
Hanashi
MEDIA
An Observation Log of My Wife
Who Calls Herself A Villainess
Written by Shiki
Illust. Wan Hachipisu


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An Observation Log of My Wife Who Calls Herself A Villainess

Story By **Shiki**
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Hanashi MEDIA




CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS
JUNE
A noble daughter of a Count in the Kingdom of Seahealby. She is the protagonist of the novel that Bertia read in her previous life.
ZENO
A spirit who contracted with Cecil. Usually serves as his valet.
IZLARICH
The kingdom's second prince of Seahealby and June's fiancé.
KURO
A dark spirit contracted with Bertia. It can disguise itself as a black fox or a young girl maid.
CECIL
The crown prince of the Kingdom of Alphasta. He is very intelligent and takes pleasure in watching Bertia, who lifts his otherwise monotonous days. Even after they got married, he continues to observe her.
ALEIS
The younger brother of the king and the current crown prince of the Kingdom of Seahealby, engaged to Lysonna. Due to the kingdom' s laws, he will eventually lose his position as the crown prince.
LYSONNA
The princess of the Kingdom of Umyuve. According to Bertia, in her previous life, she read a novel where Lysonna was the "villainess" who was frustrated by her unsuccessful relationship with Aleis.
BERTIA
Once claiming to be the "villainess" during her time as a noble lady, she married Cecil and became the crown princess. She is now working hard to become a distinguished queen.

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Part One

Each morning, I—Cecil Glo Alphasta, the crown prince of Alphasta—woke up to the sweet, sleeping face of my wife, Bertia. Following our engagement six months earlier, she had become my spouse and was now known as Bertia Ibil Alphasta.

"Ohoho. Don't think you can escape from me, the top-tier villainess, Lady Bertia! Come now, you stray cat, return the taiyaki you're holding in your mouth! In exchange, I'll give you this premium cat food… *mumble mumble*…"

Waking up to my adorable wife's peaceful sleeping face and her entertaining sleep talk… Yes, that's the spice of life.

"Tia, what kind of funny dream are you having today?"

I couldn't help but chuckle softly as I gazed at Bertia's peaceful face, which showed no signs of her waking up anytime soon. I wondered what amusing scenes might be unfolding in her dreams. Ever since she'd become my fiancée, observing her entertaining behavior had become something of a hobby of mine, and I was constantly curious about what filled her dreams. Unfortunately, I had no way of peeking into someone else's dreams. For now, I simply made a mental note to remind her later that eating food carried by a stray cat was not hygienic.

With that thought in mind, I unconsciously smiled with pride as my fingertips gently brushed the hair from my wife's face.

"Speaking of 'villainess'… It's been a while since I've heard that word," I mused, gazing at her sleeping face and recalling the times when she claimed to be a villainess. My wife, Bertia, was quite… No, very much an unusual lady from the moment we met. We were engaged when I was ten and she was eight. During our first meeting, she had suddenly declared to me, "I am a villainess!" Honestly, I had no idea what she meant.

Although I hadn't understood her declaration at the time, her unexpected remark piqued my interest since everything felt too easy for me, leaving me perpetually bored and disinterested in anything.

Yes, she appeared quite intriguing.

After that, I began to enjoy listening to her talk about "otome games" and their intriguing "scenarios," which often sounded like prophecies to me.

I utilized the information she provided, carefully adjusted to challenging situations, and orchestrated events to align with my wishes, all while keeping an eye on her progress.

In these otome games, she was meant to be the "villainess," a character who tormented the "heroine" destined to be with me, ultimately facing her comeuppance and having her engagement annulled. However, there was no way I, having taken a liking to her, would allow that to happen.

I supported her as she aimed to become a top-tier villainess, while secretly manipulating various situations to ensure we could have a joyful life together.

Sweetly, the truth was that her pure and kind nature made it impossible for her to become a true villainess. A little silly at times, this ultimately transformed her into a remarkable self-proclaimed villainess.

Despite her villainous antics, her peculiar behavior, which considered the feelings of those around her, possessed a mysterious power to both bewilder and bring smiles to people's faces. Before I

knew it, she had become beloved and revered by many, now standing by my side as a wonderful crown princess, striving every day.

Regarding her minor schemes to become a villainess, most ended in failure, and I quickly addressed any potential issues, preventing any "comeuppance" from happening. In fact, there was a girl, the daughter of a baronet, who attempted to instigate a "comeuppance," but I thwarted any efforts that could lead to it.

Even so, we achieved a better outcome than originally intended, which is no issue at all. All that remains is for me to be a good king and husband. If it'll mean seeing her smile, then that's hardly any trouble at all.

Part Two

"Your Highness, regarding the tax revenue from the Silkjeet territory, which you instructed me to verify recently, it appears that Baron Silkjeet suffered a business failure and concealed the losses by falsifying the figures in the submitted documents," reported Courtgain Deres Uradil in the office where I was attending to the morning's work.

He had been working to root out corruption in the country, collaborating with Marquis Noches, Bertia's father, since our academy days. Originally possessing a sharp intellect, his abilities were further honed through practical experience under Marquis Noches, the Chancellor. As a result, by the time of his graduation, he had become a reliable asset ready for immediate deployment.

After I graduated, and a year later when he did, I appointed him as my assistant for office work to act as my hands and feet. Incidentally, he had been acting as a spy to expose the corruption within the Uradil Count's household by becoming an adopted son there. By the time I graduated from the academy, I had managed to eliminate that corruption, leading to the fall of Count Uradil.

Subsequently, the question of what to do with the Uradil family arose, but since he had already been adopted into the family, it was decided that the house's affairs would be left to him. Of course, it was a house stained with corruption. Although Courtgain was originally a spy from our side and had proven his innocence, continuing the house unchanged presented a bit of a problem before the other nobles.

Thus, the title was downgraded from count to viscount and bestowed upon Courtgain. For Courtgain, who originally came from a minor branch of the Noches family with no prospects for inheritance, this represented a significant promotion.

As for his standing among the nobility… Normally, taking over a house known for its misconduct could have led to his ostracization, but his role as a spy for the royal family in the Uradil house had been made public. Furthermore, since he had become one of my close aides, few would dare to belittle him. Doing so would be akin to admitting to being poorly informed.

"What about the response?" I asked.

"It's all settled. Here are the details…" Courtgain said, handing me some documents.

I accepted the papers from Courtgain and skimmed through them quickly. Baron Silkjeet, it appeared, was inexperienced in crime and had been involved in a minor offense. A sanction was justified, but the proposed measure seemed reasonable.

"Thank you; this appears to be in order. Now, could you manage this next?" I said, presenting him with another bundle of documents.

Courtgain's expression tightened slightly at the sight. A significant backlog of tasks had amassed during his recent engagement. Given his espionage background, he was exceptionally qualified for both overt and covert assignments. Marquis Noches had rigorously trained him in the art of intelligence gathering.

He was truly a handy and reliable presence. *That's why I inevitably ask him to handle various small tasks. It can't be helped, right?*

"Well, Your Highness, this volume is…" Courtgain began, glancing at the documents with a hint of trepidation.

"You can handle it, can't you?" I said confidently. It would take me no more than an hour to complete.

Although my aides frequently express concerns that the workload is too much for them.

Well, all things considered, my aides—including Courtgain—are competent, and they always manage to accomplish the tasks in the end. Furthermore, after meeting Bertia, I've learned not to expect others to act exactly as I would, so I ensure to adjust the workload accordingly… right to the very limit of what they can handle.

"Uh… Yes… Please leave it to me," Courtgain consented, his shoulders drooping slightly yet resolutely.

"Thanks. You may find it easier to collaborate with Charles on some parts, so feel free to ask him if needed."

Charles, who became one of my aides after graduating from the academy, was primarily responsible for diplomatic duties. Since his practical experience was still limited, I had him focus on domestic tasks for the time being. *Eventually, though, I'll have to assign him to international assignments.*

"I will do that," Courtgain acknowledged.

Since Bertia and I got married and became involved in national affairs, the camaraderie among my aides and Bertia's lady friends, who also served as her aides, had strengthened.

The other day, when I told Charles, "You all seem to be getting along even better lately," he had snapped back quite sharply.

"We have to unite to stand against the demon lord's assaults!"

When did they become heroes fighting a demon lord? Surely, they don't see me as the demon lord?

At any rate, to provide such an entertaining tale, I decided to "reward" Charles with an extra task as a token of my appreciation.

Noticing that Charles wasn't exactly thrilled with the extra workload, I decided to make it up to him by asking Bertia to reach out to Anne—the woman he had feelings for—to suggest that she

bring him some refreshments since he seemed tired. It turned out to be a good move, as he diligently completed the additional work.

"Ah, it's almost noon, isn't it? Bertia is visiting the orphanage again today, correct?" I called out to Zeno, who was standing in a corner of the room.

"Yes. She's gone to the Shauldneat Orphanage. She plans to return by lunchtime, but…" Zeno replied with a wry smile. And for good reason. Bertia's visits to the orphanage always ended up running late because the children would plead with her to play, keeping her there longer than intended.

"Then, since we've reached a good stopping point with work, let's go pick her up. There's a meeting about that matter in the afternoon, after all."

The afternoon meeting couldn't begin without Bertia. If she returned late, missed lunch, and then rushed straight into the meeting, it would undoubtedly distress her—especially given her love of food. *Going to pick her up seems like the best option.*

"Courtgain, join us. There could be some valuable information available."

"Yes, I believe that's a good idea. I'll accompany you," he replied after a moment's thought, nodding as if he had reached a conclusion.

Normally, the idea of seeking valuable information at an orphanage would have been met with skepticism. However, the Shauldneat Orphanage was an exception. This was because the facility also trained individuals for clandestine information gathering on behalf of the country. The operator of this establishment was a former "errand runner," who retired around the same time Bertia moved into the castle to become the crown princess, having handed over her duties to her sister. This former errand runner had even provided me with updates about Bertia's condition when I was unable to observe her myself.

Despite these covert operations, it wasn't as though all the children at the orphanage were coerced into participating. The

orphanage had been established because the former errand runner, having observed Bertia since childhood, had developed a fondness for children and wished to care for them.

An establishment founded specifically out of love and compassion for orphaned children would never endorse practices that disregarded their feelings. It was obvious that the former errand runner, now the operator, would firmly refuse any such practices.

Therefore, only children who seemed suited for espionage activities would be approached. After gauging their interest, the operator only proceeded with training upon receiving their consent. This method ensured no coercion was involved. Naturally, such an approach carried a higher risk of the orphanage's true nature being exposed, potentially leading to various complications. However, these risks were carefully mitigated by initially providing recruits with only the most essential information.

I can defer these details to the previous errand runner. Our long association has built enough trust for me to feel confident everything will be fine.

"Then, Zeno, could you arrange the carriage?" I asked.

"As you wish," Zeno replied, bowing slightly before he left. He wasn't going to prepare it himself but would give instructions to someone else, so he should be back shortly.

"Let's set off once everything is ready," I said to Courtgain, who remained standing with the stack of documents I had handed him. He asserted that he would prepare to go out and left the documents behind before exiting the room.

"I wonder what my dear wife is doing right now?"

The thought of Bertia brought a spontaneous smile to my face.

Part Three

We rode in my personal carriage to the Shauldneat Orphanage, arriving without incident, only to pause in our tracks almost right

away upon arrival.

"Please wait a momeeent!"

"No waaay!"

"Ohoho! I am the villainess, you see! I shall capture you myself!"

Children of both genders chased each other at a brisk pace. Their waists were wrapped in long cloths as they bantered like young ladies. Among them was Bertia… *But what exactly is happening here?*

At first glance, it appeared to be a game of tag; however, it was clearly different from the ordinary version.

"Has Tia created another new game?" Whenever something unusual like this occurred, my wife was usually at the center of it. Since she was participating, it was almost certain she was the instigator.

"Ah, Lord Cecil!" Bertia, noticing my arrival, excused herself from the children with a few words and stepped away from their circle to approach me.

"Hello, Tia. You look like you're having fun. What's the name of this game?"

"It's the Villainess Game!"

I was lost for words.

Zeno, why don't you stop snickering behind me while I keep smiling? And Courtgain… Ah, there he goes, gazing with a fondness akin to a father watching his children grow. Although I suppose he feels more like he is observing a younger sister.

"That's quite the unique name for a game. How do you play?"

"It's essentially tag! The children of the orphanage invited me to play tag, and when I offered to be 'It,' they said that it wouldn't be appropriate to call the crown princess a demon, so…"

Well, the children might not think much of it, but the adults likely view it as disrespectful to address Bertia—the crown princess—in such a manner, hence the caution. To me, it seems like an unnecessary consideration.

"So, we talked about using a different name instead of demon, and various suggestions arose, like devil or imp, but none of them seemed to fit quite right…"

Devil isn't much different from demon, is it? And imp might imply something quite different altogether.

"In the end, I suggested that we play 'Villainess' instead!"

Why would the term 'villainess' come up as an option? Are demons and devils too otherworldly, while a villainess perhaps fits within the human category?

"If it's a villainess, the word 'role' implies that the person isn't evil themself but is merely playing the part of being evil. Additionally, it includes 'lady,' so I thought it was perfect."

What should I do? Everyone considers me intelligent, yet I can't quite grasp the meaning behind her explanation. The others… Ah, aside from the adaptable children, everyone appears puzzled.

Since the crown princess herself proposed this "brilliant idea" with a radiant smile and the children enthusiastically went along with it, donning clothes as makeshift dresses and adopting ladylike speech, no one felt they could stop them. It was unsurprising that no one dared to oppose Bertia, considering that it would ordinarily be unthinkable for commoners to make suggestions to the crown princess.

"Why are you here, Lord Cecil? Aren't you supposed to be working in your office this morning?" Bertia asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

"It's almost lunchtime. I came to pick you up."

With a warm smile, I noticed Bertia blush, her eyes sparkling. "You took the time to come pick me up, even with your busy schedule?! That's incredibly kind of you!" Her joyful smile made every effort worthwhile. As I patted her head and saw her cheeks redden further, I reflected on how fetching her was the right choice, especially in light of her adorable response.





Glancing back, I saw Zeno shrug his shoulders with a resigned expression. *For now, I want to savor Bertia's reaction, so let's leave it at that.*

As we enjoyed the moment, the children from the orphanage, who had continued their game, gradually began to gather around us. They must have sensed that Bertia was about to leave soon.

"Lady Bertia, are you leaving? When will you come back?"

"I want to play more."

"Don't go…"

The gathered children all wore disappointed expressions; some even had tears in their eyes. It seemed Bertia was quite popular here too. *It's reassuring to see she's well-liked—especially in a place where we're nurturing children who might one day serve us. It certainly reduces the chances they'll turn against us in the future.*

Well, she likely doesn't realize that she's helping to train potential recruits for information gathering, unaware that the children before her might be candidates.

Bertia consistently does a good job without realizing it.

"What should we do?"

Seemingly cautious around me, the children maintained a distance of about two meters, gazing at Bertia with hopeful expressions. Although she looked a bit concerned, Bertia also appeared pleased; her fondness for children likely made her enjoy their invitation to play.

"We have a meeting about that matter this afternoon, so we can't stay long." I said, pausing before continuing, "However, you can play a little longer if you'd like. Courtgain also seems to want to talk to the director."

At my prompting, Courtgain offered Bertia a modest bow.

"Is that truly all right? Will it not be an inconvenience for you, Lord Cecil?"

"It's fine. I've completed my morning tasks. I arrived a bit early so we could have lunch together before starting our afternoon

tasks.” Upon hearing my words, Bertia glanced at the clock tower visible from the orphanage’s garden and appeared slightly relieved.

“Thank you so much! Oh, would you care to join us in the ‘Villainess Game,’ Lord Cecil?”

“Is it a rule to wear a cloth around the waist?”

Indeed, considering my position as crown prince, playing a game while wearing a cloth skirt would be quite inappropriate. If someone unaware of the context were to witness it, rumors about the crown prince engaging in peculiar behavior could easily tarnish my reputation. Bertia, dressed practically for the outing, had no need to change her attire to fit in with the game, leaving only me, and possibly Zeno if persuaded, to don the makeshift garment.

“No, that’s just something the children chose to do themselves. When I explained what a villainess is and acted it out for them, they wanted to imitate the attire as well, leading to their current get-up!”

So, she even acted out the role of a villainess. That sounds amusing; I wish I’d been here. What a pity.

“Then perhaps I will join in after all.”

“Oh! That’s wonderful. The children will be thrilled… Huh? Everyone, why do you all look so wary all of a sudden?”

As soon as I expressed my willingness to participate, the children’s expressions tensed up as if they were facing a formidable foe. *Well, it’s naturally quite nerve-wracking for them to play with royalty, so their reaction isn’t entirely surprising.*

“Children are perceptive,” Zeno whispered. “They can detect your true nature, Your Highness.”

Do you enjoy being punished that much? I glanced sideways at Zeno, and he quickly looked away. Of course, I didn’t intend to let him off that easily.

“Unlike Tia, I’m not that close to them yet, so they’re probably just nervous,” I explained, returning my gaze to Bertia and smiling reassuringly.

My smile caught the attention of some girls among the children who had been watching us with caution. “It’s the prince!” they

whispered, their eyes brightening in excitement.

Although I could have sworn I heard a child mutter "the scheming prince," it must have been my imagination.

So, there's no need for the orphanage teachers to worry so much, right?

"How wonderful! As expected of Lord Cecil! You truly understand the children's feelings well!"

Bertia looked at me with sparkling eyes full of admiration, but Kuro, who had arrived shortly after the children and Bertia, wore a doubtful expression, as if unconvinced. Honestly, I had to agree with him on this one. It was true. I was generally indifferent to others and not particularly attuned to their emotions.

Still, if it makes Bertia happy, I don't mind getting along with the children… After all, nurturing a close relationship now could prove useful if they grew up to become aides in the future.

"Then, shall I begin by playing the 'villain'?" I said with a smile to the children before taking Bertia's hand and heading into the orphanage's yard.

I can't say I'll be the villainess since I'm not really a lady.

As we headed to the yard, the children trailed behind. While they hadn't fully relaxed around me, they were eager to join in playing with Bertia.

"Your Highness, I'll go have a word with the director," Courtgain said, approaching me just as it became clear I would be joining the children in play.

When I glanced at him, he gave a subtle nod, as if already understanding what I was about to say. Among the documents I'd handed him earlier, there were a few tasks meant for the director. Given the circumstances, he would likely proceed to gather information or relay those requests as necessary.

"It's thanks to Tia that we've been able to acquire such skilled individuals," I reflected.

Afterward, during the Villainess Game, I ended up winning decisively, which left Bertia visibly frustrated. She, along with a few

competitive boys, declared, "Next time, we'll definitely win at least once!" Meanwhile, the more precocious girls began fantasizing about us as a couple, weaving their own little dramas.

Still, if I think of it as a way of getting closer together, then yes—it was time well spent.

Part Four

Three months ago, after we returned from our honeymoon and caught up on the backlog of work that had accumulated during our absence, life finally settled down. That was when my wife, energetic as ever, burst into my office.

"Cecil! It's terrible!"

Trouble seems to follow you, doesn't it? Well, that's part of the fun.

"What's happened, Tia?" I calmed Bertia, who had rushed over to me, clutching a piece of paper and looking excited, guiding her to sit on the sofa in my office designated for guests.

Bertia's habit of rushing to me with every issue, big or small, hadn't changed over time, and everyone around us had grown accustomed to it. Without being asked, Zeno went to prepare tea and snacks for Bertia, while Courtgain, sensing the shift in the room's atmosphere, took the documents I had already signed and left the office. He probably went to distribute them to various departments, planning to deliver them after accumulating a bit more.

"Well, you see…! You see…!"

With her cheeks slightly flushed from excitement, Bertia did her best to articulate her thoughts. However, her eagerness was getting the better of her, making it difficult for her to express herself. It couldn't be bad news, given how her eyes sparkled.

"Yes, what is it?"

I rubbed her back to encourage her to speak and glanced at the item in her hand.

A seal from Umyuve. Perhaps a letter from Princess Lysonna?

Princess Lysonna, the royal representative of Umyuve, had attended our wedding and eagerly participated in the bouquet toss. Although her enthusiasm had surprised me, Bertia had immediately connected with her, and they had kept in touch ever since. After hearing about Princess Lysonna from Bertia multiple times, I could anticipate what she was about to say.

"Did you receive a message from Princess Lysonna?"

"That's exactly it! The request to direct Princess Lysonna's wedding ceremony, which I spoke about the other day, has been officially submitted!"

Even though I could infer the details, Bertia was eager to share them herself. By offering just enough encouragement, a radiant Bertia started to express her enthusiasm.

"During our wedding, I had many conversations with Princess Lysonna, and we grew to be close friends. Since then, we've kept in touch through letters! When she informed me of her upcoming wedding, we celebrated together, and she sought my help for her ceremony. Now, both Umyuve and her fiancé's country, Seahealby, have officially requested our assistance! Princess Lysonna and I share similar interests, which gives me confidence in understanding her tastes! We often discuss our dream weddings and exchange romantic stories in our correspondence. And, you know…"

As I watched Bertia speak with unusual speed, animated by her joy, I found her both captivating and charming. Her happiness, for some reason, made me feel a warmth inside. Although I seldom experienced happiness regarding my own situation, this moment felt oddly delightful.

"… Cecil, are you listening?" Bertia, who had eagerly been sharing her news, looked at me with a hint of uncertainty, tilting her head like a worried chick, which made her even more endearing. It seemed I had been too caught up in watching her.

"Absolutely. I'm paying attention. A messenger delivered the formal request from Princess Lysonna, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct! We're meant to discuss the fee and other details with them."

Therefore, the messenger is also serving as a negotiator.

"Finally, the moment has arrived for me to serve this nation as the crown princess! I am determined to make Princess Lysonna happy and will put forth my greatest effort in the negotiations—"

"Actually, let's delegate the negotiations to someone else. What do you think about Charles?"

"Huh? But that was a request directed to me…" Bertia, who was ready to handle the task, felt somewhat deflated by my suggestion.

Although it might have seemed somewhat endearing, leaving negotiations to my kind-hearted wife could easily turn the endeavor into nothing more than an act of charity. With how deeply Bertia valued her friendships, she could easily agree to unfavorable terms if persuaded with a plea like, "For Princess Lysonna's sake." While I adored this compassionate side of her, it was clear she wasn't suited for negotiations.

"It's best for professionals who know the procedures to manage negotiations between countries, as this guarantees a more seamless process. If I remember correctly, there are only about six months left until Princess Lysonna's wedding, right? It would be unfortunate if lengthy negotiations left little time for everything else you hoped to accomplish."

"Oh, that's right! I really don't know how all that stuff works… I'll let them handle it. Instead, I'll focus on planning Princess Lysonna's wedding ceremony!" Bertia clenched her fists and nodded vigorously, looking convinced by my reasoning.

Ultimately, it's up to Charles, who will probably take on this responsibility. However, I believe that's manageable. I wouldn't select anyone for my inner circle if they weren't capable of handling such tasks.

"Tia, it's great to be hardworking, but remember not to do everything alone, okay? You have many dependable friends, so be sure to consult and collaborate with them. Also, don't forget to keep me updated and share your findings, all right?"

Bertia had received thorough training as a crown princess and understood how to carry herself and respond accordingly. Surely, she could manage well enough on her own… but she often ended up doing the unexpected in the most unforeseen ways. *It's probably wise to keep encouraging her to consult her friends—they can act as a kind of safety net, just in case.*

"I understand! There's only so much I can accomplish alone. I will ask for assistance from everyone."

Her bright smile and nod sparked a bit of concern in me… However, with her friends acting like guardians, everything should be fine.

"We're going to be busy from now on, aren't we?"

Bertia exited the room with a bounce in her step, as if she might start skipping.

"For the time being, let's send Charles to the envoy, and for Bertia, let's arrange for Miss Silica and Miss Joanna, who are expected to visit the castle, to go see her," I contemplated.

We can't keep the envoy carrying the request from both Umyuve and Seahealby waiting too long. With Bertia's excitement running higher than usual, it's essential to send in guardians disguised as friends before she gets carried away.

"Zeno, I'm counting on you."

"Understood. I will notify Lord Charles, Miss Silica, and Miss Joanna about the matter immediately."

Zeno, probably reflecting my concerns, left the room with a wry smile and quick movements.

"This appears to be developing into Bertia's first major task as the crown princess. The fact that her initial assignment comes from a friend's request aligns closely with her character."

Princess Lysonna's request, although officially a matter between nations, was fundamentally an appeal to Bertia's friendship. It was Bertia's character—not her status as crown princess—that had inspired this request in the first place.

"I will do my best to support her so she can celebrate her friend in her own way."

A royal wedding for the crown princess' friend seemed a fitting occasion for the kingdom to prepare a grand celebration. Though we hadn't received the official invitation yet, this development all but guaranteed that we would be attending.

The trip to Seahealby, where Princess Lysonna is to be wed, is quite long. If we're going, I must coordinate some time away from work.

"There's plenty to do," I mused, considering budget and leave arrangements.

For the sake of my dear wife, I must also do my best.

Part Five

Thanks to Charles—who had managed the negotiations with an exasperated cry of, "This is an unreasonable demand!"—we successfully reached an agreement to hold Princess Lysonna's wedding ceremony under fair conditions, with various discussions already underway. Each country had its own customs, so not everything could proceed strictly according to Bertia's vision. This was especially true for Seahealby, the kingdom into which Princess Lysonna would be marrying, with its many unique cultures and traditions.

Therefore, the plan was to primarily propose ideas that offered a high degree of flexibility to accommodate Princess Lysonna's wishes. Dealing with the other party required intricate negotiations to align our approaches, which only made things more complicated.

"The traditional wedding sake-sharing ritual was rejected because drinking from the same cup in public is considered embarrassing and indecent. Though Princess Lysonna mentioned she'd like to do it privately with her prince consort later," Bertia said, looking a bit disheartened.

Well, that's understandable.

Even the "First Bite" at our wedding could have been stopped for similar reasons… But it was something Bertia wanted to do, and those around her were supportive, so I forcefully deemed it "no issue."

"It's a shame, especially since Lady Bertia had even prepared new sake for that traditional sake-sharing ritual," Silica remarked with a frown.

Silica and Cynthia, frequently seen with Bertia during their school days, now acted as her ladies-in-waiting. They had declared, "We could never leave Lady Bertia in another's care!" and "I will protect Lady Bertia!" Dismissing the other contenders, they had gained their roles.

Having them as Bertia's ladies-in-waiting was perfect for me. Yet, I'd been left speechless when Cynthia exclaimed, "I want to be a lady-in-waiting who can safeguard Lady Bertia and collect information!"

Having individuals by Bertia's side who were capable of both protection and intelligence gathering was reassuring, so I left things as they were. Anne had also expressed interest in serving as a lady-in-waiting; however, she ultimately chose to pursue a career in diplomacy, hoping to support Charles, who was likely to focus on diplomatic work in the future. When I told Charles this later, his face became a flood of tears.

Anne now assisted Bertia with social engagements and hosted foreign dignitaries. Although she wasn't involved as frequently as some of the other ladies, she often visited the palace to support Bertia and share information she had gathered.

As for Joanna, she was my brother's fiancée and was currently preparing to become a princess consort. She adored Bertia and expressed a desire to support both her and Shaun as they stepped into more central roles within the nation. "I'll do my best as a princess consort to support Lady Bertia, who will eventually be the heart of our country along with Lord Shaun."

Technically, the *heart of the nation* should be the king—which meant me, not Bertia—but I had the distinct feeling she'd said it intentionally. I'd chosen not to correct her, responding with a broad smile instead.

"Well, even if we can't do the sake-sharing ceremony publicly, the new sake we created together, Tia, tastes wonderful—and that's rare, since we've only just begun production. We could include it among the wedding gifts. You can discreetly tell Princess Lysonna to *enjoy it privately with her prince*."

Even though the ritual couldn't be performed in public, Princess Lysonna had expressed a wish to carry it out in private with her prince consort. By passing along Bertia's message, an unofficial version of the ceremony could still take place.

"That's a wonderful idea! Since we've created this with your help, Cecil, I'd love for them to enjoy it together!" Hearing this, Bertia's face brightened considerably, which made Silica's expression soften with relief.

The "sake" mentioned in the conversation had actually been crafted based on Bertia's memories from her previous life. When preparations for Princess Lysonna's wedding began, I'd noticed Bertia looking troubled and asked what was wrong. She'd explained that she wanted to include a traditional sake-sharing ritual, but it wouldn't be possible without *Japanese sake*.

Intrigued by the unfamiliar term, which clearly hinted at something from her past life, I came to understand that it referred to a type of alcohol cherished in the country where Bertia had once lived. The ritual, known as *Sansankudo*, involved the bride and groom sharing sake in a set sequence to symbolize their bond. While

any beverage could technically serve the same ceremonial purpose, Bertia insisted it just wouldn't feel right without the real thing.

Bertia had searched for something similar to Japanese sake but couldn't find an adequate substitute, which led to her dilemma. Curious, I'd asked why she didn't simply make it herself. To my surprise, she'd responded with a look of disbelief, explaining that only licensed individuals were allowed to brew alcohol, which had confused me.

There was no such law in Alphasta.

Of course, there were places where brewing techniques were closely guarded secrets and illegal production was punished, but making alcohol itself wasn't a problem.

It turned out the restriction came from her previous life and didn't apply in our world. Realizing that, Bertia had frozen for a moment—then, with renewed determination, declared, "Then we'll make it!"

She had declared her intention to brew… However, when I checked on her progress later, it was clear she had embraced her artisan spirit a little too zealously. Determined to create the finest sake possible, she had begun experimenting with different types of brewing rice—starting from planting the rice herself.

If she was beginning at *that* stage, there was no way it would be ready in time for Princess Lysonna's wedding. *And shouldn't the timing of the planting be considered a bit more carefully?*

Feeling slightly awkward, I'd conveyed this to Bertia, and she had instantly become despondent. Her dismay had been so genuinely distressing that I found myself inadvertently sharing a secret method with her—enlisting Zeno's help to harness the power of spirits.

Of course, we couldn't let others know we were using the spirits' power to cultivate the rice. The existence of spirits was a closely guarded secret, known only to a select group of high-ranking nobles in order to protect them. So, we officially stated that the sake had been brewed using rice Bertia had secured for Kuro's *inari sushi*.

In truth, with the spirits' quiet cooperation, we'd set up a rice field deep within a forest on palace grounds—an area accessible only to the royal family—where we then cultivated several varieties of rice in secret.

This allowed us to harvest different types of rice quickly, enabling us to brew what Bertia called Japanese sake using various rice varieties. After tasting and comparing them, she selected her favorite to be the first officially released batch, which we then began mass-producing.

Naturally, we also had the spirits' cooperation throughout the brewing process. According to Bertia, brewing Japanese sake required not only rice but also high-quality water and something called *koji mold*. I wasn't exactly sure what that was, but Bertia had explained that it likely involved some kind of fungi used to ferment the rice. Based on that clue, we then searched for suitable strains.

Identifying the appropriate fungi individually would have taken a considerable amount of time. Therefore, we enlisted the assistance of spirits knowledgeable in such matters, prepared several candidates, and conducted controlled experiments until we discovered the right one. That was how we established the foundation for our Japanese sake.

Since "Japan" was the name of the country where Bertia had lived in her previous life, we decided to intentionally retain the name, Japanese sake. From there, we experimented with various combinations of rice and water to discover the optimal blend for the best possible brew at our current stage.

Having successfully produced it, Bertia had enthusiastically proposed including the traditional sake-sharing ceremony. However, as previously mentioned, the outcome didn't go as she had hoped. While it was unfortunate for Bertia, who looked forward to performing the ritual, Princess Lysonna could still enjoy the sake as a gift, ensuring that Bertia's efforts weren't in vain. Moreover, if we introduced it as a new national specialty, the entire project could turn out to be a remarkably worthwhile endeavor.

"Ah, that reminds me! Regarding the wedding dress collaboration we all worked on recently, Princess Lysonna loved the Mermaid Dress I was rooting for, and it has already gone into production based on that design! Thank you all for your cooperation," Bertia reported with a beaming smile, clearly pleased that Princess Lysonna appreciated the design she favored.

"That's to be expected. The Mermaid Dress? That design was not only innovative but also stunning," Joanna remarked with a smile, engaging Bertia in conversation.

Joanna, you're actually jealous that Bertia sent that design to a princess from another country, aren't you? Or rather, if Princess Lysonna hadn't chosen that design, you were planning to use it for your own wedding. Your eyes are practically saying as much.

When our eyes met for a brief moment, Joanna seemed to grasp exactly what I was thinking. She clicked her tongue softly, though inaudible to everyone else.

That's a bit of a faux pas for a lady, isn't it?

"By the way, there were a few designs Bertia came up with for Princess Lysonna's dress that weren't selected, right?" Following a light cough, Joanna asked, subtly shifting the topic as if she'd just remembered it.

"Yes, there were," Bertia confirmed.

"Are those design sketches still around?"

The design for Princess Lysonna's dress had already been finalized, and production was well underway. Despite being slightly puzzled by the sudden interest in the unused designs, Bertia responded clearly, "Yes, they're still available."

"Well, that's wonderful! Actually, my ladies-in-waiting were gossiping about how marvelous it would be to marry in such a dress. So, it seems that some female nobles are eager to see the wedding dresses designed by Lady Bertia," Joanna revealed.

While discussing observations made during working hours outside the palace might not have been ideal, Joanna likely already addressed the matter with her staff. Furthermore, Bertia's

involvement in designing Princess Lysonna's wedding dress—and her status as a knowledgeable senior, having had her own wedding—were hardly secrets.

Alphasta, Umyuve, and Seahealby had all agreed that openly discussing these contributions—and showcasing the friendly relations among the nations—would be beneficial. Joanna's ladies-in-waiting likely understood this and assumed it was safe to treat the topic as acceptable conversation. While it could be wise to caution them for the future, this level of discourse posed no real issue.

"Oh, the designs for the dresses as well? Actually, your wedding, Lady Bertia, was spoken of so beautifully that guests from other countries are curious about the details," Anne chimed in, joining Joanna's narrative.

