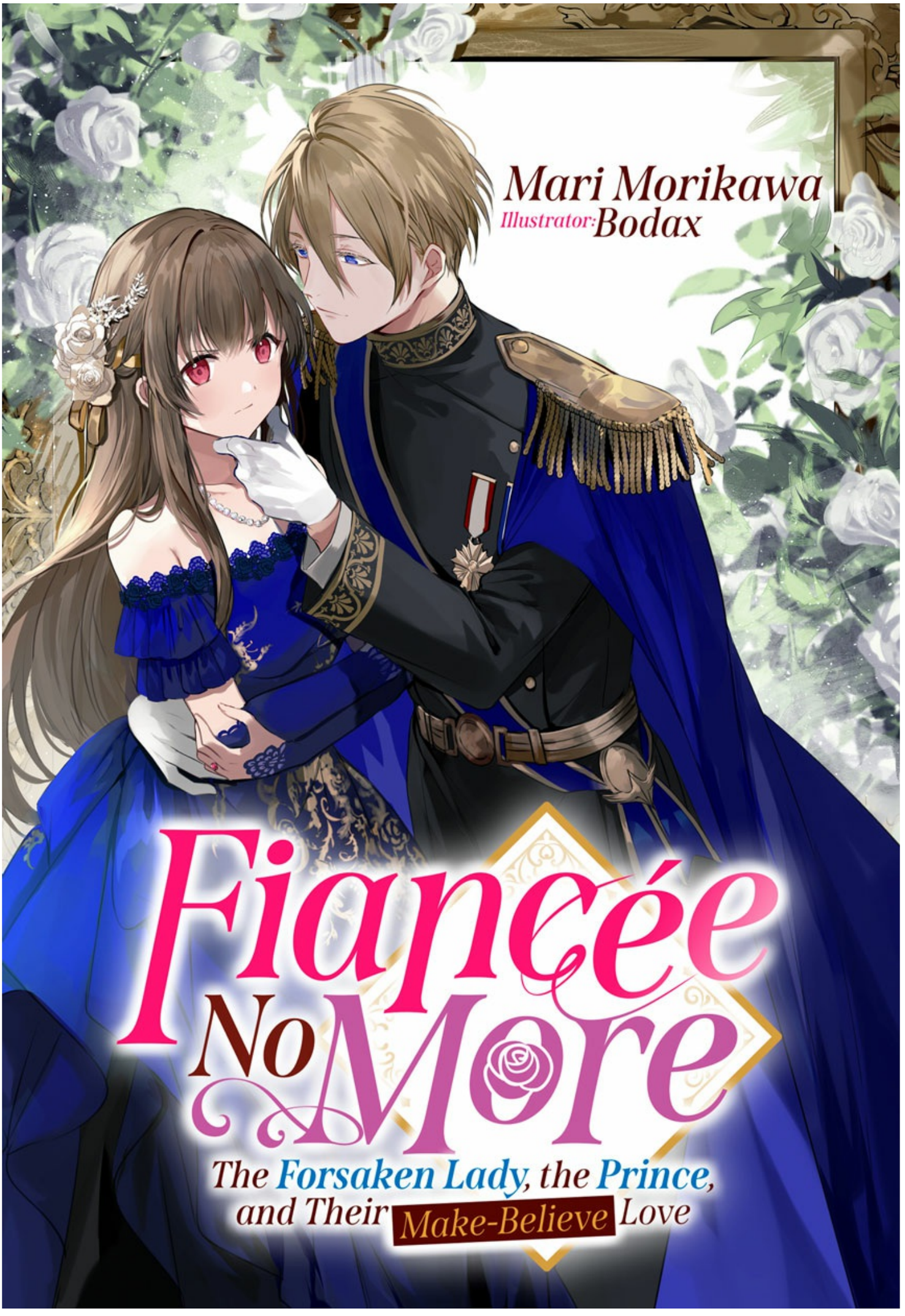
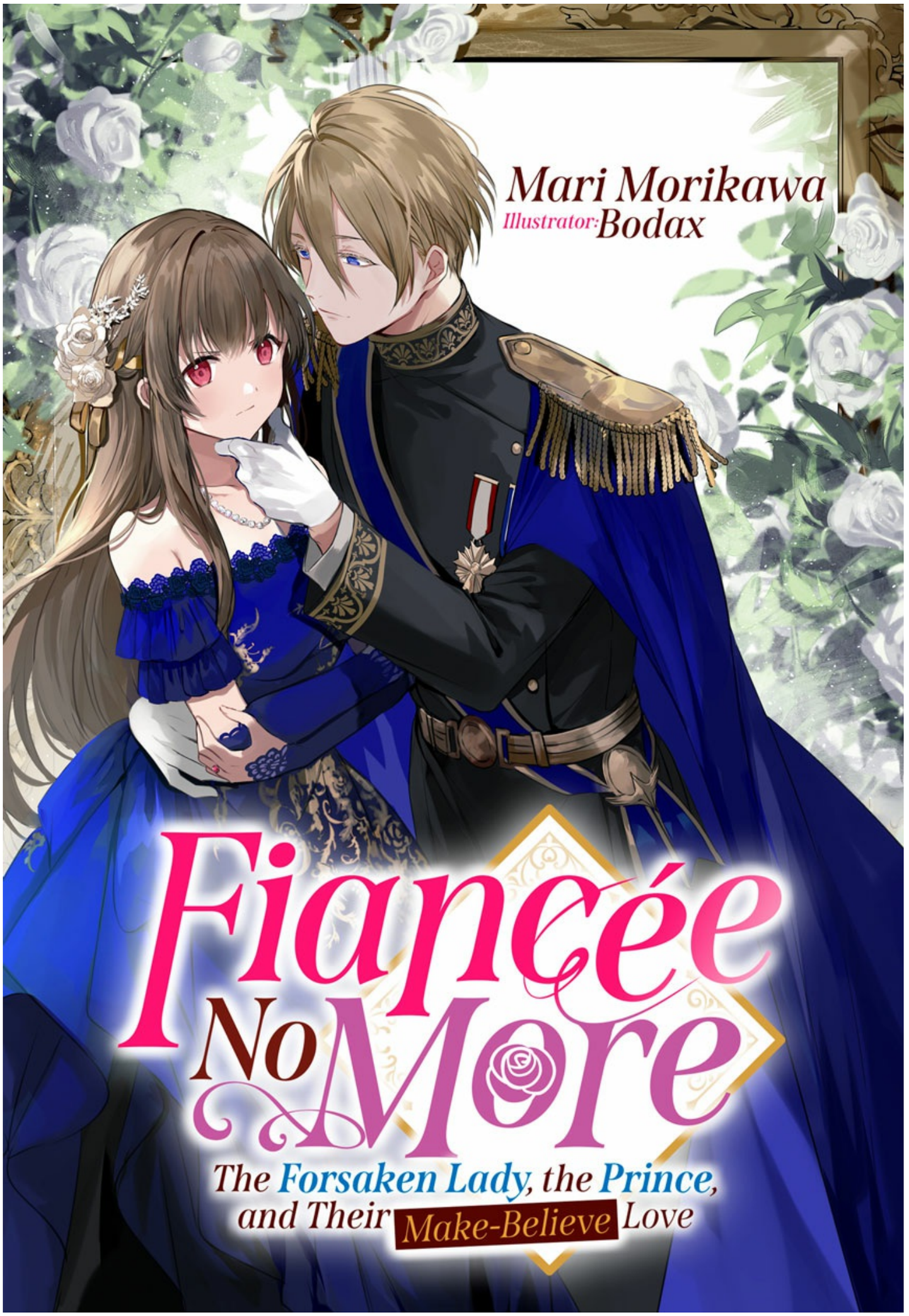

Mari Morikawa
Illustrator: Bodax
Fiancée No More
The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love


Mari Morikawa
Illustrator: Bodax
Fiancée No More
The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love

Fiancée No More: The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love Volume 1 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12


Mari Morikawa
Illustrator: Bodax
Fiancée No More
The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love

Chapter 1: End of the Engagement and a New Encounter

The Kingdom of Rosalia was an island nation situated on the island of Great Rosalia. This island stretched a long distance from the north to the south, and the climate was so different on the opposite ends of it that one would have thought it wasn't even the same kingdom anymore.

The earldom of Flozeth, the place of Estelle's residence, nestled in a valley in the northern part of the island, and it was well-known as one of the few snowy regions in the kingdom.

In July, these lands were as green as they ever got. A green carpet covered the mountains, and the pigs and sheep grazing in the pastures made for a peaceful countryside scene. Dragons lived nearby and would occasionally cause major damage to the crops, but climate-wise the summers in Flozeth were nice and cool.

Estelle was the younger sister of Earl Flozeth, the ruler of this domain. The two were expecting guests on this day. She was standing at the window in her room in the earl's mansion, gazing at the courtyard with nervous anticipation when at last she saw the coach arrive. It stopped in front of the entrance, and out stepped her fiancé Lyle and his father Earl Wyntia. For a moment, Estelle looked overjoyed at their arrival—but her expression swiftly turned to a frown.

Her purplish-red eyes were gifted with a special power—the power to visually perceive the mana of living creatures.

Mana was biological energy found in nearly all living creatures. Some humans, who'd been born with vast supplies of mana, discovered that said mana granted them powers. People referred to them as *the Awoken*. Estelle was a type of Awoken; she could perceive a living creature's mana—which was ordinarily invisible—as a mass of silver light swirling around its heart.

How an individual discovered they had powers varied greatly. For some, it

was through training; others through having a brush with death.

In Estelle's case it had been the latter. Six years ago, Flozeth had experienced a devastating scarlet fever epidemic, and Estelle had discovered her powers after she'd almost died of the disease.

Incidentally, there was a high number of the Awoken among nobles, who tended to be born with vast supplies of mana. There was a correlation between powers and mana; both were inherited at the same time. In order to maintain absolute power, the royal family brought all kinds of Awoken into its bloodline through marriage. As a result, the pedigree of royals far surpassed that of everyone else, since their family line could be traced back over five hundred years.

Estelle had become aware of her powers when she'd touched a mana stone after her fever let up. Mana stones were a special kind of mineral that absorbed mana and converted it into energy. They had a wide variety of applications, such as plumbing and mana-based furnaces.

As soon as she had touched the mana stone, she'd begun to see silver light flow to it, and she'd realized her sight was different from how it had been before her illness.

Her power wasn't limited to simple visual perception of mana in living things. After some experimentation, she'd discovered she was able to read the emotions of other people. For example, if someone in front of her felt delighted or happy, their mana would grow radiant; but if that person felt negative emotions—like sadness, anger, or hatred—it would darken instead.

Being able to see people's emotions wasn't always a good thing. Estelle could see the entirety of the other person's mana like a halo around the sun. The amount of mana you could expect a person to possess highly depended on their social class; commoners typically had very little, and nobles had more and more the higher their social status. And given how much importance nobles placed on the amount of mana they possessed, being able to actually *see* it put extra pressure on Estelle, making her thoroughly averse to high society.

Still worse, this power was active at all times; it could not be "turned on and off" at will. It made you see even the things you didn't want to see. In addition,

even were you to close your eyes, you would still perceive the presence and emotions of the living things around you as light—though the range of such perception would be shorter than if your eyes were open.

Perhaps that meant the power did not originate with the eyes. Either way, it was a source of trouble.

The reason Estelle had frowned upon seeing Earl Wyntia and Lyle was the fact that their mana was utterly dark. *Did something bad happen?* wondered Estelle. She had a terrible premonition.

***

Earl Sirius Flozeth, the head of the Flozeth household, greeted the guests at the front door.

“We’ve been expecting you, Lord Cedric, Lyle.”

“It’s been a while, Lyle,” added his younger sister Estelle.

“It has indeed, Estelle,” replied her betrothed.

A month had passed since they had last seen each other. Lyle’s expression was stiff, quite unlike the happier one Estelle had grown used to. And his mana was indeed terribly dark. Estelle stared at Lyle’s face.

It quickly became clear that her premonition was on point. Once the guests had entered the parlor and settled in their seats, Earl Wyntia brought up the reason for their visit.

“Sirius, I hate to ask this of you...but perhaps it would be best if you pretended the engagement between Lyle and Lady Estelle never happened.”

Estelle’s vision went dark. All the sounds around her rapidly grew distant and muffled.

“This is quite sudden, I must say. What brought this on?” replied Sirius, quite bewildered.

Earl Wyntia began to explain the situation, albeit with frequent pauses and sighs.

“The damage caused by last year’s never-ending rain has exceeded all expectations, you see... And I am deeply ashamed to admit that we are in dire financial straits at the moment, given this event and my investment into a textile factory a year prior to it...”

The two earldoms of Flozeth and Wyntia were adjacent to each other. They had much in common, from their climates to their industries; unfortunately, they also shared infertile land, on which few crops could be grown even in summer, due to the cold nights. The people of these domains relied heavily on cattle and potatoes for their livelihoods, as well as those grains—like barley and rye—that could be cultivated even in cold environments.

The previous year’s constant rain had affected the earldom of Flozeth more than enough. It had gone on from spring to early summer, damaging the crops not only with cold weather but with flooding as well. Wyntia had not been the only region to suffer tremendous damages. A big part of what had allowed Flozeth to persevere was the vein of mana stones the earldom had been blessed with.

“I had to take out a significant loan from Pautrier’s to make up for the losses. At first I planned to gradually repay it over time, without any drastic measures...”

Pautrier’s was one of the prominent trading companies in the kingdom. It had amassed enormous wealth through trade with the eastern states, such as the Yang Empire and Gandia. The previous head of the family had earned the rank of baron, securing them a place among the nobility.

“But apparently the owner’s daughter fell in love with Lyle at first sight—and because of my debt, I have no choice but to arrange a marriage between them...”

Estelle heard Lyle clench his teeth as he sat in front of her. He was a handsome man with jet-black hair, mysterious purple eyes, and a strong, virile face; he gave off the impression of a man in control of his desires. It was no wonder Pautrier’s daughter had fallen in love with him at first sight.

“Why didn’t you come speak to us before things had progressed this far?” asked Sirius with a grim expression.

“You had your own share of problems, did you not? Besides, you inherited your rank at a young age, so I imagined this was your first time dealing with natural disasters on this scale... Forgive me. I did not wish to burden you.”

Sirius found himself at a loss for words. It was true that he was still inexperienced in this.

“Forgive me, Estelle,” continued Earl Wyntia. “I feel utterly guilty for asking to end your engagement this way...”

Seeing the two Wyntias’ grave expressions, Estelle knew she had no say in the matter—to them, it was already a done deal.

On this day, in July of the year 533 of the Rosalian calendar, Estelle lost her fiancé in exchange for a large financial compensation.

Lyle had been her childhood friend—a man three years older than her, with whom she had played countless times as they visited each other’s domains. He had been kinder to her than her own brother, and she loved him dearly. *I’ve always dreamt about our wedding, and this is how things should end*, she lamented. Estelle just barely managed to hold her tears in until she saw the two off, and then, at last, she let them burst out.

“Estelle...”

“Brother... I’ve lost to money, haven’t I?”

The damages from the rain had been so extensive that the Flozeths couldn’t afford to financially support their neighbors. *But I didn’t lose to Pautrier’s daughter as a woman*, Estelle reminded herself inside her heart. Seeing her like this, Sirius looked like he had something to say.

***

“Lady Estelle, a letter for you,” said Estelle’s maid, Leah. She added, “If you ask me, it’s perfectly fine to tear it up and throw it away without so much as opening the envelope—but would you care to read it?”

Estelle knitted her brows upon seeing the sender’s name on the envelope. After opening it, she outright grimaced.

“Say, Leah. Is Pautrier’s daughter making fun of me, perhaps?”

Inside the envelope was an invitation to Lyle and Diana Pautrier’s wedding. No ordinary woman would dare have invited the former fiancée of the man she’d stolen from her to their wedding. Not to mention it was scheduled for June next year. That had been when *she’d* planned to marry Lyle, if only the Pautriers hadn’t thrown a wrench into the works.

Estelle and Lyle had made their engagement two years prior to these events, on the day she’d graduated from a girls’ school. The day of their wedding had ended up so distant because she had wanted to let Lyle graduate from university first. Had she known things would come to this, she wouldn’t have waited.

“She most certainly is, Lady Estelle. You have every right to be angry.”

Leah’s dismissive attitude at least seemed to bring Estelle some relief.

“Do you, perhaps, plan to attend?”

“Of course not.”

Estelle got up from the sofa, walked to the fireplace, and threw the invitation into the flames.

“How aggravating. I shall be sure to find someone even better than Lyle for myself. That will show her.” A crease appeared between Estelle’s eyebrows.

Four months had passed since her engagement had been broken off, and it was almost that time of the year when nobles started actively socializing. This period was known as *the Season*—it took place in Albion, the capital of Rosalia, and lasted from November to around May. The opening of the Season coincided with the sitting of Parliament, and since all hereditary peers held seats in the House of Lords, it wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that nobles from all over the country flocked to the capital during this time.

Snow began to pile up at the beginning of December every year in the mountainous northern domains, so the Flozeths took to the capital before this, with the arrival of November.

At present, Estelle was staying in her family’s town house in Albion, together

with Sirius. It wasn't as big as their country house in the earldom. The Flozeth household wasn't *too* wealthy; all they had in Albion was a small two-story detached house. And though it was situated on the edge of a high-class residential area, the lives of regional lords were modest in comparison to those of the wealthiest and most powerful, who usually owned several mansions.

There was no doubt that Diana enjoyed more luxuries than Estelle did. Baron Pautrier's mansion in the center of Albion was well-known for its splendor. And while the Pautriers of days past might not have held as much influence in high society, in the present—as capitalists gained power—they had an advantage over the Flozeths there, too. That made things all the more infuriating for Estelle.

Though she had so enthusiastically resolved to get back at Diana, it was very difficult to find a man more suitable than Lyle. Peers of the rank of earl or higher were in such high demand that practically all of them were already spoken for. This kingdom practiced agnatic primogeniture—a system in which all the inheritance generally goes to the firstborn son—but with a maximum priority for the Awoken, so unless there was a special reason—such as one of the younger sons discovering powers or the heir apparent being in poor health—the eldest son would inherit the title and all property and wealth. Thus, younger sons had lower value, as they had to find success on their own.

Additionally, finding a better marriage partner than Lyle would require Estelle, who was rather withdrawn, to proactively engage with high society—a prospect that made her feel gloomy.

She looked down at herself, studying the mana in her own body. It was dark—likely owing to a mixture of her anger at Diana, her worries over what was to come, and everything else that was vexing her. Estelle adjusted the shawl on her shoulders, staring into the fire crackling on the hearth. That maddening invitation had already turned to ash. And yet, it did little to dispel Estelle's melancholy.

***

Dressing up was a challenging task for a lady. Corsets were painfully tight, and makeup brushes were rather ticklish. But once Estelle had finished with that

ordeal and looked in the mirror, she saw a much lovelier version of herself than usual.

Her maid, Leah, had good taste in fashion. She'd neatly braided Estelle's chestnut hair and adorned it with a pink ornament made out of the same cloth as her dress. The string of pearls around Estelle's neck, as well as her pearl earrings, were mementos from her mother, and were made to give off a tidy and elegant look. Estelle didn't think she could compete with any truly stunning beauty, but dressing up made her more confident nonetheless.

She was also fond of the features she had inherited from her late mother. Many northerners had purplish eyes for genetic reasons, but Estelle and her brother, Sirius, had inherited their mother's distinctive purplish-red eyes.

"Now you had best make haste downstairs. Lord Sirius is awaiting you."

At Leah's prompting, Estelle left her second-floor room.

On her way to the parlor, Estelle ran into her brother, who was already dressed formally and looked like he had been kept waiting for a while. He was to be Estelle's escort at the upcoming soirée.

Her parents had already passed on. What had taken them from her was the scarlet fever epidemic that had ravaged Flozeth the summer of six years prior. She'd been attending a girls' school in Albion back then, and when she'd come home for her summer break, she had caught the disease and found herself at death's door.

Her only family member who hadn't gotten infected was Sirius. He had been too busy with his assignments at the University of Albion and had managed to avoid the danger by staying in the capital by himself.

While the aforementioned scarlet fever had Awakened Estelle to her power, it had bereaved her of her parents without a shred of mercy. Afterwards, Sirius left the university without graduating and inherited the title of earl at the young age of nineteen.

It must be stated now that Estelle had kept her power secret from her brother.

Though Sirius had the support of his uncle—his father's younger brother—the sudden onset of an earl's rigorous duties had quickly worn him out, and it had hardly been an appropriate time for Estelle to reveal her secret. But that wasn't all there was to it: she was scared of him finding out she could see people's emotions.

High society was rife with people who hid their sordid emotions behind pleasant smiles, and Estelle's school had been no exception. Estelle's eyes laid it all bare. When she had seen through the motives of her classmate, whom she had considered her best friend, it had hurt Estelle deeply. If she told her brother about her power and he distanced himself from her because of it, she felt it would bring her so much pain that she would want to end her life. He was her only remaining family in the whole world, after all.

Estelle's fears had also been exacerbated by a romance novel that had been popular at the time. Its protagonist, a high-class lady, was loathed by her family for being able to read minds. She was locked up in the attic and abused. In the end, her childhood friend—who knew about her ability but didn't resent her for it—saved her and they got married. It was a classic love story, but the fact that it depicted a mind-reader being the object of such intense hate hit too close to home for Estelle.

Additionally, were she to make public her new status as an Awoken, she ran the risk of being married off to someone other than Lyle. A noble child's value was dictated not just by their family's rank but—more importantly—by their mana and endowment with powers. Estelle had an average amount of mana for an earl's daughter, but becoming an Awoken had greatly raised her value.

Because of the rarity of Awakening and the types of powers that could be inherited, royals and high ranking peers coveted Awoken for their own lineages. And Estelle loved Lyle and didn't want any great houses to interfere. Though in the end, Diana had come between them and taken him away from Estelle anyway—which had nothing to do with anyone's powers.

Estelle recalled Lyle's well-formed features, then lightly shook her head to chase the thought away.

Revealing herself as an Awoken was bound to make the search for a new

fiancé easy. And while Estelle wasn't looking to push her brother aside, it would allow her to become head of the family as a countess.

However, she couldn't help feeling reluctant about revealing her ability to perceive mana and emotions. After some deliberation on the subject, she concluded it was best to keep her power hidden as before.

"There you are at last, Estelle," said Sirius, looking bored.

"Women's toilet takes time," retorted Estelle with her nose in the air.

"Not bad, not bad," Sirius replied after a moment. "Good luck. I know you're not exactly fond of socializing."

"You say that as though you were any good with evening parties yourself, brother. And I believe you'll need that luck as much as I."

Her comeback made Sirius fall silent. Just as Estelle had to find a husband, he had to find a wife for himself. He still hadn't set his sights on anyone, swamped with work as he had been after inheriting the title.

As siblings, they naturally looked similar in face and figure. Sirius wasn't as much of a looker as Lyle, but his features were shapely. And while his earldom was located in the northern countryside, he was still an earl. He wasn't exactly a man few would want to marry, and yet...

The thought passed through Estelle's head: *I wonder if the first prince or Marquess Rogell will be there*.

Perhaps there were more suitable young bachelors around. For whatever reason, Estelle's brother seemed to be having trouble finding himself a wife.

I *would choose him over a prince*, thought Estelle.

He had an insensitive and ill-mannered side, but Estelle loved her brother nonetheless. And she preferred living a calm and quiet life in the Flozeth earldom to potentially marrying into some troublesome family, complete with the vortex of expectations she assumed went along with the royal life.

Estelle's brother offered his arm to escort her, and she laid her hand on it and gently held on to him.

***

Outside the coach window, Albion bustled with activity. Lights powered by mana stones lined the main street, giving the evening an orange glow.

The earldom of Flozeth must've been seeing light snowfall right about now. It wouldn't begin to really pile up until December, but once it really started falling, everything would be buried in white—to the point that the snow would need to be cleared every day. As the snow made coaches unusable, the people of the earldom fastened sleighs to their horses to travel; but for the most part, they simply stayed home, waiting for the eventual thaw.

Meanwhile, in Albion, in the south of the country, snow rarely piled up. Coaches could be used all year round, and the city streets were bustling. When she thought about the big difference in life between the north and the south, Estelle felt bitter about the snow burying the place where she was born.

After they'd resolved to focus on socializing this Season—to find a new fiancé for Estelle—the siblings had left the management of the earldom to their uncle and headed for Albion. The two continued to worry for their people, however, with yet another of Flozeth's harsh winters ahead.

I hope they won't get much snow this year, wished Estelle.

All this on her mind, she gazed vacantly out the window. Sirius, who sat in front of her, spoke up.

"Estelle, tonight's ball is sponsored by Marquess Rogell, who's highly popular with the ladies. Hopefully you catch his eye."

"Oh, the competition is too fierce."

Marquess Rogell, also known as Claus Rogell, was a marquess at the young age of twenty-three. His staggeringly handsome features, ice-blue eyes, and silver hair had earned him the title of *Lord Ice*.

What's more, House Rogell had both fame and history, having been around since the founding of the kingdom. Miriallia, the late queen consort and birth mother of the first prince, had come from this house. She was Claus's aunt.

And yet, despite Claus's looks and pedigree, there wasn't a single amorous

rumor about him; he still had no fiancée, which made him just as popular with the ladies as the first prince, his cousin.

Claus and Sirius had something in common—they had both lost their fathers at an early age and inherited their titles. What set them apart was that Claus's mother was still in good health.

"Should we really go to this ball, brother?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this is the first time we've accepted Marquess Rogell's invitation, is it not? Going to this ball would mean..."

"Are you worried we'll be giving up our neutrality?"

Estelle shuddered—her brother guessed precisely what she had been thinking.

At present, the Kingdom of Rosalia was split among three factions in regards to the matter of succession to the throne. There were those who supported First Prince Arcrayne, others who supported Second Prince Liedis, and yet others who maintained neutrality.

As a general rule, the successor to the throne was chosen by the principle of agnatic primogeniture, with priority for the Awoken. Members of the royal family had an easy time Awakening, and both Arcrayne and Liedis had gained superpowers at an early age.

The public records at the time stated the Kingdom of Rosalia had eight Awoken in total. Five of them were royals.

The reason nobles disagreed on the subject, despite Arcrayne being an Awoken just like his brother, was that Liedis was of better birth and had better powers. The two had come from different mothers—after the demise of Arcrayne's birth mother, Queen Miriallia, the king had remarried to Queen Truteliese, who'd given birth to Liedis.

Queen Truteliese had come from the family of Duke Marwick—a branch of the royal family that had split away three generations prior. A history of consanguineous marriages between this family and the royal one had allowed

Prince Liedis to Awaken and gain the use of regular telekinesis—the ability to move objects without touching them—as well as teleportation.

As for Arcrayne, he could only use telekinesis, and he was even said to have a smaller supply of mana than his brother.

What further complicated things was that Arcrayne had by that point already achieved some success in official duties. He had graduated with excellent grades from Albion's leading academic authority, the University of Albion; and when the king had claimed to be in poor health at the end of the previous year, Arcrayne had done a splendid job representing him for half a year. This had made the twenty-three-year-old prince's presence felt more strongly in the kingdom.

On the other hand, Liedis was still only fifteen. A mere student.

Thus, the choice of the next king was between the affable Arcrayne, whom one could expect to reign with stability; and a young man of yet-unknown capacity for regnancy, but superior lineage and superpowers, Liedis. The law dictated the successor to be Arcrayne, but Liedis had a more powerful faction behind him, which prevented the king from holding an investiture of Arcrayne as Crown Prince. In Rosalia, this ceremony was a requirement for assuming the title of Crown Prince, and so the position of next king remained unsettled.

Up to this point, House Flozeth had remained neutral on the matter. In fact, the same went for most nobles living far to the north of Albion.

But now, this Season, Sirius had decided to accept Marquess Rogell's invitation. This was a declaration of his intent to support the first prince henceforth.

"Brother, did you choose to side with His Highness Prince Arcrayne because Baron Pautrier supports his opponent?"

"I wanted to avoid running into that irritating upstart, so yes."

"Are you sure that's a good reason to ally yourself with the first prince, who has the odds stacked against him...?"

"Wyntia and Pautrier slighted us," replied Sirius with anger written on his face. "I made this decision after consulting our uncle, so you don't need to

worry about it. We were close to the limit of how long we could keep up our neutral stance, anyhow. So this is fine. If His Highness Prince Liedis becomes next king, the kingdom will be somewhat less hospitable towards us—that's all."

"Sounds like a big problem to me..."

During the previous year's devastating rains, they had filed for a tax cut. They also had shipping costs of mana stones to worry about, and sometimes they needed grants to cull the dragon population. Losing favor with the kingdom could have an impact on things like that in the future. This was one of the reasons House Flozeth had remained on the fence up to this point, carefully determining the right candidate to support.

"Don't make such a face, Estelle. Our allegiance wasn't decided by your circumstances alone."

"Lies."

"I'm not lying. I had His Highness Prince Arcrayne's personality in mind when I made my decision."

"And what, pray tell, do you know of him, dear brother?"

"A few things. Perhaps you've forgotten, but I went to the same college as him."

From the Royal College to the University of Albion—that was the ideal path of education for all noblemen. Both of those leading institutions only accepted male applicants and had high requirements for entry. Although Sirius had needed to leave the university early to inherit his domain, he had been on this education path until then.

Prince Liedis was attending the Royal College at the moment. It wasn't as though all of its students could advance to the University of Albion, so people were keeping a close eye on his prospects. Even if he managed to enter the aforementioned university, he would need to have grades at least as good as those of his half-brother to avoid criticism—a regrettable fate, common though it was among royalty.

Inside, Estelle rather sympathized with Prince Liedis. She stared intently at her

brother's face.

"I suppose you *were* a brilliant student."

"I might not have been able to get in, had I been born two years later. When the prince took his entrance exams, they were incredibly competitive," said Sirius with an awkward smile on his face.

Whenever it was made public that the queen had conceived, a baby boom had occurred among nobility. The purpose of it was to try to put their children close to the soon-to-be-born prince or princess and follow them around. Lyle and Claus Rogell were both twenty-three, just like Prince Arcrayne.

"Were you on good terms with His Highness during those days?"

"No. We were in different years and participated in different club activities... I do remember briefly teaching him when he asked me how to hunt dragons."

"Sounds like you were hardly acquainted."

"Oh, be quiet. I know, all right? But His Highness looked gentle and kind in my eyes."

"Don't most royals act gentle and kind in public?"

In Estelle's mind, royals always had smiles plastered on their faces, and spent their time gracefully waving their hands at the masses.

"His Highness Prince Arcrayne might appear at this ball. You may get to dance with him if you're lucky."

Marquess Rogell was related to Arcrayne on his mother's side and was a leading figure of the faction supporting him.

"You know, I'm not looking to become a princess!"

Such a position would be too stressful for Estelle, whose eyes could see what others could not. Even in regular high society, the numerous and varied expectations placed on Estelle wore her down enough.

She shook her head to reject her brother's idea.

As the two continued to banter, their coach arrived at Marquess Rogell's town house. Just as one would expect from a great house—a house from which

many women had gone on to marry kings—the Rogell mansion was particularly large, despite being located within city limits.

“Shall we go, then? Your hand, milady.”

“It has been a while since I last had the pleasure, brother.”

A mischievous smile on her face, Estelle took Sirius’s hand and climbed out of the coach.

***

The dazzling ball room was no less impressive than the mansion’s exterior. One could immediately tell that a major aristocrat lived here. It was a far cry from the small detached house the Flozeths had in town.

A luminous chandelier hanging from the ceiling, antique furniture—and everything was decorated with roses that must have been grown in the mansion’s conservatory.

The name of the kingdom, Rosalia, came from an archaic word that meant “rose garden.” The royal coat of arms had white roses on it, and Rosalia’s national flower was the rose. It was for that reason that the kingdom had roses planted everywhere. Additionally, using conservatories to raise different varieties of roses and make them bloom all year was a status symbol for the wealthy.

From the curtains to the table cloths to the wallpapers, to the fine decorations throughout the room—everything here was extravagant yet refined. The walls were hung with landscapes hand-painted by famous painters, and display shelves flaunted porcelain made in the vast Yang Empire, which lay far to the east. Its smooth texture and milky color couldn’t be reproduced in this part of the world, which made the empire’s porcelain highly sought-after and very expensive.

Feeling timid after seeing Rogell’s lavish mansion for the first time, Estelle gripped her brother’s arm more tightly. She thought once again about how much she disliked high society. The ladies and gentlemen passing by her were all smiling and laughing, but many of them exuded dark mana. Though she was still furious at Diana Pautrier for stealing her fiancé, she had doubts as to

whether she really could strive to accomplish what she had set out to do. Estelle was beginning to grow disheartened already.

This was a den of iniquity—she saw nothing but lies and fabrications, jealousy and spite. Everybody hid their true feelings behind a mask.

Suddenly Estelle felt an awfully bright mass of mana approach from behind her.

“Estelle?! It’s you, Estelle!”

As she turned around, the one she found standing there was her good friend from school—Keira Werny.

“Keira! It’s been a while.”

“Estelle, who is this lady?”

“She’s my classmate from when I attended Adulena Academy. Keira, this is my brother Sirius.”

“Good evening, sir. I am Keira Werny, wife to a viscount.”

“Ah, that explains it. I am Estelle’s brother, Sirius Flozeth.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Flozeth.” Keira flashed a smile and curtsied to Sirius. “Estelle, I heard what happened with your engagement. You simply mustn’t lose heart,” she said with an anxious look, grasping Estelle’s hand.

“I would be lying if I said it didn’t bother me, but I’m not disheartened. And I wouldn’t have had a chance to reunite with you if it weren’t for that!”

Estelle returned Keira’s smile and clasped her hand back.

“Keira, I apologize for interrupting,” said a gentleman from behind her—her husband, Lord Werny. “May I borrow you back for a moment?”

“Sorry, Estelle, I must be going. I was so happy to see you I left my husband all by himself. Let us have a proper talk sometime in the future!”

With that, Keira left as quickly as when she had first appeared.

“That was the first time I’ve met a friend of yours.”

“She got married right after graduating,” replied Estelle with a shrug. “Plus, she was in a different faction. We’ve only kept in touch through letters.”

Relationships change after one graduates. Keira had been estranged from Estelle due to differences in factions and circumstances. Still, she was glad to be able to associate with her friend again now that she’d sided with the first prince.

As Keira waved at Estelle, Estelle waved back at her.

It happened then—a disturbance that could be heard up ahead. And at the center of it there was an incredibly conspicuous trio.



“It’s His Highness Prince Arcrayne. He really did come,” murmured Sirius.

Estelle already knew the identity of all three. Though she had never spoken to any of these people directly, she had seen them from afar several times when she had attended events hosted by the royal family.

The members of the trio were the sponsor of the ball, Claus Rogell; Prince Arcrayne; and the prime candidate—or so everyone said—for the position of Arcrayne's princess consort, Olivia Rainsworth.

If Claus's blue eyes were like ice, Arcrayne's were like gentle sunlight in spring, a perfect match for his handsome face. Vivid blue eyes like sapphire of the highest grade were common among royals. This color symbolized royalty, hence the name "royal blue." In Rosalia, only royals could wear clothes and jewelry of this special color.

Olivia Rainsworth was here in the capacity of Prince Arcrayne's partner. She was the youngest daughter of Marquess Rainsworth, who supported Arcrayne's faction together with Marquess Rogell. Her coral hair and blue eyes gave off an impression of frail beauty.

Seeing the two's faces and their mana, the thought passed through Estelle's head: *I wonder if Lady Olivia's love is unrequited*.

Arcrayne directed a gentle smile at Olivia as they had their pleasant conversation, but his mana was dark. In contrast, Olivia's was shimmering. It was rumored their marriage was set in stone, but perhaps Arcrayne was an unwilling participant.

As Estelle contemplated such things, her eyes met those of Claus, who stood beside the two. He whispered something in Arcrayne's ear, holding Estelle's gaze. Then, the two parted with Olivia and proceeded to walk towards Estelle.

The sight of the two men walking together—one blond, one with silver hair, and each endowed with a different type of handsomeness—left a strong impression on her.

"Lord Flozeth, thank you for coming to our ball tonight," spoke Claus, once the two were in front of Estelle and Sirius.

"The pleasure is mine. Thank you kindly for inviting us."

At Sirius's nervous reply, Claus smiled coldly.

“I am glad you could come before the roses wilted.”

“Before the roses wilt” was a Rosalian expression; it meant “before it’s too late.”

Estelle could sense ill will in both Claus’s expression and his mana. Sirius’s eyes widened slightly for a moment before he put his sociable smile back on.

“Your words are music to my ears,” he replied. “I hope we are able to aid the roses in their glory.”

Seeing her brother’s brazen attitude, Estelle felt she’d gotten a peek of a side she’d never known her ill-mannered brother had.

The reply must not have pleased Claus; his mana grew dark. Arcrayne’s, on the other hand, turned radiant. It appeared Sirius had managed to arouse the prince’s interest.

“Lord Sirius, it has been quite a long time since we last talked like this.”

“Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia—it is very kind of you to speak to me.”

Sirius bowed as low as he could, while Estelle curtsied.

High society had an unspoken rule that one was not to speak to a superior without being spoken to first. That Arcrayne had addressed Sirius was equivalent to personally giving him permission to be here. Estelle felt the mana in her surroundings soften just a little, making the atmosphere slightly more bearable.

“Would this young lady happen to be your sister?”

“Yes. She is my younger sister, Estelle.”

“Allow me to extend my greetings, Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia,” Estelle intoned. “My name is Estelle Flozeth.”

Once Estelle had formally introduced herself, she felt the mana of some people around her cloud over—primarily of the young women. Perhaps they didn’t take kindly to a newcomer speaking to the prince.

“Lady Estelle, the last time I spoke to you must have been when you were a

debutante.”

Upon reaching the age of maturity—eighteen—daughters of sufficiently highly-ranking families would debut to high society at a ball held at court. They were first presented to the sovereign, then to the rest of the royal family. It was not unusual that Arcrayne had spoken to her there.

“You remember me? It is an honor, Your Highness.”

To ensure she didn’t cause offense, Estelle pretended she was beyond herself with joy.

“Lady Estelle, it pains me to say my first dance is already spoken for. But would you give me the honor of dancing with you on my second one?”

No, reflexively thought Estelle. But she couldn’t turn down a royal’s request.

“Thank you for inviting me, Your Highness. I would be happy to oblige,” she replied, taking care not to let the look of utter joy disappear from her face.

Estelle heard people around her speaking in undertones.

“Oh my! Is that not the lady whose fiancé was stolen by the daughter of that upstart Baron Pautrier?”

“Her family was sitting on the fence until now, was it not?”

“Pautrier supports the second prince—perhaps that explains why they’ve come here.”

“*I* heard it wasn’t Lady Diana who stole her fiancé, but rather Lady Flozeth, trying to come between the two who were already in love...”

“Why, is that true? I wonder which rumor ought to be believed...”

Noblewomen excelled at gossipping in voices just loud enough that one could barely hear them. Thoughtlessly calling them out on it would result in being told, “How immodest of you to listen in!” A catty bunch indeed.

At any rate, Estelle thought, *I know rumors get embellished as they spread, but to think some of them are even putting the blame on me...*

“It’s not as though you did anything wrong,” muttered Sirius with indignation.

“Looks like scandals leave a stain regardless of who was in the wrong,” replied

Estelle with a humorless smile.

The loss of her fiancé had brought down Estelle's value. She'd had a hunch that that would be the case, but actually hearing what people said about her in high society still upset her. Even if Diana had suffered reputation losses as well, Estelle was sure *she* was hurt by it more.

"I cannot abide this. What say you I go on a rampage and ruin this ball?"

"Oh, please, it would be our family ruined next."

Estelle was happy to have a brother who could sympathize with her and share her anger.

"Don't worry! Your brother will find you a husband."

"I'm counting on you, brother."

"If there's no suitable bachelor around, you may stay in Flozeth forever."

"Now *that* sounds like you're giving up before you've even begun!"

As Estelle pouted up at Sirius, the orchestra started playing music. The ball-opening piece was a quadrille, to which only the four highest-ranking pairs could dance. The first pair to begin dancing at the center of the ballroom were the two highest-ranked guests—Arcrayne and Olivia. Then Claus and his mother, widow of the previous Marquess Rogell, joined in. Finally, the last two pairs started dancing—both with leading figures of the first prince's faction.

Once this came to an end, Estelle would have to dance with Arcrayne. Perhaps the prince was simply being considerate to them as first-time visitors, but she was so nervous she had butterflies in her stomach.

"Try not to step on His Highness's feet."

You say that like it has nothing to do with you, thought Estelle, glaring at her brother.

***

Once the quadrille had come to an end, Arcrayne headed straight back towards Estelle.

“I have come for you as I promised I would. Would you grant me this dance, Lady Estelle?”

“With pleasure,” replied Estelle, still feigning an overjoyed expression, and took Arcrayne’s hand.

Estelle’s height was average among noblewomen, but Arcrayne was tall for a man. Once they took position, Estelle found her eyes at the level of Arcrayne’s breast. She and Lyle had about the same difference in height. Reminded of her former fiancé, Estelle felt something bitter well up in her chest.

