majesty so I might take some time. We’ll have to talk to catch up, after all.’ Then, you only gave me an outer palace entry pass before heading off. Thanks to that, I had difficulty even making it into this detention center.

Nothing like this would've happened if you had also given me an inner palace entry pass from the start.”

Irene didn't respond. Everything the girl had said was technically correct, but for some reason it sounded like she was blaming Irene, telling her that it was all her fault she ended up like this. That made her feel indignant. She had hired this girl of unknown origins for her mysterious knack for reading her moods and for her subservience, but now it seemed like the time had come to fire her.

However, just as Irene was about to shout out her final verdict, a paper bag was suddenly held aloft before her.

“Oh, my dearest lady... It might've just been half a day, but you mustn't have had anything to properly eat here. You don't know how much I thought of you even as I roamed the restaurants outside the imperial palace,” her servant gushed. “I went to the places with the longest lines and bought your share as well while I was at it, and good thing I did, too. Dear, oh dear. Look at your ruined complexion. You must've been so upset, no? Have some of this, first.”

“What is this? You know I don't eat commoner... Ah? Is this...?” Irene's gaze fell to the paper bag she now held, detecting a savory fragrance wafting out of it even though its contents seemed to have cooled. Upon reading the branding on the bag, Irene's face colored with surprise. Her maid hadn't lied to her about waiting in long lines; the bag bore the label of what was currently the hottest snack shop in the capital.

“I bought it just for you, milady. Didn't I do good? Come now, dig in quick.”

Urged by her maid, Irene made her mind to open the bag, taking one of the snacks to her mouth. The taste of well-fried dough sprinkled with sugar spread over her tongue, a beautiful sensation after it had withered from starving for most of the day. After several moments of chewing, the rims of Irene's eyes turned red and all of a sudden, she was on the verge of tears.

She began to bemoan what she went through. “Oh, heavens... His

Majesty didn't seem glad to see me at all," she sniffled. "He just looked at me like I was a bother and told Sir Kane to drag me away. What in the world happened to His Majesty?"

"Well, he's completely fallen in love with Her Majesty the Empress, that's what."

"No! There's no way... umph!"

Catching notice of how Irene was tearing up again, the saintess shoved another snack in her mouth as if tired of the noise she was making. She really must've been hungry, the saintess mused. Normally, she would've just started yelling in outrage, yet she just silently ate what she was given instead.

"Now, I have the coach ready to go, so for today let's just go back to the mansion and think about this topic after having a good rest. After we return, I'll join you in flaming the empress until you feel all better inside, milady," the saintess said.

"You have to do it until I feel better, okay? Until I say stop," Irene said, sulking. "But I really don't get it. Why in God's name is His Majesty acting like that?" She pulled the saintess in close and whispered into her with a small voice. "Don't you think the empress must've cast some sort of dark spell over him? I heard some people here in the detention center talk about her, and they say she's bewitchingly pretty. Apparently, she's also getting prettier by the day?"

"Oh, bloody..." the saintess cursed under her breath, trailing off.

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"Nothing, milady. You must be tired, so please get on the coach and sleep a little. I'll wake you when we arrive."

After pushing Irene into the coach and shutting its door, the saintess hid behind the coach to punt an innocent pebble in frustration. "Aargh! Why'd I have to go and write her like that?!" she grumbled to herself. She had ended up going with the flow and giving Cecile every good quality she could think of for the main character. Doing so made it easier for her to

advance the plot and, most importantly, satisfy her desires.

One of those good qualities was her appearance. Looks couldn't have been the only things in Cecile's arsenal now, though. Eventually, she would win the hearts of young noblewomen as well as the attendants of the imperial palace who had all initially kept their distance. This was all happening because the saintess wrote her novel in a way that had been commonly known as 'placing the main character on a pedestal'. In other words, anything Cecile did would continue to result in praise along the lines of, "Ah, our beloved empress thought so far ahead!" or, "Ah, our beloved empress had such knowledge and talent!"

All the more reason as to why the saintess had to get into Cecile's body quickly. Such praise should have been hers to enjoy! It was meant to be her sweet nectar to savor!

Her gaze flicked back to the imperial palace. While she had been wandering around the capital today, she had caught wind that an envoy from the kingdom of Stoan had arrived in the country.

The object brought by that envoy was important. It was a relic—an egg housing a phantom beast—discovered in an unknown underground ruin. At a glance, it looked extraordinary, and the kingdom of Stoan had brought it as an offering to Estian. The egg would awake in response to Estian's presence and bring about a disturbance within the palace.

That was the day the saintess had to make sure she entered the premises. She clenched her fist at the thought. Soon, very soon, this world would resume its intended path. Just like she had first written.

As she stood there with grim determination filling her heart, the saintess caught wind of the sound of the coach setting off behind her. She whirled around to yell after it.

"Hold up! I haven't gotten on yet!"

Chapter 3

The Strongest of All

“So, what’s Aled doing now, again?” Estian asked.

“Busy with renovations, apparently?” Cecile answered.

“Renovations?”

“They said that there are traces of another spirit having lived inside the gem so there’s no need to build a new house, but the style isn’t to their liking. That’s why Aled’s getting an additional loan, which I was told to handle. Said it was the least I could do. Since then, they’ve been cooped up there. It’s been several days now.”

Estian looked at the jewel in his hand. It was of a rather large size and while it did appear somewhat crude in terms of craftsmanship—it seemed to have been made a long ago—one could tell that effort was put into its creation. Currently, the jewel was shining brilliantly as if a light had been lit within it. Of course, the source of that light had to be Aled bustling in there.

For some reason, Estian felt dispirited as he gazed at the jewel. He had anticipated Cecile to welcome him eagerly, rejoicing in being saved at last when he brought The Forest of Tetin, but no. Upon his return, what he got instead was Cecile telling him, "Oh, I already found a jewel for Aled to go in! So, I think you can just return that!"

Putting aside the lack of a passionate welcome, something else was grating on his nerves: that woman from before. The one who had so naturally opened her mouth to accept the strawberry offered by Cecile, something even he had yet to be fed by hand. He had been told that her name was Tania and she was the original owner of the jewel Aled now occupied. She was also Cecile’s newly elected lady-in-waiting.

For some reason, he felt ill-disposed towards her... But, then again, how could he not when Cecile put him on the back burner after he had been gone for days just so she could keep chatting with her?

“Then Tania, you'll be coming again tomorrow, won't you?” Estian remembered Cecile asking.

“Of course, Your Majesty. Tomorrow I'll bring an even better selection, naturally, and...” Tania edged closer to Cecile and whispered something, making her blush until her ears reddened. She became ecstatic as she took hold of Tania's hands.

“Really? You really have it?”

“Absolutely, Your Majesty. And I will definitely bring it tomorrow.”

“You're the best, Tania!”

Estian could still remember, clear as day, how that lady-in-waiting had shot him a glance as she smiled like the happiest person alive within Cecile's embrace, how her lips were curled into a victorious smile. Even after that, the two left him standing off to the side for a long time while they conducted a mysterious conversation amongst themselves.

Strangely enough, he caught the names of many men as they talked—Jade, Max, Hugo, Cillian, and so on—and he was most displeased to see Cecile's face brighten each time they were mentioned.

Aside from that, he also overheard them going on about regret novels, obsession novels, angst novels, possession novels, and parenting novels, but he couldn't tell what they all meant. Only after Tania left did he ask about it. “What did that court woman bring for you to make that kind of expression?”

“Wh-What about my expression?” Cecile asked. “I'm the same as usual!”

What about it, huh? Well, her face looked like the very definition of being in love. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were gently upturned into a smile for no reason. How could she claim to be ‘the same as usual’ while she wore a look on her face that enticed an inexplicable urge within him to hug her tight?

What did that lady-in-waiting promise her to get her to make a face he had never seen before?

“I see you’ve become very close with her rather quickly despite her recent employment,” he commented.

“Of course! Tania’s a good friend, but she’s also the savior who delivered me from Aled!”

“What savior? All she did was bring a jewel from her family. It was merely good luck.”

“Be that as it may, without Tania I would’ve had to listen to even more of Aled’s rambling. You don’t know what a maniac of a talker Aled was until we got Tania’s jewel, Your Majesty. Even amidst the lady-in-waiting selection, they were going on about you being impotent all day lo—hup!” Cecile hastily blocked her mouth to keep anything else from spilling out.

Unfortunately, however, enough had already been said. Estian glowered.

“What?”

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“I was wrong. Please take anything but my life.”

Aled knelt on a table and slammed their forehead down repeatedly, vigorously bowing to Estian, who was sitting facing opposite them with Tania’s brooch in his hand. He raised his hand high and—Aled’s eyes practically popped out of their sockets—let go of the jewel. Fortunately for the spirit, however, he used his other hand to catch it before it could drop to the floor.

“I—I beg of you. Anything but that. I barely finished renovating yesterday,” Aled pleaded. They went through a terrible time looking for another home-worthy jewel after the Emerald broke. They had undergone so much trouble, in fact, that when they found what they were looking for, they went crazy. “THAT’S MIIIIINNNEE!” they bellowed, demanding Cecile retrieve it from her new lady-in-waiting.

After heading inside the jewel to take a look, Aled saw traces of someone having taken up residence within it before, which was why they excitedly started fixing up the place like the latest trend. They couldn't afford to lose their home. Not after everything!

The spirit's reluctance to lose their house made them act servile to the utmost. The various variety of proud embellishments they forged of their name, like being the first elf's shadow, or being the one and only spiritual entity capable of physical manifestation, didn't help their situation in the slightest.

"You cherish your house so much, yet you wag your tongue with abandon," Estian said coldly as Aled begged. "I wonder why?"

"Exactly as you say. I wonder why I did that?" Speaking as if that had nothing to do with the matter, Aled turned to sneak a peek toward the bed in the room where Cecile was resting, thoroughly exhausted. She had a thin blanket covering her, but by the looks of the colorful marks Estian had left on what skin was visible—her exposed neck, shoulders, and even her back—it was evident how eager he had been to take her. In fact, she had endured so much that she was tired enough to snore in her sleep.

Aled glanced back at Estian, wiping the corner of their mouth at the sight of his half-naked torso bared for all to see. Although Aled was a genderless spiritual entity, they did have working eyes. They could tell that the emperor's chest was, to put it crudely, rather 'hot'.

His shoulders were broad, his collarbones were flawless, and his sculpted, veined muscles rippled with his every movement. While his lower half was still concealed, he was using a large bath towel to do so, and it had slipped slightly down to expose his hips. The sight of it made Aled gulp dryly.

The emperor sat there in all his splendor, his face languid as he swept back his hair. Aled was once shown a photobook by another spirit they were acquainted with who lauded its contents, saying, "Hey, this is what they call a photobook, but it's out of this world. Amazing, I tell you. Take one look and your mind will be blown to another realm." Estian was like a

picture out of that very book.

What a tactless towel. If it fell just a little lower...

As Aled was gulping in discontent, Estian tossed the jewel in the air and caught it again, snapping Aled back to reality. “Stop! Please stop!” they cried. “I’ll really end up a vengeful ghost if my house breaks again! Haven’t you heard how horrible spirits become when they’re consumed by malice?” they asked anxiously.

“I can simply eradicate you before that happens,” Estian replied, apathetic.

Aled couldn’t respond; all they could do was fight back tears. He wasn’t wrong. What the hell had this guy eaten to become so strong for a human? The only one among humans capable of wielding a black steel blade had been...

“Eh?” Surprise overcame Aled upon recalling a certain memory. “Wait a second. Emperor, you didn’t ingest Eugendiph’s Blood, did you?”

Estian’s eyes morphed crimson in that instant, prompting Aled to snap their fingers in realization. “Good Lord, I was right! No wonder you could wield a black steel blade—you’ve tasted some! Wait, no. How come you’re still human after taking it? Most humans end up dying or turning into monsters...” Another thought occurred to them just then. “Ah, I see why you never thought of having children. You may be capable of breeding, but a child born of your blood will become a monstrosity, after all.”

Aled was babbling on so excitedly about the realization they had come to that they failed to notice Estian staring at them pointedly. Only after it was too late did it dawn on the spirit how dangerous it was to touch upon this topic. Aled retreated a few steps back, cowed by those glaring red eyes.

They spoke up in self-defense. “No—so, I mean, I knew you definitely weren’t impotent!” Aled gulped but there was nothing there to swallow. Impotent, their foot. This guy must’ve been capable of making dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of babies if he wanted.

“You.” Estian growled in a chillingly low voice, and the spirit felt even greater fear than they had when he was hurled their jewel.

It felt like death was imminent. Before Aled knew or could do anything about it, the emperor had drawn his blade and thrust it down onto the table.

It had landed a mere paper-thin distance away from their face.

“Oh, my mistake,” Estian lied. “Let’s retry that.”

Aled screamed in fright. “Spare me! I’m sorry! I’ll never say anything again! I was just amazed to come across something I thought had been long gone!”

“Tell me. How much do you know of Eugendiph’s Blood?”

“I don’t know the details. Just that some spirits I knew took an interest because much of it disappeared after it was made. That’s the truth!” Aled shakily inched away from the black steel blade.

“You don’t know all the details, but that still means you know about it to some extent.”

“Why? Is there something you want to know?” Aled asked. “Come on, what are spirits for? You can ask any question and I’ll find all the answers in the spirit realm! Really! Promise! You know as well, don’t you? Spiritual entities like us suffer big time if we break a promise. I’ll keep my word, really!” they swore. They had rubbed their hands in a gesture of pleading so furiously fast that a fly could be put to shame all throughout their appeal. “Just say what you need!”

“Very well. I’ll need several promises from you first.”

“Several?” Aled asked. Internally, they cursed. “Damn jerk. How much does he intend on slaving me around?” they grumbled. Still, they put on their best smile. “Your wish is my command, master,” they said instead.

It was nasty and unfair, but what could they do? It was all for the sake of living. For one, that jerk still had their house and he had promised to pay its remaining—as well as additional—installments to the spirits Aled

owed. That wasn't all. Estian seemed intent on truly killing Aled without scruple if the latter refused to abide.

"First things first," Estian began, and the spirit speculated as to what he would demand first.

Information about Eugendiph's Blood, probably? Which spirits knew about that again? Ah, that fellow who lived in the jewel of Mount Griden was knowledgeable in those sorts of records. Aled fought about something with them once and they haven't been in touch for over 400 years, though... Should they look for them? Ugh, it would hurt their pride to make the first move. What was the best way to reconnect with an estranged friend naturally?