"A friend who couldn't attend your wedding asked me what type of wedding cake was served," Joanna added.

"A gentleman friend of Lord Valdo from the Knights asked if I knew any romantic ways to propose that would delight a lady. I said I couldn't think of any at the moment, but he hinted that he'd like to ask Lady Bertia, who is known for her flair for romantic gestures, for ideas. Of course, since it was a roundabout request, I pretended not to notice and let it slide," Joanna continued.

After Joanna and Anne, Silica and Cynthia also shared similar experiences, suggesting that Bertia's wedding production had surprisingly become a significant topic of conversation.

"Leave it to me! It's the wedding of a dear friend, after all! Even if no one asks, I'll prepare all sorts of surprises and things everyone will enjoy! Of course, the same goes for everyone else's weddings too!" Bertia declared with a bright, confident smile.

Her enthusiasm elicited delighted grins from the ladies present and uneasy chuckles from my aides; everyone except the still-unpartnered Courtgain,who likely imagined what their noble partners might begin to ask of them.

"Oh dear, we've gotten off topic, haven't we?" Joanna interjected, seemingly realizing that the conversation had drifted and

trying to steer it back on course.

Joanna's suggestion made everyone pause for a moment. A beat later, Bertia gasped as if suddenly realizing something.

"Then, how about we create a *wedding information magazine*?" Bertia proposed.

"Wedding information magazine?" the ladies and aides echoed, their voices overlapping in a collective murmur of confusion at the unfamiliar term.

"Yes! A magazine that serves as an ally for women getting married, compiling various wedding-related information into one book for everyone to see!" Bertia explained, her idea generating interest but also confusion among the group.

"Everyone facing marriage likely shares similar concerns. By including illustrations and specific anecdotes for clarity, compiling everything into a book could be very helpful," Bertia continued, completely unaware of the surrounding bewilderment as she spoke brightly and enthusiastically about the concept of a wedding information magazine.

Joanna's enthusiastic reply—"That sounds wonderful. I would love that."—sparked a glow in the eyes of the women present. It was clear they had already begun imagining the magazine filled with their ideal wedding concepts, dress designs, and cake styles.

This could become problematic. If we continue down this path, we might end the meeting without properly discussing Princess Lysonna's wedding.

While I found the idea of a wedding information magazine intriguing, it was clear that the discussion would be better suited for another time. There was no deadline for the magazine, but Princess Lysonna's wedding had a fixed date—and that imposed a clear time limit on our preparations.

Clap! Clap!

To refocus the conversation, I clapped my hands to draw everyone's attention.

"Let's put aside the wedding information magazine for now and return to the topic of Princess Lysonna's wedding. Bertia and I will be attending, and considering travel time, we have only about two months left for preparations, so we can't afford to get off track."

With a reassuring smile, I gently reminded everyone of the urgency. The ladies quickly fell silent and adopted a more serious demeanor.

It's commendable how quickly they can adjust their focus.

Encouraged by my prompt, the discussion moved forward smoothly. Pleased with the steady pace of the meeting, I turned my attention to listening.

It seems the preparations are going well overall.

The meeting wrapped up without any diversions or issues, successfully covering all agenda items. Therefore, I was caught off guard by Bertia's next remark.

"In just a few more months, Princess Lysonna will go from *Lysonna Umyuve* to *Lysonna Seahealby*…"

Bertia's words trailed off as we walked together after the meeting, reflecting on how smoothly the wedding preparations were progressing. The sudden pause in her voice prompted me to glance at her. She looked thoughtful, tilting her head slightly to one side.

"What's on your mind, Tia?" I asked.

She tilted her head to the other side, her expression faintly troubled as if she had a fishbone stuck in her throat.

"Well, it's nothing really… But for some reason, the name *Lysonna Seahealby* feels familiar to me."

"Considering we're involved in her transition, isn't it only natural you've heard the name a few times?"

"No, that's the thing. Since Princess Lysonna's transition hasn't happened yet, the name I've seen and heard is still Lysonna Umyuve."

Bertia appeared troubled by a thought she couldn't quite grasp, mumbling and slowly tilting her head from side to side as she pondered.

“I can’t recall! But it feels like I heard it somewhere long before all this wedding talk. Now I’m starting to wonder if it was just my imagination. I apologize for worrying you. Please don’t mind me.”

Bertia, frustrated and cradling her head, came to terms with her memory lapse. Yet, she soon regained her cheerful demeanor.

“I understand,” I said, feigning acceptance of her conclusion. However, something in this situation felt off. Although Bertia appeared to have surrendered to her inability to remember, my instincts were raising red flags.

As the meeting attendees left, I returned to my office to tackle administrative tasks. I noticed Courtgain walking behind me, so I slowed down a bit, and he, picking up on my intention, moved in closer.

“Courtgain, could you please investigate Princess Lysonna and her fiancé, the crown prince, along with any recent activities between Umyuve and Seahealby, as far as you can find, and report back to me?” I asked quietly.

Courtgain, who had been listening with his head slightly bowed, looked up at me with a momentarily surprised expression as if to say, “Why now?” His reaction was a clear sign of his inexperience.

“Is there anything you’re worried about?” he asked.

“No, it’s simply a feeling I have. There’s no specific reason, but since Tia is putting so much effort into this, I thought it might be wise to conduct some preliminary research to avoid any potential mishaps,” I explained.

Courtgain appeared somewhat skeptical of my explanation but replied with a brief, “Understood.”

“I hope nothing comes of it,” I mused, especially regarding anything related to Bertia’s past life. However, trouble often seemed to arise precisely when you least expected it. Regardless of whether something happened, it was better to be prepared and not let our guard down.



Part One

As the day of our departure to Seahealby for Princess Lysonna's wedding ceremony arrived, Bertia stood at the palace entrance, bubbling with excitement amid a lineup of carriages. It marked the beginning of our journey to attend the royal wedding, with gifts and necessities already loaded and the knights assembled in formation. Now, all that remained was for us and our attendants to board the carriages.

"We'll be on a carriage ride for some time, but let's enjoy the journey together," I replied to Bertia's beaming smile.

"Yes!" she responded enthusiastically.

After exchanging smiles, we turned to those who had come to see us off.

Bertia's father, the Marquis of Noches, along with my aides and Bertia's friends, was among the well-wishers. My parents—the king and queen—were also expected to send us off and would likely be arriving a little later.

"Bertia, if danger arises, quickly hide behind his highness. This should cause most threats to back off. Never face it alone, understood?" The Marquis of Noches warned his daughter, concern filling his voice.

Marquis, I may not have those magical powers, but I will certainly do everything I can to protect Bertia.

"Lady Bertia, exercise heightened caution while abroad. *The Love and Devotion Club* members may be fewer in number, so stay more alert than usual," Joanna urged, her brows knitted in concern.

The suggestion that there might be members of the unofficial fan club, The Love and Devotion Club, even beyond our borders hinted at just how far Bertia's charm and influence extended.

Anne gave Bertia a booklet she had prepared about Seahealby, apparently having put a lot of effort into preparing it for the trip. Bertia's delight was obvious, as was her gratitude for the work invested in compiling the information.

Silica, on the other hand, was concerned with Bertia's habits—particularly her tendency to reach for a handkerchief after indulging in sweets rather than risk staining her dress. The exchange reminded me of how parents chided their children, and it was heartwarming to see the bond between Bertia and her friends.

Among Bertia's entourage, only Cynthia, one of her ladies-in-waiting, would be accompanying us. She had taken over the responsibilities that would have fallen to Silica if she were present. This arrangement ensured Bertia's needs were met and showed how well her friends worked together.

Cynthia and Kuro, both standing ready at Bertia's side, were responsible for assisting her during the journey.

Valdo, a newly appointed knight who had chosen the path of chivalry after graduating from the academy, approached with the news that the guards were prepared for departure.

The reason he, rather than the knight commander, was delivering these reports stemmed from an earlier incident. After reviewing the initial security plan for this trip, I had pointed out numerous flaws and criticized its lack of rigor with perhaps too much severity, causing the commander to become somewhat wary of me.

While he still consulted me on important matters, he now observed my reactions with caution and often delegated simpler

reports to Valdo, knowing the two of us were acquainted. I was lenient for now, but if the negligence became too blatant, I intended to have a proper discussion.

"Thank you for your hard work. Once we greet the king and queen, we'll be ready to leave."

"Understood! I'll relay that to the commander," Valdo responded with a grin and quickly returned to the ranks.

As I noticed the knight commander observing us from afar, I met his gaze with a smile, which unexpectedly caused him to flinch. *How strange.*

Turning my attention to Courtgain, who stood beside Zeno, I noticed that his usually composed demeanor was slightly unsettled. Following his gaze, my eyes landed on something small moving just behind the group conversing with Bertia…

Ah, one of Bertia's maids—the younger sister of the former errand runner.

Her dark, greenish-brown hair and amber eyes, along with her subdued presence, made her appear younger than she was, though she was actually the same age as Bertia. In fact, her lack of distinctive features was what made her stand out.

If I recalled correctly, her name was Milma Kaimore. Now serving as Bertia's maid in her sister's place, she also quietly submitted reports to me whenever anything unusual occurred—something neither Bertia nor her companions were aware of.

"Is something the matter with her?"

Keeping my expression unchanged, I softly inquired of Courtgain, who had been tracking Milma Kaimore with his gaze, about his interest in her. He momentarily stiffened at my question, and then his expression turned somewhat sour.

"It's nothing significant," he began hesitantly. "It seems she has some business with Lady Bertia. She's been trying to find the right moment to speak up but hasn't managed to find an opportunity…"

Hearing his explanation, I redirected my attention toward Milma. Sure enough, I noticed her struggling in her attempts to catch

Bertia's attention.

"Um…" she began. "Lady Bertia…" she faltered, pausing before continuing, "I was asked to…"

Unfortunately, her soft voice, paired with her incredibly faint presence, rendered her practically invisible.

It reminded me of something the former errand runner had once said—her sister, for better or worse, was someone whose presence was remarkably easy to overlook. Visually, she blended into her surroundings, her features unassuming, her demeanor quiet.

I recalled her sharing a story from their childhood. Milma's presence was so faint that during games of hide-and-seek, the other children would forget she was even playing and leave without finding her. She would return home in tears, still unfound.

"Your observance is commendable," I said, offering Courtgain a nod of approval.

"My family has many siblings, and one of my sisters always struggled to make herself heard—much like her," he replied with a wry smile. His expression softened in a way usually reserved for Bertia, revealing the classic demeanor of an older brother.

"It seems she's about to… Ah, there it is. Despite being a fully grown adult and a competent maid, she still finds herself in these situations," Courtgain remarked, just as Milma halted her hesitant movements. Her gaze dropped, and she bit her lip, clearly holding back tears, frustration written across her face.

"Um, Your Highness…" Courtgain hesitated to continue, but I already understood what he was about to ask.

"It's fine. Go ahead," I encouraged him.

Relieved by my permission, Courtgain bowed slightly and walked briskly over to Milma.

I usually don't observe how he interacts with his siblings, so I'm not entirely sure, but it's rare to see him taking care of anyone other than Bertia like that. Watching with a bit of curiosity, I saw Courtgain address Milma with an expression that was almost admonishing.

Initially surprised, Milma soon offered a faint smile—perhaps pleased that someone had noticed her distress. After a brief exchange, Courtgain let out a sigh that seemed to say "can't be helped," then took Milma by the hand and led her to Bertia.

Courtgain, you do realize you're guiding a fully grown lady, not a child, despite her petite, youthful appearance, right?

It seemed he hadn't noticed. Milma's cheeks reddened slightly from being led by the hand, a detail Courtgain obliviously missed, showcasing his usual lack of awareness in such situations.

"Lady Bertia, may I have a moment?" Courtgain returned with Milma in tow. His voice, clear and resonant, immediately captured everyone's attention—a stark contrast to when Milma attempted to speak up.

"Lord Courtgain, what brings you here?" Bertia asked, tilting her head in confusion. Then, noticing Milma peeking out from behind Courtgain, her expression brightened. "Oh, Milma, you've returned!" Indeed, Milma had been there for quite a while, unnoticed even by Bertia.

"Um, Your Highness, this is for you…" Milma hesitantly presented a small rectangular box, which Bertia accepted with a radiant smile.

"I was told to bring this from your room, the 'Unyan!'" Milma announced, perhaps to confirm that she had brought the correct item. Bertia, visibly pleased and nodding in approval, reassured Milma.

Even so…

"Tia, what exactly is this 'Unyan' thing?" I asked, unable to determine from the box what the item was or its purpose.

"This, you see, is a type of card game," Bertia explained enthusiastically. "It's regarded as a staple for journeys by 'bus' or 'train'… Oh, my apologies, I misspoke. I meant it's a classic companion for carriage rides!"

Bus? Train? These were terms that felt foreign, possibly remnants from Bertia's past world instead of our own.

“I see. But it has quite an unusual name for a game, doesn’t it?”

The name itself resembled a cat’s meow, lacking any obvious meaning yet captivating with its distinct sound. My casual remark prompted Bertia to suddenly divert her gaze.

“Tia?”

“Well, it’s just… that… Actually,” she hesitated, her face a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. “The truth is, the game’s original name was different. While I was walking and considering changing the game’s name after the manufacturer asked me, I nearly tripped…”

“Oh?”

“And so, I had only gotten as far as the first sound ‘U’ when I nearly fell and instinctively cried out ‘Nyan.’ The person in charge of production must have misunderstood that as the name, and it was recorded as ‘Unyan’ on the production order form.”

So that was the story. My wife never ceased to amuse with her antics.

“Couldn’t you have clarified the misunderstanding?” I probed further.

Her gaze dropped, appearing a touch disheartened. “I was informed it was ‘a perfectly charming name that aligns perfectly with the princess’ image,’ and I just couldn’t find it in me to correct it.”

Bertia’s demeanor was dejected, but honestly, it seemed fitting for her. After all, she often exclaimed ‘nyaah’ in a way that was reminiscent of a cat. Perhaps this unintentional name wasn’t such a bad fit after all.

“It’s certainly a cute name… just like Tia.” I chuckled as I said this, causing Bertia, who had been staring at the ground, to suddenly let out a surprised squeak.

“Feh?!” Her face flushed bright red.

Yep, my wife is undeniably adorable.

“Since this is a game to play in the carriage, can I join in too?”

“Of course! I collaborated closely with the craftsman to ensure we could enjoy our journey together.”

"Then, you'll need to teach me how to play later, okay?"

"Yes, certainly!"

Though her face was still slightly flushed, Bertia nodded eagerly, clearly pleased. In this warm atmosphere, the arrival of my father and mother was announced.

The crowd around Bertia parted to the left and right, creating a clear path from the entrance to where we stood. The knights straightened their posture, preparing to welcome the king and queen.

Well, once the greetings are over, it'll finally be time to depart. Hopefully, everything goes smoothly… but then again, a little trouble might make the journey more interesting. So, either way, it's all good.

Part Two

The carriage rattled down its path, with only Bertia, Zeno, Kuro, and me aboard. Lady Cynthia, Courtgain, and Milma were in another carriage, while Valdo, acting as our guard, rode alongside us on horseback, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings with the other knights. As we passed through the capital, Bertia and I waved to the locals. However, once we left the city and traveled a bit further, we drew the curtains, shielding ourselves from view to enjoy some leisure time. Initially, we engaged in lively conversation, but as the chatter faded, Bertia introduced the notorious Unyan game. This Unyan proved to be quite the challenge.

The rules of the game were relatively simple and easy enough to follow without issue. According to them, when your hand was reduced to one card, you had to declare *"Unyan."*

While I find it utterly adorable when Bertia exclaims "Unyan," the thought of me doing it… Well, it gives me pause. It was one thing to mention the game's name in conversation, but quite another

to solemnly declare *"Unyan"* in the middle of a silent match. *It's a bit embarrassing, to be honest.*

Nonetheless, I played along, treating it purely as a game.

Seeing me like this, Zeno couldn't hold back his laughter, which irritated me just enough that I started playing my cards strategically, ensuring he could never win. As a result, Zeno, who perpetually ended up in last place, became the subject of Kuro's quiet snickering.

"Cecil, look! The sea!" After several days of traveling by carriage, we finally glimpsed Liman, the town with our kingdom's largest port.

Our trip was neither rushed nor casual; it was an official visit to another country, with a meticulously planned itinerary. Additionally, as we were traveling with ladies, including Crown Princess Bertia, we sought to avoid outdoor camping and structured our schedule to ensure we stayed in larger towns whenever feasible. Consequently, this careful planning had extended the duration of our journey to this point.

"We will reach Liman shortly. Let's take today and tomorrow to unwind there as we get ready for our sea voyage," I said to Bertia, who was leaning out of the carriage window, her heart racing at the sight of the distant sea. The thought of experiencing the ocean up close clearly thrilled Bertia, as evidenced by her sparkling eyes and enthusiastic nod.

Though we'll be seeing plenty of that sea the day after tomorrow, I'd rather not mention it. There was no need to dampen her spirits—especially since she'd been excited about seeing the sea ever since I mentioned going to Liman.

"Today, we'll explore the port town! Let's indulge in a seafood feast!" Bertia exclaimed.

"No, that is absolutely impossible. After all, we are fundamentally the crown prince and crown princess of this nation, correct?"

“Eh?” Bertia’s enthusiasm seemed to fade rapidly. In her mind, staying in Liman clearly equaled tourism and indulging in seafood. I could almost picture the disappointment reflected in her drooping ears and tail. We could perhaps go sightseeing, but inasmuch as I wanted to make her happy, a seafood feast was definitely off the table.

Wasn’t that obvious?

“Your Highness, the Crown Princess, please try this!” As we arrived in Liman and proceeded to our accommodations for the night, the townspeople, who had come out to welcome us, continually offered food to Bertia, who was waving from the carriage window. With our knights surrounding us for protection and the local lord sending troops to guarantee our safety, direct handovers were not feasible.

Despite our reservations, people enthusiastic about sharing their food reached out toward us, and some even asked the knights to deliver their offerings. Consequently, Bertia’s maidservants and other attendants had no choice but to exit the carriage to gather the gifts, some of which found their way to Bertia herself.

“Thanks, everyone! This is delicious!” Although the maids had diligently chosen and ensured the safety of these items, the original intention was simply to receive the gifts as a kind gesture. However, enticed by the alluring aroma, Bertia began eating on the spot. Witnessing her actions, the crowd erupted in applause.

My wife was thrilled by the delicious treats; at this point, nothing could hold her back.

“Cecil, this is incredibly delicious!”

As Bertia continued to sample the offerings during our carriage journey, essentially indulging in a mobile feast, I couldn’t help but smile wryly when a skewered shellfish was presented before me.

It appeared to be coated with sauce and grilled, emitting an irresistibly savory aroma. Glancing out the window, I noticed everyone watching us with eager anticipation.

Well, having come this far, it was a case of "If you eat the poison, you might as well lick the plate," as they say.

I recalled Bertia once explaining the meaning of this "proverb" to me.

"It truly looks appetizing." I grasped the skewer Bertia offered and took a hearty bite, gently clasping her hand as I did so.

"Hmm. It's a flavor I've never experienced before, but it's quite delightful."

"Oh, wow… th-that's wonderful to hear!" As I released her hand and smiled warmly, Bertia's face flushed bright red, and her words became jumbled. It seemed she had only just registered what we had just done—this so-called "feeding each other."

The crowd, having witnessed our exchange, erupted in even louder cheers, celebrating the affectionate bond between their crown prince and princess.

Not bad at all. It's great to share our bond with others like this.

It brought joy to the people—and, truthfully, I found it enjoyable as well. *Perhaps, every once in a while, such performances aren't a bad idea.* After all, we were still newlyweds, and a harmonious relationship between the crown prince and princess was undoubtedly bright news for the kingdom. "So, Tia, what will you have me try next?"

"Uh, well… I mean…"

As I pulled Bertia—her face now as red as a ripe apple—closer and peered into her eyes, Kuro tapped my leg with his tail. When I turned to look, I saw her munching on a fish skewer with a thoroughly displeased expression.

Her gaze seemed to say, *Don't get too carried away.*





I guess there's no choice but to back off.

With a resigned "good grief," I pulled my hand away from Bertia's shoulder and gazed out the window.

Then, out of the blue… "Uh, um, Cecil, next up… this was… suggested," Bertia herself presented the next treat.

Glancing at Kuro, I noticed his reluctant expression—one that seemed to say, *Really?* However, he made no move to stop us.

Well, if Bertia's the one initiating it, I suppose it's fine.

Feeling the corners of my mouth lift into a smile, I took a bite of the seafood she offered, which seemed stir-fried with spices.

"It's very sweet."

"Eh?! But this should have a hint of spiciness to it!"

"No, I mean being here with you, Tia."

"Wha?!" Bertia's face turned even redder.

Yeah, being newlyweds is really something special.

Ultimately, consumed by embarrassment, Bertia quietly began to eat the food, leaving me with no choice but to look out the window and wave at the passersby. It was then that I noticed Courtgain, who had been watching the crowd for some time, let out a sigh and head in their direction.

The presence of an individual from the crown prince's entourage, particularly one dressed significantly better than an ordinary servant, caused a subtle stir amongst the gathered crowd.

Navigating swiftly through the crowd, Courtgain suddenly reached out, grabbed something, and began moving back in our direction. In his grasp was… the arm of a teary-eyed Milma.

"Had she been caught up in the crowd and unable to make her way back, unnoticed as a member of the crown prince's party?"

While the other maids collected offerings for Bertia without blending into the crowd, Milma, despite wearing the same uniform, should have been noticeable.

"Blending in anywhere can be seen as a special skill, but it becomes troublesome when it occurs involuntarily," I commented.

It was remarkable that Courtgain had found her, even though the knights, always vigilant of their surroundings, hadn't noticed her disappearance. Another detail that caught my attention was the expression in Milma's eyes when Courtgain rescued her. It seemed to convey a unique warmth.

"It's love," Bertia suddenly whispered from behind me, peeking over my shoulder at the scene outside the window. It seemed her spirits had lifted after enjoying the offerings. She had grown curious about what I was observing and appeared to have noticed it too.

"Do you think so, Tia?"

"Of course! It would be nice if spring came for Brother Kul as well…"

From what we could see, it felt like Milma's tender feelings for him were unrequited. Whether Courtgain's heart would ever respond to those feelings remained uncertain. But there was one thing I had to say.

"Tia, I understand you're concerned about Courtgain and the others, but you mustn't meddle too much, okay?"

Depending on how things played out, it could end up hurting Courtgain. *Perhaps he harbors unspoken feelings for Bertia…*

No—I'd better stop thinking about that. It's just frustrating.

In any case, it was best if Bertia refrained from actively supporting Courtgain's potential new love interest. *It wouldn't benefit anyone.*

"Eh? Why is that? As a sister, I want my brother to be happy."

"Having family interfere in romantic matters can feel uncomfortable."

"However, discussing love between siblings and offering advice can be…"

"It's true that everyone is different, but I guess—no, I'm absolutely sure—that Courtgain would dislike that sort of thing." It seemed wise to emphasize this point, given Bertia's tendency to become overzealous playing cupid, as past experiences have shown.

"Is that so? Understood. I shall watch over him secretly, from the shadows."

Successfully conveying my point relieved my anxiety. In my official duties, negotiations had never made me feel this way. *Indeed, Bertia is impressive in numerous respects.*

Part Three

Five days after departing the port of Liman, our sea voyage had progressed smoothly without any significant issues.

It's only to be expected, given that Zeno, a nature spirit of royal descent, is on our ship. Even the sea spirits wouldn't want to offend a relative of their king.

Moreover, should any issue have arisen, Zeno—whose main elements were water and wind—could have easily handled most situations at sea. And with Kuro—a high-ranking spirit specialized in defense—also aboard, the chances of encountering any real problems were practically nonexistent.

As a result, our ship sailed across an unusually calm sea, making for a very comfortable journey. However, my wife, seated beside me, was gazing at the surface of the water with an unexpectedly serious expression. *What could she possibly be thinking about so deeply?*

After a while of quiet observation, she finally spoke in a heavy tone.

"Cecil, I've realized something."

"What is it?"

"I prefer enjoying the sea from the beach rather than from above its waters."

Well… that makes sense.

I'd wondered what she was pondering so deeply, only to find it was something seemingly trivial—yet she treated it with such sincerity.

Still, I could understand her sentiment. The view from the ship offered little variety; just the sea and sky, unchanging for hours on end. While the journey was pleasant, the number of things one could do aboard was limited, lacking the freedom and variety found at the beach.

"Are you tired of the sea voyage?"

"Yes. I do love the sea, but I've grown a little weary of staring at the same unchanging scenery for so long," Bertia admitted, looking downcast. Even her usually impeccably styled hair appeared somewhat lifeless, likely due to the constant sea breeze.

"I wish I could run around or get some exercise at the very least…"

"No, let's avoid that."

Running around on the deck wasn't just dangerous, it was disruptive to the crew. Above all, it would be quite unseemly for the crown princess to be seen sprinting about.

"Didn't Anne give you a compilation of documents about Seahealby before we left?" I pondered what could distract Bertia, recalling that I hadn't seen her reading it, so I asked her about it.

"Ah! That's right! I do have that!"

Bertia's face brightened immediately when she discovered an enjoyable way to spend her time. Noticing her response, I glanced at the maidservants with Bertia. One of them understood my intention, bowed, and left, probably to retrieve the documents Anne had provided us.

"Tia, would you like to return to our room and review it together?" I recalled that Courtgain had also provided some research documents.

Some of the information Courtgain had gathered might be better kept from Bertia, so I couldn't show it to her directly*. I'll need to be a bit crafty about hiding those parts. Still, reviewing our respective documents together to learn more about Seahealby wouldn't be a bad idea.*

Glancing at Courtgain and Lady Cynthia, who stood nearby, and Valdo, who remained on guard, I gave a subtle nod to signal my intentions.

"Then, we'll take the documents to the room," Courtgain said with a bow, heading to retrieve them from the office I was using on the ship.

Lady Cynthia suggested, "Lady Bertia, you must be weary from reading the documents; why not join me for tea on the deck?"

"That sounds wonderful!" Her suggestion, paired with a radiant smile, cleverly created an opportunity for us to share a private moment. *It's hard to believe she's engaged to Valdo, who so often overlooks social cues.*

"Then, I'll join you in looking over those documents and… Ugh…"

Just as the ever-oblivious Valdo attempted to insert himself with another unsolicited suggestion, Cynthia gracefully stepped back to his side and, still smiling sweetly, discreetly jabbed him in the ribs—from an angle Bertia couldn't see.

"Lord Valdo, please guard the entrance to our room."

"Understood."

Despite his usual lack of situational awareness, Valdo seemed to realize that following Cynthia's lead was the wiser course. He gave a stiff nod, clutching his side.

Watching their exchange, I reconsidered my earlier impression. *They really are well-matched. His inability to read the room is perfectly balanced by her ability to handle it for him.*

"In that case, let's spend some quiet time together in our room, going over the documents," I proposed, feeling quietly grateful to Cynthia for preventing Valdo's interruption and gently steering Bertia back toward our designated cabin.

Though I said "just the two of us," our spirits are bound to follow. Zeno might keep his distance, but Kuro rarely left Bertia's side. *It can't be helped. Since they're not human, I suppose they don't count as intruders on our 'alone time.'*

Part Four

Upon entering the room, we were greeted by Bertia's maid and Courtgain, who were already waiting with the documents. Bertia received the compilation from Anne via her maid, while I took the research that Courtgain had prepared.

Along with Kuro and Zeno, we entered the room.

"Cecil, what are those documents?" Bertia, expecting me to be interested in her compilation and wanting to go over it together, was confused to see me with a different set of documents.

"Since we're meeting with royalty from another country, I thought it might be useful to see if there are any potential dealings that could benefit our nation. So, I had Courtgain do some research," I explained, quickly flipping through the documents to show her pages filled with numerous figures and tables that she was least likely to find engaging.

"As expected of you, Cecil."

As I expected, Bertia regarded me with a blend of admiration and utter indifference toward the documents. She likely viewed them as "unrelated to her, focused on my work," realizing that there was nothing essential for her. Any important information I believed she should know could be highlighted and communicated to her verbally afterward.

"I'll be looking over this while also going through the compilation Anne put so much effort into, but don't mind me and feel free to focus on what Anne wrote for you."

"You're going to read both at the same time?!" Bertia looked at me with surprise, her gaze shifting between the documents in my hand and my face.

I wonder why she's so astonished.

"I'm just a bit faster at reading text than most people. I'll finish a page before you do, then I'll use that spare time to go through this document," I explained with a smile, which only seemed to astonish Bertia further.

It was a common practice for me, so her amazement caught me off guard… *Then again, I suppose this isn't exactly a "normal" habit for most people.*

Glancing at Zeno for some semblance of grounding, I saw him nod slightly with an expression that seemed to say, *You're finally getting it,* as if confirming my obliviousness to these kinds of social cues.

Clearly, I need to be more mindful of these differences.

"Wow, that's amazing! As expected of Cecil!" Bertia's praise, delivered with a bright smile, made me chuckle and reflect inwardly, even though I didn't think it was such a remarkable feat.

"It's not that big of a deal, but… thank you."

Having someone who sincerely praised even the little things I did felt unexpectedly heartwarming. *It's strange how, unlike the casual acknowledgments from my parents when I was younger, Bertia's compliments feel so much more meaningful.*

"Well then, let's start reading," I suggested as we settled side by side on the sofa, only for Kuro to promptly claim his usual spot on Bertia's lap. It appeared his preferred seat hadn't changed even after our marriage.

A little consideration for the newlyweds would be nice, wouldn't it?

Catching my silent plea, Kuro glanced briefly in my direction before turning away, clearly unwilling to give up his place by Bertia's side to me. With a resigned shrug, we each began flipping through our respective documents.

Thirty minutes into our reading, Bertia closed the last page of her document. By that time, I had already finished reading mine.

"That's the end of it! It was incredibly informative!" Bertia tightly embraced the documents Anne had given her.

"It seems Anne really went out of her way for you, Tia. We'll have to thank her when we get back."

"I will thank her repeatedly! Plus, I plan to buy many souvenirs as a gesture of gratitude!" Bertia said with heartfelt emotion.

Anne's document was indeed well prepared. While most of the content was already familiar to me, it was clear that Anne had put a lot of thought into creating it for Bertia. It detailed particularly important customs in Seahealby that Bertia needed to be aware of, including people she should make an effort to connect with at parties and those it would be best to avoid—a veritable social manual for navigating Seahealby.

Although Bertia was well-versed in domestic social circles, international diplomacy was unfamiliar ground. Despite her efforts to study on her own, the preparations for Princess Lysonna's wedding had kept her too busy for any in-depth research.

Anne's compiled documents skillfully filled the gaps in Bertia's understanding, highlighting the key points that required review. It was clear just how deeply Anne valued and cared for her.

"Then, how about we review a bit before heading back to the deck for tea?"

"Indeed! Strike while the iron is hot!" Her abrupt shift to blacksmithing terminology was perplexing.

Ah, it must be similar to a proverb from her previous life. I understand the gist of it, so there's no need to delve deeper, I suppose.

"First up, the foundation of Seahealby."

"Pirates!"

"That's correct, but you're oversimplifying a bit, aren't you?"

Our conversation was nearly nonexistent. Despite the brief response, I continued to elaborate on the foundation of Seahealby with a wry smile. True to Bertia's words, pirates played a significant role in the country's history. In fact, Seahealby itself was founded by pirates.

Of course, now that it was a sovereign nation, piracy was no longer practiced, and the country had become renowned for its thriving maritime and fishing industries. Still, traces of its piratical past lingered in the nation's deep love for the sea, the strength of its navy, and even its national flag.

The flag of Seahealby, featuring three tridents intertwined with a double-headed serpent, directly inherited its design from the pirate banner once flown by the royal family's ancestors. *While the motif might be considered striking, it certainly gives off a rather aggressive impression.*

"The unique origins of Seahealby result in some distinct cultural aspects, especially in how the 'crown prince' is perceived," I noted. Bertia's brow furrowed with concern.

"That's why Prince Aleis's position, as Princess Lysonna's fiancé, is rather delicate," she remarked.

Her concern was understandable. Although Aleis held the title of crown prince, he was not the king's son but rather his much younger brother. This unusual arrangement stemmed from Seahealby's cultural traditions and its succession laws, which prohibited anyone under the age of twenty from assuming the title of crown prince.

In Seahealby—a nation descended from pirate ancestors who revered strength above all—it was unthinkable for a child to take command. Even the son of a captain would struggle to inherit leadership if he was perceived as weak. A ship led by a child would be seen as vulnerable, an easy target for enemies. In such a combat-driven society, a leader unable to fight alongside the crew would be considered unfit. The result could be mutiny, internal strife, or even the death of the young captain at the hands of a crew unwilling to follow someone they viewed as inferior.

This mentality remained deeply rooted in the pirate families that later rose to royal status during the kingdom's founding. The formalization of these ideals into Seahealby's royal succession laws reflected the enduring influence of their martial heritage.

When establishing these laws, they wisely rejected the idea of simply appointing "the strongest" as king—a method that would have only encouraged bloodshed and power struggles. Instead, they introduced a rule requiring a minimum age for succession, ensuring that only those with a degree of competence and maturity could

assume the role. Hence, the policy that no one under twenty may be named crown prince—a law that remained in effect to this day.

Unfortunately, this system created the potential for long periods without a designated crown prince—no clear successor to the throne. In such cases, if something were to happen to the king before a mature heir came of age, the kingdom would be left without a leader.

To prevent that, Seahealby adopted a provisional measure. If a reigning monarch had no adult children, the youngest royal brother would be formally adopted as the king's son and appointed crown prince. This arrangement was temporary and intended strictly for emergencies.

Once the king's biological son reached adulthood, the line of succession would be revised accordingly, and the title of crown prince would be passed on to its rightful heir.

"To me, it seems like a lot of trouble, but it's normal for Seahealby, so it can't be helped," I remarked.

After centuries of tradition, such practices aren't easily changed—nor is it our place, as foreigners, to comment.