A refined and unhurried tune began playing with no regard for her feelings. As per the program written in the invitation, the second piece was a slow waltz.

Estelle danced to Arcrayne’s lead. Her dancing was average—neither good nor terrible. Arcrayne’s lead, on the other hand, was skillful, and Estelle was surprised to find herself lighter on her feet than her ability would ordinarily have allowed, even despite the height difference.

As she wasn’t fond of socializing, she always did the bare minimum of dancing at balls. Thus, she could pretty much only compare Arcrayne’s dancing to that of Lyle and Sirius. Lyle was like Estelle, neither good nor bad, and Sirius’s lead was rough.

Dancing with Lyle had been like following the textbook to a T. Sirius, on the other hand, was agile and could dance well, if he put his mind to it. When he danced with other women, he was courteous, but with Estelle he would be nasty on purpose. Compared to her experience with those two, dancing with Arcrayne was easy, and the bitterness she’d felt earlier grew less pronounced over time.

“I see you can dance well.”

“Only thanks to your wonderful lead, Your Highness,” replied Estelle with a smile.

Anybody would agree that Arcrayne was an orthodox prince. Not only was he handsome, he was also tall, slim-looking but in fact muscular, and his gorgeous soiree frock coat suited him well.

If not for Estelle's power, she would no doubt have been able to enjoy the dance more—but the mana of the young women around her had been dark and frightening ever since she had started dancing.

Arcrayne's mana was dim too. It had been that way ever since the quadrille with Olivia, and so Estelle wanted to believe it wasn't her he found displeasing, but dancing itself.

All of a sudden, after several steps and a turn... Estelle shuddered, sensing malice beyond comparison to the animosity of the women around her.

Among the guests behind Arcrayne stood a waiter with murky mana. He continuously stared at the prince.

He scares me, thought Estelle. She casually made a step in the opposite direction to distance herself from the man, guiding Arcrayne with her. *What's with that man?*

As she continued to watch the waiter in secret, she noticed he was holding a handgun under his tray. Her eyes widened. The gun was pointed at Arcrayne.

She moved before she could think, shoving the prince away with all she had. The next moment...

Bang! rang through the ballroom, and a sharp pain coursed through Estelle's left upper arm.

It hurts... It burns... She could think of nothing else. The screaming and shouting all around her began to grow distant.

"Lady Estelle!"

Estelle fell suddenly, and Arcrayne caught her in his arms. The smell of fresh bergamot tickled her nostrils—perfume, perhaps. As her vision grew dim, she saw Sirius running towards her, his face wan.

With that, Estelle's consciousness faded into darkness.

***

It's so hot... The thought was running through Estelle's head as she came to her senses. She couldn't understand why she felt hot in every part of her body. *Have I caught a cold?*

Around her was a place she didn't recognize. She lay in the center of a fine-looking canopy bed. It was dim but not completely dark, thanks to a gentle, indirect orange light in the room.

Beyond the canopy, Estelle could see the dark brown drawing room furniture, likely walnut. Along the walls were serene rural landscapes, with Yang pottery on the shelves. The room had an elegant and calming ambience.

Where...am I...? she wondered.

As she tried to get up, sharp pain shot through her left upper arm. She collapsed in agony, at last remembering what had happened earlier.

She'd been shot. Right in the middle of her dance with Prince Arcrayne, at the ball held at Marquess Rogell's mansion.

Estelle trembled in fear, belated as it was. Her body felt terribly sluggish and hot. She had heard one would get a fever when sustaining a wound, and that fact was now sinking in.

She inspected herself. Her wounded left arm was bandaged. The soiree dress Estelle had been wearing when she'd arrived had been replaced with a dressing gown, which was easy to take off and put on and felt highly pleasant on her skin. *With this luster, it must be silk*, she theorized. Between that and the exquisite embellishments on the sleeves and collar, it was clear the gown was of the finest quality.

The fever she felt likely explained the sweat she was drenched in. Her throat was dry too.

Estelle surveyed her surroundings, then began to sit up carefully, so as not to aggravate the wound. She reached out a hand towards a pitcher on the bedside table. However, she got dizzy in the process and collapsed on the spot. A loud clatter reverberated throughout the room; she must've knocked something down.

Someone who appeared to be a maid rushed into the room, crying, "Is

everything all right, miss?!" She had probably heard the noise.

"I apologize. It looks as if I've knocked something over."

"Please don't worry about that. I'm glad to see you're awake. You've been unconscious for a whole day."

"Gracious..."

With the maid's help, Estelle returned to the bed.

She resolved to ask the question that was on her mind. "Say, where might this be...?"

"The town house of Marquess Rogell, miss. You were shot protecting His Highness Prince Arcrayne at the ball last night. Perhaps you do not remember?"

"I do remember being shot."

"Your voice is hoarse, miss. I will bring water and *then* clean up." The maid gave Estelle a smile and left the room.

A little while later, the maid returned with a new pitcher. On her tray was also a spout cup, which she must've brought out of consideration, so that Estelle could drink while lying down.

"Please have some water first." The maid brought the spout cup to Estelle's lips.

The water inside was faintly acidic and sweet. It appeared to have lemon and honey in it. Once she saw Estelle start to feel better, the maid began cleaning up the floor.

"Um, thank you... Have you been taking care of me here ever since I was shot?" timidly asked Estelle.

"That's right," replied the maid with a pleasant smile. "The doctor said it was best not to move you. Lord Flozeth is staying here too."

"He is...?"

Just like Sirius was to Estelle, Estelle was Sirius's only remaining family. They had other relatives they could trust—their uncle and his wife—but siblings had

a whole different level of significance. Estelle knew she must've made her brother worry.

"It's late today, so I'll let him know tomorrow."

At the maid's words, Estelle wondered what time it was. She looked at the wall-mounted clock, just visible in the indirect light, and noticed the hour hand pointing at one o'clock. Based on what the maid had said, Estelle inferred that it was one hour past midnight.

"The floor is all clean now, so I'll be taking my leave. Please make sure to rest well, miss—you still have a fever."

The moment Estelle had been left alone, she grew sleepy. Her body, beset by the fever, still required rest. Thus, she allowed sleep to take her.

***

Mana didn't only power mana-based devices; it also affected one's natural regeneration. Nobles naturally had large supplies of mana, so even if they didn't Awaken to any powers, they still tended to be more sturdy than commoners, and they healed from wounds and illnesses more quickly.

Estelle was no exception. Come next morning, she had already recovered enough to be able to sit up. She couldn't move her left arm and still had a slight fever, but her appetite had returned. After she'd eaten a meal that was easy on her stomach, had her bandage changed, and had the sweat wiped from her body while she was at it, she felt considerably better.

Another scar, she thought. When her engagement had been broken off, that had left a scar too, a scar that still hurt; now she had a physical one to go with it.

Disregarding the maid's efficient attentions, Estelle gently touched her bandaged upper arm.

The Rogells' family doctor had come first thing in the morning and told Estelle about the state of her injury. Luckily, the bullet had only penetrated the flesh of her left upper arm, so the wound wouldn't take too long to heal. However, he had told her that it would most likely leave a scar, as the weapon the assailant had used was a mana pistol.

Mana-based guns could only be used by those with sufficient mana. Every time the trigger was pulled, some of the wielder's mana was absorbed and converted into energy, which was then fired as a bullet. It was said that the blasts from these weapons always left scars, even in spite of a noble's regenerative ability, due to the fact that they brought another's mana in contact with the victim's wound.

This meant that Estelle could no longer wear dresses that exposed her shoulders and arms—and that her value as an unmarried woman had been brought down once more. As a noble, she was glad she had managed to protect a member of the royal family. But when she thought of her own future, she regretted not running instead.

"Um, it's difficult to say this, miss..." began the maid, hesitant.

"What?"

"His Highness Prince Arcrayne—as well as my master—have said they wish to speak to you... May I let them in?"

Estelle had gone two days without a bath due to her injury, and all she had for clothing was the dressing gown over her nightwear. She was reluctant to be seen by a man in such a state of undress, but she couldn't turn down a prince's request.

"Very well. I'll see them," replied Estelle, since she had no other choice.

Arcrayne and Claus entered the room a few moments later, looking dazzling enough to make Estelle even more ashamed of her current sorry state.

On one side, a blond prince and a silver-haired marquess. On the other, a woman with plain brown hair, with one scar from losing her fiancé and another from a pistol. Compared to these two radiant noblemen, Estelle felt she looked shabby and pitiful. She hung her head and adjusted the shawl the maid had given her with her unharmed right hand, seeking to hide her body to whatever extent she could.

Arcrayne took a seat on the chair by the bed and flashed a smile at Estelle. Claus stood behind him.

“Allow me to first express my gratitude, Lady Estelle. Thank you. It is because you risked your life that I live to see another day.”

“My body moved before I could think, Your Highness. It is wonderful to know you were unhurt.”

“How do you feel? I’ve been told your fever has gone down.”

“I still have a slight fever, but I feel better than yesterday.”

“I’ve also been told the bullet will leave a scar. It’s an inexcusable thing to happen to an unmarried woman. I intend to do whatever is in my power for you. For example, introduce you to a new fiancé.”

Estelle’s gaze snapped up.

“I’m aware of the misfortune that has beset you, Lady Estelle,” he continued. “Your engagement to Earl Wyntia’s son was broken off due to Pautrier’s involvement, was it not? His company supports the second prince. Have you, by any chance, sided with me to avoid encountering them?”

“It is as you say, Your Highness,” replied Estelle after a brief pause. “I would be delighted to be introduced to a man who would be of benefit to House Flozeth.”

A magnanimous smile appeared on Arcrayne’s face.

“Very well. I’ll introduce you to someone who’s a perfect match for you...but first, there’s something I need to ask you about.” Arcrayne’s mana clouded over in an instant.

What’s going on...? wondered Estelle.

Arcrayne wasn’t the only one with dark mana in the room. The same went for Claus’s.

Fear crept into the confused Estelle. Arcrayne was smiling—but for a brief moment he seemed to her like a ferocious predator who had set his sights on her.

“The way you moved in our dance before the shooter pulled the trigger... It was rather suspicious. Almost as though you were guiding me somewhere. Why was that?”

Estelle went pale. *What do I do? I can't tell him. I can't let people know of this power. How do I explain it away?* A barrage of thoughts appeared in her mind, one after another.

"You cannot answer because you have a guilty conscience. Am I correct? Estelle Flozeth," cut in Claus. "You and Lord Flozeth were first-time guests that day. Perhaps you arranged for that man to sneak in here because you wanted to curry favor with His Highness?"

"What?" It took some time for Estelle to process Claus's words. "My lord, are you saying that assassination attempt was some sort of ruse concocted by me and my brother?"

"Simply put, we're investigating the possibility you were the masterminds behind it. And your brother just so happens to be staying here too, at the moment."

"What is the meaning of this?! What have you done with my brother?!" Claus's high-handed manner had aroused fear in Estelle.

Arcrayne intervened. "That's uncalled for, Claus. She's still only a suspect." But his graceful smile did not touch his eyes, and his mana was still dark. "We haven't done anything to Lord Flozeth yet, other than have him stay in another drawing room. He has seemed awfully haggard from worry these past two days."

Estelle held her breath.

"Let me see my brother, please."

"I can't do that. It would be a problem if you two collaborated on a story to tell us. Whether we interrogate your dear brother or not is something I plan to decide after hearing what you have to say for yourself."

"My brother would never do something so outrageous. It should become clear if you properly investigate the matter!"

"The shooter killed himself. At the moment, we have no clue as to his motives or anything else about him," Claus informed her with a cold expression.

Arcrayne's expression, on the other hand, remained gentle. "Could you tell us

if you happen to know anything? For your dear brother's sake too."

If you looked at their attitude alone, this was a case of carrot and stick. Claus was putting pressure on her with his high-handed attitude, while Arcrayne spoke gently, as though trying to reason with her. But since Estelle could sense their mana, it was no different from both of them threatening her.

"I saw that man in the crowd while we danced," Estelle finally said. "I could tell he was aiming at you, Your Highness, so I wanted to distance ourselves from him to whatever degree I could."

"You're telling me you noticed the shooter at such a distance, and in *that* crowd? If you're going to give us this rubbish, at least come up with something less cliché." Claus shot an icy glare at Estelle—a look so cold it befitted his title of Lord Ice.

"Claus, you're scaring Lady Estelle." The smiling prince with dark mana was another source of dread for her. "Look, my patience is starting to run out. Would you answer me while I'm still asking nicely?" Arcrayne's smile vanished at once, leaving only those furious blue eyes that seemed as though they could see right through Estelle. His mana grew even more sinister.

I'm scared, thought Estelle. As he was both royalty and an Awoken, Arcrayne's mana was denser than that of anyone of lower status—it was so massive that it covered his whole body. And that dense mana was now murky with his anger.

"I-I'm not lying. I am an Awoken... I can see mana. And I saw mana with extreme malice in it..."

"I told you to think of something better if you're going to give us this crap!" exclaimed Claus.

"I'm telling the truth! I really can see mana!" snapped Estelle. "There's two people outside the room right now and one...somewhere above us, am I right? I imagine they're keeping an eye on me."

At her reply, Claus's mana became even more hostile, causing her to flinch.

"Above us, is that right...?" asked Arcrayne. "And which part of the ceiling do you sense it in?"

Estelle pointed upwards, trembling. “Around there—between the bed and that chandelier.”

“Interesting...”

“Your Highness,” said Claus after a pause.

The two exchanged glances. Claus’s animosity remained unchanged, but Arcrayne’s mana had quickly brightened.

“Perhaps Lady Estelle is telling the truth about her power. I do have two guards outside and one in the ceiling.”

“You cannot be serious, Your Highness!”

“Claus, Lady Estelle correctly indicated the hidden chamber in the ceiling. Isn’t it safe to say she’s an Awoken?”

“I...suppose you may be right...”

“Lady Estelle, would you mind telling us more about your power?” asked Arcrayne, turning back to Estelle. His mana was sparkling with his curiosity.

Estelle gulped, feeling a bad premonition.

Marquess Rogell’s drawing room, where Estelle had been resting, had a hidden chamber in the ceiling. Its apparent purpose was keeping important guests safe.

After Estelle had told Arcrayne and Claus about her power, they had tested it using this chamber. She couldn’t sense the mana of those more than five meters away without a direct line of sight, but for the purpose of this test, it hadn’t posed a problem.

“I have no choice but to believe,” uttered Claus, surprised. “It appears Lady Estelle really is an Awoken.”

“Her ability is quite interesting, too. While its range is limited, it allows her to sense people through walls and other obstacles. And she can even roughly *see* people’s emotions.”

They had put people in the hidden chamber and asked Estelle to say how

many were there. After repeating this test a few times, Arcrayne and Claus finally seemed ready to acknowledge her power. She must've been rather tired from dealing with the two for so long, as she'd slowly developed a headache. She felt her fever on the rise too.

"Oh, my apologies, I forgot you were wounded. Care to lie down?"

It took Estelle holding her aching head for Arcrayne to finally notice her condition. She took him up on his offer, and he placed a hand on her back and helped her lie down.

"Have I been cleared of suspicion?"

Arcrayne stared at Claus, who then let out a breath of resignation.

"Yes, I suppose so."

As the attitude of Lord Ice softened up, Estelle snuck a peek at him. His mana was calmer now. While the darkness was not completely gone from it, it was a big difference from when he had put his animosity towards her on full display.

"I apologize, Lady Estelle. My position is rather delicate, you see. As I'm constantly in danger of assassination, it has made Claus here rather high-strung."

"Members of the second prince's faction are after His Highness Prince Arcrayne's life. I'm aware of how rude I was towards you, Lady Estelle, but I hope you now understand."

"Please raise your head, my lord. If I am no longer a suspect, then that is all that matters."

"Truth be told," spoke Claus with some hesitation, "I don't have complete faith in you and Lord Sirius either. Until I can know for certain you had nothing to do with the assassin, I must investigate and keep watch on you."

"I understand His Highness's position. I never meant to do anything dishonorable, so please investigate me as much as you wish," replied Estelle, looking Claus directly in the eyes.

In the corner of her vision, she saw Arcrayne's mana flare bright. As she turned towards him, she saw his royal blue eyes gazing at her.

“Why do you keep your status as Awoken a secret, Lady Estelle? I think you would find a husband in an instant if you made it public.”

“While I cannot exactly see people’s emotions clearly, I am afraid of people finding out I can do it at all... What if they hate or fear me for it?”

“I think I understand your concerns, Lady Estelle,” Claus replied. “To be frank, I am uncomfortable with the fact you can read the general direction of my emotions.”

Claus’s words stung in Estelle’s chest.

“Please, Your Highness, my lord, don’t speak of this power of mine to anyone. I have not even told my brother. If he were to find out—if he grew to resent me, I...”

The room went quiet for a few seconds. Arcrayne’s eyes widened slightly, and he brought his hand to his chin in thought. The silence was uncomfortable. Estelle placed her right hand on her chest and clenched it in a fist.

“So... An Awoken from an earl’s family, from a house that has kept its distance from Albion’s politics until now...” said Arcrayne at length. “The earldom lies in the northern mountains—its land is infertile, but it is blessed with a mana stone vein, which brings it decent profit.”

Estelle felt like the prince was speaking of her earldom, but she couldn’t be completely sure. Then, appearing to have made up his mind, Arcrayne lowered his hand from his chin and faced Estelle directly.

“Lady Estelle, will you marry me?”

“What?”

“Your Highness?! What has come over you?!” exclaimed Claus.

He and Estelle both had their eyes wide open in surprise at the prince’s offer that had come like a bolt from the blue.

“You realize she hasn’t been fully cleared of doubt yet, right?”

“I think she’s practically guaranteed to be innocent. You feel the same way deep inside, don’t you?”

For a moment, Claus went silent at those words.

“Still, to propose to a woman you have only just met... Shouldn’t you be more careful about things like these?”

“What do you think, Estelle?” asked Arcrayne, before Claus could continue. “You said you wanted me to introduce you to a potential future husband. What about me? I think I’m a rather good choice.”

Estelle blankly stared at the prince with her mouth open.

“Um... This is too sudden...”

“Is there something about me you find unsatisfactory? Not to toot my own horn, but you won’t find a man of suitable age and higher status than me in this kingdom.”

It was true. Since Prince Liedis was still fifteen, the highest-ranking man of marriageable age was Arcrayne. No other potential husband could have better status, birth, or looks.

“Marry me, and you’ll put Lyle Wyntia and Diana Pautrier to shame. Don’t you find it frustrating how much people talk about what happened?”

It was like the Devil’s temptation. And while Estelle didn’t particularly have a grudge against Lyle, she did have a lot on her mind when it came to Diana Pautrier. However...

“I-I am too humbled,” she stammered. “The idea of becoming a...a princess...”

She couldn’t accept the offer so easily. Though Arcrayne was first in line for succession, the lack of public consensus meant his future position as sovereign wasn’t guaranteed. Assuming he did become king, his spouse would then be queen consort—an overwhelmingly important position.

On the other hand, if he lost to his brother, things could go much worse. While she might become a duchess and live a quiet life with the king’s brother in some domain owned by the royal family, there was always the risk of being charged with some crime.

“You are so modest, Lady Estelle. What is it that’s not to your liking? Perhaps it’s my face?” asked Arcrayne, leaning over Estelle as she lay on the bed. He

brought his face close to hers.

Seeing that handsome face at point-blank range made her heart race.

“Y-You have a very shapely face, Your Highness, but I do not fancy a position that could have me imprisoned, executed—goodness knows what else...”

“Are you worried about what will happen if I lose to Liedis? I value my life, so I’m doing my best to bring about a more peaceful future.”

“That hardly sounds like a secure prospect. As I value my life too, I shall have to decline your offer.”

“So you insist on rejecting me. But do you realize you have no right to refuse a royal’s wishes?”

As Estelle looked to get away from him, Arcrayne cut off her path of escape with his arm. He was effectively pinning her down on the bed from above.



“Wait a moment, please!” cried Claus. “What about Lady Rainsworth, Your

Highness?!”

“Yes, I suppose I would have married her, had you never made an appearance. Unfortunately, I don’t have much fondness for her.”

“Really?”

Arcrayne’s reply surprised Estelle and made her feel sorry for Olivia. Her mana was so radiant when she was by the prince’s side; she appeared to be completely in love with him.

“It seems she fully expects to become my consort, as though it were set in stone. That excess pride of hers makes me uneasy.”

“I can be proud and selfish too.”

“Perhaps. I don’t know you well, Lady Estelle. Perhaps if I have you by my side long enough, I’ll notice some part of you that I find unpleasant, as was the case with Lady Olivia.”

“Then please take back your proposal! I am not fit to be your wife.”

“I cannot do that. You are of use to me in a way nobody else is,” replied Arcrayne with a callous smile.

Just a short while ago his face had been like sunlight in spring, and now it was gone without a trace. In all likelihood, that gentle and amiable expression was a mask. This, then, must have been his true self.

“What is it you intend to use me for?” asked Estelle, trembling.

“You’re not the brightest, are you, Lady Estelle?” said Claus, who had been watching on in silence up to that point.

Estelle took offense at his spiteful tone.

He went on, “His Highness Prince Arcrayne is being targeted by extremists among the second prince’s supporters. Given your power, don’t you think you could foil future assassination attempts to some degree?”

“I don’t have any attachment to the throne, truth be told. I’ve even said as much in public, but the radicals won’t take my word for it. And I’d prefer to die a natural death.” Arcrayne let out a sigh of exasperation.

“So you wish to use me as a walking alarm?”

“Exactly. The royal family would greatly benefit from your power.”

“There’s no guarantee it will pass on to my children.”

“I’m well aware of that. But it could reappear through atavism. You and I simply have to do our best and get *very* comfortable with one another.”

“Excuse me?!”

Blood rushed to Estelle’s head at the prince’s implication of how their nights together would go.

“It pains me to say this, Lady Estelle, but now that His Highness has set his eyes on you, you had best resign yourself to your fate.” Claus directed a pitiful look at the dumbfounded Estelle.

Chapter 2: Aftermath of the Proposal

A full week had passed since the assassination attempt at the ball, and yet Estelle remained at Marquess Rogell's mansion. The wound on her left arm had all but closed up. Regrettably, just as the doctor had predicted, it was healing in a way that would leave a scar. The bullet had ripped right through her skin, which made the wound close in an unsightly bulge.

The reason for Estelle's continued stay at the mansion even after her recovery was the fact Arcrayne had proposed to her after she had revealed herself as an Awoken.

When Sirius learned she had regained consciousness and came to check on her, Arcrayne officially asked for her hand in marriage.

Rosalia was a patriarchy. Women couldn't receive higher education, and without special permission from the kingdom, they couldn't inherit titles or their family's fortune either. Decisions with regards to their marriage were also made by the head of the family.

Sirius, the head of the Flozeth household, agreed to the marriage without a second thought. It was partially due to the fact that Estelle claimed to be happy after the prince fell in love with her at first sight—a story she'd had to make up to keep her power a secret from Sirius—but also the fact that he easily accepted Arcrayne's believable fabrication.

Remembering it gave Estelle a headache and made her press her fingers to her temple. Not only was Arcrayne a smooth talker; he was outright wicked. He had made it so that in Sirius's mind, Arcrayne was a veritable Prince Charming who had been in love with Estelle from the moment he saw her.

"Lady Estelle is a saint who risked her life to shield me from an assassin's bullet."

"I was smitten with her humble attitude after the fact, too. No other woman is so sweet and has such a beautiful nature."

“Because of me, a scar was left on her body. But a part of me is delighted at that fact. It gives me an excuse to make her mine, under the pretext of taking responsibility. Please forgive such an unseemly side of me, Lord Sirius.”

“Destiny binds me to Lady Estelle. I have no doubt *that* was the reason her engagement with the Wyntias’ son was broken off.”

Arcrayne spouted lines like that with such a serious look on his face that Estelle could only see him as a seasoned swindler.

Still, as this was a matter of marrying into royalty, Sirius’s approval alone was not enough. To finalize the two’s wedding, her background had to be investigated first, and both the sovereign and the parliament had to give their approval as well.

At present, Estelle was waiting for the formalities to end while staying at Marquess Rogell’s mansion. She hadn’t been able to return to the Flozeth town house; now that Arcrayne had proposed to her, she required protection.

She couldn’t adequately be protected in a simple detached house like the Flozeths’ residence in Albion. Claus had been stuck with guarding her, and he didn’t even try to hide the displeasure on his face. Also, as Estelle knew how to shoot, she’d been given a small mana pistol for protection, just in case. She had it hidden under her dress even now.

Estelle sighed at having become the object of this man’s attentions—the sort of man who would put her in such an absurd situation.

Not only did he put me in danger, but he’s even making me study, she lamented.

No sooner had her arm recovered than a private tutor was appointed to her. Foreign languages, court rituals, geography and history of Rosalia and its neighbors, a review of etiquette... To become a princess, she needed to be more knowledgeable and cultured than an ordinary noblewoman. Studying for such a purpose was a source of distress for Estelle.

Let’s see... This is the domain of Rogell... Its main industry is agriculture. They

mainly grow wheat. Beside it lies the duchy of Marwick... Estelle frowned as she tackled her geography assignment in the mansion's library. Geography was her weak subject, even back in school. She had a general idea of the industries found in the northern parts of Great Rosalia, but she was completely clueless about regions she had no personal familiarity with. Estelle recalled how in her school days she'd found it hard to study the subject, having trouble memorizing things she had no interest in.

A princess needed to know all the peers and regions of her kingdom. If she didn't know every noble by sight and name, it would be difficult for her to mingle in high society once she married the prince.

As Estelle groaned over her assignment, struggling to put names of the local lords and major industries on a blank map while checking her textbook, a man's shadow fell on her desk. Looking up in surprise, she saw the very man who had forced her into this situation.

"Your Highness."

"Hello, Estelle. I've come to check up on you."

"I was hoping you would knock first..."

"I did. Perhaps you were too focused and didn't hear it?"

"What about your official duties?" asked Estelle with a sullen expression on her face.

"I got done with them early today," replied the prince, beaming.

Arcrayne had spent the past ten days playing the role of a prince who had fallen in love with Estelle at first sight—for that, he had visited Marquess Rogell's mansion every two days. And each time he had fun teasing Estelle. Quite the wicked sort.

As he reached out towards the desk, Estelle snatched her assignment away from his hand.

"Is this on geography? It appears you're struggling a fair bit."

"I am not good with it."

"I know. I've taken a look at what grades you had in school."

“Gracious me... You did?”

There was a very clear divide between the grades of Estelle’s good and bad subjects at school. She hated geography and history; her grades in them were dreadful. Estelle was embarrassed to know Arcrayne had seen them. She glared at him, but he had a cheerful smile on his face. His radiant mana made her resent him even more.

“As part of looking into your background. Your financial situation, how you siblings did in school, your daily lives, *et cetera, et cetera*—all of that is getting investigated and reported to my father.”

Things can’t get any worse, thought Estelle, scowling.

“I can’t stand geography and history. They’re impossible to get into my head. Back in school I just barely managed to avoid failing by simply memorizing things without really understanding them, but it was all gone the moment I graduated.”

“It’s more efficient to focus on understanding the logic of geographical phenomena, rather than to memorize things without thinking.”

“Logic, you say...?” asked Estelle, tilting her head in puzzlement.

“For instance, the earldom of Claret is famous for its wine—and do you know what fruit is required to make wine?”

“Grapes.”

“To cultivate grapes, you need dryness and sunlight. Now consider how the earldom of Claret is topographically protected by a peninsula that projects from the Heredian continent. This makes rains less frequent. That should tell you what needs to go in this part of the blank map, right?” Arcrayne tapped his finger on the domain closest to the continent. “Your earldom is known for its ale and sausages, isn’t it? Why do you think that is?”

“It’s cold and the land is infertile, so we grow a lot of barley. And since there’s not many crops we can grow, many farmers put pigs to pasture instead.”

While Estelle struggled to learn about other parts of the kingdom, she knew her earldom well. He reply brimmed with confidence, but then Arcrayne flashed

a nasty smile.

“There are many forms of livestock. Do you know why your farmers chose pigs and not cows or sheep?”

“Huh?”

Estelle froze up at the unexpected question. Seeing that, Arcrayne shrugged and proceeded to explain.

“It’s because farming pigs is highly efficient. They quickly grow and become meat. The popularity of mixed farming in the north also has to do with the severe climate and harsh terrain. Do I need to explain mixed farming too?”

“Do not look down on me. Even I know that much.”

Mixed farming was a type of farming which involved both the growing of crops and the raising of livestock. Many of Flozeth’s people made a living farming pigs and growing things like alfalfa and sugar beet for fodder—they grew barley and potatoes for their own food.

“There’s generally some kind of reason for why this or that industry developed in a given region, most often related to the climate or geographical conditions. The reason you see so many ironworks along the coast is that iron ore and mana stones required for manufacture have to be brought in by ship. It might be easier to memorize if you form an understanding of these things.”

“It is as you say...” replied Estelle weakly.

As she did, the prince ran a hand through her half-up, half-down hair, then lifted a lock and kissed it, startling her. The smell of bergamot tickled Estelle’s nostrils.

“Sorry to make you do this, but keep at it. I intend to adequately reward you for being my personal alarm.”

That handsome face so close to Estelle’s made her heart quicken. He was the wicked sort of man who knew the power of his looks and made use of them.

Considerate of Estelle’s wishes, Arcrayne and Claus were keeping her power a secret for the time being. Only four people currently knew her status as an Awoken: Arcrayne; Claus; Claus’s mother, Sierra; and a court attendant by the

name of May, appointed to Estelle by Arcrayne to act as both her maid and bodyguard.

The conditions for keeping her power a secret were for her to attend Arcrayne and use her power to serve his interests. The easiest way to keep an unmarried daughter of an earl by his side was to marry her, which was why Arcrayne had proposed to Estelle. First, she would be his fiancée—and eventually, a princess. He wished for her to bear him at least one child. However, this also meant tying Estelle down.

Estelle resisted, of course. To that, Arcrayne had promised her the highest amount of esteem as a princess. This included accommodating any needs the earldom of Flozeth might have. She couldn't be unreservedly happy about the proposal, however, given the risks that came with the possibility of Arcrayne losing to the second prince.

Don't get the wrong idea, Estelle, she warned herself, looking away from Arcrayne.

What he was after was her special power, not her as a person. She had no doubt the prince was only being nice to her to make her fall for him and accelerate their marriage. She knew it well, and she was angry at herself—that her very emotions seemed to dance to his tune. A part of her wasn't opposed to the prospect of getting married to him and spending nights together... On the contrary, it was excited about the idea.

How foolish can I be? Estelle censured herself. She couldn't let herself be deluded by Arcrayne's looks. After having this internal monologue, she lightly shook her head to chase away her budding affection for the prince.

He was a terrible person who was using his authority and blackmail to exploit her. Estelle needed to keep that in mind.

Arcrayne said a short break was in order and took Estelle to the mansion's conservatory. It was a terrace with glass walls on the estate's premises, filled with southern ornamental plants. Lit by gentle sunrays, the conservatory was warm in contrast to the cold and desolate garden outside. In the center was a garden table with a tea set prepared by May on it.

May—or Maybel Cao—was Estelle's personal maid and one of the four people who knew her secret. Though she'd ordinarily been a court attendant at Arcrayne's palace, he had appointed her to serve Estelle. She was a serene beauty with a cold, standoffish air and clear-cut features; she apparently had some Eastern blood flowing in her veins.

Estelle had wanted to call over her family's servants—she had grown familiar with them, after all—but Arcrayne warned against it. He persuaded her that only his tight-lipped subordinate could keep both her power and her status as an Awoken a secret.

For the sake of her mental health, Estelle couldn't be attended by people who bore her ill will. Fortunately, May appeared to be highly professional, and her mana never revealed any unpleasant emotions, even when she was by Estelle's side.

Moreover, as Arcrayne's birth mother, Miriallia, had come from the Rogell household and this mansion belonged to them, it was like a second home for him; he seemed to come and go as he pleased, even without Claus around.

"I'm here today to give you this," said Arcrayne, once he and Estelle had sat down. He then handed her a royal blue envelope.

The envelope was emblazoned with a crown and a shield with white roses on it. Both the color of the envelope and the crest on it signified the royal status of the sender. Estelle frowned, a bad premonition on her mind.

"*Must* I read it...?"

"I suppose so. It's from the queen."

The wax seal was a lily—Queen Truteliese's seal. There was a tradition among the members of the royal family to use certain kinds of seals: men chose among animals, while women chose among flowers other than the national flower, the

rose. Incidentally, the king's seal was a wolf, and Arcrayne's was a tiger.

"My father and Queen Truteliese wish to meet you before they approve our marriage. This is an invitation to a tea party hosted by the queen."

"I see you do not call her 'mother.'"

"I do call her stepmother—when I'm in front of her."

Arcrayne's mana clouded over. It was said that Queen Truteliese was fanning the flames of the two princes' antagonism, as she wished to see her own son take the throne. In most fairy tales, stepmothers are villains, and it must've been no different for Arcrayne. Relationships between parents and children unrelated by blood were just as complicated in the royal family as they were among commoners.

"Don't be so nervous. I'll go with you to the party. It would take something extraordinary for them not to approve our marriage."

"Is that so?"

"I don't yet know how my father will react, but I'm fairly sure the queen will be in favor. If she thoughtlessly objected to it and I ended up marrying Lady Olivia, it would only bring trouble to the queen."

Perhaps she was being paranoid, but Estelle felt like he was implying that House Flozeth was inferior to House Rainsworth.

I suppose it's true, she conceded. At the end of the day, Flozeth was a rural earldom in the north. In many ways it simply couldn't compare with one of Rosalia's preeminent families, the house of Marquess Rainsworth.

"The tea party is in three days. Could you show me later what dresses and jewelry you've brought in?"

When Estelle had moved to this mansion, she'd had her personal effects delivered from the Flozeths' town house to her new place of residence.

"What do you intend to do after seeing them?"

"I was thinking of wearing a matching outfit on the day."

"It seems my chances of escape grow ever fainter."

“Our story is that I fell for you at first sight, after all. We have to do everything in our power to make it more credible,” replied Arcrayne with a cheerful smile.

He’s definitely a sadist, thought Estelle. He seemed to be greatly enjoying himself whenever she looked displeased. That ferocious expression he wore when he’d interrogated Estelle must’ve been another part of his true nature.

All of a sudden, the tea and sweets that had been placed in front of Estelle lost their taste.

***

“Prince Arcrayne in Love? A Fateful Meeting at a Ball...”

“His Partner is Estelle Flozeth!”

“What is this article?!”

As Diana Pautrier crumpled up the newspaper and threw it on the floor, Yufil looked on with a chilly gaze. As she was Diana’s maid, she kept her true thoughts to herself and put on a worried look instead.

“You’re telling me the first prince fell in love with Estelle Flozeth at first sight?! Why is it always her?!”

Next, a cushion from the sofa flew at the table, knocking down a glass flower vase and loudly shattering it to pieces. Shattered glass, scattered flowers, water seeping through the rug—cleaning up all of this was going to be Yufil’s job.

Here goes another of her temper tantrums, thought Yufil, quite fed up with them by now. However, she made herself look fretful, gently placing a hand on Diana’s shoulder.

“You mustn’t believe articles such as that. Isn’t this just some lowbrow tabloid?”

In order to keep a finger on the pulse of the kingdom, the residents of this mansion bought a variety of newspapers, from quality papers catering to high-ranking nobles to tabloids full of radical and dubious articles. Diana’s fit had begun when she’d happened upon one such article.

Diana regarded Estelle Flozeth as her enemy. It had all begun eight months prior to these events, in March of the current year, after a dramatic encounter

with Lyle Wyntia. She had been on her way home from a theater when a horse drawing her coach had gone out of control. The one who had gallantly saved her that day was Lyle.

While it had been a rather commonplace encounter, Diana had fallen head over heels in love with the black haired young nobleman who had leapt on the fractious horse and stopped her coach. Unfortunately, he'd already had a fiancée by the name of Estelle Flozeth. However, Diana simply couldn't find it in her to give up on Lyle, so she had gone to her father in tears to beg him.

Her father was the president of his trading company, appropriately named "Pautrier's." The public knew him as a rather idiosyncratic man, and he had a soft spot for his daughter. Driving Earl Wyntia—a man in deep financial distress from last year's endless rains—into a corner, he had made Lyle and Estelle's engagement history, all in the blink of an eye. A truly terrifying man.

You thought you could win against Lady Estelle, thought Yufil as she soothed Diana.

The Estelle Flozeth Yufil knew of was indeed more plain than Diana. Diana was a gorgeous beauty with curly blonde hair and peridot-like, yellow-green eyes, outshining Estelle with the latter's plain brown hair, even if Estelle had rare purplish-red eyes.

Even when it came to the clothes they wore on social outings, Diana's were surely of better quality. Diana often focused on that detail to denounce Estelle behind her back. And it was none other than Diana who had spread the rumor that had villainized Estelle in the recent scandal, on which she had spent copious amounts of money.

But you should know, Lady Diana...I'm quite certain some would find her more attractive than you, Yufil thought.

Diana was beautiful and came from money—everyone would surely agree with that. But frankly, she was cocky, selfish, and inconsiderate.

Yufil didn't know what kind of personality Estelle had. However, her looks placed her well within the definition of a beauty, and Yufil imagined there were plenty of men who might take a liking to a beautiful, tidy lady with a calm and composed air.

Mr. Lyle's heart most likely still belongs to Lady Estelle, speculated Yufil. At the very least, that was how things appeared to her. Diana had probably noticed it too, which had surely intensified her antagonism towards Estelle.

There had been a shooting at a ball hosted by Marquess Rogell about ten days ago. When Diana had heard that Estelle had regrettably suffered a wound, she'd expressed sympathy towards her in public while ridiculing her when nobody was looking—that was how much she hated Estelle. However, seeing as that incident had sparked romance between her and a prince, one never knew what the future might hold.

Yufil pitied her greedy, childish, and impatient mistress. But the only reason she soothed and humored this woman, putting up with her antics, was the good pay. Thus, Yufil kept her thoughts to herself and flattered her mistress.

"My lady, even should the first prince and Lady Flozeth get close, you never know how things will go. Her Majesty the Queen regards His Highness Prince Arcrayne with disfavor, doesn't she?"

"That's true, but this still makes me angry! Mr. Lyle can't seem to forget that harlot, and now she's got herself a prince!" shouted Diana, continuously stomping on the cushion that had landed on the floor. It was very much like her to throw a fit while avoiding the glass shards scattered about so she didn't hurt herself.

It appeared there would be a little more time before this storm had passed. Though she was disgusted with Diana's behavior, Yufil continued to console her, playing at flustered concern.

***

The day of Queen Truteliese's tea party had arrived. As Estelle made her way to the entrance hall after hearing that Arcrayne had come for her, Sierra Rogell, Claus's mother, called out to her.

"Lady Estelle, are you headed to the Palace of Albion?"

Sierra was a ghostly, surprisingly young-looking beauty with silver hair and very pale blue eyes. Claus had apparently taken after her, and standing beside her, he looked more like a younger brother than a son. The one thing that

strongly set them apart was their personalities. Unlike Claus, whose expression was nearly always cold as a steel blade, Sierra was a lovely woman who was very expressive when she spoke, even though standing silently made her look more like a statue of a beautiful goddess.

"I'm worried that vixen might do something to you. I can't do anything other than listen to your complaints, but if there's something upsetting you, do let me know."

As Sierra clenched her fist, offering Estelle her encouragement, she didn't look like a woman with a twenty-three-year-old child at all. Estelle was afraid to ask how old she was, but she looked as though she was in her late twenties.

Estelle only felt as at home as she did in the marquess's mansion because Sierra had shown her so much consideration.

"Thank you, Lady Sierra."

Had it not been for her, Estelle might not have been able to put up with the major changes in her daily life after Arcrayne had proposed to her. She bowed to Sierra and left.

Sierra seemed to be so nice to Estelle because of some conflict between her and Olivia's mother, Mrs. Rainsworth. Of course, it was probably also because of how Arcrayne himself felt about Olivia, not to mention the fact Estelle was an Awoken; but the biggest reason was that she couldn't let Mrs. Rainsworth gain more influence in Arcrayne's faction as a result of him marrying Olivia.

The world of factions was terrifying. Their members were like wolves fighting for leadership in a pack. What's worse, Estelle would have to set foot in this world sooner or later.

As she went down the stairs, dejected, her eyes met Arcrayne's. He was looking up at her from the entrance hall. Just like they had arranged ahead of time, Arcrayne wore a black frock coat with a purplish-red tie and a pocket square of the same color, while Estelle had a long-sleeved, purplish-red day dress on, embellished with black lace and ribbons. It was the same purplish-red, rosé wine color as Estelle's eyes.

Estelle felt awkward, wearing matching clothing with someone as handsome

as Arcrayne. She worried about whether or not she looked good enough beside him.

“It becomes you, Estelle,” said the prince and extended his hand to escort her.

As she took it and drew close to him, she smelled bergamot. She had come to realize it was his signature scent.