That's when Estian continued and broke Aled's train of thought. "Keep in mind that the moment you say a single word about Eugendiph's Blood to Cecile, you're dead," he ordered. "What's with the look? Got a problem?"

"No. How could I?"

His statement had merely struck Aled as unexpected. They had thought he would immediately ask for information regarding the blood, yet instead the first thing he did was mention how he didn't want Cecile to know about it? It was disarming.

Estian left the jewel on the table and approached the bed before continuing to speak. "Second, fix up whatever nonsense you've told Cecile about me being impotent on your own. And get your hide inside the jewel."

With that said, Estian lay down next to Cecile. A moment later, Aled vaguely overheard Cecile complain about how she couldn't take any more, while Estian coaxed her into going for just one more round.

Did Aled really need to clarify anything when the emperor was making it so clear with his body? They grumbled to themselves on their way into the jewel, the couple's voices ringing distantly behind them.

Cecile couldn't suppress a chain of yawns. How many rounds did they go for last night, again? Once, twice, thrice, four times... No, forget it. She was of the opinion that numbers didn't matter. All she needed to remember was that it was really, really good.

She rubbed her sleepy eyes as she turned the page of a book. There was a reason she kept reading when she could've chosen to sleep a little more instead. She figured that this book would be a big help to her in the future.

The book in her hands was a story which she often stayed up at night to read when she lived in Navitan. It had been included amongst the books Tania bought. "You can't miss out on this when you're going for classics!" she had said, so Cecile was happy to read it again.

'None Sought the Imperial Palace's Most Beautiful Flower' was its title.

The plot went as follows: the female lead of the story was in a loveless marriage with the emperor. He came to her every night, but only to sleep with her. They never shared anything personal whatsoever.

Gradually, the female lead grew tired of the emperor's attitude. Then, one day, she met the imperial knight commander—the emperor's right-hand man—in a garden. They met more often until they eventually ended up falling in love with one another.

The female lead dreamt of a future together with the knight commander, not the emperor, and realized she had to abandon her status as the empress to grant her wish. So, she deliberately behaved wickedly before the emperor. Voices calling for her disposal grew louder by the day. She waited for the emperor's final judgement. When he came to their bedroom one night, however, he simply asked her, "Do you think I'll let you go?" and began to demonstrate a growing obsession with her...

As she read the book, Cecile repeatedly went over the parts where the empress deliberately behaved wickedly, thinking that she should take

note for later. Estian had told her to do bad things but she was clueless as to how she would, so reading and learning was important. Never had she expected one of these books to serve a practical use one day, though.

While flipping through the book's pages, she halted all of a sudden. She had reached a section she used to favor a lot in the past. It was the scene where the female lead and the knight commander shared their first kiss amidst the rose bushes. Reading the scene now, however, didn't move her as deeply as before.

She didn't get it. Why did the emperor seem better to her now? She used to think he was a piece of trash, a leopard incapable of changing its ways. Upon looking over him again, though, he seemed kind of earnest?

Perhaps she felt that way because the emperor in the story had black hair and black eyes like Estian. Come to think of it, the knight commander in the novel...

It was then that she heard a knock on the door. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"Sir Kane is here."

"Let him in."

Cecile swiftly placed a bookmark on the part she was reading, covered the book, and pushed it to one end of the table. The moment Kane entered the room, she shot a discreet glance at the covered book. Didn't they have the same features as the emperor and knight commander in the book? The color of the emperors', as well as the knight commanders', hair and eyes were one and the same.

"Your Majesty, is there anything wrong with my face?" Kane inquired curiously at Cecile staring at him with a look of surprise.

"N-No. On what business have you come here today?" she asked. It was nothing new for Kane to visit the empress' palace. Even during Estian's absence, he had come numerous times to convey and inform her of many things. He appeared to have come with that purpose in mind today as well. A rather thick stack of papers sat in his hands.

“I have brought the schedule for next week.”

“What of the matter regarding holding an audience with the envoys of the Stoan Kingdom?”

“A dungeon was recently discovered within their kingdom. It seems they went to some pains while excavating it since it was so old. Apparently, they found a number of some rather curious items. I’m told they intend on offering up the rarest of those items,” he explained.

Kane quickly left the room after he finished telling her about her schedule. Cecile took a second read through everything he had handed over before she looked at the end of her table.

The book that was there until just a while ago was gone.

“Where did it go?” She covered it with white paper because she was embarrassed to have its title seen by others. “It... It can’t be...” Cecile muttered, recalling the bundle of papers Kane took back with him.

Her face turned pale.

It didn’t end up falling in with that bundle, did it?

*

“Kane.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Kane replied, looking up in surprise. Estian's tone had turned cold all of a sudden. Why was he being like this? Was there a problem?

He had quietly pulled something out from amongst the bundle of papers Kane brought back with him from the empress’ palace and begun to read it. There shouldn’t have been anything of issue regarding it as far as Kane was aware, so he felt awfully muddled when Estian then commanded him with a laugh. “Get your head on the floor, for starters,” he said. “And...”

He tossed a book before Kane.

"Ban the sale of this book across the continent. Right this instant."

And thus, 'None Sought the Imperial Palace's Most Beautiful Flower' became a forbidden book within the empire.

*

"So, what I'm saying is, I think I had a big misunderstanding. I took a tiny look yesterday and, oh baby, the emperor's got a body. Mmhm. And I saw the way you two were at it—boy, the bed looked about ready to brea—"

"Oh, shut up, will you?!"

The hands of the servants attending to Cecile ceased their movements the instant she yelled. In particular, the attendant who was reading aloud the empress' schedule for the day had paled, turning whiter than the sheet of paper in her hand. She looked like she'd start sobbing at any moment as she asked, "Sh-Shall I shut up?"

"N-No," Cecile said hastily. "I was just thinking about something else... Keep going."

Seeing the way her maids looked at her, Cecile worried as to what kind of rumors about her were going around. Perhaps she was being gossiped about as a lunatic who talked to herself?

Honestly. Why did that spirit have to keep acting up again?

Aled was happy with the jewel they obtained. They stayed quiet inside it, and at first Cecile was relieved to be troubled by them no more, but then the quiet didn't end up lasting for very long. The spirit crawled out of their den again the day after Estian's return and returned to regaling her with nonsense.

She turned away from Aled, frowning. In any case, it was fortunate that Estian took the responsibility to pay for the installments the spirit had

been whining about. In addition to that, now she could pay Tania for the jewel.

She had been in such a hurry that on the first day of the lady-in-waiting selection, she had grabbed Tania's hands and declared, "I need you."

Cecile was a woman with a conscience. While the emperor might have told her that he needed her to be an evil lady, she couldn't find it in her to simply steal jewelry from an outright stranger and be done with it. However, all of her possessions were treasures belonging to the imperial family, which was why she had asked Kane whether she could use a bit from her share of the imperial funds.

"You may use as much as you like," he had answered. "His Majesty hasn't specified a sum on his part, so please send word if there is anything you need or want. Only..."

"Only?"

"You may only do so after His Majesty returns."

"Why?"

Many thoughts had passed through Cecile's mind, then. Did the emperor intend to supervise how she spent her money? But that just wouldn't do! She had been looking forward to buying books with the funds. Wasn't that too stingy of him, checking all of where and what she bought?

Kane hurriedly shook his hands, quick to add an explanation upon seeing the range of expressions that had overtaken her face. "Please do not misunderstand!" he had said. "There hasn't been an empress until now, so changes to the financial regulations need to be instituted accordingly. For that, you'd need His Majesty's final approval, so the process has been put on hold. All for that blasted Tetin gem!" He shook his head. "The arrangements are only slightly off-course, though, truthfully. The matter has also been delayed because of His Majesty's new habit of staying at your palace. As you know, he hardly comes out once he goes in, and he only returns the next day."

Cecile had kept Kane's word in mind until Estian came to her later that night, burying his face into the nape of her neck. "Your Majesty," she had interrupted. "I want to spend some money. Quite a bit of it."

Estian's face had contorted at her words. "Must you ask that right now?" she remembers him saying.

"But it's urgent!" she had protested. And urgent it was indeed. Although Tania kept silent about the matter being the kind girl she was, there was no way getting robbed of her jewel had to feel good.

She had ended up becoming Cecile's lady-in-waiting by happenstance, but Cecile was fond of her. In particular, she liked how she now had a friend whom she could talk to and how similar their reading preferences were. She didn't want to be hated by Tania for this, so she needed to pay her back for the jewel as soon as possible.

Following her claim, Estian had hesitated, so she had chosen to press him more strongly for an answer. "Please, give your approval right now!"

"No, I mean... Must I really do it tonight? When we've already taken off our clothes?"

"That's okay!" she insisted. "We can just wear them again!"

"Wear them again?" Estian echoed her, reduced to a daze. Then, he snapped out of it, pulling her in by her arm. At the time, she had been caught off guard, so she ended up wrapped in his arms, their naked bodies held flush against each other. When she had taken his appearance in, it seemed like his body was tenser than it usually was that night. Why had he been holding himself so stiffly? "So, you're saying... you won't do it with me until I approve this matter?" he asked.

"Eh?" Was that how it was? That was the moment Cecile realized what exactly she had been holding hostage from him. In their nudity, Estian had stuck himself to her like glue. Wielding the bed as a weapon to bend the emperor to her will... She had jumped in surprise when she caught the unintended meaning behind her own words. "No, that's not it!" she rushed to amend. "What I meant to say is—"

“I did tell you to try harder and do well, but never did I expect you to put it into such good practice.”

“What I meant was that money borrowed should be returned!”

She had answered him hastily but it was already too late. Estian had redressed at lightning speed and zoomed out of the room, returning a bit later.

“I've handled everything,” he had said once he returned. “You're to receive ten times more than the appraised value of that jewel, so let's focus on our own business now.”

Estian divested himself of his clothes with haste for the second time, and, liberated from the wait, his movements had been devoid of hesitation. He hadn't let her go until dawn, and she had chirped beneath him the entire time.

Only after noon the next day was Cecile able to crawl out of the bed.

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Having recalled what she had to do to secure her allowance, Cecile felt a wave of relief wash over her. She was glad she didn't have to do anything but sleep yesterday. There was an event happening today, so last night she had tearily begged Estian if they could sleep holding hands only.

He looked dissatisfied by her request, but only for a brief moment. He soon acquiesced and did as she wished. Then, he covered her snugly in a blanket and lay down to pull her into a hug. She quickly drifted off in his arms.

She had gotten used to somebody sleeping next to her as well as seeing his face upon waking. It felt like a bit of a problem to get used to it, though. She sighed at the thought, but then she shook her head. Today's work needed to be done before she did any dwelling on other topics.

She lowered her gaze to the papers she held in hand. The Stoan

delegation was visiting, and as the empress, she had to attend their audience with Estian. While Kane organized the documents neatly, Cecile still had much to memorize: the order of greetings from the envoys, the greeting she should give to the audience, the procession of the event proceedings, *etc.*

Imperial etiquette was a particularly difficult thing for her. Although she was educated on the subject for a month prior to her wedding, what she had learned was almost superficial. She needed to study some more.

She had felt the need to study back then as well, and she tried her best, but she realized there was too much she still didn't know upon entering the imperial palace. She needed someone who could teach her. As Kane had once advised, it seemed necessary to choose more ladies-in-waiting so they could help.

Cecile looked at Tania, who was reading through a document with burning focus. Since she was the only lady-in-waiting belonging to the empress, there were quite a few things that she was entrusted with for the occasion. She appeared to be trying to memorize everything, but she looked pale. As expected, Tania looked like she would have a hard time handling these matters on her own.

Cecile needed to pick a lady-in-waiting who was well-versed in imperial etiquette for Tania's sake, too.

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Tania looked at the paper in her hand. Many times, imperial attendants had asked if she was alright after spotting how pallid she had gotten.

She wasn't alright. She was in trouble, and she knew it deep in her heart. She shifted her gaze to a spot above the papers Kane had brought, where a letter from her mother lay:

Come back home right this instant, or I will find you and kill you.

-Mom

How was that a letter from a mother to her daughter?! Clearly it was more like blackmail! No, blackmail might've actually been better...

She was extra frightened to see how her mother had signed it at the end. A cold sweat trickled down her back. In truth, she had sent a letter home out of excitement on the day she became a lady-in-waiting.

"Mom, I shall now enjoy a fabulous life in the capital," she wrote. "Who cares about that bumpkin province? I don't need to do any more sword practice, nor do I need any more crossbow practice! I don't need to go hunting for winter wolves, nor do I need to clean the grizzly kennel! I am free!"

What she got was her mother's reply to that. It was unknown as to precisely how furious her mother had to be to have written back, but five—five!—marks of broken pens were visible on the paper from that short sentence alone.

Why had Tania written a letter like that? She was plagued with deep regret, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. Besides, she had a bigger problem... She miswrote the return address, so her mom's letter was from a week ago!

That being the case, it was highly likely that her mother, who had yet to receive a reply, had already set out for her. Tania blanched even further.

She was so dead.

*

Estian was listening to a report from Kane. "Suspicious, you say?" he asked.

"Yes. Word from the Stoan kingdom is that they've dispatched a mage to look after the items just in case, seeing as they were discovered in an ancient underground dungeon."

“So that mage could be someone sent from the Mage Tower...”

Kane nodded. “It seems that this was why the barrier of the Mage Tower had been open for a while despite how untimely it was.”

The Mage Tower.

As the name suggested, it was an enormous tower where mages gathered. In reality though, the name referred to the huge city built around the tower rather than the structure itself. Unusually enough, the tower was protected by a barrier so no one could enter outside of designated periods. No one could exit, either.

“That bloody mage lord,” Estian swore. “Who knows what he’s up to after staying quiet for a while. And didn’t they say the barrier of the holy kingdom was broken some time ago? So many suspicious things have been happening.”

“Indeed. And if the rumors of the saintess going missing are true...” Kane trailed off.

“Who but those of the Mage Tower would do such a thing? There's no way the saintess broke the barrier and left the holy kingdom on her own, after all.”

Well, truthfully, the saintess had done just that, but since he had no way of knowing, Estian banged on his table with a face full of irritation.

Mage Lord Richard. Although he took on the appearance of a young man, he was, in reality, a fox who had lived for centuries. Some even entertained the thought of him being the incarnation of a dragon due to his mighty magical power and unknown age.

“Must I kill the bastard a few more times to knock some sense into him...?” Estian fumed. Around a year ago, the mage lord suffered a terrible defeat by his hand. He ended up regretting that day’s actions because he received a letter from Richard later, though.

Dozens upon dozens of various spells were cast upon the letter—from protection magic to illusion magic—as if crying out to the world, “This is the letter written by a mage lord!”