"Princess Lysonna seemed a bit perplexed by it, but Prince Aleis himself doesn't seem bothered," Bertia mentioned.

"Well, for those who consider it normal, it would be strange to worry about it," I mused. Cultural norms can vary widely depending on the community to which a person belongs.

"That's right! Princess Lysonna mentioned that Prince Aleis is a very calm and kind person, so there surely won't be any conflict!" Bertia tried to sound optimistic, though she still seemed a bit worried.

"A calm and kind person," I reflected.

Courtgain's research suggested the prince was quite astute. He was reputed to always wear a pleasant and friendly smile, thereby making a good impression on others.

Prince Aleis's successful ventures indicated that he was not only a sharp strategist but also capable of making ruthless decisions

when necessary. Such qualities were essential in a ruler—after all, kindness and gentleness alone could not protect everything.

Obviously, the direction of his focus and actions could shift dramatically depending on what he prioritized. If he accepted the eventual transition from his position as crown prince with grace, all would be well. But if he clung to power, things could become far more complicated.

Nonetheless, I offered quiet reassurance. "It will surely be all right."

And if something truly insurmountable arises, I'll step in behind the scenes.

Frankly, the well-being of Princess Lysonna, Prince Aleis, or even Seahealby as a whole is secondary to me. But since Princess Lysonna was Bertia's friend, any distress on her part would undoubtedly affect Bertia—and *that* was a prospect I found unpleasant.

So, I'm prepared to assist, within reason.

"I hope Princess Lysonna finds happiness," I remarked.

"She definitely will!" Bertia confidently declared, her face bright with optimism, dispelling any shadow of worry.

Returning her smile, I suggested, "Now, let's go over Anne's documents once more. There seem to be a few other key figures we should remember."

Thankfully, Anne had included portraits of these individuals, providing a visual cue that, while not always perfectly true to their real-life appearance, could help Bertia familiarize herself with them, especially those she should be cautious about approaching too closely.

"Let's try to guess their names by covering them and only looking at the portraits! It'll be like a quiz and should be fun!"

As Bertia gleefully flipped through the pages featuring important figures, we took turns trying to match names with portraits in a playful quiz format. Watching Bertia furrow her brow, pace around the room, or mutter under her breath in an attempt to recall names

was amusing, making this game quite enjoyable. However, as a quiz, it wasn't much of a challenge for me since I could remember all the details after a single glance.

At one point, when Bertia couldn't recall a certain individual, she turned to Kuro for assistance—a clear miscalculation, given his usual silence. Remarkably, Kuro didn't respond verbally but instead used gestures, forming a cross or a circle with his paws to convey his answers.

"You don't remember either, Kuro?" Bertia asked, following his silent shake of the head and his excited circular gesture. "You do know? Please tell me!"

Predictably, Kuro remained silent, shaking his head once more when Bertia looked hopeful.

Kuro continued to shake his head, his ears and tail drooping. "Why can't you? Are you saying I should figure it out on my own?"

"Tia, Kuro doesn't speak, remember?"

"Ah! Of course," she exclaimed, even though she knew well that Kuro never spoke.

It was curious how she could briefly forget such a familiar fact.

"But then, what were those circles and crosses about?" Puzzled, Bertia tilted her head, prompting Kuro to mimic her gesture.

It seemed that Kuro, in his own unique way, was trying to communicate who Bertia should or shouldn't interact with—particularly those he deemed unfavorable. It was touching to see him so dedicated to protecting her, but I'd need to make sure he didn't overdo it and cause any unintended disruptions.

Spirits had their own ways, ones not always visible or easily understood by humans. We *definitely don't want rumors of paranormal activity at the wedding.*

"Indeed, it's impressive that you remembered that part so well, Kuro! Amazing! I have to keep up and do my best too!" Bertia praised, petting Kuro's head.

The stern look Kuro had while scrutinizing the portraits of those to be avoided softened into contentment under Bertia's touch, as he

pressed his head into her palm with a satisfied expression.

"Well, shall we head up now? Cynthia must be eagerly awaiting your arrival," I suggested after observing the two of them for a moment.

Reluctantly, I helped Kuro down from Bertia's lap, noticing his tail puff up in displeasure. However, we couldn't keep Cynthia and the waiting maids at bay for too long.

Offering my hand to escort Bertia, she placed hers in mine, a slight blush on her cheeks. As her husband, it's my role to support Bertia by covering any gaps in her knowledge or readiness.

With that determination, we proceeded to join Cynthia and the others on deck, eager to enjoy the rest of our day.

Part Five

Bertia spent much of her time in her room, diligently reviewing the documents and committing the details to memory. While the task felt daunting, it likely provided her with a valuable distraction. By the time she had memorized everything, only a few days remained before our arrival in Seahealby.

Despite her earlier claims of tiring of the sea view, Bertia's commitment to studying had kept her from looking out at the ocean for some time. When she finally did, the sea seemed fresh and captivating to her once more. We relished the final stretch of our maritime journey, with Bertia rediscovering her initial excitement for the sea voyage before we reached Seahealby.

Now, it was time to switch from the ship to the carriage we had brought, heading toward the royal palace of Seahealby.

"I really hope everything goes smoothly…" I murmured, a sentiment I had shared several times already.

As we approached the royal palace of Seahealby, a growing sense of unease enveloped me. Usually, I might have welcomed

potential trouble as a distraction, but with Bertia by my side, I felt compelled to be extra cautious.

According to Courtgain's documents, there appeared to be no major issues in Seahealby, yet that didn't imply complete tranquility. *After all, a nation comprises individuals with diverse intentions and plans; it'd be naïve to assume there wouldn't be any minor conflicts or challenges.*

"Maybe it's the dread from the bad foreboding that worries me?"

If the nature of the potential problem were clear, we could prepare for and address it. However, at this point, we did not even know if there was a concrete issue to worry about.

"All we can do is hope it's just an unfounded concern," I thought as we set the carriage in motion toward the palace.



Part One

After concluding our journey by sea and continuing by carriage, we finally arrived at the royal capital of Seahealby.

"Cecil! The castle! I can see the castle! It's so big!" Bertia, captivated by the sights of a foreign city, had been glued to the carriage window since we entered the capital. Her excitement upon spotting the distant royal palace and turning back to me with joy was akin to that of a tourist.

Despite her familiarity with castle life, the sight of another country's palace seemed to possess a unique allure of its own. I found it curious, considering she lived in a castle herself, which was considerably larger.

"Ah, yes, it is indeed. But it looks like we're still a fair distance away, so it might take us a little more time to actually get there," I remarked.

In the royal capital, no building stood taller than the palace, making it visible from anywhere in the city. However, visibility didn't equate to proximity—the palace still appeared small in the distance, a clear sign that we still had a long way to go.

Moreover, the capital was naturally busy with carriages and pedestrians, and with the Crown Prince's imminent wedding, it was

even more crowded with people arriving from various places, which slowed our progress.

Although we had sent a messenger ahead to inform Seahealby of our arrival today, navigating through the crowded streets to the palace with a considerable escort and security measures would inevitably slow us down. Even with the palace in sight, we would need another hour or two to reach our destination.

"I've been corresponding by letter, but it's been a while since I last saw Princess Lysonna in person. I'm looking forward to it!" Bertia exclaimed, her anticipation for the reunion clear in her voice.

Her eagerness to meet her friend, amid the bustling atmosphere of the royal capital on the eve of such a significant event, was palpable.

The correspondence between Bertia and Princess Lysonna was frequent, yet the time they spent together was minuscule. It was remarkable how they managed to become such good friends despite this. Initially, the speed at which their friendship developed made me wonder if there might be some ulterior motive. However, that concern turned out to be unfounded, as it became clear that the change was not in Bertia but in Princess Lysonna herself. Known for her somewhat tense demeanor, Lysonna seemed to soften significantly after starting her friendship with Bertia, as if all her sharp edges had been smoothed out.

Observing Princess Lysonna's transformation reaffirmed my belief in Bertia's exceptional talent for building friendships. Zeno had even remarked that transforming Princess Lysonna was easy for someone who had managed to transform *me*—a statement I agreed with, though for some reason, it irritated me.

I had replied with a half-joking threat that the most I could manage was switching Zeno's meals to unseasoned vegetables—a sharp contrast to Bertia's impressive skills. That day, Zeno's meals had consisted solely of flavorless leafy greens, despite his repeated pleas for at least some dressing.

Considering spirits didn't need to eat, I saw no reason to adjust the menu. Watching this unfold, Kuro attempted to bribe Zeno with one of the extra *inari sushi* Bertia had prepared—perhaps strengthening their bond as spirits in their own peculiar way.

"Ah, Cecil! Look over there. There's a large building!"

Bertia, animatedly discussing the differences in architecture, attire, and goods from shop windows, pointed out a large building that ranked second only to the royal palace in size. The expansive grounds suggested it wasn't bustling with visible activity but likely housed a significant number of people within.

"What could this building be for? It looks so familiar from the front…" Bertia murmured, her curiosity evident as our carriage approached the building's facade.

I had hoped the sense of foreboding I felt would turn out to be unfounded, but more often than not, it proved accurate. *It's not confirmed yet, but perhaps it would be wise to stay on alert.*

While Bertia was engrossed in the view, I quickly retrieved a notepad and pen hidden in my coat. I jotted down instructions to investigate this building and, slightly opening my side of the window, handed the note to Valdo.

"Pass this to Courtgain," I whispered.

Valdo nodded discreetly before stepping away to talk with another guard. This precaution had been arranged beforehand, given Valdo's tendency to overlook subtleties.

Ensuring that we were prepared for potential issues was only logical. Courtgain would begin investigating the building's significance; however, in the meantime, it might be wise for us to gather some additional information on our own.

"Hey, Tia, you mentioned before that Princess Lysonna's new name sounded familiar. Is there anything specific that's bothering you?"

While Bertia hadn't shown signs of recalling anything specific, any insights gathered beforehand could prove useful, especially if they stemmed from her past life memories.

"Eh? Ah… Yes! When I first heard Princess Lysonna's new name, it did feel strangely familiar! And now, finding this building somehow familiar too—it's all quite mysterious, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is mysterious," I agreed, contemplating the implications of her reactions and the vague familiarity she felt.

Despite my growing sense of unease, Bertia seemed to regard these oddities as nothing more than curiosities, having even forgotten her initial discomfort with Princess Lysonna's name. *Perhaps I'm too on guard… but it's not something I can just dismiss.*

And yet, as I watched Bertia, I found myself relaxing without meaning to—almost ready to accept whatever came next as part of the adventure.

"Hey, Tia. Could this possibly be related to that 'otome game' you mentioned before?" I inquired, half-expecting a breakthrough.

"Not at all," she replied, instantly dismissing the notion. Her confidence sparked my curiosity.

"May I ask why you're so sure?"

"I absolutely adored that *otome game*, scouring every corner for a hidden route involving you, Cecil. I played it thoroughly, so I can assert with certainty that it's not related!"

Bertia's conviction was clear, leaving no doubt about her thorough exploration of the game.

This seemed to reduce the likelihood that her past experiences with the "otome game" were influencing her perceptions. Yet, a part of me hesitated to completely dismiss the possibility.

"Then, is there a chance that the game had a sequel you're unaware of, possibly due to certain circumstances, and you only know parts of it?"

"Absolutely not! If there were such a thing, I'd find a way to play it, even if it meant coming back from the dead!" she exclaimed.

"Is that so?" I mused, though I doubted the feasibility of resurrecting for a game.

Nonetheless, it seemed that, to Bertia's knowledge, there was no sequel to the "otome game" she was so fond of.

Bertia's denial of any sequel effectively ruled out the possibility that her sense of familiarity stemmed from such a continuation, which was somewhat reassuring.

I still couldn't shake the odd mix of relief and lingering curiosity. *The sheer passion she'd need to resurrect just to experience a story again… It's a testament to how endlessly fascinating she is.*

"Cecil, please don't worry. It must be just my imagination!" Bertia assured me.

"All right. But if you remember anything, make sure to discuss it with me right away," I responded, acknowledging her optimism.

It was clear she tended to see things in a very positive light, so I was counting on her to come to me with any concerns before they escalated. Ideally, we could address any issue promptly and minimize potential fallout—even if that meant dealing with some consequences along the way.

In any case, whatever developments arise from our concerns will likely happen during our stay in Seahealby.

With that in mind, we chose to focus on enjoying the sights and experiences of Seahealby's royal capital, ready to face whatever might come our way—together.

Part Two

Upon arriving at the palace and after receiving a warm greeting, we proceeded to another location for a brief exchange of pleasantries with the king of Seahealby.

While it was Princess Lysonna and her soon-to-be husband, the Crown Prince, who extended the invitation, our status as guests of honor required a priority audience with the king.

This arrangement likely reflected the king's desire to build a closer relationship with Alphasta, a prominent kingdom, by personally engaging with its crown prince, me.

The king, though he exuded a brawny presence not unlike Valdo's in both appearance and speech, clearly possessed a sharp intellect. He appeared to use that physical presence deliberately, lowering others' guards with a disarming demeanor—an effective tactic that hinted at a strategic mind beneath the surface.

Still, subtle cues in his gaze and reactions betrayed the presence of deeper intentions, noticeable to anyone paying close enough attention.

While I contemplated feigning ignorance about the king's hidden agendas, considering the potential for upcoming events, being underestimated didn't seem wise. Thus, by subtly acknowledging my awareness and exerting gentle pressure during our conversation, I noticed the king's expression growing increasingly strained by the end. Wondering if I might have pushed too hard, I eventually decided it was acceptable, as I saw the king shift his attention to Bertia's cheerful demeanor for comfort.

After navigating through that fruitful encounter, we were guided to the guest palace where we would be staying.

"Lady Bertia! We've been eagerly awaiting your arrival!"

As soon as we arrived at the guest palace, Princess Lysonna, Prince Aleis, and three others—two men and a woman—came out to greet us. I had briefly seen Prince Aleis during our welcome at the royal palace, but the three individuals with him were unfamiliar faces, though recognizable from the briefing materials as the first and second princes, along with the second prince's fiancée.

"Princess Lysonna, I've been looking forward to seeing you!" Bertia greeted her friend with open arms, and the two women shared a joyous reunion.

Technically, this was a formal meeting between royal families. Proper etiquette would normally dictate a more reserved greeting before engaging in conversation. However, both Prince Aleis and I, amused by our partners' excitement, did not intervene.

"Oh dear, I was so delighted to see you, Lady Bertia, that I completely forgot to introduce everyone," Princess Lysonna

exclaimed, regaining her composure and turning apologetically toward the others from Seahealby.

Except for the first prince, the others responded with a shake of their heads and a smile, indicating they didn't mind the oversight. The first prince, while gesturing to move the conversation along, appeared noticeably displeased by the informality.

While etiquette is indeed important, the inability to overlook such minor deviations can indeed appear to demonstrate a lack of generosity.

"Prince Cecil, Lady Bertia, allow me to introduce you. This is Prince Aleis Seahealby, my betrothed," Lysonna said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you for the first time. I'm Aleis. Thank you for your support and presence," Aleis greeted us warmly.

"I'm Cecil Glo Alphasta, and this is my wife, Bertia. Congratulations on your upcoming wedding," I responded as we shook hands, and Bertia curtsied in accordance with the introduction.

Once Bertia straightened, attention naturally shifted to the three individuals standing slightly behind Prince Aleis.

"Actually, they also expressed a wish to greet Prince Cecil and Lady Bertia. May I introduce them?"

"Yes, of course," I agreed, shifting the focus of the conversation to Aleis and myself—a natural transition since Lysonna was our only prior acquaintance here.

Usually, the highest-ranking individuals present would lead such exchanges, although personal settings might dictate otherwise. Starting with formal introductions still seemed appropriate.

"Allow me to introduce them. Standing next to me is the First Prince, Ramtak; next to him is the Second Prince, Izlarich; and beside him is Izlarich's fiancée, Lady June Silconia," Lysonna introduced.

As their names were called, each bowed in turn, confirming they were indeed the individuals we had been briefed about.

"It's an honor to meet the esteemed Crown Prince Cecil and Princess Bertia of the great kingdom of Alphasta. We look forward to getting to know you," Prince Ramtak spoke on behalf of the trio.

Although his words were respectful, the look in his eyes when he regarded Bertia and me was unmistakably confrontational.

I didn't exactly scorn individuals who wore their hostility openly, but the inability to conceal such sentiments often marked them as lacking in sophistication. While some might interpret an aggressive gaze as a sign of ambition, it was more commonly perceived as hostility, making it difficult to build any kind of positive relationship.

Even if there was genuine intent to be adversarial, making one's stance so clear only served to heighten the other party's guard, leading to loss rather than gain. Such tactics might work to intimidate the weak, but in settings like this, they were ineffective and a poor strategic choice.

"Indeed, we'll be staying in this country for a while, so let's get along during our time here," I suggested, aiming for a tone of amicable diplomacy.

"Yes, we look forward to your company," they responded, seemingly eager to foster a cordial relationship for the duration of our visit. *It remains to be seen what happens after that.*

Prince Aleis gave a wry smile while the others relaxed their expressions after completing the "friendly greetings." It seemed that the underlying message in my words was lost on most of those present, except for the crown prince.

Bertia, usually all smiles, had suddenly frozen, her face betraying her shock. She seemed pale, which was unusual. It didn't appear that she had picked up on my underlying feelings; her gaze was fixed not on Prince Ramtak but on Prince Izlarich and Lady June.

"Ah, ah, ah…"

As Bertia's hand slowly began to rise, as if to point at the pair, I quickly wrapped her hands in mine and asked, "What's wrong?"

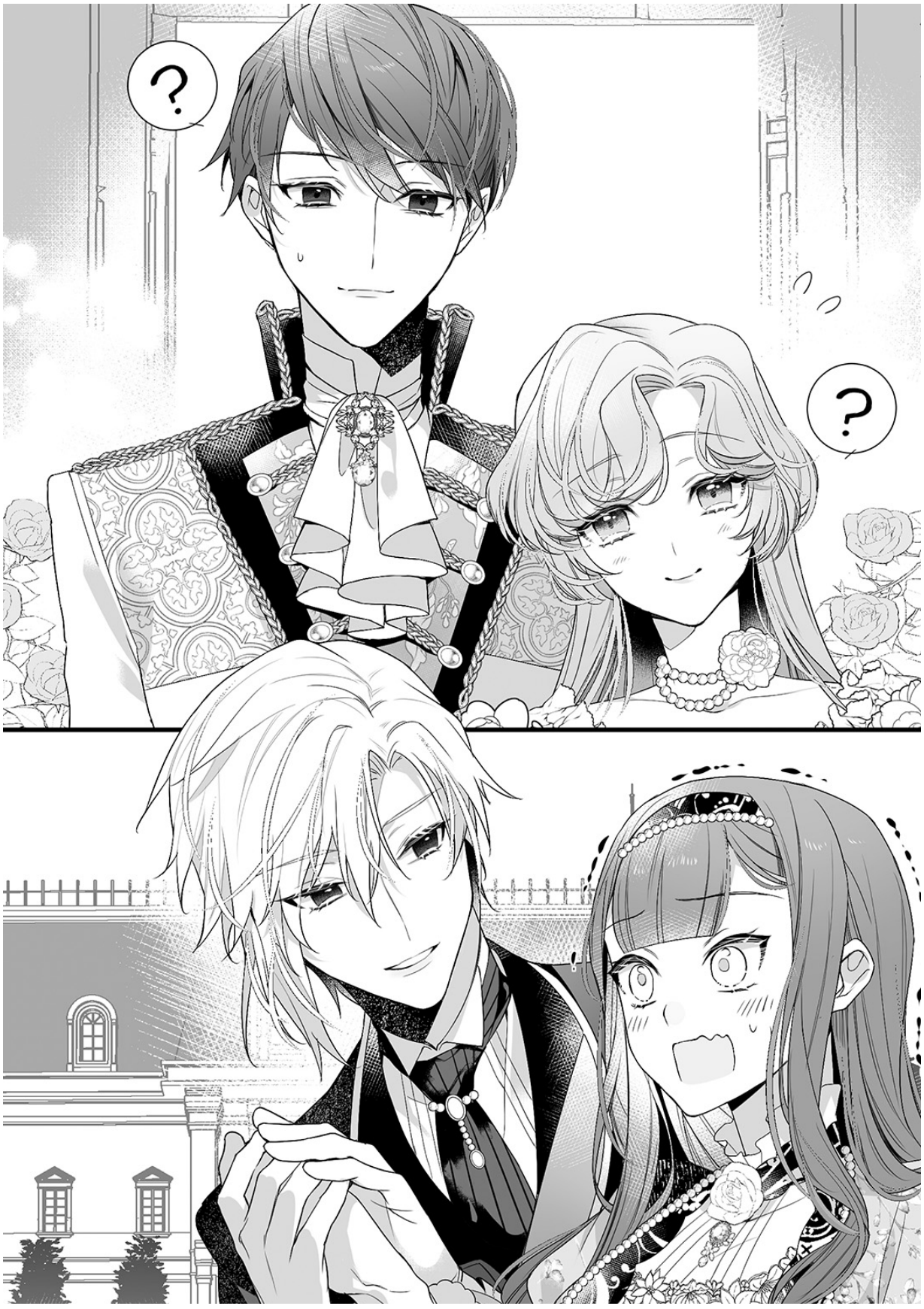
While shielding her actions from the others' view, pointing at royal figures from another nation, especially upon first meeting, would indeed be a breach of etiquette.

"Cecil! I've realized it!" she exclaimed.

"Is that so? I've realized something too," I responded, knowing that I couldn't allow her to speak any further in this setting.

"Really?! You're amazing," she whispered, likely mistaking my understanding for something different.

"Ah, you've noticed too, right? How close Prince Aleis and Princess Lysonna seem," I quickly redirected.





My attempt to deflect Bertia's outburst with a casual remark surprisingly elicited shock not only from her but also from Prince Aleis and Princess Lysonna. Glancing their way, I noticed Lysonna turning a deep shade of red, embarrassed, while Aleis shifted from surprise to a more intrigued expression. It seemed Lysonna's typically strong demeanor made her bashful reaction unexpected.

Regardless, their responses were not negative, so there was no issue there. The challenge now was finding a graceful exit before Bertia could delve into any indiscreet topics without concern for the audience.

"By the way, Tia, you seem a bit pale. Are you feeling the effects of our long journey?" I inquired, cutting her off before she could continue.

"No, not at all! I just—" she began, but I quickly interrupted her.

"It's not good to push yourself too hard. Prince Aleis, I'm terribly sorry to impose right after your warm welcome, but could we perhaps take a moment to rest?"

Prince Aleis, though surprised, graciously acquiesced.

"Absolutely, you need to rest. I'm sorry for not addressing your needs earlier. We have organized the welcome dinner for tomorrow night, so please take this opportunity to unwind. If you need anything, please inform the palace staff, and we'll make sure you're well looked after."

While my true motive was to prevent any potential mishaps with Bertia in her current state, both Aleis and Lysonna seemed genuinely concerned for her well-being, accepting my request at face value. I felt a slight pang of guilt for misleading them—especially Lysonna, who appeared sincerely worried.

Still, avoiding a situation where Bertia might speak out of turn was essential. As much as I adored her unpredictable nature, there were times and places where discretion was paramount.

Amidst the unfolding scene, Bertia's flustered attempts to assert that she was fine were swiftly overshadowed by the flow of

conversation, framing her as a dutiful but unwell new crown princess doing her best to carry on.

My carefully placed expressions of concern helped shape that perception, just as I intended.

"Um, that…" She tried to interject, but I continued to guide the narrative toward her recovery and anticipated lively interactions with Princess Lysonna the following day.

"Certainly! I've been looking forward to having lots of conversations with Princess Lysonna. I'd love to have tea together!" Bertia finally found her footing in the conversation and enthusiastically affirmed her eagerness.

"Then, may I also join you for tea? And perhaps Prince Cecil could accompany us?"

"A splendid idea. May we also attend?" I seized the moment to suggest my participation alongside Aleis, keen to evaluate the crown prince in a more relaxed setting—an opportune moment for both of us.

"Of course, I don't mind. What about you, Lady Bertia?"

"I welcome it! I'd love to hear all about how the two of you met!" Bertia chimed in, now completely absorbed by the prospect of the tea party, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Caught off guard by Bertia's shift in focus to their love story, Aleis seemed momentarily taken aback, while Lysonna eagerly engaged, though slightly embarrassed.

Indeed, marriages among royalty often prioritize political alliances over love stories, leaving little room for romantic tales of how couples first met. Yet, Princess Lysonna's reaction suggested not a lack of stories to share but a hesitation to discuss them in front of Prince Aleis—perhaps due to the private nature of their relationship or personal details they preferred to keep between themselves.

"Let's save that discussion for tomorrow," I suggested, thinking it would give Princess Lysonna time to prepare how she might share their story with Bertia in a way that would be comfortable for her.

"Then, let's meet again tomorrow," I prompted, leading to nods of agreement from the Seahealby group as they departed.

Only Prince Ramtak appeared slightly dissatisfied, glancing back at us with a hint of discontent, perhaps due to the brief and somewhat unsatisfactory nature of our interaction. However, considering the pretext of Bertia's apparent ill health, it was challenging for any complaints to be voiced openly.

Whether we allocate more time to engage with them later will depend on Bertia's insights and how she feels after today's unexpected developments.

Part Three

"Cecil, it's serious!"

Bertia, having eventually grasped the intention behind my words and actions, had been waiting patiently for a chance to speak with me. Well, "patiently" might not be entirely accurate. She seemed to struggle to contain her eagerness to talk, frequently glancing my way and pacing the room in an unsettled manner. Yet, she managed to keep her mouth shut until the right moment.

After sending off Prince Aleis and his party and giving instructions for our stay, Bertia and I finally settled down in a room within the detached palace to rest and enjoy some tea. It was just the two of us, along with Zeno and Kuro, in the room. Lady Cynthia and the maids were busy organizing the palace environment. Valdo was diligently standing guard outside the room, while the other guards sorted the supplies they had brought and prepared their quarters.

With a conducive environment for conversation finally established, Bertia wasted no time.

"It's serious, you say? What happened?" I asked, already sensing this had something to do with Prince Izlarich and Lady June, given her earlier reaction.

The issue wasn't their involvement; it was how we were related to it. According to Bertia, it seemed we were not connected to any "hidden routes" or continuations of an 'otome game.'

"I remembered! Princess Lysonna is the villainess from a novel I read in my previous life!"

So, the villainess this time isn't Bertia. It was not something I could say to Bertia, who was worried and panicking over the possibility of her friend being a villainess, but it was somewhat relieving.

"Is that so? And in that novel, what about us?"

"We're not in it at all!"

"A novel related to an otome game?"

"Not related at all."

"I see."

It seemed, just as Bertia had said, that it had nothing to do with the "otome game" we were involved in. *That makes things simpler.*

We just need to support Princess Lysonna as much as we can from a third-party perspective. Since it's not a situation that directly affects us, we can take it easy.

"So, what's the story about? Can you tell me more?" If it seemed troublesome, I could simply steer Bertia in a different direction and maintain some distance. That way, we wouldn't become involved.

Even if we were to keep our distance, having some information would be better. Normally, "a story from a novel in a previous life" wouldn't count as information, but given Bertia's precedent with otome games, it shouldn't be taken lightly. It should be considered information and factored into our planning. That was what I was thinking when I asked her, but for some reason, she suddenly averted her gaze.

"Tia?"

"Well…"

"Yes?"

"Actually…"

"What is it?"

"I don't remember the details."

Silence filled the room.

No, the only sound was Kuro munching on sweets.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, puzzled.

Indeed, it had taken Bertia some time to recall the novel. Considering how vividly she remembered various aspects of the otome game previously, I had assumed she would be able to recall and share more about this novel once she jogged her memory.

"You see, I bought that novel because it had a small character in the background that resembled you, Cecil, at a time when new episodes of that otome game were not coming out and I was in a sort of 'Cecil withdrawal' state!" she explained, somewhat flustered.

"Hmm. I don't quite follow."

What in the world is "Cecil withdrawal"?

From what I could gather, Bertia had bought the novel because it featured a background character who apparently bore a slight resemblance to me. However, the reasoning still eluded me. *Even if the character looked like me, it wasn't actually me, right?*

"Are you suggesting infidelity?" I teased.

"Not at all! I am devoted solely to you, Cecil! Besides, in that novel, the character resembling you played a role lurking in the shadows… but was so shadowy he hardly appeared at all… which diminished my desire to read, and I only skimmed through it," she said, her shoulders drooping in disappointment.

I wasn't sure how to react to a disheartened Bertia. At any rate, it was clear she cared for me, and as long as I didn't stray from her, there would be no infidelity. *So, we should just continue on our "drowning in love route," right? That seems to be the best course.*

The question now was how much of the little information she knew we could gather.

"If that's the case, it can't be helped if you don't remember. Can you tell me what you do remember, even if it's just the general gist?"

I asked, hoping to glean whatever I could from her fragmented recollections.

"Of course!" she exclaimed with a renewed spark of enthusiasm. Piecing together her disjointed memories, she began to outline the rough storyline she could recall. The content was relatively simple—or perhaps it seemed so because she remembered so little of it. Nonetheless, it sounded like a fairly typical story.

The main focus seemed to be the love story between Prince Izlarich and Lady June. The two were childhood friends who got along well and, given their compatible social standings, became engaged. As they grew up and began to genuinely love each other, Princess Lysonna appeared on the scene as the crown prince's wife.

By the time she entered the story, Princess Lysonna's marriage to the crown prince had already grown cold. Feeling neglected by her husband, she harbored resentment and jealousy toward the happy couple—Prince Izlarich and Lady June—and sought to tear them apart.

After a series of events, Princess Lysonna's attempt to physically harm Lady June came to light. No longer protected by her husband, the crown prince, she was condemned to a life of seclusion.

"I see. I've got the gist of it, but it seems like we're missing crucial details," I noted.

Understanding the direction and outcome of the story is one thing, but without the concrete details of how it unfolds, devising a strategy becomes significantly more challenging.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized.

"It's all right," I reassured her.

Though we can't pinpoint exactly what will happen, we can make some educated guesses. Most importantly, as long as Princess Lysonna didn't act on her jealousy in a reckless way, it was unlikely that any serious problems would arise. *And should she stray from the path… the consequences would be hers alone to bear.*

"Our strategy, then, is simply to keep an eye on Princess Lysonna and ensure she doesn't do anything foolish," I concluded.

"That's correct. As long as Princess Lysonna doesn't become a villainess… if she can have a happy marriage with the crown prince, then all should be well!"

Bertia's eyes sparkled with hope as I summarized our approach —perhaps relieved to have a clear course of action.

What remains is to see how much we can do for Princess Lysonna during our stay. If it still doesn't work out, then we'll have to accept it as her responsibility.

I was convinced we wouldn't get involved. Ah, what a relief. It seems this bad premonition of mine was unfounded…

"I've decided! I will become a standin villainess for Princess Lysonna's sake!" Bertia suddenly declared.

"What?" I was taken aback. It seemed my wife had begun spouting something incomprehensible again.

"It's perfect! As a top-tier villainess myself, I'll perform admirably as a standin villainess!" And just like that, in her mind, this unusual plan solidified.

Bertia. Why venture into the fray when we could have stayed out of it?

My bad feeling had come to pass after all. Despite my internal sigh, I knew there was no stopping her now. *Once Bertia decides on something, she pursues it relentlessly.*

"So, with that said, it's time for a strategy meeting!" Her eyes shining, Bertia pumped her fist in the air with enthusiasm, followed by Kuro, who also raised his fist, having finished his sweets.

Kuro clearly didn't grasp what was going on. He was just joining in because Bertia seemed to be having fun. He hadn't been paying much attention to the conversation, being too engrossed in his snacks. However, knowing Kuro, he'd likely go along with Bertia's plans regardless of his understanding.

With the pair seemingly excited and Zeno and I wearing bemused expressions, a notable gap in the room's atmosphere had developed.

"Planning a strategy meeting… but what exactly do you intend to do as a standin villainess, Tia?"

Although I really wanted to ignore the question, I couldn't just let it pass. *I guess I should ask. If I don't, the conversation won't move forward. Or rather… the opposite. If I don't ask, it might move too far ahead, and we could end up in a situation we can't recover from.*

"I'm so glad you asked!"

I really wished I hadn't.

"The crucial point this time is Princess Lysonna's position!" she declared.

"Position… You mean her role in the novel, not her status as the crown prince's wife, right?"

Currently, in the kingdom of Seahealby, Princess Lysonna's position was that of *"a woman who will eventually become the wife of the future king."* It was a rather delicate situation, and how she chose to navigate it would certainly be a challenge. However, what Bertia was discussing had little to do with such realistic matters. Instead, she was focused on how to respond to the fictional scenario that might befall Princess Lysonna in the novel.

"That's right! Although, unfortunately, I barely remember what specifically Princess Lysonna did due to only skimming through that novel… there is a certain formula to what a villainess does! Based on that, we can deduce what kind of actions and words are expected from Princess Lysonna's position in the novel and establish a general plan of action!"

At this moment, I'm more dismayed by your wildly imaginative approach than the fact you skimmed through the novel. No—*it's precisely because of your boundless creativity that I find my days filled with joy.*

Still, the idea of adopting the typical behavior of a villainess… That was something.

In fiction, there were certainly patterns readers tended to favor, and it wouldn't be unusual for certain developments to feel

predetermined. *However, if the actions of real-life villains followed such predictable formulas, crime prevention would be far simpler.*

Then again, considering how many petty villains commit similar misdeeds in reality, perhaps the concept isn't entirely off base.

"So! As a result of my analysis, being a former top-tier villainess myself, the role demanded of Princess Lysonna in the novel is… this… these…" Bertia began, then hurriedly started scribbling something on a piece of paper.

Scribble, scribble, thud.

After placing her pen on the desk, Bertia slapped the paper down with a satisfied look. "This is it!"

Bertia, I understand you wanted to present it clearly on paper, but if it's not already written by the time you announce it, the timing gets a bit awkward, doesn't it? However, if you're satisfied, I don't mind the slightly odd timing.