“Don’t get so worked up; it will only be my father and the queen. I do, however, want you to tell me after the party what their mana looked like. Think you can do that for me?”

“As you wish.”

Estelle nodded and got into a coach emblazoned with the royal crest, together with the prince.

***

The Palace of Albion where the king lived was located in the northern part of the city and comprised twelve buildings. Those buildings, each large enough to constitute a palace in its own right, were named after the signs of the zodiac. It was customary for members of the royal family to receive one of these palaces on their seventh birthday and live separately from their parents. The venue for this day’s tea party was the Leo Palace, the home of the king and queen themselves.

Inside the coach, Estelle sat by Arcrayne’s side to keep up the act that he was up to his ears in love, which was mentally taxing for her. When she got out of the coach, her head aching, a court attendant of the Leo Palace was waiting for them. She led them to the room where the tea party was to be held, and both the king and the queen were already inside.

“Father, stepmother, I’ve brought her. This is Estelle Flozeth.”

Just as he had told Estelle, Arcrayne called the queen “stepmother” when he was in front of her.

“Your Majesty, the radiant sun of Rosalia—allow me to introduce myself as well. I am Estelle Flozeth.”

Once Arcrayne had presented her, Estelle spoke the words of formal

introduction which were expected at an audience with the king and queen.

“Welcome, Arcrayne, Lady Estelle. Please, have a seat,” said Queen Truteliese.

Once Estelle had taken the queen up on her offer, she snuck a peek at her and her husband.

You lied to me, Your Highness, thought Estelle inside. Judging by the fact that their mana was dark, Estelle didn’t exactly seem to be welcome here. The queen had particularly murky mana. All that talk of it being more convenient for Queen Truteliese if Estelle became a princess, rather than Olivia Rainsworth—what had *that* been all about?

King Sashes Ethelbert of Rosalia looked the way you’d expect Arcrayne to look in his senior years. Estelle had heard he had enjoyed immense popularity in high society in his youth. There were traces of it about him even now; he had the charm of a man with many years behind him. Just like Arcrayne and Liedis, Sashes was an Awoken. He had command of powerful telekinesis, and while he didn’t have as much mana as Arcrayne, it was still the sort of large supply that befitted a member of royalty.

By his side was Queen Truteliese, gorgeous like a full-flowered rose. With striking dark brown hair and equally striking, lustrous blue eyes, she radiated dignity and refinement.

Those blue eyes, found also in Olivia Rainsworth and members of House Rogell, were common in high-ranking noble houses close to the royal family in the south of Great Rosalia. Coming from House Marwick—a ducal house known as a “spare” for the royal family—Queen Truteliese had the same royal blue eyes as Arcrayne and the king.

As an earl’s daughter, Estelle had already met the king and queen when she debuted to high society two years prior. Being invited to such a private session was different, however. There was a nagging pain in her stomach from the stress.

“First, I’d like to thank you for saving my son, Lady Estelle,” began the king.

“Allow me to express my gratitude as well. Thank you for protecting the first prince from an assassin,” continued the queen.

“It was my duty to protect my king’s family.”

This exchange marked the start of the tea party—which for Estelle was like sitting on a bed of nails.

“I’ve heard the earldom of Flozeth is one of the snowiest regions in the kingdom,” said the queen. “Is it about time for it to be buried under snow?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It generally starts to pile up in December.”

“Your earldom lies in the northernmost part of the dragons’ habitat, yes?” asked the king. “I’ve been told they wreaked some havoc this year too. I think a grant will be approved soon, and you’ll be informed of it.”

“Thank you for your kind assistance.”

“You do most of the dragon hunting from late winter to early spring, correct?” added the queen. “I’ve heard Earl Flozeth personally leads the hunting party.”

“That is correct. Culling the dragon population brings stability to our people’s lives.”

On the surface, it was just a pleasant conversation about harmless topics. However, the king and queen’s mana were both murky from start to finish, indicating that the two of them weren’t as accepting of her as they appeared to be.

The tea and sweets laid out on the table were of the finest quality, as befit a royal palace, yet Estelle could scarcely taste them. All she could do was wait for the time to pass.

“Now, then, shall we get to the main topic?” said the king at last.

“By all means,” replied Arcrayne, stepping up to the challenge. “I think you’ve now had time to see what kind of person Lady Estelle is, father, stepmother. I intend to make her a princess.”

“As you are first in line for the throne, there is a chance she will become queen in the future. And I do believe Olivia was better suited for the position, Arcrayne.”

Estelle had known the king would say this. Olivia Rainsworth’s marriage to Arcrayne had been rumored to be a sure prospect; by contrast, Estelle was of

lower status and had less influence on the central government. The king hadn't been informed that Estelle was an Awoken.

Every member of the royal family received their own palace at a young age. Because of that, Arcrayne and Sashes were more distant than your average father and son. Apparently, Arcrayne couldn't fully consider his father an ally.

Letting the king know about Estelle's powers would make her the most promising candidate for Arcrayne's wife. However, if they told him, they ran the risk of the queen finding out—so it had been decided to keep the matter a secret.

Under such oppressive, dark clouds of mana, Estelle began to hang her head. But then Arcrayne placed his hand over hers in her lap, and Estelle's eyes widened. Because of the table cloth, the king and queen shouldn't have been able to see it. The warmth coming from Arcrayne's hand made Estelle's heart leap.

"Your Majesty, is it not Arcrayne's feelings that matter?" the queen mediated. "It's true that Lady Estelle lacks many things compared to Lady Olivia, but she could put in effort to make up for it."

Why is her mana getting even darker? wondered Estelle. It should've been more convenient for the queen if Estelle became a princess, rather than Arcrayne establishing ties with House Rainsworth—one of the leading supporters of the first prince's faction, with high influence on the central government—because the queen wanted Liedis to take the throne.

"When the next king is chosen, the temperament of the future queen will be taken into consideration," spoke the king. "Are you prepared for it?"

"Yes, father. I am."

"I cannot approve of your marriage just yet. Give me a little more time to investigate her."

"I have faith you will consider her in a positive light."

With that exchange, the tea party drew to a close.

***

Once she was out of the Leo Palace and back inside the coach, Estelle could finally feel some relief. Just like on the way there, Arcrayne sat beside her in the coach, which she accepted with a distant look.

“I knew the queen wouldn’t object. And though my father spoke as he did, I think he’ll give his approval too.”

“Are you certain? Because the two had dark mana.”

Arcrayne stared at Estelle in surprise.

“Both of them? Even the queen?”

“Yes. She spoke as though she supported me, but her mana was even murkier than that of the king.”

The prince went silent in thought and brought a hand to his chin.

“Have you...ever met her? In the past, I mean?”

“No. Well, I met her briefly at a debutante ball before, but today was my first time properly speaking to her.”

Though Estelle had visited the Palace of Albion several times since her debut, the king and queen had been far beyond her reach—people she had only been able to look at from afar.

“I wonder if there’s bad blood between her and the Flozeths... Perhaps I should look into it.” Arcrayne was mumbling now.

Estelle gazed at his profile. She hated how handsome he always looked.

Were the king to give his approval, this man would almost certainly become her husband. Even though he brought with him a risk of death for himself and everyone around him, he was an attractive man.

However, Estelle had to wonder what he would do about her if the king didn’t give his approval. Arcrayne needed Estelle by his side to make use of her power. As she came from an earl-ranked house, the most respectable way to do that was to marry her. And if that became impossible...

“What does Your Highness intend to do with me if His Majesty does not grant his approval? Even I resent the thought of being kept as a mistress.”

“He *will* approve, probably. Ever since Prince Gilfis eloped, the royal family has become more tolerant of marrying for love. We owe him for that.”

“You are talking about the *love with the crown at stake*.”

Prince Gilfis was brother to Arcrayne’s grandfather. Despite being the crown prince, he had become famous for falling madly enough in love to throw away his future as king. The woman he had loved was a divorcée from the lesser nobility. He had eagerly sought to marry her, but she had been deemed too unsuitable. This love had been highly criticized, not only by the king (Arcrayne’s great-grandfather) and nobles, but by the whole public as well. In the end, Prince Gilfis had become reckless enough to cast everything away and elope to the New World with his beloved.

Furthermore, this love had ended quite tragically. Five years after they had fled to the New World, Former Prince Gilfis and his wife Einis perished in a traffic accident. There were credible rumors of the royal secret service, “Shadow of the Rose,” having a hand in their deaths.

The story of a prince who had met an untimely death after a scandal had left a strong impression on the public, and it came to be known as the “love with the crown at stake.”

“The whole thing with Prince Gilfis became a massive scandal, after all. You’re unmarried and you come from an earl’s family, so I don’t think my father will be so uncompromising.”

“But still...what if it comes to that? What will you do?”

“If it comes to that, I’ll have to think of a different way to keep you around. Given how much people talk about the two of us now, it would be difficult to make you a court attendant at my palace, so I suppose that leaves keeping you as my favorite mistress.”

“I believe I have said I resent the thought.”

“I promise I will cherish you as much as I can if it comes to that. Even more than my wife.”

“That is *not* the problem. And it would be discourteous to your wife.”

Estelle couldn't stand the idea of sharing a man with another woman. She knew that nobles generally married for political reasons, and that some of them pursued their own love with their paramours once they had fulfilled their obligation to produce offspring. However, she didn't want to think about such matters just yet.

"For now, let's hope my father gives his approval, shall we?"

How can he say such awful things with a straight face? wondered Estelle. He didn't need her as a woman, he didn't need human emotions, and all he wanted was a walking alarm by his side—to Estelle, it sounded like this was the gist of what Arcrayne had said.

***

Once the two got back to Marquess Rogell's mansion, Claus and Sierra came out to greet them. Between his duties as a feudal lord and Arcrayne's close aide, Claus was rarely able to come home to this mansion. He seemed to be staying at Arcrayne's Libra Palace much more often, and Estelle hadn't seen him in a good while.

"Welcome back, Your Highness. How did the tea party go?" asked Claus.

"The matter is still up in the air," replied Arcrayne.

"His Majesty King Sashes doesn't make quick decisions." Claus shrugged and glanced over at Estelle. "Lady Estelle, you must be tired. Would you like to rest in your room until dinner?"

Ever since Arcrayne had proposed to Estelle, Claus had become so polite with her that one might have forgotten how he had spoken to her at the start. Indeed, he now seemed to be treating her as his lord's future wife.

"I do not think I can eat dinner today, so I shall pass. I apologize."

"Oh, but that's not good, Lady Estelle," said Sierra with worry. "You should rest in your room for now, but I'll bring you something light to snack on later. You wouldn't want to go hungry in the middle of the night."

Grateful, Estelle took her up on her offer, then proceeded to the drawing room assigned to her.

***

Back at his Libra Palace after seeing Estelle to Marquess Rogell's town house, Arcrayne had to confront his father. The king had used one of the hidden passages that had been built between the palaces to keep this visit in absolute secrecy. Arcrayne knew the matter his father had come there to discuss: Estelle..

Plopping down on a sofa, Sashes got straight to the point.

"Arc, are you out of your mind? How could you choose that girl instead of Lady Olivia?"

"I am as sane as ever, father. I have fallen in love with Lady Estelle, and I cannot imagine marrying any other woman."

"As long as that feeling is genuine..."

The king could be oddly perceptive. Under his doubtful gaze, Arcrayne started to think how to talk his way out of this.

"Don't you want to be king? Rainsworth won't stay silent if I approve of this engagement."

"I believe I've said before that I don't. Let a willing party become king instead."

"I want it to be *you*, though..." the king replied, bitter.

Rosalia was under the rule of law, after all—and Sashes didn't want to go against the custom of the eldest son inheriting the throne. The reality, however, was that he could anticipate backlash from the second prince's faction led by the queen and Duke Marwick if he expressed this opinion in any official capacity, which was why he kept it to himself.

"Choosing Estelle Flozeth will ruin your faction."

"Is that not for the best? That will make it easier to give the crown to Liedis."

"The problem lies with his...temperament."

"He's still a child. Don't you think he will calm down once he grows up?"

"I'd feel much safer simply having you take the crown instead of leaving

things to chance...” Sashes sighed and frowned. “I do feel guilty for putting unnecessary burdens on you.”

Arcrayne directed a chilly look at the king. He knew the king loved and valued him in his own way as First Prince. However, that same love was directed at Queen Truteliese and Liedis in equal measure. His father was stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to abandon any of his family.

The late Queen Miriallia had perished too early, forcing Sashes to remarry to create a spare successor for the throne. Arcrayne knew this well, and he also wasn’t about to blame his father for eventually warming up to Queen Truteliese, in spite of the fact that he’d been cold to her at first out of consideration for Miriallia.

Prince Liedis’s lineage was better, and when he’d Awakened to the rare and valuable teleportation, the queen and Duke Marwick had become greedy, which was how this whole tragedy had begun.

“It’s not too late. Would you reconsider your engagement?”

“I must refuse,” bluntly replied Arcrayne, hoping his father would finally give up on the idea of making him king.

He didn’t want the throne. He wanted release from the hostility of the second prince’s faction and from having to constantly be on his guard. That was all he wished for.

***

“Ngh...”

It was already dark when Estelle woke up. Checking the clock, she saw the hour hand was pointed at four. It was a safe bet that it was four in the morning.

She didn’t remember anything after returning from the Palace of Albion and changing into something comfortable. As the last thing she recalled was sitting on a sofa and drinking tea that she’d had May prepare, she concluded that she must’ve fallen asleep at that point.

Somebody must’ve carried her, since she was in bed. Wondering who it had been, she sat up and lit the mana lamp by her pillow. It must’ve been some

time since the fire had burnt out in the fireplace, as it was a little cold in the room.

Estelle didn't think she could sleep any further, likely since she'd fallen asleep earlier than usual. She put a housecoat on and moved to the window. She swept the thick satin curtains aside to see the bright silver new moon—and the winter star that bore the same name as her brother. Sirius, "scorcher" in an ancient language, was the brightest star in the winter sky.

Estelle's parents had named the siblings after the stars. "Estelle" was the Evening Star, Venus.

One couldn't see as many stars at night in Albion by contrast to the earldom of Flozeth due to all the mana lights. From where she now stood, Estelle could only see the bright stars of the first magnitude. She missed the night sky of her home, where she could see even the Milky Way on the clearest nights.

Even though she had slept well, Estelle felt awfully tired in both mind and body, and inexplicable tears appeared in her eyes.

***

"Lady Estelle, what's wrong? You look terrible."

Come morning, Sierra expressed her concern for Estelle. Claus, who rarely got to have breakfast with everyone, looked like he had something to say to her too.

"I must've been very tired yesterday. I fell asleep right after going back to my room... Because of that, I woke up at an awkward time in the early morning and couldn't go back to sleep," replied Estelle with a half smile.

She was aware of how terrible she looked. She'd been crying, having felt something akin to homesickness a short while ago. Estelle had used the water in the pitcher in her room to wash her eyes in an attempt to cover things up, but when she looked in the mirror after it got bright outside, she saw that her eyelids were still puffy.

"Lady Estelle, may I talk to you for a moment?" asked Claus after breakfast, just as Estelle was about to return to her room.

“Yes, Lord Claus?”

“Is everything all right?” he asked after a pause.

Estelle tilted her head. Seeing that she did not understand what he meant, Claus sighed.

“You were crying, were you not? Around four in the morning, I believe. I happened to wake up in the middle of the night and went to the terrace, where I heard a woman’s weeping.”

Estelle was silent for a moment, then asked, “What makes you think it was me?”

“I have confidence in my hearing. You shouldn’t be going outside at this time of the year. What if you catch a cold?”

“I could say the same thing to you, Lord Claus.”

He gave her a chilly stare instead of a reply.

“Are you *that* against the idea of marrying His Highness?”

I am, thought Estelle. Not that she could speak the truth to Arcrayne’s close aide.

Claus sighed as she went silent.

“The consort of the first prince is the second highest position a woman can achieve in this kingdom, after the queen.” He seemed to have taken Estelle’s silence as a yes.

“It would be too ambitious for me. Such a position is simply too high...”

“Oh, but it’s surely not. You come from an earl-ranked house. Most wives of princes have come from the same or higher ranked families.”

Claus wasn’t the expressive type. When he said things like that with such a blank look, it made Estelle feel like he was reproaching her.

“I was only hoping to marry into a family that would benefit Flozeth... I’ve received sufficient education for marrying a lord, but not a member of royalty. Frankly...all the additional studying I have to do is a heavy burden that makes me suffer.”

Though she spoke falteringly, Estelle glared at Claus. He only reacted by sighing.

“Does a woman’s happiness not lie in marrying a man who desires her? His Highness desires you. Enough to declare he’ll keep you by his side even should His Majesty the King be against it.”

Estelle wondered if what Claus was saying amounted to, “Is it not enough for you that someone wants you?” and, “It’s awfully impertinent for the likes of you to express discontent.”

“His Highness doesn’t desire me as a woman. He simply wants to use my power.”

Another pause. “I suppose so,” replied Claus. “But what’s wrong with that?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“His Highness values you for your power. Does that not create a much stronger connection between you and him than something as unreliable as love?”

Taken by surprise, Estelle stared into Claus’s very pale blue eyes. They were cold and felt like glass. No emotion appeared on his face, and she couldn’t read anything from his mana.

It felt like she was being tested.

“While some might see it as an honor, it’s nothing but a bother to me.”

Frustrated and upset, Estelle looked away from Claus. Nobody here understood how she felt—not he, not Arcrayne. Ever since she had Awoken to this power, it had been a source of stress. Because of that, it didn’t make her happy in the slightest if someone wanted her for it. If a man were going to propose to her, she wanted that to be because he desired her as a woman.

When Estelle had become engaged to Lyle, there were more than mere political motivations behind it, as the two had been close long before that and Estelle had felt sufficiently loved. She wished her current relationship had even a small fraction of that love. It wouldn’t have been so difficult for her had she felt any love from Arcrayne.

She was attracted to him, which made her feel empty on the inside. Arcrayne only needed her power. He was only being nice to her and acting the ideal suitor to gain her power, and his good looks weren't helping Estelle resist his advances—a truly nasty sort of man.

"Just like His Highness wishes to use you, why don't you use him too?"

"Use him...?"

"Your previous fiancé was stolen from you by the daughter of Baron Pautrier, was he not? Do people not say all manner of things about it in high society?"

They did, and that wasn't the end of it. Pautrier's daughter had even sent Estelle an invitation to her and Lyle's wedding. Just remembering it made Estelle angry.

"I wasn't planning to reveal this quite yet," added Claus, "but *The Solaris* has gotten wind of His Highness's interest in you."

The Solaris was the most widely-circulated tabloid in all of Rosalia. Its extreme content made it stand out among the rest. They were known to sink their teeth into any scandal involving celebrities, such as nobles and actresses, and they covered it with a flashy mix of half-truths. People looked down on it as a lowbrow tabloid with stalkers for reporters, fabricated articles, and generally no standards to speak of—however, its influence on public opinion was not to be taken lightly.

"Are they going to write a story about it?"

"Their sense of smell rivals that of hyenas. That ballroom was full of nobles who saw the assassination attempt, and His Highness himself keeps coming here with no apparent intent to hide it."

"Is it on purpose, by any chance...?"

"I did advise him to keep things on the down low, but he must have thought it would help secure His Majesty's approval if everybody started talking about it."

This rendered Estelle speechless. Arcrayne had turned out to be more calculating and scheming than she had anticipated.

"Though I don't think he has outright leaked it," Claus added.

That doesn't really help, thought Estelle.

"Your personal information is already in wide circulation. Your birthday, your academic background, the breaking off of your engagement to Lyle Wyntia, the scar on your arm from when you protected His Highness—everything. I'd expect very extensive media coverage on the way."

Estelle felt dizzy.

"How is my brother doing? Is our town house besieged by journalists right now?"

"We have already had him moved to a hotel. The kinds of things you're worried about haven't happened."

Claus's words brought her slight relief.

"Regardless of whether His Majesty the King gives his approval or not, His Highness will surely strive to keep you by his side. With that in mind, you would do well to find the mettle to use him as well. Think of all the gossip you will have to face in high society. For example, people might accuse you of using your scar to pressure His Highness to marry you."

"Are you, perhaps, cheering me up?"

"Not in the slightest," replied Claus without a moment's hesitation. "I'm saying this because your depressed face is an eyesore, that's all. When I heard you crying in the middle of the night, I thought it was a ghost. Would you do me the favor of not turning this mansion into a haunted house?"

Glancing at Estelle for a moment, Claus added, "That will be all," and took his leave.

***

Estelle didn't have any lectures with her private tutor today, on account of her feeling unwell. After she went back to her room, she asked May to bring her the recent tabloids.

"Prince Arcrayne in Love? A Fateful Meeting at a Ball..."

"His Partner is Estelle Flozeth!"

“Lady Estelle at the Leo Palace! Engagement Set in Stone?”

“Lady Estelle and Prince Arcrayne Wear Matching Outfits...”

Estelle held her head as she saw how much had been written in the tabloids about her. Starting with ‘The Solaris,’ several tabloids had laid out her private life for the world to see. They had written about her former fiancé and the woman who had stolen him as well. Estelle didn’t know Diana Pautrier personally, and yet some of the articles had even cooked up catfights between the two.

“Why, they’ll write anything in the tabloids. You shouldn’t take them seriously,” said May, directing a chilly stare at “The Solaris” in Estelle’s hands. “Why don’t I help you change instead? There’s no better mental diversion than dressing up. I’ve heard Lord Sirius is coming here in the afternoon today.”

“He is?”

“Indeed. He seems to be worried about you, with all these articles going around.”

“I don’t need to dress up to see him.”

“That won’t do, Lady Estelle. And dressing you up is a source of delight for me too.”

May’s taste in fashion could’ve rivaled that of Leah, Estelle’s maid in the Flozeth household. She was particularly skilled at doing up Estelle’s hair, and appeared to have been vexed by the fact that she had never had an opportunity to show her talent while she served under Arcrayne.

“Please and thank you.”

Estelle gave a light shrug and left both her clothing and makeup to May.

***

When he paid Estelle a visit in the afternoon, Sirius looked as spirited as always.

“For crying out loud, reporters have been keeping constant watch on my town house ever since those articles came out. Can’t imagine what would’ve

become of me had His Highness not provided me with a hotel room—which was very considerate of him."

"Do you plan to stay here until around the middle of February as always?" asked Estelle.

Sirius had not only come to Albion to socialize, but also to sit in Parliament. All hereditary peers were members of the House of Lords. Parliament was generally in session from December to April, but in the Flozeths' case, the earl had to lead the dragon hunt from late winter to the beginning of spring, and thus had special permission to leave mid-session and continue his participation through a mana-based communicator.

"Can you afford to stay there for two more months? Won't that cost a pretty penny...?"

"Don't worry, His Highness is paying for it. It's amazing, really—he got me a suite in Albion Garden."

Estelle was dumbfounded. "Albion Garden" contended for the position of the highest-class hotel in the city.

"Wish I could stay there..."

"The service you get here at Marquess Rogell's mansion is about the same, no? My sister, you've landed yourself a hell of a man. Now even I'm swamped with invitations, portraits of various ladies, and what have you." Sirius looked a little tired.

"I hope you can find someone nice to marry," replied Estelle.

It felt like Arcrayne was removing obstacles in his way without her even knowing. Estelle could only sigh quietly.

Chapter 3: Traveling Funfair

“Please wear this today.”

On the first Lord’s Day after Estelle’s visit to the Leo Palace, May gave her the kind of outfit a woman of the working class would wear. It was worn and battered, perhaps borrowed from a maid.

“Why would I wear something like this?”

“Lord Claus said a little break was in order. You need a disguise to get past the reporters keeping watch on the mansion.”

Estelle’s eyes widened. That cold Claus of all people—a man whose face never betrayed any genuine feeling—was showing consideration for Estelle? *Is he actually a kind person?* she wondered.

“Claus is often misunderstood. In my personal opinion, however, he’s more straightforward and easy to understand than His Highness Prince Arcrayne.”

May smiled, then proceeded to braid Estelle’s hair loosely and put the kind of makeup on her that made her look uncouth on purpose. Estelle had plain features to begin with—and by the end of it all, she looked no different from the sort of ordinary girl one could find anywhere in the city.

“Now, you should leave through the back door today. Act like you’re a maid on her day off.”

Seeing the proud look on May’s face put Estelle in a better mood too. She had never needed to make inconspicuous outings before, so it was her first time wearing commoner clothes.

“Are you coming with me?”

May wasn’t clad in her servant uniform today, but instead wore something similar to Estelle’s current outfit. However, May replied, “No. I’m going out too, but only to protect you. I’ll be sticking to the shadows. Somebody else will be escorting you.”

With a lighthearted smile on her face, she urged Estelle towards the back

door.

When Estelle got there and saw just who was to be her escort, she went wide-eyed.

“Your Highness?! Why...?”

“Because I’m your escort today.”

Standing there like a child who had successfully pulled off a prank, Arcrayne was wearing commoner’s clothes just like Estelle. Unlike her, however, he was too handsome for them; they didn’t belong on him at all. With his shimmering blond hair and royal blue eyes, no doubt anyone could tell that he was a noble dressed up as a commoner.

“Your Highness... I do not believe that disguise is serving its purpose.”

“Don’t worry, I have this too.”

Arcrayne showed Estelle his arm. On it was a bracelet with a small pattern engraved into it.

“This is an artifact passed down through the royal family. If you direct some mana into it...”

Artifacts were special mana-based items created using ancient, now-lost technology. There were many kinds, but they rarely appeared on the market. The royal family was known to keep a wide collection of artifacts gathered across many generations of kings.

As Estelle looked on, she saw mana flow from Arcrayne into the bracelet. Immediately afterwards, his hair and eyes turned brown.

“How about now? I think it makes a pretty big difference.”

While his face was still as shapely as ever, he no longer radiated such a strong aura of nobility. A person really can give off a very different impression just by changing the color of their hair and eyes. To top it off, Arcrayne also wore a flat cap low over his eyes. At a glance, nobody should’ve been able to tell he was royalty.

“You should be fine as you are,” he said. “Makeup does wonders to change

how women look.”

Arcrayne’s eyes were fixed on Estelle’s face.

“Are we going out together?”

“That’s right. It’s both so you can relax and so the two of us get to know each other better.”

I’m not sure I can relax if you’re around, Estelle thought reflexively.

“Are you sure about this? You have assassins coming after you.”

“I have bodyguards. They’ll be following us from a fair distance.”

“I am not sure it would help—if someone were to shoot you again...”

“It should be fine. After all, I have a walking alarm with me. Even I want to go out into the city every now and then for a break.”

A bodyguard who stood at Arcrayne’s side cut in, “Don’t worry, Lady Estelle. Most physical attacks on His Highness won’t even—”

“Hold your tongue.” The prince glowered at him.

“What is he talking about?” asked Estelle after a pause.

She couldn’t simply disregard what she had just heard.

“It’s nothing. Come on; let’s hurry. We’ll have less time to enjoy ourselves.”

“Please tell me, Your Highness.”

Under her intent gaze, Arcrayne began to look uncomfortable.

“When a member of royalty Awakens, they are immediately taught how to control not only their power, but their mana too. As a result, some of us occasionally discover additional abilities...”

“It’s not made public, but His Highness is monstrously sturdy. You couldn’t cut him with a sharp blade if you tried.” It was the same member of the Royal Guard who had cut into the conversation earlier. He was a plain-looking youth. Though he was dressed like a commoner too, Estelle knew he was in the Royal Guard because she had seen him accompany Arcrayne several times before.

“‘Monstrously’, is it now...? I didn’t know you saw me that way, Neil...”

Arcrayne's smile did not reach his eyes. Neil awkwardly looked away and distanced himself from the two.

"In my case, I gained something like a constant mana barrier around the surface of my body. So I'm pretty safe against physical attacks. Though getting cut by a sword feels like getting hit with an iron pipe—and hurts just about as much..."

"Wait," Estelle replied after a brief moment, "does that mean there was no need for me to protect you at the ball?"

She began to tremble all over. Protecting Arcrayne had left her badly wounded and with a scar on her left arm, and for what?

"A handgun of that power... I suppose I would've probably been fine."

A moment's silence.

"You're the worst," Estelle spat.

Why had she protected him that day? She wished she could go back into the past.

"Are you sure you even have need of my power?"

"Oh, but I do. The mana barrier can only do so much. I'm not sure I could survive a shot from a Dragon Slayer."

Dragon Slayers were mana-based guns developed specifically for hunting dragons. They fired extremely high-power projectiles capable of penetrating a dragon's tough hide. It was said that it could blow any ordinary human's head clean off, leaving nothing above the neck.

"Sorry. You're angry with me, aren't you? But believe me, I'm grateful for what you did—it let me meet a woman with a power as rare as yours. I do regret letting you get hurt."

Estelle had nothing to say.

All right, I'm going to take Claus's advice and use this man too, decided Estelle, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

"Estelle..."

“I am not angry,” she finally replied. “Thank you kindly for your concern.”

Suppressing the storm raging on inside her and staring back at the prince, Estelle saw the color of his mana waver.

“Let us make haste, Your Highness. As I rarely have the opportunity to go out, I would like to visit various places.” She gave Arcrayne a cheerful, artificial smile.

“You’re right,” he replied after a brief delay. “Shall we be off?”

Arcrayne smiled, seeming to pull himself together, and offered his hand to Estelle.

***

As Marquess Rogell’s town house was rather far from the urban area, Estelle and Arcrayne had to use a servant’s cart. Arcrayne drove, while Estelle sat beside him. The cart wasn’t designed for transporting people, so Estelle’s buttocks hurt from the rough jostling of the wheels.

“I want you to call me ‘Ren’ once we’re deeper in the city. Make sure you never say ‘Your Highness,’” warned Arcrayne on the way.

“As you wish.”

“As for you... Let’s make it ‘Aster.’”

“Quite the simple choice.”

The modern Rosalian equivalent of Estelle’s name was Aster. As she made a retort about the simplistic alias, a smug look appeared on Arcrayne’s face.

“You don’t want to stray too far from your real name in these things. If you can’t react to it in an instant, it will become obvious that the name is fake.”

This prince occasionally showed off a childish side, like now.

“Have you already decided where we shall go first?” asked Estelle.

“We’re going to the central park... But first, the way you speak. Can you be less formal? Speak the way you talk to Sirius.”

“I shall... I’ll try.”

Arcrayne laughed quietly as Estelle corrected herself. Judging by his mana

today, he was in rather high spirits.

“Your High... I mean, Ren. Are you used to this?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been out in disguise.”

Though he didn’t give Estelle a clear reply, his speech was slightly more casual than usual, and she suspected he had done this on a regular basis.

“Also, about my brother... Thank you for giving him a hotel room to stay in.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s for my future brother-in-law. I could’ve let him stay at Claus’s mansion, but I thought he’d be more at ease in a hotel.”

“I wanted to stay in a hotel too...”

“Oh, but for you, that’s not an option. I wouldn’t be able to ensure your safety there.”

“What about my brother, then?”

“He’s not as important as you. If you want to stay in a hotel, I’ll make it happen eventually, but I’d like you to put up with the mansion for now.”

“You would take me to a hotel?”

“If you become mine in body and soul.” The prince shot her a flirtatious glance.

Estelle blushed. “What?!”

“We would be spending the night away from home. I’d have my expectations, you know? I’m a man too.”

Seeing Arcrayne quietly laugh again, Estelle knew he was being nasty as always.

“Looks like you just can’t drop that formal speech of yours.”

After a moment of silence, Estelle said, “I apologize, Ren. It’s difficult, considering where we normally stand.”

“It’s all right. If you think of us as a new couple, it’s not that unnatural.”

But as they talked, their cart finally entered the city proper, and Estelle’s eyes sparkled when she saw the hustle and bustle of the main street. She had been

away from it for so long!

***

The plan was to leave the cart with the purveyor of the Rogell Household, as had been arranged ahead of time, and then proceed to the park on foot.

“We’ll be walking for a short while, is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Ren. We are heading to the central park, correct? My shoes today are easy to walk in, so you need not worry.”

Estelle was a noblewoman. Arcrayne had thought she might look uncomfortable at the idea, and he smiled when she replied calmly instead.

So far, Estelle was in favor with him. He felt slightly uneasy about making her a princess, but her education could be brought up to snuff. She had graduated from a prestigious school—Adulena Academy. Estelle had the basic knowledge and bearing expected of a daughter of nobility, and she could also hold everyday conversations in the languages of three neighboring countries.

What she lacked was mainly knowledge on geography, history, and the major noble families. Arcrayne had been told she needed to expand her vocabulary in foreign languages and correct her pronunciation, but she could take her time with that. She was a diligent woman with an interest in self-improvement, so this problem was likely going to solve itself with time.

Frankly, to Arcrayne, Estelle had been an unexpected find. He had only invited her to the dance that day to improve the public image of Earl Flozeth after he had declared his allegiance to him.

For generations, the earldom of Flozeth had maintained economic stability. The Flozeths had shown no ambition for the central government and their influence on the political world was negligible. Still, one of the eternally opportunistic noble houses of the north had sided with Arcrayne, and he’d reckoned there was no harm in showing a welcoming attitude. Granted, Earl Wyntia had sided with Liedis at the same time, but the Flozeths’ allegiance was more advantageous, as their earldom had a vein of mana stones.

As Arcrayne had already been looking for a suitable woman to replace Olivia as his future wife, his encounter with Estelle, an Awoken, had been rather

convenient. In his mind, Estelle's future by his side was already a done deal. Whether she became his legitimate spouse would depend on the king, but Arcrayne was fairly confident he would get the king's approval. He'd be in quite the bind otherwise.

It wasn't as though Arcrayne hated Olivia, but having her around simply didn't feel right. What bothered him was the arrogance she occasionally displayed, as she was convinced she would become his consort. Her looks, ability, and lineage left nothing to be desired, but a part of Arcrayne simply couldn't accept her as his partner for life.

When it came to personality, he had a much bigger preference for Estelle, who chafed at the thought of becoming a princess and wanted to escape. It was in a man's nature to want to chase after those who run away. Arcrayne felt like chasing her down, cornering her, and putting her in a cage of his own making.

In terms of keeping the queen, Arcrayne's half-brother, and the maternally-related Duke Marwick supporting them in check, he knew it would've been better to forge a connection with the Rainsworths, one of the prominent supporters of his faction. Forging one with the Flozeths instead—a household which secluded itself in the north and never took central stage—would not help Arcrayne secure a sure footing.

However, Arcrayne didn't want the throne in the first place. He simply didn't want to be confined or imprisoned should Liedis become king. What he wanted was to live a full life, free from worldly cares—and without a drop in living standards, of course.

If he couldn't become king, he would ideally rule some domain owned by the royal family and live a comfortable life as a feudal lord. And if it looked like Liedis intended to prosecute and get rid of him, Arcrayne would flee either to a neighboring country or to the New World. He was secretly making preparations for that.

Estelle's power was sure to come in handy for achieving that goal. It was also convenient for Arcrayne that she didn't want to publicly announce her status as an Awoken. Just as he didn't reveal his mana barrier to the public, it was best to keep one's trump cards hidden. Speaking in terms of chess pieces, Estelle had

the potential to become a queen—or so Arcrayne suspected. And the best way to make her his “queen” was to tie her to himself through love.

Arcrayne had never fallen in love, so he couldn’t understand why, but the people around him behaved as though love were the biggest motive for devoting oneself to another.

He was aware that his looks and his position as prince made him attractive to the opposite sex. If he took full advantage of those things, he should’ve been able to seduce her just like any other woman. For that, he intended to make full use of his body, his money, and everything he had.

To Arcrayne, everyone around him was a pawn. He kept useful pawns close to him and mercilessly discarded the rest. Arcrayne supposed that made him a defective human being.

In any case, Arcrayne’s only concern was that Estelle’s power might expose this wickedness of his. As she had said she could only roughly tell what a person was feeling at any given time, it was probably fine. For now, he was enjoying this game of theirs.

The problem was what to do about her in the future, when he would lose interest in her and began to hate her. There was no guarantee the position of a princess wouldn’t change Estelle, and people’s feelings changed over time. Nobody could tell the future. Queen Truteliese used to be like a red rose—unassuming and kind, despite her gorgeous exterior—right after marrying the king. However, she had changed once the king had come to love her, and this had hurt the young Arcrayne deeply.

If Arcrayne came to feel negative emotions towards Estelle, there was a risk of her acting against him. To avoid it, he had to come up with another way to tie her to himself, something other than love.

He wondered how he might keep her captive. Make her bear his children? It wouldn’t be enough, he concluded. Perhaps he could get Sirius to marry one of his pawns; then House Flozeth would be unable to oppose him.

Arcrayne was aware of how egoistic and detestable he was. Becoming calculating, however, had been the only way to survive in the Palace of Albion. Growing up to be such a man had been unavoidable.

Those were the excuses he made to himself, anyway.

The prince snuck a peek at Estelle's profile. Seeing her enjoy herself watching all the people outside, he felt guilt well up in him.

The central park the two were currently headed to was located along Albion's main street, so they would be arriving shortly.

Suddenly, Estelle opened her eyes very wide. Following her gaze, Arcrayne saw a tent through the park's trees. It was decorated with flags, mana lamps, and similar things, and it was swaying in the wind, exuding cheerfulness.

"Is that a traveling funfair...? I suppose it is that time of the year already," noted Estelle.

With the New Year's festivities just around the corner, many people gathered in Albion. That was what brought traveling funfairs to this central park at the end of every year. It even had a merry-go-round and a wooden roller coaster. The accompanying staff held various kinds of performances, while an array of stalls surrounded the tent. All of that made the funfair a highly popular source of entertainment for the locals.

"Have you been to one of these before?" asked Arcrayne.

"But of course. I came practically every year with my friends in my school days. Your H...I mean, Ren, thank you for taking me here."

Estelle seemed to be having fun—bringing her here had been the right choice. Arcrayne had decided to take her for an outing because Claus had reported that something was wrong with her. Estelle must have gotten anxious from the sudden changes in her life after he had proposed to her, what with her new environment, her studies, the audience with the king and queen, and everything else. If Arcrayne wanted to make Estelle fall for him, that simply wasn't going to do. He had to use the opportunity to gain favor with her to whatever extent possible.

Smiling at Estelle, Arcrayne readjusted his hold on her hand.

***

Full of motley crowds, the central park brimmed with life. Juggling, magic

tricks, acrobatics, fire breathing—such performances could be seen all over, and there were stalls with food and sundries, making it a joy to simply walk around the place.

It brought Estelle some discomfort to have Arcrayne there, but she wasn't about to let the rare opportunity to enjoy herself go to waste. She looked around at everything as they walked through the funfair.

"What do you want to do first?" asked the prince. "The classic choice, the merry-go-round?"

"That and the roller coaster too."

Merry-go-rounds and wooden roller coasters both functioned on mana stones. Traveling funfairs with equipment as large as this could only operate with the backing of the royal family, nobles, or the extremely wealthy.

"You'd best get ready to stand in a line."

Indeed, both the merry-go-round and the wooden roller coaster had incredible queues. Clowns were performing nearby, however, to keep people from getting bored while they waited.

The roller coaster—with its rail cars hurtling up and down and around its steep wooden tracks—was especially popular, and Estelle was highly fond of it too. However, after two and then three rides, Arcrayne grew pale in the face.

"Do you perhaps not enjoy roller coasters?" asked Estelle.

"I guess so. It looks like I just can't handle going down slopes at an extreme speed."

"Oh, but then I suppose you would not enjoy sledding either."

In snowy parts of the kingdom, sledding was a standard winter amusement.

"Had I been born in Flozeth, I'm sure I would've been fine with roller coasters too," replied Arcrayne, his hand clamped over his mouth. He looked rather sick.

"Why don't we rest on a bench for a time?"

"There's no need to go that far, although I *would* like you to spare me another turn on the roller coaster..."

Though she felt bad about it, there *was* something rather satisfying about watching the normally implacable prince look so pale and drained. As she discovered this weakness of Arcrayne's, she almost felt as though she had awakened to a curious proclivity.

"I am tired too, so I would like to rest. I will go buy something to drink."

"Let's go together, then. It's cold, so something warm would be nice, wouldn't you say?"

With a weak smile, Arcrayne tugged Estelle along by the hand and headed to a drink stall. At the stall, he ordered coffee, while Estelle asked for hot chocolate. The two sat down to rest and drink together, and once they were done, they decided to walk around the other stalls.

"They're doing target shooting over there. How about it, Aster? You can shoot, can't you?"

"There is a big difference between a mana gun and a toy."

Whatever Estelle said, when she took a closer look at the stall, a stuffed bear toy—which seemed to be the grand prize—caught her eye.

"Is that not a Rudy?" she asked.

Rudies were toys made by a famous stuffed toy manufacturer, Rudy's. At the center of the many prizes at the target shooting stall was a cute little bear in a crown and a royal blue mantle.

"You have a discerning eye, young lady," said the bearded, suspicious-looking stallman. "This little Rudy here was made to commemorate His Majesty's silver jubilee. Only two hundred of these were made, so they're highly valuable."

Arcrayne stared at the toy with curiosity.

"Interesting. So it's a premium prize?"

"How about it, lad? Care to give it a go?"

"I'm not much of a good shot."