Annoyed at having to undo one spell after another, Estian decided to erase every trace of magic using his black steel blade and opened the letter, wherein lay this message: “You wish to know about Eugendiph's Blood? Then why don't you stop by our mage tower? Please contact us immediately!”

If the sender's name was not Richard and Eugendiph's Blood was not mentioned, he wouldn't have hesitated to toss the letter away, wondering how such an advertisement made its way to the emperor's office.

In any case, it was a letter sent by the mage lord himself and so Estian made time in his busy schedule to visit. What Richard told him upon his visit, however, was enough to make him blow his lid.

"I never wrote that I knew about it well, though? I only asked if you wished to know," Richard clarified. "But, anyway, welcome, Emperor. Could I just get a barrel of your blood right here? And don't mind how man-sized the thing is. You'll learn plenty enough about Eugendiph's Blood once we start researching with your blood, so while the order of things may be a bit messed up, the end result is that my letter told no—kaagh!"

Richard could speak no more after that.

"So, you just thought to con me—me—is that right, Mage Lord?" Enraged unforgivably, Estian unleashed a beating on Richard that refused to relent for three days and three nights.

The only reason Richard managed to stay alive was thanks to the hundreds of healing spells he cast on himself. Also, because Kane pleaded to Estian from behind him, crying, "There'll be more work to be had if you kill the mage lord, Your Majesty!"

Estian's furious kick had literally sent Richard's head rolling like a ball across the floor, but his disembodied head seemed to have a life of its own. He merely muttered to himself at the emperor's fury. "Come on, would it hurt to donate even a little?" he complained as if entirely oblivious to the situation at hand.

That had been a year ago. There hadn't been much movement from the

Mage Tower since then, which was why Estian thought that was the end of it, but who knew they would start getting up to shady stuff at this point?

“The bastard. He must've been too busy sticking his head back on the last year to crawl out of the woodwork only now,” Estian said, looking down at his arm. He too had suffered countless wounds in the fight with Richard, but now there wasn't even a trace of them left. This was one of the powers of Eugendiph's Blood.

Looking at this, he could understand why the Mage Tower was dying to research him. Not like he had any plans of allowing them after that.

Their motives were the same in that they wanted to know about Eugendiph's Blood, but their final goal was completely different. The Mage Tower undoubtedly wished to create more successors of Eugendiph, whereas Estian wanted to completely get rid of it so that no one like him would ever again exist in this world.

“Shall we cancel the audience today?” Kane asked cautiously after noticing Estian's stiffening face. Anyone could tell that he was in an extremely foul mood at the moment. Then, Kane added, “Or shall I bring Her Majesty the Empress over?”

“Yes, Cecile...” Estian responded automatically, but then he trailed off and looked up. “Why did you mention her all of a sudden?”

“I figured that your mood would improve a little with her by your side.”

“What sort of—” nonsense was that? He didn't finish his statement, though, opting instead to just shut his mouth. Like Kane said, his mood might actually improve with her by his side. He wanted her here, in fact. He had a feeling he could successfully stop thinking about Eugendiph's Blood in her presence.

His impulses struck him as odd. Why, though? Apparently, he was fond enough of Cecile that Kane noticed and thought to make that suggestion. Estian knew he liked her, but why? Was it because she was beautiful? Countless women had approached him prior to his marriage with her, though. Were none of them really as beautiful? No, that couldn't be the

case. Regardless, he never felt the tiniest bit of interest toward them.

Was it because of her curious behavior? It was indeed amusing to hear her practically beg him for death upon their first meeting with all those demands of hers, but what would have happened if someone other than Cecile had done the same thing?

The wedding probably would've ended up as a funeral, no doubt.

Estian grew ever more pensive. How strange. Why did Cecile soften him so? He was not one to become so lenient towards something he took a liking to. Others might've simply exclaimed, "That's love!" upon hearing his thoughts, but Estian just shook his head. Strangely, something was bothering him.

"Shall I bring her over now?" Kane asked.

"No, leave her be."

Suddenly, a loud noise occurred outside and Estian looked out the window. There, he saw a delegation of envoys entering through the imperial palace gates off in the distance.

He had to push his thoughts aside for the time being, be they about Eugendiph's Blood or Cecile. Right now, his top priority was dealing with that delegation, where Richard had to have snuck himself into.

"Let's see what tremendous preparations you've made, then," Estian challenged, clenching his fists as he thought of using them to vent his foul mood.

*

"Eh, what the? Isn't that Richard?" the saintess muttered to herself in the midst of watching the envoys come in. "What's going on? I'm pretty sure I didn't write Richard into the delegation?"

She took another look at the envoy in her confusion. Soon, large letters began floating above the head of a certain man amongst them.

『Name: Richard Age: 486 Occupation: Mage Lord / Status: Casting a transforming spell and a masking spell.』

The letters disappeared a little after the saintess blinked her eyes. “Wow. I never imagined that this is what True Sight would look like,” she said. “It's like a game status window, though.”

True Sight was one of the abilities she had originally given to the saintess in the novel, something to discern the status of, or receive information in regards to, another individual in exchange for a great amount of holy power. In truth, however, she hadn't intended on giving the saintess such an ability at first. She had only done so in a reckless attempt to bulldoze through a difficult part in her writing. Thanks to that, the power ended up looking like something out of a game novel instead of anything that actually belonged here.

The saintess stared at Richard for a long time, but then hastily turned her head toward the wagon brought by the envoys. Once again, letters rose like before, this time above the cover of the wagon.

『Name: Phantom Beast Egg / Hatching Condition: Contact with an individual of great power.』

This was exactly the same thing she wrote in the novel, so why on earth was Richard meddling? Wasn't he supposed to appear mid-story as the second male lead?

The saintess slowly closed and opened her eyes, vanishing the text. She had to stop using her holy power. Any further and Estian's keen senses would catch onto the abnormalities in the air. Besides, she had to use it sparingly because it wasn't infinite.

Well, this had been enough.

Simply confirming that the phantom beast egg was arriving as expected, would have been plenty, but she ended up finding out the unthinkable. She was uneasy seeing something that differed from what she had written, but in any case, it was a small change. The world hadn't started to stray from the main path yet.

Only the way she wrote it would lead to a happy ending, after all.

With that thought in mind, she glared at the wagon entering the imperial palace again. According to her plotline, 'Chapter 2: I Stopped a Phantom Beast Attack' would begin in roughly two hours. It was the sweetest part in the early stages of her story, as well as a part where Estian's love deepened. There were many tender and touchy-feely moments to be had.

Which was why...

"I've absolutely got to get into Cecile before that happens! I can't miss out on this chapter!" she screamed.

The saintess' war cry echoed against the imperial castle walls.

*

Estian made his way to the audience room. Cecile, who had arrived first and was waiting, got up to greet him. After getting the attendants to leave, he approached her. "Why do you look like that?" he asked her.

"I'm feeling nervous," she admitted.

When he gave it a bit more thought, he did recall that she had been much the same right before meeting his officials for the first time. She looked fine after entering the hall, however. It was as if she had never been anxious at all.

"Still," he said. "You seem more nervous than before."

"They're foreign envoys. Last time, I was facing citizens of this nation, so I thought they'd control themselves somehow, at least. However, if something goes wrong this time, it could lead to international issues..." Cecile trailed off.

"What, you were concerned about that sort of thing?"

"I have some common sense!" she insisted.

Laughter fell from Estian's lips at the sight of her talking to him freely even as she trembled. Why was it that she felt nervous about something like that, yet she felt nothing of the sort toward him?

Kane had stood by Estian's side for so long that he had grown accustomed to his presence, while Irene's fearlessness stemmed from how she could talk as she liked due to the leniency he afforded her from their shared blood. Cecile, however, didn't fall under either of those cases, which was why he found it curious every time she acted so normally toward him.

Estian lifted Cecile up by her waist before seating himself in a chair and placing her on his lap. They were so close that the warmth of their bodies could be felt through the thick clothes they wore. However, as Estian pulled her in even harder against him, feeling satisfied, Cecile burst out in alarm. "The dress will crumple!" she protested.

"Shouldn't you be feeling surprised and confused first, in moments like this?"

"I've already grown used to Your Majesty doing this, so not really?"

That was understandable, given how Estian had clung to her within her palace during their honeymoon.

"Is that right? Then, shall I try something less familiar?"

She turned cautious. "What are you going to do?"

His hands didn't hesitate to climb up her body and, startled, she slapped them away with audible force. "You can't! If you want to do it, be patient and wait until the evening!"

Estian remained silent. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why she looked even prettier in moments like this. Had somebody else slapped his hands in such a manner, they would've already lost their limbs. Actually, he wouldn't even lay his hands on them in the first place. The more he thought about it, the stranger he felt, yet for all that he still felt pleased.

"What did you think I'd do?"

“Well, of course you’d...!” Her words trailed off, then, and her face instantly began to burn bright red. She couldn’t bring herself to continue, not in broad daylight.

He took advantage of her hesitation to pester her hips with his hands again. He was rather pleased that she didn’t slap them away this time. “And why do I have to be patient?”

Cecile found his question ridiculous, but she still answered him. “Because the audience with the delegation will be starting soon.”

“And? What of it? It wouldn’t even be a problem to postpone the audience for an hour or two. I could put it off until tomorrow or next month if I so wished.”

“You’re right, but...”

“Shall I just do that? Honestly, I don’t really want to meet them. May as well say the emperor wants to spend some more time with his empress and send them back on their way.”

“But then I’ll be the one taking on all the hate again,” she whined.

“So, what? Isn’t that all according to plan? It’s even better if you can gain some notoriety without having to do anything bothersome.”

It was indeed as he said. When Cecile flung the Emerald of Aled in front of the officials, she had felt like she was throwing her heart along with it. If this was a chance to easily gain some infamy without doing anything like that, then...

Still, why did she feel like it was unfair? She looked at the paper still in her hand. Maybe she was upset because of all the hard work she put into memorizing its contents. Her efforts felt in vain now.

And not just her, either. Tania, too. She remembered how Tania had been reading and rereading her own sheet of instructions over and over as well, turning pale with effort. She had tried so hard, so Cecile didn’t feel right disregarding all their efforts on a whim like this.

“Your Majesty!”

Out of nowhere, the door to the audience room abruptly jerked open without even so much as a knock. Startled by the arrival of someone else, Cecile pushed at Estian's chest as hard as she could to dislodge herself, resulting in her immediately falling into... his arms.

“You surprised me,” Estian admonished. “What were you thinking?”

Kane hurriedly bowed in apology. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. The matter is just that urgent.”

Estian glanced at his right-hand. “Ah, Kane,” he said. “I wasn't talking to you, so don't mind it. Are you all right, Cecile? This is why you shouldn't push me.” He had just barely caught her after she almost fell to the floor. After lightly taking hold of her waist with one hand, he pulled her completely into his embrace as if to tell her not to move anymore. Then, he focused his attention on Kane. “I won't forgive you if the matter is of no consequence.”

“I am truly sorry for interrupting a good time of yours, but...”

Normally, Kane would have said something along the lines of ‘I shall tell you later’ and taken his leave, but he didn't go away even as he hesitated. Moreover, he was glancing at Cecile, not Estian.

Realizing that what Kane had to say was more important than he thought and that Cecile was probably involved, Estian let her go with a discontented face.

“So, what brings you, then?”

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As soon as Estian released her from his arms, Cecile promptly skedaddled out of the room. As she left, the attendants standing outside approached her, puzzled. “Oh dear, your clothes...”

Upon spotting the wrinkles on the hem of Cecile's dress, they swiftly set about smoothing it out before quietly bowing with knowing looks on their

faces afterwards as they took their leave. The sight of them acting that way made Cecile feel twice as indignant. She wanted to yell after them, saying, “I didn’t do it! I didn’t, I tell you!”

A moment later, Kane came out of the room to tell her that Estian was looking for her. She swore she was going to leave straight away if he tried something funny again.

With that thought in mind, she re-entered the room and stopped before the door, eyeing Estian warily while holding onto the handle so she could leave at any time. He clicked his tongue at her caution. “You don't have to be so ready to run. I only called because there’s something I need you to do.”

“Something I need to do?”

He hummed in assent. “I don't think it's very different from what I originally asked of you, either. Could you come here for a second?”

She didn’t budge, still guarded.

“I’m not going to do anything, so will you stop looking me like that?” he sighed.

When Cecile finally drew near, still wary, Estian reached out and pulled her by the arm. The moment she fell into his arms, looking incensed, he began to whisper in her ear.

Hearing what he had to say, her mouth fell open. “You want me to do something like that?” she asked tremulously.

*

The event proceeded peacefully. While Tania did stammer a bit, confusing the order of actions and which greetings to use, no big problems arose due to Kane’s timely assistance, having expected such developments. The atmosphere in the audience room was different than before, however.

Normally, the imperial officials' sharp gazes would've been directed towards the visiting foreign envoys. Today, though, all their eyes were focused elsewhere. To be precise, they were all riveted on the emperor, who occupied the highest seat, and the empress, who sat right next to him.

Everyone was already well aware of the empress' eccentricity, so they all knew what was coming today as well. Surely, she was going to do something crazy today, too.

And, to no one's surprise, the empress had begun meeting their expectations from the moment of her appearance. According to imperial etiquette, the emperor and the empress were supposed to enter the audience room holding hands while standing approximately a foot apart, yet right now...

"Your Majesty, I think it's too cold in here. Goodness, I can see my breath. What if I freeze to death?" The empress cooed petulantly, clinging to the emperor's arm as she rubbed herself against him. The sight elicited troubled sighs from among the ministers. It would be summer soon and wearing long sleeves made it hot enough to feel steamy, so what was she even talking about?

The officials shot Cecile daggers with their eyes. "Go inside if you're so cold!" their gazes desperately shouted. "Go back to your palace! What madness do you intend to rain upon us before this delegation?!"

In response, she smiled at them. The dazzling light from the chandelier in the audience room made the jewelry on her head, neck, hands, and ears shine with even greater brilliance, adding a fine glimmer to her perfectly coiffed platinum blonde hair.

"Ahem!"

"Hmm!"

The officials who chanced eye contact with her turned their heads hastily, coughing as their faces reddened. They hurriedly fanned their faces with their hands. It had suddenly gotten a little hotter somehow. Estian glared at the ministers for a moment before murmuring to Cecile

with all the tenderness in the world.

“Is it very cold?” he asked her.

“Yes, but...” Cecile held Estian's hand up to rub against her cheek. “It’s okay because Your Majesty is lending me a hand like this.”