"Exactly, the role Princess Lysonna is meant to play is that of a barrier to spice up the romance between the lead couple, Prince Izlarich and Lady June!!"

Hey, Bertia. The paper you quickly wrote on and placed under your hand is now hidden by it, losing its purpose the moment you made your declaration. Besides, being a barrier to enhancing a romance doesn't seem like something we'd need to confirm so eagerly, does it?

"So, what exactly do you plan to do?" I inquired, genuinely curious about her next steps.

"That is…" Bertia began, only to be interrupted.

"Wait a moment, Tia. Your palm is completely black," I pointed out. Her hand had touched the freshly written ink, which was not yet dry, smearing her palm with black ink. I hurried to stop her as she brought her hand, chuckling, up to her mouth… but alas, it was a bit too late. The tip of her nose was now adorned with a black smudge.

"What on earth is this on my hand?!" she exclaimed, perplexed.

What do you mean? It's your hand, covered in ink from just moments ago. Have you already forgotten what you did?

"Here, let me wipe it off for you… Continue talking," I suggested. Zeno offered a handkerchief, slightly dampened with magic, which I took to gently clean Bertia's nose.

"Eh? Why my nose… There's ink on my nose too?!" she realized, shocked.

"Go on," I urged her, wiping her nose and offering a smile to encourage her to continue, despite her suddenly flushing red and becoming flustered by the awareness of her predicament.

Despite displaying confusion with mutterings of "In this state?!" and "Ahh," upon seeing my unwavering smile, Bertia reluctantly continued her explanation.

"Ahem. So, there are primarily two things we need to do," she said, clearing her throat and gathering herself as I wiped her hand.

Finding the situation amusing, I listened intently to her continuation.

"First, based on what we know from the novel, the critical point is the relationship between Princess Lysonna and the crown prince. Currently, Lady Lysonna holds great affection for the crown prince, and I've heard that he cherishes her deeply in return. Therefore, it would be ideal not to disturb this relationship but rather to deepen their bond."

"I see," I nodded. While this plan shouldn't lead to any trouble—considering the precedent set by her friend and my close aide—I couldn't say there would be absolutely no issues. However, with a bit of support and minor adjustments, we should be able to keep problems at bay. After all, Bertia's well-intentioned actions, though they might perplex others, had never led to unhappiness.

"So, in this busy period leading up to the wedding, I want to ensure that no sad misunderstandings occur between them, helping to further deepen their relationship," she elaborated.

"Hmm? Are misunderstandings more likely to happen during this period? I don't recall us experiencing anything like that."

Bertia and I are still newlyweds. I'm genuinely curious about why she thinks "misunderstandings are prone to occur before a

wedding."

It's possible that I simply didn't notice, and Bertia felt similarly, which made me even more curious.

"In our case, Cecil, by the time I got around to doing anything, you had already taken care of most of the tasks that needed doing, so we hardly ever found ourselves too busy to meet," Bertia explained, her gaze drifting as she reminisced about how many tasks were completed before she even got involved.

Hmm, was that not okay? I had a lot of free time until Bertia graduated, and I didn't want our time together to decrease unnecessarily, so I ended up managing things on my own.

"No, no, our situation is beside the point. I mean, generally! Preparations for the wedding and starting married life can be so busy that misunderstandings are likely to occur. Additionally, facing a significant life transition like marriage can lead to a lot of anxiety. There's even a term for it, 'marriage blues!'" she clarified.

"Ah, I see… 'Marriage blues,' huh?"

Though I said it, the term *marriage blues* didn't exist in this world. Still, considering that many noble marriages were arranged for political purposes, it wasn't unusual for there to be a period of gloom—or frequent quarrels—either before or shortly after the wedding, especially when the couple wasn't well-suited.

So, I could more or less understand what she meant.

"Did you experience 'marriage blues,' Tia?" I asked.

"With Cecil taking such good care of me, I hardly had any time to feel anxious! But let's not talk about us right now!" she quickly retorted, causing a smile to spread across my face.

I couldn't help but feel delighted. As I intertwined my fingers with hers—now clean and beautiful—she blushed deeply and turned her face away in a huff.

My wife is truly adorable. She makes me forget about everything else—whether it's other couples' issues or the affairs of other countries.

"So, anyway! If even a couple as close as they are can have misunderstandings, there must be some trigger for it. And you think that the likelihood of such a trigger occurring is high… now?"

"That's right," Bertia replied. Though she had been blushing moments ago, she suddenly looked downcast, as if all the energy had drained from her. It was clear she was genuinely concerned about Princess Lysonna's future.

"In that novel, I believe the relationship between the two of them started to cool off immediately after the wedding. To be precise, Princess Lysonna was fond of the crown prince, but he treated her coldly," she recalled with a frown. "If their relationship is good *now*, just before the wedding, but starts to cool immediately afterward, something must happen in the meantime…"

Or perhaps Prince Aleis originally had some ulterior motive, behaving affectionately only until the wedding to ensure its success?

Observing Bertia, it seemed she hadn't considered that possibility. True to her kind nature, she likely believed that the affection they showed each other was genuine and complete.

Moving forward, when it comes to managing a country, she might benefit from being more discerning of others' intentions… But even so, I hope she stays just the way she is.

When I'm by her side, I'll support her. And when I'm not, her friends will surely step in. They'll gladly do it—for Bertia's sake.

"So, we should do something that further develops their relationship during this time," I suggested.

"Exactly. Oh! And if there are any worries they might have, I'd like to listen and help as much as possible!" Bertia nodded earnestly.

If fostering their relationship is the goal, then perhaps facilitating their interaction, or engaging them in meaningful conversation during tomorrow's tea time, might be the most effective approach.

As for any concerns they might have… *Given the relationship between Bertia and Princess Lysonna, she might end up sharing her worries without any prompting.*

As for Prince Aleis… He seems rather astute, so it may not be necessary to intervene directly. If he seeks advice, simply listening should suffice.

Then again, considering we're practically strangers, he likely wouldn't want to confide in me anyway.

"Actually, I've already thought of one idea to help develop their relationship," Bertia announced.

"An idea? What might that be?" I asked, intrigued.

"Ahaha… I'm so glad you asked! The moment it was decided we'd have tea with Lady Lysonna and the others tomorrow, I had a flash of inspiration! We must arrange a *double date*!" Bertia declared, puffing out her chest with confidence.

I tilted my head slightly, puzzled by the unfamiliar term. *Double date…? It's probably a concept from her previous life.*

"Tia, could you start by explaining what a *double date* is?"

"Oops! I accidentally mentioned something from my previous life again," she said with a sheepish smile.

That's all right. *It's quite normal for you to slip into talk of your past life.*

"Let me explain, then. A *double date* involves two couples who are dating going out together! It's more lively and fun than a one-on-one date because you're in a group. For couples who haven't been together long, it can be a more relaxed and enjoyable experience than being alone," she explained.

I see, so a date involving two couples is what's called a "double date." But then…

"Hey, Tia. You seem to know a lot about double dates… Did you have any in your previous life?" I asked with a grin, feeling a bit curious.

What's the matter, Kuro? Your tail is puffed up to twice its usual size. And why has Zeno backed up against the wall?

"No, no, no, I've never done such a thing! I only went out with a couple and a male friend of mine because my friend wanted to try

something double date-like. In my previous life, I was part of the 'non-popular' crowd," she hurriedly denied, shaking her head.

Though Bertia had quickly denied it, her description made it sound like the outing might have been arranged to set her up with that male friend. And following that logic, it was likely that the so-called friend had feelings for her, wasn't it?

It seems Bertia was just as oblivious in her previous life—fully demonstrating her knack for missing the atmosphere and breezing right past it. I'm torn between feeling sympathetic for the other party and feeling relieved… But for now, perhaps we should just go ahead with this "double date" idea? Somehow, I feel like this inexplicable restlessness won't go away unless we do.

"So, tomorrow will be our first real double date," I mused.

"You're willing to cooperate, Cecil?" Bertia beamed with excitement.

"Of course," I promised. "I'll do my best."*… to adore Tia,* I added silently. "Oh my, you're fully committed! If you're on board, Cecil, then there's nothing to fear!" Her joy was palpable, and as I watched her smile, I tightened my grip on her hand ever so slightly.

Bertia, slightly embarrassed but pleased, squeezed back. *Yes, I'm looking forward to tomorrow.*

"So, for the 'deepening their relationship' strategy, let's start with tomorrow's double date and plan our next move based on their reactions. Then, there's the… acting as a standin villainess, creating obstacles for Prince Izlarich and Lady June's love."

"Do we really need that?" I asked, making a final attempt to resist.

"It's necessary," she asserted immediately, fully charged and ready to proceed. I had hoped to dismiss this part of the plan, thinking it unlikely that Bertia could cause any real trouble, yet I was not entirely convinced it was risk-free and wanted to avoid any potential issues.

"Love thrives by overcoming obstacles, after all!" she declared.

Aren't there many couples who seem perfectly happy without any hurdles to overcome?

Well, even beyond obstacles, many noble couples find happiness in arranged marriages, where their paths are chosen by others. I believe there are various ways to deepen a relationship without necessarily becoming an obstacle.

"In the novel, the two of them start as childhood friends, and their friendship gradually evolves into love. Because this development is slow, their realization of love for each other may feel somewhat subdued. Princess Lysonna's entry as someone who envies and disrupts their budding love adds tension. The couple's experiences of being threatened with separation, along with Prince Izlarich's heightened awareness of his desire to protect Lady June from Princess Lysonna's harassment, deepen their love," Bertia explained.

I see. But from what you've described, it seems more about deepening an already existing affection. Even if the love is tentative, love is love, isn't it? I wonder if it's necessary to force it to deepen.

"Therefore, I think preparing events that make them appreciate each other more would be beneficial," she suggested.

"Got it. You've really thought this through," I acknowledged. *It seems there's no turning back now. All that's left is to enjoy the process.*

"Unfortunately, I haven't come up with a good plan yet. Given that we're in a foreign royal palace, we need to carefully consider what is appropriate," she admitted.

"I'm glad you're aware of that," I noted. *However, the real issue seems to be the misunderstanding that acting as a standin villainess—intentionally creating obstacles—might somehow be acceptable. It appears she hasn't quite grasped that this could be… problematic.*

"Cecil, can you think of any effective ways to cause a rift between them?" she asked, eyes filled with hopeful anticipation.

"Hmm…"

Bertia looked up at me with a troubled expression, waiting for a solution.

To respond, I began to consider what sort of scenario might fit her request.

"If you're intent on driving a wedge between them… we'd start by targeting their support system. Lady June's family is known for their vineyards, right? We could develop a chemical that affects grapes, employ someone discreet to distribute it, and significantly reduce their income. When they start feeling the financial pinch, we introduce them to unscrupulous lenders…"

"STOP! Stop right there, Cecil! That's going too far, and it would turn into a long-term battle!" Bertia exclaimed, halting the increasingly dark strategies I was outlining.

"That's true. If we were to split up the prince and the countess, it would require significant groundwork to avoid leaving any lingering resentment. Though I still think this is on the milder side. The quickest method would be to dig up past records and expose the kind of minor infractions almost every noble has committed…" I continued, only half-seriously.

"Stop, I insist! And searching through past records for wrongdoing would take an enormous amount of time…" she protested.

"Not really. It's quite a common practice for us," I said, the corner of my mouth lifting in a slight smile.

"Nearly all of us aides have been forced to do it," Zeno added with a glance resembling that of a dead fish, eliciting Bertia's sympathy.

"All right, jokes aside…" I said, trying to steer the conversation back to safer waters.

"You were joking?! That's confusing!" Bertia exclaimed, flustered by the sudden turn of events.

Of course, it had been a joke. The grapevine scheme—as Bertia herself pointed out—would have taken too much time and caused unnecessary damage.

As for digging up dirt, it was unlikely that foreign dignitaries like us would be granted easy access to such sensitive documents.

While it wasn't impossible to find a method, it would have required infiltrating spies or gaining enough trust to be welcomed into their confidences. It would be more effort than the situation was worth.

Besides, if we went to such lengths, the barrier we would create around their relationship wouldn't be a mere hurdle—it would become a prison wall, likely smothering any tender feelings before they could take root.

"Well, the most realistic approach would be a honey trap, but that's definitely not something Tia should be doing."

The moment I mentioned *honey trap,* Bertia's eyes lit up with a *"That's it!"* expression, so I gave her a smiling yet firm look to drive the point home.

Even if it were a valid strategy to deepen their bond, having the future queen consort use flirtation on a prince from another country would be more than inappropriate—it would go directly against my personal wishes.

"Ah, yes, you're right. Even if we had someone else do it on our behalf, it could negatively impact their reputation. That's not an option," she admitted, seemingly disappointed but understanding the need to abandon that idea.

"I'll make use of all the villainess knowledge and skills I've honed so far to come up with something," she declared with newfound resolve.

"Is that so? Well, let me know once you've decided on a plan," I responded, open to allowing her to engage in some harmless mischief but ready to veto anything too problematic.

"Understood. I'll consult with you about anything that requires your cooperation," she assured me.

"No, I mean everything," I corrected her.

"Eh?"

“Tell me everything, okay? I want to know all about what you are up to,” I insisted, emphasizing my desire to be involved and informed about her plans.

At my insistence, Bertia blushed deeply. I pulled her into an embrace and gently kissed her hair.

“All right?”

“Yes, yes, yes, I understand!” she stammered out her agreement.

With such insistence, I grew confident there wouldn’t be any issues moving forward.

Part Four

That night, while Bertia bathed with her maids, Courtgain came to see me.

“Prince Cecil, regarding the matter you asked about earlier today…” he began.

“Ah, about that building, right?” The situation had already moved beyond the need for information about the building, making it somewhat irrelevant. However, since he had gone through the trouble of gathering the information, listening to his report was my responsibility as the one who requested it.

“That building is known as Cawin Academy, reputed to be the most prestigious school in the kingdom of Seahealby,” Courtgain informed me. He handed me a document about ten pages long detailing Cawin Academy, indicating that he had researched not only the building but the academy itself quite thoroughly. It felt truly regrettable that his efforts had turned out to be unnecessary.

“Are Prince Izlarich and Lady June enrolled there?” I asked.

“Yes, they are both in the first year of the senior division. Prince Ramtak is also enrolled but in the final year,” he confirmed.

“I see.” It was just as I had thought.

Bertia's sudden recognition of the building, thanks to its depiction in a novel from her previous life, clearly suggested a deep engagement with the visual elements of the stories she loved.

The contrast in the specificity of her memory—vague on plot details but sharp on visual aspects—likely hinged on where her interests lay most passionately.

"No, I don't think there's a need to delve further into the school's internals for now," I decided after considering Courtgain's question. "Bertia's interest in the building was sparked by its connection to her past memories, not by any current relevance it might have to our situation."

Acknowledging the efforts Courtgain put into gathering the information, I added, "Your work has been very insightful, though. It's given us a clearer understanding of the context surrounding Prince Izlarich and Lady June. Let's keep this information in mind as we navigate our visit here. It might come in handy in unexpected ways."

Courtgain's diligence was invaluable, even if the immediate application of the findings wasn't apparent. "Thank you, Courtgain. Please, keep an eye on any developments that might impact our stay here or our relationships with the local nobility. For now, though, let's not intrude further into the school's affairs."

Understanding the delicate balance between using information and respecting privacy, especially in a foreign domain, was crucial. My focus remained on ensuring Bertia's plans, whatever they might entail, stayed within the bounds of propriety and did not inadvertently create any diplomatic issues.

"Of course, Your Highness. I'll remain attentive and report any matters of concern immediately," Courtgain assured, ever ready to fulfill his duties with the utmost discretion and efficiency.

As he departed, my thoughts lingered on Bertia's plans for the double date and how best to support her in her endeavors to deepen the bonds between our friends, all while navigating the complexities of our positions with care and foresight.

"Right. There's no need to go to great lengths, but could you look into Prince Izlarich, Lady June, and their immediate circles? Given that we can't predict Bertia's next move, it's hard to say what information might prove useful."

"As you wish," Courtgain responded, ready to leave upon receiving his new instructions.

"Oh, and could you take Milma with you and offer her some guidance, within reason?" I knew Courtgain was aware of Milma's unique role within Bertia's retinue of maids—a role akin to espionage, given her background as the sister of a former errand runner who specialized in such tasks. When Milma succeeded her sibling, I'd made sure to introduce her to Courtgain, emphasizing her potential usefulness in activities similar to his own.

"Milma…?" A slight frown creased Courtgain's brow. This would be the first time they would work closely in the same group.

Though aware of each other's existence and occasionally crossing paths, they had interacted little until now. Based on their limited engagements, Courtgain likely viewed Milma as a somewhat unreliable figure prone to mistakes. Yet, her skills in stealth were invaluable, and as a woman, she could access areas where Courtgain, a man, might stand out or be unable to approach.

That's the official reason, at least. Unofficially, this could be a chance for a new romance to blossom for Courtgain, much like it did for others. Without making it too obvious, a little push from my end shouldn't hurt. After all, I'd welcome any opportunity for Courtgain to shift his protective, brotherly attention from Bertia to someone else.

"Just do what you can without overextending, all right?"

"Understood," Courtgain agreed, accepting the task with his usual professionalism.

Courtgain let out a small sigh before bowing and exiting the room, leaving me in the newfound silence. I exhaled softly as well, contemplating the scarcity of information we had to anticipate the

forthcoming events. *For now, my focus is on what tomorrow will bring.*

As a newlywed mentor, it was somewhat of a task to ensure that Princess Lysonna and her company see just how much Bertia and I were in love. Bertia and I had to make a concerted effort to display our happiness prominently—primarily for Bertia's sake.

"Well then, perhaps I should take a bath as well to relax and unwind. It'd be best to time my exit close to when Bertia returns." Considering the typically longer duration of women's baths, lingering too long could cause me to be late.

"Zeno, let's go," I called out.

"Understood," he replied, prepared to follow.

It seemed the long day was finally coming to a peaceful close.



Part One

The day after reaching the Seahealby Kingdom's palace, we enjoyed a late breakfast. It was at that time a maid from Princess Lysonna approached us. Through her, we verified our schedules and decided to modify our plans, agreeing to have tea together in the afternoon as promised.

"Are you ready?" I asked, coordinating my timing to meet her, only to discover Bertia already set, seated on the sofa in her attire for the tea party.

"Of course, I'm completely ready!" She nodded with confidence, having just downed a glass of green liquid… Some sort of juice, maybe? *Based on my experience, whenever she's this self-assured, she usually concocts something intriguing. What might she be scheming today?*

"I chose to embrace today wholeheartedly, so I enjoyed a unique nutritional drink!" she proudly lifted the empty glass she had just downed.

I'm curious about what was in that drink. It looked healthy based on its appearance and name, but…

While I reflected on this, a slip of paper was discreetly handed to me. Milma, true to form, barely made a sound. The document she

presented appeared to be the recipe for the "nutritional drink" that Bertia had been savoring. The ingredients seemed wholesome enough, though I couldn't quite envision the flavor, nor was I keen to. It looked like a concoction of sweet, bitter, and distinctly flavored components, all mixed together. There seemed to be an effort to harmonize the tastes, but it was difficult to gauge how successful that was.

While I was interested, my curiosity didn't drive me to ask about trying it myself.

"With this, I feel energized today!"

I found myself questioning, *With her being perpetually energetic, what does being "full of energy" truly mean for her?*

"Additionally, I've got a surprise ready for today! I'll reveal it to you, Cecil…" Bertia started to get up from the sofa but quickly sat back down again.

"Please hold on for a moment. I'll show you now…" She attempted once more but found herself in the same predicament.

"Oh? Hold on a moment! I'll get up now!" Bertia's embarrassed efforts to stand prompted amused smiles from her maids.

"Lady Bertia, allow me to assist you," said Cynthia, moving closer to lift Bertia by the hand.

"I'm up! Thank you very much, Lady Cynthia!" With Cynthia's assistance, Bertia finally managed to stand, showing her gratitude with a radiant smile, while Cynthia, similar to the other maids, couldn't help but smile faintly.

"Cecil, check this out! These are my secret weapon: super high heels!"

Bertia lifted the hem of her dress just enough to display her shoes, stepping forward for emphasis. The heels were strikingly thin and high, appearing nearly impossible to walk in under normal circumstances. They resembled a weapon rather than footwear, though they might do more damage to her than to any foe.

"Oh? Oh dear!" As soon as I had that thought, she started to lose her balance, teetering precariously.

"Eek!"

"Careful!" I quickly moved to catch her, extending my hand to steady her. As she reached out to break her fall, I gently supported her waist to help her regain her balance.

"I'm sorry…" Bertia said, appearing somewhat downcast.

"Tia, won't you fall if you wear shoes like that?"

"That's the main idea," she answered.

I felt perplexed. *What could my wife be thinking? Oh, that's right; it's typical not to grasp things right away.*

"Would you mind elaborating further?"

"Oh my! Even you, Cecil, are perplexed?"

"Yes, I don't understand. Can you clarify?"

Her maids had probably also questioned her when she decided to wear the shoes. Everyone around Bertia loved her, and aware of her tendency to trip, they would likely have tried to prevent her from wearing something so risky. If she persisted, she'd surely have faced inquiries about her choice.

"Hehehe. For the upcoming double date, I've planned a strategy to draw Princess Lysonna and Prince Aleis closer, giving them an exhilarating surprise," she revealed.

I had a feeling that before anyone experienced a shock from getting closer, they would be surprised by Bertia's imminent fall.

"And these super high heels are necessary for that!" Once again, she tried to showcase her shoes by stepping forward, but since I was still holding her waist and hand, she didn't falter this time. However, her reliance on my grip suggested she would have surely fallen without support.

Although she'd nearly fallen just moments ago, her restlessness might stem from the nutritional drink she'd consumed earlier. However, it could also be too early for it to have any impact.

"When they're standing together, I'll casually walk over and pretend to trip, nudging Princess Lysonna just a bit. With Prince Aleis close by, he'll have to catch her! This situation will bring them closer

and surely ignite some excitement. It's a clever scheme, guaranteed to make their hearts race!"

"I understand," I replied, nodding. I grasped Bertia's goal. "So, basically, you aim to replicate our current situation?"

Bertia initially appeared puzzled by my comparison. However, after reflecting on our current position, she nodded in agreement, grasping the analogy.

"So, it seems you're quite excited at the moment, right?"

"Of course… yes…" Her cheeks flushed with warmth at my comment. Up until that moment, she had been gazing at me openly, but now her eyes shifted restlessly, looking away.

"Um, Cecil, I'm all right now," she said, attempting to push me gently, signaling that she wanted to step back from the half-embrace supporting her.

Well, I'm not about to let go that easily.

"No, that's not possible. You could fall and injure yourself before we achieve our goal. I will accompany you to the tea party this way."

"Oh! Well, I just…" She paused.

"If that's the case, I can't let you wear those shoes." It wasn't merely about wanting to see Bertia's reactions; those very high heels appeared alarmingly unstable. I could easily picture her twisting both ankles in a frantic attempt to regain her balance.

"Ugh… All right," she eventually agreed, though with some hesitation. Acknowledging her lack of balance without my assistance, Bertia nodded.

Despite all the flaws in Bertia's plan and the low probability of success, I wondered whether she realized it.

Probably not, considering the situation we're in.

Still, it's amusing, so I'll keep my observations to myself for now.

"It's impressive that you can walk in something so difficult," I said, starting our walk with what I hoped was a casual sense of closeness, careful not to let on that I was supporting her to avoid a fall.

As we walked, I couldn't help but smile wryly at her attempts to keep her balance and inquired about her choice of shoes.

"I crafted these while aiming to become a top-tier villainess. A true top-tier villainess is, after all, expected to don high heels that resemble weapons, clicking assertively with each step. However, I found them quite impractical for daily use, so I reserved them for special occasions."

"So, this is the 'special occasion,' huh?"

"It does appear that way!" she agreed.

It seemed she had misunderstood what defined a "special occasion." Wasn't the initial objective simply to walk confidently in these heels? The irony in wearing them now, ostensibly to pretend to trip, appeared to stray quite a bit from that objective.

"Oh, Cecil," she said abruptly.

"What's wrong?" I inquired, noticing a shift in her tone.

"I think my foot is about to cramp."

Ah. These shoes, already difficult to balance in for even a few steps, now threatened to cause a cramp. She was planning to push Princess Lysonna by faking a fall, yet it seemed far more likely she'd collapse before even getting close.

Despite the obvious need to reconsider her plan, she seems intent on going through with it.

"How about I lift you a bit to ease the strain on your foot?" I proposed, repositioning my hold around her waist so her feet barely grazed the ground, minimizing any chances of discomfort.

"Cecil, you're incredibly strong! But… are you certain that's okay?" Bertia exclaimed while I helped her walk by lifting her slightly.

"As the maid guiding us mentioned, it's not too far, so we should be okay," I reassured her. After the wedding, where I had to carry Bertia, I thought about the chance of facing a similar scenario and restarted my somewhat overlooked fitness routine while managing my responsibilities. This small effort was well within my abilities.

Nevertheless, anticipating what might occur next, it seemed prudent to prepare a pair of comfortable shoes for Bertia. I noticed Cynthia, who was trailing behind us, seemed to share the same concern and was already seeking assistance from Milma. I followed her gaze to Milma, who had a small box that probably held a spare pair of shoes.

Cynthia and I shared reassuring looks, nodding in silent agreement. I had faith in her ability to find the right moment to discreetly change Bertia's shoes.

Even with the small setback before leaving, we headed to the tea party with Princess Lysonna and her group as intended.

Part Two

"Prince Cecil, Lady Bertia, we were expecting you," said the maid who guided us through the palace to a garden near the detached palace, where the tea party awaited. Princess Lysonna and Prince Aleis were already there to greet us.

"Prince Cecil, Lady Bertia, I appreciate you taking the time to meet with us," Prince Aleis conveyed his thanks.

"It's our pleasure. Thank you for the invitation," I replied while shaking his hand. Meanwhile, I worried if Bertia could support herself, but she appeared to have adapted to the super high heels during our walk and managed to stand easily, which relieved me.

I didn't dare leave her alone, so after exchanging greetings, I subtly wrapped my arm around her waist once more, pretending to be an escort, to make sure she wouldn't fall.

"It's genuinely delightful to witness the closeness between you two," someone commented.

"Well, we are still newlyweds," I responded.

Prince Aleis looked at me with a blend of amusement and disbelief, and I replied with a cheerful smile. Although there was

another reason behind my behavior, it wasn't the right time to discuss it.

"Please, Prince Cecil, Lady Bertia, take your seats," Princess Lysonna proposed, after finishing their greetings as Prince Aleis and I had done. Following her suggestion, I first guided Bertia to her seat before sitting beside her. The seating order at the circular table was Prince Aleis, Princess Lysonna, Bertia, and then myself.

Once we were all settled, Bertia suddenly widened her eyes and turned to me, looking shocked. She likely understood that, given the tea party was the main event and we'd mostly be seated, her towering heels wouldn't get much attention—a realization that appeared to trouble her. Although her worry was clear, there wasn't much we could do, and I didn't feel compelled to step in, so I just smiled back and moved on.

"Once again, I want to express our gratitude. Thank you for making the long journey to our wedding," Prince Aleis said, with Princess Lysonna nodding in agreement. The two of them appeared to be an ideal couple, yet if Bertia's tale was accurate, they were bound for a loveless relationship fraught with misunderstandings. It was strangely unsettling.

"Congratulations on your marriage! We are delighted to celebrate this wonderful new chapter with you both," I said.

"We're delighted to be here to celebrate with you."

After sharing more light-hearted conversation, we officially commenced our tea party.

From the very beginning, Bertia gazed at me with pleading eyes, clearly overwhelmed by the barrage of questions and topics aimed exclusively at her.

"Lady Bertia, concerning the dress design you previously shared with us before…"

"Lady Bertia, regarding the cake we intend to present to the guests…"

"Lady Bertia, about the romantic arrangement you mentioned previously…"

Indeed, Princess Lysonna's relentless focus on Bertia was overwhelming. It felt as though Prince Aleis and I were mere spectators, as she kept redirecting the dialogue toward Bertia. At first, it appeared that there was some attempt to involve us, with sporadic efforts to include Prince Aleis and me in the discussion.

Unsurprisingly, that effort was short-lived. Although my status as a near-stranger may account for my exclusion, the exchange between Princess Lysonna and Prince Aleis felt distinctly awkward, as they struggled to keep their conversation flowing. It wasn't for lack of effort or the inability to communicate; whenever Prince Aleis spoke to Princess Lysonna, her replies were curt and her demeanor somewhat frosty, making it difficult for anyone to engage with her.

Princess Lysonna's discussions mainly revolved around the upcoming wedding, likely due to Bertia's presence. The conversations primarily focused on wedding preparations. Whenever she attempted to engage us, it revolved around dresses or cakes—subjects we struggled to respond to without any concrete references. Lacking actual items to compliment and detail knowledge, our input in these conversations was minimal and did not generate much enthusiasm.

In the end, the discussion returned to Princess Lysonna and Bertia, as they appeared to be the only ones truly relishing the wedding-related subjects.

"Men are so unreliable, right?" Princess Lysonna exclaimed, a bit exasperated.

In response to her comment, both Prince Aleis and I could only exchange wry smiles in acknowledgment. In this situation, we had little to say or do, which only reaffirmed her point.

If the discussion had revolved around Bertia's dress design, I could have participated, thinking about what styles might suit her and offering my input. However, since it concerned Princess Lysonna's dress instead, it held little interest for me.

And frankly, I don't think my opinion would be appropriate anyway.

Consequently, the tea party primarily centered on Bertia and Princess Lysonna, while Prince Aleis and I played the part of entertained observers.

"Bertia is incredible, don't you think? She consistently brings forth such unique and marvelous ideas. Princess Lysonna seems quite entertained too," Prince Aleis remarked, starting a conversation with me.

Considering the circumstances, starting our own discussion was the logical step to take.

"I'm certain Tia would be thrilled to hear that," I replied, my eyes turning to the woman in question. She was deeply involved in her conversation with the princess but occasionally cast curious glances in our direction, which made me stifle a laugh.

"Prince Cecil even uses a nickname for Lady Bertia. Your relationship must be quite close… I envy that," he said softly, prompting me to raise an eyebrow at his phrasing. This implied there could be tension between him and Princess Lysonna, as Bertia had speculated.

What should I do about this? As I watched the two women excitedly talk about wedding plans, I observed that Princess Lysonna, though briefly, also stole glances at us. However, unlike Bertia, her looks were more discreet, nearly unnoticeable unless you were really paying attention. *Might there be a misunderstanding between them?*

"We've known each other since childhood. Our years together are quite different from your experiences," I reflected, opting for a neutral and safe reply.

"I understand. I heard that you both have been engaged since childhood," remarked Prince Aleis.

"While it may be an overstatement to say we were together all the time, we did meet occasionally and exchanged letters. As students at the same academy, we had plenty of opportunities to deepen our bond," I elaborated. Framing it this way might make it seem trivial. Nonetheless, I held those shared moments in deep

regard, as they were invaluable in helping me understand her heart and fall in love with her.

"Really? Your comments make the time my partner and I shared before choosing to marry seem rather short," he reflected.

"Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing, since meeting someone is simply a matter of fate," I reflected.

Crown Prince Aleis and Princess Lysonna had not been familiar with each other for long. After attending my wedding with Bertia, Princess Lysonna had returned to her country, where she had her first matchmaking session with Prince Aleis. Previously, she'd gone through several matchmaking attempts, none of which were successful. However, her first successful match turned out to be with him. On the other hand, due to his complex status, Prince Aleis received fewer matchmaking offers and was not particularly interested in them. Nevertheless, he selected Princess Lysonna as his partner.

One might view this story as fated, although their time together has been quite brief. Still, in royal and noble circles, arranged marriages are common, making their situation neither unusual nor concerning.

"We share the time we've built together. You both have the opportunity for new, meaningful experiences ahead. That's what matters," I expressed.

"I understand. That presents a new viewpoint," he reflected, his hand contemplatively rubbing his chin.

At that moment, Bertia lost her patience with the stagnant relationship between Princess Lysonna and Crown Prince Aleis.

"Let's wrap up this discussion! Princess Lysonna, didn't we plan to set another day for the wedding talks? This is meant to be a double date! A double date!"

The endless wedding talk, directed solely at Bertia, might have been enjoyable in its own right. However, my wife wasn't the type to ignore the original purpose of the gathering in favor of an unrelated

conversation—especially when that purpose involved a friend's future.

She interrupted the conversation midway and declared her intent loudly.

There was just one problem… Neither Crown Prince Aleis nor Princess Lysonna had any idea what a double date was.

"Um, Lady Bertia, could you explain what this 'double date' is?" Princess Lysonna, taken aback by Bertia's unexpected comment and curious about the strange term, inquired.

Prince Aleis, lost in thought, redirected his focus to the conversation and listened attentively.

"I'm happy you inquired! A double date occurs when two couples in love spend time together on a shared outing. That's precisely what we are doing now! To elaborate further, it includes activities such as walking hand in hand or sharing exciting moments during group activities," Bertia explained.

"What! L-Love each other? W-We're not in that kind of relationship… It's more like a political marriage!" Princess Lysonna, who had been attentively listening to Bertia, instantly flushed and awkwardly denied it after hearing the explanation.

Prince Aleis raised his brows slightly at her response. His feelings were understandable. Even if the union were purely practical and devoid of genuine emotions, being put on the spot right before the wedding would certainly spark some reflection.

This could present some challenges. A little smoothing might be necessary…

"Well! That's quite a claim. Who was it that wrote letters proclaiming their encounter with Crown Prince Aleis as destiny? Who said no man was as wonderfully patient and generous to accept a strong-willed woman like herself without disdain? Who fantasized about being the woman capable of supporting him through the challenges brought on by his delicate situation?"

"What?!"

Both Prince Aleis and I looked at Princess Lysonna, whose face flushed deeper. Prince Aleis's eyes widened in surprise at her expression.