While Arcrayne gave a light shrug, Estelle was already handing coins to the stallman.

“Aster, you’re going for it?”

“I am. Might as well.”

The man gave Estelle a cork-firing toy gun. Compared to mana-based weaponry, it was light and looked terribly cheap.

“I can’t have you actually shooting this little fellow, so would you mind knocking this thing down instead?”

The stallman took the bear off its shelf and put a substitute target in its place—a box.

“So all I have to do is bring that down?”

“Yeah. The bear’s yours if you can do it in five shots, young lady.”

With that, Estelle readied the gun.

The first shot went way off the mark.

A little to the right...? she concluded. Adjusting her aim, she fired again. This time, the cork went to the left of the target.

“Do your best, young lady. You’ve got three more shots.”

Ignoring the man, who was all smiles, Estelle fired another shot. It was a hit. However, the box didn’t move an inch—perhaps the cork had hit a bad spot.

“Ah, so close!” the man said.

Fourth shot. This time, the cork definitely hit the center of the box, and it didn’t move in the slightest, causing Estelle to raise an eyebrow.

“Too bad. You’ve got one more, though!”

“That’s right, Aster. I’m sure the next one will do it.” Arcrayne placed a hand on her shoulder.

Was this a trick? A suspicion arose in Estelle as she saw the stallman’s grin, but it would’ve been immature of her to make a fuss about games meant to fool children.

She readied the gun again, steadied her aim, and pulled the trigger. The next moment...

A powerful gust of wind blew in out of nowhere, knocking down everything around. The target shooting stall wasn't spared either—the prizes went tumbling off the shelves. Loud screams erupted from all around. As Estelle lost her balance, Arcrayne propped her back up.

"How strange," said the prince with a smile. "Everything else got blown away, yet the substitute target is still in place. I wonder why?"

So this was a hoax all along? wondered Estelle, her eyes widening as she looked at Arcrayne.

"You saying I did something to the box?" The bearded man glared at the prince.

"I was but voicing a question."

With that, Arcrayne took the toy gun out of Estelle's hands and returned it to the stall.

"Shame about the prize, Aster. There's no corks left, so let us be off."

As he pulled her along by the hand again, Estelle didn't linger and left.

"Hey, get back here, lad!"

She heard the man's grating voice behind her, but Arcrayne paid it no heed and briskly walked away. Estelle chased after his back.

"Ren, you used your power, did you not?"

Just before the wind had blown, she had felt his mana waver. What was more, the gust of wind had contained mana.

"How did you know?"

"Everybody knows you can use telekinesis, and that wind had mana in it."

"So you can tell even things like that," replied the prince with a gentle smile. He reached out and fixed her bangs, which had gotten disheveled in the wind. "Well, that man cheated. It was just a little payback. Did you perhaps really want that Rudy?"

"No."

It had only piqued her interest because such a rarity didn't belong in some

ordinary stall. The bear was cute, but it wasn't as though she wanted it *that* badly.

"Oh well. I thought I'd get one from my father's bedroom for you if you wanted it, no matter which way that had gone."

"I have no need for something from the king's bedroom," replied Estelle, shaking her head.

Still... I'm surprised he would use his power over something so trivial, she thought. She stared at Arcrayne's smug face as she considered his surprisingly childish side.

Suddenly...

"Estelle...?"

Her expression froze up when she turned around. Standing there was a young man with black hair, purple eyes, and a strong, manly face—her former fiancé, Lyle.

"It really is you. What are you doing here, and in such an outfit? I was worried about you after all those strange articles in newspapers, but I couldn't just go see you, given my current position."

He headed straight for Estelle. She couldn't decide quickly enough what to do, and as she stood petrified, Arcrayne stepped in front of her.

"I think you have her confused with someone else, sir. She's my sweetheart, and her name isn't Estelle."

"But...you're..."

"Lyle, what are you doing?"

Lyle wasn't backing down easily, but that only lasted until a demanding female voice came from behind him.

Diana Pautrier. Estelle hadn't been acquainted with her, but she knew Diana's face. Dressed in a gorgeous outfit, she glared harshly at Lyle.

"Who are they? Do you know them?"

Lyle bit his lip under Diana's interrogation.

“I apologize. I seem to have mistaken you for someone else,” Lyle murmured in Estelle’s direction and turned around, going back to his new fiancée.

At this time of the year, stalls at the traveling funfair sold a large range of local cuisine and other specialties from various parts of Rosalia, which attracted men and women of all ages and social classes. Lyle and Diana must’ve been here as an engaged couple on their day off.

“Aster, let us go too.” Arcrayne grabbed Estelle’s hand and led her in the opposite direction from the other pair. “Guess he’s not to be underestimated. A man who saw right through your disguise...”

For some reason, Arcrayne’s mumbling resonated with Estelle.

***

Led by the prince, Estelle got away from the funfair. Staying there any longer had borne the risk of running into Lyle and Diana again.

“Wonder what he wanted to talk to you about, after all this time...” mumbled Arcrayne once more, prompting a quiet sigh from Estelle.

“I think he was worried about me. He was like another brother to me.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have cut in like that. Did you want to talk to him?”

Estelle shook her head.

“No, I would not have known what to say. I am glad you did the talking for me.”

“You will eventually run into him in high society, whether you like it or not. You should think of how to deal with him when that happens. What do you want to do about him, Aster?”

Estelle thought for some time.

“Our engagement was not broken off because I hated him, so I think I can talk to him a little. But honestly, I would rather avoid coming face to face with Lady Diana.”

“Very well. In that case, you should be as condescending with her as possible. I’ll help.”

“That is most reassuring.” Estelle finally managed to relax her stiff expression.

“Now, it’s not often we get to go out, so let’s make some fun memories at the end. It’s a little far, but there’s a tearoom I can recommend. Though it’s not as fancy as the kind of places you always go to.” Arcrayne flashed an encouraging, gentle smile.

“Oh, but I hardly go to fancy places, so I think it will be fine.”

“Then let’s go.”

Tugged along by the hand, Estelle started walking again.

***

Before Estelle knew it, her rare outing was already over. Just as they’d left the mansion, she and Arcrayne returned on a cart to the back door. It was already fairly dark outside, as the hour hand had passed five o’clock. With full-blown winter almost upon the people of Rosalia, the sun had recently started to set very early.

“Well, that’s that,” said Arcrayne.

“Thank you for taking me out today.”

“Not everything went perfectly, but I really enjoyed myself. I hope you feel the same way.”

“I enjoyed myself too.”

The tearoom the two had visited at the end had served good tea, and Estelle was fairly sure she was no longer bothered by her run-in with Lyle. She was actually grateful to the prince from the bottom of her heart.

“In that case, may I have a reward?” whispered Arcrayne into Estelle’s ear as he lent his hand to help her off the cart.

“A reward, you say...?”

As she raised an eyebrow, Arcrayne brought his face very close to hers.

He’s going to kiss me! Estelle assumed. As she readied herself for it, however, he pinched her nose instead.

“You fell for it. I can never get enough of teasing you.”

“Oh, you...!”

Seeing the prince laugh, Estelle blew her top.

“You’ll freeze if you stand here all day. Come on, let’s get inside.”

As Arcrayne pulled her indoors, half smiling, Estelle was astonished. *Such a nasty man!* she grumbled internally, shaking in anger.

***

After entering the mansion and parting with Arcrayne, Estelle walked through the corridors with May, who had been late to appear at the back door. She was still struggling to contain her anger.

Arcrayne’s nature eluded Estelle; she could never tell what he was thinking. Just when she started to think of him as a gentleman, he would show his wicked side, and she knew he enjoyed toying with her.

From the state of his mana, it was clear to Estelle that he was fond of her. On the one hand, it was an honor; on the other, it saddened her to be seen as a walking alarm that was fun to play with. Arcrayne did treat her with respect, but that was all. She couldn’t hope to receive anything more from him.

Oh, what am I thinking... Estelle chided herself . She was astounded to find herself wanting more than respect from the prince. Evidently, she had at some point been enthralled by the prince. *Don’t, Estelle,* she immediately scolded herself again and shook her head to deny her feelings.

At first glance, Arcrayne appeared friendly, but there was more to him. Behind his affable smile was a cold and calculating man who always acted strictly in self-interest. His attitude towards everyone was generally the same, and she rarely felt any humanlike emotions from him, to say nothing of love.

She felt stupid for being drawn towards a person who she couldn’t imagine would ever return her feelings.

With all these thoughts running through her head, Estelle had finally reached her room. May opened the door for her. As she stepped inside, her eyes widened. There was a mannequin in the room—one that hadn’t been there

when she left.

“What is this dress...?”

On the mannequin was a navy blue robe décolleté—a dress considered to be the most formal female attire. The fabric was lustrous silk taffeta. The dress was set with beads that glittered like stars and had been embroidered with roses in gold thread. Its sleeves were long, and it had been carefully designed to hide the scar on Estelle’s left arm.

“Looks like it was delivered while you were away. This is a present from His Highness. He said you would need it eventually.”

Estelle was dumbstruck, dizziness taking over. If she wore a bluish dress with Rosalia’s royal symbol—the rose—embroidered in a golden thread, anyone would associate her with Arcrayne. His blond hair was the color of honey. The only reason the dress was navy blue must’ve been the fact royal blue—the color of his eyes—was restricted for use.

“I’m surprised you know my size. I don’t remember having my measurements taken since coming here...”

“We made an enquiry to Flozeth, so the size should be correct.”

Once again Estelle was dumbstruck. May continued in the meantime, all smiles.

“Would you like to try it on? Although I would suggest taking a quick bath first.”

Estelle couldn’t speak for a moment. “Where is His Highness right now?” she asked.

“He should be changing too at the moment. After having dinner here, His Highness intends to return to the palace.”

Listening to May’s matter-of-fact reply, Estelle grew dizzy. May was quite the peculiar type, as perhaps should’ve been expected from someone who had originally been Arcrayne’s personal attendant. She always looked unruffled, and her mana never showed signs of swaying. It did make it easier for Estelle to accept May as her personal attendant, but sometimes she couldn’t help

envisioning her as some sort of doll.

"If this is enough to surprise you, you're going to have a hard time in the future. A dressmaker is to come tomorrow, to make fine adjustments to this one and to prepare to make numerous dresses in the future."

As Estelle remained speechless, May offered her a gentle smile.

"That's what it means to have the first prince propose to you. I would suggest taking whatever you can get."

I'd made up my mind to use him, and yet... Estelle wavered. She was genuinely happy about getting a pretty dress. Especially now that she'd become aware of her feelings for the person who'd given it to her.

Still, such wasteful spending weighed on her. It was probably because House Flozeth wasn't particularly well-off. Until now, Estelle had had to figure out ways to get by. When she needed a new dress, she would order something as orthodox as possible. She also repurposed old dresses and wore her clothes and accessories in different combinations, and sometimes traded in her old dresses when having new ones made.

And so Estelle had mixed feelings as she gazed at Arcrayne's present.

***

The Palace of Albion, home to the royal family, was made up of twelve buildings named after the signs of the zodiac. King Sashes had given one of them, the Libra Palace, to Arcrayne.

Having presented himself at the office in said Libra Palace, Claus Rogell quietly sighed. He was currently watching a stand-off between Arcrayne and Marquess Rainsworth, who had barged in on them first thing in the morning. The marquess held a newspaper in his hand—*The Solaris*—on the front page of which was a report on Arcrayne and Estelle Flozeth visiting the Leo Palace together, with a photo attached.

"What am I to make of this article, Your Highness?! When another appeared in *The Solaris* the other day, you told me it was nothing but gossip!"

Marquess Rainsworth's face was red with anger. It was only natural, as he

was desperate to make his daughter a princess.

"I didn't have any special feelings for her when that last article came out. It was when I inquired after her health several times that I grew attracted to her. So the rumors are true."

Though Arcrayne was his lord, Claus found him rather inconsiderate for declaring such a thing as though he had done nothing wrong. It had been decided from Claus's birth that he would become Arcrayne's close aide. And having associated with him for so long, Claus knew that Arcrayne was a rational man with little emotion—though the same could be said about Claus himself too.

To Arcrayne, Olivia Rainsworth had been the most fitting pawn to become his wife. That had changed, however, when Estelle Flozeth, an Awoken, had made an appearance. Though Claus sympathized with Olivia, he thought it was a good idea for Arcrayne to have a secret Awoken for a pawn. What's more, her power was a rare one—not only could she perceive others' mana, she could *see* the general direction of their emotions. Keeping her by his side would let Arcrayne know about assassins and those bearing ill will towards him ahead of time.

"Though I feel bad about Olivia, I intend to make Estelle my consort. I've fallen in love with her."

"I prided myself on the thought that my daughter was politically the most fitting choice for you... Now you would put yourself at a disadvantage for this woman? Has *love* made you lose your mind?!"

Arcrayne's royal blue eyes glowed with a chilly luster. "I could say the same to you, Tohrmeyler Rainsworth."

The marquess held his tongue. In the past, Marquess Rainsworth had been engaged to Claus's mother, Sierra, but had broken off his engagement to marry his love and Olivia's future mother, Adeline. The love between the marquess and Adeline, an émigré from the neighboring Franciel, had made quite a fuss in high society back in the day.

Her pride wounded, Sierra still resented this couple. It was the most likely reason for the support she showed Estelle. Marquess Rainsworth was highly indebted to Marquess Rogell for his help in bringing things under control. This

was also why he was affiliated with the first prince's faction.

"Love is a troublesome matter. As I am now, she's constantly on my mind. You were the same, were you not?" said the prince with a bewitching smile. Its charm was powerful enough even to captivate another man.

Somewhat amazed by Arcrayne's prowess as an actor, Claus continued to watch him go on and on about his love life.

"Your Highness! You will regret this choice one day!"

"I'm well aware of that, Marquess. But I don't regret it now, even if it means you'll break away from me."

The marquess's face was utterly flushed with anger.

Good grief, this is going to take a while, Claus speculated, letting out another quiet sigh. *Oh well—not like I could go back to the mansion anyway.*

It was on Arcrayne's orders that Claus was currently staying at the Libra Palace and almost never returning to his own mansion. As the prince was hiding Estelle at his aide's mansion, this was a precaution against uninvolved parties growing suspicious of anything.

Wonder when he'll let me go back, thought Claus, sighing for the umpteenth time. He had definitely gotten the shortest end of the stick in this whole affair. But despite everything, he continued to serve Arcrayne, as that was what his first love had wished for.

Even now, his futile love for her kept his heart in a firm grip.

Chapter 4: Announcement of the Engagement

Estelle was in a shooting range located under Marquess Rogell's mansion. Most basements in nobles' mansions were used for storage or as lodging for live-in servants, but this spacious mansion had both of those things *and* a shooting range in its basement. It was quite well-appointed too, with mana barrier devices embedded into it to allow for practicing with mana-based weaponry.

There was only one reason Estelle had come here: to escape the uncertainty clouding her mind. It had been a full week since her visit to the traveling funfair. She had been visited by a dressmaker, a jeweler, and owners of various other businesses in the meantime, getting new accessories and trinkets in the form of presents from the prince.

Arcrayne's regular visits continued too, as he moved things forward without any regard for Estelle's feelings. What really made her feel cornered was the fact he had bought her three entire sets of jewelry to match her dresses. She wasn't used to extravagance, and it pricked at her conscience, but she couldn't find it in her to complain to the prince.

Gently shaking her head to drive the gloom away, Estelle poured her mana into the pistol in her hands and aimed it at one of the targets.

Shooting was a skill she had learnt out of necessity. The earldom of Flozeth was located close to the habitat of dragons, who would occasionally raid human settlements. To bring one down, you had to use a Dragon Slayer, a mana gun tuned for high power and long effective range. Only a person endowed with high amounts of mana could use such a gun.

Dragon slaying was mainly the earl's job, but in his absence or during other emergencies, someone else had to be able to wield a Dragon Slayer, regardless of sex. Estelle fulfilled all the necessary conditions, and had thus been taught to shoot at an early age. It suited her nature to take aim and fire at targets in a

cool, disengaged state of mind—and by now, shooting was a hobby with practical value for her.

Someone's here, she noticed. Mana-based weaponry was quieter than that which fired gunpowder, but one still had to cover up one's ears when practicing. Estelle had only noticed the person standing behind her because of his mana.

A disk-shaped target had appeared, activated with mana, and it moved around chaotically each time Estelle shot it until she landed ten shots. After shooting it for the tenth time, Estelle turned around. Standing there was Arcrayne in a highly ornamented frock coat, which meant he had just come back from his official duties.

Estelle took off her ear guards before addressing him.

"You are back again."

"Why, our story is that I'm head over heels for you, remember?"

Arcrayne flashed his usual gentle smile. Judging by his radiant mana, he was in a good mood today.

"Nice shooting there. You hit almost every single one."

"Thank you for your kind words."

"Have you, by any chance, shot a dragon before?"

"Only once," said Estelle after a moment of silence. "Although it was a gunner in our service and not me who made the killing shot."

Lords of domains beset by dragons were allowed to employ wielders of Dragon Slayers as mercenaries.

Estelle had faced a dragon one year ago. Sirius had been busy hunting dragons himself at the time—as he was every year—and had been absent from the earldom. That was when a dragon had come flying into the earldom, and there'd been nobody else to deal with it, so it had been up to Estelle to lead the reserve gunners to slay the dragon.

"I pray a second time never comes. It was quite frightening."

A dragon could fly faster than a mana locomotive. Even shooting one from a Dragon Slayer's maximum effective range didn't guarantee your safety. If you couldn't kill it in one shot and the dragon closed the distance on you, you weren't coming back from that.

Estelle tightened her grip on the pistol in her hand as she remembered the dread she had experienced that day.

"There won't be a second time. You'll be by my side, after all."

Estelle shuddered. To her, it sounded as though Arcrayne were saying he wouldn't let her go home.

Though Flozeth had harsh weather, it was a beautiful land regardless. Estelle was particularly fond of its spring. After the long, pitiless winter, with the coming of thaw, many flowers blossomed in full glory all at once. This was something you could only see in snowy regions.

Remembering her home always made Estelle want to go back. It made her miss her brother, as well as the two's uncle and his wife.

"You seem to have something on your mind."

Estelle took a moment to reply. "No, nothing in particular."

"I can tell that's not true. You don't want this, do you? Your face says you don't want to live with me."

Seeing Estelle's lack of reply, Arcrayne sighed.

"Should I take your silence as a 'yes'?"

"Would there be any point in saying it? I have no means of disobeying your wishes, no matter how much they go against mine."

In Rosalia, nobody had more power than royals. Going against their wishes could easily get you charged with lèse-majesté.

"How strange," said Arcrayne after a moment. "Why do I find that attitude of yours so upsetting?"

"I am very sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. Power can restrain the body, but not the mind.

Even I know that much."

Arcrayne's smile grew cold as his mana clouded over. It appeared Estelle had aroused his displeasure.

Though she wondered how she could appease his anger, she couldn't think of anything. Estelle didn't want to say something she didn't mean, and telling the truth—that she didn't want to become his consort—felt like adding fuel to the fire.

"An unofficial decision has been made," added the prince. "One you might see as bad news."

"What...?"

"My father has approved of our engagement. It will be officially announced at the New Year's party."

That's it. There's no escape now, lamented Estelle, hanging her head and closing her eyes.

"Once our engagement is announced, I will have you move to the Libra Palace. You should prepare for it."

The Libra Palace was one of the twelve buildings comprising the Palace of Albion, and the one Arcrayne lived in.

The prince brought his hand to Estelle's cheek.

"Once that happens, you will be mine both in name and in reality. A lot to look forward to, isn't there?"

Though Arcrayne was smiling, his mana was still turbulent, and his royal blue eyes held a glint of uncertainty.

"I'm sure you need time to prepare, so I'll spare you the procreation for the time being," whispered the prince into Estelle's ear, then stepped away from her and headed out of the basement, leaving her to stare at his back in blank amazement.

As he'd said those words, Arcrayne had looked like a beast of prey to her. He'd looked like that when he'd interrogated her too, back when she'd been wounded, no less—it must've been his true nature.

And such a two-faced man was to become her husband! As if that weren't enough, he was a first prince—one engaged in political strife, always at risk of being assassinated or overthrown.

Frightened by her future prospects, Estelle wrapped her arms around herself.

***

The new year of 534 of the Rosalian calendar had begun.

Estelle had moved to the Libra Palace in the early morning and was being dressed up by May and other female attendants of the palace. A New Year's party hosted by the royal family was to be held later that day. It was the most important banquet of the entire year, as all of the feudal lords were required to present themselves to the king. In addition, Arcrayne and Estelle's engagement was to be officially announced on the occasion.

Starting from this day, the Libra Palace would become Estelle's home. Perhaps it was for this reason that, to prepare for the upcoming party, she'd been given the chambers meant for the wife. She also had a bedroom among her boudoirs, which had a door leading to another bedroom—one with a marriage bed.

I won't have to go there... Right? wondered Estelle.

"Once that happens, you will be mine both in name and in reality."

Recalling Arcrayne's words from the other day, Estelle felt her cheeks flush. But she calmed down the next moment, remembering how he'd said he would "spare her the procreation for the time being." *It should be fine,* she told herself.

Although there had been some opposition to the two living together while they were only engaged, there was the precedent of King Sashes letting Queen Miriallia live with him in the Leo Palace from the moment of their engagement, so Arcrayne had forced his way.

Incidentally, Arcrayne had apparently been born only seven months after their wedding, which the records stated to be a premature delivery. Estelle thought it best not to dwell too much on what that really meant.

After taking a bath, getting a massage, and being groomed literally from head to toe, Estelle was exhausted before the party had even started.

For this occasion, she was to wear the dress she had received on the day of her outing—that navy blue robe décolleté with golden roses embroidered on it. On the ring finger of her left hand was a rhodolite garnet engagement ring—the same color as her eyes. No sooner had the king given his unofficial approval for the two's marriage than Arcrayne had given her this ring; he had apparently researched her taste in jewelry and procured this ring ahead of time. It had claws that curled like petals to hold onto the rhodolite.

Now that Estelle looked back on it, she realized that all these garments and other belongings must have been prepared for her with this day in mind. Her dressing room held not only clothes and accessories made to order specifically for her, but also accessories that had belonged to the late Queen Miriallia—as well as the numerous other items Estelle had regularly worn in Flozeth.

What had pleased Estelle when she'd moved to the Libra Palace was her reunion with her maid Leah, who had served her on the Flozeths' property. After a strict aptitude test and an investigation of her background, she had been employed as Estelle's personal lady-in-waiting.

She and May seemed to have found a kindred spirit in each other, likely owing to their shared interest in fashion. They appeared to be enjoying themselves as they treated Estelle like a dress-up doll.

"How about pearls for the accessories?" asked Leah.

"No, His Highness said it has to be this set of diamonds," replied May. "The late Queen Miriallia had apparently worn them on the day her engagement to His Majesty the King was announced."

"Oh, my... So His Highness is going to have Lady Estelle wear the same accessory in the same place as his mother? That is simply marvelous!" Leah was beaming with excitement.

"Now then, with accessories out of the way, let's decide on the hairstyle. How about a half-up, half-down hairdo, with a braid and inlaid with pearls?"

"Why not go with fewer pearls and add an arrangement of roses? We could

make it a spread of white roses and pearls... Given that Lady Estelle's engagement will be announced today, I think wearing the national flower is a must."

As nice as it was that these two got along so well, Estelle felt like it took at least twice as long for her to get changed now, compared to when she only had either of them waiting on her. She sighed inwardly.

"My lady!" Leah suddenly addressed her. "Do you have any wishes in regards to your attire today?"

Estelle was a little at a loss on how to reply. "Um...I have faith in your taste in fashion, so...I'd kind of rather fully leave all this to you..."

The two put silent pressure on her with their stares. Feeling like she had to suggest *something*, Estelle desperately racked her brain for ideas.

"How about adding a golden ribbon to my hair? I think it will go well with the golden roses in my dress."

"And it matches the color of His Highness's hair!" replied Leah. "Let's weave a thin golden ribbon into the braid. Then, finally, we'll add some white roses..."

"That sounds good. Let's go with that," added May.

Estelle's suggestion seemed to have satisfied the two. It relieved her to see the cheerful looks on their faces.

***

Once Estelle had fully dressed, she went to the living room—and found not only Arcrayne there, but also her brother Sirius.

"Whoa, what have they done to you?!"

Sirius's poor manners prompted a wide-eyed look from Arcrayne and gave Estelle a headache.

"Brother, you would do well to mind your language in the presence of His Highness," she said with a glare.

"Sorry, sorry," apologized Sirius with a shrug. "You're incredibly beautiful. It's hard to believe you're my sister."

“Would you kindly not take *my* lines, Lord Sirius?” said Arcrayne.

The two seemed to have had a friendly chat while they waited for Estelle.

While Sirius’s formal dress was of no particular note to Estelle, as she was already used to seeing it, Arcrayne’s was overpoweringly gorgeous. The outfit he wore, which resembled a military uniform, was known as a court uniform—the most formal of royal attire. His jet-black costume, complete with epaulets and a golden aiguillette, made him look austere; and the royal blue sash hanging diagonally from his shoulder, as well as the medals on his chest, further embellished his fine appearance.

Though it wasn’t the first time Estelle had seen him in his court uniform, her racing heart just wouldn’t calm down.

“I know it is late for this, Your Highness,” began Sirius, “but are you quite certain you want *her*? Her face and wit are nothing extraordinary.”

“I’m certain, Lord Sirius. She’s a most attractive woman in my eyes.”

You’ve never thought of me that way at all, Estelle remarked inwardly, but said nothing. Sirius, in the meantime, had tears welling up in his eyes. He got up and bowed to Arcrayne.

“Your Highness, please take care of her. She is my precious sister, the only one I have.”

“Please, Lord Sirius, raise your head. I swear I’ll make her the happiest bride in the world.”

Estelle felt disgusted with Arcrayne for his insincere talk. Still worse, his mana was radiant. And though Sirius was Estelle’s beloved brother, he was altogether too naïve and thus had completely fallen for Arcrayne’s tricks. She felt like she was watching a bad play in a theatre.

“Never thought I’d be seeing you off like this... May you find happiness, Estelle.”

“I will, brother,” replied Estelle after a pause.

She wondered if such a day would ever come. Estelle certainly didn’t plan on leading an unhappy life, but her childhood dream—establishing a warm,

affectionate household with a husband she could love, who would love her in return—seemed to be out of reach with this prince.

Because she had caught Arcrayne's attention, she would now have to live in the swirl of expectations and ulterior motives that was the Palace of Albion. The mere thought of it was depressing.

***

The New Year's party was held in one of the Palace of Albion's twelve buildings—the Pisces Palace. At present, it wasn't used as a royal residence, but as a venue for large-scale events like this one hosted by the royal family.

Olivia Rainsworth, who was also present at that dinner party, restlessly awaited the royals' arrival. It had been about two months since she'd last seen Arcrayne. She knew he was very busy with royal events from the end of the year to the start of the next one. However, this was the first time he'd rejected her requests to see him for so long. He hadn't granted her any audiences, accepted her invitations to parties—anything. It was clearly abnormal.

The only people allowed to attend the New Year's party were feudal lords and their companions, one per lord. Olivia was so desperate to see Arcrayne at least once that she had asked her mother to feign an illness and let her attend as her father's companion.

There was only one reason she wanted to see Arcrayne: she insisted on personally asking him if the rumors about his engagement were true.

I *should've been his first choice,* she thought to herself. Out of all the suitable members of Arcrayne's faction, Olivia was of the highest status and most appropriate age. Also, Arcrayne had often chosen her to accompany him to parties, so all the gossip had said he was most likely going to marry her.

The situation had changed in early November, at the time of the ball held at Marquess Rogell's mansion. An assassination attempt had taken place during the slow waltz, which had been the second musical piece of the night. It was then that Estelle Flozeth had taken a bullet for Arcrayne. Ever since that night, Arcrayne had been acting odd.

If only it had been me dancing with him that time... lamented Olivia, biting her

lip. She was convinced she would've acted no differently from Estelle.

At any other ball, Arcrayne would've given Olivia his second dance as well. That day, however, he had rejected her request for a second dance and gone to Estelle instead. He had, of course, been motivated purely by politics—the way Arcrayne had explained it to Olivia was that he'd wanted to show a warm welcome to Earl Flozeth, who'd been on his first visit to a soiree held by Arcrayne's faction, having remained neutral until that point. She hadn't had much of a choice other than to let him go.

Thinking about what had followed filled Olivia with regret. She should've used whatever means possible to have that second dance with him.

And then all those tabloid articles had come out, and her father had barged into the Libra Palace—and Arcrayne had apparently admitted to being attracted to Estelle. According to her father, Arcrayne had said he'd gradually come to love her over the course of his inquiries after her health.

"Isn't there an extra seat for the royal family?"

"Looks like the rumors were true..."

The seating order at banquets was strictly decided by the nobles' ranks. As there were more seats for royalty than anticipated, the nobles were all abuzz, whispering back and forth.

"Father..." uttered Olivia, looking up at Tohrmeyler sitting beside her.

"I told you you shouldn't have gone today."

Judging by his manner, Olivia realized he must've known what was going to happen on this day ahead of time. Arcrayne was definitely going to announce his engagement. And in all likelihood, it was going to be with Estelle Flozeth.

Olivia felt the piercing gazes of the surrounding nobles on her. Once, everyone had seen her as the most likely candidate for marrying the prince, and now it felt like they were sneering at her for thinking herself worthy of that very thing. It was humiliating. Up until now, being the daughter of a marquess, Olivia had lived a life completely free of others' pity or contempt.

There was another person in the room who had people's attention—Earl Flozeth. Brother to Estelle, the young earl was having a pleasant conversation with another lord sitting in an adjacent seat, showing no concern for the eyes on him.

Didn't he have Wyntia sitting beside him last year? recalled Olivia. His seating precedence had gone up. Noticing it only now, Olivia tightly clenched her fists under the table. Her nails dug into her palm through her thin lace gloves, but in this moment, Olivia needed the pain.

Earl Wyntia and his wife looked uncomfortable and ashamed. No wonder—their son's former fiancée was about to make a comeback as the first prince's future wife. Gossip regarding the scrapped engagement between Estelle and Lyle Wyntia was popular in high society.

It should be noted that Baron Pautrier, the very man who had taken Lyle from Estelle, had not been invited. He had earned his rank through fortune, and did not possess a feudal domain of his own, which made him ineligible for attending this party. Had he been here, he would surely have diverted some of the rude gazes that were now pointed at Olivia.

Loud fanfare resounded through the hall, announcing the arrival of the royal family. In stepped king and queen, followed by Arcrayne escorting Estelle. Despite all the gossip already in circulation, their appearance still sent ripples of astonishment through the hall.

Estelle looked far more beautiful than Olivia remembered her. She was clad in a navy blue robe décolleté embroidered with golden roses, which somehow made Olivia think of Arcrayne. It was said that Estelle had a scar on her left arm left by a mana pistol, and the slightly long sleeves added substance to that rumor.

Her neatly braided chestnut hair was charmingly adorned with a golden ribbon and an arrangement of white roses. On the ring finger of her left hand was a gleaming ring with what appeared to be rhodolite—a mineral of the same purplish-red color as Estelle's eyes.

Olivia *had* thought of her as a beauty, but only as one whose looks were

merely above average. However, looking at her now, Olivia had to admit defeat. Estelle's makeup greatly enhanced her shapely features—so much so that even Arcrayne, standing beside her in full dress, could not eclipse her.

Olivia had no doubt it was none other than his love that had made Estelle so beautiful. She was close to losing her mind with unsightly jealousy.

***

My stomach hurts... I want to go home... Estelle lamented inwardly, looking pale as she waited in the royal antechamber.

"Don't be so nervous, Estelle," said Arcrayne. "All you have to do is stand by my side."

"My, my—would you look at these lovebirds?" Queen Truteliese was all smiles. "Does it not look like Rosalia's future is in good hands, Your Majesty?"

Though her face said she was looking at something heartwarming, her mana told a different story—it was as dark as it had been at that dinner party the other day, indicating she felt differently on the inside. King Sashes, meanwhile, had a somewhat troubled look on his face.

"I suppose so," he replied after a few moments. "Make sure you cherish her, Arcrayne."

A queen who hid her negative emotions towards Estelle, and a king who seemed reluctant to approve of the engagement—Estelle's future parents-in-law brought her nothing but worry.

Also, since Prince Liedis was a minor and couldn't yet attend official social events, Estelle still had yet to meet her future brother-in-law. Arcrayne had told her there was no need for it, but Liedis was a source of concern for her nonetheless.

As Estelle stood there feeling anxious about her future, she heard fanfare announcing the arrival of the royal family.

"Shall we?" urged Arcrayne.

Entering the hall together with him after the king and queen, Estelle felt like a convict being taken to her execution.

As soon as she set foot into the banquet, she felt a myriad of eyes on her. She was scared. It was as though the nobles' piercing gazes, their mana, had become a concentrated mass of malice that was swooping down on Estelle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began the king, "I am pleased to be your host on this night as we celebrate the coming of the New Year. There is something I must share with you all."

His speech didn't register with Estelle at all, going in one ear and out the other.

"I have recently approved of the engagement between my first son, Arcrayne Ygritt of Rosalia, and the sister of Earl Flozeth, Estelle Flozeth. I shall more formally proclaim this engagement in Parliament at a later date."

As soon as the king had announced the engagement, the mana across the hall clouded over. Everyone in this place was either a feudal lord or the family of one. With that and the fact they had more mana than commoners, Estelle felt like throwing up from the fear and disgust the sight brought her.

Only a handful of people in the whole venue were happy about the announcement: Sirius, Sierra, Claus, and several of Estelle's friends from school, such as Keira.

The one with the darkest mana in the hall was Olivia Rainsworth. She appeared to be here in the capacity of Marquess Rainsworth's companion, in place of his wife. Her beautiful face was distorted with unrivaled hostility for Estelle, making her look like a demon from sacred scriptures—the personification of envy.

Once the king had finished his speech, Estelle, Arcrayne, and the queen bowed to everyone present and took their seats.

The banquet had only started, but Estelle already felt like making an escape. Thinking how it was only the beginning of her suffering for the night, she wished she could faint then and there.

Chapter 5: New Life in the Libra Palace

I'm so tired... thought Estelle, listlessly plopping down onto a couch in her room in the Libra Palace. She had just gotten back from the dinner party.

The nobles' piercing gazes and dark mana she had felt the moment she'd entered that hall had been so frightening that she was worried she'd see them in her nightmares.

As Arcrayne had been by her side all along, nobody had directly spoken to her throughout the whole party. But since Estelle could always perceive people's emotions together with their mana, being there for so long had been akin to torture.

"Lady Estelle, you mustn't go to sleep right away! Not before a bath!" said Leah, rousing Estelle as she dozed off on the couch.

Estelle's room had rather luxurious facilities, which was no surprise, as it had been made for a princess. Adjoining it was a private bathroom, complete with a sauna ordered from the northern parts of the Heredian continent.

It had been May attending to Estelle for the duration of the party, who was well familiar with the palace. Leah had stayed here in the meantime, preparing things Estelle would need before going to sleep, such as a bath and nightwear.

With Leah's help, Estelle finished her bath, attended to her skincare routine, and was about to change into her nightwear when she went wide-eyed at exactly *what kind* of nightwear Leah gave her. It had a suggestive design—pure white, with a rather open chest.

"Wait, Leah. I can sleep in this room today, right...?"

"No, my lady, His Highness has instructed me to send you to the shared bedroom."

"What?! But we're not married yet! We're only engaged!"

Estelle quickly grew pale. Her wedding was still scheduled for autumn of current year, with no concrete date set as of yet. *So much for "sparing me the*

procreation," lamented Estelle.

"I'm not going! I'll sleep right here!"

The idea of being alone with Arcrayne in such obscene nightwear was too humiliating.

"You must not, my lady! Please go to the marital bedroom, for me and May!"

"What does this have to do with you two?!"

"There may be punishment in store for us if we disobey His Highness's orders."

Leah was firmly gripping Estelle's arms, desperate to persuade her.

He's not despotic enough to punish them for something like that...or is he? I wish I could be sure of that... thought Estelle. As Estelle recalled the ferocious smile he would occasionally reveal, her shoulders drooped.

Snug in a housecoat on top of that nightwear—as it was chilly—Estelle headed to the shared bedroom, and found Arcrayne already inside. He was sitting on a couch, looking through some papers. Once he saw Estelle, he put the papers down, then addressed her.

"There you are. Are you hungry? I've had a snack prepared. You barely ate anything at the party, right?"

Laid out on the table were pastries, cut fruits, and other light food.

"I shall help myself just a little," replied Estelle quietly, distancing herself from Arcrayne and sitting down—which prompted a smile from the prince.

"You don't need to be on your guard so much. I'm not going to do anything to you if you don't want it. I haven't fallen so low as to force myself on an unwilling girl."

"Then what did you call me here for?"

"Our story is that I'm madly in love with you, remember? People might start to suspect that something is wrong with me if I don't do anything to my future wife even though we now live under the same roof. It may have been different in the past, but nowadays, future wives of princes aren't required to be virgins."

Estelle went stiff at Arcrayne's words.

"I'll ask, just in case," he continued. "What do you prefer? Doing the deed with me, or sleeping on dirty bedsheets?"

"I do not understand what you mean by that."

"A maid might suspect something if she doesn't see any traces of the act when she comes in to clean. We should prepare accordingly."

While things were now clear to Estelle, she also wondered why he had asked such a pointless question. There was only one way she could answer.

"Dirty bedsheets, please."

"Oh, it hurts when you say it so *outright*..."

Despite what he said, Arcrayne seemed to be enjoying himself. He got up and approached the tea wagon beside the table. On the wagon was a tea set and a mana-based teapot. It appeared he was going to make tea.

"Tea? Allow me—"

"You're tired, aren't you? Just sit there."

Stopping Estelle, Arcrayne started to prepare tea, looking as though he were used to it. Before long, a pleasant aroma wafted through the air. Estelle wondered if the tea had an apple flavor.

"Do you often make tea yourself?"

"I do. Not very fond of people going in and out while I'm busy with my duties, you see."

Arcrayne's tea had a pleasant smell and warmed Estelle up. The pastries were delicious too. She hadn't had the presence of mind to really taste anything she'd eaten at the party, so it felt like it had been some time since she'd last had something that wasn't tasteless.

"Is it good?"

"It is."

"Glad to hear it," replied Arcrayne with a cheerful smile.

“Your Highness, thank you for being so kind to my brother.”

Not only had Arcrayne invited Sirius to the Libra Palace before the banquet, but even during said banquet, Arcrayne had gone to where Sirius sat and showed a lot of consideration to him, as Sirius was the brother of his fiancée.

“He’s my future brother-in-law, after all. And it’s easy to get along with him, given how straightforward he is,” said the prince, taking a sip from his teacup with a smile.

Estelle wondered if she was overthinking things, but it sounded to her like he meant that Sirius was a simpleton who was easy to handle.

“If I may... Is it not a problem that I have moved here without ever meeting His Highness Prince Liedis?” asked Estelle once again.

“It’s probably fine. He and I don’t exactly get along, you see. He comes at me whenever we run into each other, which is a bother to deal with,” replied Arcrayne with a sigh.

Just as was rumored, the two brothers appeared to be on bad terms.

“You should be careful too,” continued Arcrayne. “He was spoiled so much that he’s grown up into an egocentric, selfish boy. If you happen to see him when I’m not around, I want you to make sure you don’t anger him. His telekinesis is pretty strong, so if he ends up going wild in rage, you never know what he might do.”

After a moment’s pause, Estelle replied, “I shall be careful.”

Prince Liedis appeared to be quite the danger.

“By the way, how was the mana at the party today?” asked Arcrayne, changing the subject. Perhaps he didn’t want to talk about Liedis anymore.

“Almost everyone had dark mana,” replied Estelle. Thinking, she added, ”Oh, but Duke Marwick was pleased.”

She recalled the wrinkled face of the old duke. He was Queen Truteliese’s father.

“That old nuisance was pleased, you say?”

“He was.”

“What about the queen?”

“It appears I am indeed not in Her Majesty’s good graces. It is quite the mystery. Have I ever done something to displease her?”

Though Queen Truteliese had given her blessings with a smile for this engagement, her mana had darkened whenever Estelle had been in her sight, just like at the earlier tea party.

“I don’t know... I’m looking into it, but nothing’s come up yet. Hmm...” Arcrayne brought a hand to his chin in thought.

With her stomach filled, Estelle grew sleepy. Seeing her yawn, Arcrayne held out a hand towards her.

“Right—you’re tired. Ready for bed?”

“*Must* I sleep in the bed with you...?”

“It will be suspicious if you don’t. And you won’t be able to sleep well on the couch.”

As this was the marital bedroom, the bed in it was very spacious. If the two slept on the opposite ends of the bed, their bodies were unlikely to come in contact. Estelle conceded with a sigh.

Once Estelle had climbed into the bed, Arcrayne used his telekinesis to put out the lights in the room, leaving just the bedside mana lamp. She was a little envious of how he could do that without having to walk to the light switch.

Taking off his robe, Arcrayne walked to the bed. Seeing his normally-hidden collarbone and trained muscles peeking over his collar, Estelle reflexively looked away.