Objectively speaking, they were just a couple having a good time, albeit it was somewhat discomfiting to watch. Regardless of their nobility, they certainly made for an enticing picture... The issue was the time and place.

The officials looked to Estian as their last hope. “Your Majesty, please stop the empress!” their eyes seemed to cry.

Shouldering all the expectations of his officials, Estian replied to his wife. “How can one hand be enough when you’re this cold? Come a little closer,” he purred, removing his cloak from his ceremonial attire and wrapping it around Cecile’s shoulders.

The officials’ appall was written right across their faces. They were fools to believe in him!

Covered in Estian’s red cloak, Cecile stuck even closer to his side, visibly pleased. Then, she grabbed one end of the cloak to lift half of it over his shoulder. “How can I keep this all to myself when you who govern this empire are more precious than anything else? Let’s cuddle up in it together, Your Majesty,” she coaxed.

He smiled gently. “Your thoughts alone warm me enough even without it.”

Oh, for crying out loud...

Right when the officials had all given up on any further thinking, an attendant announced the arrival of the delegation from the kingdom of Stoan. The envoys entered the audience room.

“I deliver greetings on behalf of the kingdom of Stoan, Your Majesty, the—the... Emperor.”

The head envoy, who had approached to make his greetings, faltered with his speech for a moment after having caught sight of the display

before him. Meanwhile, the imperial officials all nodded with looks of understanding on their faces. “Bewildering, isn't it?” their pitiful faces all seemed to say. “We think the same. You see, His Majesty wasn't like this before.”

Fortunately, the head representative of the Stoan delegation was a seasoned fellow. Aside from his brief pause, he exhibited flawless professionalism as he uttered the last of his greetings. Suddenly, the empress' voice rang through the audience room bearing a tone of sincere incomprehension. “Stoan?” she said. “Where can one find that country? This is my first time hearing such a name.”

The mouths of the imperial officials began to drop, one after another. There was no way the empress couldn't have known. After all, Stoan was the neighboring country of Navitan, her homeland, and it had twice its history to boot.

It's begun. The empire's officials drooped in resignation.

She continued. “Isn't this country too small for me to hear of?”

The mocking tinge in her voice was a tell-tale sign—the empress was being deliberately obtuse.

*

Cecile wanted to cry.

Earlier, Estian had told her: "Try your best to hurt the Stoan delegation's pride."

In truth, she had already picked out a suitable act of madness from the novels she had been reading. “I'll hold back a bit from anything jewelry related for today... Hmm,” she had mused when brainstorming. “It's easiest to stick myself close to His Majesty, but that's still a bit embarrassing. Acting like that in front of others is a bit... Well, what's left is just saying stupid things, but then I'll end up being called a fool, not a

villainess.”

Cecile had driven away all her servants—even Tania—before she thoroughly poured through the romance novels she had kept disguised in her bookshelves. She had placed a bookmark on every page she came across where the villainesses harassed the female leads, repeatedly reading through their actions. She had decided to reenact one evil per day, but... she ended up doing everything at once!

Cecile had clung to Estian as soon as they entered the audience room, showed off her jewelry to the officials, and now she was saying things anyone who listened would deem stupid.

“Or maybe... it’s a country that isn’t even worth memorizing,” she drawled. Truly, she wondered how she managed to say such mean things without stammering even once.

How could she not know about Stoan? Of course she knew. When she first learned about the concept of foreign countries growing up, Stoan was the first other country she had heard of. It was right next to Navitan, after all! Despite the fact that they were so close, however, it had a good climate and many plains unlike her home country.

She loved fruits from Stoan. Again, how could she not know about the place? In the past, her maids within the royal villa had occasionally brought her fruits, saying they were leftovers from deliveries to the main palace. All of them were hardly found in Navitan: juicy grapes, tangy and sweet apples, crispy pears... Every single one of them came with a label that read: “Made in Stoan—sugar content guaranteed! Real-name production system! Tastes bad? Get a refund!”

Upon learning that these fruits all came from Stoan, the country had become the land of her dreams in childhood, so much so that it had been a wish of hers to visit one day after she grew up and left the royal villa. She wanted to tour around and buy a ton of fruits. Yet despite all this, she had to watch the face of the Stoan delegation’s head envoy freeze up at her words.

Her heart was crying out to him. “No! I know a lot about Stoan!” it

swore within her chest. “I know where the fruit market opens! I’ve memorized what fruits grow well in what regions! I wanted to visit someday, so could you please give me some local restaurant recommendations?”

She dared not voice the truth of her feelings, however.

Instead, she glanced at Estian discreetly. Their eyes met the moment she turned her head. Apparently, he had been watching her the entire time, her expression thoroughly amused.

The frozen Stoan envoy barely managed to maintain his smile as he pried his lips back open in reply. “Oh, our country neighbors your homeland, Your Majesty. The Kingdom of Navitan and—”

“Ahh, no wonder it sounded a bit familiar—it was that place, the one that makes a living out of peddling fruits. Well, I suppose the things you brought won’t be worth much either, then. Why bother bringing fruits so far when we have more than enough of them in the Empire?”

Silence descended all across the room, the weight of it deafening in an entirely new way. Cecile nervously clasped onto Estian’s arm, prompting the latter to draw close and whisper into her ear. “I can’t help but admire you every time I witness your acting,” he told her.

Really, now? Who asked him to feel admiring? Incredulity coursed through her entire body.

He turned his head to look at the head envoy. “Well, it appears that the Stoan kingdom has nothing much of interest to my empress.”

The head envoy bowed his head. “I am deeply ashamed,” he said, and Cecile was on the verge of tears.

“Don’t be like that!” she wanted to tell him, barely holding herself back. “I totally love Stoan’s fruits! You can consider them the pride of the entire continent!”

After bowing, the head envoy spoke once more. “However, what we have brought with us for this occasion were not fruits, but items that were discovered in an ancient underground dungeon. We brought everything

we excavated as an offering, from objects with curious functions to things that still remain a complete mystery to us, so if you would please take one —”

“There won't be any dirt on them, will there? Did you even wash them properly first?”

Silence once more.

Cecile decided to acknowledge her own talent, an awful talent where she always managed to pick the meanest things to say. She had crossed the point of no return. Stricken by the cold looks shot at her, she pulled Estian's cloak harder around herself, trying to hide.

This was what she had to do to survive as the empress?

Estian caressed her face as she hid her sobs deep within her heart. Bearing open, adoring tenderness, he spoke to the delegation without even sparing them a glance, his attention directed solely to his wife. “Goodness. It appears my empress isn't satisfied,” he fussed. “What you brought hadn't lived up to her expectations.”

Cecile shot a look at him that said, “Can't you deal with the rest yourself? I've done this much. Why are you putting me on the spot again?” but Estian shrugged off the glower she gave him with a leisurely motion. Riled up by his apparent tranquility, she defiantly picked up from where he left off.

“Why would my feelings matter, Your Majesty? I had only hoped for something that would befit your prestige,” she said. She barely managed to mince her words instead of just desperately crying out, “Don't cop out on me!”

He lightheartedly ignored her attempts to grasp at straws. “This won't do. My biggest fear in the world is to fail to satisfy you. It seems I must go back and sooth your anger... All night long, that is.”

Estian's unquestionably odd claim made Cecile drop her gaze slightly. To others, she appeared embarrassed and coy, but in reality, she was simply mourning her defeat. While she did need to put her life at stake for

these charades, she didn't, for the death of her, feel up to matching his words with a line of her own. Something like a flirtatious giggle and then, "How about we go and start burning the night away?" or whatever else that proved equally cringe-inducing.

"The kingdom of Stoan's delegation may return. It seems that we will have to do without looking at your offerings, so I will gladly accept your regards," the emperor said. "Well then, Empress. Shall we return?"

"All will be as you wish, Your Majesty," she acquiesced.

Just as the two were in the midst of immersing themselves in a world of their own creatin akin to when they tossed the Emerald of Aled, essentially readying themselves to commit a sociopolitical atrocity by simply leaving, another voice called out.

"If you would please wait a moment, Your Majesty," a man said. He emerged from behind the head envoy, drawing Cecile's attention. He was wearing an ordinary outfit that looked no different from the one worn by the other envoys and he had dark brown hair and brown eyes, thoroughly inconspicuous features that would never linger upon a passerby's mind.

As Cecile observed the man, she felt like something was off. The man was too ordinary, so much so that if she briefly turned around and looked back, she had to search for him again. "Your Majesty," she murmured, tugging on his hand as she held it laced with hers.

This was the man.

She had found him. The person Estian had spoken of.

*

Was this him?

Estian noticed how Cecile's entire body stiffened as she clung to his arm. Then, he turned his gaze to the envoy that had stepped out of the group, immediately catching on to something strange.

So, a masking spell, hm? A spell that clouded one's very existence in plain sight, effectively leaving no impression on others. It happened to be the most favored spell used by those belonging to the Mage Tower when they were up to no good. Estian looked at the cloak he draped over Cecile. To all appearances it was only a regular red cloak used for ceremonies, but it was, in fact, enchanted so that it could block most magic of the combat and curse varieties. She would come to no harm with this cloak, even if something happened, but he still couldn't rest easy.

He couldn't even begin to count the number of attempts made on his life so far, so he had expected that nothing interesting would occur this time around, either. Then, Kane came to him and asked, "But wouldn't Her Majesty be in danger?" and his entire perspective shifted.

This was why he thought to send her back first. Surprisingly enough, however, she firmly declared that she wouldn't. She questioned whether he knew how hard she and her lady-in-waiting had studied for this occasion, even taking out a crumpled set of notes from the pocket of her dress—God knows where it had been hidden—to show him.

"I do say some nonsensical things, but I still want to do the things expected of me as an empress. I really put my all into memorizing these things," she said. It was apparent she thought he was trying to send her away out of distrust, and he brooded over that long enough that she resumed speaking. "Besides," she added, "I have to stay by Your Majesty's side, so I can't pull away like this, right?"

"You're right about that," he had allowed.

So, she ended up going with him.

His jumbled thoughts were instantly tamed once he understood that she wanted to stay by his side. For some reason, he craved the sound of her saying that again and again, over and over. He felt like listening to those words alone would be enough to satisfy him for hours.

Now, he looked to his side. She seemed to have noticed something strange about the envoy as well. He could feel her hands trembling as she held him. In the days to come, she would have to face dangers of this level

dozens—hundreds of times.

He was going to send her back to the palace if she got too scared. Kane was standing off to the side, and if he gave the order, Kane would take her back to her palace at once. He was enough to handle the situation here alone, after all. Nevertheless, despite how her body quivered in fear, Cecile refused to back down. She merely squeezed his hand tighter as if to convey her trust in him, and he responded in kind. She had played her role well, so now it was his turn.

Estian glared at the man who had come forward. “Insolent,” he growled. “Who permitted you to speak?”

“I beg your forgiveness for my impatient transgression, Your Majesty, but I do so only because there is something I keenly wish for you to see for yourself,” the spelled envoy smoothly replied.

“See for myself?”

“Indeed. It’s something we found in the dungeon.” The man opened the large wooden box next to him and carefully took out what was inside, holding it aloft.

Estian watched carefully. “What might that be?”

“I’m not sure either... but it has a peculiar shape.”

“Peculiar, you say?” someone interjected. “It just looks like a large bird egg, no?”

“What are you saying? Anyone can see that it’s a square rock.”

One of the officials watching the exchange cut in. “Hold on now, you two. Are you talking about that bumpy fruit?”

Each official observed the object the envoy held and ended up astonished. The man most definitely displayed a single object at most, yet it appeared differently to everyone else.

“Wh-What is going on?”

As people began to question things, thoroughly flummoxed, the mysterious envoy took a step forward with a smile. “Your Majesty, if I

may ask... What does this look like to you?”

Estian didn't answer. “What is that?” he asked instead.

“We don't know, either. All we know is the inscription written upon the stone slab we discovered along with this object read: ‘It shall awaken at the touch of the strongest of all.’” The man took another step closer and held the object out before Estian. “Which is why we wish to offer this to you, Your Majesty.” His eyes flashed with excitement. “No matter how hard I think about it, you are the only one I can think of who can awaken this object. Please, accept it.”

Cecile and the officials who were watching everything play out were all thinking the same thing: “Who the hell would be mad enough to take something so suspicious?”

*

While a tentative exchange occurred within the audience hall, a commotion was brewing at a door to the inner palace.

“Move! Move aside, all of you!”

The soldiers guarding the door quizzically turned their heads at the sound of an explosion, the voice of a shouting woman following soon after.

“Who's she?” one asked.

“Looks like a maidservant?” his companion answered.

The woman ran toward them from the opposite end of the long corridor they were standing in. Wearing a maid uniform, she charged wildly, surging like a starved boar in sight of its prey. Her clothes made it easy for the soldiers to identify her as an outsider; attendants belonging to the palace didn't wear maid uniforms covered with so many excessive frills.

Regardless, the guards clicked their tongues and issued a warning to the unauthorized visitor once she had come within earshot. “Stop, young

lady. You cannot go inside.” The guard speaking gestured, assuming she was a maid that had lost her way, but she didn’t slow down.

Something was off about this.

The moment the guards had started to feel alarmed, the charging maid cried out: “‘Holy’—”

For a moment, the guards doubted their own eyes. The maidservant’s fist was covered in a clear, blue light, emanating such power that they could literally feel it from afar. Very rarely, the commanders of each imperial knight order would spar without restraint, during which spectators might sense their power—compressed to the extreme—for fleeting moments. Right now, the maid’s hand seemed charged with that same magnitude of power.

“It’s an atta—”

“—‘Shit!’” the maid finished.

Even before the guards could raise the alarm, the maid’s fist launched toward them. With a tremendous slam, the shimmering marble floor of the corridor was smashed in an instant and they were sent flying along with the debris. After blasting the guards away with a single blow, the saintess cried out, “I’ll be a dog if I ever write a gimmick like this again! A dog! The hell is with the saintess’ technique being named ‘Holy Shit’?! Even fossils wouldn’t play a gag like this!”

The saintess looked at her fist. No wonder the barrier of the Holy Kingdom was broken by her punch. She had forgotten she had written this in.

She glanced back at the path she had run across. Although it was not clearly visible from this side of the corridor, the door around the other end of it was actually destroyed. The guards that had been watching over that one had fallen before it as well. It went without saying that she had taken down every guard on the way here. All of them had fallen before they had even properly caught sight of her. If one were to look at her combat abilities alone, she was less of a saintess and more of a knight commander, to be honest.

Right. She did heap a bunch of abilities onto the saintess to unblock the plot that one time, but...