"Additionally, you shared that your nerves stem from liking him so much that you often respond coldly when he talks to you. Even though you appreciate kind treatment and sweet words, you find yourself acting tough out of habit and struggle to show a softer reaction. These situations are precisely where you should consider adjusting your behavior…"

"All right, that's enough, Tia. If we continue like this, Princess Lysonna's face might actually explode from embarrassment. Have you forgotten how we were reprimanded for similar antics with Lady Silica and Nelt before?"

I hesitated to say I had been late in stopping her; unveiling these truths so spontaneously might not have been the wisest choice. I had believed that taking a strong approach could help the two of them, who were clearly at odds.

Now, it seems I may have overstepped. Continuing this way would be far too unfortunate for Princess Lysonna.

"Oh, I completely forgot. A maiden's heart is fragile! Insensitivity is unwelcome! I must hush at the slightest signal… If only Lady Silica, who always gives me a sign, were here!" Bertia scanned the area in desperation, looking for someone who was clearly absent. Hoping for assistance, she turned her eyes toward Cynthia.

Cynthia smiled warmly at Bertia and remarked, "I'll make sure to inform Lady Silica." In response, Bertia appeared stunned before sinking into a slump, visibly disheartened.

This time, the focus was on fiancés on the verge of marriage. While love played a role, the revelation was limited to the contents of a letter, which might lessen the consequences. In the meantime, Princess Lysonna, her cheeks still flushed, appeared stunned and not yet furious.

At last, it seemed she had regained her composure. With a movement so rigid it might have creaked, she faced Prince Aleis, only to quickly glance away from his unwavering gaze. Rather than lowering her eyes, she raised her chin as if to say, "Hmph!"—a likely product of her tendencies.

It turned out my intervention was unnecessary. Bertia had forcefully cleared up their misunderstanding using sheer strength. However, Prince Aleis looked confused about how to respond to Princess Lysonna after this sudden turn of events. This was understandable, as they had been awkwardly avoiding each other, and even their conversations typically ended in cold replies. Although he knew she appreciated his efforts, he might not instantly know how to react. I believed he could navigate the situation well, but watching it unfold wouldn't be enjoyable for me. Thus, considering Princess Lysonna and to set an example for the newlyweds, it might be more suitable for Bertia and me to take the lead instead.

"Tia, come here," I said, turning my body toward Bertia and extending my arms wide while slightly pulling back my chair.

Bertia, looking a bit puzzled, tilted her head but obediently stood up and began walking toward me… only to spectacularly trip forward.

The little familiarity she had gained with her super-high heels had backfired. When she wasn't used to them, she couldn't stand at all—but now that she could, it simply led her to fall forward.

Right. Forward, into my arms.

Yes, of course. I had anticipated this. It was the goal, after all.

"Whoa! Lo-Lord Ce-Cecil?!" she exclaimed.

I welcomed Bertia, who had seemingly jumped into my arms, and settled her onto my lap. I wrapped my arms around her from behind, gently limiting her movements to prevent any thrashing. This was purely out of kindness, after all. We certainly wouldn't want her to twist her ankle or face any worse injury by moving carelessly.





“Hey, Tia. Isn’t it a bit unfair that Princess Lysonna is the only one feeling embarrassed?” I teased, offering a warm smile to Bertia, whose face had flushed bright red. She tensed up at the question.

Her awareness of her mischievous act likely left her immobile.

I noticed some disapproving gazes from those around us, but I decided to disregard them. After all, ignoring them wouldn’t lead to any issues.

The bond between the Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Alphasta was so strong that rumors of their deep affection had long spread. “Additionally, wasn’t it you, Tia, who came to me because you struggled to connect with Prince Aleis? If so, it seems you should be setting the example, correct?”

“Is that the main point here?!”

“That’s precisely what it is.”

“I understand.”

The expressions of surprise and disbelief around us seemed to say, “Are you really convinced by that?!” However, those reactions were best ignored. At this moment, the priority was fostering a warm atmosphere between Prince Aleis and Princess Lysonna, just as Bertia had hoped.

I think this is also influenced by the double date effect that Bertia referenced. When one side radiates a sweet vibe, it encourages the other side to follow suit.

Princess Lysonna, watching us, remarked, “I could never engage in such embarrassing behavior!” However, she snuck glances at Prince Aleis’s reactions. Despite her claims, it appeared she had a glimmer of hope.

Observing her demeanor, Prince Aleis, lost in thought, nodded as if he had reached an understanding. He suggested that with a bit more encouragement, they too could cultivate a warm atmosphere, inspired by our example.

“Shall we keep going with the tea party?”

“In this condition?!”

Bertia’s protests were answered with a smile, allowing the delightful tea party to carry on.



Part One

On the third day after arriving in the royal capital of Seahealby, Bertia and I pursued separate activities. We had come to the country ahead of other international guests to help with the final preparations for Princess Lysonna's wedding ceremony, in which Bertia played a significant role.

As guests from other nations were about to arrive, Princess Lysonna and her team would soon be busy, complicating movement. The priority was to push forward with preparations before their arrival. In light of this, Bertia decided to meet with Princess Lysonna on our third day at the palace.

As for my activities, nobles and merchants from Seahealby sought my attention. The nobles likely aimed to establish connections with our nation, while the merchants intended to sell goods under the guise of presenting "souvenirs from their land." Honestly, I would have preferred to observe Bertia, but since the final dress confirmations and other events were limited to women, I was reluctant to intrude and ultimately accepted my situation.

Managing these formalities was tiresome, yet I had no choice but to participate in these affairs and await my wife's return, all in service of our country.

“Although the goods offered by the merchants are rather intriguing, particularly those that might appeal to Tia, the aimless conversations with the nobility continue to be as dull as ever. Nevertheless, there are a few insights that could prove useful for our nation, so I intend to confirm their validity and make use of them,” I pondered.

Once the day’s audiences ended, I sighed, enjoying the tea Zeno prepared in the office we were using at the guest palace.

Only Zeno and I were in the room. Bertia and Kuro had gone to see Princess Lysonna, while I had assigned Courtgain the responsibility of confirming important details for our visit to this country.

Upon giving him the compiled list of requests, he appeared a bit pale. However, since he didn’t decline, I presumed the tasks were doable with some effort.

“Now, the sole question remains: how should I respond to that invitation…?” I contemplated, gazing at the letter lying open on the desk.

First Prince Ramtak had extended a dinner invitation. Although his ambition might initially have seemed troublesome, he was royalty, and his rise to crown prince appeared likely. Strengthening ties with him could potentially benefit our country. However, given Bertia’s close friendship with Princess Lysonna, who was to marry Crown Prince Aleis, becoming too familiar with First Prince Ramtak might not be advisable.

For the time being, Prince Aleis was prepared to relinquish his position to Prince Ramtak when the time came, assuming a lesser role. Yet, should complications arise that pushed them into rivalry over the title of crown prince, I would need to intervene to keep Bertia from becoming upset.

It seemed that Prince Ramtak, foreseeing this possibility, had extended the invitation to strengthen our ties.

“Nonetheless, given the close bond between Tia and Princess Lysonna, accepting his invitation shouldn’t damage our relationship

significantly… right?"

At present, Prince Aleis and Prince Ramtak are not displaying any overt hostility.

Although a sense of rivalry could be felt from Prince Ramtak toward Prince Aleis, it had not escalated into outright conflict. Accepting his invitation appeared to be safe, so long as Bertia and I maintained our relationship with Princess Lysonna and her fiancé.

Despite whatever could be happening behind the scenes, Prince Aleis and Prince Ramtak continued to maintain a facade of cordial relations, so neither could rightfully accuse us of "betrayal."

"I'm curious about the novel Tia brought up; maybe it's worth discussing further?" Although Prince Ramtak wasn't featured in the novel Bertia referenced, as the brother of Prince Izlarich, the protagonist's adversary, he could have important insights. Likely more emotionally expressive and candid than Prince Aleis, he could turn out to be a more accessible source of information.

All that was left was for me to confirm my attendance at the dinner, which meant Bertia would join me. I was certain she would joyfully exclaim without hesitation, "It's such an honor to be invited!" For her, it probably just represented a chance to make new friends.

"I should probably consult Bertia before deciding," I reflected, choosing to postpone my response once more as I slid the paper to the table's edge. Zeno quickly retrieved it, setting it in the shelf section for documents pending replies.

"Oh, it's gotten late. Now that I think about it, Bertia should have returned by now; I wonder what's going on…"

As I glanced at the clock, I noticed that more time had elapsed than I had expected. According to her schedule, she should have returned by now. Considering her security detail, both seen and unseen, there shouldn't be any cause for concern…

Perhaps she was deeply engaged in discussion with Princess Lysonna? Just then, I heard footsteps approaching the room, faster and heavier than usual.

The door swung open unexpectedly. Surprised, I looked to find my wife, slightly out of breath, standing there.

"Ah, Tia, welcome back—"

"Lord Cecil, it's awful! I've made a serious mistake," Bertia interrupted, hurrying toward me. Even though she was the crown princess and seemed to remember this, opting for a brisk walk instead of a run as she entered the room, her urgency was evident.

Bertia's hurried approach usually indicates either she's truly caused a problem or she's the only one worrying about something. So, which is it today? Given that Cynthia, who entered behind her, appeared relatively unconcerned, it probably wasn't a serious matter.

As always, Kuro's face showed no emotion as she stayed close to Bertia. Her unchanging expression and the gentle swaying of her tail made it difficult to discern her feelings. Since spirits naturally had a different perception than humans, relying on Kuro's reactions as a measure would not have been prudent.

"What happened, Bertia? Today was meant to be your meeting with Princess Lysonna regarding the wedding preparations, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's right! However, what I did occurred afterward!"

I understand. So, does this mean Princess Lysonna may not be involved? Without the story, there's little I can do.

I signaled for Bertia's companions to step back. They bowed in understanding and quickly left the room, with the exception of Cynthia and Kuro. I requested that Cynthia remain since I might not fully understand Bertia's story without her; it was a precaution.

"So, what happened?" I prompted Bertia to take a seat on the reception sofa and share her story.

To soothe her, I motioned for Zeno to make some tea. Drawing from past experience, he served it lukewarm. There was a time Bertia had been given hot tea, and—in her excitement—drank it in one go, scalding her tongue in the process.

Later, I'd learned from a veteran maid in her family that whenever Bertia felt upset, they would intentionally serve her tea

lukewarm. Since that incident, her personal maids and Zeno learned to adjust the tea's temperature based on her mood.

Truly, we possess such capable servants.

This time, she also gulped the lukewarm tea that Zeno had made and sighed, "Phew."

"Lord Cecil, I… I'm unsure if I should say I did it or if I made a mistake…"

Bertia appeared somewhat calmer as she began her explanation. I nodded and urged her to continue, "First, can you tell me what happened?"

"Yes, indeed… As I was returning to this detached palace after my meeting with Lady Lysonna, I ran into Lady June, who was there to visit Prince Izlarich."

That reminded me—Courtgain had mentioned that today was a holiday at the Cawin Academy. Most likely, Lady June had come to the palace to visit her fiancé, Prince Izlarich, on her day off, and that was when she had coincidentally run into Bertia.

Despite the vastness of the palace, the areas one frequented typically depended on status or role. Princess Lysonna, set to become the crown princess, and Prince Izlarich, the second prince, were of the same royal blood and related as aunt and nephew, so their spheres of activity wouldn't be too far apart.

Therefore, it wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility that Bertia and Lady June had crossed paths while visiting those two individuals.

If those two were to meet, I could only imagine Bertia amplifying her schemes to become the villainess.

"And then?"

"I felt it was the ideal chance!" she exclaimed.

Ah, she truly committed to it.

"I chose to greet her with an overbearing demeanor. At that moment, she said she was headed to meet Prince Izlarich, which made me think, 'This is my opportunity to sabotage their romance!'"

"A hindrance in their romance… Okay, and?"

"I stood in Lady June's way."

So, she essentially turned into a physical obstacle? Is that what it means to be a "hindrance in romance" or to take on the role of a "standin villainess?"

"So, you came to understand that that strategy was flawed?"

If she acknowledged that as a mistake, it might signify growth… perhaps?

"No, that was a victory! I effectively delayed her meeting with Prince Izlarich. Clearly, after my intervention, Lady June must have voiced her frustrations to him about feeling mistreated, causing Prince Izlarich to console her, resulting in them sharing a lovely moment."

Bertia, what gives you such confidence?

My instincts suggested that such a future had yet to occur.

However, I believe that hearing the rest of the story without voicing my thoughts now could lead to some intriguing insights, so I'll refrain from commenting for the moment.

"So, what went wrong, then?" I inquired.

"I couldn't figure out how to stall her right away to disrupt her plans."

"Hm?"

While observing Bertia's dejected look, I tilted my head, puzzled. *Isn't simply engaging her in conversation a straightforward way to stall for the sake of being mischievous?*

From my perspective, time could have been better spent than on such endeavors. Still, regrettably, I had often noticed nobles engaging in subtle efforts to obstruct one another.

One such method—as Bertia had attempted this time—involved intentionally delaying someone with subsequent engagements.

If the other party was of equal status, various polite excuses were usually employed to keep them occupied. However, if one's rank was higher, simply initiating a conversation was often enough to accomplish the goal. After all, without a very compelling excuse, it was difficult to take one's leave in the presence of someone superior.

If the next appointment involved someone of even higher status, a carefully placed hint might work. But if the meeting concerned someone of equal or lower status, it could backfire—potentially being perceived as placing them above the person causing the delay.

Worse still, if the engagement was something that couldn't be disclosed, extricating oneself from the situation became all the more difficult.

Basically, Bertia, as the crown princess of a significant nation, could have easily delayed Lady June, who is engaged to a prince, by just discussing any suitable topic. There was likely no need to overly complicate a stalling strategy…

Ah, but if she had assigned Lady June a task using her status, it would definitely have enhanced the standin villainess vibe, wouldn't it?

I wonder if the issue was simply coming up with a suitable task on the spot. Did she end up inventing some bizarre errand instead?

"I see. Indeed, thinking of a method might have been challenging for Bertia," I noted, even though some nobles seemed to do this effortlessly as part of their daily routine.

"That's exactly it. I intended to take my time to devise a plan before executing it, but I panicked when the unexpected opportunity arose…"

"Yes," I acknowledged, recalling that I had asked her to report her plans in advance.

Perhaps she deemed this "unexpected opportunity" an exception to that rule. Ideally, she would have held back from acting impulsively and brought the situation back for discussion first. *But imposing such a restriction might feel too constricting, wouldn't it?*

Maybe the role of the immediate stopgap in such moments should fall to Cynthia, who serves as both a guard and a lady-in-waiting for Bertia. She seemed cheerful enough, so I trusted she could handle it. *Though whether she would maintain that composure in a real crisis remains to be seen.*

"I ended up declaring, 'If you wish to pass, you must defeat me first!'" Bertia confessed.

"Yes… Wait, what?"

Why did it come to that? That's a bizarre turn of events by any standard. Lady June must have been quite bewildered to hear something like that.

"And then, realizing it would be improper to physically confront her as the crown princess of a nation…"

Wait—why are we operating under the assumption that Lady June could be defeated in the first place? According to my research, she had trained in self-defense just in case, hadn't she? *While Bertia might have the upper hand in physical strength, she's extremely averse to causing harm to others, right?*

No matter how terribly she's treated, Bertia is the type who couldn't retaliate unless pushed to an extreme. I imagine even if Lady June were to push her or slap her, Bertia would likely just stand there in shock. Or perhaps… reflect on what she might have done wrong.

The idea of her "repelling" someone seems a bit far-fetched.

"So, we resolved it with rock-paper-scissors."

"I see. You came to an agreement through rock-paper-scissors, huh? That's an interesting and peaceful way to sort out a disagreement."

"However, because that ended swiftly, we opted for a ten-round game of 'Look Over There.'"

"'Look Over There'? That's a game you frequently play with the kids at the orphanage."

"Look Over There" was popular among the orphans. This game became part of a series created by the crown princess for the children at the orphanage, achieving remarkable popularity across our nation. However, it's doubtful that the game has reached this country.

By introducing this game—explaining the rules, practicing, and playing—Bertia likely gained a significant amount of time. One could

argue that she achieved her objective. Still, witnessing the crown princess and the second prince's fiancée playing "Look Over There" in a corner of the palace must have felt surreal. Yet, it was peaceful… and intriguing, so why not?

"Yes, it appears my mind experienced a moment of panic, and the first competition I thought of was the game I typically play with the children," she said.

In times of panic, individuals typically fall back on what they know… Yet deciding to act on it is a different issue altogether.

"But you were able to reach your goal, correct? We should regard it as a success, shouldn't we?" Although the approach was unorthodox, it was harmless, so there should be no problem.

We can likely view this as a situation successfully avoided, since there were no significant issues.

This episode had certainly been entertaining. However, I questioned whether the situation Bertia had confidently described earlier—where a distressed Lady June reported being bullied to Prince Izlarich, leading to a tender and reassuring moment between them—ever actually occurred.

To an outsider, it would have simply appeared as two women engaging in an unusual game—hardly anything that could be interpreted as bullying.

"Absolutely unacceptable! As a former elite villainess, that decision is beneath me!" Bertia declared, hiding her face in her hands. "Oh, how foolish I am!" she muttered, bending forward in despair.

Isn't being a fool her usual state? My… Our beloved fool. That's my dear wife, Bertia.

Everyone in the room now looked at her with amused expressions.

Cynthia, unfazed by Bertia's villainess comment, may have developed a familial tolerance to her antics after spending so much time by her side, acquiring a family-like level of tolerance to her antics. I couldn't help being impressed.

"It's fine. Among nobles, using games to engage others is quite common," I assured her.

Nobility typically preferred refined adult games that reflected their cultivated tastes. They might devise scenarios that compelled others to participate or place bets to ensnare them—an approach that stood in stark contrast to Bertia's.

Among the elite, using rock-paper-scissors as a subtle form of coercion was unheard of.

Naturally, I kept these reflections to myself.

"Ah! That's true! There are 'games' embedded in 'events,' kind of like 'mini games'!" Bertia's expression lit up. "When I consider it this way, maybe what happened wasn't so terrible after all!"

Yes, many terms related to her previous life had come up. Still, since several of them sounded somewhat familiar, I could at least guess their meanings, right?

It seemed that Bertia had been referring to *otome games,* which not only progressed through scenarios but also incorporated simple games at certain points, similar to the *otome game* we were said to be part of.

This concept might have been unconventional in novels or in real life, but in a game designed for fun and enjoyment, incorporating various interactive elements—regardless of the situation—to influence the scenario or the affection levels of the so-called "capture targets" wouldn't have been unusual.

Games are, after all, meant to be enjoyed, so including a variety of entertaining features makes sense. In a game, such things wouldn't be strange. In a game, that is. But this was the real world, and the idea that Lady Lysonna was a villainess existed only in fiction. By that account, Bertia's argument was flawed.

However… seeing her so animated and amused by the thought, I'll let it pass—for now.

"By the way, who emerged victorious in 'Look Over There'?"

"Of course, I won!" Bertia proudly announced her victory. However, considering her self-appointed role as a "standin villainess,"

her success in the game and the mini games she mentioned could be viewed as somewhat misguided. It was hard to envision her truly embodying a villainess because, typically, a victory for a villainess over the heroine would have consequences for the heroine, such as a drop in affection levels or missing out on something advantageous.

"Truly impressive, Tia. You excel at 'Look Over There,' don't you?"

"I have never defeated you, Lord Cecil."

It wasn't that I found getting into the details too troublesome and decided to just go along with it, okay?

It's just that, in a novel's world, there aren't branches like in games, and the outcome of a game doesn't change anything.

I let it slide, considering that.

"However, after our conversation, Lord Cecil, I've begun to believe that what happened might actually be all right!"

That's probably a misunderstanding. While it might not pose a problem, I don't think it's the kind of behavior befitting the crown princess of a great nation.

"Yet… I believed I had been quite unpleasant, but in the end, Lady June invited me to a tea party. Given my friendship with Lady Lysonna, I needed to clarify that I couldn't support Lady June, so I said, 'I'm good friends with Lady Lysonna!' In a surprising turn, that resulted in plans for a tea party with the three of us."

This was likely due to your emphasis on your friendship with Princess Lysonna during Lady June's invitation, which may have led her to incorrectly assume that you wanted Princess Lysonna to be included too.

Now, I'm convinced that Lady June doesn't believe Bertia was unkind to her. In fact, she may feel that this incident has actually strengthened their bond. I glanced at Cynthia, who nodded, seemingly confirming my thoughts.

"Tia, is it really your intention to be adversaries with Lady June?"

"That's right. To assist Lady June and Prince Izlarich in their relationship, I must assume the role of a villainess."

Given Bertia's nature, it would be difficult for her to be cold to someone who approached her with kindness… even if they had ill intentions.

It seems she's struggling between the role she's decided to take on and her own feelings. Maybe it's time to slightly shift the direction of her efforts.

"Nonetheless, I believe this scenario offers a great chance… for Princess Lysonna and Lady June to foster a beneficial relationship."

Bertia's role as a standin villainess had been intended to prevent Princess Lysonna from being cast in that light. Therefore, creating opportunities for Princess Lysonna and Lady June—who would traditionally have been adversaries—to become friends could prove highly beneficial.

Should they both find joy in each other's company, it would signify that Princess Lysonna wouldn't be labeled the villainess in the tale.

"Ah! Indeed, you're right! In that case, if I play the villainess a little at the tea party and then get scolded by Lady Lysonna for it, it will deepen their relationship, and I can fully fulfill my role as the standin villainess! What a splendid situation that would be!"

No, I don't think being mean is necessary, you know?

Ah… but Bertia's eyes are sparkling with determination. It seems this plan is already in motion and can't be stopped.

Well, Cynthia would be attending the tea party as Bertia's lady-in-waiting. And from my brief interaction with Princess Lysonna, she seemed the type who would likely step in to support Bertia. So, I decided it would be safe enough to leave it to them.

"I'm really happy to hear that! I suddenly feel quite tired, so I think I'll go rest in my room for a while." Bertia's face softened, and a smile appeared as she stood up from her seat.

"Ah, but before you leave, could I borrow Cynthia for a moment?"

"Eh? If Lady Cynthia is okay with it, then I don't mind…"

Bertia appeared surprised and slightly anxious, likely unable to understand why I would want to hold Cynthia back.

"I apologize. As Cynthia is also your guard, I have a couple of questions for her regarding that incident."

I genuinely wanted to hear her viewpoint on what happened, but I couldn't express that directly, so I gave a more believable reason.

Since a guard's responsibilities included watching over the individual they protected, requesting her account wasn't entirely untrue.

"Oh, I see! So, I don't need to be here?"

Bertia tilted her head, contemplating a new question. The brief relief on her face could have stemmed from concern about me being alone with another woman—possibly even jealousy.

While it would be nice to believe that, I don't intend to explore it further. The reality remains a mystery.

"Yes, it's just a quick check. You look tired, Tia, so you should rest in your room for a bit."

"I'll come join you after I'm done. Then we'll enjoy some tea together. We also have the traditional sweets from this country that Princess Lysonna gifted us."

"That's right! There's still time before dinner, and sweets are perfect when you're tired, aren't they?!"

Since arriving here, she had only been served cold tea. But tea meant to quench thirst and tea shared with friends over sweets and conversation were entirely different experiences.

The moment Cynthia mentioned tea with sweets, Bertia's face lit up—proof enough of that fact.

"Then, I'll excuse myself first. Lady Cynthia, I'll be waiting for you!"

Bertia, nearly light enough to skip, left the room with Kuro. Upon exiting, she rejoined the maids waiting in the hallway, and her steps became a bit more subdued.

We watched her leave with smiles, but the moment the door closed behind her and she was out of sight, our expressions turned serious.

"So, what's the situation?" I asked. Cynthia stepped forward, straightening her posture.

"The events are mostly as Lady Bertia described. However… I believe there's a slight mismatch between Lady June's perception and Lady Bertia's."

It seems about as I expected.

"Lady June likely sees Lady Bertia's behavior as a type of Alphasta humor, meant to make her, despite being the fiancée of the second prince yet still just a countess, feel less anxious around the crown princess of a significant nation… To be honest, I shared the same impression until I heard Lady Bertia's story."

Indeed, viewing the actions more as a humorous gesture toward a lower-ranking lady, instead of a tactic to strengthen ties with the second prince and his fiancée, would be the typical response.

"Moreover, while Lady Bertia and Lady June engaged in 'Look Over There,' I took the chance to verify Lady June's schedule… It seems she showed up earlier than expected for her meeting with the Second Prince and was simply passing the time. The Second Prince, occupied with his official responsibilities, expressed his appreciation to them for keeping him company. However, Lady June appeared to think that Lady Bertia knew about her early arrival and deliberately chose to help her fill the time, even though she didn't specify what she was thankful for." She clarified.

It seemed a significant misunderstanding had arisen between the two. Moreover, each held a conviction about the other's perception—Bertia believed Lady June was in a hurry, while Lady June assumed Bertia had intentionally stayed with her. That belief, paired with a sense that addressing the issue directly would be impolite, kept either from clarifying their actions. As a result, the misunderstanding remained unresolved.

"I see. So, Lady June views Bertia's behavior as filled with humor and considerate kindness. That would make an invitation to tea seem quite natural."

From Cynthia's account, it seemed Lady June's regard for Bertia might have significantly improved. She might even have reported to Prince Izlarich about the kindness she received by now.

Thus, while Bertia's initial goal may not have been achieved, it appears she's gained something even more valuable in the process, which is quite fortunate, isn't it?

"Thank you for your efforts, Cynthia. Kindly keep supporting and informing us of any further developments… You may leave now."

"Excuse me," Cynthia said, smiling warmly as she curtsied before leaving the room, which made me sigh.

"So, is it time for the tea party now?"

Alternatively, something unexpected may happen before that time. Indeed, Bertia remains endlessly fascinating to watch.



Part One

"Ah, today again, I shall eagerly step into the role of the standin villainess!"

Bertia had been feeling especially joyful lately. Ever since Lady June extended her invitation, she had been attending tea parties almost daily, where she believed she was excelling in her role as the standin villainess.

"The tactic of introducing malicious sweets, a hallmark of any villainess, proved successful at the first tea party with Lady June and Princess Lysonna. Additionally, my plan to speak poorly of Lady June's family home was also effective! Most importantly, these daily tea parties, held after Lady June's school hours, undeniably serve as a perfect barrier to love, snatching away precious moments from the affectionate couple!"

"Is that so? I hope you're right." I listened to Bertia's cheerful story with a wry smile. Indeed, her schemes could be said to resemble the actions of a typical villainess.

That is, if they were actually successful.

Two days after Bertia was invited to tea by Lady June, Lady June had successfully obtained Princess Lysonna's consent to hold their first tea party with the three ladies. It appeared that both

Princess Lysonna and Lady June had been struggling with how best to approach each other and determine the appropriate distance between them. The tea party, with Bertia positioned between them, had likely served as a valuable opportunity to help narrow that gap.

According to information Milma had gathered from the servants of both Princess Lysonna and Lady June, both women had been very pleased with the chance to grow closer. Princess Lysonna, in particular, due to her naturally stern demeanor, had always found it difficult to form friendships unrelated to politics or power. She seemed genuinely grateful to Bertia for facilitating this one.

Given Princess Lysonna's nature, she might have felt lonely within her circle of acquaintances, which had consisted only of subordinates and followers. *But she probably couldn't express that honestly.* Moreover, having now essentially married into a foreign kingdom, she found herself without even those familiar presences around her.

Among young noblewomen marrying into royalty, Lady June had likely hoped to befriend someone her own age but had struggled to make that happen, leaving her frustrated. In this regard, Bertia was… almost uniquely capable of making friends with anyone—a trait that proved invaluable in expanding social circles.

At their first tea party, Bertia—playing the role of standin villainess—devised the so-called "malicious sweets strategy." When I first heard about it, I recalled stories of childish pranks involving sweets with bugs hidden inside, and I wondered if that might be too extreme for two soon-to-be royals. However, as long as it wasn't poison, one could technically claim it was accidental. So, I thought we'd just see how it played out…

Of course, this was Bertia we were talking about. The idea of using sweets with actual bugs was immediately dismissed as too cruel—and, apparently, an insult to the sweets themselves.

The next idea involved creating sweets that looked like bugs, but that too was rejected for potentially suppressing appetite. Eventually, they settled on a cake decorated with sugar candies

shaped like snakes—simplified and designed to be somewhat cute. Bertia had intended to choose a motif that young ladies would ordinarily find distasteful yet could be rendered charming to some degree.

Unfortunately, in the Seahealby kingdom, snakes were considered sacred creatures—guardians of the land.

Bertia's cake, featuring a snake design, brought joy to Lady June, a native of Seahealby, as it represented their national creature. Though initially puzzled, Princess Lysonna was touched by Lady June's tears. Realizing it was a significant symbol in the country, she remarked, "It's so thoughtful of a foreign crown princess to come up with such a refined gesture." Bertia, misreading Lady June's tearful look at the snake cake as fear, exclaimed, "She's terrified by the snake cake! Truly, I am the perfect villainess!"

As I listened to Bertia's delighted account, with Cynthia beside me and Milma sharing stories gathered from the servants, I almost burst into laughter at Bertia's astonishing naivety.

There had also been a time when Bertia inquired whether there was any information that could be used to disparage Lady June's family. I recalled a noble from a neighboring country who had previously caused trouble for our nation over alcohol-related matters and had also been involved with Lady June's family, who were known for their wine production.

At the time, Lady June's family had remained blissfully unaware of the deception and had already begun to suffer from the consequences. I feared they would face significant losses if things continued unchecked.

Under the impression she was delivering a cutting remark, Bertia exclaimed, "How could they not realize they're being deceived? To think they would remain so carefree when facing such dire consequences!"

Lady June immediately contacted her father, Count Silconia, and they managed to recover with minimal damage.

Lady June is likely to hold an important position in the future.

Thinking it wise to curry favor, I trusted Bertia with that piece of information intentionally. Delivering it without arousing suspicion is just so Bertia. Ultimately, my plan had worked as intended—Bertia ended up providing crucial information to Lady June. However, Bertia perceived Lady June's reaction as that of a "tragic heroine, pained and withdrawn after I disparaged her family."

In the daily tea parties that followed, Bertia—after complaining that *"Just selling ordinary alcohol is so dull,"*—would suggest things like, *"If you made cocktails with wine, the variations could expand dramatically."*

This caused Lady June to grow quite fond of her… though Bertia herself remained completely unaware.

"Perhaps it's time for me to see for myself?" I quietly speculated. Although I'd been getting updates about the tea parties, it might be wise to look in on them myself, driven by curiosity… or concern.

The tea parties sometimes ended up being just between Bertia and Lady June, but when the timing was right, Princess Lysonna was also invited. Today happened to be one of those days she could join in.

"Eh? Did you say something just now?"

"Well, I was just thinking that maybe I should escort Bertia to today's tea party so that Princess Lysonna doesn't forget my face," I replied with a bright smile.

Of course, I wouldn't actually join a gathering meant only for women, but escorting Bertia there should be fine.

"Oh, Lord Cecil! Princess Lysonna isn't such a fool."

"It's just an excuse to spend a bit more time with you."

I hadn't expected my words to be taken literally.

"Wha—! Lord Cecil!" Bertia's face turned bright red at my words. But she looked pleased, which I thought was cute.

Still… isn't she a bit too trusting of people's words? While my desire to spend more time with Bertia isn't false, it does make me a bit worried.

Well, regardless, it's good that she accepted the escort idea. Now… perhaps I should prepare some kind of gift as a way to score some points with the ladies?

Part Two

As the tea party drew near, Bertia and I headed to the venue together. Bertia had noted that Lady June might be weary of attending tea parties daily. Yet, it seemed Lady June, who had developed some affection for Bertia, didn't share that sentiment at all. Since our stay in the Seahealby kingdom was brief, it appeared that Lady June was eager to take advantage of the limited time we had to meet.

Furthermore, the tea parties were organized to accommodate Lady June's schedule, making it impossible for her to view them as an inconvenience. For Princess Lysonna, on the other hand, these social events provided a refreshing distraction from the hectic wedding preparations.

Moreover, as a noble lady from the Seahealby kingdom, educated to become the future wife of the second prince, these meetings offered her a valuable chance to ask questions and learn about unfamiliar topics.

"Look, over there!"

As I guided her, Bertia abruptly halted in the corridor leading to the venue. Coincidentally, the towering high heels she once wore had been put away since that day, and she now wore regular shoes.

"Ah, that's Lady June and… is that the daughter of Duke Margone?"

The person matched the description of someone listed among the key figures in the Seahealby kingdom we had researched beforehand—Magawana Margone, the duke's daughter. Officially, she was a leading candidate to be engaged to the first prince, though no formal decision had yet been made.

Moreover, Duke Margone's family was surrounded by persistent dark rumors and, despite their appearance, was apparently facing financial difficulties. It was the sort of information our spies could uncover without much effort, so the royal family of Seahealby likely knew as well but were probably choosing to observe the situation for now.

Despite being of an age where an engagement wouldn't be surprising, Lady Margone had been skillfully avoided by the royal family, still unable to secure a match with the first prince. Furthermore, her personal reputation was less than favorable.

She seems to be the very picture of what Bertia would call a "third-rate villainess."

I wondered why Lady June would be in the company of such a person, but it appeared that she—having come to the palace for her tea party with Bertia—had been caught and was now being hassled by Lady Margone.

"I am inviting you to tea, and you dare to decline?"

"But I already have a prior engagement…"

"As the future crown princess and a duke's daughter, I invite you. Shouldn't you cancel any prior commitments?" Lady Margone, surrounded by her entourage, insisted with an intimidating presence, her followers nodding in agreement.

Assuming Lady June would naturally acquiesce to her demands, Lady Margone projected an air of inevitability—refusal or excuses were clearly not on the table.

Although Lady June, as a countess's daughter, ranked lower than Lady Margone, a duke's daughter, she was already engaged to the second prince. Under ordinary circumstances, mutual respect—rather than undue subservience—would have been expected between them.

Moreover, the tea party she was heading to involved Princess Lysonna and Bertia. Considering whom to prioritize, the choice should have been obvious.