“You should move a bit to the center so you don’t fall,” Arcrayne suggested.

“I will not! I do not toss and turn in my sleep.”

Estelle thought she heard Arcrayne snicker.

“Now then, it’s time for those preparations I mentioned.”

With that, Arcrayne pulled a dagger from under his pillow.

“Why do you keep something like that under your pillow?”

“To deal with assassins. Oh, but don’t you go trying to kill me in my sleep with it. You’d need to pour quite a lot of mana into it to make it hurt me at all, and naturally, I would notice if you tried anything beside me.”

This dagger appeared to be a mana blade. It had a mana stone embedded into the haft, which let the wielder make the weapon sharper by pouring mana into it.

Doing just that, Arcrayne cut the palm of his left hand, causing Estelle to open her eyes wide in surprise.

“Maybe I overdid it. It hurts a fair bit.”

“I must treat—”

“No need. It’ll close up right away.”

Letting his blood drip on the bedsheets, Arcrayne opened a small box by the bedside. Inside were wet, steaming hand towels. He took one of them out and wiped his bloodstained hand with it. Just like he had said, his wound was already gone without a trace.

This is how quickly royals regenerate, remarked Estelle. As she could visually perceive people’s mana like a corona around the sun, she knew Arcrayne and King Sashes both had an extremely high amount of it. In an ordinary commoner, Estelle would see no more than a fist-sized amount of silver light around the heart—but in Arcrayne’s case, his mana spread far out around him, looking like a halo behind his back. Nobles and Dragon Slayer wielders only had enough mana to cover their torsos, so royals were on a completely different level.

He really didn’t need my protection that time, she thought to herself. Perturbed, Estelle gently held her scarred left arm, which was hidden under her sleeve.

“I think you should take off that thick housecoat. I know it’s winter, but it’s warm in this room, and you’ll definitely sweat if you sleep under a quilt.”

“I-I will not! There is a small problem with my nightwear...” replied Estelle,

wrapping her arms around herself.

“Oh, they made you wear something for a couple’s first night together? I’ll turn around, so you can go ahead and take that housecoat off, then hide under the quilt right away.”

What Arcrayne had warned her about was on point—Estelle *would* sweat in her sleep if she didn’t do as he said. With that in mind, she took off the housecoat once she had seen the prince turn around, then slipped under the soft down quilt. Immediately afterwards...

Arcrayne turned around and vigorously pulled the quilt away.

“What?!” exclaimed Estelle.

“Interesting...”

“What are you doing?!”

“Well, when you hide something from me, that makes me want to see it.”

Arcrayne’s gaze was fixed on Estelle’s cleavage in full view. As her cheeks turned red, she tried to push the prince aside and escape—to no avail. Arcrayne had her pinned to the sheets below as he hung over her.

“Y-Your Highness... Let me go...”

“No,” he whispered in reply, bringing his handsome face close to Estelle’s.

She got a light whiff of bergamot. Try as she might to shake herself free from Arcrayne, the difference in strength between them was too great. As she forcefully swung her head to the side in terror, something wet touched her neck, startling her. It was lips. She was being kissed on the neck. The realization made her flesh creep.

“Stop! What are you doing?!”

“What do you mean? This is part of the preparations.”

“What...?”

Removing his lips from Estelle’s neck, Arcrayne flashed a delightful smile, then proceeded to bury his face in her chest.

“Have to leave evidence that something happened, you know?”

Checking her chest, she found it flushed with congested blood. As Arcrayne pulled away from Estelle, he returned the quilt to how it had been before and slipped under it as well.

“Though I’ll do more if you wish?” suggested Arcrayne.

“I-I will pass!”

Her cheeks flushed red, Estelle turned her back to the prince. She heard him snicker behind her. His mana was radiant too, and he seemed to be really enjoying himself.

Estelle was being toyed with. She was both angry and incredibly embarrassed. Her rapid heartbeat wouldn’t settle down.

She furtively traced her fingertips over the mark Arcrayne had left with his lips on her chest.

***

Once Arcrayne had killed the light by the bedside and closed the bed canopy, everything was completely dark. As soon as he heard Estelle’s breathing grow steady beside him, indicating she was asleep already, the prince involuntarily let out a laugh. She had been so on guard, worried he might do something to her, and yet she’d fallen asleep so quickly. On the other hand, that was likely a testament to how exhausting that day’s party had been for her.

Arcrayne could see well in the dark. Careful not to make a sound, he looked beside him at Estelle’s face, peaceful in sleep.

By now, Arcrayne had taken quite the liking to Estelle for her perseverance and serenity. He was sure she had much on her mind after being brought to this palace against her will.

He knew she wished for a more ordinary happy life; she did not want to become a princess. She must’ve held all her thoughts to herself and accepted his marriage proposal in fear of being charged with lèse-majesté. Arcrayne felt a little guilty for forcefully tying her to himself.

But he felt no regret. He had fought tooth and nail to stay alive. Arcrayne would use anything that could be used. There was no other way to survive in

this decadent vipers' nest. While he felt bad for Estelle, he couldn't just let a useful pawn get away.

Arcrayne was a man too. He felt desire when a woman was nearby. "Making it look like something happened" had been a mere excuse. He had left a mark on Estelle's chest with his kiss simply because he wanted to touch her. Arcrayne had only been able to keep his desire to take things further in check because he sympathized with her.

He could lay his hands on her any time he wanted. With that in mind, he found it acceptable to wait a little longer, until they warmed up to each other.

Arcrayne softly touched the sleeping Estelle's face. She groaned in her sleep, frowning and brushing his hand away, looking irritated—then she turned over Arcrayne's way. Thinking he might've woken her up, the prince observed her face for a while.

His worry proved unnecessary, however, as Estelle quickly resumed her even breathing. Smiling suddenly, Arcrayne placed a light kiss on her cheek.

***

It was cold. Estelle wondered if the fireplace had burnt out.

Squirming around, Estelle buried her head beneath the quilt in search of warmth. Then she felt something warm very close to her. It was too big for a hot stone, but so incredibly warm nonetheless. Estelle clung to the object.

She wondered what it was. It reminded her of a hound she used to keep.

"Kai..."

Had he come back to her? It had been quite some time since he'd died of old age...

Also, this warm object had a pleasant scent, one that was different from Kai's characteristic, also pleasant smell. It was the scent of a fresh citrus, but just a little bitter...

"I don't know how I should feel about you saying another man's name..."

The warm object had spoken to her! Estelle's eyes widened. She was surprised yet again to see the exquisitely shapely face of a young blond man at

point-blank range.

“Your Highness...?”

Once she had become aware of the prince, Estelle froze up. She wondered why Arcrayne was right in front of her. Then, searching her memories, she recalled moving into the Libra Palace the day before.

“I almost laid my hands on you after your passionate embrace, but now you’ve spoiled my mood.”

Only after Arcrayne said it did Estelle finally realize she was clinging to him, causing her to blanch. She hurried to disentangle herself from him, but he had an arm around her and used it to pull her towards himself instead.

“Please! Let me go!”

The sensation of his strong muscles and that bergamot scent served to confuse Estelle. Realizing that the only thing separating their skin now was her thin nightwear, Estelle grew dizzy.

“Say, who’s Kai? You had a man other than Lyle Wyntia? I’ll consider letting you go if you tell me.”

“Kai is a dog I once had!” cried Estelle, panicked. “He was a hairy white Flozeth and we slept together during the cold months!” Then she heard a suppressed laugh by her ear.

“I know. I’ve done my research on your past conduct. I knew there were no other men, and I knew your dog’s name.”

He’s the worst. He’s such an idiot, thought Estelle. Of course, she could only disparage the prince inside her mind; to do so aloud would be to disrespect royalty

“I told you what you wished to hear, so let me go, please.”

“It’s cold, so no. It’s my first time sharing a bed with someone, and I have to say, it’s pretty good for cold parts of the year. It’s warm.”

Estelle’s futile struggle to get away had only served to make her aware of the difference in strength between a man and a woman. With no option left open for her, she promptly gave up.

“Oh? You’re accepting this situation?” asked the prince.

“I simply do not believe in pointless effort,” replied Estelle with a blank look.

Judging by the sunlight seeping through the canopy, it was already morning. There wasn’t a single fireplace in the palace, but instead, there were much more expensive mana-based climate control devices. It must’ve been chilly because said appliance had ceased operation. It was comforting, almost, to have human warmth, so she gave up her struggle and closed her eyes.

It’s Sirius here and not His Highness, she told herself. She had slept in the same bed with someone every night in her childhood, be it Sirius or Kai.

As she thought about these things, Estelle grew sleepy again. Wishing to escape reality, she let sleep take her.

***

When Estelle next woke up, it was because the warmth beside her had disappeared.

“Mmm...” she groaned.

“Are you awake?”

As she opened her eyes, wondering who had called out to her, they met those of Arcrayne, who was sitting up in bed. She jolted. She had gone back to sleep after he had embraced her. As she lay there, looking bewildered after her realization, Arcrayne let out a laugh.

He brought his face close to Estelle’s and immediately planted a kiss on her forehead, sending a tremor through her.

“You’re awfully weak to this, for someone who was engaged before. You didn’t do things like this with Lyle Wyntia?”

“I-I did not! The most we have done is hold hands... He was a serious man.”

“Was he now...? Good, good. I’d rather not have some bastard’s stains on what belongs to me,” said Arcrayne with a smile that felt a bit contemptuous. “At any rate, I need you to gradually get used to touching me. I left you alone last night, but eventually, I *will* have sex with you.”

“I-Is it not my power that you need, Your Highness? I would be completely fine with a marriage blanc...”

“I must admit, that would be a problem for me. Sorry to disappoint,” Arcrayne shot back with a cheerful smile. “I hate going through unnecessary trouble. I get my urges as a man, and it would be extremely inefficient to find release for them somewhere on the side. On the other hand, it’s perfectly legal for me to do it with you, and I find the idea of not doing so to be unthinkable. Besides, people would think much more highly of me if they thought I cherish only my wife.”

Does this man even have a human heart? wondered Estelle after hearing such things.

“I’m getting up,” said the prince. “What about you?”

“Me too. I have rested enough.”

“Then let’s have breakfast brought in here. Our story is that you can’t stand well after I made love to you last night, so you should take it easy for the rest of the morning.”

“What?!”

Estelle went red in the face. She hated herself for reacting to every suggestive thing she heard.

“I’ll tell May, and only her, that nothing happened between us, but I want you to mind how you act around others.”

“Can we not tell Leah?”

“I’ve brought her here for your sake, but I can’t fully trust her yet, so I’d like you to refrain from letting her know. Sorry. I know she’s your trusted maid.”

“It is quite all right, Your Highness—I am aware you have not been acquainted with her for long.”

Estelle must have chosen the correct words; Arcrayne smiled in satisfaction.

“I’m going to show you around this palace in the afternoon. We didn’t have time for that yesterday, after all.”

Arcrayne stroked Estelle’s hair, disheveling it, then left their shared bedroom in the direction of his personal room.

After a short while, May and Leah stepped in to help Estelle dress.

“My lady, it’s so...moving...to know you’ve climbed the final step to womanhood,” said Leah with deep emotion in her voice, making Estelle feel like burying her head in the sheets.

For some reason, May was giving her a slightly cold look instead.

All of this was just an act to make it look like Arcrayne was head over heels for Estelle, and yet it still made Estelle unbearably awkward.

“Looks like you’ll have to wear a dress with a closed neck today,” said Leah. “Good thing it’s winter.”

She was in good spirits. Leah had been furious about how things had ended between Estelle and Lyle as though it were about herself, and she must've been happy to see her mistress so easily smite a prince.

This prince is in a politically difficult spot... Estelle wanted to say, even though Leah should've already known as much.

***

Come afternoon, Arcrayne paid a visit to Estelle's room.

"How are you feeling? If everything's good, I'll show you around the palace."

May and Leah had been awfully mindful of her physical condition today. It made Estelle wonder if the first time was *that* taxing on the body. She'd heard it was painful, and the fact she'd eventually have to do it with Arcrayne made her uneasy.

I'm not opposed to the act itself... In fact, wouldn't it even be an honor? His Highness is so handsome... thought Estelle, though she hadn't forgotten about the big problems with him—namely, the fact that she had to deal with the royal family and the risk of assassinations.

As the daughter of nobles herself, she had a duty to marry into some family of note. Had Arcrayne not set his eyes on her, she would've no doubt had to give herself to a man of significantly lower status than the prince. She couldn't call Arcrayne a good person, but for the most part he was gentlemanly with her, and most importantly, he was a prince. Estelle couldn't think of a better marriage partner, provided his political position became secure in the future.

"What's wrong, Estelle? Do you feel unwell?"

At Arcrayne's words, Estelle suddenly came to her senses.

"I apologize; I was lost in thought. There is nothing wrong with me. I can go," she replied in a fluster.

The prince gave her an extensive tour of the Libra Palace: they visited his personal chambers, drawing rooms, parlor, different halls, the study, the storage room, lodgings of live-in servants... Room by room, he showed Estelle

all around the vast grounds of the palace.

Other than the regular servants, the palace was protected by members of the Royal Guard. Among them was Neil, a guardsman Estelle had run into several times before. She had been instructed to visit the shooting range at the Royal Guard's training facility if she wanted to practice with firearms.

As far as Estelle knew, most of the servants in the Libra Palace had previously served Marquess Rogell—and only trustworthy ones, those loyal to Arcrayne, were hired. However, judging by the mana of servants she passed by, not all of them were disposed well towards her, which made Estelle all the more grateful for getting May and Leah assigned as her close aides.

Furthermore, those who bore ill feelings towards Estelle were to be transferred to other posts in the future to keep them as far away from Estelle and Arcrayne as possible.

As the palace had many different rooms, the tour had taken over an hour.

"I want you to stay in this palace for the most part," said Arcrayne. "Always have a member of the Royal Guard with you when you go out into the garden."

"If I must," replied Estelle after a moment's pause.

Though she acknowledged his instructions, they felt no less stifling. Still, that was what it meant to be engaged to Arcrayne. Estelle had no other choice.

The last place he showed her to was his office.

"When I'm not out on my official duties, I'm usually here. And while I'm here, I want you to spend your time in this nearby room."

With that, he led her to an adjoining room. Inside was a bed, a couch, and a bookshelf full of books. Perhaps it was meant to be a nap room.

"You'll be having lectures here while I'm on duty. Once you're familiar enough with the place, I'm thinking of having you help with my duties too."

"So you intend to exploit me even more?"

"You'll eventually have to manage this palace as my consort. Consider it a rehearsal. I'll make sure it doesn't become too much of a burden on you."

After another moment of silence, Estelle replied, “I understand. What about my interaction with high society?”

“You may keep it to a minimum; that’s not a problem. There should be a mountain of invitations piling up ever since our engagement was announced—I’ll sort through them later and tell you which ones you should accept. You’re a Cinderella, as it were. There’s no doubt the whole country has its eyes on you.”

Arcrayne’s words made Estelle feel quite fed up with all this once again.

“The reason I want you to spend your time here is so that you can be my personal alarm using your power. If you sense suspicious mana, let me know with this.”

The prince took a small box out of his frock coat pocket and opened it, showing the contents to Estelle. Inside was a silver ring with a mana stone embedded into it.

“This ring forms a pair with one of my cufflinks,” explained the prince.

Upon closer inspection, one of his cuffs did have a cufflink with a design similar to that of the ring.

“If you direct mana into the ring, the cufflink will vibrate slightly, letting me know. I had it made with the size of your fingers in mind. Try it on for me, would you?”

“Very well.”

Accepting the mana ring, Estelle put it on the middle finger of her left hand. Thanks to its simple design, it didn’t overshadow the engagement ring on the nearby ring finger.

“Looks like the size is good,” said the prince. “Let’s test it out. Direct some mana into it.”

Estelle did as asked, at which point Arcrayne’s cufflink slightly vibrated—so slightly, in fact, that it would’ve been impossible to notice, had she not been paying attention to it.

“Looks like it works well. All right—let’s move on. I’ll show you the garden next,” said Arcrayne with a smile.

***

Come night, Estelle had to share the bed with him again. Everybody had to know Arcrayne was infatuated with her, of course, as their cover story went. If everyone thought he was besotted with Estelle, he could keep her as his own personal alarm without raising any suspicions—that was his plan, at any rate.

I don't know how long my heart can take this, lamented Estelle.

Polished to a shine by May and Leah, Estelle headed to the shared bedroom, feeling dejected. As always, Arcrayne had gotten there before her. He was sitting on the couch, reading.

"Looks like they worked you hard again," said Arcrayne. "You look exhausted. Come take a seat over there."

"Yes, Your Highness. Thank you."

Estelle took the prince up on his offer and sat across from him, at which point he put the book he was reading on the table. She checked the title and was surprised to find what appeared to be a mass-market adventure novel.

"So you read books like these too," she remarked.

"I like a book you can read without thinking before bed. Anyway, isn't it about time you stopped calling me 'Your Highness'?"

"But then how should I address you...?"

"Just call me Arc. You're my future wife."

It was easier said than done. Estelle was reluctant to call a member of royalty by his first name.

"Go on, Estelle, call me 'Arc.'" She remained silent, so he repeated himself: "Arc."

The prince was persistent. Estelle felt he wouldn't let her off the hook until she did as told. With no other choice, she obliged.

"Lord Arc."

"Guess I'll let you off with that for today," Arcrayne replied after a pause.

He appeared to have been satisfied by Estelle's hesitant reply. This prince

could be tiring to deal with.

“How’s life here? Think you’ll be all right?” he asked.

“For me it is not a question of whether I shall be all right, but whether I can get used to the changes.”

“Spoken like a model student,” said Arcrayne, cracking a smile. Judging by his mana, he didn’t appear displeased by Estelle’s answer. “Let’s change the subject. Estelle, I know it’s sudden, but how good are you with embroidery?”

It really was sudden. Estelle tilted her head; she could scarcely imagine where this had come from.

Sewing was an essential skill for any woman, regardless of social standing. For commoners, it was one way of making a living, while upper class ladies needed to embroider the family crest onto their husbands’ belongings, as was a wife’s important duty. Bad needlework would bring shame upon the husband, which was why all women earnestly learned to sew from a young age.

“About as good as any other woman, I would say. Is there something you wish me to embroider?”

With a nod, Arcrayne took a piece of royal blue cloth from the table and spread it before Estelle.

“This fabric. You probably already know about the upcoming hunting contest in March.”

She quickly understood what he was driving at.

“Will this be a mantle?”

The hunting contest was a social event hosted by the royal family which doubled as a military exercise. It was held in a royal forest in the vicinity of Albion and involved its participants competing to see how much game they could hunt.

Tradition dictated that the men taking part in it wear a new mantle every time, one with their family crest embroidered into it. It was said to have originated from the practice of praying for the well-being of family members leaving for war.

It was customary for the embroidery to be done by the woman closest to the man in question. Generally, it was either a spouse or a fiancée, and if a man had neither, a woman from his family or relatives would have to do it.

The Flozeths were always busy with dragon hunting at that time of the year, so they never participated in this contest. However, just like with the hunting contest, it was customary for the women to give embroidered mantles to the men before they went to the mountains to hunt dragons, so either Estelle or her aunt Pamela had had to prepare one for Sirius every year.

“Considering the amount of time it would take to make it into a mantle, I’d like it to be ready in a month,” said Arcrayne.

Estelle took the fabric from the prince. It was rather thick wool. Upon closer inspection, Estelle found that embroidery sketches had already been drawn on it.

“So I should sew it as shown here?” she asked.

“That’s right. Think you can do it? If the time limit is a problem, I can shorten your classes.”

Tradition held that the embroidery had to be palm-sized and located on the side opposite the dominant arm. Estelle frowned—there was a *second* sketch on the fabric. An ordinary noble needed only the family crest, but because Arcrayne was royalty, Estelle apparently had to embroider his personal seal along with the royal crest. To make matters worse, both of them were complex. The mere sight of the sketches put her off.

It’s hard enough to embroider anything on such thick fabric, Estelle inwardly complained. Holding her head, she decided to think of this as a good excuse to get out of the classes she hated so much.

“May I have three to four hours a day to work on this, for the time being? I shall consult you if my progress ends up too slow.”

“Very well. I’ll adjust your schedule.”

Estelle looked at the fabric. Unlike those times when she’d done this for Sirius, the prospect of doing embroidery for Arcrayne made her dejected because she lacked feeling for him. Having come to this conclusion, Estelle

softly traced her fingertips over the sketches.

Chapter 6: Chance Encounter with the Second Prince

At the start of the year, Arcrayne's many duties often took him away from the palace. Starting the day after he'd asked her to embroider his mantle, he would only come to the palace to sleep. Almost none of said duties allowed Estelle to accompany him as his fiancée. With that and the fact she had secured some time away from classes to work on her new task, her life at the Libra Palace had become relatively comfortable.

It had been decided that Estelle's first social event since her betrothal to Arcrayne was announced was to be a tea party at Marquess Rogell's mansion, hosted by Sierra, which was a week away. Tea parties were women's social events; the plan was to have Sierra introduce Estelle to those ladies of Arcrayne's faction who were favorable towards her. Estelle had been told that her former classmate Keira would be invited, so she was genuinely looking forward to seeing her again.

Today, Arcrayne was out again, so Estelle decided to wrestle with her embroidery in her room. It took a lot of effort to stick a needle through something as thick as wool over and over. Even using a thimble, her hands would start to hurt right away, so working on this for extended periods of time was difficult. But if she didn't make a regular effort, she wouldn't leave enough time for the fabric to be made into a mantle.

The Rosalian royal crest had a shield with a white rose on it, as well as a crown. Depicted behind the shield were dragons and swords. It was incomparably more difficult and bothersome to make than nobles' crests. On top of that, Estelle had to embroider Arcrayne's personal seal as well, which meant at least twice the amount of work.

I can't do this anymore, thought Estelle as she cast the fabric and her embroidery hoop aside and shook her aching right hand. She felt like she'd injure her hand one of these days if she didn't take frequent breaks.

“Good work, my lady,” said Leah without a moment’s delay. “Shall I bring something sweet?”

“No, I’d rather go for a walk. Can I go out into the garden for a little while?”

“Very well,” answered May. “I’ll bring your coat.” She looked well-prepared for this kind of development.

Estelle massaged her tired hand as she looked at May’s back. The hand would surely stop hurting after a short break, and Estelle intended to get back to her needlework afterwards.

Arcrayne had told her to always have a member of the Royal Guard with her when she went out into the garden. Today, it was Neil accompanying her—the guard she had seen the other day when she had visited the traveling funfair.

Now that Estelle had officially become Arcrayne’s fiancée, members of the Royal Guard had been appointed as her personal bodyguards. Other than Neil, there was another one: Neville, a veteran guardsman. The two guarded Estelle in shifts.

Apparently, these two were particularly loyal to Arcrayne. The prince had decided it was in the interest of Estelle’s security to tell several of his most trusted retainers, including Neil and Neville, about Estelle’s status as an Awoken. That said, *they* had only been told she could sense malice, unlike everyone else who had learned of her power. It was best to keep the fact she could perceive the general state of people’s emotions under wraps.

Almost all of the trees in the garden of the Libra Palace had lost their foliage, but the place was beautifully adorned with winter-blooming plants such as viola and alyssum. Snow rarely fell in the south, and it appeared that plants could survive the cold. Estelle’s breath steamed white in the air, but it just wasn’t the same kind of cold she had experienced in Flozeth.

“Lady Estelle, where are you headed?” asked Neil in front of her.

“I’ll make a lap around the garden, then head back. Just wanted to get some fresh air,” she replied.

The weather was good, but Estelle didn't want to make everyone go along with her despite the cold for too long.

Neil was a blond, plain-looking youth with freckles on his face. The volume of his mana, however, was about the same as Estelle's, which explained how he had ended up with the Royal Guard at such a young age.

The amount of mana one had been born with had an effect on what mana items one could use and how powerful such items were in one's hands, which was why it was undeniably proportional to how high a soldier could expect to climb the ranks. Many officers and members of the Royal Guard were second or younger sons of noble families, ineligible for inheritance, and Estelle assumed Neil was one of them.

When she and Arcrayne had left Marquess Rogell's mansion incognito, Neil had looked to her like the sort of ordinary man one could find anywhere, but now, in his Royal Guard uniform, he was handsome.

There was a gazebo far out in the garden with evergreen oaks planted around it, covered in a green foliage even in this cold. As Estelle passed by that part of the garden, she sensed a large volume of mana that bore negative emotions. The emotions themselves were mild, but the amount of mana was as large as Arcrayne's, making Estelle flinch.

"Lady Estelle," May called out . She had sensed Estelle's reaction and stepped in front of her to protect her.

"What's wrong, Lady Estelle?" Neil quietly asked, who must've sensed the threat in the air and prepared for combat just like May.

"There's someone on that tree..." Estelle replied.

Oddly enough, even though she could see the light of mana atop an oak, she couldn't see any trace of a person there. This only exacerbated Estelle's fear. She had a mana pistol on her for self-defense even now, but she was utterly frozen in place.

In her stead, Neil pulled out his own mana pistol and pointed it at the top of the oak. But in the next moment...

An invisible power came flying their way, knocking the weapon out of Neil's hands. Though perhaps "invisible" was not entirely accurate—Estelle's eyes could see that it was a mass of mana.

Telekinesis?! she thought to herself. It was just like that time she'd seen Arcrayne use his power at the traveling funfair.

"Get down, Lady Estelle!" shouted May, just as some objects reflecting silver light flew from her hands.

They must've been throwing knives. However, they struck a barrier of mana mid-air and fell to the ground.

Another Awoken was here. The realization hit Estelle just as somebody jumped down from the top of the oak. Estelle went wide-eyed at the boy she saw—he was just like a younger Arcrayne. The only difference between them was the boy's strawberry blond hair.

There was only one teenager she could think of who looked like that.

"Your Highness Prince Liedis...?"

"That's right," the boy admitted with ease, exuding arrogance. "And you are? Don't you think it's rude to suddenly call my name before you're given permission to speak?"

So this is Lord Arc's political opponent, remarked Estelle.

He was still only fifteen, however. Liedis was more of a figurehead; his faction was actually led by his birth mother Queen Truteliese and his maternal relative Duke Marwick, who were also the ones attacking Arcrayne.

There wasn't anything they could do about an intruder of royal status. Neil and May knelt on the spot, but their hostility and vigilance towards the prince remained palpable.

Estelle curtsied, then spoke the words of formal address to royalty.

"Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia, allow me to properly extend my greetings. My name is Estelle Flozeth."

"Interesting... So you're my brother's future wife. You may raise your face."

Taking the prince up on his offer, Estelle saw a somewhat contemptuous expression on his face. His features were just like Arcrayne's, but the impression she got from Liedis was completely different. Arcrayne was a gentleman—this prince was a pompous, cocky boy.

"Hmm... I thought I'd come take a look since my brother says he's so obsessed with you, but you're nothing special. Just what does he see in you?"

Estelle could see why Arcrayne had said Liedis had been spoiled so much that he'd grown up into an egocentric, selfish boy. Having to stand here and endure his rude, scrutinizing stare... Why, had this been a relative of hers, she would've already slapped him hard enough to make him fall to the ground.

"That servant by your side is more interesting than you. I didn't think she could see me even after I used a perception-breaking artifact. Looks like my brother keeps some outstanding watchdogs."

He stepped over to May, then forcefully grabbed her by the chin and inspected her face without a hint of courtesy.

May remained expressionless. But judging by her cloudy mana—which normally showed little change—she appeared uncomfortable with the second prince's actions.

It had been Estelle who had sensed Liedis, but he had mistakenly assumed it was May, as she had been the first to act. Estelle felt guilty.

At any rate...a perception-breaking artifact? thought Estelle. It explained why she had seen Liedis's mana on top of the oak, but not the boy himself. *To think a mere boy has such a powerful artifact in his hands...*

It looked like something that could be used for assassinations, theft, and all sorts of other crimes if it fell into the wrong hands.

"You. Name?" asked Liedis in an overbearing manner.

"Maybel Cao."

"Judging by your face and name, you're a Yang immigrant, aren't you?"

"My father came from the Yang Empire."

"Is that so..."

The prince swept an evaluating gaze over her.

“It’s too bad,” he said. “If you weren’t an immigrant, I would’ve invited you over to my side.”

Liedis’s grandfather, Duke Marwick, was famous for his nationalist and anti-immigrant stance. Perhaps the second prince had inherited his way of thinking.

“And I’d better dispose of outstanding people who won’t become mine.”

“Kgh, aaahhh!”

May screamed as mana came flowing out of Liedis’s right hand, twisting her right arm in an unnatural direction. It must’ve hurt. Her face was contorted in pain.

Since Estelle could see mana, she knew it was the prince’s telekinesis at work.

“Please stop this, Your Highness!” exclaimed Neil, getting up on his feet, but Liedis sent him flying to the side.

Ordinary people were powerless in front of the Awoken. Estelle was one, but her power was useless against the prince’s telekinesis.

She pulled out her concealed mana pistol.

“What, you’re going to shoot me?” asked Liedis, as though he were provoking her.

“You mustn’t, Lady Estelle! Please run away!” said Neil.

Ignoring them both, Estelle pulled the trigger. She wasn’t aiming at the prince himself, however, but rather at the waves of mana flowing from his right hand to May.

The prince’s eyes went wide.



Mana pistols fired mana as bullets. Estelle had correctly surmised that she

could interfere with the telekinesis tormenting May. Severed by the mana bullet, the flow of mana stopped, allowing May to limply bring her arm back down.

“Didn’t think you actually would...” said the prince. “You know this constitutes lèse-majesté, right? Are you prepared for what’s in store for you?”

“I-It was Your Highness who trespassed on Libra Palace grounds and used violence in the form of your powers against a servant and a member of the Royal Guard... Do you not think extenuating circumstances would be taken into consideration?” Estelle glared at the prince, who had surprise written all over his face. “I shall also claim legitimate self-defense! I believed I would be next after you were finished with my attendant and bodyguard, so I fired a warning shot. Would it not be just as much of a problem for Your Highness if the public were to find out how outrageously you have acted in your brother’s palace?”

All of this was just a bluff she had come up with on the spot. Estelle had acted before she could think of the consequences. Were Liedis to publicly fault her, she would be the one in an unfavorable position. That was what it meant to deal with members of the royal family, not to mention princes.

“Looks like my future sister-in-law is surprisingly hot-blooded,” mumbled the prince after a pause. “I’ve lost interest. Though I have to say, that part of you isn’t so bad either.”

Flashing a smile, the prince leapt into the air, soaring upwards. Estelle could see it in his mana—he was using his telekinesis to fly.

“I’ll leave you alone for today. See you later, my sister-in-law. When my brother goes down, try not to go down with him.”

With that, the prince bowed in an affected manner. Then he spun around in the air. Not a moment later, shedding powerful waves of mana, he vanished.

Liedis was well known as an extremely outstanding Awoken who had command not only of telekinesis, but of teleportation too. What Estelle had just witnessed must’ve been his second power.

“Lady Estelle, what have you done?!” scolded Neil, running up to her. He was the first to recover from stupefaction. “You’re under our guard! In situations

like this, please use us as shields and run away!”

“Run...?” repeated Estelle.

“That’s right, Lady Estelle,” replied Neil. “We’re by your side so that, should worse come to worst, we can shield you with our bodies.”

Still sitting on the ground, May seconded Neil’s words. She looked to be in pain, so her right arm must’ve still hurt.

“We’re powerless before royal Awoken. I apologize,” said May.

It was said that Awoken with offensive powers could only be defeated by other Awoken who were at least as strong. Ordinary people didn’t stand a chance. That said...

Why do they have to apologize to me? wondered Estelle. She felt like crying at the sight of the two bowing low to her. It had just sunk in how fundamentally *different* the servants of the Libra Palace were from those she’d had back home.

Just about all of her servants in Flozeth had been locals. As Estelle had been born to the feudal lord’s family, her servants weren’t only people to make use of, but also people to protect. However, the people here—the servants and members of the Royal Guard working in the palace—existed solely to protect and serve the royal family.

“Thank you for saving me. But please run next time,” said May. “Having said that, it’s also our blunder that we didn’t explain to you how to act when you’re under our protection. I deeply apologize.”

“Allow me to apologize too,” added Neil. “I’m truly sorry.”

Under this cascade of apologies, Estelle felt like running away.

***

Estelle had been told that when May had her twisted arm checked by Arcrayne’s personal physician, it thankfully turned out that neither the bones nor the tendons had been damaged.

She went to the prince’s office and reported the incident with Liedis to Claus, who was on duty here. Other than his duties as a marquess, he was also a government official who worked as an aide to Arcrayne.

“Who could’ve thought His Highness Prince Liedis would force his way into this place...” said Claus after hearing the whole story, heaving a deep sigh. “Lady Estelle, you must run next time something like this happens. We were lucky that His Highness left this time.”

He was saying the same things as Neil and May.

“Lady Estelle,” he continued, “from now on, please try to stay inside the Libra Palace while His Highness Prince Arcrayne isn’t around. There are barrier devices installed into the walls that repel powers, so as long as we station more guards, I believe we can deal with intruders like him here.”

“Really? I can use my power without any issue...”

Her eyes could perceive the mana in mana-based devices too. She *had* noticed the building had some strange devices installed into it, but hadn’t known they created a barrier that neutralized powers.

“Yours is rather special,” replied Claus. “Perhaps the barrier can’t affect those powers that are always active, just like His Highness Prince Arcrayne’s mana barrier.”

“I see...”

“I’ll let His Highness know about the raid using a mana-based emergency communicator, so you should spend the rest of the day in your room. In this palace, the barrier is the strongest in your and His Highness’s rooms.”

“As you wish,” said Estelle after a moment of silence. “I’ll be taking my leave, then.”

So I can’t even go to the garden at will... lamented Estelle as she stepped out of the office. Her shoulders drooped and she sighed.

***

Estelle had been told Arcrayne would arrive late on this day too.

To be on the safe side, she had May rest for the remainder of the day. After taking a bath with Leah’s help, Estelle went to the shared bedroom and picked up a book for lack of anything better to do.

Dear me, I can’t take any of this in at all, Estelle realized. The book in her

hands was supposed to be a light romance novel, something one could read without thinking, but her eyes were simply passing over the lines without any retention of what she'd just read.

As she cast the book aside and got up to go to bed ahead of Arcrayne, she heard footsteps coming from the direction of his room. The door clicked open, and in stepped the prince. He seemed to have been in a rush to get back, and still had the same outfit on as he'd worn that morning. Estelle had heard he had a military ceremony to attend, and indeed, he was wearing a pitch-black military uniform.

If memory serves me right, he spent just two months in a military academy, she recalled.

As was customary with boys of the royal family, he had joined the army at the same time as he'd entered university. After graduating, he'd been meant to go through a military academy and then start serving in the army.

However, right after he had gotten into the academy, King Sashes had collapsed, and Arcrayne had to leave the army. Thankfully, the king recovered after half a year, and by now looked healthy in the eyes of the public—but there were credible rumors of him being, in fact, gravely ill.

Though it had been limited, Arcrayne's time in the military academy still made him look comfortable in a military uniform.

"Estelle! Are you all right?!" the prince exclaimed as he briskly walked towards her and peered at her face.

"His Highness Prince Liedis did not lay a finger on me. He targeted Neil and May."

"He must've thought it would be a step too far to actually do something to you. Still, I can't believe he would make such a bold move..."

Arcrayne sighed, then touched Estelle's cheek. She knitted her brows at the cold sensation of his fingertips coming through the gloves.

"Your hand is cold. Was it chilly outside?"

"Sorry. I shouldn't have touched you before taking a bath. I'll go do that and

get the dirt off. It's already late, so you can just go to sleep ahead of me. I'll raise an objection with Liedis first thing in the morning."

Quickly parting from Estelle, Arcrayne headed to his room.

Estelle decided to take him up on his offer and got into the bed without any hesitation. Leaving just the light by the bedside as she slipped under the quilt, she found a mana-based hot stone there which brought her warmth.

The prince came back roughly thirty minutes later. Estelle smelled soap and the usual scent of bergamot from beside her as he slipped under the quilt. It had only been a few days since she had started living here, but a part of her had already come to feel relief from that scent. It appeared she had been tense ever since her unforeseen encounter with Liedis.

"Are you still awake?" asked the prince.

"I am."

For some reason she was having difficulty falling asleep tonight. As she replied and turned over, her eyes met those of Arcrayne, peering back at her. Seeing him so comfortable in his nightwear was bad for Estelle's heart—it gave her a feeling of superiority to know that very few people ever got to see him like this.

"I'm free for five days starting tomorrow," said the prince. "I've been working like a horse ever since the end of last year, after all. How about we get away from the city?"

"Will you take me somewhere?"

"I will. We can't go too far, since I'll need to return immediately if something happens, but anywhere close by is fine. College should resume for Liedis by then, and I don't imagine he'll have time to come bother us once he starts living in the college dorm. Things get ridiculously busy at that point."

The Royal College where Liedis went was an elite training school. As he was always compared with Arcrayne, people wanted him to have better grades than his brother.

"Is there a chance a different Awoken will try something...?" asked Estelle.

“I think it’s safe to say no. Awoken outside of royalty don’t have impressive powers, and among royals, only *he* would use them for violence.”

At present, Rosalia had eight Awoken known to the public, five of whom were royals. Estelle began to list the five in her mind: *His Majesty the King, Lord Arc, His Highness Prince Liedis, the former royal Duke Marwick...*

Duke Marwick was grandfather to Liedis and political enemy to Arcrayne. To the latter he was also his grandfather’s younger brother—his granduncle. Estelle had seen him at the New Year’s party. The duke was rather old, so he apparently almost never left his mansion.

The fifth Awoken on the list was Arcrayne’s aunt, but she had moved to a neighboring country after marrying.

“That fool... Doesn’t he realize our father immediately knows if someone uses their powers in the Palace of Albion?” said Arcrayne.

“Oh? Is that true?”

“The royal family has an artifact that senses the flow of mana within the palace. So if someone thoughtlessly uses powers here, it will become clear to my father right away. There’s no doubt he’s aware that Liedis used teleportation, and that you fired your mana pistol.”

“Does that mean I have a scolding coming my way?” Estelle’s face clouded over.

“It’s that fool’s fault for raiding this palace, so I think you’ll be fine... But if someone does reprimand you, I’ll handle it, so don’t worry,” the prince reassured her.

“Did His Highness Prince Liedis do what he did knowing he would be scolded by His Majesty...?”

“That’s right. He’s a nasty one, wouldn’t you agree? He’ll easily get away with harming a servant or two. And May even attacked him, even if it was to protect you. He’s a sly one, so I imagine he accounted for that in his decision to use his powers.”

“My goodness... What a tyrant! How can a person like that be allowed to

become king?!”

“He’s pretty nice with his folks, despite everything. I suppose I can only pray he’ll calm down when he grows up a little,” said Arcrayne with a deep sigh and a shrug. “You’ve probably heard this from others already, but I’ll say it too: Estelle, if someone attacks you like Liedis did today, think about ensuring your safety first. This will, in turn, protect your entourage.”

“As you say...”

“Servants of royalty are taught to sacrifice themselves if necessary in order to protect their charges. Now, while you *will* need to hear a lecture on how to act when you’re under protection...I should thank you. I’m grateful you protected Maybel Cao.”

As the prince inclined his head to her, Estelle grew warm on the inside little by little.

“That aside,” he continued, “I’ll teach you how to develop your power, starting tomorrow. If you get better at detecting mana, you might be able to notice my brother’s approach sooner and make your escape.”

“Is such a thing possible?”

“Those born into the royal family have an easy time Awakening, so there’s a technique to improve powers that’s passed down through the generations. Don’t you think it’s worth a try?”

“I do...but is it all right for you to teach me such a thing?”

“Normally, I’d have to ask my father for permission... However, you’re my fiancée and a future princess. I’m just going to assume he wouldn’t mind, since it would be of benefit to me if your powers were to improve.”

A mischievous smile on his face, Arcrayne combed his fingers through Estelle’s hair.

“It’s almost gone. Think I should leave a fresh one?” he asked in a whisper.

Noticing the prince staring at her chest, Estelle reflexively adjusted her nightwear. The one she wore today was suggestive too. No matter how much she protested, Leah and May never let her wear any normal kind of nightwear,

and by now she had already given up.

“I-Is it not too early for that? It is still faintly visible.”

“But if I don’t leave a new mark, people might say I’m losing interest in you, you know? I think it would be best to do this—to show everyone how much I cherish you, of course.”

Estelle cast her eyes down, her cheeks red. The servants of this palace respected her thanks to Arcrayne’s pretense. She knew a hickey was an effective prop for their performance. But getting one felt extremely embarrassing.

“We can take things further if you want. I could leave a mark on your stomach or your thighs, for instance. Wouldn’t it be better to leave one where people could easily—”

“On my chest, please!” Estelle cut in, unable to bear the shame—and immediately regretted her words. “I-I shall not undress... And please do it in an inconspicuous spot,” she added, trailing off.

No sooner had Arcrayne’s mana lit up in apparent delight than he started giggling.

“Look at you, going so red from a bit of teasing. You’re adorable, Estelle.”