In the first place, the saintess had been an improvised character meant to help the protagonists overcome their crisis in the later part of the story, which is why she ended up giving this character strengths without any consideration for plausibility. Furthermore, beyond giving her a stupidly powerful ability because she thought that no one would quibble over something concerning a mere supporting character like this, she had named the attack ‘Holy Shit’.

“How humiliating,” she lamented. Dashing through the inner palace corridors, she swore never to insert such worthless internet humor into her writing ever again.

In any case, she needed to be present at the setting to know what was going to happen within the story from this point on. A tinge of regret flashed over her face as she ran. Guess she wasn’t going to be seeing Irene around anymore.

They wouldn’t have anything to do with each other from today onward, but she did her best dressing Irene this morning before setting off, thinking it was the least she could do. Being an antagonist of some importance, Irene was a bearer of exceptional looks, making the saintess feel as if she had started the day feeling like she had been playing with a doll as she fussed about changing her into different outfits and fixing her hair.

“Why are you making such a fuss?” Irene asked at the time. “I’m only going to the imperial palace.”

“Since you were chased out the last time, you must look your most beautiful when you next return. Cute, as well,” the saintess added. “Oh, hold still a little, will you? I can’t braid your hair very nicely if you move too much.”

Irene had likely noticed her disappearance by now and would be looking all over for her, but that didn’t matter to the saintess. Their acquaintance was now ending and it wasn’t like Irene would be

particularly troubled by it. All she was losing was a convenient maid who had a penchant for saying the right thing.

Anyway, if the saintess could kill Cecile today, then she'd be able to enter Cecile's body and Estian would become her man like he was meant to. The world would finally be set to rights!

"Over there! I hear sounds over there!" a knight called out.

"Get her quick!"

As the saintess ran over to the next door, she heard the clamor of knights already hot on her tail. At that instant, however, a peculiar noise rang throughout the palace. It sounded like something twisting and breaking, vivid and calamitous.

"Ugh!"

"What is this noise!"

The abrupt disturbance caused the saintess and the knights to block their ears, yet still they could not help groaning at the piercing sound. She knew what was making this racket. The phantom beast has been born!

The condition for the phantom beast's birth was physical contact with a powerful individual. Estian had certainly touched the phantom beast egg.

*

The knights in the audience room walked over to the envoy who had presented an oddity to Estian and seized him by the arms.

"Your Majesty, shall we drag him elsewhere and kill him? Or shall we kill him right here and now?" One of the knights asked fiercely, requesting his emperor's judgement. He looked like he was raring to rip the envoy apart on the spot, but the man in question remained unconcerned.

"Your Majesty, what shape does this take in your eyes? Would you

please quickly explain?!" he began to shout. "And try giving it a touch already! Aren't you curious what will happen?!"

Estian stared intently at the man, lips pressed tight. Slowly, he stepped down to stand before the envoy. Then, he bashed him right in the face with a vengeance. The move sent the envoy's face swiveling around with a sound that resembled something bursting. Blood shot from his mouth, splattering out of him and dribbling to the floor along with his saliva and a broken tooth. The emperor remained wholly remorseless as he scowled. "Richard, you bastard," he spat. "Here I was, suspicious of the Mage Tower, and you just come prancing right in? Seems like you glued your neck back on well enough for you to start spouting nonsense again."

At that, the man finally looked devastated. "H-How did you know?! You're a sharp one, alright!"

"Wouldn't it be stranger not to know? The way you speak makes it so obvious, Mage Lord," Kane said, having approached unnoticed.

"What is it?! What did I say?!"

Kane eyed Richard distastefully, like one would a stalker. "I meant how you obsess over His Majesty and his reactions."

The disgust in his expression prompted Richard to protest in his defense. "Wouldn't you be curious, too?" he asked. "He took Eugen—"

Estian struck him again, sending Richard's face jerking in the opposite direction this time. Something else shot from his mouth again, but no one paid it any mind. Estian hoisted him up by the collar and he began to kick and struggle in the air. He hacked out a surprised, pained cough. "Emperor. H-How about you let go of me and we can talk?"

"Say that word once more and I swear I will instantly kill you. Go on, I dare you," Estian threatened. "As for these spells..." Estian frowned, then drew the black steel blade by his belt with one hand and immediately cut off one of Richard's arms.

The onlookers were about to scream at the sight, horrified, but then they got another look at the severed limb. It had just been lopped off of

Richard, yet there wasn't any blood on the wound. It was cut cleanly. It looked more like it belonged to a doll than a person, rolling across the floor.

The moment their eyes lifted from the arm back to the arm's owner, they once again gasped in wide-eyed shock. Just a while ago, the man the emperor had hanging from his grip had looked unremarkable enough that his face had been hard to remember, yet, all of a sudden, he had been replaced by a man with stunning looks and long silver hair. His face looked to be injured by Estian's fists and blood was flowing from his torn lips. His hair and clothes were in disarray. Clearly, he was the man who had just gotten beaten a moment ago, yet...

"Now you show that mug of yours," Estian hissed, gnashing his teeth with a glare.

*

Richard? Master of the Mage Tower? The man was so famous on the continent that even Cecile was familiar with his name. He had always been mentioned in the mysterious stories going around about the tower, after all. He was an enigmatic individual who was said to have lived for a very long time, and aside from the title of mage lord, he was also known as the Great Sage.

After meeting him, though, she felt inexplicably hollow inside. She was going to stop reading novels with mages for males leads. Starting today.

She pulled Estian's cloak over herself. Richard was a handsome one, alright. Most of the male leads that were mages in novels originating from continent were based on Richard, which was why even their names were mostly slightly different versions of his: Hardt, Lehart, Rihard, and so on. In addition, Richard was usually depicted as a cold, haughty, and proud man of few words. He was normally written as the kind of character that ignored the female lead at first, only to end up becoming her stooge...

Who knew he'd turn out to be a perverted stalker like this?

Richard hadn't even really said much, yet she could already feel the image of the Great Sage in her mind falling apart. Meanwhile, Estian was shaking him like a ragdoll.

"Oh, just touch it!" he pleaded, still shouting. "I'm telling you the words written on the slab are true! Give me the benefit of the doubt and touch it! Please! Just once!"

Beside Richard sat the head representative of the Stoan delegation, collapsed to his knees and looking like a lost child. "But there hadn't been anyone like this amongst us before..."

"Well, of course! You think a face like mine's a common one?!" Richard cried out in response, even as Estian kept jostling him in midair. "I've spent over 400 years maintaining this body and face of mine!"

His shouting only provoked Estian to shake him even wilder.

Cecile watched them while musing to herself, wondering if her job was done now. She began permitting her gaze to travel elsewhere, until she noticed something. She shot to her feet, startled, effectively dislodging Estian's coat from her shoulders. She didn't care, though, because she started sprinting toward Estian.

"Your Majesty!" she screamed.

Estian turned to her to find the arm he had cut off moments ago hopping toward him with the strange object Richard had been begging him to touch in its grip. The only thing that obstructed its path to him was Cecile lodging herself between them. Before he could reach out to her, however, her hand landed upon it, and the world instantly began to shake. It twisted and cracked, splintering in sound until it drowned out everything else.

Something was awakening.

“Wh-What’s going on?” Richard gazed above him, his collar still in Estian’s grasp. He had made it so that his severed arm picked up the egg and brought it over while he distracted everyone. He just needed Estian to make physical contact with it.

At the sight of the arm nearing, he thought he had succeeded in his plan, but who knew the empress would interfere? Still, it should’ve been fine. The egg had no reason to react to an ordinary woman like her, anyway. The stone slab had instructed that only the touch of the strongest being of all would awaken what lay within.

After examining the slab following his discover of it, Richard was able to identify who had created it along with the rest of the dungeon: the ancient clan of Eugendiph. They were the dungeon’s masters. Long ago, they held a monopoly over magic and power across the lands, reigning over humans. Nevertheless, even amongst those powerful clansmen, there had been some who rose to the top, lording over them with superior blood that differed from the rest.

That was why they sought to evolve their strength even further.

There was only one person whom they would deem the strongest of all: the bearer of Eugendiph’s Blood, a concoction derived from pooling together the blood of the strongest clansmen. While they had succeeded in creating it, none could bear the power it held.

All of them died in the end, as was the fate of those who tasted of its strength. Yet here a bearer lived, resurrected in the modern era within the emperor Estian.

Richard scanned him from head to toe again. Eugendiph’s Blood was discovered long ago in an ancient dungeon, and from the very moment Estian’s father, the previous emperor, found out what it was, he poured all his efforts into controlling its power. An unquantifiable number of humans, beastmen, and animals were dragged into his experimental labs in his search for a body that could withstand it.

Back then, Richard thought it strange that the lab animals contracted to

be sold to the Mage Tower were instead sold to some other place. That was what led him to investigate the truth of the matter and discover the truth of the previous emperor's research. He hadn't even considered stopping the experiments, however. In fact, he gladdened by them, enough that he wanted to thank the previous emperor for taking the trouble to begin what he himself had sought to pursue.

The emperor's experiments were a series of failures. Eventually, there hadn't been a lot of Eugendiph's Blood left, only enough for one more shot at a success. At that point, the emperor had brought in a child: his youngest son born from him and his empress, whom he had never once given the time of day. He dragged Estian into the labs, the boy screaming all the while. Richard clicked his tongue at the sight.

The emperor must've wanted to control Eugendiph's Blood desperately if he was going as far as to use his own son as a guinea pig.

Richard just hid, waiting beside the laboratory. Since the next experiment was bound to be the last, he intended on taking something back to the Mage Tower, even if that something was simply the corpse of a specimen that had been fed the blood. Miraculously, however, Estian had come out alive.

Eight years had passed, but it never got easier to claim that he had stayed human, especially considering the fact that he had destroyed his way out of the laboratory.

*

While Richard busied himself with recalling the past, another punch came flying to his face. The smacks echoed across the audience room. A clear, lilting cadence of fist against face.

"Oh, will you stop hitting me?!" he screamed. "Let's talk it out, damn it!"

In any case, a bearer of Eugendiph's Blood was thrashing his face

without holding back the slightest bit. It would be difficult to endure the force behind it all for very much longer, even with his strengthened body. He was afraid his head would get knocked off all over again.

Intent on preventing that, Richard rushed to explain. “It wasn’t much! It’s a phantom beast egg. There’s no way it’ll wake up unless you, the emperor, touch it!”

However, once Richard finished speaking, dodging Estian’s fists, the sound of something massive being pressed broke out. At the same time, everyone in the audience hall groaned as a terrifying, mountainous pressure fell over them all. Richard looked to the side in surprise and saw that while his attention had been elsewhere, the egg, which had previously been in the empress’ hands, had begun floating in the air. The space around it began to warp, reality bending inconceivably.

Cecile had listened to Richard’s explanation, but it didn’t make sense. “It’s woken up, though?” she asked, bewildered.

Estian was just as baffled. “Hasn’t it?”

“Oh.” Richard joined them, dazed. “It woke?” That prompted another punch from Estian. With that, he snapped out of it, shouting, “No! That’s impossible! Why is it reacting to her?!”

It didn’t make any sense. When Richard heard that Estian was getting married, he had investigated as to what kind of woman the empress-to-be was, and she just turned out to be the illegitimate child of some minor, inconsequential country’s king. Her mother was a maid and she was mainly abandoned and left to be raised by servants. A notable aside was that she was fond of fruits, but beyond that, this pretty much summed her up entirely.

So, why did the egg react?

“At the touch of the strongest of all... Wasn't that what it said?” Richard murmured and, for the first time, his expression turned rigid. Had the stone slab been incorrectly deciphered? Or, was it all a trick? If not that, then had the egg simply gone insane? The only thing he could be certain of was that there wasn’t anything special about the empress beyond that

face of hers.

The egg began to crunch as its shell started splitting. Soon after, a large wing shot out from the crack.

An appendage longer than a human being protruded from a head-sized egg, but no one had it in them to point out that discrepancy. The wing was bizarre-looking; it wasn't covered in feathers, but in jagged, thick, and scaled leather which glistened in the light.

"That's...!" Amongst the people in the audience room, a general who had faced a multitude of monsters in numerous battles cried out in astonishment. Due to his experience, most monsters failed to make him even so much as twitch a brow, yet now he trembled as he turned to the emperor. "Your Majesty, you must leave. That's a—"

Suddenly, another wing shot out of the egg. No, wait—not just one wing, but three wings had shot out. That made four wings in total. Wings like these would usually remind a person of a wyvern, but they only had two wings. According to legend, the only four-winged creature was a...

"Dragon!"

Perhaps as if to respond to the cry, the small egg broke apart completely, revealing a gigantic body hovering in midair that threatened to fill half of the spacious audience room. Everyone present ran to one side, screaming in terror. Some could be heard jumping out of the windows, overcome and made desperate by their fear.

Estian tossed Richard away and took Cecile, who was still in a daze, into his arms. He cursed to himself. Damn it! He thought the worst thing that would happen would be a few spells getting slung around. If he had known this was going to happen, he would've sent her back to her palace from the start, but it was too late for regrets now. He had to focus on getting her safely evacuated before he dealt with the creature.

He steeled his resolve. He was going to kill the dragon, and he was going to cut Richard into tiny little bits. Retreating with gritted teeth, Estian ran. Richard, unaware of what Estian had just resolved to do to him, muttered to himself in ecstasy. "Whoa, awesome," he breathed.

Although it was called a phantom beast egg, it was actually a kind of aggregate magic from the summoning branch. What the egg would give birth to was proportionate to the power of the person who it made physical contact with. Simply put, it relied upon a completely unknown factor. Richard had brought the egg with the hopes of a man scratching a lottery ticket, wondering as to what Estian's touch would've given birth to, yet somebody else went and scratched that ticket for him instead, landing in what had to be first place. He had no idea why things had ended up like this, but in any case, the result went beyond what he had anticipated.

A dragon. God, a dragon.

Dragons were beings that had disappeared from this continent even before the clan of Eugendiph did. However, this newborn dragon shook its wings. Excited, Richard approached it. Seeing how big it was despite having just been born, it could surely grow up to be the size of a mountain once fully mature, at the very least.

While he measured its size, Richard remembered the most fundamental problem he had at hand. "How does one catch a dragon? Aren't they immune to magic?" he wondered aloud.

Right then, Richard and the dragon locked eyes. It felt like the creature was laughing at him...

A voice reverberated in his head, echoing as if listening from within a cave. "Did you just say you're going to catch me?" the dragon asked.

Crunch!