All she needed to do was state her plans and decline firmly… but she seemed entirely daunted by the overwhelming presence before her. At that moment, her only company was her servants—unlike Lady Margone, she lacked a proper entourage.

That left her without any allies to intervene, rendering her helplessly isolated.

What should one do in such a situation?

"See, Lord Cecil! Isn't this the perfect chance for a standin villainess act?" Bertia suggested brightly.

"A standin villainess act? What do you have in mind?" I asked, intrigued by her plan.

Might she be considering leveraging Lady Margone's behavior to further challenge Lady June?

"Ahaha, you don't see?" Bertia playfully chided.

"Indeed, it eludes me," I admitted. Bertia's thoughts often proved elusive.

"We simply go to Lady June, who's been invited to a tea party by her friend, and assert, 'You should prioritize my invitation!'—wielding our authority to intervene," Bertia revealed her scheme with a flourish.

That was precisely the predicament Lady Margone had imposed on Lady June, causing her distress.

Wait—does Bertia think Lady June is troubled because she wishes to attend the tea party with her friends but can't because of prior arrangements? That couldn't be the case. The interaction before us lacked even the faintest trace of camaraderie or warmth.

It seemed far more likely that the two were not friends at all. Rather, Lady Margone—who fancied herself the future wife of the First Prince—was using this interaction to assert dominance over Lady June, whose engagement to the Second Prince was already firmly established.

If Lady June were to attend that tea party, it would be nothing more than a parade of veiled insults and boasts—devoid of any enjoyment.

"Then, I shall make my departure!" announced Bertia.

"Ah, Bertia…"

Before I could even attempt to hold her back, she had already plunged into the midst of the ladies embroiled in conflict.

Well, to say "before I could hold her back" suggested I intended to do so in the first place… which, honestly, wasn't the case.

For now, I simply moved a bit closer—just enough to be in a position to intervene if necessary.

Because it seemed interesting, I chose a spot carefully out of sight from Lady Margone and her group. Glancing over, I noticed Zeno had caught on to my plan. With an exasperated expression, he signaled the guards and maids who had accompanied us to stand by, while he followed me into a position safely beyond Lady Margone's and her entourage's line of sight.

Moving as a large group would certainly have drawn attention. For discreet observation, minimal numbers were key.

"Well, well, Lady June! What a coincidence to see you here!"

Lady June, who had been cornered by Lady Margone without a moment to explain and looked on the verge of tears, turned her gaze toward Bertia upon hearing her name called.

I casually slipped behind a nearby pillar, stepping out of their line of sight.

"Ah… Lady Bertia," Lady June spotted Bertia, her face relaxing with relief. In that instant, a tear she had been suppressing rolled down her cheek.

Bertia, those tears express relief, you know? They're not tears of anxiety or fear since you've made it here, so you don't need that apologetic expression.

"Is this a friend of Lady June's, I wonder?" Bertia tried to assume a villainous posture, staring down Lady Margone and her entourage. Lady Margone seemed to flinch at the intensity of her look. This reaction likely stemmed from the embarrassment of being caught bothering Lady June in a group setting, compounded by the

unexpected label of "friend." Typically, Bertia's comment was nothing less than dripping with sarcasm.

Bertia spoke sincerely, but no one appeared to realize.

"Um, this is Lady Magawana Margone from a ducal family of our Seahealby kingdom," Lady June said, skillfully dodging the "friend" comment and emphasizing her rank instead. *Usually, this would indicate a lack of friendship… but then again, we are dealing with Bertia here.*

"Ah, a member of the Margone ducal family! I am Bertia Ibil Alphasta, Crown Princess of the Kingdom of Alphasta!" Bertia proclaimed proudly, making every effort to embody the role of someone of great significance.

In this situation, etiquette required that the lower-ranking Lady Margone, simply a noble, introduce herself first. However, taken aback by the unexpected arrival of the Crown Princess of Alphasta, Lady Margone was left speechless, giving an enthusiastic Bertia the chance to announce herself instead.

This development undoubtedly cast a negative light on Lady Margone's etiquette. Bertia naturally grasped these protocols thoroughly… yet she may have become overwhelmed in the heat of the moment.

Personally, I think it was a good move on her part—especially against Lady Margone.

"Ah! My apologies. It is an honor to meet the Crown Princess of the esteemed Alphasta. I am Magawana Margone from the Margone ducal family," Lady Margone said quickly, bowing as her expression contorted as if she had just tasted something foul, having recognized her etiquette misstep a moment too late.

Her entourage quickly bowed as well, but without introductions from Lady June or an invitation from Bertia, they could not share names or formal greetings.

In the midst of this, Bertia nodded with satisfaction, while Lady June looked at her as though she were a savior.

"Please, raise your head, Lady Margone."

Prompted by Bertia, Lady Margone straightened up, though her expression remained bitter.

"Pardon me, but I was inviting my friend, Countess Silconia, to a tea party. Do you have an issue with that?" Lady Margone inquired, her voice filled with annoyance.

Bertia let out a soft chuckle in response.

"Of course, there's an issue! I had already arranged to have tea with her. Isn't it quite inconsiderate to disrupt such plans?"

"What?!" Lady Margone pivoted quickly to face Lady June, who greeted her with a radiant, cheerful smile, nodding affirmatively.

Despite Lady June's earlier efforts to convey her prior commitment, Lady Margone had not listened, neglecting the "who with" aspect of their conversation. With the revelation of the other party, Lady Margone appeared to finally grasp the seriousness of her mistake.

"I understand. It was rather sly of you not to inform me, Lady June," Lady Margone remarked, managing a forced smile while shooting a sharp glare at Lady June. Lady June flinched briefly, but recalling her strong ally in Bertia, she took a deep breath and straightened up.

"I apologize. I attempted to express myself multiple times, but you spoke so quickly that I couldn't find the opportunity to interject…"

In essence, Lady June expressed her frustration about not being able to speak, as Lady Margone had dominated the conversation. With a concerned look, Lady June quickly offered her apologies, making it difficult to blame her. However, this criticism likely unsettled Lady Margone, whose fan creaked in response, as if it were lamenting.

"I apologize for that… Let's plan our tea party for tomorrow instead."

Ah, she plans to relieve today's frustrations in the future.

"I'm sorry, but starting now, Lady June, Princess Lysonna, and I plan to host tea parties daily! While this will eat into your time with

your friend, Lady June has kindly agreed to indulge my whims!" Bertia declared passionately.

Next to her, Lady June, who had previously turned pale at Lady Margone's mention of "tomorrow," suddenly brightened, nodding enthusiastically while sporting a wide smile.

"What?!" Lady Margone found herself momentarily speechless, her eyes darting between Bertia and Lady June.

This essentially eliminated any opportunity for her to express her frustrations toward Lady June. Additionally, Princess Lysonna's participation in the tea parties indicated a strong bond with Lady June, implying that even after we returned home, intervention by anyone would be challenging.

Even if Lady Margone were to marry the First Prince and ultimately become the Crown Princess, the prospect of confronting two sisters-in-law and the Second Prince's wife, who would likely work together against her, would prevent any impulsive decisions. *Indeed, Bertia is impressive.*

However, it's probable that she did not have any such intentions with her actions.

"Isn't it somewhat arrogant to interfere in another country's royal family?"

"Oh, not in the least! I am the Crown Princess of Alphasta! It's perfectly fine to express my wishes!"

"But, even as the Crown Princess of Alphasta, these actions might cause international problems!"

"Why would my desire to host tea parties with my friends result in international problems?"

The dialogue between Bertia and Lady Margone was starkly contrasting. Bertia appeared genuinely puzzled, unaware of the underlying meanings. In contrast, Lady Margone perceived Bertia's naivety as either a pretense of ignorance or a purposeful challenge.

The atmosphere was tense… or rather, everyone *except* Bertia appeared to feel it, which made the scene oddly amusing to observe

—almost like watching a comedy, once you understood the situation correctly.

"Ha… You plan to hide behind the power of a great nation, do you? But whether Prince Cecil of Alphasta would allow such behavior is another matter. I've heard that Prince Cecil and my father became quite close during their recent audience," Lady Margone said, her smile brimming with misplaced confidence.

However, I have no recollection of becoming close with her father.

Ah, that's right. Duke Margone—her father—*happened to have a wealth of potentially useful, yet poorly guarded, secrets.* Keeping him talking had been easy with just a bit of encouragement, allowing me to multitask while he unwittingly spilled information.

He must have mistaken that for genuine camaraderie.

Well, it's refreshing to have that little mystery cleared up.

Regardless, there's no way I would ever side with Duke Margone. Aligning with someone so riddled with leaks would bring nothing but loss. The best strategy is to extract what's useful… and let him flounder and self-destruct on his own.

"That's not true! Lord Cecil always supports my actions." Bertia's confidence faded as soon as Lady Margone mentioned my name. She didn't have to fret. Supporting her and keeping an eye on her actions had turned into a bit of a hobby for me.

"Oh, across history, women who exploit their status for personal gain have consistently faced disapproval from men. Lady Bertia, please be cautious," Lady Margone advised, though her tone seemed to reflect her own circumstances.

At that moment, every man observing this exchange seemed put off by Lady Margone's remarks. But rather than dwelling on that, it was more important to comfort Bertia, who might have begun to worry that I was displeased with her.

It might be time for me to step in.

"You're having an interesting conversation," I remarked as I approached.

"Lord Cecil…" Bertia's voice softened.

"Pr-Prince Cecil!" Lady Margone's eyes sparkled with surprise and delight at my arrival. "It's a pleasure to meet you for the first time! I am Magawana, the daughter of Duke Margone. I look forward to your acquaintance."

As I walked over to Bertia, Lady Margone bowed and began her introduction. She might have been excited to meet me, but addressing someone of higher status without a formal introduction was a breach of etiquette.

By the way, my initial remark was either directed at Bertia or just a passing mumble, so using it as an excuse to speak to me wouldn't really hold up, would it?

But it's fine. I have something I want to say to her.

"Ah, I did meet with Duke Margone recently. He's quite a character," I remarked, implying amusement—certainly not admiration—and nothing more.

"Oh, my father would be delighted to hear that!" she responded, likely unaware of the sarcasm hidden in my words.

"I've also heard about you from Duke Margone."

"Oh, my father…" Lady Margone blushed slightly at my words, her reaction betraying a flicker of self-consciousness even before I shared what I'd heard.

Well, perhaps that makes it all the more satisfying to bring her down a notch.

"Duke Margone seems very fond of you. He mentioned with a laugh how spoiling you too much since childhood has resulted in you becoming quite a selfish daughter."

"Oh! Ho ho… I do tend to be overly indulged by my father," she replied quickly, tensing at the word *"selfish"* but forcing a smile in an attempt to deflect gracefully.

It's awkward, isn't it? Especially since she just berated Bertia for being willful, claiming such women are disliked.

"He mentioned he always ends up giving you whatever you want… even if it belongs to someone else," I added, watching her

reaction closely.

At that, even Lady Margone fell silent, her complexion paling slightly.

"That hair ornament is lovely," I said with a smile, nodding toward the exquisite pearl piece she wore.

I had made it a point to familiarize myself with pertinent information about key figures in this country beforehand.

"Isn't that an heirloom of Viscountess Paul's family, handed down through generations? It's intriguing how you came to own such a piece… yet it truly is splendid. I believe it would dazzle even more in its rightful setting."

Her breathing was nearly audible. Naturally. The pearl hair ornament she wore had been forcibly taken after she admired it at a party, and it was originally worn by the Viscountess Paul.

"That's not it! This is, um… something I borrowed from her…"

"For the daughter of a duke to need to borrow something from a Viscountess… That must be challenging," I remarked.

Taken by surprise, she found it difficult to formulate a believable excuse. Unless the item was exceptionally unique or lent by someone of higher standing, claiming to have "borrowed" it usually served as a weak justification among nobility. It hinted at a serious financial dilemma, implying that one could not afford such luxuries independently.

For nobles, who placed immense value on appearances, few things were more dishonorable.

"No, that's not what I meant… Um…"

"Were you so charmed by it that you felt compelled to wear it, even if it meant borrowing?" I asked lightly. "However, to avoid any *misunderstandings*, it would be wise to return it promptly… Of course, in the same pristine condition it was lent to you."

Her expression tightened with displeasure, but Lady Margone reluctantly agreed. "I shall do so. I appreciate your advice." She removed the hair ornament and handed it to one of her attendants, presumably to ensure its return.

"It's commendable how promptly the duke's daughter acts. I'm sure you'll also extend your gratitude to Viscountess Paul, who lent it to you… and, of course, make amends for any potential misfortune that may have befallen her during its absence."

"Of course, that goes without saying!"

Failing to express thanks for a borrowed item would be a failing not just as a noble but as a person.

And naturally, any sudden misfortunes occurring around the lender must be avoided at all costs. Should anything of the sort happen… at the very least, I would consider her responsible.

Lady Margone, seemingly understanding my implication, acknowledged my point with a face that blended irritation and reluctant acceptance.

"Good. I'm sure this matter will come up during their tea parties later. Princess Lysonna will certainly appreciate your sincere actions."

"I understand."

Princess Lysonna can be trusted to handle matters in our absence. Being of royal blood, she's adept at navigating these situations and ensuring proper decorum. Her strong will means she won't be easily overwhelmed, unlike Lady June.

And if, for some reason, things still go awry… I have plenty of ways to intervene. I've already gathered the necessary information, and doing so wouldn't take much effort.

"Ah, and one more thing…"

As I addressed her again, Lady Margone's face tensed, clearly bracing for whatever might come next.

"Men may disdain the whims of just any woman, but they're often quite tolerant—fond, even—of the whims of someone special. Just as your father finds your whims endearing, I find my wife's whims to be charming."

I cast a glance at Bertia, who had been watching our exchange with an anxious expression. Her face softened into a relieved smile—one that contrasted sharply with Lady Margone's, which was now twisted in displeasure.

“Now then, we shouldn’t keep Princess Lysonna waiting. Shall we go, both of you?”

I gently took Bertia’s hand, resuming my role as her escort. At the same time, I gave a subtle glance to the side, prompting the guards and maids who had been waiting nearby to swiftly approach.

“Will Zeno be escorting Lady June, or will Kuro do it?” I asked, glancing at Zeno.

Before he could answer, Kuro quickly stepped forward and took Lady June’s hand.

It seemed perhaps Kuro was jealous of Zeno escorting her?

While Zeno offered a wry smile at Kuro’s sudden move, he didn’t appear displeased—in fact, he seemed quietly pleased.

Lady June looked a bit bewildered at first but, perhaps due to Kuro’s youthful appearance, accepted her escort with a bemused smile.

“Then, we’ll take our leave.”

Ignoring Lady Margone, who glared at Bertia as we departed, we made our way toward the tea party venue.

Still, Lady Margone, do you not remember that Bertia holds a status where she truly could “wear her power as a cloak” against you?

Part Two

When we arrived at the tea party, Princess Lysonna awaited us with a visibly displeased expression.

“You both are quite late, aren’t you? I trust you’ll explain your reasons to me?”

“Ah… I sincerely apologize, Princess Lysonna,” Lady June said, bowing deeply as she shrank under the princess’ evident displeasure.

“Oh, does this mean you won’t explain why you were late?” Princess Lysonna appeared even more frustrated by Lady June’s

quick apology.

With her fingertips tapping a rhythmic pattern on the table, she directed a stern gaze at Lady June. Although it was true that our tardiness was an issue, her attitude appeared overly severe. The contrast between her present demeanor and her behavior alongside Prince Aleis was striking.

Her irritation could arise from more than our lateness; she could also be adjusting her behavior around him.

"No, it's simply that…"

"So, will you share the reason or not?"

"Well…"

Lady June felt entirely overwhelmed by Princess Lysonna's assertive demeanor, finding it difficult to articulate the situation, despite only needing to recount the events.

Just as I began to feel it was the right moment to intervene and diffuse the situation…

"Oh, Princess Lysonna! You were worried something might have happened to us!" Bertia exclaimed joyously before I could open my mouth.

I can't help but think, considering the tense atmosphere and the strangeness of her remark, whether Bertia's heart is, in fact, made of iron.

"I-I just wanted to know what happened to you two…"

"So, you were truly concerned about us! Thank you so much!"

"But I was trying to say…" Princess Lysonna, who had made Lady June so flustered, now found herself on the defensive with Bertia. The fact that she blushed could indicate that perhaps Bertia's interpretation was closer to the truth.

"Eh? Princess Lysonna?"

Lady June, shocked by the interaction between Bertia and Princess Lysonna, gazed at the princess in astonishment.

"What is it?!… All right, we can talk about it over tea," she said, averting her gaze in a way that partly hid her embarrassment, before signaling her personal maids who were waiting nearby.

They promptly began preparing for the tea party.

"By the way, why is a gentleman here?" Whether trying to shift the conversation or genuinely curious about my presence, Princess Lysonna flicked her fan open, obscuring the lower half of her face as she looked in my direction.

Her glance was not as openly furious as the one aimed at Lady June, yet it still revealed her unease and mistrust.

"I apologize. I intended to accompany my wife today. I treasure every moment spent with her and also hope to be amicable with the women near her," I explained.

"Oh, is that why? It's nice to see such a good relationship," she commented, her tone laced with sarcasm, but she appeared to accept my explanation as she closed her fan.

While her demeanor toward me was far from warm—understandably so, given that I had essentially invited myself—her acceptance was still somewhat gracious.

"Oh, Princess Lysonna! Being called friends like that makes me blush!" Bertia chimed in.

Bertia, you do realize that was meant sarcastically, right? Or… is there actually a part of her that's envious?

"Really, Lady Bertia always seems so happy… I'm quite envious."

Bertia's blithe response earned a sigh and an exasperated look from Princess Lysonna.

The quietly muttered *"I'm quite envious"* at the end was likely her true feelings.

This could be useful.

With a bright idea in mind, I glanced at Zeno, then signaled toward a corner of the building facing the garden—the site of our tea party.

Following my gaze, Zeno looked at the building, nodded in understanding, and whispered something to Milma nearby.

Indeed, Milma might be just the right person for this task.

"Do you not get tired of talking with Lady Bertia, Prince Cecil?"

"Do you get tired?" I countered with a question of my own.

Princess Lysonna hurriedly shook her head. "No! I mean, not really tired. Lady Bertia has a wealth of topics and is full of creativity… It's enjoyable."

Just like me, Princess Lysonna seemed both exhilarated and exhausted by Bertia's dynamic presence. But that didn't mean she didn't want to be around her.

In fact, it was quite the opposite for me—I married her precisely because I *wanted* to be with her.

I'd frankly admit that if asked, Princess Lysonna, less forthright, tends to speak in ways that come off as sarcastic—almost reflexively so.

Realizing her comment might have sounded negative, she quickly tried to backtrack. But the fact that she could backtrack like that was thanks to Bertia.

Without her, Lady June would likely see Princess Lysonna as intimidating or overly stern.

As for me… Well, I'm not particularly concerned, but without Bertia, even I might find Princess Lysonna more difficult to engage with.

And both Lady June and I would likely be far less inclined to approach her at all.

"Princess Lysonna! I also find talking with you very enjoyable!" Bertia exclaimed, throwing her arms around Princess Lysonna with a beaming smile.

"Hey! Be careful! And that's not very ladylike!"

Though startled, Princess Lysonna's face flushed red as she hurriedly tried to return Bertia's embrace. Her eyes didn't narrow in irritation but soften, crinkling with what looked very much like joy.

Watching their interaction… It was odd, but somehow, Princess Lysonna—who was usually so strict and outspoken—seemed just like any other reasonable person in their company.

Perhaps, in this way, their dynamic is perfectly balanced.

"That's nice…" Lady June's quiet murmur reached my ears as she watched the two with a gentle gaze, clearly envious of their

rapport.

As I continued observing the ladies, Zeno softly called my name. Following his cue, I glanced toward the corner of the building we had signaled earlier.

One of the windows, previously closed, was now open.

It seems Milma successfully executed our plan.

Now, if we can steer the conversation smoothly… everything should fall into place.

"You two, rather than playing around, why not settle down?"

"Playing around? That's all because of your wife!"

"I always enjoy the company of Princess Lysonna; I really admire her!"

Even though Princess Lysonna responded to my remark, Bertia's proclamation of love caused her to blush deeply and rendered her speechless again.

That's right, you haven't experienced friends who openly convey their feelings like this back in your homeland, have you? Hearing someone say "I love you" is unfamiliar to you, and it makes you feel embarrassed.

"Ahem. So, Prince Cecil, what are your plans after escorting Lady Bertia? You aren't thinking of attending a ladies' tea party, are you?" After a slight cough, as if striving to regain her composure and with an expression that clearly conveyed, "Don't interfere," Princess Lysonna inquired.

That's okay. I realize I'm the unusual one in this situation. After I finish my tasks, I will leave quickly.

"Naturally, I wouldn't want to impose. However, since my wife was excited about the tea party, I thought it would be nice to bring a small gift."

As I raised my hand slightly, one of the waiting maids approached, holding a basket. She lifted the cloth that covered it to provide a clearer view of its contents, tilting it gently. Inside the basket were a canister, skewered lemons, and various traditional sweets from our country.

“Eh? Lord Cecil, what’s going on?” Bertia, not knowing I had a surprise contribution, appeared taken aback.

“While traveling to the Seahealby kingdom, I discovered a plant that appeared to be the herbal tea ingredients Tia expressed interest in trying. I discreetly verified its safety and enhanced the flavor, preparing herbal tea. Although I originally intended to surprise you with it after we got home, I realized it would be more enjoyable to share it now at a tea party with close friends.”

This was indeed true. I consistently strove to meet my wife’s desires to the best of my ability, carefully listening to her words. On this occasion, I merely happened to find the herbal tea ingredients that Bertia had referred to.

The safety checks, drying, and flavor adjustments likely relied on Zeno’s abilities and connections, especially regarding spirits. Considering the duration of our journey, any discrepancies can be easily overlooked and shouldn’t be an issue.

“The herbal tea I wanted to try? Ah! Does lemon indicate it’s the color-changing tea?” At first confused, Bertia’s expression transformed into a radiant smile upon noticing the lemon, as if she were recalling our earlier conversation.

“A tea that changes color? That’s something I’ve never come across. What about you, Lady June?”

“I haven’t heard of it either,” Lady June replied. Both she and Princess Lysonna seemed intrigued by Bertia’s mention.

“It begins as a lovely blue, reminiscent of Lord Cecil’s eyes! But when lemon or lime is added, it transforms into a lively purple!” Bertia enthusiastically lifted the can of herbal tea from the basket, gazing at it with affection.

“This lovesickness,” whispered Princess Lysonna.

“Totally lovesick,” Lady June concurred as both smiled at Bertia, their expressions softening despite the light teasing.

Certainly, to some, this might appear as lovesickness. I recognize this, yet my wife often gravitates toward items in my color, making it somewhat unavoidable.

Additionally, a color-changing herbal tea that shifted into such a delightful shade had the potential to become popular among the nobility—and possibly grow into a thriving industry. The plans for sourcing seeds of the raw materials were already in place. We would gather what we could carry on our return journey and schedule the shipment of the remainder for a later date.

Upon returning home, we would begin developing cultivation techniques to support gradual mass production.

We must act swiftly and carefully before the source countries realize the value of the raw materials and raise the prices.

"Princess Lysonna, Lady June, may I brew this tea?"

Clutching the can tightly in excitement, Bertia turned to them. Both nodded with smiles, clearly agreeing to her request.

After witnessing such gleeful anticipation, refusing her would have been difficult.

"Prince Cecil really spoils Lady Bertia, doesn't he?" Princess Lysonna remarked, watching Bertia practically bounce with joy as the maids began preparing the tea.

Lady June seemed a bit uncomfortable being sandwiched between me and Princess Lysonna without Bertia nearby. Instead, she chose to watch Bertia as she helped with the tea preparation. Kuro also lingered by Bertia's side, clearly interested.

"The privilege of spoiling the woman you love is reserved for the man she's with, don't you think? Is it different for Prince Aleis?"

Princess Lysonna drew a sharp breath and lowered her gaze for just a moment—enough to confirm my suspicions.

*Indeed, when I saw her with Prince Aleis the other day, there was a certain distance between them—*a *formality, even. That's why I chose to act as a model of marital bliss… but changes like that don't happen overnight. Especially not easily.*

For all her strong-willed appearance, Princess Lysonna strikes me as someone who struggles to express her true desires. Her life as a princess likely taught her to conceal any emotion that could reveal vulnerability, like insecurity or sadness. And that would make

it difficult for Prince Aleis to understand how to truly make her happy.

"He does give me gifts and treats me kindly. But he's a busy man…"

"So, you feel lonely?"

"I-I-I-I'm not saying I'm lonely at all!"

Princess Lysonna's face turned a vivid red, like a balloon ready to burst, as she vehemently denied my remark.

Seeing Bertia and the others react to her loud response, she quickly attempted to mask her anxiety, gesturing with her hand as if to dismiss it as unimportant.

"Sorry, I didn't anticipate such a response."

She likely felt surprised that I'd touched a nerve.

"No, I was simply taken aback by the unexpected remark. I'm not lonely… Not lonely in any way!"

It's evident that she feels lonely. Her denials, though passionate, make it too obvious.

"Lately, Prince Aleis has been showing a little more interest in me…"

That was good to hear. It seemed Prince Aleis was making an effort—perhaps learning something from observing us newlyweds.

"Still, when I look at Prince Cecil and Lady Bertia, I can't help but feel there's a distance between us."

Princess Lysonna's quiet admission of unease likely slipped out thanks to the relaxed atmosphere Bertia had naturally created.

But feeling a "sense of distance…" That's something worth pondering.

It's natural for couples to differ in how they interact and in how quickly they grow comfortable with one another. The issue arises when one side begins to feel the weight of that distance.

Bridging such a gap requires communication, a shared understanding, or at least a compromise on what constitutes a comfortable distance for both.

"Prince Aleis is kind and allows me the freedom to manage my own affairs. He is aware that I'm hosting this tea party but doesn't ask for details or participate in the same way that Prince Cecil does. I truly value his respect for my independence."

I understand. Granting her the freedom to act as she pleases can certainly be viewed as a kindness, particularly since Princess Lysonna appears to dislike being micromanaged or directed by others. Although Prince Aleis may have adopted this tactic, underneath her confident exterior, she probably yearns for attention and affection. While she values her independence, she also experiences loneliness—a truly complex character.

"I couldn't help but notice that this tea party has plenty of sweets, yet the table is missing any flowers. Is there a particular reason for that?"

Glancing at the table set for the tea party, I noticed it was laden with enticing sweets but lacked any floral decorations.

At my observation, Princess Lysonna looked slightly puzzled by the sudden change in topic, but she simply offered a wry smile and made no further comment.

"Unfortunately, I'm still not well-acquainted with the flowers of this country."

"Why not use flowers from the palace gardens?"

"While I mainly stay in the royal quarters, I'm not officially the Crown Princess yet, so I'm somewhat regarded as a guest. Each garden in the royal quarters is assigned to a member of the royal family, and since I don't possess a garden of my own, it would be inappropriate for me to take flowers from them. Furthermore, for a casual tea party with friends in the garden, having flowers on the table isn't necessary."

"Is that so?" I had somewhat anticipated her response, and it was just as I'd thought.

In truth, if she truly desired them, she could easily obtain flowers. Yet her reluctance to expressly ask likely stems from not yet

officially holding a position within this country, despite her nearly confirmed status.

She wouldn't hesitate over necessities meant for maintaining appearances, but this matter feels more personal… more delicate.

"Ah, but… I once saw the blue roses that Lord Cecil gave Lady Bertia," Princess Lysonna said with a small smile. "She wanted to bring them with her when she married. She said they were so special, she propagated them at her family home to plant in the palace gardens."

"Lady Bertia is usually very kind and forgiving, a generous person… but when I asked if I could have a cutting of those roses, she said, 'These are too special for me to give away.' I remember feeling a bit envious then."

She laughed softly. "So, maybe when I have my own garden, I'll try growing flowers that match Prince Aleis's eyes or hair."

Cultivating flowers in Prince Aleis's hue may be meaningful to her; however, this "special" does not imply it was "given by Prince Aleis." She likely does not expect that.

"Prince Aleis would surely be thrilled to hear that. He might even bring you flowers that match your color or his own, right away."

"Oh! While that would make me very happy, he's far too busy for such gestures… and I wouldn't express such a trivial desire."

"Really?"

"Yes… I'm not as direct or charming as Lady Bertia. Making such requests would feel 'whimsical' or 'troublesome.' It's just not in my nature. Besides, it would suit me more to ask for jewels instead."

Princess Lysonna covered her mouth with her hand, letting out a soft chuckle. It seemed she had her own idea of her image—though it appeared to be quite skewed.

If only she would embrace her whims fully, speaking and acting as she truly wishes.

It seems she has her own set of special rules, distinguishing between the whims she allows herself to express and those she doesn't.

Ah, this is starting to feel complicated.

The herbal tea was already being poured into cups by one of the maids we had brought along. Soon, all the cups would be filled.

Bertia was watching the process with sparkling, joyful eyes.

I'd like to make my exit before the tea cools down, but I'm waiting for something crucial to arrive.

While I could leave it to their discretion, not being able to intervene if something goes awry feels somewhat irresponsible from the orchestrator's perspective.

As I mused over this and engaged in casual conversation, the awaited moment finally arrived.

"Excuse me, Princess Lysonna. I heard you're having a tea party. Although I can't attend, I brought these for you to enjoy in my absence," said Prince Aleis, slightly out of breath as he arrived.

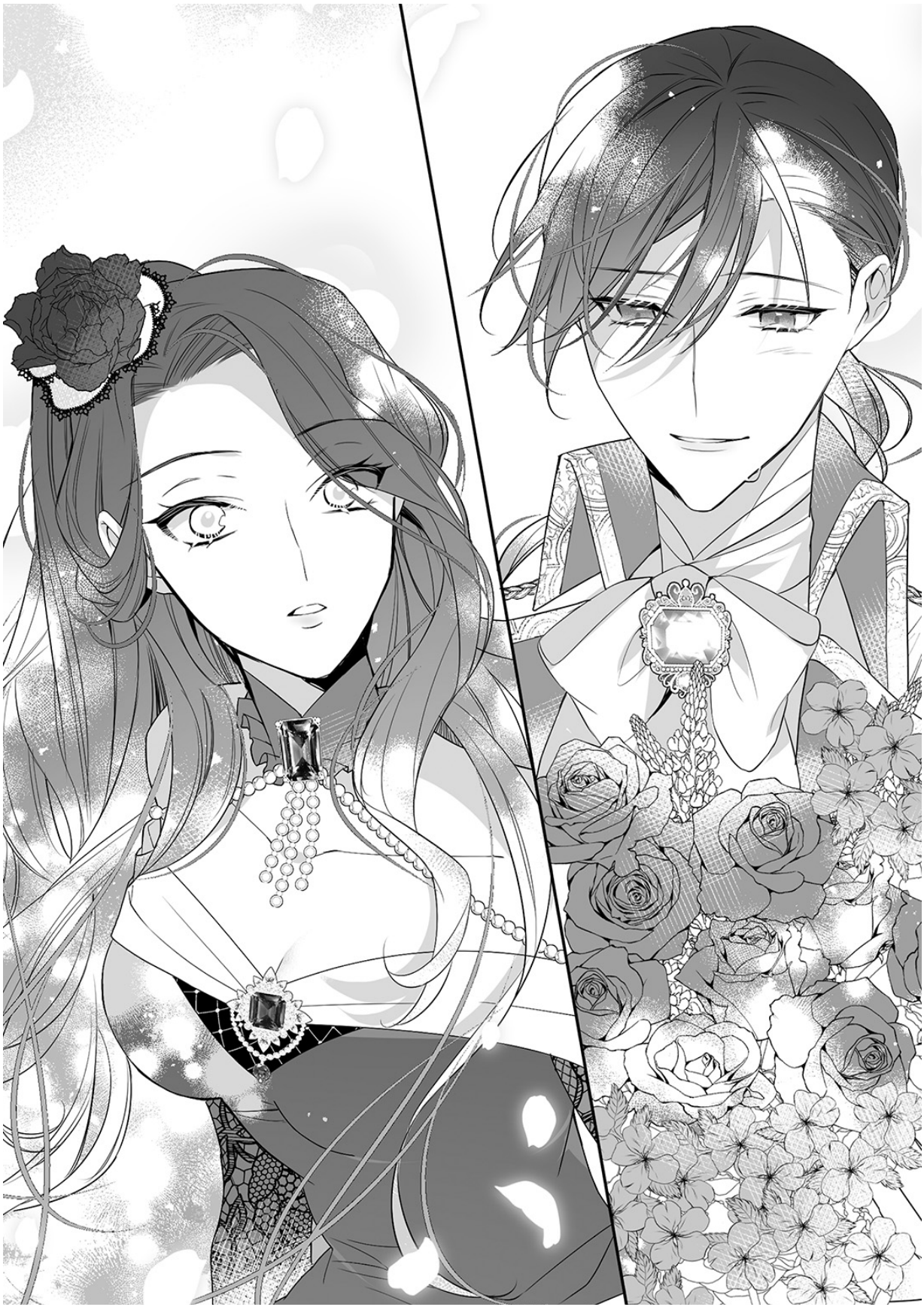
In his grasp was a bouquet that matched both Princess Lysonna's hair and eye colors, as well as his own. It was arranged with minimal decoration, save for a ribbon, implying it was assembled in a rush.

I might have played a role in bringing about this outcome.

"Oh? Prince Aleis, what brings you to this place?"

"I wanted to bring you happiness with these flowers," he said, taking a deep breath and giving a warm smile as he handed over the bouquet.

"Eh? Why now…?"





Caught in a mix of surprise and confusion over the recent events, Princess Lysonna took the bouquet from Prince Aleis.

"You see, the window in my office, which ought to have been closed, was surprisingly open. I overheard your conversation and hurried to prepare something, though Prince Cecil managed to do it first," Prince Aleis clarified, glancing at me slyly.

He has reason to be suspicious of me… and he's correct in his suspicion.

Whether or not Princess Lysonna had intended it, the garden she selected for the tea party was clearly visible from Prince Aleis's office.