As he patted her on the head, Estelle finally realized it had been one of his usual nasty antics.

“You are a fool, Lord Arc!” she exclaimed, covering up her cleavage and turning her back to the prince.

It only made her angrier that she could sense his radiant and joyful mana behind her.

***

Once he could tell by her breathing that Estelle had fallen asleep, Arcrayne peered at her sleeping face. She had really let her guard down, for a woman who shared a bed with a healthy, vigorous man—though this wasn’t anything new. And it was, after all, Arcrayne who’d forced her into this situation.

The prince himself had trouble falling asleep and was a light sleeper. It was

likely thanks to his physical makeup that he could function without issue every day despite only getting short, shallow sleep. And because of that physical makeup, he had yet to show Estelle his sleeping face.

He was just like a wild animal. Thinking about it, Arcrayne concluded he had become this way because he'd spent his childhood in an environment where he could never let his guard down.

As the prince watched the woman defenselessly sleeping beside him, the idea of having his way with her flashed through his mind, but he immediately drove it away. He couldn't afford to break the trust he had gone to such lengths to build. Arcrayne decided it was best to wait for another month or two, and that when the time came, it would surely be more effective to ask her for it directly.

This is my property, Arcrayne thought at the sight of Estelle's sleeping face as the realization hit him all over again. He'd evidently begun to see Estelle this way when he'd had her move to the Libra Palace. That was the only way he could explain the strong emotions that had arisen in him when he'd learned Liedis had bothered her.

That fucking brat, Arcrayne inwardly cursed his half-brother. Normally he would never use such foul language.

Liedis had been spoiled rotten and had grown up into a selfish, egocentric boy. At the same time, being constantly compared with Arcrayne had completely warped him. To Arcrayne, his half-brother was an annoyance—one that kept bothering him at every opportunity.

Eight years was a large gap in age. To make matters worse, whatever Arcrayne did, he did it better than the average person. He had cut a few corners to avoid putting his full ability on display, as that would likely have raised the risk of him being assassinated, but college classes were no walk in the park. Liedis currently appeared to be in a desperate struggle to maintain his grades.

With his unusual powers of teleportation, Liedis had superior blood to his half-brother, but he was the embodiment of competitiveness; he simply couldn't rest until he was the best in everything else as well. He was always looking for ways to disparage Arcrayne, so he had probably snuck into this palace to look for Estelle's shortcomings.

Arcrayne had been told his stupid brat of a brother had assessed Estelle as “nothing special,” and that he had bluntly said he didn’t hate her strong-willed side. This was terribly getting on Arcrayne’s nerves. It would’ve been best had Estelle let Liedis take her for a nobody—why had she fought back with her mana pistol?

Maybel Cao was a useful pawn. Saving such a pawn deserved recognition, but it was unacceptable to have that brat set his eyes on Estelle. Thankfully, he appeared not to have noticed her power, but Arcrayne wanted to keep Estelle hidden until his half-brother went back to college.

As he thought of where to hide her, he began to grow irritated—for some reason—with her peacefully sleeping face. The prince wondered what would happen if he filled the air with hostility. Would she sense the disquieting mana and wake up?

Having casually set his mind on testing that theory, Arcrayne took out his hidden dagger from under his pillow and drew it from its sheath. It was the mana blade he had used on their first night together to make it look like they had done more than sleep.

With Estelle, he didn’t even need to direct mana into the blade to make it a threat. He simply thrust it at her throat—for all the world as though he were going to kill her.

Estelle abruptly opened her eyes in the dark, looking startled. Arcrayne could feel a slight repulsive force on his hands.

Could it be... The word sprang to his mind unbidden: telekinesis.

Awoken had occasionally been known to discover additional powers. The weak repulsive force that had just tried to stop his blade had been much too feeble, but it was enough to make Arcrayne’s hostility vanish without a trace.

Seeming fully awake now, Estelle shrieked as she stared at the dagger, then said, “Lord Arc... What in the world...?”

“Just a little test,” explained Arcrayne as he sheathed the dagger. “I was wondering if you function as an alarm even while sleeping.”

Estelle heaved a deep sigh.

“I must ask that you do not do this again. It is bad for my heart.” She averted her eyes. Her face said she was stifling something.

“Sorry I woke you up. Sweet dreams.”

As Arcrayne touched Estelle’s hair, she tensed up. He could feel anger and caution from her shaking body and pursed lips.

And she still doesn’t go shouting in anger... remarked the prince. While he pitied her, some part of him felt satisfaction.

Chapter 7: A Wish Upon the Sky

“Kildare or Ulster—which one do you prefer?” asked Arcrayne at breakfast, causing Estelle to blink in surprise.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Remember our conversation last night? I’m free for five days in a row, starting today. I’m asking where you want to go. Both of those places are two or three hours away by coach.”

The choice left Estelle stumped, as she was bad with geography. She couldn’t quickly recall where they were or what set them apart from other regions.

“Um, I am ashamed to admit I have not applied myself in my studies. I have not the slightest idea what kind of lands those are... If memory serves me right, Ulster had spas, did it not?”

“Correct. And Kildare is a port town to the south with delicious seafood. Both are health resorts, and I own a cottage in each.”

“So the choice is between seafood and spas? Not an easy decision to make...”

Fresh fish was something Estelle had almost never had an opportunity to taste, growing up among the mountains. But it was hard to give up spas too. She loved bathing, and the facilities of the Libra Palace—which even had saunas—were like paradise for her. It would’ve been a supreme living environment, were her life not perpetually in danger.

“If going out is too much of a hassle, we can stay...or so I was going to suggest, but it looks like you *do* want to go. Let me know once you’ve decided on one of the two.”

“Where would *you* rather go, Lord Arc?”

“Me? Honestly, I’m fine with either—though I do think Kildare might be better at this time of the year. If I remember correctly, there’s a sky lantern festival next Sunday.”

Even in Estelle’s imagination, the sight of the lanterns drifting out through the

sky in the direction of the sea was dreamlike.

“I would love to see it,” she replied, her eyes sparkling.

Arcrayne nodded with a smile. “All right. I’ll go get in touch with my administration there; you should prepare to leave after morning.”

Estelle’s morning was probably about to get hectic—but her heart was racing with anticipation for the upcoming excursion.

***

Almost all of Estelle’s preparations for the trip to Kildare were handled by May and Leah. They packed her personal effects, such as extra clothes and makeup, as well as the unfinished embroidery and some books to pass the time with.

The plan was to bring the minimum number of guards with them and spend the vacation without any worries. As Arcrayne and Estelle weren’t going to wear anything extravagant, their personal attendants had been given days off under the pretext of taking care of the palace while the prince was away.

“It’s your first trip together! Enjoy yourselves.” Unaware of the actual state of affairs, Leah gave her genuine blessings to Estelle. Her mistress could only reply with a forced smile.

They would reach the cottage in a coach meant for traveling incognito, while the members of the Royal Guard accompanying them would ride horses. One of them was Neville, who was Estelle’s personal guard, and the rest had been selected from Arcrayne’s. Apparently, Neil had been left behind as punishment for exposing Estelle to danger when Liedis raided the palace.

Even though the coach was for traveling incognito, the only difference was the absence of the royal crest. It was still luxurious, and unlike when they had gone to the traveling funfair, this trip felt like one a true aristocrat might make. The interior was opulent, and the seats were practically just as comfortable as those in an official coach with the royal crest. The comfort was further improved by the coach being highly airtight and having a mana-based climate control device installed.

Showing his gentlemanly side, Arcrayne had let Estelle sit facing the front of

the coach, as she would be less likely to get motion sickness that way. Had she been traveling with Sirius, the matter would've been decided with a coin flip. As Estelle realized how immature her brother was, the coach started moving.

"How about we get started on training your powers?" suggested Arcrayne.

"Oh, by all means. But...here? Is this possible in a coach?"

"It is. All you need is some spare time. You might learn surprisingly easily, since you can see mana. Now watch me—I'm going to make some of my mana flow."

The prince closed his eyes and started taking deep breaths. Just then, Estelle could see his mana begin to slowly flow around his body.

In any living creature, the mana came from the heart. It was thought that hearts had a mana-accumulating function. Even in Arcrayne's case—with his great abundance of mana—its source was the heart. Looking closely, Estelle could see silver light flow from his heart to the rest of his torso, from his torso to his left hand, from his left hand to his head, from his head to his right hand, return to the torso, then proceed to both legs. At the end, it all returned to where it used to be.

"Did you see it?"

"You made mana circulate throughout your whole body, correct?"

"That's right. I don't think ordinary people are conscious of their mana, except when using mana-based devices—you have to purposely cycle it through your body."

Estelle realized he was right. Devices operating on mana had mana stones inside them—touching the stone absorbed your mana and powered the device without you needing to do anything. Estelle had never even thought of moving her mana through her body.

"That about covers the basics. Think you can do it?"

"I shall try," Estelle replied after a moment of hesitation. She wasn't confident about this.

An ordinary noble only had enough mana to cover their torso, and that

applied to Estelle too. Spreading it to her head, then to her lower half, not to mention making it circulate like that—Estelle wondered if such a thing was possible for her.

Move, she commanded inside her mind, looking down at her heart. Nothing happened—her mana remained still. *Move! Move, I said!*

But no matter how much she wished for it with furrowed eyebrows, her mana didn't so much as budge.

After a moment of silence, she asked, "Does mana really move?"

"I thought you might be able to do it. Hmm... I guess it's not enough to just be able to see it. I don't know how well this will go, but I'll try to provide some assistance. I'm going over to your side."

With that advance notice, the prince got up. Estelle shifted to the right, making room for him to sit.

"I'm going to touch your hands," he warned Estelle, then took off his gloves and placed his palms over her hands. "Now, I'm going to make my mana flow into you. Some display a terribly strong rejection to it, so be ready."

Estelle didn't have so much as a moment to react to his words. Arcrayne's mana started flowing into her from his hands. She shrieked from the sensation; it sent shivers up her spine and raised gooseflesh all over her body.

"Stop! I cannot take this! Let go of me!"

Try as she might to shake him off, tears beginning to well up in her eyes, he had a tight grip on her hands and wouldn't let go.

"If you only resist it this much, it should work. Put up with it for a little longer."

Arcrayne's mana was bright—he seemed to be having fun. It was just like those other times he had reveled in being wicked to Estelle. Tears appeared in her eyes. This prince definitely had sadistic proclivities.

The mana coming from his hands had encroached upon Estelle's entire body now. The discomfort of it, like nothing so much as a swarm of tiny insects crawling around her insides, made her shriek. "Stop it..." she begged. No matter

how much she shook her head in rejection, Arcrayne refused to let go.

The mana coming from his hands coursed through her body and finally reached her heart. Estelle felt like something was being drawn out of it—and the sheer horror of that sensation made her lose grip on her consciousness.

***

When Estelle next opened her eyes, what came into her view was Arcrayne's upper body and his gorgeous face gazing outside the coach.

What's going on?! she wondered in confusion. As she started moving about, the prince peered at her face. *He's close! Wait, there's something warm under my head... It's not his legs by any chance, is it...?*

After taking in her surroundings, Estelle froze up. Her head was resting on Arcrayne's lap. Moreover, she was covered with a throw—*and* Arcrayne's coat.

D-Did I make a funny face in my sleep...? Wait, that's not what's important here... I didn't stain his clothes, did I? I hope I didn't drool... she thought to herself. Turning pale, she quickly sat up and touched Arcrayne's trousers to check. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with them.

"You can be surprisingly bold," said Arcrayne after a moment.

His voice coming from above Estelle made her go red in the face. *How could I do something so immodest?!* she asked herself.

"I-I apologize!"

She had patted a man's lower half. As she apologized in a hurry, Arcrayne extended his hand to her.

"Looks like you don't have a fever. Seeing how animated you are, can I assume you don't feel unwell? Do you remember what happened? You lost consciousness after I forced my mana into you."

"Oh..." The prince's words made her recall what had just happened. "You are terrible, Lord Arc! It felt awful, and I asked you to stop!"

"Sorry. I just thought it might work because the rejection you showed wasn't that terrible..."

“What did you do such a thing for...?”

The feeling of another’s mana entering her body had been revolting. Just remembering it gave Estelle goose bumps.

As she glared at the prince, he looked uncharacteristically apologetic.

“It was to show you the channels for mana circulation. I didn’t think it would make you faint.”

As he replied, Arcrayne picked up the blanket and coat that had fallen to the floor, then put them over Estelle’s lap. She seemed to have dropped them when she’d sat up.

“Oh, Lord Arc, now that I am awake, I have no need of this anymore. Please take it back,” said Estelle and handed him the coat.

The prince got up to put it on, then returned to his seat across from Estelle. She straightened herself too.

“Just how long did I sleep for?”

At Estelle’s question, the prince took out his pocket watch and showed it to her.

“Just over an hour,” he replied.

It was that *long...?* wondered Estelle.

“How do you feel? Any part of you feel strange?” asked Arcrayne, prompting Estelle to fully inspect herself.

“Everything seems to be fine. At most, I think there is a bit of pleasant warmth around my chest...”

“I see. Maybe now you might be able to get your mana to move.”

Estelle looked down at her chest. Her mana was swirling in the form of silver light.

“I shall try.”

With that declaration, Estelle closed her eyes. She placed her left hand over her heart and took a deep breath.

Move, she commanded to the warmth in her chest. It felt like something had budged. But getting it to move any further was very difficult. *Move...* she pleaded with it. *More...* But the tiny bit of movement was all she could muster despite her best efforts.

Estelle recalled the feeling of Arcrayne's mana forcing its way into her. Specifically, the sensation of something being *drawn out* that she had felt just before losing consciousness. In all likelihood, that had been the result of those "channels" being forced open. She somehow remembered where they were. Getting her mana to them, however, was something she had trouble with.

Suddenly, the coach jolted. Perhaps there was a depression in the road. Unfortunately, it robbed Estelle of her concentration.

"Did it go well?" asked the prince after a pause, seeing Estelle open her eyes.

"It is certainly difficult. It felt like my mana moved just a little bit, but I do not think I am able to make it circulate."

"That's how it goes when you've only just started training. In fact, I'd say it's pretty good if you felt it move at all. It was like that for me too."

"Would my power become stronger if I managed to make my mana circulate?"

"I think that's pretty much guaranteed. The amount of your mana will increase as you keep training, and you'll be able to control your power better and use it more efficiently."

"Mana can increase in volume?"

"It can. Though there's only so much of it you can gain through training... Normally, the kingdom would've taught you all this a long time ago—so long as you reported yourself as an Awoken."

After a moment of silence, Estelle replied, "I knew nothing about powers at all, did I?"

"Pretty much. But you can start learning now. Fortunately, I can teach you to a degree," said the prince and flashed a reassuring smile. It was brimming with confidence. "The royal household defines Awoken as those who can use special

abilities by drawing mana from inside their bodies, without the help of mana-based items. Using one's mana brings about different results. A typical power is telekinesis. That's what almost all Awoken in Rosalia have, at least those we know about. Liedis can use teleportation on top of his telekinesis. There seem to have been Awoken in the past whose powers allowed them to create fire or see through the walls of a box to learn what's inside."

Estelle had heard of those powers. They were known as ignition and clairvoyance, respectively. History had records of people with all sorts of other powers, such as telepathy, mind reading, and far-sight.

Arcrayne detached his cufflink—the one that formed a pair with the mana ring he had given Estelle. Placing it in his palm, he made his mana slowly move from his heart to his palm. As the mana left his palm, the cufflink gently began to float. It was telekinesis. The prince skilfully manipulated his mana to rotate the cufflink.

"In my case, telekinesis activates when I release mana from my heart and through my palms like this. In the past, those who possessed clairvoyance were apparently able to see inside boxes and buildings by releasing mana from their eyes. But you always see mana even though you'd rather not, right?"

"Yes."

"This is just a hypothesis, but I think in your case, mana channels leading from your heart to your eyes formed when you Awakened, without you being aware of it. Now your mana is constantly being released. If you manage to find those channels by cycling your mana, you might gain the ability to choose whether you want to use your power or not at any given moment."

That was something Estelle had been wishing for ever since she had come down with scarlet fever and Awakened to her power.

"Of course, that's not the only result you can hope for. If you learn how to direct your mana to your eyes on purpose, there's a chance it will extend the scope of your power. If I remember correctly, you previously said you can only sense the mana of those in the radius of about five meters if you can't see them directly, right?"

"Yes, only about that far."

“Don’t you think it would make your ability considerably more useful if you could double that range? You’d become capable of reliably sensing suspicious people lurking on a floor above or below you, and should you find yourself at the scene of some disaster such as a fire or a landslide, you could search for survivors from a safe distance.”

At Arcrayne’s words, Estelle’s eyes widened. It had never occurred to her to use her power at locations stricken with disasters. Just a year prior, Flozeth had been afflicted with a long spell of devastating rain. Many of her people had perished in the ensuing floods and landslides. Had she been more imaginative, she could’ve run to where disaster had struck and potentially saved someone.

“Why did I never...think of such a thing...?” uttered Estelle.

She had been completely distracted by the annoying aspects of her power; she’d never realized it could be helpful too.

“It’s not too late to start using it to help people,” suggested Arcrayne.

“I suppose... Although it is hard to imagine I will ever have an opportunity to go to locations hit by disasters again, given my current position...”

“Ideally, I’ll end up not as a king, but as a lord in charge of some suitable royally-owned domain in the countryside, and live a carefree life. If things came to that, it would make you the wife of a lord instead of a princess. You’d definitely be of help should disaster strike.”

“You are talking about an uncertain future. Although...I suppose it would be nice.”

If Arcrayne were to leave the palace and become a countryside lord, it would be an ideal future for Estelle. But would the queen and Duke Marwick ever allow such a future?

Should Liedis become king, Arcrayne could potentially threaten his legitimacy. And the histories of various countries all over the world provided plenty of examples of ruthless kings who had secured their thrones by executing all of the other members of royalty.

Even brothers often fought more fiercely than strangers when their interests were at stake. Perhaps friendly relationships between siblings, such as the one

Estelle had with Sirius, were in fact rarer than adversarial ones. As she recalled her brother's face, Estelle let out a melancholic sigh.

***

At the same time, at a different place in Albion...

In a dimly lit room, a group of people had come together to enjoy a leisurely smoke. They were using hookahs, which were said to have come from hot and humid lands like Gandia and Anatolia. A hookah had a tall, beautiful glass jar, from which a long, narrow pipe extended above. Inhaling the contents of the jar through the pipe caused a sweet fragrance—with spices or vanilla extract mixed in—to flow through one's throat along with pleasantly chilly smoke, clearing one's head.

He had started coming there after complaining to a former classmate—a friend who was a bad influence on him—about the stress of his new, drastically changed environment.

"There's something much stronger than ordinary cigars. Wanna give it a shot?"

Lured by the offer, the young man set foot in *that place* without thinking too much, and he'd immediately become addicted.

The room was decorated with exotic eastern furnishings, ceramics, and various other items. Coupled with the peculiar smoke of the hookahs, it created the illusion of being in a faraway land.

The man wanted to forget everything. If he could go back into the past, he would. And so, to take his mind off the troubles of reality, he had come there once again. Without ever giving much of a thought to what was in those hookahs...

***

Estelle and Arcrayne's coach arrived at Kildare a little after three in the afternoon. Starting from roughly ten minutes prior, the sea had come into view, putting Estelle in high spirits. She had rarely had the opportunity to go to the

sea, having been brought up surrounded by mountains.

Arcrayne had told her more about the town on the way: apparently, Kildare had originally been a quiet fishing community, but a naval base had been built here about thirty years prior. Relatives of officers had started visiting, and the village had quickly grown into a town.

The town's mild climate appealed to many who sought a health resort in winter. According to the prince, the locals had started holding these sky lantern festivals to lure tourists.

The gentle hills along the coast were lined with old stone buildings, making the town feel like a place straight out of a picture book. As Estelle opened the window, a salty sea breeze blew into the coach.

The plan was to stay here for four days and three nights. Arcrayne had five days off, but to reduce the burden of his duties, he had decided to return a day early. The festival was to be held on Sunday, which was two days away. It was an ideal schedule that would let them properly see the sky lanterns.

They would be staying in a small cottage which seemed to be the prince's personal property. It was built in a corner of the shore that was lined with the villas of the rich. Estelle's special eyes could see that the cottage had barrier devices installed into the outer walls, just like the palace.

At the entrance door stood an elderly couple, who Estelle was told were "the administration" Arcrayne had mentioned. The hair on both their heads was shot through with white, but they stood straight-backed and looked hale and hearty.

Escorting Estelle as they both got out of the coach, Arcrayne addressed the husband.

"It's been a while, Jack."

"It has indeed, Your Highness. And this lovely young lady must be your betrothed, Lady Estelle. Congratulations." The old man offered Estelle a soft smile.

"Estelle, Jack used to work as head chef at the Libra Palace," explained the prince.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Estelle. My name is Jack, and I am an administrator of this cottage. This is my wife, Sarah. With your permission, I shall exercise my cooking talent for the two of you during your stay here.”

“Please enjoy your time at Kildare,” Sarah added.

The elderly couple displayed excellent manners. Their expressions and mana were both filled with respect and affection, which gave Estelle a favorable impression.

“His Highness has let us manage this cottage as a place to spend his remaining years after he retires,” said Jack.

“We are very grateful to His Highness,” added Sarah. “Now, allow me to show you to your room.”

She led Estelle and Arcrayne to a bedroom on the second floor.

“I should have known we would be sharing a room again,” Estelle mumbled immediately after Sarah had left.

“I want to preserve the facade that I’m madly in love with you, even here. You never know where we might slip up and reveal the truth. Besides, our security detail is inevitably smaller here compared to the Libra Palace, so it’s best for you to stay by my side,” explained the prince in a matter-of-fact way.

Everything was to make use of Estelle as a walking alarm. Her heart was being bewitched by Arcrayne; it wailed whenever he acted like a loving partner.

“The bed here is small,” continued Arcrayne, “and not many people have a chance of seeing us here, unlike in the palace, so you don’t have to share the bed with me. I’ll sleep on the couch, so you can go ahead and use the bed.”

Indeed, both the bed and the bedroom itself were rather compact compared to those in the palace, likely owing to the small size of the building. Estelle was reluctant to make a prince sleep on a couch, but she *did* want to make use of the rare opportunity to sleep alone.

“If you truly mean it, then I will indeed have you sleep on the couch.”

“I don’t mind. Anywhere is heaven compared to beds in the military academy.”

Estelle had recently started to find Arcrayne's gentle smile suspicious. She looked away from it and approached the window. The large window led to a roof terrace which provided a gorgeous, sweeping view of the sea. There were stairs leading down from the terrace to a private beach.

"Care for a stroll? Or should I have some tea brought up?" offered Arcrayne.

"It would be a waste not to go," replied Estelle after a moment's pause. "I would like to walk around before it gets dark."

"All right. Then let's go."

As Arcrayne extended his hand to Estelle, she brushed her fingertips over it.

Once the two stepped out onto the roof terrace, they could hear waves and smell the strong odor of the sea. Arcrayne pulled Estelle by the hand as they descended the stairs down to the private beach and strolled along the shore. The palm trees growing on the beach and the beautiful contrast between white sand and blue sea made Estelle feel like she had come to a southern country.

"This is a lovely place," she remarked.

"It is. I bought it because I liked the scenery," said Arcrayne with a hint of pride.

"Are you boasting of your wealth?"

"I suppose so. Even if something happens and we have to flee abroad, I have enough to ensure you live in comfort."

"Huh...?"

Surprised, Estelle looked up at the prince, only to find him calmly gazing at the sea.

"Other than the money I get for my status, I did inherit my mother's personal capital. The profits I've earned from investing that capital are distributed across banks in Franciel, Ascania, and the New World. Once we get married, I'll give you the full list of my deposits. Should something happen to me, it's all yours."

"Now *that* is ominous."

“I *do* plan to run at once if I sense real danger. Still, it’s best to prepare for the worst.”

“Why not simply throw everything away and run, if you have such hidden riches?”

“I can’t do such a thing at this early stage. I have a duty as one born into royalty. Though I do sometimes wish I had been born as someone with fewer responsibilities, such as a member of lesser nobility.”

“Not a commoner, I suppose.”

“It’s not like I hate manual labor, but considering how little it pays, I’d rather put food on the table through the *nonmanual* kind.”

A lawyer, a doctor, an accountant, a clergyman, a scholar—to get an occupation such as those, one first had to enter a university. To be able to do so, one needed to have had a private tutor from a young age, as well as to be able to afford the expensive tuition. Which was why, inevitably, only boys from rich families wound up in occupations like those, such as second or younger sons of nobility ineligible for inheritance, or the sons of lesser nobility.

“Your brother’s position is pretty ideal too,” continued Arcrayne. “The environment is harsh in the north, but it’s easy to keep your distance from the central government. Besides, looking at you siblings, it’s very clear that you grew up in a loving family.” He paused. “I know you were against my marriage proposal, but it’s not like I wanted to be born into royalty either.”

As the prince stared at the sea, his eyes were perfectly clear and serene. Estelle guessed that the emotions behind his cloudy mana were anger and sadness.

Arcrayne being so open with her made her chest feel tight. She wasn’t about to forgive him for dragging her into the world of politics against her will. However...

He was a victim too. It was tragic enough that he had lost his mother at a young age, but then the king had remarried and showered his new wife with so much affection that she’d sought to take away the crown he had been entitled to by birth.

For the very first time since she had met him, Estelle realized she wanted to help the prince.

***

On the next day, Estelle couldn't get out of bed. Perhaps her exhaustion had finally caught up with her, as she had a fever.

Why does it have to be now...? lamented Estelle. She had really been looking forward to this trip. And there was even a festival the next day.

She'd had a great deal of fun until today. Jack's meals, full of fresh seafood, had been delicious, and for the first time in a long while she had gotten some comfortable sleep in a bed after making Arcrayne use the couch. The window in the room opened to a gorgeous view of the sea. The place was healing her heart, exhausted as it was from her life in the palace, to which she had yet to grow accustomed.

Had nothing come up today, she was supposed to go to the town and walk around different stalls and stands. To Estelle's knowledge, with the upcoming launching of sky lanterns under the pretext of a fishing festival the town was full of colorful stalls making good business.

I'm holding Lord Arc back, thought Estelle. In consideration for her, he had stayed at the cottage instead of walking around town. They would surely both be having fun sightseeing right about now if not for her fever, and she felt deeply apologetic for getting him mixed up in her troubles.

The prince in question was in an adjacent bedroom. The doctor who had examined Estelle said she had likely overworked herself, but if it happened to be a cold, there was a risk of transmitting it to Arcrayne, which was why he had moved out of the room.

Perhaps there was a party that had benefited from Estelle's bad shape—the guardsmen who had accompanied the two on this trip. Since both their charges were confining themselves in the cottage, they had apparently been allowed to head out to town one group at a time. The guardsmen looked apologetic, but Estelle had no objections to this development, hoping that special breaks like these would help with morale.

“Estelle, I’m coming in,” announced the prince after knocking on the door as Estelle went from one shallow slumber to the next, then stepped in with a tray in hand. “I’ve brought chamomile tea. Can you drink?”

Estelle sat up in the bed, and immediately held her head from giddiness.

“You all right? You should keep lying down if it’s hard to be up.”

“You need not worry. I was simply a little dizzy,” replied Estelle with a weak smile and took the teacup from Arcrayne. A sweet, calming fragrance wafted into her nose. “Thank you. I was just getting thirsty.”

“You’re welcome. It’s good to stay hydrated. I’ve brought you a heated stone too. It’s charged with my mana, so it should last for a whole day.”

Arcrayne put the mana-based heated stone under Estelle’s blanket. She was grateful, as the fever had made her feel chilly.

“Should we have taken it easy at the palace instead?” asked the prince.

“I apologize... I asked you to bring me here for the festival, and now this happens...”

“Nobody falls ill because they want to. Just rest; there’s no rush.”

Being treated with such kindness made Estelle want to cry over her pitiful state.

“Um... If my fever is not gone by tomorrow, please do not hold back on my account.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not the kind of place a man can go alone to. You should worry about getting proper rest for now.” The prince flashed Estelle a gentle smile, then left the room.

Staring at the remaining tea in the cup, Estelle heaved a deep sigh.

***

Estelle slept like a log, the infusion prescribed by the doctor likely doing its job. When it was time for a meal, Sarah brought both food and an additional infusion.

Estelle didn’t get many opportunities to come anywhere close to the sea, and

it saddened her that she could only handle easily digestible foods, like those typically given to the sick, due to her lack of appetite. The porridge she'd been served *did* have seafood broth in it, but she wished she could eat so many other things—namely, anything oily or deep-fried.

Estelle continued her cycle of shallow sleep and frustrated wakefulness, and her fever just barely let up by the evening of the next day—probably thanks to her regeneration through mana—and she became able to get up for a short time.

The sun set early in winter. It was still just a little past five, but everything was already completely dark outside. The town must've been full of people getting ready for the sky lantern festival by now.

As Estelle lay in bed, absentmindedly imagining what was going on in town, Sarah brought her something to eat. On the tray was a hearty tomato-based soup, soft white bread, and crème caramel.

"You said you had appetite at lunch, so I've brought you more this time," explained Sarah. "Do you think you'll be able to eat this?"

"I think so," replied Estelle. "Thank you."

Accepting the tray, she started eating while sitting on the bed.

"His Highness cherishes you so much, Lady Estelle. He said he couldn't let himself be the only one to enjoy good food, and has been eating the same things as you since yesterday."

"Huh...?"

Thrown off by Sarah's unexpected remark, Estelle stared back at her in open-mouthed wonder. Her heart leapt. The things she had been eating since the previous day were clearly not enough for a grown man.

After a moment of silence, Estelle replied, "Thank you for letting me know, Sarah. His Highness is very sweet, isn't he?"

"He certainly is. My husband and I are very grateful for the opportunity to serve His Highness. We're really glad he's found himself someone special."

It was stifling for Estelle to see Sarah's joyful smile. She *was* special to

Arcrayne. But not in the way everyone thought.

“Well then, I should take my leave for now. I’ll be back for the dishes later.” With that, Sarah bowed to Estelle and left the room.

Estelle gazed listlessly at her food and picked up her spoon.

***

“Estelle, are you up?” asked Arcrayne, having come to her room after she had finished her meal and was busy reading one of the books she’d brought with her.

“Lord Arc... Is it true that you have been eating the same things as me since yesterday?”

“I don’t feel so well either, truth be told. Didn’t feel like eating anything too heavy on the stomach.”

He was *definitely* lying. But the kindness of the lie shook Estelle to her very bones.

“You look much better now. How do you feel? Can you get up fine?” asked the prince.

“Yes. I still feel languid, but I can stand up now. As I am getting better, we should be able to return on time.”

“We have some leeway in our schedule, so we can stay for an extra day. Just make sure you don’t push yourself.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Once Estelle had given her reply, Arcrayne smiled at her and approached the closet.

“Lord Arc? What are you...?”

Disregarding the confused Estelle, Arcrayne opened the closet and took her winter clothes out.

“Put this on. The sky lantern festival is about to start; let’s go see it.”

“What? But I can hardly walk yet...”

The prince extended his hand to her. A stream of mana flowed from his palm, lifting the blanket off Estelle.

“I’ll take you there with my power. It’s rather cold outside, so be sure to dress warmly.”

As Estelle sat there with a blank look on her face, her clothes came piling up on her lap one after another.

Arcrayne left the room to let her change, returning when she was dressed to go out. For whatever reason, he had a basket in his hands.

“You should dress a little warmer,” he said upon seeing Estelle, and put a shawl over what she already had on.

She looked rather unsightly, bundled up in countless layers of clothing.

“Mind carrying this for me?” asked the prince, handing her the basket.

Estelle tilted her head in confusion. “What is this for?”

“There’s a sky lantern inside. You want to launch one too, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Then let’s go.”

Opening the window leading onto the roof terrace, the prince offered his hand to Estelle. As she took it, the prince’s mana enfolded her and she began to float upwards. She squealed—and in the next moment, Arcrayne had her in his arms. With a smile like that of a child who’d just pulled off a prank, the prince controlled his mana to lift himself into the air with telekinesis as well.

Estelle was in the air. The astonishment had left her dumbfounded.

As she remained petrified, Arcrayne held her in his strong arms. Estelle didn’t know whether she was or wasn’t glad about all those thick layers of clothing separating her from the prince. Her heart still raced, however, because his face was so close to hers. She was one turn of the head away from kissing him.

Arcrayne had the same bergamot scent as always. Estelle could hear the loud thrum of her heart in her ears. She turned away from the prince in hopes of taking her mind off him—and gulped at the scenery that came into view.

In the jet black night sky was an ivory crescent moon, lighting up the sea below and coloring it ultramarine. Its waves foamed white as they surged onto the shore one after another.

Estelle cast her gaze elsewhere, only to find she and the prince had at some point reached a fairly high altitude—the lights of the town gleamed below, and a lighthouse built at the edge of the harbor cast beams of light into the sky.

“I’m...flying...” breathed Estelle.

The desire to soar the skies like a bird had surely been man’s dream since the dawn of time. At present, the only known ways for people to fly were hot air balloons and gliders, which had been created because a great number of inventors had looked up to the sky, longed for it, and challenged it.

Even now, numerous engineers were going through trial and error to create a mana-based machine that could fly like a bird—as high, as fast, and as far as possible. The recent years’ industrial development had been remarkable, so the day of the first flying machine was surely not far off. However, Awoken such as Arcrayne and Liedis gifted with powerful telekinesis could fly with extreme ease, as if to mock the engineers’ efforts.

The wind was cold, biting into Estelle’s uncovered face enough to make it hurt. Yet it didn’t bother her in the slightest. She was so captivated by the beautiful night scenery below her that she forgot to breathe.

“How do you feel?” asked Arcrayne. “Are you cold?”

“I am fine,” replied Estelle. She was too busy with excitement and delight to worry about such things. “Lord Arc, thank you for bringing me here. It’s so beautiful... I have never seen such a gorgeous view before.”

“You’re welcome. While I’m honored that you liked it...I’m afraid we’ll be landing now. I don’t want anyone to see us, and flying while carrying someone actually uses up quite a lot of mana,” whispered Arcrayne, looking apologetic, then descended to a lower altitude and landed on a small hill from which they could see the entire beach.

The crowds of people who had gathered for the festival were concentrated at the beach. Everybody had lights in their hands, which appeared to be sky

lanterns, and a few impatient folks were already launching theirs towards the sea.

“You’ll have to excuse the distance; I know it’s a little far, but we obviously can’t be flying into that crowd from above.”

Indeed, Awoken were considerably rare, so if a person came flying in from above it would make a big commotion.

“Can you see the ship at sea?” asked the prince. “Once you see a firework rise from it, that’s when you launch the lantern. Let us get ready too.”

Arcrayne took the basket with the sky lantern from Estelle’s hands, then unfolded the one inside and lit it with a match.

“It will fly away once you let go, so be careful,” he warned, handing her the lantern. It was shaped like a candle with a large paper bag over it.

“How curious... How do these lanterns soar through the sky?”

“It’s the same principle as hot air balloons. There’s a special oil on that candle.”

“Is it not dangerous to use flame? I imagine it could start a fire if it fell on a town.”

“At this time of the year, the seasonal winds at Kildare blow from land towards the sea. We only let them hold this festival after checking where the wind will blow on the day of, and the sky lanterns themselves are standardized—they’re designed to burn out and fall within five minutes. So there’s nothing to worry about.”

Just as Estelle grew impressed with how knowledgeable the prince was, a firework went up into the air. With a bang, a large flower bloomed in the night sky. Using that as a cue, everybody let go of their lanterns at once, and countless lights rose into the sky above. The sight of the lanterns slowly flying towards the sea was wondrous—as though a swarm of fireflies were taking off all at once.

Estelle let go of the lantern in her hands, gently launching it into the skies. Before she knew it, she was wishing time would stop—that was how beautiful

the scene was.

She snuck a peek at Arcrayne beside her. He was really mean to her at times, but fundamentally, he treated her with kindness and respect.

What do I do...? thought Estelle. The more she learned about the prince, the more she was drawn to him. He would surely never return her feelings. And while that was heartrending, a part of her didn't care. Even if he didn't feel the same way about her, as long as she could be by his side...

Ahh... I love him, realized Estelle. Lowering her eyes, she brought a hand to her chest—to the place where he had kissed her, though the mark had already mostly faded away.

Chapter 8: The Way Back

The white crescent moon hanging over the nighttime sea, the town lights below resembling starlight, and the countless lanterns soaring into the sky at the firework's cue—such wondrous sights from the previous day appeared time and time again in Estelle's mind whenever she closed her eyes.

Her wish for the time to stop had gone unanswered, and she and Arcrayne were currently in a coach, heading back to Albion.

"Estelle," the prince remarked, "if you still don't feel well, shouldn't you be lying down?"

"I feel much better now," replied Estelle, shaking her head. "I was simply lost in thought as I recalled yesterday's events." She then added, "Lord Arc, thank you for yesterday. I had never thought I would end up soaring the skies... I shall never forget that view. It was truly beautiful."

"I'm glad you had fun."

"I am so sorry you did not get to enjoy yourself much because of my condition."

"Don't worry about such a thing. I'm well aware I've put a burden on you. You were cast into a different environment all of a sudden—it's no surprise you would fall ill."

As usual, Arcrayne was gentlemanly and kind.

"Are you all right now?" he asked. "If you're in pain, we'll rest, so I want you to be frank and let me know."

"I truly am fine. I doubt I could walk for long periods of time, but I have no trouble merely sitting."

Estelle readjusted the throw on her lap. She still felt somewhat listless, but she'd recovered enough to be up and about indoors without issue. It was *because* she'd recovered that she didn't know what to do with all the time on her hands as she rode in the coach. She couldn't read or work on the

embroidery, as that would give her motion sickness, so all she could do was stare at the changing scenery outside the window. And as she did so, her mind would wander yet again the previous day. The pattern kept repeating itself.

Am I quick to fall in love...? wondered Estelle with a sigh. Until a short while ago, her heart had been set on her former fiancé Lyle. But now, most of it belonged to the man sitting in front of her. They said love was something you fell in without any warning and then sank deeper and deeper into, like quicksand, but Estelle felt like she had found a new love too quickly.

Her heart wouldn't stop racing at the fact that she was sitting so close to Arcrayne in the cramped interior of the coach. Sneaking a peek at the man sitting across from her, she found him still gazing vacantly out the window. The reason his honey-blond hair seemed to glitter in the sunlight shining in from the window, and his face—refined like a sculpture—seemed more radiant than usual, must've been the fact Estelle had become aware of her feelings for him.

As always, he had a great deal of mana. It had shrunk to about a fifth of its usual volume the day before, after he had soared the skies with Estelle in his hands, but it had been almost fully restored by morning. According to the prince, one had to be a royal Awoken to have telekinesis powerful enough that it could be used for flying. And indeed, to lift two adults into the air, one would need a considerable amount of energy.

"What is it?" asked the prince. "Have I captivated you?"

"N-No! I was simply thinking how you recovered almost all of your mana in one night after using up so much of it yesterday."

"Oh... Even if I'd completely used it up, it would recover after a good night's sleep."

"Do you have that much mana because you are a member of royalty? Or is it a result of your training?"

"For the most part it's my birth. I think I've told you before, but there's only so much you can increase the amount of your mana through training. Though training definitely gives you more mana."

After a moment of thought, Estelle replied, "I am going to find time to try

cycling my mana too, starting today.”

It had been out of the question while she was ill, but at this point she might as well make use of what she had been taught. It would surely help if she could learn to control her power.

“Want my help?”

“No, thank you,” replied Estelle, firmly shaking her head, making Arcrayne giggle. “Oh, right. Lord Arc, there is something I have been wondering about all along. May I ask?”

“What is it? If it’s something I can answer, sure.”

“Um... It looks to me as though you have more mana than His Highness Prince Liedis, so why does everyone say he has more than you?”

As she asked the question that had been on her mind all along, Arcrayne’s mana clouded over. Perhaps it wasn’t an appropriate topic.

“Right, I forgot you can literally see mana,” mumbled the prince after a pause, looking somewhat at a loss. “It’s simple: I intentionally used my telekinesis just before I had my mana measured, deplenishing it to a degree that wasn’t suspicious to anyone. So as far as the public knows, I have less mana than Liedis.”

In Rosalia, children had the volume of their mana measured a total of three times: at the ages of seven and twelve, and upon reaching maturity at the age of eighteen. This was done to determine what mana-based items they could use. The amount of mana was important for children aspiring to become soldiers, engineers, and the like.

“Why would you do such a thing...?” asked Estelle.

“To make it easier for Liedis to succeed to the throne and lower my chances of being assassinated.”

Arcrayne’s reply was so matter-of-fact! It wrung Estelle’s heart with pity.

***

“Astonished as I am by the recent turn of events, I must ask that you take good care of my niece, Your Highness.”

These words lingered in the back of Arcrayne's mind as he looked at Estelle, who seemed to be having mixed feelings. They had been spoken by her uncle, Oscar Flozeth.