The dragon then proceeded to smoosh Richard with its foreclaw, forcefully grinding its claw against the floor several times before turning around. Many creatures were huddled up in one corner of the room, and although he had just been born, the dragon possessed enough knowledge to identify what different things were. Those huddling creatures were humans, feeble little things. Even if there was a strong individual amongst them, they would be incapable of even just touching the tip of one of his scales.

However, there was something amongst them that appeared human but wasn't. The people had called him the emperor. He looked rather troublesome to deal with and he had a sword forged out of black steel.

Still, it seemed like there wasn't anything here aside from the emperor that seemed capable of harming him. After grasping his surroundings, the dragon chortled in satisfaction. He was definitely destined to become the toughest of them all. He was going to climb to the top and slaughter things every day, killing every living thing on the continent.

The newborn dragon had formed such a solid plan for the future that if an adult dragon had been around to hear, they would've praised him, saying something along the lines of: "Now, there's a good whelp. You've a bright future ahead of you!"

But, as the dragon spread his wings to commit his first murder, the door behind him suddenly sprung open.

Sensing a strange presence, the dragon held his breath and looked back where he saw a woman coming through the opened door. She looked at the dragon and, with a fierce frown, cried out, "Hey, what's the story's final boss doing over here?!"

*

Everyone, from Estian to the dragon, looked lost. The most confounded of them all, however, was the saintess. She had entered joyously, expecting the phantom beast to emerge as she had written, but what she found was not a run-of-the-mill beast. Instead, it was an entire dragon.

The saintess yelled at the dragon again, suffering at the height of her incredulity. "I never wrote you coming out!"

This was wrong. She was sure that, according to her writing, a phantom beast called Garum was to be born after Estian touched the phantom beast egg. Garum was a huge wolf that served as gatekeeper to the entrance of the underworld, preventing the living from sneaking past its

watch. For that reason, it happened to hold hostility toward all living things. This was why the saintess expected a wolf to be running wild on the other side of the door to the audience room, yet what entered her field of view instead was a gigantic tail, four wings, and leathery skin covered in black scales.

She could tell what it was just by looking at its back—the last dragon of this world, Girgantia. How could she not know? That thing was a disaster designed to strike at all mankind, to appear in the final phase of her story to half-devastate the world. It was to be defeated by the power of love between Estian and herself, ‘Cecile’. Moreover, dragons were divine beings in this world, so they weren’t even considered phantom beasts.

It shouldn’t have even appeared here, either! Why did it show up in the imperial palace when it was supposed to be encountered in the Dark Mountain Range? The saintess screamed internally.

To describe it using video game mechanics, it was like a field boss suddenly manifesting in a beginner zone. In fact, she had actually been inspired to make Girgantia the final boss while she was playing a game, thinking, “The last boss definitely has to be a dragon!”

How was she supposed to defeat something like that, though? In her story, Girgantia died in the innermost area of its nest in the Dark Mountain Range, and it couldn’t be killed without the anti-dragon weaponry prepared there by the ancient ones. There was literally nothing she could do in the palace.

The dragon was created to be so powerful that quite a few items were required to defeat it. The saintess vaguely recalled this was why the middle part of her story was about Estian and Cecile roaming the lands, so they could prepare them. Of course, they hadn’t just roamed around. There were many developments causing Estian to burn with jealousy as Cecile chanced upon meetings with the secondary male leads: Kane the knight commander, Richard of the Mage Tower, Ruin the imperial prince of the Hyun continent, and so on and so forth.

How could things end right after the beginning like this, though? When

she hadn't even tasted the sweetest parts of the story? The saintess suppressed the anger boiling within her as she glared at the dragon.

She thought harder on it. How was the dragon killed in the novel? The color drained from her face once she remembered. "Freaking bloody..." she trailed off, cursing.

The dragon had been killed by the saintess at the cost of her life. Richard was useless since the creature was immune to magic, so Estian, Kane, and Ruin were left to go at it. They still didn't have enough strength to finish it off, though, so the saintess gathered all her holy power to die together with the dragon. She even vaguely recalled writing that even the saintess' remains were never found afterwards...

"That's ridiculous! I haven't even slept with the male lead or any of the secondary leads!" she suddenly shrieked. "I can't die here, not like this!"

As the saintess clutched her head in despair, the dragon—who had been watching her emotional roller coaster this entire time—asked, "Human. What's up with the nonsense you've been uttering this whole time?"

"You shut up, Girgantia! I'm being serious here!" she snapped.

That startled Girgantia, causing it shrink back. It was still a newborn. It had yet to leave its name in history, so how did this woman know what it was? That sort of thing was known to none other than itself and its parents. She was wearing what was called a 'maid uniform', so she shouldn't have been a very powerful individual, even amongst humans.

It was also pretty suspicious how her aura had been brimming with power from the moment she entered.

Girgantia cleared its throat. "Well... I'll kill you slowly later. I think I'll deal with the other humans first," it said, feeling somewhat uneasy about killing the saintess immediately and refocusing on the other cowering humans.

Then, it grew bug-eyed in surprise. "Huh? They ran away that fast?"

All the terrified little humans were gone without a trace, leaving nothing more than a wide-open, gaping door where they used to be. It shook on

its hinges, rattled by the wind as if to say, “Wouldn't you have run, then, too?”

Suddenly—*hwwk!*

An intense, crimson light shot toward the dragon's body accompanied by the sound of something breaking through the wind. At the moment, a figure collided with the beast. It roared in discomfort before an explosion occurred, blowing it back.

The dragon spread its wings and set its claws against the walls of the audience room in response to the sudden attack. Meanwhile, Richard—who was bloodied all over and buried beneath Girgantia's feet—rolled into a corner of the room, but no one cared.

“How dare the likes of you, a mere human, attack me!” the dragon roared.

“Too late for that. You've already taken a beating,” Estian said, swinging his sword again as the dragon glared at him. Sword aura was a power even a knight commander had difficulty using, yet it materialized so effortlessly each time he moved his blade. He charged forward once more with his sword aura, pushing back and knocking Girgantia over so that its feet and wings slammed against the walls and columns of the building, causing a veritable explosion and structural collapse.

The floor and ceiling began to split apart audibly. The building had already begun shaking from the moment that the massive dragon planted its claws upon the floor. Estian scowled at Girgantia as the latter raised its head again amidst the falling ceiling fragments.

How was he supposed to take this creature down? Estian had never encountered such an enemy before. Once, he had heard from Richard—who was still squirming around over in the corner—that dragons were immune to magic, but it was still unknown whether or not physical force was effective against it, for it was a creature present amidst ancient times.

Estian looked at the hand gripping his sword and saw what appeared to be hazy, red smoke curling around it. “Damn it,” he said.

He knew what the smoke was. Eugendiph's Blood, which he was forced to ingest all those years ago, had sensed a crisis and was trying to emerge from within him. Its appearance was not out of fear or protective instinct, but merely out of joy at encountering a foe worthy of ripping and tearing apart. Estian turned his head toward the door through which all the others had left. He had entrusted Cecile to Kane and ordered him to have her escape quickly, along with the other people as well.

That being the case... since there was no one around to see... wouldn't it be fine to use the power within the blood he bore? But, as Estian had briefly contemplated the possibility, something other than Richard wriggling in the corner caught his eye.

"Go! Go away!" he shouted. He had thought everyone had fled, but one person was still standing in the corner, quivering. She was a familiar face: Tania, Cecile's lady-in-waiting.

Fucking shit. Why did she of all people stay behind when all the others had no trouble running for their lives?

Judging by how she trembled, it looked like she couldn't even move out of panic. To be honest, Estian didn't care in the slightest whether someone else lived or died, but this was a bit of a different story. He knew Cecile would be devastated if Tania perished.

Estian had told her many times that she could simply do nothing and spend her time eating and playing, yet she insisted on doing what she had to do and picked a lady-in-waiting, who seemed to have joined her complicated studies. Cecile eagerly looked after Tania, saying she had found a friend with a hobby to share.

Does he just leave her?

When he thought back to how Tania had eaten a fruit from Cecile's hand, he didn't feel very inclined to save her, but he shook his head a moment later. Although he didn't like her, he couldn't allow someone in possession of Cecile's favor to die. It was easy for him to imagine how much she would cry following Tania's death. She had cried all day because he threw a jewel, so surely, she would cry an ocean of tears for at

least a solid month if someone were to die. Estian found the thought of seeing her sorrowful face difficult to bear.

Girgantia raised itself up. “An opening!” it bellowed triumphantly. It stretched its maw wide open at seeing Estian with his back still turned to him. The surrounding air immediately got sucked into the dragon’s mouth like an intense gust of wind. Then, sparks began to ignite from within—it was trying to unleash its species’ specialty: its breath of fire.

That was as far as it would go, however.

Pow!

Suddenly, someone climbed atop Girgantia’s wings, kicking its mouth shut before any fire could leave its lungs. Because of that, the beast was left to sputter in its own smoke, making disgraceful sounds as it tried to reorient itself.

“Kane!” Estian cried out. Kane had kicked the dragon. “Why did you return?!”

The knight commander must’ve returned out of concern for Estian when he should’ve stayed still and protected Cecile after hiding her away.

“Did you just kick me?” squawked Girgantia indignantly. “I bit my tongue!” It spat out some bloody saliva, then wrapped its tail around Kane’s leg and tossed him aside, sending him colliding into the floor with a thud. He slid straight into a corner of the room. With that hindrance gone, the dragon returned its attention to Estian.

It had expected he would’ve tried run away, but forget even escaping. He had gone off to the human woman in the corner. The beast stepped forward, its large body moving with haste so that the floor sunk with every heavy step its limbs took. But just as Estian was about to make it to Tania, upon seeing the furiously approaching Girgantia, Tania shrieked. “Stay away!” she yelled.

As if that would make the dragon stop. Estian briefly wondered if he should just toss her into the moat outside the window when she screamed again. “I hate lizards more than cockroaches!”

Then, she dashed past Estian, swinging her fists at the dragon. She landed blow after blow, each one growing louder, hitting harder, and moving faster than the last. They were harsher than any other hit heard up until this moment, the sound of them carrying all across the audience room. The emperor was essentially witnessing his wife's lady-in-waiting thrashing a dragon's feet at a speed even he couldn't quite discern with his eyes.

The spectacle evoked a memory he had previously forgotten of something Kane had reported to him about Tania upon his return to the imperial palace after retrieving the Forest of Tetin.

"Though she may look like an ordinary young lady, she is the only daughter of Margrave Kaniche," Kane had begun. "I have heard that as a result of being put through rigorous specialized education, she is accomplished in the sword and in hand-to-hand combat. Aside from that, she's also skilled in poisons. That wasn't all, though," Kane added. "Apparently, the girl possesses her mother's herculean strength, which is a good thing. Margrave Kaniche might be a little furious, but I'm sure there's no other young lady out there better suited to protecting Her Majesty. It'd be a relief to have her around for dangerous situations, too."

Yes. Of course. That was why Estian had left her by Cecile's side: so she could double as a bodyguard.

He watched the dragon get beat by Tania as it clutched its feet and rolled upon the floor in pain. Never had he imagined her to have such monstrous strength. At least, not enough that she could clobber a dragon.

"Have I actually been keeping the most dangerous thing of all next to Cecile?" Estian mumbled to himself. Still, Tania's fists knew no rest as they continued to punish Girgantia's body.

*

"H-How..."

The saintess looked at the man who had fallen by her side. The man who had been bleeding from his head, unconscious from the impact of colliding against the floor and rolling far away.

He was someone she knew well.

"Kane?" she asked, voice small. He was a character of her own creation, just like the dragon. In truth, she had put even more effort into his creation than she had in most others. "Wh-Why is my secondary male lead..."

She took the collapsed Kane into her arms. Since the days of old, romances featured a male lead, a female lead, and someone who boasted charm no less than that of the male lead, yet was never fated to be together with the female lead, destined only to gaze upon her from afar for his entire life: the secondary male lead.

In essence, Kane himself.

Unlike Estian, who had dark hair and eyes, Kane had red hair and blue eyes, but that didn't mean he wasn't handsome. Ugly men were unnecessary in romances, after all. In the saintess' story, he would fall for Cecile's charms following her possession, but being a man of noble intentions and a pure heart, he would hold onto his principles and simply watch over her from a distance. He would do so forever, until the end of his days, because of Cecile's status as an empress.

This man was supposed to be burning with precariously suppressed love for the female lead, but now he was covered in blood, lying prone upon the floor. The saintess poured holy power into where she touched him, blue light vanishing his wounds away. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"Wh-Who..."

He blinked repeatedly for his sight had yet to return to him, but the saintess covered his eyes with a hand as if to put him at ease. Then, she whispered into his ear. "Be still. I'll come back after taking care of everything," she said.

"Who...?" he tried once more.

The saintess' hand glimmered with a blue light again and Kane's body went slack just as he was about to rise up. She carefully placed Kane, now sleeping with a peaceful expression, on the floor and stood up. It was then that Girgantia, who had been suffering Tania's furious assault, took a few steps in retreat until it before the saintess, who grabbed its tail. "You dare hurt my man?" she asked, furious. A fire blazed in her eyes.

The saintess liked this world. She had written it with smooth inspiration, after all. She didn't suffer from writer's block even once as she composed the story, as if she were painting actual individuals that existed somewhere in another world. The reason she continued to write was partly due to how smoothly the progress came, but also because she had loved all the leading male characters in the story.

It had been so fun to write.

The saintess had brought her characters to life with the drive of a twisted sort of love—of having men that were to her taste endure anguish due to the extent of their love for her—along with a mindset intent on benefiting womenkind. The more handsome men out there, the merrier. That was the idea.

Holy power began to rapidly accumulate the hand gripping Girgantia's tail. "For the sin of hurting the main characters' faces," the saintess began, glowering at the dragon with eyes full of determination, "don't think this will end with a simple death."

She felt angrier than she had the time she got a comment that read, "Your writing sucks balls."

*

Cecile was running like mad. Attendants were hot on her trail. "Your Majesty! You mustn't!" they cried, desperately trying to catch her. They weren't fast enough, though, and she kept sprinting away, a book nestled carefully in her hands all the while. It was titled 'I Ended Up Suddenly

Taming a Dragon’.

Everything that had just happened unfolded the same way it did in the book. She knew it. Unbelievable as it may be, she knew exactly what this situation was. She stared piercingly at the book in her hands.

Stoan delegation. An object excavated from an unknown dungeon. A dragon.

She knew this. All of this. She tightened her grip on the book.

When the dragon appeared, Estian had swiftly ordered Kane to send Cecile to the empress' palace. Drawn away by Kane to her room, she was still recovering from her shock when everything it suddenly hit her and she sprang to her bookshelf, shouting, "I know this situation!"