I had instructed Milma to open the office window to enhance our listening, and we utilized Zeno's wind abilities to transmit the voices. Naturally, we ensured the sound remained natural, avoiding any volume that might seem forced or unnatural.

Milma had returned long before Prince Aleis's arrival, likely escaping unnoticed thanks to her skill in moving stealthily and her background as an errand-runner—giving the illusion that the window had simply opened on its own.

It's only natural to feel uneasy about something like this; it almost resembles a ghost story. Among everyone, Prince Aleis's mistrust of me reveals his sharp insight. Naturally, I won't ever confess to being guilty.

Instead, I simply smiled at him, opting to remain silent.

"Ah, Prince Aleis, what a delight," Bertia said as she came closer with Kuro, trailed by Lady June.

"I apologize for interrupting, Lady Bertia, Lady June."

"Oh! What a beautiful bouquet! Is it a present from Prince Aleis to Princess Lysonna?"

"Um… I guess so?"

Although Princess Lysonna seemed confused, she looked back and forth between the bouquet and Prince Aleis, her nodding hesitant and flustered. Despite her troubled expression, she held the bouquet tightly to her chest, as if it were a precious treasure.

Though she may have been too overwhelmed or naturally reserved to show outright joy, her cheeks reddened, and her lips formed a faint smile.

Prince Aleis, seeing her reaction, smiled with relief and satisfaction as he watched her.

"This bouquet, Princess Lysonna, was swiftly arranged by Prince Aleis when he overheard your request for flowers to adorn the table, despite his hectic schedule," I explained.

"Seriously?! Was that the discussion?"

Princess Lysonna gazed at me, surprised, but I just nodded in return with a smile, omitting superfluous details to preserve the core of the story.

"How wonderful! That's pure love!"

"Love?!" Her face flushed an even darker shade of red at the mention of love.

Prince Aleis let out a soft chuckle as he tenderly draped an arm around her shoulders.

"What?! That's way too close! There needs to be an appropriate space between men and women!"

"The space between a man and a woman who are about to get married is precisely this," he replied.

"Who said that?!"

"How about the couple in front of us? They've shown it through their actions more than mere words." Prince Aleis, sporting a wry smile in my direction, appeared to have a faint blush on his cheeks too.

Regardless of the circumstances, I feel these two have genuine feelings for each other… Bertia, are you sure they're going to have a falling out, with Princess Lysonna becoming a villainess?

Observing the two of them made it difficult for me to envision that situation.

"I wish…" Lady June whispered again softly.

Unfortunately, I can't conjure up her betrothed, whose whereabouts are even unknown to us, into this scene.

“Enough, everyone! Please stop teasing me! Gentlemen, it’s time for you to leave. This gathering is for ladies from here on,” Princess Lysonna finally burst out, unable to contain her embarrassment any longer.

Though her version of “making a fuss” amounted more to gently swatting away hands than anything truly unladylike—as one might expect from her, rather than from Bertia.

“If you don’t hurry, the tea will become cold,” she remarked, turning away and shooing us off, her cheeks still tinged with embarrassment. Prince Aleis and I shared a knowing glance and laughed.

“I originally intended to just escort her here, but it appears I’ve lingered too long. So, it’s time for this intruder to take their leave. Bertia, I’ll see you later. Have a good time,” I remarked as I prepared to leave.

“Yes! Thank you for the amazing tea, Cecil!” Bertia responded, lifting the can she had been holding, her smile radiant.

I was truly happy that she was satisfied.

“Princess Lysonna, enjoy yourself as well. Remember, my garden is always open to you. No need for formalities, especially since you’ll be my wife soon. Once we’re married, let’s pick flowers to plant together,” Prince Aleis added.

“Thank you for the flowers. They’ll certainly brighten the table. As for the garden… I might just take you up on that offer,” she mumbled, still facing away, her tone blending anticipation and happiness, contrasting with how she’d spoken to me earlier when we were alone.

“And Lady June, please look after them for me. Also, ensure you report back on what we discussed here. Sharing information is important before anything unusual occurs,” I instructed.

“Thank you for your concern, Lord Cecil,” Lady June replied, bowing respectfully before Prince Aleis and me as we departed the gathering.

As we exited the venue and entered the building, we quickly arrived at the corridor where we would separate.

"Lord Cecil, I value your concern, but it's rather alarming. I would prefer a softer approach in the future, and if possible, a bit of warning," he stated.

"I'm not entirely sure what you mean… but I'll do my best to help," I responded.

"It's become clear to me that you are not someone to be made an enemy of."

"Well, I suppose it's better for both of us to have fewer enemies, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

We said goodbye with smiles; it was a friendly exchange.

Hey, Zeno. We were just having a casual conversation, so why do you seem so frightened?



Part One

As the day faded and shadows deepened, I had just completed my tasks and was considering going to dinner. Courtgain approached me from behind, radiating a quiet urgency.

"Lord Cecil, it appears Milma has arrived," he murmured, his voice almost inaudible.

I briefly glanced at the area that Courtgain had subtly indicated. There stood Milma, concealed behind a column, waiting for the perfect moment to emerge, her eyes reflecting anxious anticipation as she observed us. When she noticed that we were aware of her presence, she emerged from the shadows, a look of relief brightening her face.

"I'm sorry to interrupt during this busy moment, but I must talk to Lord Cecil…"

Before speaking to me, Milma turned to Courtgain with gratitude, nodding slightly in thanks. Courtgain returned the gesture with a small nod, as if to say, "Don't worry about it," and flashed her a brief smile. This short interaction appeared to spark joy in Milma.

Their straightforward interaction made me smile, but I noticed the knights responsible for our safety. Their faces showed disbelief as they watched Milma approach.

"What's happening, Milma? Shouldn't you be with Tia right now?" I asked, taking a moment to let the knights distance themselves while keeping them near enough to maintain their protective roles.

Since Milma was one of Bertia's maids, her appearance before me likely concerned Bertia. It seemed prudent to ensure that our conversation could take place with minimal listeners.

"After the earlier tea party, Princess Lysonna and Lady Bertia spoke, and since then, Tia has appeared unsettled. She expressed a need for solitude to reflect, remaining quietly in the courtyard's gazebo, lost in thought. Although I have arranged for a guard to ensure her safety, she looked so despondent that I felt it necessary to inform you…"

Is Bertia feeling down? That's certainly out of character. Since it's after the tea party, it's improbable that she's just hungry or missed any snacks.

"I appreciate you informing me. Dinner time is nearing, so I'll visit her to understand her thoughts."

"Thank you. I promised to assist with dinner preparations, so I'll go to the dining hall now," Milma said, her face brightening into a smile at my words. Her demeanor clearly reflected her affection for Bertia. It might be appropriate to acknowledge her for taking the initiative to report this issue.

"Courtgain, I'll go get Tia. Can you please take Milma with you?"

"Eh?!" Milma exclaimed in astonishment, her face turning red as if it could burst, while Courtgain bowed his head respectfully.

"As night falls, it's wise to be careful when a lady is walking alone," I said. While Milma, in her role as a maid, might work late and even gather intelligence and was certainly able to defend herself, this gesture was meant as a reward. It was appropriate for Courtgain to escort her as a "delicate lady."

"Um, would that trouble Lord Courtgain?" Milma asked, her pleasure and excitement evident, though she looked at Courtgain hesitantly.

Courtgain chuckled with a wry smile and shook his head. “I’ve completed my duties for today. My last task was to accompany the prince, so if he allows it, I have no objections.”

Although “escorting” her only involved walking her to the dining hall with guards present, it was fundamentally a polite gesture.

“Then I will entrust her to your care, Courtgain.”

“Understood. I will make sure she is accompanied properly,” he replied, extending his arm to Milma as they left together. A short distance away, I observed how Milma’s presence appeared to diminish noticeably—a fascinating quality that had always captured my interest.

“Hey, Zeno. Don’t you think her unusual talent for blending into the background is strange? Any idea why that is?” I called upon my guardian spirit Zeno before summoning the guards back, still watching the two of them walk away.

“Even though you asked, you must already have the answer in mind, right?”

“Perhaps, but there’s a chance I might be wrong.”

“You’re not mistaken. You understand exactly what it is. Some spirits have difficulty perceiving such matters, you know?”

“But you get what I mean, right?”

Zeno sighed and shrugged, a wry smile on his face. “Should I consider that a sign of trust and feel happy, or should I mourn the pressure you’re placing on me?”

“It’s about trust,” I reassured him, despite his objections.

“That certainly feels more like pressure! You’re quite the cute and challenging prince.”

“Challenging? At this age, I’m far from being called ‘cute’ anymore.”

“Ah, pursuing what was never within reach even during your childhood—how foolish of me,” Zeno remarked, his shoulders sagging in feigned despair.

I greeted him with a warm smile. In spite of everything, he had grown more expressive over time, a transformation I found quite

endearing.

"So, what actions will you take regarding Milma?"

"Nothing needs to be done. This is not a situation that calls for intervention."

Certainly, I had suspected Milma's unusual ability to remain unnoticed, but it didn't require any specific action. This trait was an integral part of her identity, deserving both acceptance and careful observation.

I will act if needed, and if an opportunity arises to address it, I'll take it. But that's all there is to it.

"If Tia begins to fret about it, then I'll re-consider," I stated firmly.

"So ultimately, it hinges on Lady Bertia, right?" came the response, recognizing where my true priorities were.

"My attention is on Tia, after all," I asserted with a smile at Zeno, who looked quite exasperated. The ability to profess something so meaningful without hesitation or doubt filled me with joy.

In truth, it might be more beneficial for me to have something or someone as equally important as Bertia in my life. However, due to my challenges in forming such connections, I treasure moments like these when I can truly appreciate the importance of my sole devotion.

"It's nearly refreshingly simple," the comment came, with a hint of teasing.

"More importantly, it sounds like my wife is feeling down, so I need to go to her right away," I remarked, disregarding Zeno's sigh. I redirected our talk to the real concern—Bertia's distress and sadness.

I should go and provide her comfort, potentially stopping any impulsive actions before they occur.

"Come on, let's move," I gestured to the guards, signaling that it was time to head to the courtyard.

Part Two

After leaving the guards at the courtyard entrance, I headed to the gazebo where Bertia was seated.

“Tia, what’s the matter?”

At the sound of my voice, Bertia, who had been blankly gazing at the garden, glanced up with a look of surprise.

“Lord Cecil, why are you here?”

“Dinner is almost ready. I heard you were here and came to get you,” I said, deliberately leaving out the fact that Milma had informed me. Milma’s choice to update me stemmed from her concern for Bertia, but I thought Bertia might prefer not to know.

As I spoke, Bertia quickly glanced around, her eyes flickering about. When she saw the darkening sky, she lowered her head. ”Oh, is it that time already? I apologize for being late.”

It was surprising that she had been outside for so long without noticing the darkness until I mentioned it.

This truly indicated how absorbed she had been in her thoughts.

“Come on, let’s—”

“Tia, please sit down,” I cut in, preventing Bertia from quickly rising, attempting to resume her normal behavior, and encouraged her to sit again.

“Lord Cecil?”

I smiled at Bertia, who seemed confused and was perhaps wondering why we weren’t on our way to dinner. Gently, I took a seat next to her and held her hand.

“Hey, Tia. Is something bothering you?”

“Eh?! No, no, not at all! I swear, there’s nothing!”

“Your reaction pretty much indicates there is,” I joked, unable to suppress a smile at her transparent lie.

“It’s really nothing serious. Well, it is serious, but there’s nothing I can do about it… More like, I can only watch from the sidelines…” Bertia murmured quietly, her eyes downcast.

"So, what's bothering you?" I urged a little more assertively, recognizing her reluctance to share with me.

"Can we keep this just between us?" She gazed up at me with imploring eyes, and I nodded in reassurance.

"Today, I had a… consultation? A venting session? With Lady Lysonna. I can't delve into specifics as it pertains to her feelings, but…"

"It's okay. I just want to know what's on your mind."

Princess Lysonna is just a princess from another nation, engaged to the crown prince of yet another realm. Her issues do not concern me.

Additionally, if understanding what Princess Lysonna conveyed is essential for addressing Bertia's worries, I can easily obtain the information from other sources besides Bertia.

"I should have known, but I didn't understand," Bertia whispered softly, prompting me to urge her to continue for clarity.

"Recently, Prince Aleis has been attending tea parties more often, bringing along sweets and flowers. In light of the novel, I believed that the future was looking brighter. However, I've begun to observe the reactions of others toward Prince Aleis…"

"Ahh, I see…"

I started to understand her concerns. Essentially, Bertia was beginning to grasp the sensitive role Prince Aleis held in this country.

Understanding that someone is in a "delicate position" and witnessing their treatment firsthand are two vastly different experiences.

Knowing about bullying is one thing; seeing it unfold in real time is entirely different.

"In my presence, it's not as if he's being openly harassed. Everyone treats Prince Aleis with the respect due to a crown prince and seems to rely on him for his competence. But there's a subtle distance… as if they're handling a fragile object," she explained.

"Indeed, I've felt that too."

Since arriving in the kingdom of Seahealby, I had encountered Prince Aleis on several occasions within the royal palace. He always seemed busy with work, yet the interactions of those around him remained strictly professional.

The kind of casual banter or flattery aimed at gauging moods, which people around me often engaged in, was noticeably absent around him. And, naturally, he didn't have close aides like Courtgain or Charles for me.

No, that's not quite right.

There are a few individuals who seem to play such roles, but they too maintain a professional distance that makes any personal closeness hard to discern, blending in with the rest.

I've noticed them exchange looks in fleeting moments, so I suppose it's more about "appearing so on the surface," and they are actually close.

Likely, it's a consideration of their positions as nobles. Should Prince Ramtak ascend as crown prince, Prince Aleis could be seen as an inconvenience. Being seen as close to him might be deemed inappropriate, given the circumstances.

Conversely, servants of common birth, who were not directly involved in the noble hierarchy, clearly showed their affection for Prince Aleis.

Given the situation, it was likely that Prince Aleis enjoyed considerable popularity outside the palace walls.

I suspect that many nobles, merely out of respect for Prince Ramtak, restrain themselves. Deep down, they might wish to become closer to Prince Aleis.

This dynamic probably hinges on Prince Aleis's position becoming more secure—and his relationship with Prince Ramtak stabilizing—at which point their true sentiments might surface.

"Upon hearing Princess Lysonna's story, it seems the situation is worse than what I had vaguely sensed," Bertia shared, a hint of concern coloring her voice.

"What specifically?"

"Well, I can't say exactly… but it seems there's quite a bit of harassment happening away from the public eye… mostly from Prince Ramtak."

"Ah, him. That does sound like something he would do."

Bertia, despite claiming she couldn't reveal much, has actually said quite a bit, hasn't she?

I wonder if she believes it's acceptable as long as she doesn't disclose the specific details of the harassment. The distinction isn't entirely clear to me.

"It appears that in public, a certain decorum is maintained, but in private, there are many disparaging remarks directed at Prince Aleis," she explained further.

"I see," I responded, grasping the gravity of the situation.

Indeed, that would be consistent with what I knew.

Although my interactions with Prince Ramtak had been limited, I couldn't say they had left me with a favorable impression of him.

He often adopted a haughty demeanor toward servants and likely looked down on women as well.

If someone like me, a member of a major nation's royalty, is involved, he makes an effort to foster good relations and secure cooperation—but his attitude toward others tends to be domineering.

For Prince Ramtak, the existence of Prince Aleis, who currently held a higher position but was seen merely as a placeholder until he turned twenty and inherited the role of crown prince, was problematic.

Even if Prince Aleis loses the title of crown prince, his status as a royal brother demands a certain level of respect.

Yet once Ramtak becomes the crown prince, Aleis will officially be of lower status.

In Prince Ramtak's view, Aleis is someone he can look down upon from now on, but public scrutiny prevents this. This discrepancy likely fuels his frustration.

Operating under the belief that he won't be reprimanded if his actions remain unseen and anticipating no retribution from Prince Aleis himself in the future, Ramtak's hostility is directed at Aleis.

From my perspective, such thinking is foolish.

"Princess Lysonna, hailing from Umyuve, feels unsettled by this treatment and is quite frustrated. Yet, reacting poorly could further complicate Prince Aleis's situation, so she chooses to endure. Meanwhile, Prince Aleis feigns indifference, though it seems he, too, is struggling," Bertia elaborated.

"It's a complex issue. As a royal of Umyuve, she can file a protest through her country, but its effectiveness is uncertain, particularly given that the power dynamics between Seahealby and Umyuve do not vary greatly."

The scenario would change if it involved Seahealby and Alphasta. Alphasta, being significantly larger than Seahealby, clearly had a superior military strength, leaving Seahealby with little possibility of winning in a conflict. This imbalance could create circumstances that would prompt someone married to an Alphasta citizen to express dissatisfaction to their homeland, which could result in serious issues. Hence, instead of the current tacit acceptance, a quicker response might have been expected, or this kind of harassment could have been entirely avoided.

"Princess Lysonna's marriage to Prince Aleis will greatly assist him. However, if she manages matters poorly, it could endanger Prince Aleis's standing. Although their union is generally advantageous, it is crucial for them to consider their actions carefully."

"Princess Lysonna expressed similar sentiments. She understood the difficult situation Prince Aleis was in, but she hadn't expected it to be this tough. Prince Ramtak once advised her that 'being Aleis's wife is so hard, you'd be better off quitting and going home,' yet she is determined not to give up, as her feelings for Prince Aleis are deep. Nevertheless, she felt disheartened by the current struggles."

Bertia’s expression grew serious, likely due to worry for Princess Lysonna.

This difficulty was precisely why Princess Lysonna had been caught off guard.

Although Prince Aleis’s position was unstable, it was an integral part of the country’s system.

For generations, this scenario had occurred without significant problems, as it rarely sparked controversy.

This system follows a defined protocol—no individual can become crown prince until they reach twenty years of age, and the crown prince can be changed when necessary, with this being recognized as standard practice.

Provided no one intentionally causes disruption, operations should continue seamlessly within this structure.

So, why was Prince Aleis’s case particularly troublesome? It wasn’t due to any fault of his own. Regardless of his personal feelings, Prince Aleis had shown no overt attachment to his position thus far.

Then, who was causing the disturbance? It was Prince Ramtak, the first prince. Discontent with having to lend out the crown prince position, even temporarily, and envious of Prince Aleis’s popularity among the people, he harassed Prince Aleis without provocation, driven purely by dislike.

Consequently, the attitudes of those around Prince Aleis, anticipating the future crown prince’s displeasure, had led to Prince Aleis being treated as if he were a delicate matter.

I couldn’t help but smile wryly at Bertia’s disheartened slouch.

Was she unaware that her friends were drawn to her and offered their support because of her character?

“Tia, you’re charming just as you are.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Look, you’re missing the point… Consider it like this: you consistently greet everyone with a smile, regardless of differences.

This creates a positive environment and attracts others to you. This is crucial for a crown princess."

"So, acting with a smile is important?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

Certainly, there's much more, but many people have found comfort in her smile. Recently, the king of Seahealby requested Bertia's presence in discussions due to her calming influence.

Does that mean discussions with me require soothing to such an extent, even if they last only an hour? Or does he simply wish to see Bertia's smile?

If it's the latter, I should perhaps avoid arranging meetings between him and Bertia in the future.

If it's the former… maybe I should try to become a source of comfort myself, with thirty percent more smiles?

The last time I tried something similar, everyone around seemed oddly intimidated, but that must have been my imagination.

"The other thing is to increase your circle of friends. In this regard, you're already lending your strength, aren't you?"

Bertia tilted her head in confusion, not grasping the meaning.

She genuinely seemed oblivious to the impact of her own actions on others, probably because doing her best for others had become second nature to her. The concept of "doing something for someone" might be somewhat foreign to her.

"It's about Lady June."

"Ah! That's right. I had forgotten."

Bertia's smile brightened upon my reminder, clearly understanding what I was getting at. She truly looked better smiling than frowning.

"Yes, indeed. Princess Lysonna is doing her best, and Lady June is very supportive of her. Everything will surely work out well! Oh, but…"

"What's wrong?"

After a moment of relief, Bertia's expression clouded again, as if she had just remembered another concern.

"I was thinking… Even if things turn out well for Princess Lysonna, what will happen to Prince Aleis?"

"Prince Aleis, huh?"

Indeed, mediating between Prince Aleis and Prince Ramtak is a challenging task, bordering on overstepping bounds. They aren't Bertia's friends, nor can they be naturally involved like Princess Lysonna and Lady June, who are tied together by friendly relations.

"After listening to Princess Lysonna, I started to wonder if Prince Aleis's situation, similar to the crown prince in the novel, might be due to the stress stemming from his precarious position."

"That's… not an impossibility."

He had been in this position for a long time, and it seemed unlikely that his stress would suddenly increase now. However, the upcoming marriage with Princess Lysonna could serve as a catalyst for change, making it impossible to rule out entirely.

It's merely a possibility—and not a particularly high one at that.

With his marriage to Princess Lysonna, Prince Aleis's visibility would increase, possibly making Prince Ramtak more vigilant and worsening the harassment, perhaps to the point of pressuring Prince Aleis's circle to weaken his support base. Such outcomes were conceivable.

If that were the case, it would become conceivable for him to coldly lash out at his wife, blaming her for worsening his situation.

But this remains pure speculation.

Among the possibilities, the initial theory that something else occurred during their engagement still held weight.

"I'm friends with Princess Lysonna, so when I remembered the novel, I wanted them to be happy, but at the same time, I thought the crown prince was a terrible person. However, seeing the various backgrounds that weren't mentioned in the novel, it's not so simple to judge… I'm not sure what to do."

It was understandable why she was so troubled, typical of Bertia's caring nature.

“Why worry? If he’s a good person, that’s a reason to be happy, right?”

“Eh? But I’ve been supporting them while doubting whether Prince Aleis might be a bad person?”

This was… quite a confusion. The situation was simple, yet she failed to see it.

“All you did was worry about Princess Lysonna and be cautious of Prince Aleis because of the novel, right? But you haven’t been rude to Prince Aleis, nor have you tried to break them up. Instead, you’ve aimed to keep their relationship healthy for a happy marriage, haven’t you?”

Bertia looked up, lifting her face from its downcast position. I gently stroked her head to reassure her.

“What you think inside doesn’t affect others if you don’t express it, and in reality, no one’s had a bad experience because of it, right? And regardless of Prince Aleis’s background, neglecting his wife isn’t acceptable, right? Or would you find it acceptable for Princess Lysonna to endure a difficult marriage just because he has a compelling backstory?”

“That would be unacceptable!” Bertia’s eyes widened as she vigorously shook her head.

Exactly. What matters most to you is seeing those close to you happy.

“Then our course of action doesn’t change, does it? If anything, we might just need to check if there’s any trouble surrounding Prince Aleis or think about how we could assist.”

“Ah! That’s right! Making those changes would also contribute to Princess Lysonna’s happy married life!” she said excitedly.

“Exactly.”

The question of how much intervention was necessary lingered, yet it seemed more prudent for me to take charge instead of Bertia. Besides Prince Aleis, Prince Ramtak posed a real worry. I certainly didn’t want to involve Bertia recklessly and put her in harm’s way.

“In that case, I’ll do my utmost to defeat Prince Ramtak!”

"No, could you please avoid involvement? I'll manage issues related to them."

I swiftly lowered Bertia's determined fist. An unintended "defeat" could be problematic if I didn't anticipate Prince Ramtak's next move.

"But why? I can take down a man if it's for Princess Lysonna."

"No, it's problematic if you bring someone down, and sometimes issues like these are better dealt with by other men."

We cannot allow her to "defeat" another nation's royalty without careful preparation.

And with Bertia, there's a real concern she could actually act on it.

"I get it. Certainly, some issues are best handled among gentlemen."

"That's the spirit! By the way, Tia, I got an invitation to dine with Prince Ramtak… Would it be all right if I decline?"

I planned to agree if Bertia was fine with it, but Prince Ramtak appeared to be worse than I expected. He likely held a poor opinion of Bertia, given her closeness to Princess Lysonna, and he had a tendency to look down on women. It seemed likely that Bertia would feel uncomfortable in his presence.

In that situation, it would be more prudent for me to meet with him privately and play along during our conversation to gather different pieces of information. This type of person, who vents their pent-up frustrations on others, often reveals a lot when they relax their defenses—particularly when they're under the influence of alcohol.

"That's okay, but are you certain about this?"

"No need to be concerned. I'll speak with him directly. Tia, I hope you don't mind if I use you as my reason for turning down the dinner invite. It will help me earn his trust."

It's easier for me to let Bertia take the blame for my refusal rather than damage his impression of me because of my situation.

As the crown princess of Alphasta, preventing us from meeting should pose no issues.

If someone attempts to disseminate odd rumors about Bertia, I may initially overlook it. However, I will later make sure to correct and refute those rumors, addressing those who propagated them in a thorough manner.

"Of course, that's perfectly fine! I'm the villainess in this scenario, after all! It's just like I was destined to be a villainess!"

What makes her happy about that? Keep in mind that the true antagonist here—Prince Ramtak—is the source of the chaos. Justice, at its core, is merely a villain confronting another villain.

"If you're fine with it, then that's decided. But you must promise me that if anything bothersome occurs, you'll let me know immediately. I'll handle it… suitably."

"Understood!"

Seeing Bertia regain her spirits and smile was a relief. Just as we shared a moment of mutual smiles…

Grrrrr…

Bertia's stomach made an endearing protest.

"?!" Her face flushed bright red, and upon witnessing it, I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"We've delayed our dinner for a while now, haven't we? The chefs should be eager for our arrival, so let's head out."

"Yes, certainly."

As Bertia stood, her voice soft, I offered my hand to her. She lightly placed her hand in mine to help herself up. It was quite memorable how she went back for seconds of the main dish during the meal that followed.

Her late-night flurry of activity was even more striking, as she fretted about overeating and began exercising around the room.

Part Three

"Ha! Ha! Haa!"

First, allow me to offer an excuse.

"Yo! Ha! Haa!"

I was born into a royal family. The Kingdom of Alphasta enjoyed a notable peace, with my father, the king, at the helm, free from issues regarding succession that often plagued other nations. While our situation was safer in many ways, being the crown prince still posed significant risks, including the threat of attacks.

Even in my sleep, I couldn't say I was constantly on edge, but I was definitely attuned to the presence of others, rousing easily at the faintest movement.

Click…

"Hm? What's going on, Kuro? Oh? You'd like to join me? We have to be quiet, though, since Lord Cecil is still sleeping."

So, this wasn't deliberate.

"Just like this. You clasp your hand and flex your arm… Then, like this, ha!"

I had just awakened to find that Bertia had gotten up earlier than I did at dawn. I considered pretending to be asleep, curious if she would come back after going to get a drink of water.

I didn't expect my wife to check if I was awake by looking at my face, then stand up and imitate a cat in front of the mirror.

"That's all! Great job, Kuro!"

Ah, Bertia had risen to take part in some activity, and even Kuro had come to investigate upon sensing that something was wrong.

The night was ours, belonging to Bertia and me—a cherished time. Kuro was usually kept from entering our room, although she was responsible for waking us and assisting with morning preparations. Thus, it wasn't unusual for Kuro to come and see what Bertia was up to this morning.

However, it feels like I've completely missed the moment to awaken.

Now, what to do? Should I continue to observe my wife's amusing and adorable actions a bit longer, or should I make it known that I'm awake and watch her surprised reaction?

It was a dilemma.

"Eh? What is it, Kuro? Lord Cecil returned late last night; we should let him sleep a bit longer… Ah…"

Our eyes met.

Kuro, realizing I was awake, looked at me with an expression that seemed to say, "How long will you pretend to be asleep?"

"Good morning."

"Oh, good morning…! Um, Lord Cecil, since when have you been awake?" Bertia, perhaps embarrassed to have been caught in the act, flushed red and fidgeted with the hem of her nightgown as she asked.

My wife looks wonderful today too.

"Hmm, since you got up, I suppose?"

"You should have said so sooner, from the beginning!"

Bertia, her eyes glistening with unshed tears and staring intensely at me, made me laugh as I joined her at the edge of the bed.

"What made you mimic a cat this morning?"

"Mimicking a cat? No, that's not it! This is shadowboxing, a real martial arts training technique!"

"Martial arts…"

Despite her attempts to appear proud and boastful, to me, it clearly seemed like she was imitating a playful cat…

Besides, I doubt your cat-like punches will actually take anyone down. In fact, I'm more concerned that you'll injure your own hand from throwing punches than you would harm someone else.

While Bertia had certainly maintained her fitness for her diet, she hadn't trained for combat. Being the cherished daughter of the Marquis of Noches, she might have learned some self-defense techniques vital for avoiding an assault, but those would focus mainly on evasion rather than offense.

Given her nature, she would probably hesitate to execute an attack that might harm someone, even if the opponent had acted cruelly. For someone not used to causing harm, attacking with the aim of defeating another would prove challenging.

Oddly, when I began combat training, it was remarked upon how frighteningly little I hesitated.

"Ha! Indeed, I'm not merely a typical marquis's daughter anymore…"

Were you ever a regular marquis's daughter to begin with? I suppose as an infant, even you couldn't have been anything but quiet… though your mother said that wasn't the case.

Moreover, a "normal" marquis's daughter wouldn't have thought of guarding a friend who was engaged to a foreign crown prince. Such ladies were not nonexistent—or rather, there was a similar woman close by who claimed to serve as both a lady-in-waiting to the crown princess and her guard, despite being the daughter of a marquis.

"You should do what you can in your current position. There are surely things you can do beyond physically protecting her."

You can help her from a safe place. Otherwise, if something were to happen to you, I'd find myself aggressively targeting your friends and their acquaintances.

"I understand. I'll leave the physical aspects to the professionals. It would be sad if the guards were out of work and unable to receive their salaries."

Where exactly does your confidence come from, thinking you could eliminate the need for guards with your own abilities?

From what I've seen of your cat-like punches, if you tried to guard Princess Lysonna, you'd probably end up making the real guards' jobs even more difficult.

Far from reducing their workload, you might even necessitate an increase in personnel.

Thankfully, Alphasta had already taken her unrestrained nature into account and had brought along extra guards. The guards of this country were already busy enough with the wedding preparations. Adding to their burden would not have been wise.

"By the way, Lord Cecil, are you certain you're all right to be up? You came back very late last night…"

Bertia appeared to have abandoned her martial arts training. She approached me while I remained seated on the bed, took a seat beside me, and placed Kuro on her lap.

Honestly, I wished I could enjoy some mornings without Kuro since getting married. However, we had made several concessions for Kuro, so it couldn't be avoided. On the bright side, Kuro appeared to be enjoying those moments with Zeno, so it was not entirely negative for him.

"Ah, I've had enough rest; I'm fine."

"And… how was last night?"

Bertia gazed at me with worry.

I smiled softly, stroking her head to comfort her.

"Last night, huh? There weren't any specific problems, but…"

As I reflected on the previous night's events—spent mostly sipping unpleasant drinks with Prince Ramtak—I wondered if there was something I ought to mention to Bertia.

Part Four

After discussing it with Bertia, I decided to decline Prince Ramtak's dinner invitation the next day and promptly sent him a letter. Naturally, the letter was a polite refusal of his invitation. The reason I gave, borrowing Bertia's name, was that my wife was too busy and had no free time. This was intended to leverage Prince Ramtak's less-than-favorable impression of Bertia, who was close to Princess Lysonna, and to further instigate his desire to stay away from Bertia.

Of course, the claim of having no free time was a lie; we could have made time if we wanted to. Such a fact could easily be uncovered with a little investigation, given our residence within the palace grounds, even if it was a detached palace. However, questioning why it was impossible and probing for an explanation was considered tactless among royalty and nobility. This ensured that he couldn't press Bertia for an invitation.

Even though he might not be able to question it openly, he would likely realize that we actually had the time. Thus, Bertia would be perceived as unwilling to make time for him, which would definitely tarnish her image in his eyes—just as I intended.

If he were to spread any strange rumors, it could damage Bertia's reputation, but given the disparity in our nations' power, it was unlikely he would openly confront us.

Although Prince Ramtak was respected as the future crown prince and king of his country, his reputation was not particularly good. Even if he spoke ill of Bertia, who generally had an exceptionally good reputation, others would likely see it as him simply disliking and badmouthing her. While some might outwardly agree with him, they probably wouldn't believe it deep down, so it posed no real problem.

More importantly, it was crucial that Prince Ramtak did not bother Bertia with any unwelcome advances.

"So, after rejecting the dinner, you were asked to join him for drinks post-supper, correct?"

This came from a letter by Prince Ramtak, shortly after I sent my refusal.

Once I finished the letter, I threw it onto my desk and said, "Feel free to read it if you want." Zeno picked it up, skimmed through quickly, and smiled wryly.

To be frank, it's irritating. It's inconvenient but expected.

"To receive a personal invitation from Prince Ramtak for private time at night, you must have developed a close relationship," he stated.

"I'm just as surprised as you are. Who would have thought we'd become so friendly?"

Evening hours were primarily intended for family time or personal pursuits. If there was a close relationship, inviting the other person for relaxed conversations over drinks or to play games was common; however, using this time for social commitments was uncommon. In essence, extending an invitation to someone not well-known during these hours could be risky, as it might be viewed as impolite if misunderstood.

"Due to his excessively elevated status in his own nation, Prince Ramtak likely doesn't think about others often. He has grown too used to having his invitations take precedence, losing sight of the fact that these expectations do not hold true beyond his borders."

Even if someone learned that it was impolite, an environment where everyone tolerated their behavior might slowly diminish that understanding. With time, they might come to see their actions as normal.

To individuals used to allowances, boundaries can be slowly expanded until they no longer realize when their actions become inconvenient, often remaining oblivious until they cross into unacceptable territory.

In Seahealby, Prince Ramtak wasn't anticipated to take on crown prince duties until he turned twenty. Although he held responsibilities as the first prince, Crown Prince Aleis managed most interactions with foreigners, limiting Ramtak's chances to engage with those he needed to be mindful of. This explained why such a mistake had occurred, and he probably wasn't even cognizant of it.