Oscar served as the standin lord of Flozeth while Sirius was in Albion. He couldn't leave while Sirius was here in the capital, so he had learned about Arcrayne's engagement with Estelle from a short conversation the prince had had with him over mana-based communicators. But despite its brevity, it had made it more than clear enough to Arcrayne that Estelle had grown up loved by those around her.

"Though I know it is hardly appropriate to say such things to you, Your Highness, I was not able to have children of my own. Estelle and Sirius are like children to me. So please, make Estelle happy."

Oscar wasn't the only one who cherished Estelle. There was Sirius too.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Your Highness, I am opposed to letting her marry you. But we are in no position to refuse Your Highness's wishes. So please, promise me you will make Estelle happy. She is my one and only sister."

That was what Sirius had told Arcrayne with an earnest look on his face just before the New Year's party.

The prince wondered why it got on his nerves to such a terrible extent to see Estelle look at him with pity—she, who had grown up with her relatives' love and care. Was it envy?

Forced to be by his side, Estelle was meek and quiet. Arcrayne didn't imagine he'd ever have set his sights on a woman of her type, if it weren't for her special gift. He wanted to cherish Estelle—after all, he was aware he had put her in danger against her will—but he occasionally felt an intense desire to walk all over her.

The only blood relatives who had loved Arcrayne unconditionally had been his late mother and the late Marquess Rogell, who was Miriallia's brother and Arcrayne's uncle. He did still have relatives who supported him—his aunt Sierra and his cousin Claus—but Sierra had married into the family, and Claus was only siding with the prince because of the former's longing for Miriallia. Arcrayne's relationships with them weren't close and full of trust, unlike the one Sirius had

with Estelle.

Arcrayne's father had alienated himself from Arcrayne after he'd come to love Queen Truteliese. And to begin with, the custom of royal children leaving their parents and getting their own palace at an early age ensured that relationships between said children and parents were a curious mix of close and distant. Arcrayne was no exception, having received the Libra Palace on his seventh birthday and grown up surrounded by employees of the royal palace since then.

Seeing the honest, decent emotions of someone who had grown up in a loving environment—someone like Estelle—made Arcrayne feel hazy. A sensibility like hers was far out of reach for someone like him, who had grown up in the Palace of Albion.

"Um... I apologize. It must have been an inappropriate question," said Estelle.

Poor girl. She must've *seen* his negative emotions; she'd gone pale. And judging by the satisfaction Arcrayne felt at the sight, he must've had some sadistic proclivities.

Estelle's thoughts always showed on her face right away. She would be openly happy when Arcrayne was nice to her, and she went silent when she was angry at him—likely her prudence at work, telling her she couldn't express that anger due to the difference in their status. Of course, Estelle's eyes told Arcrayne more than her mouth, so he could see right through her, but he genuinely liked that she had such self-control.

"It's not. In fact, it's only natural for you to have questions about it, given that you can see mana," replied Arcrayne with a gentle smile. The emotions inside him had settled down, so Estelle shouldn't have been able to see any more restless mana from him.

Her power was half-baked. Unlike the powers of telepathy and mind reading, hers didn't let her accurately tell what emotion she was looking at, leaving room for manipulation.

"Of course you were going to question it sooner or later, once you'd met Liedis. The matter slipped my mind. I should've explained it in advance."

As Arcrayne spoke, doing his best to keep the sea of his emotions calm,

Estelle's relief was clear as day. She really wore her heart on her sleeve. It looked like Arcrayne needed to teach her some subtlety sooner rather than later.

High society was overflowing with vice, political motives, and self-interest. If you couldn't learn to wear a mask, you might be targeted by a pack of starving hyenas.

The coach shook with a big jolt just when Arcrayne began to consider the future course of Estelle's education. As he put himself on guard, he heard a loud tremor from the outside.

Are we under attack?! he wondered.

He had taken meticulous precautions to keep their trip under wraps, but sometimes there was simply nothing you could do to stop a secret from getting out.

Reflexively pulling Estelle close to himself, Arcrayne used his telekinesis to form a protective barrier around them, then called out at the top of his lungs,"What's the matter?!"

"Th-There was a landslide all of a sudden!" replied Neville from his horse that had been running side-by-side with the coach. "We're unharmed, but the coach driving in front of us got caught in it..."

While it was relieving that it was no raid, Arcrayne couldn't simply carry on with his day if someone had been victim to a disaster.

"Estelle, stay in the coach! Do *not* leave until I make sure it's safe!" ordered the prince and rushed outside.

***

The moment Arcrayne opened the coach door, Estelle heard a woman's grieving voice and a child's crying.

"I beg you! My son is stuck in there—please hurry and save him!"

Though Arcrayne had ordered her to stay inside, she was still curious about what was going on, so she stuck her head out through the window and surveyed the road ahead.

“Lady Estelle, you must not leave yet,” Neville told her. He seemed to be the only one staying by the coach to guard her.

“We’re not under attack, are we? Doesn’t that mean we might be able to do something?”

Disregarding Neville’s attempts at stopping her, Estelle bolted out of the coach. That was when she saw the slope the landslide had created and the overturned coach ahead.

Upon closer inspection, Estelle could see that the horses which had been pulling the coach were convulsing on their sides. Not far from them were two collapsed men, with one of Arcrayne’s guards assessing their state. By their side, a woman who looked about thirty was clinging to Arcrayne, pointing at the fallen mass of earth and frantically pleading with the prince to save her son. Judging by her obviously luxurious clothes, the overturned coach belonged to her. She was hurt too, and her head was bleeding.

“Neville, help me raise this seat!” instructed Estelle.

There were storage compartments under the seats in Arcrayne’s coach, loaded with both their luggage for the trip and things they might need if something happened on the way, such as camping equipment and a first aid kit.

Neville was big as a bear. He easily raised the seat in question without Estelle’s help. She grabbed the first aid kit and rushed outside again. It was then that Arcrayne noticed her and approached.

“Estelle! Stay in the coach. A woman shouldn’t have to see such a horrible—”

“Even I can apply first aid!” interrupted Estelle and headed to the two collapsed men, who lay completely motionless.

Nothing could be done for one of them. His head was bent in an unnatural direction, and he had clearly already breathed his last.

The other one was groaning in pain, a terrible wound on his right leg. One of Arcrayne’s guards was pressing a piece of cloth to it to stop the bleeding, but both the cloth and the man’s torn clothing were stained crimson with blood.

“Is it just an external wound? Any damage to the bone?” asked Estelle,

rummaging through the first aid kit.

The guard tending to the man looked her way with bewilderment. “The bone’s broken. It’s... It’s quite gruesome—the bone is exposed, so we’ll handle —“

“An open fracture? I’ve treated worse, so leave it to me.”

As Estelle moved over to the wounded man, gauze and bandages in hand, the guard gave way to her despite his perplexity. Peeling off the piece of cloth he’d used to stops the bleeding, she saw the affected part in its messy state. The wound was indeed deep, and the broken white bone sticking out through the skin added to the horror of the sight. Estelle layered gauze on top of the broken bone to shield it, then wrapped bandages over the wound to stop the bleeding.

“Cian, it looks like we can let Estelle handle the wounded man. Come help dig up survivors over here,” said Arcrayne to the guard who had tended to the man before Estelle. “Neville, you come too.”

Arcrayne headed with them towards the fallen trees and heaps of earth. He must’ve judged her capable when he saw her apply first aid without any hesitation.

Glancing to the side, Estelle saw what the woman was looking at—the heads of a man and a small boy lying on top of one another, stuck between fallen trees and boulders. The man was shielding the boy with his body, protecting him. Thanks to him, the boy appeared to be unharmed, and was crying his eyes out in the man’s arms. The man, meanwhile, looked to be in terrible pain and could barely breathe.

“Please, save him... Save Ceddie...” uttered the woman as if praying and clung to Arcrayne.

The boy’s convulsive sobs were gradually getting weaker—perhaps he was either tired or hurt somewhere.

“I will support the trees and boulders using my telekinesis so they don’t fall. Men, rescue them!”

The guards acted on Arcrayne’s instructions. Making ample use of the principle of leverage and similar concepts, little by little, they cleared away the

fallen trees and earth. In the meantime, Arcrayne's mana flowed from his body to become a telekinetic field, covering the man and the boy.

It didn't look like Estelle could do anything for the two buried under the landslide. Turning back to the wounded man in front of her, she picked up an appropriately-sized wooden board that appeared to be a part of the nearby destroyed coach and fastened it to the man's wounded leg as a splint. She decided it was enough for treating the bone fracture, but the man looked pale in the face and was shaking—he must've lost too much blood. Estelle had to keep him warm. Briefly returning to her coach, she returned with a throw and covered the man with it.

Next up was the woman watching the rescue efforts with bated breath.

"Lord Arc will get your son out, so let me treat you," said Estelle, going down on her knees. "You're wounded too, are you not?"

"Um... Would that man happen to be His Highness the first prince, by any chance...?" The woman appeared to have calmed down enough to see her surroundings.

There was only one young man who both looked just like the king and could use powers.

"Yes. So there should be nothing to worry about. It might be dangerous here, so let us move away a little."

Estelle drew close to the woman and took her to a place from which they could still watch the rescue efforts, but one that appeared to be safe.

"Is it just your head that hurts? Is there anything else?" asked Estelle.

"My whole body hurts. I was hit all over in the coach...but since I can move without issue, it shouldn't be anything major..."

The woman trembled, her gaze fixed in the direction of the boy. She must've been too focused on how the rescue was going to think of herself.

"Ceddie grizzled that riding in the coach was boring," she explained. "He asked to ride one of my attendants' horses... Oh, I should've ignored him! Even if he started wailing and acting up..."

Tears came gushing forth out of the woman's eyes. Estelle placed a hand on her back and gently stroked it to calm her down.

"Don't worry. I'm sure it will be fine," she said.

In the end, the woman's son, Ceddie, was saved, though it was too late for the servant holding him in his arms. By the time Arcrayne's guards had managed to lift the fallen trees enough to create a gap and pull Ceddie out, the man had already stopped breathing. The only consolation was that Ceddie had gotten away with mere scratches.

The woman introduced herself as Licia Burrell. The only survivors were Licia, Ceddie, and the coachman in her family's service. The coachman was the man with the broken bone in his leg whom Estelle had given first aid. They were apparently tourists, just like Estelle and Arcrayne, who had come from Albion to Kildare to see the sky lanterns, and they'd had this accident on their way back.

Licia didn't want to trouble Arcrayne any more and declined his offer of further assistance, so Arcrayne had his guards call for help from a nearby village and let the locals take care of the rest.

"Your Highness Prince Arcrayne, the young sun of Rosalia, I shall never forget the favor you have done me today, and I shall visit you in the future to properly express my gratitude." Licia's manner was elegant as she spoke, and from the way she carried herself, one could see she was very wealthy.

Estelle and Arcrayne would be making a detour around the collapsed road on their way back to Albion.

"So landslides can happen even on clear days like this one," muttered Estelle once the coach started moving.

"Maybe the ground was unstable," said Arcrayne.

"It would have been us suffering that fate, had we passed there at a slightly different time. I shudder to think about it."

The prince was silent for a moment, then replied, "I suppose so. I think this might be what they call 'divine providence' over in the Yang Empire."

“Huh...?”

As Estelle tilted her head in confusion, Arcrayne continued in a matter-of-fact manner.

“Licia Burrell and her son named Ceddie, whose proper name is probably Cedric... These names match those of the youngest daughter and grandchild of the current president of Belfias—the bank. Mrs. Burrell looks very much like the wife of Baron Belfias, and given her attire and the way she carried herself, I think it’s pretty safe to say it’s them.”

Estelle’s eyes opened wide. Baron Belfias was a magnate to rival Baron Pautrier. While Pautrier had amassed his fortune through trading with the eastern states, Belfias had invested the capital he’d earned through banking into colonies in the New World, earning tremendous riches.

“Belfias *was* already on my side...but he will be even more obliged to me after this incident. You did well too, Estelle.”

Estelle felt somewhat alarmed at Arcrayne’s praise.

It’s like he’s playing chess, she thought to herself. People were chess pieces; Arcrayne’s circumstances were the board. And his calm face was that of a chess player about to make a move. *I’m just another chess piece to him.*

She’d known it already. But realizing it all over again made her heart ache. The love she felt for him told her, *Isn’t it enough to simply be of use to him as a pawn?* However...

There was a greedy part of her that wasn’t satisfied with being a mere pawn. In fact, that was how she *truly* felt. If Estelle had a choice, she wanted to stand by his side—she wanted them to be a married couple who loved each other. The two sentiments were in conflict inside her mind.

“You’re full of surprises,” said Arcrayne. “Treating the wounded seemed second nature to you. May I ask why?”

He gave Estelle an appraising look. Her value was being assessed here.

“We have dragons living nearby. And hunting dragons leads to people getting hurt.”

“I was told it was the earl who hunted dragons.”

“Yes. It is primarily the work of the earl and other men. Spirits dwelling in the mountains dislike women.”

“Ah, that’s right,” said Arcrayne. “You believe in animism in the north, don’t you? I read about it in a book once.”

Messianism—a popular religion in Rosalia—had been brought in by the kingdom of Ancient La Tène when it had ruled these lands in the distant past. Ancient La Tène was a kingdom known for its superb mana technology—it had brought the artifacts into existence. Whenever they had conquered indigenous peoples, they would destroy their culture and suppress their religion to control the local population. However, people’s deep-seated beliefs had quietly persisted even through La Tène’s efforts at indoctrination. The animism believed in the north was one such example.

“You are well informed,” replied Estelle.

“If I remember correctly, the spirits living in mountains are women, and if a woman sets foot in their domain, they grow jealous and set off an avalanche. That’s how the folklore went, right?”

“Yes. Which is why women capable of wielding Dragon Slayers learn to shoot to prepare for when the men are away, but do not actually participate in dragon hunting. As for medical care, I studied it hoping to be of use to my earldom—I would do anything for my home.”

Estelle’s familiarity and experience with medical treatment had, in fact, come in handy a year prior, when she had visited areas that had suffered the most under the disastrous never-ending rains. She stayed so calm in the face of horrible wounds any normal person would find unbearable to look at because she had seen worse back then.

She had learned to shoot and treat wounds both in service of her earldom. Estelle’s birthplace was her wellspring—everything she was as a person flowed from it. Arcrayne calmly observed this woman who was to be his wife—his Estelle.

Chapter 9: After the Break

“Lady Estelle, wake up please. I know you’re tired, but His Highness said it’s time to wake you up.” Coming to rouse Estelle was Leah, whom she hadn’t seen in four days.

What with the whole business of rescuing Licia Burrell and her son and coachman, and then the detour on top of all of it, by the time they got to Albion, it had already been far into the night. Estelle appeared to have completely overslept because of that.

As she opened her eyes, what she saw was her room deep in the Libra Palace. She still hadn’t fully recovered, which was why she had gone to bed here the night before instead of using the shared bedroom.

“How was Kildare? Did you and His Highness get closer?” asked Leah, all smiles.

Estelle found her slightly irritating at this moment. She wished May had woken her up instead—at least she knew the truth about Estelle and Arcrayne’s relationship.

“I got a fever after we arrived, but His Highness used his power to take me to the festival,” said Estelle with reluctance.

Of course, Leah squealed. “Ah, how nice of His Highness! But what do you mean he used his power? If memory serves me right, he can’t use teleportation unlike His Highness Prince Liedis, yes?”

“He made us fly using telekinesis...”

“What?! That’s one of those things only a royal Awoken can do! It’s like something straight out of a fairy tale... Ah, how wonderful...”

Leah just wouldn’t stop squealing. Still, telling her all this was bound to spread the rumor of Arcrayne being courteous with Estelle even at the destination of their trip.

“What is May up to? I haven’t seen her since yesterday...” asked Estelle.

“She’s been at the Royal Guard’s training facility together with Guardsman Neil ever since you left on your trip. She seemed troubled by the fact she couldn’t do anything when His Highness Prince Liedis raided the palace, and she said she was going to completely retrain herself.”

Estelle didn’t think training would change much—only a royal Awoken could take on another of their kind, after all. May could be awfully dour; Estelle worried she might be getting obsessed with it.

“For what it’s worth, I’m also being trained to protect you. I can at least become your shield if anything happens.”

“I pray that it doesn’t,” replied Estelle with a faint smile, seeing Leah look so eager.

“By the way, Lady Estelle, there are very special guests coming today. So let’s get you dressed up and put on your makeup!”

“Guests? I haven’t heard anything. Who is it?”

“That’s a secret,” said Leah.

Her cheerful smile left Estelle perplexed.

After a light brunch, Estelle went to the drawing room where, as she had been told, Arcrayne and the guests were waiting. She beamed once she saw who was there.

“Uncle Oscar!”

It was none other than her uncle, who was supposed to have been substituting for Sirius in Flozeth at this time of the year.

“I’m here too, you know...” uttered the *other* guest.

“Oh, brother. But why? If you two are in Albion, what about the earldom?”

Estelle raised an eyebrow at the sight of her two relatives sitting on the drawing room sofa. They really did resemble each other.

“There’s not much snow this year,” replied Oscar, “and Pamela stayed behind at the earldom, so it should be fine for a short while.” After a brief pause, he

added, “I wanted to see your face no matter what.”

Pamela was Oscar’s wife. Unfortunately, the two had never managed to have children. Perhaps that was why Estelle’s uncle and aunt loved her and Sirius like their own children. Ever since the siblings’ parents had died, the two had supported them both openly and from behind the scenes. It was extremely reassuring to have their aid.

Oscar supported Sirius as his land steward, while Pamela had taught Estelle how to conduct herself as a mistress of a domain. Oscar and Pamela were so reliable that to the siblings, they were practically their second parents.

While Oscar looked similar to Sirius, he was rather different in personality. If Estelle’s brother was casual and irresponsible, Oscar was strict and overserious.

“They’ve been ganging up on me, telling me to treasure you,” said Arcrayne with a shrug.

The prince was sitting across from the two guests. He wore his usual calm smile, but his mana was dark.

Sirius, Oscar... Just what did you say to him...? wondered Estelle. Setting her uncle aside for the moment, her brother could be rather tactless.

The brother in question was reaching out for the baked sweets on the table, clueless as to what was going on in Estelle’s head. Estelle had half a mind to grab him by the collar and thoroughly question him.

“While I did want to see His Highness and pay my respects... Estelle, I’ve actually brought a friend of yours,” said Oscar.

“A friend...?”

“You should stop by the stable later,” added Arcrayne.

The realization finally hit Estelle.

“Have you, by any chance, brought Lunaris all the way from the earldom...?”

Lunaris was Estelle’s beloved horse—a chestnut mare. While she wasn’t all that fast, she was mild-tempered and gentle, which made her easy to ride.

“I’ve heard you’ll be attending the hunting contest,” explained Sirius.

“Thought you’d need the horse, so I asked Uncle Oscar to bring it here. Not that I expected him to come here in person as well.”

His words cheered Estelle up.

“I wanted to make a courtesy call to His Highness,” added Oscar. “I imagine we’ll be associating with each other for a long time.”

Oscar seemed to be in a father’s frame of mind. He was looking at Arcrayne with a face that betrayed a mixture of emotions—it was hard to tell what lay behind it. Estelle didn’t need to see his and Arcrayne’s mana to know there was some tension in the air between the two, and she could somehow guess what exactly had put the prince in a bad mood.

At Arcrayne’s recommendation, Estelle gave Oscar and Sirius a tour of the Libra Palace, showing them what kind of life she led there. To conclude the tour, they all went to the stables.

It was Estelle’s first time there. As she went inside, the characteristic smell made her nostalgic—and she shouted for joy once she saw that her familiar chestnut horse really was here.

“Lunaris!” she exclaimed.

Horses were smart creatures. Once Lunaris saw Estelle, the horse brought her head towards her with a fond look. They had been away from each other for three months, but Lunaris seemed to remember her mistress nonetheless.

“Lady Estelle, you may want to use these,” said the groom and offered her sugar cubes.

Lunaris neighed at the sight and pawed at the ground with a hoof, as though saying, “Hand those over already.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll give you the sugar, so calm down,” said Estelle.

As she held out her hand, sugar cubes in palm, Lunaris deftly scooped up just the cubes with her tongue and ate them. Then, the horse scratched the ground with her foreleg again. It was adorable how she begged for more treats.

“You’d better get some practice in before the contest. You’re not good at

riding sidesaddle, are you?”

Sirius’s words caused Estelle to freeze up.

“Um, do I have to ride sidesaddle at the contest...?”

The hunting contest was held in a royal forest in the vicinity of Albion. Since it doubled as a military exercise, there was a rule that everyone had to ride horses on their way to the forest. And while the men would go into the forest and hunt game, the women would put up pavilions and have a picnic to socialize.

“No woman attends the contest in a riding costume with trousers, so you’ll naturally have to ride sidesaddle,” explained Arcrayne. “I’ve already had a riding habit made for you—have you not seen it yet? It should be somewhere in the dressing room.”

“Albion’s ladies don’t ride horses astride. You’re not in the sticks anymore,” added Sirius.

He was quite right. Estelle had completely forgotten about it. Normally, a lady wore a habit and rode her horse on a specific saddle for riding sideways to avoid exposing her legs.

“Estelle, don’t tell me you can’t ride sidesaddle,” said Arcrayne.

“I think I can handle it if the horse only walks...but frankly, it is not my strong suit. I rode astride back in the earldom.”

Since riding sidesaddle meant the rider’s body weight was distributed unevenly, that made the whole thing more taxing on the horse. On top of that, it required more skill of the rider than riding astride.

“I’ll help you practice. I think I can find time once or twice a week,” said the prince.

“Please and thank you...” weakly replied Estelle.

“I can see that Your Highness treasures Estelle. I am glad I took the time to come here despite my duties,” said Oscar before taking his leave of the Libra Palace. Apparently he would be spending the night in a hotel and returning to the earldom the next day.

Arcrayne's manner was only an act. Estelle found it overwhelmingly sad that nobody could realize this.

***

"Lady Estelle, if an assailant shows up from here, this is how you run. And if it's from this side, you run like this. You are under our protection, so you must never step in front—please only think about running and staying alive."

After Arcrayne's break, Estelle's education had resumed. She was currently in the room adjoining Arcrayne's office, being lectured on how those under protection should act. Giving the lecture was a chief officer of the Libra Palace who was entrusted with managing the male servants—Haoran Cao.

In addition, Haoran was May's father. Apparently, he had come from the Yang Empire, was an expert in eastern martial arts, and was serving both as Arcrayne's guard and his close aide, taking care of his daily necessities all by himself. He had the shapely features of someone from the Yang Empire and a firm build that made him seem younger than he probably was.

"I know you're constantly carrying a pistol for self-defense," continued Haoran, "but your own safety always comes first. Please consider using the weapon to defend yourself as a last resort. Depending on the situation, it may be better to let yourself be captured instead of thoughtlessly resisting."

Estelle had the pistol under her dress even now. She'd carried it ever since she had met Arcrayne, so there was always a bruise from where it chafed against her skin. It was disheartening for her as a maiden, not to mention physically painful, but it was something Estelle had to accept.

She let out a quiet sigh. Haoran's lecture wasn't over yet. He told her how to escape in various situations: when attacked by thugs in a building, when attacked outdoors, when it's not simply outdoors but outright in the wilderness, when it's in a city, *et cetera, et cetera*.

"Having said all that, if it's His Highness Prince Liedis coming after you, just make sure you run. He's a walking calamity. As for those two, I've already taught them how to do a little better, should the same thing happen again."

Haoran cast his gaze at May and Neil standing behind Estelle. Sensing their

mana cloud over in that instant, Estelle turned back and saw them with extremely stiff looks on their faces. It appeared Haoran had been thoroughly training them while Estelle was away on an excursion.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it...? Sorry.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize, Lady Estelle! It’s our fault for being weak,” replied Neil, straightening his back.

Seeing him like that, Estelle could just imagine that the two had gone through some grueling training, which made her feel all the more apologetic.

***

Arcrayne, still on duty, showed up in the adjoining room when Estelle was hard at work on her embroidery, making effective use of her time until the next tutor arrived. As she had been indisposed at the time, she hadn’t made any progress on it at all while she was away from the palace. If she didn’t work on it regularly, even if she was proceeding bit by bit, she wouldn’t finish it in time for the hunting contest.

“It looks neat,” said the prince.

“Thank you for your kind words.”

Embroidery was an essential part of a woman’s training in homemaking arts. Any girl of noble birth could do this much.

“I know it’s difficult to do the royal crest due to its complexity. And for me, you also have to do my personal seal, which pricks my conscience.”

After thinking for a moment, Estelle replied, “That I shall not deny.” Then, shaking out her aching hand, she couldn’t keep from complaining, “I do wish your seal was some animal without any special patterns, and not a tiger...”

“Sorry about that. It was my father who chose my seal, not me. So you’ll have to take your complaints to him,” replied the prince with a forced smile.

Incidentally, the king’s seal was a wolf, while Liedis’s was a black panther.

“Would you like tea?” offered Estelle. “My hands are tired, so I would like to take a short break.”

“You’ll make some for me?”

“I will. Though I am worried whether you will find it to your liking.”

The room had a tea set. Getting up from her seat, Estelle walked over to the cupboard with the mana-based pot and tea leaves.

“You have so much here,” she remarked. “Do you have any preferences?”

“Any sort will do. Just pick one that you like.”

“Hmm... Bergamot tea it is, then.”

Estelle had chosen the tea with the scent of Arcrayne’s favorite perfume.

“What’s your favorite sort?” asked the prince.

“I like elderflower tea. It does not appear to be here...”

“Sorry,” said the prince after a brief moment of silence, which made Estelle tilt her head in confusion.

“Do you, perhaps, not enjoy it?”

“I have some issues with it. Anyway, the tea party at the Rogell mansion is coming up tomorrow.”

Arcrayne couldn’t have been more blatant in changing the subject. Estelle could tell he didn’t want to talk about this.

“Yes,” she replied without delay. “I am nervous, as I will be socializing for the first time since the announcement of our engagement.”

“You don’t need to steel yourself so much. It’s a party hosted by my aunt, so even if there was someone there who didn’t think well of you, they couldn’t do anything. Let me know afterwards if someone does say or do something unpleasant to you.”

It’s like he’s spinning a cocoon around me, thought Estelle. She had found his words stifling, even though one would normally be grateful for being enveloped in protective kindness and warmth.

***

Arcrayne was on his visit to the Leo palace to submit sanction papers when he

happened upon Queen Truteliese in one of the hallways. He inwardly clicked his tongue at the encounter.

“Oh, Arcrayne. Are you on your way back after seeing His Majesty?”

“Yes, stepmother.”

“Shouldn’t you be coming here more often? You’re already engaged, and I’d love to speak more with Lady Estelle.”

The queen let out a cheerful laugh and smiled. It should be noted that Estelle was currently on her way to the party at Marquess Rogell’s mansion.

“I’m truly happy for you. I’ve always thought you would marry Lady Olivia. Lady Estelle is much better than her. After all, she seems so simple, so honest, so well-behaved.”

Thank you for choosing some girl from northern rural nobility as your future spouse. She looks so plain, so well-behaved, so easy to handle—Arcrayne wondered if he had caught all of the hidden sarcasm in the queen’s words, or if there was more.



“I’m so sorry about the silly little trouble Liedis seems to have caused you,”

continued the queen. “I’ve given him a good scolding, so I would be glad if you could forgive him too.”

“Thank you for your consideration, stepmother.”

“Why, you could say your future wife will be my daughter, couldn’t you? It was quite a wise decision for someone like you to choose a woman like her.”

How foolish of you to willingly set yourself back in the fight for succession. This makes things easier for me—Arcrayne couldn’t help but suspect numerous hidden meanings behind her words.

“I think Liedis simply got too carried away when he learned he would have a sister soon. It’s quite embarrassing, what he did. Would you do me the favor of arranging a meeting between myself and Lady Estelle in the near future? I would like to apologize for my son’s rowdiness, as well as to simply talk to her.”

Arcrayne paused, then replied, “Our schedules are busy, but I will see what I can do.”

Once he had bowed to the queen and parted with her, he began to consider the matter from various angles. Estelle had said Truteliese wasn’t in favor of this engagement. However, when speaking to the queen, the prince couldn’t see anything in her attitude to suggest that. She had even requested a meeting with Estelle—perhaps it was worth letting them see each other again.

At present, Arcrayne had yet to receive a report that there had indeed been some kind of history between the Flozeths and the Marwicks or the queen herself. The spies he had brought up and trained from childhood knew their trade. So the fact that they had yet to report anything meant there was a high chance nothing would come up in the future.

Is Estelle lying? No, it might be better to assume her power made her incorrectly perceive the queen’s emotions, concluded Arcrayne.

Did the queen want to intentionally raise the cohesion of Arcrayne’s faction by having him marry Olivia, only to then bring them down in one fell swoop? Or perhaps she actually wanted *him* to take the throne instead of Liedis...? *No, that’s impossible,* thought the prince, rejecting the idea after recalling how Duke Marwick and the queen had behaved towards him until now.

As he considered how to address every conjecture on his mind, Arcrayne left the Leo Palace.

Chapter 10: Familiar Faces at the Opera House

Estelle sat beside Arcrayne, looking tense as she faced the king and queen.

This was the Royal Opera House. It had been built in the center of Albion, and was the most prestigious theater in the city. Estelle was there with Arcrayne on an invitation from the king and queen to see a play together.

Since she'd been invited in the king's name, she was sitting in the royal box. This special box, located on the second floor—straight in front when looking from the stage—was first-class both in its design and furnishings, made to amply show off royal authority to the audience.

An opera was being performed right now on the stage, but Estelle couldn't process it. Still, if she pretended to be watching the performance, she wouldn't need to talk to the king and queen, which was a boon.

Estelle and Arcrayne had been called here under the pretext of an apology for Liedis's recent act. The king and queen had already apologized, which brings us to the present moment.

There was another reason Estelle had come here. Arcrayne had asked her to check again if Queen Truteliese's mana really darkened every time she looked at Estelle. And given the distance, Estelle didn't even need to look at the queen to sense her mana. Still, she wanted to make sure with her own two eyes, so she furtively put the queen in her field of vision.

The queen was watching the stage, opera glasses in hand. It had been approximately half a month since Estelle had last seen her future mother-in-law, and the latter's mana was calm and peaceful; it was hard to believe she had previously displayed negative emotions towards Estelle.

Does she approve of me now...? wondered Estelle. Trying to figure the queen out only served to confuse her more, and this wasn't the only inexplicable thing about the queen's mana.

“I summoned you two today to apologize for Liedis’s behavior. Once again, as his mother, I’m sorry,” the queen had said earlier, at the start of the opera. “Still, he’s your brother by blood, if only a half-brother. As his older brother, you simply *must* forgive him, Arcrayne. You will, won’t you?”

Something about her attitude at the time had struck Estelle as somewhat aggressive. The intense look she had given Arcrayne practically said she wouldn’t let him refuse. King Sashes beside her had simply looked on with a wry expression. It was clear this family had complicated relations between parents and children.

“You need not even say it, stepmother. I’ve already forgiven him. Liedis and I may have different mothers, but he’s the only brother I have,” replied Arcrayne with his usual calm smile at the time. His mana, however, made it clear he didn’t mean what he said.

“I thought you’d say as much. You *are* such a kind brother, after all; you have always treated him well.”

The queen had worn a cheerful smile, but her tone had been somewhat disdainful. What had further perplexed Estelle was the queen’s thoroughly murky mana. It had almost been as though the queen was reluctant to take on such an attitude...

No, that cannot be, Estelle chided herself, hurriedly casting the thought aside. She could have also interpreted it as the queen hating her so much she didn’t want to even have Estelle in her field of vision.

However, the mismatch between the queen’s bearing and her mana made Estelle rack her brains. It was vexing—she could see mana, but she could hardly see directly into another’s mind. Her head had begun to hurt from all the thinking. Looking away from the queen, Estelle closed her eyes and massaged her temples.

***

The Royal Opera House also served as a place for members of the upper class to socialize. The appropriate time for it was during intermissions. Estelle, together with Arcrayne and the king and queen, joined the crowds of people heading from their seats to the lobby.

The approach of royals caused a stir and drew some glances, but due to the unspoken rule that one mustn't speak to those of higher stature without being spoken to first, nobody talked to them or Estelle.

With Estelle in tow, Arcrayne went around greeting his supporters one by one. Almost all of them were related to the women Estelle had met at the tea party hosted by Sierra—she could once again feel how the prince had done utmost then to ensure Estelle could fit into his faction. Those who would likely bear ill will towards her, such as Olivia and her hangers-on, had not been invited to that party.

Though a coincidence, it was also significant that she and Arcrayne had helped the disaster-struck Licia Burrell on their way back from their short trip.

Just as Arcrayne had surmised, she was related to Baron Belfias, the banker. Estelle thought helping Licia and Ceddie had been pretty much entirely to Arcrayne's credit, but the whole affair had still motivated Baron Belfias to express his support for her.

With Marquess Rogell and Baron Belfias as Estelle's allies, her position in the faction as a future princess was growing more and more solid. At the same time, however, she'd heard various rumors about Olivia Rainsworth and couldn't genuinely be happy.

"Good evening, Lord Werny, Keira," said Arcrayne.

Estelle had turned into a doll, all polite greetings and sociable smiles, but she quickly recovered upon seeing her friend.

"Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia. Lady Estelle. My wife and I are grateful for our encounter on this fair night," intoned the viscount.

"Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia, I am grateful for our encounter tonight," added Keira.

Estelle was so relieved to see her friend from her school years.

"Estelle, it was such a pleasure to talk to you for so long at Lady Sierra's tea party the other day," said Keira.

“I feel the same way. I’m happy to see you again.” Estelle smiled from the bottom of her heart.

“I get envious when I see you two walking together. Your relationship is at its peak, yes?”

But Estelle could only envy Keira. The latter was a happy woman whose childhood love, Viscount Werny, had returned her feelings. The two of them were cousins. They were quite similar to how Estelle and Lyle had once been, in that they had known each other from a young age.

Keira looked happy. Her first love, after all, had been requited. Estelle knew the two were content from Keira’s radiant mana and joyful face.

While Estelle was glad to see her friend’s happiness, the latter’s mana made jealousy arise in her. Estelle felt as though it was turning her into an ugly, despicable human being.

She couldn’t let such a dark emotion show. Estelle locked it away inside her heart and smiled at Keira.

“Thank you,” she said. “You look very happy yourself.”

“I am, to put it mildly. Not only did I get to marry a wonderful man, but I can now talk to my dear friend once again.”

“Why, I’m also reassured that my dear fiancée has you as her friend.” Arcrayne joined the conversation. “If you can find the time, do come to the Libra Palace to see her.”

Keira’s cheeks flushed to be addressed by the prince. This seemed to perturb Viscount Werny. The sight of such a pair was heartwarming.

Suddenly Estelle felt a powerful gaze from somewhere near her. Furtively glancing over to see where it was coming from, she saw a woman—vaguely familiar—staring at her. As Estelle stood there, trying to recall who she was, Keira spoke to the woman.

“You are...Lady Knightley, correct? It has been a while.”

Keira’s words made Estelle remember. This was Matilda Knightley, her

classmate from her days in Adulena Academy. That had been the extent of their relationship, however, and Estelle didn't remember being very close to her.

"Why, it *has* been a while, Lady Knightley, hasn't it?" Estelle added, unable to ignore her due to the flow of the conversation.

Matilda beamed at the greeting. "It has indeed, Estelle. I'm very glad I got to see you again."

"Is she your friend?" asked Arcrayne.

"She was my classmate at Adulena."

As Estelle introduced Matilda, the latter curtsied. "Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia," she intoned. "My name is Matilda Knightley."

"We met when you were a debutante, didn't we? Good evening to you, Lady Knightley," replied Arcrayne.

By the look on Matilda's face, she was clearly excited to be talking to the prince.

"Estelle, please don't call me 'Lady Knightley'—one would think we're strangers! We may not have seen each other in a long time, but please call me Matilda, just like in our school days."

Estelle chuckled inwardly at her words. They hadn't exactly been on a first-name basis at the academy. Ever since the announcement of Estelle's engagement, she'd had to deal with more friends that she barely knew, as well as distant relatives. It must've been the so-called "price of fame."

"My apologies. We haven't met in a while, so I wasn't sure if I should address you by your first name," replied Estelle, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. She put on her usual sociable smile.

Setting her self-proclaimed friend aside, Estelle was happy to get to see some real ones, starting with Keira—but there was no time to speak for long in the whirlwind of pleasantries.

After giving smiles to countless people, primarily those of Arcrayne's faction, Estelle felt like the muscles in her face were going to start twitching. She really

was bad with high society. With so many people around, she could only see the mix of their emotions as chaotic, so it was extremely draining on her.

Suddenly, as she heaved a quiet sigh, Estelle sensed mana filled with particularly negative emotions. She glanced in its direction, but she immediately came to regret the decision to do so.

Lyle Wyntia and Diana Pautrier were looking her way. Diana's mana was especially dark.

Lyle's was dark too; the two's relationship must not have been going well. While Estelle thought Diana deserved it, she also wanted Lyle to be happy, so she felt conflicted. Caught in the riptide of everything that had happened after her encounter with Arcrayne, she was almost completely over her former betrothed, but she still liked him.

She didn't know if Lyle had loved Estelle with the same passion she had once had for him. But her childhood friend had definitely felt affection for her. He had doted on her as though she were his little sister, and their families had gotten along well, so the talks of their engagement had gone without a hitch. Had Diana Pautrier not forced her way between them, Estelle must've still been living a calm life in Flozeth.

Looking at Lyle, Estelle felt her heart ache with something bittersweet. It had not been as though they'd parted by their own will, and she had always dreamed of becoming Mrs. Wyntia. Once, it had seemed certain that she would go back and forth in the land she knew and loved, living sometimes in her parents' home and sometimes in the home of the family she'd married into, serving as a bridge between the two earldoms. Perhaps she felt the way she did because she had a lingering attachment to the life she had once been so close to obtaining.

"Your former fiancé is looking this way," said the prince as Estelle blatantly looked away from Lyle and Diana. "You can go talk to them if you like. What do you want to do?"

Estelle shook her head. "Please do not make waves on purpose."

"Diana Pautrier is an amusing one. She got what she wanted, but her face says she's still displeased with you. When I see people like her, I'm always just

so tempted to provoke them.”

“‘Provoke’...? What do you intend to do?”

“Let’s see... For instance, I could give her the most irritating face I could muster up.”

Estelle burst into laughter. “A face? What kind of face would that be?”

“Hmm, while a condescending look *should* be effective against Lady Pautrier...”

The prince flashed a daring smile at Estelle, then suddenly pulled her close by the waist.

“Lord Arc?” she asked, surprised by the unexpected proximity.

“Estelle, can you smile?” replied the prince with a bewitching smile himself. “A happy face should be effective against her too. So try smiling.”

Estelle couldn’t do it so suddenly. As she stood there hesitating, Arcrayne brought his face to her cheek. His handsome countenance stopped at point-blank range, right before making contact with Estelle. But if you looked at it from the right angle, it could appear as though he was kissing her on the cheek.

Blood rushed to Estelle’s head. She had no attention to spare for the varied emotions in her vicinity; it was as though time had stopped for her and her alone.

He makes it look like we’re happily in love... What a cruel man, thought Estelle. And yet her heart rejoiced. She wished he would actually kiss her.

If I move my face just a little... The thought passed through her head, but she couldn’t act on it. She was restrained by the morals she had been taught growing up as the daughter of an earl, which told her she mustn’t do something so immodest.

As she stood petrified in emotional turmoil, the bell announcing the end of the intermission resounded through the opera house.

“Looks like it’s working,” whispered the prince, smoothly pulling away from Estelle.

As she looked towards Lyle and Diana, Estelle saw that their mana was terribly murky.

She could vaguely infer how Diana felt. She was the kind of woman who would send a wedding invitation overflowing with spite. She'd been looking down on Estelle, so she must've found it unforgivable that Arcrayne had chosen her.

Estelle had to wonder, however, why Lyle felt such strong negative emotions upon seeing her and Arcrayne close together.

Has he not given up on me...? she wondered. That would complicate things. If Lyle still had feelings for her, that would explain why Diana glared at her. She was no doubt furious at the fact the man she had stolen from Estelle had lingering attachment to his former betrothed. Not that Estelle was about to show her even a trace of sympathy, given what Diana had done to her.

"Estelle, let's head back," Arcrayne urged her.

Estelle thought on the subject as she walked back to the royal box. *Had those long rains from two years ago never happened... Had Diana Pautrier never come between me and Lyle...*

Such suppositions were meaningless, but she couldn't help it.

***

"What is the matter with that harlot...? Showing off how close she is with His Highness in front of everyone... Does she not think it indecent?"

There she goes again, thought Yufil, observing her mistress in astonishment as Diana—sitting on a sofa—began to bite her nails and grumble.

Diana Pautrier—the selfish aristocrat she worked for as a maid—had apparently run into Estelle Flozeth in the Royal Opera House yesterday. The public currently treated Estelle, whose engagement with First Prince Arcrayne had been officially announced, as the woman of the hour. She was practically a contemporary Cinderella.