She hurriedly pulled the book out as if she was possessed by something. She quickly flipped through its pages and soon found the part she had remembered first:

“A spell of dragon-binding that was lost to the ages, forgotten by all, now lay in Cecile's possession. She had thought it merely an ordinary book, yet it contained the spells she needed, perfectly recorded. It was no magic, but the power of words that had ruled the land in the beginning of its creation. That power had crossed time to fall into her hands.”

Cecile felt goosebumps rise on her skin as she had read that page. Everything that had been narrated before and after this part was identical to her current situation. A dragon was suddenly born the moment the protagonist laid hands on an unknown egg, and the beast ran rampant with indiscriminate murder.

What was going on? Why was it all the same as it was in the story? Moreover, this book... It wasn't Cecile's usual genre because it was a child-raising story. It was actually about raising a young whelp that grew into a mature dragon in the space of a brief separation. The dragon returned to the heroine eventually, saying, “I finally found you. Now, I will never part from you again.”

The reason Cecile kept the book despite the fact that it didn't ascribe to

her preferences was because the protagonist's name was the same as hers.

When did she read this again? If she recalled correctly, during her past at the royal villa of Navitan, it was given to her by one of her maids. “Princess, you’ve absolutely got to read this one,” they told her.

Who was it? Who said that?

For some reason, she couldn’t remember anything about the maids whom she had grown up with, whom she had met with every single day. A sense of loss washed through her at the abrupt void the missing memories left behind.

Just then, a few attendants caught up to her. One came close and said, “Your Majesty, this place may also be dangerous. You must hurry and take shelter elsewhere.”

“Is that so?” she replied, but just as she was about to move, she paused and gave the servant a sharp look. “Who are you?”

“I’m sorry? What might you be saying, Your Majesty? Did you not see me this morning?” The attendant looked puzzled, but still, Cecile retreated.

“No, I have never seen you before. Speaking of which—Tania? Where is Tania? Why do I not see her anywhere?”

“Your Majesty, let’s first head somewhere safe. We’ll seek the others out later...”

The attendant was anxious and didn’t know what to do after Cecile kept stepping away from her. The other attendant by her side also looked troubled, her gaze darting between Cecile and her colleague. Nevertheless, Cecile turned around with the book in hand. Her palace, which had once been so familiar and cozy to her, suddenly felt strange to her. Nothing had changed and the dragon was still far off in the distance, yet her instincts were screaming that she was in the most dangerous place she could be.

Cecile examined the attendants drawing nearer to her. She had never seen their faces around before. Perhaps there was a problem with her,

seeing that she couldn't even remember her maids from back in Navitan, but...

These people were dangerous. She had no doubt they were, and as soon as she cemented the realization, she kicked her heels off and ran away as fast as she could.

The two attendants looked startled as she pushed them aside. She ran wildly without looking back, heading straight for the audience room. Servants who spotted her midway called out to her in surprise, but she didn't listen. She had to get back to His Majesty and find Tania.

She knew where she'd be safest even with the dragon running amok nearby. The moment Estian was absent from the imperial palace, she wasn't safe anywhere, so she had no choice but to return to his side. She might get an earful once she found him since he had specifically requested for Kane to take her away and she was technically ignoring their efforts to save her, but...

It was possible that she was the only one that suspected she might be in danger. Maybe she really had overreacted and the attendants from before were trying to take her farther away out of genuine worry, but...

She pushed past more perplexed servants. Then, she opened the book she had in her hands, easily finding the page she had been reading a while ago even as she ran:

"Cecile ran with the book. The key to saving everyone was in her hands at this very moment."

Cecile's hesitation vanished the moment she read that sentence. Her instincts were crying out for her to do as it was written within the story.

How strange.

While she was surprised by the book, unlike the attendants from before, she didn't think it was dangerous to listen to it. In fact, it made her feel as if someone was holding out a hand to her and guiding her along. Once more, she wondered who the person who gave her this book was. She wanted to send someone to Navitan to find the maid after all this chaos

was settled.

As she was running, she felt pain on the soles of her feet; she had stepped on what appeared to be a broken fragment of stone that had fallen as the ceiling collapsed. This bit of pain was no cause for her to stop, however. According to the book, the dragon could not be defeated unless she were to go, so go she must.

Meanwhile, the audience room was getting closer. By Estian's orders, the knights on the site warned Cecile not to enter but they hesitated to take action, whereas Cecile kept running past them all unfalteringly. Even now the palace was shaking and the sounds of destruction and havoc were audible from the outside.

Estian and the others who remained were still fighting the dragon.

"Your Majesty!"

A surprised voice called out from behind Cecile, but she ignored it and wrenched open the door of the audience room she had fled from minutes ago. Buffeted by a blast of dusty wind, Cecile hacked and coughed as she took in the situation.

It was a battlefield inside. A gigantic dragon was moving all over the place, its every movement creating flying debris and clouds of dust. Plates were smashed and the furniture and walls were being shattered, too. The cacophony struck Cecile's ears painfully.

"Your Majesty! Tania!" she immediately yelled.

Despite the chaos, she had been heard.

"Cecile?" Estian shouted. "Why have you returned?!"

"Yes, I'm here!" replied Tania.

She had called them in the same way, yet the tones they answered in were so different. Still, she felt reassured; both of them appeared unharmed, in any case.

Soon after, Estian appeared before Cecile through the clouds of dust. The moment saw his furious face, she took the initiative to speak before

he could. "You can be angry with me later, but, please, bring me closer to that dragon first! While protecting me, of course!" she added.

"What?" Estian's expression was alarmed and dubious. He had wondered what kind of madman would voluntarily come here when he heard someone open the doors, but who would have imagined it was Cecile? And he barely got Kane to leave with her, too.

Cecile was in terrible shape after running back. Her hair, which the maids had poured their souls into tying prettily, was disheveled and flailing in the wind; her dress was ripped—God knows how—in one place, leaving a fair leg exposed, and besides that, she had stepped on something on the way and was bleeding from her feet. Estian felt a mixture of anger and distress upon realizing how she actually looked worse than he did after he'd been battling a dragon. He hadn't sent her away to see her return such a mess. However, before he could properly scold her, she had interrupted him with instructions to get her closer to the dragon. He could hardly believe it.

Cecile uttered the utterly unexpected in the most confident way. "There's no time to explain! You've defeated the dragon many times now, but it still gets up again, right? That'll keep happening unless I take care of it!"

Estian's eyes widened. It was just as she said. He and Tania had faced the dragon together—no, to be exact, there were three of them fighting the dragon together. They had someone else on the opposite side he and Tania occupied. The other combatant's figure was hidden due to the dragon's enormous body and the dust in the air, but clearly, they were of formidable skill.

That did not improve the situation, however. They had definitely defeated the dragon. They saw it fall to the ground, but the very next moment, it would rise to its feet, looking as lively as it did in the beginning. Tania had been astonished at the sight, but the dragon had simply shouted, "Surprised? This is a special ability belonging to our species: Infinitum Repeat Sectioni! It's the ability to maintain our best condition at any time!"

As the dragon blabbered incomprehensible words, amidst the sounds of the collapsing building, the voice of a woman broke through the air from the other side, clearly furious. "Look at it flex, yammering on about its looping feature! Argh, why did I write something like that in?!"

Estian hadn't the slightest clue as to what she was going on about, but in any case, the situation didn't look favorable.

Seeing Estian hesitate, Cecile shouted, "The dragon won't ever fall unless we use the dragon lord's spell!"

"And where are we to find that spell?!"

"We don't need to look for it because I have it right here in my hands!"

At that, Estian glanced at the book she carried, spotting a title written in a distracting, illegible font plastered across a cover composed of eye-searing pink, gold, silver, red, and blue foil. 'I Ended Up Suddenly Taming a Dragon', it read.

He didn't say anything outright, exactly.

"I get why you're making that face, but right now you've got to trust in me!" Cecile pleaded, hastily clutching onto Estian and seeing his expression turn cold. "I'll explain the details later! Anyway, here's the dragon lord's spell!"

"Cecile, I..."

"Oh, seriously!" she cried, frustrated.

Since he kept hesitating, Cecil dashed into the fray alone, approaching the dragon. She opened the book to read aloud what was written within. "I, the Ruler of All Creation, command you, O Foolish and Wicked one: let one wing be bound by the Chains of Iside!" she chanted.

The moment the first part of the spell escaped her lips, a mass of intricately-arranged lights rose above the dragon, forcing it to collapse once more. Then, the light began to rapidly wrap around the creature's wings as if they were living chains. Girgantia cried out in shock. "Th-This is...!"

Upon witnessing what was happening, Richard—who was rolling around the place looking about, say, medium dead—yelled in astonishment. "Wh-What the—that's a power that's been all but lost to ancient times!"

Regardless of whether or not Richard was surprised or whatever, Cecile was about to continue reading the next part of the spell when a mass of stone dislodged from the ceiling due to the force of Girgantia's struggling. It was hurtling toward her, and she flinched, but the pain of impact never came. Estian had landed a punch on it, destroying it before it could reach her.

Seeing that Estian was protecting her after all, Cecile continued chanting the spell unhindered. "Let another wing be bound by the Spear of Orpheus! And another by the Sword of Durs!"

Two more masses of light appeared, just like the first one, shackling a pair of the dragon's wings. It was mere light that contained it, yet the beast dropped to the ground, attempting, desperately, to flap its wings in vain. "Ridiculous!" it cried. "How could! A human! I'm sure this spell is—"

Cecile didn't care about the dragon's opinion. She continued to chant. "And the last wing shall be bound by My power, the Ruler of All Creation!"

Next, she spoke a word that couldn't be described by human ears, surprising even herself. She was just reading from the text in the book, so how did such a strange word escape her? The writing, too. It was in a script she couldn't recognize, so how had she known what to say?

Amidst everyone's amazement, she completed the last section of the spell: "ἄνδρ"

The dragon struggled as it began to sob. "N-No! I was wrong, Mommy!"

Mommy?

Everybody on the scene froze at the unexpected outburst. 'Mommy'? Was the dragon's mother here somewhere? Their eyes roved everywhere across the decimated audience room, but, naturally, no other dragon

could be found.

Meanwhile, the lights had fully ensnared Girgantia and it crumpled completely, its wings pinned behind it like a specimen on display. It flailed frantically, kicking up another thick cloud of dust and gouging lines into the floor as it struggled. Fragments of marble shot out to Cecile, startling her into bracing for another hit, but then a strong pair of sturdy arms took her by the waist and pulled her safely back.

The marble fragments barely grazed her hair. They smashed into the wall with a loud bang, and the sudden force of getting pulled back had her dropping the book until it cluttered to the floor. The sight of the now crumbling wall, destroyed by the collision with the marble, sent shivers down her spine. Had Estian faltered the slightest second when pulling her back, her head would've been destroyed in place of the wall.

Just as the magnitude of the danger she escaped finally dawned on her, a relieved sigh left Estian's mouth. Cecile turned to look at him and could tell, from the moment that their gazes met, that she was going to be so dead after this. The look in his eyes told her that he wouldn't have stayed quiet if they were in a slightly less perilous situation.

Estian raised his hand. No way. He wasn't going to hit her, was he? He hadn't done such a thing before. Startled, she flinched slightly, her eyes squeezing shut. However, all he did was gently wipe some dust and dirt out of her hair.

"I think I need to have a long talk with you after taking down that dragon," he said.

"Will you be mad?"

"Obviously," he replied, and the underlying anger in his tone made Cecile shrink in on herself until she spotted an injury on one of his cheeks. Seeing that the blood was only welling up only now, the cut must've been inflicted when he was protecting her from the marble a moment ago.

"Your Majesty, you're bleeding!" she exclaimed. She reached out to touch him, but he flinched away. The moment he heard the word

'bleeding' he hastily avoided her hand as if he opposed the feel of her touch. Her hand was left hanging in midair, lost and hesitant.

"Don't touch me with your hands," Estian muttered, causing Cecile to freeze, which, in turn, made him feel a little befuddled. Just as he was about to say something again, she suddenly lunged forward, embracing him by the neck and pulling him in. Caught off guard by her completely unexpected action, he couldn't prevent her from drawing his face closer to hers. As soon as he was about to ask what she was doing, her lips darted past his cheek. When she drew away from him again, her lips were smudged with the blood and dirt that had been on his cheek.

"What have you done!" he shouted, aghast.

"I've done as you asked," she explained. "I didn't touch you with my hand! Only with my lips!"

He didn't say anything.

"I'll have to wipe it off, of course, but you can scold me twice as hard later!"

Still, nothing.

"Uh... three times as hard?" she offered. Estian's continued silence made Cecile sweat. Should she have said it ten times?

When she had begun to reach the height of her nerves, he took her into his arms. "I won't get angry," he whispered, confusing her. He continued. "With that, I'll pretend nothing happened."

Then, he adjusted his hug around her, lifting her higher, and Tania, who had been watching them from the side with sparkling eyes, thought, "I expected no less from these two. So passionate, even in a situation like this!"

Noticing Tania's gaze, Cecile realized what they were doing in front of a dragon and she smartened up. "Let me down, please!"

"Do you think you'll be walking with a hurt foot? Be still for a moment. I'll finish this once and for all." Still holding her up, Estian took hold of

his black steel blade again.

Forced to the ground by Cecile's spell, Girgantia could only squirm like a beast caught in a net. Nevertheless, even though it was incapacitated, slaying a dragon was no easy feat. As Estian approached the beast, Tania followed with her fists clenched and ready.

Suddenly, the dragon's body was consumed by a blue light. It let loose a scream. "It hurts!" it shouted. "What is this?!"

The unknown woman once again roared from the other side of the dust clouds. "The Last Bang is what it is, you muuutt!"

*

Girgantia wanted to cry. The light constricting the dragon's four wings scattered back into the air and then dipped to lash its back powerfully.

"Ack!"

This tear-inducing ferociousness... it had to be his mother! Due to the nature of the dragon race, Girgantia was fully self-aware from the time he was an egg. Naturally, the one he talked with most often was his mother, the dragon lord.

"Girgantia, what's one plus one?"

"Eleven!"

The baby egg's answer led to the dragon lord lashing the innocent cave wall with her tail. The wall fell apart with a rumble, its broken pieces crushing the other monsters in the cave beneath the onslaught. Being the merciless creature she was, however, the dragon lord didn't even spare them a glance as she glared at her egg.

"Why, I'll squash you underfoot," she threatened.

"I was wrong, Lord. The correct answer is two," Girgantia said, quickly wising up.