"He often invites his favored companions for drinks late at night. Those who cannot decline these invitations believe he enjoys their presence. Now he's extended the same invitation to me."

If only someone close to him could let him know what a nuisance it was. Unfortunately, those around the irritable prince were mostly sycophants. Naturally, they wouldn't suggest otherwise.

"So, what will you do?" asked Bertia.

"Of course, I'll join. I'm curious about his current thoughts. Reflecting on it, this invitation to have a drink is perfect. With a few drinks, he's probably going to open up more."

I rarely got drunk, making this an ideal opportunity to collect information. Additionally, the timing couldn't have been better. Accepting his invitation now would likely open the door to more invitations later. He likely believed befriending the Crown Prince of the influential Alphasta could gain him an advantage over Crown Prince Aleis, especially while Aleis and Princess Lysonna were occupied with wedding arrangements and entertaining guests.

Unfortunately for him, I wasn't looking to form a personal bond. Meeting only when necessary was acceptable, but he wasn't someone I wanted to befriend. Therefore, the time when wedding guests had just started to arrive worked well for me. Following this invitation, it would be easier to excuse my absence by claiming to be busy with various meetings.

Prince Ramtak likely had others he wished to connect with, making it easier to maintain distance.

"I'll take Valdo and a few others. Maybe I'll bring Courtgain along too."

"Isn't that a bit much for just a private drink?"

"Increasing the number of guards indicates that I remain vigilant around Prince Ramtak. Additionally, if we discreetly communicate that 'this was a follow-up suggestion after I had to decline dinner due to scheduling conflicts, making it hard to refuse,' it would be even more advantageous."

Understanding my intent, Zeno nodded in agreement and said, "I'll subtly spread the word."

Next, by casually arranging a chance to meet with Crown Prince Aleis and weaving the backstory of tonight's drink into our conversation, we could avoid any awkward misunderstandings. Given his intelligence, and as long as the intention was clear, he would likely respond appropriately to Prince Ramtak's situation, especially considering their relationship was not exactly cordial.

Sigh… I won't be able to enjoy my usual chat time with Tia before bed tonight. It's regrettable, but it can't be helped. Ah, to ensure Tia doesn't feel lonely, maybe I'll ask Kuro and Miss Cynthia to stay with her until she falls asleep. They wouldn't mind, right?

Considering Cynthia's position as Bertia's lady-in-waiting and their strong friendship, which included sleepovers in their dormitory prior to our marriage, it was fitting to request her assistance. Unlike my connection with Prince Ramtak, they would definitely appreciate the opportunity to recall their school days.

"You clearly have affection for Lady Bertia, Your Highness."

"And who else should I show affection for, if not my wife?" I replied with a smile.

Zeno nodded in agreement. "That's right."

"I'll compose a reply to the letter; could you handle the other arrangements, Zeno?"

"Of course."

It was unsettling, but it's wise to tackle unpleasant tasks swiftly. Prince Ramtak's letter had also proposed, "How about tonight?" which aligned perfectly.

Grasping the pen, which seemed unusually weighty, I composed my response.

That evening, following a pleasant dinner with Bertia, I decided to forgo the usual routine of going straight to the bath and then our bedroom. Instead, I ventured to a part of the palace specifically reserved for Prince Ramtak, accompanied by Valdo, Courtgain, Zeno, and several other guards.

Royalty typically had various rooms allocated to them in addition to their private quarters within the royal residence. These included offices and reception areas, separated by family. Crown Prince Aleis mainly utilized his space for work, while Prince Ramtak appeared to use his not only for work but also regularly for socializing with friends. Consequently, the rooms designated for meetings surpassed those intended for work.

Though he often criticizes Crown Prince Aleis, I question what he is actually achieving. Doesn't he see that by avoiding responsibilities, especially with Aleis being capable, he's only inviting greater challenges for himself down the line? Yet, it's precisely his lack of understanding that leads him to act so carelessly.

"At last, you're here. I've eagerly awaited your arrival, Prince Cecil," Prince Ramtak said, smiling, as a valet announced my presence.

As I stepped inside, the overpowering scent of alcohol and cigars nearly made me recoil. While our castle has specific rooms meant for post-dinner drinks, none carried an odor like this. It was hard to tell if the room was inadequately cleaned or if it had been so mistreated that no cleaning could remove the stench.

It was evident that this room was hardly appropriate for entertaining foreign royalty with whom one had little familiarity.

Observing my slight frown, Zeno subtly offered me a handkerchief, gently scented with peppermint, likely implying I could use it to disguise the smell. Although I was tempted to take it, I raised my hand in a quiet gesture of refusal. We needed to maintain an amiable appearance during this visit.

Using the handkerchief would have indicated my dissatisfaction with the odor in the room. Although such a gesture is usually permissible, our objective in this situation was to gather information, which required me to exercise patience.

Understanding my intention, Zeno quietly tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket and followed me with a neutral expression. Prince Ramtak appeared unaware of his actions. Courtgain briefly frowned but quickly regained his composure, likely more frustrated by my summons than the odor itself. As for Valdo, he seemed unbothered, possibly accustomed to such smells from his time in the knights' quarters.

"Thank you for the invitation, Prince Ramtak. As a gesture, I've brought some of our nation's finest liquor," I stated, while Zeno quickly handed over a box with the liquor inside.

"I appreciate your considerate gift… However, it seems you've arrived with quite a number of guards."

Only Valdo and another guard joined us in the room, while more were positioned outside. Prince Ramtak furrowed his brows at the sight, probably anticipating my arrival with a lighter heart and fewer guards, trusting the invitation.

"Ah, it appears that the castle in Seahealby experiences a significant flow of visitors, particularly during the night. Given that security is often more relaxed, I believed it prudent to bring additional guards as a precaution," I replied with a smile to Prince Ramtak, who did not hide his displeasure.

"I understand. Having people from different countries here makes sense."

Prince Ramtak, seemingly persuaded by my explanation and unable to probe further, offered a strained smile. Yet, it was evident that he found it difficult to hide his genuine emotions. Perhaps he could improve by learning to better shield his feelings.

"Right this way. I've set out some of the finest liquor from our country."

"Thank you."

Following his lead, I sat down on the sofa he pointed to.

The table in front of us was prepared with beverages, mainly wine and Kiwis—a distinctive, amber-colored liqueur that combined bitterness and sweetness.

If the aim is to outdrink someone, focusing primarily on Kiwis could be the most effective strategy.

"Let's raise a glass to our nations' prosperity," I suggested.

"To prosperity," we all responded.

I raised the glass brimming with Kiwis for a toast and had Zeno taste it before I sipped.

"I apologize. We typically try a small sample when eating or drinking abroad for safety reasons," I clarified.

That statement was only partially true. Although it was correct that we had a taster, not all that we ate was sampled. In fact, during

the tea party with Princess Lysonna, we did not employ one.

This tasting practice was unnecessary for us, as our spirits were always present and could instantly sense any poison in our food or drink without needing to taste it.

So, why maintain a taster? It's simple: to show that we're always vigilant, thereby deterring any potential adversaries. The existence of spirits must remain secret. Relying solely on them and foregoing a taster entirely might invite underestimation—even trouble—from enemies thinking we're vulnerable.

"To be this guarded," Prince Ramtak noted with a strained smile, watching Zeno sample the drink and declare it safe before passing it back to me.

If he's bothered by such precautions, he'll struggle with the diplomatic complexities to come.

"Such caution is typical of royalty," I remarked, smiling warmly as I took a sip of the tested Kiwis.

Yes, the taste is delightful.

Prince Ramtak was indeed correct; it was rather enjoyable. The liquor went down smoothly and was easy to consume, making it easy to get drunk if one wasn't cautious. Yet, no matter how much I drank, I had never truly been drunk.

"Yet, Prince Cecil, it seems you have a challenging situation, don't you?" After about an hour of drinking, as the alcohol began to impact Prince Ramtak, he unexpectedly introduced this topic. At first, both of us had been reserved and tense, which resulted in superficial chatter instead of substantive dialogue. However, as he became more intoxicated, he became excessively familiar, and I had been waiting for the moment he would start to inquire.

"In what way?" I asked, tilting my glass, swallowing the liquor, and then casually licking the residue from my lips.

"I've heard… that your wife, the princess, can be quite a challenge, often getting you into trouble?"

"Oh? Who might have said that?"

Prince Ramtak leaned in, smirking and dropping his voice a bit.

Though I was annoyed when he started to speak negatively about Bertia, I gestured to the Alphasta group to hold back their discontent. Causing a commotion would hinder my ability to discover his actual motives.

It's frustrating, but retaliation can wait; there's no need for it right now.

"Everyone knows," he asserted.

"Really? It's quite concerning that everyone knows about my wife's whims." *And their cuteness,* I added silently. I wonder who discovered this first?"

Courtgain cast a disapproving look at me, but noticing my calm demeanor while sipping from my glass, he appeared to understand there was more to my words and chose to stay silent.

Interestingly, Courtgain seemed to manage his alcohol consumption effectively, though he primarily faked drinking, as the amount in his glass barely shifted throughout the evening.

Prince Ramtak regarded Courtgain as little more than an afterthought, scarcely glancing his way. Consequently, even an apparent attempt to mimic drinking slipped under the prince's radar as he grew a bit tipsy. On the other hand, Valdo watched us with envy while we drank. Stationed here as a guard, he had to refrain from alcohol and remained standing behind me next to Zeno.

"I can't reveal names, but a particular young lady distressed by the princess' whims sought my counsel. She noted, Prince Cecil, that you too appear quite affected by your wife's unpredictable nature."

"Is that so?" *It seems the source is Lady Margone.*

Concealing her name had little impact; while I received a moderate number of male visitors in this country, female guests were rare. Of the few women I interacted with, only a handful could plausibly have talked about such issues with Prince Ramtak, which made identifying the informant fairly straightforward.

She probably manipulated our interaction to fit her storyline, depicting herself as a victim to Prince Ramtak to strengthen their bond while inventing events.

I hadn't anticipated Prince Ramtak would directly bring up such a topic.

"Indeed, whimsical women can create quite a stir. You've been guiding the princess, even assisting Princess Lysonna, haven't you? How's that experience? Isn't it more pleasant spending time with me rather than managing those pesky women and a Crown Prince Aleis who allows such antics?"

By that reasoning, Prince Ramtak, are you suggesting I have a flaw for allegedly overlooking a fanciful wife like Bertia?

"That's one perspective. I'm not familiar enough with you to decide…" *In other words, I must decline your invitation.*

"But you're interested in getting to know me better?"

"Hmm… That's clearly untrue."

"It *is* true! So, may I assume that you will keep supporting our nation for the sake of the goddess?"

"As long as the goddess (*Bertia*) smiles upon us."

"The goddess of victory appears to favor me rather cruelly, Prince Cecil. But there's no need for concern; she consistently looks upon me with a smile."

"I hope that the goddess—" *Bertia, who might offer her favor to Seahealby but not necessarily to you* "—smiles upon you as well." *Although that seems improbable.*

"To the goddess (*of victory*)." "To the goddess (*Bertia*)."

By deliberately omitting words to foster confusion, I replied ambiguously, leading Prince Ramtak to cheerfully propose a toast, which I welcomed with a radiant smile. Zeno and Courtgain, both of whom were well aware of my character and genuine motives, exchanged slight, concerned looks in my direction. Nonetheless, Courtgain, in alignment with my feelings, lifted his cup, whereas Zeno chose to look away.

Valdo appeared taken aback by the deeper implications of my words. While he did not fully understand them, he sensed the mood and chose to remain silent for the moment.

I need to clarify the subtleties of this exchange to him later. I wouldn't want him, or someone like Miss Cynthia, to propagate misunderstandings based on their misunderstandings.

"Now, let's proceed to a special bottle I've kept for us to… Hmm? What's that sound?"

As Prince Ramtak, feeling cheerful, was preparing to open the next bottle, a commotion erupted from outside. After a knock, he permitted entry, and a guard leaned in, declaring, "Prince Ramtak, Prince Izlarich is—"

"Brother! Please allow me to talk to Prince Cecil as well! I have a request for him!"

Prince Izlarich emerged, pushing aside the guard, his expression filled with desperation.

"What's this about?" Prince Ramtak inquired, a puzzled look on his face as he turned to me, seemingly seeking my insight.

"It's fine. Why not allow him in?" I proposed, curious about the situation as I finished my drink while Prince Izlarich entered with Prince Ramtak's hesitant approval.

Part Five

"So, since Princess Bertia arrived, June has been so cold to me…"

"I see."

"She used to visit me often, but now…"

"I understand."

"So, what's up with the daily tea parties?"

"I understand."

"Prince Cecil, are you actually paying attention?"

"I understand… Yes, I am paying attention."

Yes, I was listening… At least, at first. Two hours had passed since Prince Izlarich had entered while Prince Ramtak and I were

enjoying drinks. During this time, Prince Izlarich relentlessly voiced his grievances, primarily urging me to "do something about Bertia."

Furthermore, as soon as he arrived, Prince Izlarich began drinking willingly, transforming his complaints into what felt like the incoherent ramblings of a drunken individual bothering me.

Honestly, I was confused about what I was hearing. Prince Ramtak, eager to portray Bertia as a "troublesome and capricious woman," had started disparaging her, fueled by Prince Izlarich's complaints. Frustrated, I asked Zeno to discreetly reduce the water in his drink, raising the alcohol content to accelerate his downfall.

Once the servants laid him down, he fell into a deep sleep. It was intriguing, that Seahealby, with its pirate heritage, nurtured a robust drinking culture and allowed alcohol consumption at a notably younger age than in our country.

Although this may reflect the country's culture and I was in no place to judge, seeing the extreme drunkenness of these two royal students led me to believe they should have learned to drink responsibly first.

This holds true despite my efforts to inspire them to express themselves more openly.

"In essence, you're feeling upset because Miss June and Tia have formed a close bond, making you feel neglected?"

Even with his ornate language, this seemed to capture the essence. Initially, as a temporary antagonist, Bertia had intended to sabotage the romance between the heroine, Miss June, and her love interest, Prince Izlarich. Ironically, befriending Miss June and spending time together daily ended up achieving the opposite of her goal.

Congratulations, Bertia. You may be the first "villainess" in history to play your part so well. However, your spite appears aimed not at the heroine, Miss June, but rather at Prince Izlarich, the male lead.

Bertia may not have recognized this.

"No, that's not it! I'm merely pointing out that it's odd for my fiancée to overlook me for the company of a foreign crown princess! Still, I'm confident June wants to see me as well. She used to visit me frequently, after all. However, she can't simply dismiss the princess' invitations…" Prince Izlarich, heavily intoxicated, slurred his words as he attempted to present his argument.

No matter how frequent the tea parties were, as a future princess, she naturally prioritized attending to a distinguished guest —the crown princess of a prominent country—over simply socializing with her future prince.

Relationships and connections among noblewomen were vital. Prince Izlarich noted that Miss June spent significant time with him at the academy. To him, their close childhood friendship made their frequent interactions there natural. However, the academy served as an essential venue for young nobles of similar ages to cultivate their connections. As someone destined to be a princess, it was crucial for her to engage regularly with other women of her status.

Spending extensive time with a fiancé is the unusual aspect—unless it resembles a romance novel.

This suggests that Miss June probably has few female friends.

Being named the fiancée of the second prince at such a young age had likely turned her into a target of jealousy, exposing her to the indirect harassment often found among noble circles. Had her family possessed greater power or wealth, they might have been able to offer her some protection. Nevertheless, while her family was recognized for their loyalty, they lacked significant influence or affluence.

Ideally, Prince Izlarich, her fiancé, ought to have been supporting her through these challenges. However, considering his current state, it was evident that he was unaware of the fragile situation Miss June faced.

"For royals like us, Prince Izlarich, it's advantageous when the women who will become our wives build relationships with other women. Why do you present it as if it's a negative?"

Arguing with him while he was drunk may have been pointless, yet I hoped some of it would resonate, so I continued to push forward.

"Women can just socialize at social gatherings, right?"

"You know, a tea party is quite the delightful social occasion," I responded.

I couldn't help but feel frustrated by Prince Izlarich's rather gloomy tone.

He seems… not a bad person, but maybe not the brightest.

"However, it's not necessary to do it so often… Perhaps during soirées or similar events… As a result, June is unable to visit me."

"If Miss June can't visit you, why not go to her? Even if you cannot attend the tea parties, you should still be able to pay her a visit. In fact, Crown Prince Aleis frequently visits Princess Lysonna with gifts despite their attendance at the tea parties. Likewise, I accompany Tia or present her with gifts too."

"Eh?"

At my words, Prince Izlarich gazed at me with widened eyes, full of surprise.

"It appears you're frustrated that Miss June isn't choosing to visit you, but have you thought about her perspective? While other attendees have their fiancés or husbands bringing gifts and attending, hers isn't present. Might she feel let down?"

It seems that Miss June truly enjoys her tea parties with Bertia and the others, which may explain why she gets so engaged in their discussions that she forgets about her fiancé's absence.

"No, I just haven't received an invitation…"





"Ultimately, it's a women's tea party. I'm not invited, either. Thus, this situation is less about expectations and more about being considerate."

Typically, few noblemen would offer gifts or make appearances in these situations. However, when their wives or fiancées were hosting or attending tea parties with close friends, presenting a considerate gift or making a brief appearance—particularly if the event took place in their own home—was seen as a mark of respect. It communicated to other guests that these women were valued by their fiancés or husbands, representing a meaningful gesture.

Especially for women marrying into powerful families like royalty, how much they were respected by their male counterparts could greatly influence their own standing. These clear demonstrations of care could be surprisingly effective.

"But I might be a nuisance…"

"Doesn't Miss June tell you about the tea parties? Like when or where they're held?"

"She does talk about them, yes…"

"Then maybe she's hoping you'd ask if you could drop by?"

Of course, there's also a chance she simply enjoys the gatherings with Bertia and wants to share her excitement.

"There's no certainty that you wouldn't be intruding, but if that's a concern, why not just ask her directly?"

Silent, Prince Izlarich stared downward, his intoxicated mind likely contemplating something.

"But I don't wish to impose on Princess Bertia… or perhaps she doesn't genuinely want to attend but feels obligated to…"

After reflecting for a while, he ultimately expressed his concerns, though with diminished conviction compared to his previous complaints. It appeared that the effects of the alcohol were fading and he was starting to regain his sobriety.

"While Tia can be impulsive, she would never compel a friend to do something they don't like."

Certainly. She may test the boundaries a bit, but I don't believe she would force anyone. Even in her role as the temporary villainess, if she noticed true discomfort, she would probably withdraw instinctively and might even extend her help—she truly is that kind and empathetic person.

"If Miss June feels obligated to attend the tea party for Tia or Princess Lysonna, despite her true feelings, that's when you step in, right? You could heroically show up at the tea gathering and whisk Miss June away, saying you have urgent business."

The hero saving the heroine from the villainess during a tea party, exclaiming, I played my role as the hero flawlessly!

"But I'm not sure how June feels…"

"That's precisely why a conversation is necessary. It appears you have significant concerns about Miss June, and since you're engaged, this is an ideal moment to discuss and better understand each other."

If you find yourself with time to drunkenly interact with me, it would be wiser to heed your fiancée and prioritize what benefits both of you. Also, to clarify, please avoid going to Miss June's house at this late hour, as it would truly be an inconvenience.

You know those romantic scenes in novels that young ladies enjoy, where someone creeps to the house at night, tossing pebbles at the window as a signal? Trying that in real life would probably be annoying, don't you think? There's a risk of breaking the window, or she might not wake up. Even if she does awaken, the sound of taps at the window could be quite frightening.

Even if you successfully navigate these challenges to meet her, noblewomen typically hesitate to encounter men in their sleepwear. In certain situations, they may even rouse their servants to prepare… Making impulsive decisions while intoxicated is very unlikely to yield favorable results.

"But in situations like this, shouldn't the woman speak up to honor the man's position?"

"Does it really matter who speaks up first? That's hardly a significant issue."

A slight headache began to form as I noticed Prince Izlarich's ongoing reluctance.

It wasn't the alcohol but my frustration with his indecision that was causing it.

"But as a man, my position…"

"Actually, as a man, shouldn't you be forthright and just ask directly? That seems far more manly to me. Besides, you might feel lonely with less time spent together, but the same might not be true for her. If you wait for her to bring it up, things might never change. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Well, I wouldn't like that, but…"

Prince Izlarich took a sip of his drink, his lips tight. It appeared he understood the best course of action, yet pride or some subtle emotion restrained him from acting.

Maybe it's better to just be blunt with him.

"Prince Izlarich, it seems like in love, the one who falls first loses."

"What?! F-Fallen for her?! I— I mean, sure, June and I are close childhood friends, and I don't dislike her. And yes, she's my fiancée… but fallen for her, that's not…"

The color of Prince Izlarich's cheeks turned a noticeably different shade of red than the alcohol in response to my words.

Huh? Although he clearly wants to monopolize Miss June's attention, has he not recognized his own feelings for her? I think I can be quite slow to pick up on others' emotions, but he appears to be operating on an entirely different level.

"If you didn't care for her, you wouldn't come complaining to me, a member of another country's royalty, just because you can't see her as often, right?"

"No, that's not…"

"In this country, it seems expected that women support men, and for a man to be concerned about a woman's feelings is

considered shameful. However, since both are human, failing to moderate such attitudes in private could lead to being forsaken."

"Forsaken?!"

Prince Izlarich flinched as if hit by lightning. While Alphasta usually elevated men above women, this didn't imply that women were overlooked. In public settings, men might assume leadership roles, yet many families demonstrated mutual respect at home. This dynamic was evident in my own parents' relationship as well as that of the Noches couple. Behind closed doors, my father showed considerable respect for my mother, and the Marquess of Noches frequently yielded to his wife's desires.

Their actions stemmed from a deep love for their wives rather than cultural influence; it was driven by shared emotions.

Of course, I hope to be the same with Bertia.

"That would be troubling."

"But even if you were to break off the engagement, there are other young ladies, aren't there?"

"What?! Breaking off an engagement is out of the question! I've already decided to spend my life with June."

"That's what love is, isn't it? If it were merely a political marriage, there'd be no need to be so adamant."

My words seemed to resonate with Prince Izlarich, pulling him out of his inebriated state into serious contemplation. He likely found himself grappling with reconciling his beliefs against a reality that questioned his norms.

At this point, it might be best for him to reflect on his own. Yes, better done without me around.

So, it should be okay to leave now, right?

"I'll be taking my leave now."

"Eh? But I still have more to talk about…"

"You should think about it on your own from here," I suggested, hoping he wouldn't bother me any further.

As I got up, Courtgain and the guards started to leave, relief visible on their faces; they also looked worn out from the one-sided

talk with a drunkard.

"Prince Cecil…"

Remaining in his seat, Prince Izlarich called my name with an expression as sad as that of a deserted puppy.

Part of me almost felt sorry for him—*almost, but not quite.*

I had indulged him more than required, partaking in a love advice session with someone I hardly knew.

I believe I've shown considerable patience, given the circumstances. In the past, I would have swiftly ended this seemingly pointless waste of time. It was my wife who helped me understand that what appears futile may have significance and that relationships merit the effort… although I question whether this specific interaction has any value.

"Oh, that reminds me. Whether you choose to attend Miss June's tea party or not, it might be worth checking out yourself sometime… They really enjoy their conversations."

With that last piece of advice, I took my leave, aware of how late it had become.

It's time for a bath to wash away the lingering smell of alcohol before heading to bed, where I can be with my beloved wife a bit earlier. Bertia is likely deep in slumber by now, but just seeing her peaceful face will surely soothe this unusual fatigue I feel.

"I'm thankful for my nearly unwavering sobriety," I reflected. My ability to drink without becoming excessively drunk allowed me to swiftly get ready for bed and be with my cherished wife. I faintly remembered seeing Prince Ramtak being taken to his room earlier, having passed out. If I found myself in that situation, I wouldn't be able to share a bedroom with Bertia, causing her unnecessary trouble… Just a passing thought as I got ready for the night.

Part Six

"Cecil?"

While I smiled wryly, reflecting on the events of the previous night, Bertia sat next to me, cradling Kuro on her lap, and looked at me with evident concern. Clearly, my thoughtful silence had drawn her attention.

"Tia, do I smell like alcohol today?" I asked, hoping not to offend with any lingering aroma. Even though I had bathed before bed and didn't feel particularly inebriated, I had indeed been drinking late into the night.

"Alcohol smell?" Bertia appeared confused by my inquiry. She leaned in closer, taking a gentle sniff. "Not at all. You have your typical refreshing scent."

"Oh, could it be the soap? At least there's no scent of alcohol. I'm relieved." I exhaled in relief.

"You were out with Prince Ramtak last night, correct? Did things go smoothly between you two?"

Bertia's fascination with the previous evening lingered, indicating her keen interest.

"It began with only Prince Ramtak and me enjoying drinks, but then Prince Izlarich interrupted us. Once Prince Ramtak was sent home for excessive drinking, I ended up spending the majority of my time with Prince Izlarich."

In reality, it was more about listening to Prince Izlarich's drunken rants and love woes than consuming alcohol.

Upon hearing Prince Izlarich's name, Bertia's response was electric. Her eyes shone with excitement as she leaned forward eagerly, causing me to chuckle without meaning to.

What should I tell her?

That her role as a standin villainess has been unexpectedly effective might thrill her to the point of further recklessness.

With the royal wedding approaching and more international guests arriving by the day, it was a delicate time for any unpredictable actions on her part. *Perhaps it's best not to mention just how successfully she's played her part.*

Yet simply saying their relationship had deteriorated wouldn't do either. It was a tricky situation.

"It seems Prince Izlarich is at a point where he's reconsidering his relationship with Miss June. It's more than childhood friendship, yet he hasn't fully realized his romantic feelings. He misses her but doesn't understand why. It's quite a delicate situation."

After some thought, I decided to speak only of his emotional turmoil, omitting any mention of the tea parties causing it. This way, Bertia could see that things might be moving in a positive direction without feeling the need to intervene rashly.

"Well, well, well! That's rather sweet and sour, isn't it?" she exclaimed, even though he had actually spent the evening drunkenly venting to me.

"Yes, so maybe it's best to just watch over them for a while without interfering too much. If someone (*Bertia*) were to act rashly, it could complicate things."

"Indeed! We wouldn't want him (*Prince Izlarich*) to act rashly and create unnecessary misunderstandings."

Although I noticed the misunderstanding, I chose not to address it and merely nodded at Bertia. Since we had agreed to "watch without meddling," it should be fine.

"By the way, how have your tea parties been going lately?" I inquired, intrigued by the current vibe.

Bertia's demeanor changed upon hearing my question. "Initially, I believed I was playing the role of the standin villainess effectively… but recently, I've grown quite close to Miss June."

"Ah, you two appear quite close," I noted, remembering a recent time I walked by their tea party. They were smiling and chatting joyfully.

She's completely forgotten about playing the villainess, I thought as I walked by, but it seemed this was not a one-off occurrence.

I had my suspicions, particularly since Bertia frequently returned to our rented villa accompanied by Miss June.

"Why? I believed I was playing my part as the villainess flawlessly!" Bertia lamented, distressed.

It's fine. While I didn't say it, Bertia's role as a villainess had effectively affected Prince Izlarich.

"Additionally, when Miss June starts acting all affectionate, repeatedly addressing me as 'Lady Bertia, Lady Bertia,' I feel too guilty to push her away and ultimately end up spoiling her!"

"Is that so? That sounds tough," I responded, realizing that Bertia might not be suited to be a villainess after all. A real "villainess" would readily brush her off as bothersome. Furthermore, in the classic villainess role, she wouldn't even be in a position to be approached affectionately from the start.

"I've never felt this close to a younger woman before. The moment I began to see her in a somewhat sisterly way, it was game over for me…"

"That's understandable," I noted, reflecting on Bertia's affection for her younger brother, Anes. Her behavior was predictable; she had a strong tendency to dote on younger people, particularly her siblings. Although she reprimanded them when necessary, always considering their best interests, her approach remained largely affectionate. It was impossible for her to be strict with someone she perceived as family. "Until recently, I believed I could handle things… but the other day, when I proposed organizing a tea party to assist Princess Lysonna, considering all the foreign guests, Miss June reacted with an enormous smile and a great willingness to help, which made me realize it was futile," Bertia said, recounting her recent experience.

"I see."

The goal appeared to be expanding Princess Lysonna's social network amid many international visitors by hosting a small tea party. Though it would have been perfect for Princess Lysonna to serve as host, she was currently swamped with wedding arrangements and attending to guests, which left her little time to manage such an event.

In Umyuve's usual situation, she could have turned to her family or entourage for help. However, being in a foreign country without familiar faces made this difficult. Although she realized that hosting the event would be advantageous in the long run, she felt stuck and nearly despaired—until Bertia suggested they co-host the event. Miss June appeared especially eager to support Bertia.

It was evident that she had formed a strong attachment. Though there could be an underlying motive, her actions appeared more influenced by admiration and a wish to be helpful to someone she held in high regard.

"Our Crown Princess really excels at socializing, doesn't she? Ah, but there might be one piece of advice worth giving.

"I'm willing to assist with the tea party; however, it may be more effective if it's framed as a request from Princess Lysonna. Involving the Dowager Queen and the Queen of Seahealby might also prove advantageous," I proposed.

"Involving the Dowager Queen and the Queen?" Bertia repeated, tilting her head in confusion. She likely hadn't considered their inclusion. In Alphasta, she wouldn't have hesitated to consult my mother for advice.

Perhaps she views this as an extension of their usual afternoon tea gatherings.

"The Dowager Queen will be Princess Lysonna's future mother-in-law. To nurture a positive relationship, seeking her assistance now is prudent. This approach also pays respect to the Dowager Queen," I clarified.

The previous king of Seahealby was still living. Even after declaring his retirement when Crown Prince Aleis came of age and transferring the throne to his elder brother, he continued to be an important figure with substantial influence. The Dowager Queen, who had also stepped back from her role, maintained considerable power, particularly among the women at court. Gaining her cooperation was essential for everyone.

Should someone wish to enlist the Dowager Queen's help due to her connections, it would be wise to also involve the Queen to ensure respect for the current royal couple. This was especially vital considering Crown Prince Aleis's sensitive position.

"Taking independent actions may be perceived as overstepping by outsiders. Depending exclusively on the Dowager Queen might suggest a disregard for the present king and queen. Focusing solely on the Queen could be considered disrespectful to the Dowager Queen. Given Crown Prince Aleis's role, it is essential to proceed carefully," I continued.

Bertia seemed to understand, nodding seriously at my explanation.

"Although none of these actions are fundamentally incorrect, considering the sensitive nature of marrying into a different country, it's wise not to ignore these factors. Additionally, Bertia's participation adds noteworthy significance to the issue."

"What does it mean for me to help? Isn't my desire to assist a friend enough?" Bertia inquired, tilting her head in curiosity, her expression brimming with wonder.

Bertia frequently influenced those around her positively, often without realizing her effect. While she endeavored to learn, her understanding of political nuances was somewhat limited. Nevertheless, her friends, especially Cynthia, skillfully made up for this by supporting Bertia, ensuring she seldom encountered difficulties. It seemed that Cynthia permitted Bertia the freedom to act as she wished, fully aware of the consequences.

Princess Lysonna should have thought about involving the Dowager Queen and the Queen. Her friends were adamant about not meddling in the affairs of foreign royals, in contrast to Bertia.

"As I previously stated when you began aiding with the wedding plans, supporting foreign royalty not only highlights the establishment of cordial relations but also creates a favor that may be called in later. In this instance, your participation facilitates

engaging the Queen, who could have been a potential opponent, in addition to the already probable support from the Dowager Queen."

"My assistance makes it easier to involve the Queen? Oh! I see! It's because the Queen might feel inclined to show kindness to me! Just like how my mother doesn't complain when I receive sweets from guests, even though I'm usually only allowed one. It's like that, isn't it?!"

"Sweets. Yeah, well, something like that, I suppose?"

When Bertia explains it, the intricate dynamics between nations are simplified to the level of receiving sweets from a guest. While I think it's better for her to stay true to her nature rather than overthink, it's uniquely Bertia.

"Nonetheless, it's clear that the royal couple seeks to build a strong connection with us. Consequently, they're likely to support a tea party that encourages a favorable relationship with you. At the very least, they would probably feel pressured to prevent the Dowager Queen from overshadowing them."

Regardless of Prince Ramtak's attitude toward him, the dynamic between the royal couple and Crown Prince Aleis was not especially tense. There appeared to be an underlying sense of apology toward Prince Ramtak's behavior. Consequently, Princess Lysonna might have been able to secure their cooperation independently, but Bertia's participation almost ensured it.

"It's a bit complicated, but it would be wonderful if everyone could get along well! I'll talk to Princess Lysonna about this idea!" Bertia's understanding might not have been perfect, yet her enthusiasm was unmistakable. Princess Lysonna, a true royal at heart, surely grasped these intricacies. Though currently overwhelmed by her duties, a nudge from Bertia should prompt appropriate action.

"That would be great. I hope it turns into a lovely tea party."

"Yes, absolutely!" Bertia's bright smile washed away any complexity from my mind.

“Do your best.” This tea gathering wasn’t formal—it simply provided an opportunity for individuals from different countries to meet in a relaxed atmosphere. Although there was no reason for excessive worry, I was prepared to extend my help whenever needed.

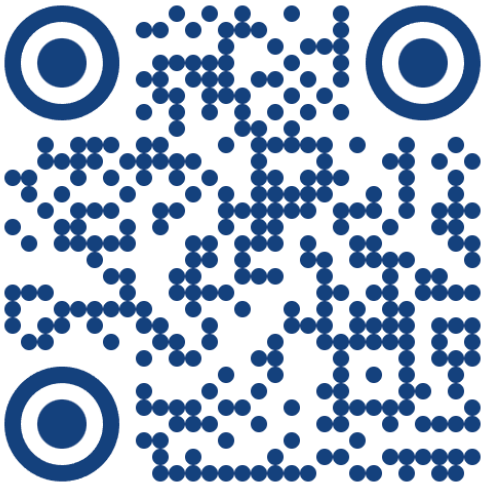
Thank you all

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