"I'm gonna ask once more. Answer within three seconds. When a is an algebraic number other than zero or one and b is an irrational number, is a to the power of b a transcendental number?"

"Yes, it is."

The dragon lord nodded at his quick answer. Damned little rascal. Fooling around when he clearly knew what to do.

The longer a dragon stayed in its egg, the greater its body and strength when it hatched. That being the case, Girgantia remained under the protection of his mother, even though the conditions for his awakening had already been met.

The dragon lord pressed a claw to her horn. The child she had birthed in her declining years did nothing but mess about. He seemed to have started puberty already despite not even having hatched yet because lately he had adopted a habit of responding to her words with utter nonsense, giggling in amusement.

She couldn't even give him a good paddling since he was still in the egg. She sighed heavily, but then an idea struck her. She went up to the egg and began writing in midair with a claw. The letters she wrote came to life and drilled themselves right into the egg.

"Eh? What's this?" Girgantia asked.

"The tough fist of love."

Startled by the sudden manifestation of something bright pulling at his wings, Girgantia began to flail about in his egg. The light pulled at each of his four wings and constricted his movements, then lashed at his back. A ferocious wave of pain washed over Girgantia, and he felt tears well up at his first taste of pain.

"Thought you'd be safe inside the egg, eh? What did I tell you would happen when you mess with me?"

"You told me I'd be dead meat, Mom. I-I mean, Lord."

The dragon lord stared at her little egg for a moment before shaking

another claw at him. "Bear in mind, that's what you're going to get whenever you spout rubbish at me from now on."

After that, Girgantia suffered roughly another 3,000 rounds of beatings.

Later on, after the incident in Dark Ages arrived, the dragon lord placed her egg in the deepest of dungeons. There, Girgantia fell into a deep slumber. When he woke up, he could tell that not a single member of his clan capable of responding to his call had remained alive.

He decided he might as well just go back to sleep, so he rolled onto his other side in the egg, getting comfortable. Dragons had no capacity to feel sorrow upon the extinction of their kin to begin with, so he felt fine. Who could break his egg open, anyway?

Only someone as powerful as the dragon lord would be able to hatch a dragon egg, and there was no way such a being existed anymore, so what was there to do? Nothing but sleep.

One day, Girgantia's lazy slumber had been interrupted, however. He sensed humans entering the dungeon, and they took him out with them. He didn't mind, at first. Touring the world while lying inside his egg didn't sound so bad.

So, he was brought faraway only for him to be hatched by the touch of a female human, forcing him to be born into the world. Out of nowhere, however, the woman who hatched him used the very same spell that was once used by his mother. It didn't make sense. His mom was dead, wasn't she? Didn't he hear the humans talking about how her bones still remained in the deepest region of the Dark Mountain Range?

Yet, pain from the lashings never lied. This was definitely his mother's work, which was why he had ended up involuntarily crying out to her in apology. It hurt, but he could still handle that much punishment. However...

Girgantia turned his head to look at the woman grabbing the end of his tail as she filled her hands with blue light. The moment the light exploded and swallowed him up, he felt like he was getting fried in oil. He cried out in agonizing pain, screaming over and over again. "Stop! I was wrong!" he

begged.

“As expected, the same as it was written,” the woman in the maid uniform said. “Listen up. I’m gonna kill you today, here and now, even if I die.”

Again, possessed with a burning hostility toward him, she placed her glowing hands upon his body and forced him to writhe with even more pain. Her every touch caused popping oil sounds to prickle from his hide. What was wrong with her?!

As the seconds passed, however, the woman began to bleed from her mouth. Girgantia knew it. It couldn’t be easy for a mere human to muster up the strength to reduce a dragon to this state. However, just as he resolved to hang in there for just a little bit more...

"The Last Bang is what it is, you muuutt!"

A blindingly powerful blue light engulfed him.

*

The dragon was entirely enveloped in holy power. Who cared if Estian found out about the saintess, anyway?

She gnashed her teeth, a litany of unscrupulous thoughts bursting through her mind. “God be damned, anyone laying a hand on the male leads is fucking dead. Fucking. Dead!” she cursed. “I’m the only one allowed to touch my boys! They’re all mine!” She panted furiously. Blood was flowing out of her like her nose was a faucet before she could even realize it, spurned by her excessive use of holy power.

Girgantia wriggled like a harpooned fish until eventually, everything stopped, and her holy power dissipated as well.

She panted, her breathing woefully ragged. Soon, her vision grew faint and she collapsed, all the strength rapidly leaving her body. Was she going to die like this? Perhaps she was. After all, she had used the power

she was supposed to use at the very end of the story here instead, and the original saintess had most certainly died after exerting herself as much as she did.

Even as darkness encroached upon her vision, the saintess turned her head to look at Kane, who was lying down with a relaxed expression. She felt regret at the sight of his disheveled figure and seemingly sleeping face. Although the saintess had not yet seen Estian, at least she had met Kane and even hugged him. That was all she got to experience, but, as the saying went: something is better than nothing. If she could at least get Kane...

She should've given him a deep smooch when he fainted a while back.

That was her last thought as she passed out, her hand still reaching for him.

*

In the middle of a room deep in the imperial palace, there was a stake connected to a thick chain, and bound to the end of the chain was a small dragon the size of a wolf cub. That dragon was Girgantia.

Right after he passed out, he disappeared all of a sudden, leaving everyone on the scene wondering if he had fled somehow. Soon, however, they were able to find him slumped over in the center of the audience room.

"He's become small?" they noticed.

Having been reduced to roughly the size of a small dog, Girgantia was promptly bound in chains by knights and moved to the room he was presently kept in. Kane brought over a chair and sat down in front of the creature. "Name?" he asked.

His eyes still swollen from waking up only recently, Girgantia replied, "How arrogant. I am the last heir to the proud dragon race, a great being

the likes of which you humans cannot dare to speak of."

At that, Kane gave Tania, who had been standing behind Girgantia all along, a look signaling her into action. She eyed the dragon as if he were an insect and then audibly stomped on his tail with the pointed heel of her shoe.

He cried out in pain. "Hey! How could you step on that again?!" he griped, clutching at his tail to protect it from her stomps. No one afforded him any sympathy.

His eyes cold as he looked upon the dragon, Kane said, "I will ask you again: name?"

"Girgantia."

"Who are your parents and what do they do for a living?"

"I don't know who my father is, but he's one of the three dragons my mother met during her travels. My mother was the dragon lord but I heard she passed away in the Dark Ages."

Once the baby dragon—now obediently answering the questions—mentioned the dragon lord, Kane turned his head to where the emperor and empress sat cupping their chins. Wanting Cecile's opinion on Girgantia's answer, he asked, "Do his words match with the story in the book?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "The book had also stated that the mother of the hatchling was a dragon lord."

Estian's expression turned serious. After catching Girgantia, he had tried looking for the book Cecile had been holding while other people cleaned up the ruined audience room. Who would have known the book contained a spell capable of subduing a dragon? It was necessary to examine it properly.

After searching through the audience room for a long time, however, Estian swept back his hair in irritation. "Where did it go?" he asked.

Estian was sure he had seen it fall from Cecile's hand when they were

dodging the flying fragments of marble courtesy of Girgantia. He had thought it would be found in no time, considering its eye-searing pink cover and glittering foil, but he couldn't find it anywhere. The book was visually unforgettable, yet no one cleaning up the audience hall could recall seeing it anywhere. In the end, Estian had no choice but to return to Cecile empty-handed. He had assumed that since they knew the title, they could just buy a new copy, anyway.

He ordered Tania—who was said to have brought it into the palace in the first place—to procure another one, only to receive an unexpected reply. "'I Ended Up Suddenly Taming a Dragon'? But I've never bought such a book before? I've never even brought it in," Tania said, surprised. "Four-legged things becoming male leads!? I don't read beast stories!"

At that, Girgantia snapped, "Hah, who'd romance the likes of humans? It's creepier that you lot write such things. It seems you mortals know how awesome dragons are, though, at least," only to have his tail stepped on by Tania again.

The strangeness of the matter didn't end there. The Imperial Guard received Estian's command to immediately go out and purchase that book, so they went to the largest bookstore in the capital and scoured the romance corner, but the book was nowhere to be found. They tried asking the staff as well, but they firmly answered, "The dragon trend ended long ago, and we haven't even heard of that title before."

What was going on?

The situation seemed all the stranger when Estian heard Cecile's explanation later on. "I'm sure one of my previous maids gave it to me, but I can't remember who."

She had spent every day with those maids yet she still couldn't remember? Nevertheless, Estian ordered someone to go to Navitan and bring back the maids of the royal villa who had raised Cecile. He had already planned on bringing them over since they had taken good care of Cecile in her childhood, so it was going to happen sooner or later, anyway.

Meanwhile, Kane's interrogation was coming to a close. Estian looked at

the dragon, who had now become dispirited and meek, with mixed feelings. It was a big ordeal and there were many witnesses, so the appearance of the dragon was impossible to hide. It seemed like people from all sorts of countries throughout the continent were coming to visit them soon, he mused.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't have cared whether they came or not—he just needed to sit at his designated chair and glare a little, after all—but this time, he wasn't alone. Estian turned to look at Cecile. She sat beside him with a pair of fluffy slippers on her feet since they were still injured. Noticing his gaze, however, she avoided his eyes awkwardly.

What was up with all of this?

How on earth was Cecile able to hatch the dragon egg and use the dragon lord's spell? The more Estian thought about it, the more odd things he noticed about Cecile. When she put her lips on his bloodied cheek, he felt faint for a moment. His blood was like poison; other people had to avoid it. However, she hadn't shown any sort of reaction to it.

Naturally, he knew that Eugendiph's Blood wouldn't pass onto another person through simple physical contact—as his father had performed repeated experiments on the subject—but it was impossible for nothing to happen. Usually, an ordinary person would have to lie down sick for several days at the least. Yet, in Cecile's case, aside from looking teary when her feet stung occasionally, she was perfectly healthy.

Regardless, foreign visitors this time would come with the purpose of trying to meet Cecile. The simplest solution might've been to prevent them from meeting her, but it was unlikely that they would simply turn away upon refusal. Without a doubt, they would try to break their way in somehow and maybe even send him some useless women while they were at it, too. Just because he already had an empress didn't mean they would stop sending women over to him.

A sigh slipped from Estian's mouth.

"By the way, Emperor. Do you mind sending me back now?"

His forehead creased at the voice that came from the corner. Richard

was smiling with his head, arms, and legs each contained separately. It was a rather chilling sight, but no one in the room was shocked by it. They had seen a dragon already, so what was the big deal about a living head rolling around by itself?

"Don't make me laugh," Estian scoffed. "You think you can just prance on out of here? You're the cause of this entire mess to begin with. Don't even dream of your body stuck back together until the Mage Tower compensates us for your deeds."

"Compensation, you say? You got a dragon thanks to me, so I should be the one being compen—don't kick my arm! It hurts, I tell you!" Richard whined.

"Be grateful that I'm sparing you for what little use you have," Estian said after kicking Richard. Then, he sat back down again. Everything was suspicious. Be it the book, the forgotten maid, or the things that were happening to Cecile. While Richard might be soft in the head, his knowledge of magic would be required to dig deeper into the matter.

As Estian was contemplating over how to use Richard, somebody knocked on the door. He allowed them in, revealing that it had been the grand chamberlain. His steps faltered when seeing Girgantia tied in the middle of the room, likely recalling the destruction the dragon had wrought upon the imperial palace, and he stood as far away as he could before reporting to Estian. "They say the maidservant has awoken," he said.

"Is that right? What did she say?"

The maidservant in question was the one who was discovered collapsed alongside Kane on the other side of Girgantia. Upon looking into who the woman was, she was revealed to be a maid of Irene who had entered the palace that day. According to a doctor's diagnosis, she had merely fainted from exhaustion and there was no threat to her life, so it was decided she would be given treatment in the palace.

"That is... She says she doesn't remember," the grand chamberlain reported hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" Estian frowned. Although she had been out of sight at the time, that maid had to be the one who attacked Girgantia from the other side. Putting aside the mystery of how a maid had such power in the first place, saying that she didn't remember? Did he have to force the truth out of her?

Estian was contemplating on what to do when Kane spoke up. "Your Majesty, entrust that matter to me. I think I'll have time to spare, what with Girgantia being cooperative."

His words prompted Estian to look at Girgantia. After answering several of Kane's questions, the dragon was filling in the 150 questionnaires created under the imperial provisions for interrogating of prisoners of war. Whenever Girgantia tried to grumble about something as he filled in the paper using a pen held with his tail, Tania would threateningly raise her heel and the dragon would swiftly resume writing even as he muttered under his breath. From this point on, the interrogation would proceed smoothly even without Kane.

"Right. Then, I'll leave that to you."

*

Upon waking up and examining the state of her body, the saintess was shocked.

Where did all her holy power go?

Ever since she had possessed the saintess' body, she could feel herself overflowing with divine power as if all the waters of the oceans were at her disposal. Now, though, forget oceans. She felt as if she were in the middle of a desert that had been utterly bereft of water for a hundred years. Could her power be gone since she used it all up on the dragon?

In any case, she was certain that she had no holy power. She couldn't feel a thing no matter how hard she tried. Just as she was feeling particularly lost, however, somebody opened the door to the room she

was in and entered.

"Heavens! So, this is where you were!" they exclaimed.

It was Irene. Only after she entered the room did the saintess look around. From the looks of it, she was still inside the imperial palace.

After entering the room, Irene sat beside the saintess and pulled her into a hug, rattling away. "Goodness, the knights were suddenly going around asking if they knew about this one woman. It sounded just like they were talking about you so I came dashing over, and what a good thing I did! They say you were caught up in something huge? And I hear you fainted. Are you feeling fine? You don't know how much I've looked for you since you disappeared! Oh, how I worried! Did they change your clothes because they were too dirty?"

The saintess felt perplexed as she settled in Irene's embrace. Why was this girl suddenly acting like someone who had found their long-lost sister? What?

But then, Irene's tone abruptly dropped low as she said, "By the way, though... I heard you said some strange things to the other maids at home?"

"I-I'm sorry? What do you mean strange things?"

"For example, something like, 'So long, I'm through with this place,' or 'Work hard looking after the young miss in my stead'." Irene's tone fell even lower. "And then there's that time when you told me to wait, but you didn't return for so long you were found somewhere else... You wouldn't be trying to run away from me like my previous maids now, would you?"

Her words caused lines of sweat to appear on the saintess' forehead.

Wh-What? Why did it feel like she had just entered an obsession route?

〈Continues In Volume 2〉

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