They say His Highness is madly in love with Lady Estelle, so Diana should've expected they'd at least be kissing or cuddling on their visit to a theater, thought

Yufil. She showed no signs of how she truly felt, and could only wait for Diana's anger to pass, acting appropriately worried.

"Agh, why must she make me so angry?!"

Following Diana's caterwaul, a cushion came flying from the sofa.

Diana was as weak as one would expect the sheltered daughter of a high-class noble family to be. The cushion she'd flung didn't fly far, landing softly on the floor quite close to the sofa.

"And why does Lyle have to be like that?! Why does he have to stare at Estelle?! *I'm* his betrothed!"

You're obviously reaping what you sowed, thought Yufil. This was all because Diana had used money to come between two people who loved each other, forcing them apart. And now that a prince had fallen in love with Estelle, was it not Lyle who'd gotten the shortest end of the stick?

Yufil sympathized with the man, recalling his sharp, masculine face. It had been that face that got him Diana's attention. He was a truly pitiful young man.

In Yufil's opinion, Lyle was doing a good job as Diana's fiancé. From the traveling funfair to the theater visits, not to mention her *insistence* that he visit her every three days and always bring a gift, and her constant complaints: "Stop buying baked sweets from the same store every time," she'd say, or, "I don't like lilies, their scent is too strong," and so on and so forth... He had to deal with all of Diana's selfish demands and was as thoughtful as he could possibly be in the role of her betrothed. It was painful even for Yufil to look at his struggles, mere servant though she was.

Lyle must've been so humble because the financial support of the earldom of Wyntia hinged on this engagement. However, he clearly wasn't satisfied with this situation—it was easy to see from his eyes, which looked more and more dead with every passing day. With his hollow eyes, he put Yufil in mind of a taut string—one that might snap at any time, she feared.

"How does a nobody like her end up with His Highness...? They're not a good match at all. She's forgotten her place..." Diana continued to whine.

Today's outburst was hardly the worst of them. Diana hadn't broken

anything, at least; she was only hugging a cushion and grumbling. It was hard for Yufil to put up with having to listen to all of that, but she kept telling herself to hang on, for the pay's sake.

I wonder how long it will last today, she thought.

"Please calm down, my lady. I'm sure it's a misunderstanding and Sir Lyle wasn't actually looking at Estelle. Isn't he coming here every three days and bringing you lovely flowers and sweets?" Yufil tried to soothe her mistress, putting on an anxious look.

"You didn't see what he was like yesterday, Yufil."

"Commoners can't visit the Royal Opera House so easily," replied Yufil.

The Royal Opera House was a place for the upper class to socialize. Yufil *could* pay for the cheapest seats if she saved up, but there was another obstacle further ahead: the dress code.

"His Highness and Lord Lyle both keep looking at that harlot! Why does an upstart like her...?!"

"If you walk around the city and see an outstandingly handsome man, it's quite common for the woman accompanying him to be simply ordinary," said Yufil. "Maybe beautiful people are used to seeing other beautiful people, in their families and in the mirror."

I think Lady Estelle is beautiful enough, though, added Yufil inwardly. It was true that Estelle Flozeth wasn't a smashing beauty. She might not have borne comparison with the gorgeous Diana if they stood side by side, but she was still an elegant and graceful woman, and if you looked closely, you would notice her shapely features.

"So you're saying I'm too beautiful for my own good?"

"My brother said flawless women who are always on their guard are hard to approach, my lady."

As she kept Diana company, Yufil carefully chose her words to avoid upsetting her. She didn't realize it was none other than her way with words that left her unable to get away from this troublesome young lady.

So by the time somebody knocked on the front door, Yufil was already tired of listening to Diana's grumbling.

"Excuse me," said Yufil upon returning to the room. "Ms. Florica is here."

"Florica? I'll see her right away."

Seeing Diana get up from the sofa with unconcealed excitement, Yufil felt relieved. She was finally getting a break from her mistress's grumbling.

Florica was a fortune teller whom Diana held in great esteem. In her thirties, she was a member of the Rupt people and had mildly tanned skin, as well as black eyes and hair. The Rupt were an ethnic group that led a nomadic lifestyle.

She always wore her gorgeous Rupt attire. That and the fact she was a fortune teller made her seem terribly mysterious.

As Yufil made tea and brought it to the parlor, she caught Diana grumbling to Florica.

"...and that's what happened. I'm so frustrated," said Diana, finishing her story.

She'd changed her audience from Yufil to Florica, evidently. The latter was calmly listening to Diana lament about her visit to the opera house yesterday. The room was filled with the smell of exotic eastern incense brought by Florica, causing Yufil to involuntarily hold her breath. She couldn't handle this smell at all.

Among the wealthy, there were some deeply superstitious types who believed in fortune-telling, and Baron Pautrier was one of them. Diana had been substantially influenced by her father, watching him as she grew up.

Yufil was the kind of person who found fortune-telling nonsensical, so she couldn't help giving Florica a cold look. Still, she was at least grateful to her; Diana always seemed to calm down after Florica listened to her grumbling and told her fortune.

"That must've been a very difficult experience for you, my lady. Now, what shall we do today? Would you care for me to see once again if you and Sir Lyle

are compatible?”

“No, not this time. I’d like to know about the fortunes of His Highness Prince Arcrayne and Estelle Flozeth from now on. Why, as a royal subject, I’m simply concerned about whether or not everything will go well for them.”

An obvious lie. Oh, I’m sure you’d be happy if their relationship ended in flames, Yufil scoffed, but only inside her mind.

“Very well. Then I will use my cards.”

A tranquil smile appeared on Florica’s lips, and she produced a set of cards with pretty designs and began to shuffle them.

“I see a sign of impending trouble,” said Florica after a while. Yufil had retreated to the waiting room after serving the tea, but she could still *hear* the fortune-telling going on in the parlor. Florica went on, “It appears they will be put to a test in the near future.”

That fortune could apply to practically anyone... How many times has she already said things like that with a serious look on her face? wondered Yufil.

No married life could be completely devoid of trouble. And while Arcrayne and Estelle weren’t an unthinkable pairing in terms of their social status, it was still one with clear disparity—the first prince of this kingdom on one side, and a noblewoman just up from the country on the other. The difference in the environments they’d grown up in would undoubtedly lead to discord between the two. Furthermore, the first prince was at the heart of the political strife over succession to the throne. Even Yufil, who wasn’t knowledgeable about the world of nobility, could tell that the outlook for Arcrayne and Estelle’s married life was rocky.

“Lyle wouldn’t take his eyes off that harlot yesterday,” said Diana. “I wonder if he really still has feelings for her...? Could you divine that for me too?”

Florica readily accepted her additional request.

Once the fortune-telling was over, Florica would always talk Diana into buying dubious lucky charms at high prices. Yufil couldn’t tell the difference between a fortune-teller and a swindler at all.

Chapter 11: The End of Dreams

Estelle had marched into Arcrayne's office at the Libra Palace with a question on her mind.

"Why am I not to accept this invitation? Heidi is my childhood friend... A fellow graduate of Adulena Academy too."

In Estelle's hand was an invitation to a literary salon from her close friend Heidi Léger. The Légers were a feudal noble family with their earldom in the north, and to Estelle, Heidi was as much a childhood friend as Lyle.

In the north of Great Rosalia was a steep mountain range known as the Dragonbone Mountains. It was the largest habitat of dragons in Rosalia, so named because the bones of dead dragons slept among its slopes.

The Dragonbone Mountains spanned the Léger, Flozeth, and Wyntia domains, and the close resemblance of their lands' natural environment had made the three families fast friends since long ago.

The memories of the four of them—Estelle, Heidi, Lyle, and Sirius—running around the hills and fields until dark were irreplaceable to Estelle.

Heidi was the same age as her, and the two had ended up as classmates at the girls' school. In those days, they'd spent a great deal of time together—with Keira and the others in their group of friends—and had kept a friendly relationship even after graduating, as their earldoms were close by. Heidi wasn't the self-proclaimed kind of friend like Matilda at the Royal Opera House. The length and depth of Estelle's friendship with her couldn't compare to those of Estelle's other friendships.

The invitation to the salon said it would be a gathering of the classmates Estelle had gotten along with in school, and that they wanted to go back to their school days once in a while and chat as though they were still students.

Heidi had been sending Estelle concerned letters ever since Estelle's injury at the Rogells' ball. Estelle had been waiting for an opportunity to meet her somewhere, and having received this invitation, she couldn't have asked for

more. Which was why she had come here to get Arcrayne's permission to accept it, and yet...

"I want to let you attend, believe me...but I've been informed Lyle Wyntia has made contact with Heidi Léger."

Estelle's heart leapt at the sudden mention of her former fiancé's name.

"Lyle and Heidi are childhood friends too. I do not find it strange they should meet at some point if they are both in Albion."

"What if you go to that salon and Lyle is there? It seems he's caused trouble at the Léger mansion three days ago, demanding to see you. Though some brawny servants apparently threw him out.

"Why do you know such a thing, Lord Arc...?"

"I had my men keep eyes on him. Was worried about that look he gave you at the Royal Opera House. I have someone watching Diana Pautrier too, just in case."

Estelle was dumbfounded at how well-prepared Arcrayne was. Still, she didn't want to back down so easily. It was a rare opportunity to see her old friend.

"As I have said before, even should I encounter Lyle, I would not mind having a conversation with him. And you always have someone guarding me..."

"Even if there's a guard with you, I don't want you to see Lyle Wyntia. That man is dangerous right now."

"Dangerous...?"

"When I had my men look into his conduct, some bad things came up."

After a brief silence, Estelle asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Apparently he's been frequenting a secret club that offers shady drugs."

Estelle held her breath at Arcrayne's words.

"On the surface, it's a members-only club for those who enjoy hookahs, but it appears those water pipes have a psychotropic, highly addictive drug named 'Elysium' mixed in with the spices and honey."

"Why is such a place allowed to operate...?"

“The Albion Police already keep a close eye on it, of course. It’s just pretty difficult to expose what goes on in there because, as it seems, the place has some troublesome backers.”

Isolated neighborhoods for ethnic minorities; Yanfatown, home to numerous immigrants from the Yang Empire; gangs lurking in the slums—the capital of Rosalia had plenty of dark corners where even the police couldn’t easily get involved.

“But why has Lyle turned to such things...?”

“It should be due to his engagement with Diana Pautrier. I was told he complained quite a lot about her in a coffee house he frequents... It seems this hookah club was recommended to him by a friend from his school days.”

Estelle could hear her pulse in her ears, a horrible sound. While she sympathized with Lyle, she was astonished that a small part of her rejoiced at his misery. It was true that she had felt anger when she learned about the sudden end of her engagement, but she thought it had been directed only towards Diana Pautrier.

So this anger I felt... It was directed at Lyle too, realized Estelle.

Not wanting Arcrayne to notice such an ugly emotion in her, she changed the topic to keep up appearances.

“Lord Arc, if Lyle has become a drug addict, does that not put Heidi in danger...?”

“I have people keeping watch on her mansion, to be on the safe side. I will respond adequately to whatever disturbance he may cause.”

Now that she knew all this, Estelle had no choice but to back down. After a moment of silence, she said, “Thank you for your consideration for my friend. I shall be taking my leave now, as I must write to Heidi saying I will not be able to attend.”

“Estelle,” Arcrayne called out as she started to get up from her seat, barely managing to suppress her discontent. “I can’t let you go out there. But you’re welcome to bring your friends here, to the Libra Palace. Just let me know ahead of time who you want to invite.”

“Would that be all right?”

“Naturally. And it will help you learn to socialize as a princess. You can talk details with Haoran. I’ll let him know before the day is over.”

“Thank you very much!”

Hosting meetings would involve a lot of work, but Estelle could put up with it for the sake of seeing her friends for the first time in a long while. She beamed as she thought about it.

***

The beautiful blue glass water pipe had geometric shapes drawn on it. Inhaling the smoke instantly made you feel lightheaded and pleasantly intoxicated.

This water pipe showed you dreams. The one Lyle always saw was about his childhood. When he closed his eyes, he saw Sirius, Heidi, and Estelle. It was a memory of them running across the green hills and fields, even as they got covered in mud.

Had Sirius married Heidi and Lyle married Estelle, they could’ve stayed together even after growing up. Lyle’s vague wishes for such a future were, by now, far in the past.

Back then, he had thought the joyful times would last forever.

One of the turning points that had marked the end of their childhood together was Sirius’s enrollment in the Royal College ahead of Lyle at the age of twelve. Lyle had to prepare for the entrance exams to the same college at the time, so they had far fewer opportunities to get together as four.

Sirius and Heidi had had feelings for each other, but it had never come to an engagement. Heidi was an only child and, as she was the only one who could inherit her family’s land and title, she had to take a man in marriage—but her position didn’t allow her to marry Sirius, who would inherit Flozeth himself.

Lyle and Estelle, on the other hand, *had* gotten engaged, but that had been broken off when Diana had come between the two.

Lyle loved Estelle, who had looked more and more ladylike and beautiful

every time he had seen her. She, too, had loved him dearly, as though he were her second brother. Lyle had unconditionally believed they would make a happy home together.

Had he not come across that runaway coach, the woman by his side would no doubt have still been Estelle. He wished he'd let that coach be. His kindness had cost him his engagement and forced him into a new one.

When the beauty who had stepped out of that coach looked at Lyle with affection, frankly, Lyle didn't object to it as a man. However, that woman—Diana Pautrier—had turned out to be the bad sort of high-class lady, with money and power to boot.

To grant Diana's wish, Baron Pautrier had bought up the debts that the financially troubled Earl Wyntia had owed to merchants he had frequented, and used them to compel Lyle to swap his betrothed for another. His only choice had been to accept it, for the sake of his family.

While Diana was a beauty, she was an uncompromising woman. She would become cross if Lyle didn't visit her frequently, and he had to be mindful of what gifts he brought her.

Every time he heard Diana's demands, they wore down his heart and made Estelle appear at the back of his mind. He couldn't help comparing the two. They were supposed to be only a year apart in age, but Diana had been so spoiled in her upbringing that she seemed childish and selfish by comparison.

Lyle wondered why he hadn't resisted back then—on the very day Baron Pautrier had visited his earldom, debt papers in hand. Looking back on it, the Wyntias had been completely overwhelmed by that wealthy boor of a merchant waving their large debts around. Also, according to Lyle's father, his pride hadn't allowed him to ask the young Sirius for help.

As time passed, they ended up drowning in debt—and soon enough the only option was to accept the baron's demands.

"I want to see Estelle," muttered Lyle with cloudy eyes. There was no common sense in his drug-addled mind to quell the thought.

Ever since the first prince had fallen in love with her, it had become difficult

for Lyle to see her. Sirius's whereabouts were unclear too. Heidi was the only one Lyle could rely on at this point. She had turned him away the other day, but she was kind; if he kept on asking her, surely she would eventually agree to help.

When he stepped outside the secret club, Lyle headed straight for Heidi Léger's mansion, his mind still adrift. On the way, a passerby forcefully bumped into him. As Lyle was shoved out onto the center of the road, the neighing of a horse reached his ears. And then...

***

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Estelle concentrated on the mana in her heart.

Move, she commanded. She felt it shift ever so slowly, flowing into narrow channels. However, she couldn't do it as well as Arcrayne had previously shown her.

Even if Estelle strongly wished for her mana to move, it would only move just a little bit. But the fact she could get it to move at all meant she'd at least made progress since the time she first learned how to train her power.

On an unrelated note, as she became conscious of the channels for circulating mana, she'd also realized something about the hypothesis Arcrayne had made when teaching her this exercise.

He had been right about the idea of her mana constantly flowing in the direction of her eyes. There was indeed a terribly wide channel leading from Estelle's heart to her eyes. However, the way Estelle was now, this particular channel was too wide for her to be able to close at her own will.

When Estelle concentrated on her training, she hit her limit unexpectedly quickly compared to when she focused on other tasks. Both medically and physiologically, it was apparently said that a person could maintain deep concentration for about fifteen minutes at most. After a lapse in concentration, Estelle couldn't move her mana anymore.

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. As usual, Estelle was in the room adjoining Arcrayne's office. She was unexpectedly busy, as she had many things to do: listen to lectures, work on embroidery, practice riding sidesaddle, and train her power.

"Lady Estelle, would you like some tea?" asked May. Perhaps she'd noticed Estelle's focus had been interrupted.

"It's fine—I'll make some myself. I need a little change of pace."

With that, Estelle walked over to the cupboard with tea caddies.

"His Highness should be taking a break soon too," said May. "Wouldn't he like it if you brought him some as well?"

"You think so? I hope I won't be bothering him."

Despite her reluctant tone, Estelle chose Arcrayne's favorite brand of tea. Minding the temperature of the water and the brewing time, she carefully made tea with a pleasant aroma.

Checking the mana, Estelle saw that the only people in the adjacent room seemed to be Arcrayne and Claus. It goes without saying she could tell Arcrayne apart by his abundance of mana, as he was a member of royalty, but since Claus was a high-ranking noble, he had plenty of his own, and Estelle could easily discern him too.

As Estelle started to walk towards the office, carrying a tray with tea cups, she abruptly stopped once she sensed that both men had dark mana.

"Lyle...had...accident..." came disjointedly from beyond the door leading to Arcrayne's office.

"Is something the matter?" asked May.

"Oh... Um... Both of them have dark mana, so...it looks like they're talking about something serious."

"Was...Highness...it...?" came again from the office while Estelle talked to May.

"I'll make tea again later. May, you can have this cup," said Estelle, returning to her previous spot and smiling to hide her agitation.

What's going on...? she wondered.

"Lyle Wyntia has had a traffic accident... Was it Your Highness who arranged it?"

Estelle had definitely heard Claus say those words. She wrapped her arms around herself, turning pale.

"Lady Estelle, you have been acting strange since a short while ago..." said May.

"It's nothing."

Though it seemed she still had her doubts, May didn't question Estelle any further and said no more. She was a skilled servant of the palace, so she must've picked up on Estelle's wishes.

Taking a deep breath, Estelle sat back in the couch.

Her feelings towards Lyle were mixed. When she'd realized her anger towards him, her love for him had vanished in an instant, but it wasn't as though she didn't care about her childhood friend at all anymore. Which was why learning he had gotten into an accident had made her worried.

***

It was a little past three in the afternoon when Arcrayne paid a visit to Estelle.

“Estelle, I’ve taken care of my duties for the moment, so let’s go work on your riding skills.”

Estelle saw the invitation as her opportunity to ask Arcrayne directly about Lyle. When she’d changed into a riding habit and headed to the entrance hall of the Libra Palace, Arcrayne, who had already been waiting there, enveloped her with his mana.

Ever since Liedis’s raid, Arcrayne had become overprotective of Estelle. Whenever she wanted to go outside, he always used his telekinesis to create a mana barrier around her. Since this rapidly depleted his mana, he could apparently only keep it up for about two hours at the longest, but it was enough for horse riding practice.

When he does things like this, how can I not...? thought Estelle. Her heart was drawn to him more and more at every such occasion.

When the two got to the riding ground, Estelle saw the groom waiting for them, holding Estelle’s favorite horse by the reins. Beside Lunaris was Arcrayne’s favorite, a brown male by the name of Azure.

Lunaris was equipped with a sidesaddle. Estelle had no choice, since practicing with it was necessary in preparation for the hunting contest, but she wished she could at least sometimes ride astride and go as fast as she wanted to.

Riding sidesaddle required more skill than riding astride. Those proficient with it could fully control the horse even in a sidesaddle—they could even have it jump over obstacles—but the best Estelle could do at her skill level was make the horse trot.

Mounting Lunaris, Estelle first made her slowly walk around. The wind was cold, but the view of the riding ground from atop Lunaris felt liberating.

Once Estelle and Arcrayne had gotten enough distance from the groom,

Arcrayne pulled his horse up beside Estelle's.

"You look like you have something to ask me."

Estelle was taken aback by the fact that the prince had forestalled her. Did her face make it that obvious?

"And it's about Lyle Wyntia's traffic accident," continued Arcrayne.

He had struck to the very heart of the matter—and Estelle froze up in surprise, which in turn elicited a smile from the prince.

"May reported this morning that you started acting strange all of a sudden. You should practice hiding your feelings a little better. You overheard my conversation with Claus, didn't you?"

"I apologize. It was improper of me to eavesdrop."

"I'm not angry. Though I'd be lying if I said I was comfortable with it."

Estelle wondered how that was any different from him being angry. Seeing Arcrayne's negative emotions, she grew dispirited.

"Why do you care about your former betrothed so much? Is it because he's your childhood friend?"

"I suppose so. He was like a second brother to me."

"I see," replied the prince after a pause.

Is he jealous...? No, there's no way, thought Estelle. She couldn't imagine Arcrayne having such...*human* feelings. At most, it must've been his desire to monopolize his favorite toy.

"It's true that he got run over by a coach," began Arcrayne as Estelle studied him. "Fortunately, he'll live, but apparently he broke the bones in his hips and legs, so he was taken to a hospital. Convalescence will surely be hard on him, though. I don't know how long he's been a regular in that secret club, but he should get symptoms of withdrawal to some degree."

"Do you think he will be able to free himself from his addiction as a result of his hospitalization?"

"Who knows? I do pity him, but he can only get through this on his own."

The Lyle that Estelle knew wasn't the kind of person to even try drugs. Her childhood friend's fall from grace was depressing for her.

"It was an accident, yes?" asked Estelle. "Why did Lord Claus sound as though he doubted you...?"

"Because that man is an eyesore to me."

"Huh?"

Estelle looked at Arcrayne in surprise. Unfortunately, she couldn't see his face because of the sun shining from behind it.

"The fact that your previous fiancé became a drug addict had enough potential to cause a scandal, but then he went and caused a disturbance at the Léger mansion trying to see you. It would definitely be trouble if any reporters were to get wind of this."

"Oh..." Estelle realized he was right. "Even so, the idea of you doing something to Lyle..."

But she realized with astonishment that she couldn't write it off as unthinkable.

Prince Gilfis, famous for his *love with the crown at stake*, had died in an accident in the New World together with his wife. There were rumors regarding the potential involvement of the royal secret service in their deaths.

"I haven't done anything to him," said the prince. "Though I don't know if you can believe that."

He spoke in a chilly voice. It was as though he could see the doubts in Estelle's mind. She was breaking into a cold sweat at the thought.

Arcrayne treasured Estelle. Which was why she had to believe him—but she simply couldn't bring herself to do so completely. To Estelle, Lyle was a land mine, so to speak. It wouldn't be strange if Arcrayne tried to eliminate him to protect her.

The prince's dismissive attitude was painful for Estelle. She loved him. So why couldn't she fully trust him?

"Why don't we pick up speed?" suggested the prince at length. It felt as

though he was saying this conversation was over, pushing Estelle away.

They went from a walk to a trot. Using her legs, Estelle instructed Lunaris to pick up speed.

This part wasn't a problem. What she couldn't yet do was the next step—making the horse canter.

Lunaris was a mild-mannered, properly trained horse, but Estelle's instructions didn't get through to her very well when she rode sidesaddle. It was especially vexing because she could easily do all this when riding astride.

Patting her horse with a sigh, Estelle lamented, "What's troubling you, Lunaris?"

"I think it's about your balance. She's smart, so she realizes that with where you put your weight, it will be dangerous to go fast."

Estelle vaguely understood as much even without Arcrayne telling her.

"Knowing this does not mean I can *do* anything about it. How nice it must be for men to be able to ride astride."

"I don't think you'll have any trouble at the hunting contest if you can handle trotting this well."

Then, just as Arcrayne forced a smile...

Something came flying in from far in the distance and bounced off Estelle, somewhere near her right shoulder. Startled, Lunaris neighed loudly and reared up.

"Estelle!"

Arcrayne's voice reached her ears.

Reflexively, Estelle pulled the reins towards herself and used all of her muscles to rebalance herself and avoid falling off.

"It's okay, it's okay, Lunaris. Easy, girl," she said, patting the horse.

Once Lunaris had calmed down, Estelle noticed Arcrayne's outstretched hand, hanging idly. "Oh... Perhaps I should have let myself be saved like a sweet girl?"

"No... I'm glad you got her to calm down."

“Had this not been Lunaris, I would probably have fallen off.”

Other than Lunaris’s natural temperament, she and Estelle trusted each other. Estelle patted the horse’s mane again.

After that, the groom and Royal Guard came running, and the situation turned into an uproar.

The object that had struck Estelle’s right shoulder turned out to be a crossbow bolt. Estelle shuddered at the thought of how she no doubt would’ve been badly wounded, had Arcrayne not been protecting her with his power.

The horse riding was called off for the day, and Estelle ended up returning to the Libra Palace together with Arcrayne.

“Lord Arc, thank you for protecting me. When I think about what would have happened otherwise...”

But her gratitude was only met with an apology. “Actually, I should apologize for letting you go through such a frightening experience. I did think they’d try something one of these days.”

She could infer from Arcrayne’s words that this was an everyday affair.

“I wonder why they are so persistent when they should know about your mana barrier...” said Estelle.

“Probably to harass me. Since they’re after my life, I always have to be on guard when I go out.”

Those words wrung Estelle’s heart. Anger at his situation welled up inside her. While the biggest target of her anger was the second prince’s faction, which kept making attempts on his life, Estelle was also angry at the king, who didn’t let Arcrayne leave the palace.

“I wonder why His Majesty forces you to stay in the palace...”

“My father wants me as his successor, and he won’t listen no matter how many times I protest. Besides, he’s already collapsed once. He can’t let a royal of age leave, thinking of the worst case scenario,” replied Arcrayne, then cracked a smile.

***

Ever since then, Arcrayne was constantly in a sour mood. He tried not to show it on his face, but Estelle—what with her power—couldn't help but see his negative emotions.

Was it because she had doubted him? Or because of the crossbow attack?

The Royal Guard had gotten to tracking the shooter at once, but apparently they'd never managed to find whoever it was.

"Kgh...!"

Estelle frowned; she'd vigorously stabbed a fingertip on her left hand with a needle. Perhaps she shouldn't have been working on embroidery with these gloomy thoughts coursing through her head.

A bead of blood welled up on her pierced finger.

Estelle couldn't let blood get on the mantle. Her hands had gotten tired anyway, so she carefully placed the fabric on the table. As she pressed a handkerchief to the wounded fingertip, a red stain of fresh blood appeared on it. Since she was embroidering on a thick fabric, she had to use strength, and her needle itself was thick. It appeared she had stabbed the finger quite deeply due to the force she'd applied.

Estelle reached for her bell, intending to call a maid over to treat her, but then...

She was in the shared bedroom, and there was a knocking on the door. As she gave permission for entry, Arcrayne appeared in his nightwear.

"Estelle, what happened to your hand?" asked the prince, his eyes widening at the sight of his fiancée.

"I got distracted... I was just about to call a servant over."

"There should be a first aid kit somewhere around here..."

Arcrayne took out a large wooden box from a cabinet, then moved over to Estelle.

"Show me," he said.

“You wish to treat me?”

“No need to call a servant just for this.”

Arcrayne applied clean gauze to the still-bleeding fingertip, then skilfully wrapped a bandage around it to fix it in place.

“Thank you.”

“You got this from the embroidery, right? That means I share the responsibility for your wound.”

“I suppose so,” said Estelle after some thought. “I did stab myself while embroidering *your* mantle.”

“I see you’ve learned to talk back to me.”

Arcrayne finally gave her a cheerful smile. Then he walked over to the mantle on the table and touched the embroidery.

“Thank you. It looks nicely done,” he said.

“I am glad it is to your liking.”

Thanks to Estelle’s daily efforts, she expected to be able to finish her work the following day. She’d been rather meticulous, so she was quite proud of how it had turned out. Once she was done, she would still need to line and embellish the fabric. Arcrayne would surely look dazzlingly gallant in this mantle, which was the royal blue color—the very symbol of royalty.

“Lord Arc...”

Estelle felt like she’d be able to ask him, now that he was in good spirits. It was about Lyle’s traffic accident. She wanted him to deny it more firmly—to give her a reason to believe him.

“Regarding Lyle... It truly was not you, was it?”

There was a moment of silence. “You still doubt me?” replied Arcrayne with a sigh. “I won’t deny that I considered getting rid of him. It doesn’t help that apparently he’s been calling out your name at the hospital constantly. Though I imposed a gag order right away.” Rather than angry, he looked sick of the matter. “Honestly, I still have half a mind to bump him off even now. But I

won’t. No matter how it happens, if he gets hurt, it will cause you to suffer. And I’d rather avoid that.”

“What do you mean by that...?”

“I want you to be my absolute ally. I wouldn’t do something that betrayed your trust.” Arcrayne reached out to touch Estelle’s cheek. “I’m surprised by it myself, but it would seem I’m jealous of that man.”

“Huh...?”

“*I’m* your betrothed now. It doesn’t feel good to think you have your previous fiancé in your thoughts.”

Those words brought Estelle both surprise and a somewhat dark delight.

Arcrayne generally didn’t seem the type to have human feelings, and yet astonishingly, he felt something akin to possessiveness towards her. She wanted to see what other emotions of his she could direct toward her. How could she accomplish that?

“Estelle,” whispered Arcrayne, “if I said I wanted to take our relationship further, how much would you let me do?”

“Further...? How do you mean...?”

As Estelle stood confused, Arcrayne traced his fingertip from her cheek to her chest, touching the top of her bosom over her clothes.

“I left a mark here before, remember? It’s been almost a month since we started living together. I was thinking it’s about time we took the next step.”

Estelle went wide-eyed at his words. He *had* said he would eventually have sex with her, but she’d never thought he’d want her today.

She knew it was stranger that they *hadn’t* done anything yet, given that they were a healthy man and woman sleeping in the same bed. As a woman, she felt joy at the thought of being desired. However, she surely couldn’t surrender her body and mind to him so easily.

What passed through Estelle’s mind now was the time she had attended the tea party hosted by Sierra. Many women at that party had been of the same

generation as her mother.

As they were married, they had more experience in life than Estelle. They'd thoroughly congratulated Estelle on (ostensibly) catching a prince, but they'd also worried about her. They'd imparted some of their knowledge about men's instincts on her, as well as how to make her married life with the prince go better, and similar things—with enough enthusiasm to make Estelle involuntarily recoil.

According to what she had been told, all men were hunters by nature.

In the primitive times, men had gone hunting to support their wives and children. Women, on the other hand, had raised children while striving for harmony with their surroundings. Which was why even now, after the advent of civilization, men apparently had something one could call a hunting instinct.

The more difficult it had been for a hunter to catch his prey, the more he valued it.

The veteran ladies had been quite emphatic about the importance of playing a woman who was just barely out of reach when dealing with a man.

Ah, but still... thought Estelle.

"You won't let me go that far yet...?"

Arcrayne's strangely pained look made it difficult for Estelle to reject him.

"No, no, Lord Arc..." began Estelle in a faint voice, casting her gaze down. "I am your betrothed, so if you desire me, all I can do is accept you."

Using the entirety of what little pride she had left, Estelle spoke with the implication that, although she was not against the act, it would only be as her duty.

She absolutely couldn't let Arcrayne find out how she truly felt. If he were to notice, Estelle would surely become an easy woman in his mind, one who surrendered her body and mind as though it were nothing.

***

Once the lights in the bedroom were off, Estelle removed her gown. The

nightwear under it had a suggestive design, made with the purpose of spending nights with a man in mind. Estelle wondered if she was meant to take it off as well in situations like this.

Undressing on her own was both immodest and embarrassing. As she sat on the bed in hesitation, unsure of what to do, Arcrayne came close to her.

Though the curtains were closed, moonlight shone faintly in, revealing glimpses of his collarbone and his burly chest between the seams of his nightwear.

If Estelle could see that much of him, it meant Arcrayne could see her body as well.

She panicked at the thought, as she didn't think herself as beautiful as Arcrayne. Since the meals at the Libra Palace were delicious and she wasn't allowed to go outside much, she'd recently gotten some flab on her belly, and no matter how much she had tried to lose weight, her slightly plump lower half wasn't getting any thinner. She had a complex regarding it.

"Are you scared?" asked the prince.

Fear, uneasiness, bashfulness, a little bit of anticipation, curiosity for the unknown—the mix of those feelings had put Estelle in a state of extreme nervousness. She couldn't stop trembling. Evidently, Arcrayne had taken it as fear.

"It *is* my first time..."

"I'll be as gentle as I can," replied Arcrayne. "Put this on first."

Arcrayne held out a bracelet with a mana stone attached.

"Is it a mana item...?" asked Estelle.

"It's one of the artifacts passed down in the royal family. It inhibits reproduction."

"Re...!" gasped Estelle, startled by the word.

Her cheeks turned red. She could sense that Arcrayne was smiling.

"My father gave it to me when I first brought you here. It would be a problem

if we had children so early, so I'd like you to wear it at least until our wedding. Royal weddings keep you busy for an entire day, which will be physically taxing on you and you won't be able to choose what dress you wear."

"Until our wedding." Estelle felt like Arcrayne was implicitly saying this wouldn't be the last time, which made her so embarrassed that she was worried her face might burst into flames.

Once Arcrayne saw Estelle put the bracelet on her left arm, he took the arm in question and poured mana into the bracelet. Then, he brought her left hand to his lips and planted a kiss on the wedding ring on her ring finger.

It was like a knight's vow.

Perhaps feeling that Estelle had relaxed, Arcrayne brought her closer to him.

***

"Sorry, I couldn't show much concern at the end," whispered the prince after the deed was done.

Estelle shook her head.

In the act, the prince *had* been a little nasty, but she thought he'd been gentle enough with her. His usual gentlemanly manner had persisted even when he'd made love to her.

It *had* hurt, but that must've been unavoidable, as it had been Estelle's first time. Although she really couldn't imagine there would ever come a time when it would start to feel good.

"I am glad you were my first, Your Highness Prince Arcrayne," said Estelle, awkwardly looking away.

At that, Arcrayne's mana brightened up in an instant. Turning her gaze back to him in surprise, Estelle saw him hold his mouth.

"Lord Arc...?" she asked.

After a pause, the prince replied, "That power of yours is a bother. You can *see it*, can't you?"

This time, his mana clouded over. The emotion Estelle could read based on

those changes, as well as his attitude, was...

Is he being bashful, by any chance...? thought Estelle. As she stared at Arcrayne in disbelief, he kissed her left upper arm—the place with the scar from when she had taken a bullet for him.

"It was thanks to that assassination attempt that I met you," said the prince. "However..." Next, he took her left hand and planted a kiss on the bandage over Estelle's fingertip. "Your beautiful figure is covered in wounds and scars because of me. I'm sorry."

"It is not your fault."

The one to blame had been that shooter.

Estelle *had* been angry at his high-handedness when he had proposed to her, but at this point in time, she thought that being brought together with Arcrayne hadn't been a bad thing in the end.

Though perhaps she had let herself be shackled too much and too easily by his gentlemanly attitude and his kindness over the three-something months they had known each other.

As Arcrayne gently held her in his arms, the warmth of his body made her heart melt.

***

When Estelle woke up, Arcrayne was already gone from the bedroom. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was almost noon, so the prince must've already headed to his duties.

As she tried to get out of bed, the pain in her lower half made her cheeks flush. She was also in her birthday suit, and looking over herself in the bright sunlight, she saw kiss marks in many different places. She was embarrassed at all the evidence the act had left behind.

Arcrayne had unveiled all of her, and Estelle had come to know him as well. While she was happy about it, there was something akin to melancholy welling up in her, perturbing her heart. Some part of her was unsatisfied.

It was the first time her feelings were in such a mess over a man. This must've

been the kind of burning love depicted in novels and plays.

Arcrayne had made her his fiancée. He had slept with her. He treasured her. What she wanted, however, wasn't the amicable gentleness he displayed towards everyone, but a heated, passionate feeling one would have for only a single person. It was sad and painful.

Estelle *had* loved Lyle, but she'd never felt such a burning emotion before. Perhaps her feelings for him had been a mere extension of sibling affection or friendship and not real love. It felt that way because of how much of Estelle's mind was now occupied by Arcrayne.

Estelle had her pride, however. She didn't want to disgracefully beg to be loved.

She couldn't afford to let Arcrayne find out about this feeling. Not only would her value go down in his eyes if he knew, but he would also take advantage of her love. He was the type who was capable of such a thing. Olivia Rainsworth appeared in Estelle's mind.

With a deep sigh, Estelle grabbed her nightwear, which hung artlessly on a bedside chair, and lightly dressed herself. Even slight movements made pain course through her, as though different parts of her were creaking. It wasn't like she couldn't get up, but she felt sluggish. She now understood the reason people around her had been so awfully worried about her after her fake first time.

Estelle was hungry. She wanted to get the sweat off her too.

As she was about to ring the bell to call a female servant, Estelle noticed a note on the bedside table. It read, in flowing handwriting, "I've opened up your schedule for today, so take it easy and rest."

It was Arcrayne's handwriting. Casting her eyes down, Estelle traced her fingers over the letters.

It was a little relieving that the one who came to see her wasn't Leah, but May, who knew Estelle's circumstances well. May wouldn't say anything unnecessary; she was always as calm as her appearance would suggest. Leah,

on the other hand, would definitely have made a big fuss over it and squealed a lot. There were times when it was relieving to see bright, sunny Leah, who was upfront with her feelings, but Estelle didn't want someone making noise by her side right now.

"How do you feel?" asked May.

After thinking for a moment, Estelle replied "It still hurts a little. Is anything strange about the way I walk?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. Should I say 'congratulations'?"

"I suppose so," said Estelle after another pause. "Thank you." She gave her an ambiguous smile.

From now on, she would need to make sure no one around her noticed how she felt about Arcrayne. If May, Claus, or Neil were to notice, it would definitely leak to Arcrayne as well.

May was considerate. She must've realized Estelle wasn't in the mood to talk, as she finished all of her work in an indifferent manner and retreated to the waiting room for female servants.

After filling her stomach with a light meal and washing off all the traces of the previous night's events, Estelle could finally relax.

Perhaps out of consideration for Estelle, May had prepared a loose tea gown for her that didn't require a corset. This was one of the pieces of clothing Estelle had asked Arcrayne for, as she found the gradation of the pink—which grew deeper and deeper towards the train—very lovely.

Wearing something pretty made Estelle feel better. Holding the train of the gown with a smile, she went to the shared bedroom to pick up her unfinished embroidery.

***

At last, the embroidery on the mantle was done. As Estelle was singing her own praises in front of her work, May entered her room.

"Lady Estelle, may I bother you for a moment?"

"May, you're just in time. I've finished the embroidery," said Estelle, holding

out the royal blue fabric to show the embroidered crests.

“It looks very neat. May I have it so I can take it to the tailor?”

“Certainly,” replied Estelle, handing over the fabric. “By the way, did you want something?”

“Do you think you can walk over to the parlor? Lord Flozeth is visiting.”

“My brother? Why now?”

“He said something has happened at the earldom and he must return posthaste.”

What could it be? This is concerning, thought Estelle.

“I’ll go right away,” she said.

Estelle got up and let May lead her to the parlor.

As she stepped into the room, she saw Arcrayne talking to Sirius.

“Estelle, how do you feel?” asked the prince, getting up and approaching her as soon as he saw her face.

“Are you unwell, Estelle?” added Sirius, his expression clouding over at the sight of Arcrayne’s behavior.

“It’s been very cold recently, so I’ve been a bit ill. Lord Arc is exaggerating.”

Estelle couldn’t tell him the truth, so she hurriedly made up an appropriate story. Then she sat beside Arcrayne, across from Sirius.

“In any case, brother, did something happen at Flozeth? I’ve heard you’re already going back...”

On a regular year, the dragon population in their northern habitats would be culled starting from around the end of February. As the month had only just changed, it was still a little too early for Sirius to return to Flozeth.

“Right...” replied Sirius. “I’ve been told there are signs that the dragons are close to waking up—maybe it’s the low amount of snow this year. So we’ve decided to start the hunt a little early. That’s all there is to it.”

“Be careful,” said Estelle.

Starting from this year, Estelle wouldn’t be there to help him. Granted, women only did behind-the-scenes work, but hunting dragons was a dangerous job that sometimes got people wounded or worse, so Estelle was worried.

“I got aid from His Highness in the form of modern Dragon Slayers and people to wield them, so the hunt should go more smoothly than last year. Oh, don’t make that face.”

Sirius got up and reached out to dishevel Estelle’s hair.

“Stop it! You’re making a mess of my hair,” said Estelle, pulling back on impulse.

A cheerful smile appeared on her brother’s face when he saw her like that.

“Your Highness, now that I have seen Estelle, I believe it is time for me to go. I am sure my sister has many shortcomings, but please take good care of her,” said Sirius and bowed to Arcrayne.

“I should be able to get a long vacation in summer, so I intend to pay a visit to Flozeth,” said the prince. “I want to see where Estelle was born and raised.”

“Please do visit us. I shall be waiting,” replied Sirius.

Estelle reflexively gazed at Arcrayne’s profile. She would be able to visit her home in the summer. Thoughts of her birthplace set her heart aflame.

***

Now that Estelle and Arcrayne had done the deed, the distance between them had definitely shrunk. As soon as Estelle got into bed, the prince wrapped his arms around her.

She wondered if they would do it again on this night. As she went stiff from nervousness, Arcrayne ran his fingers through her hair as though to calm her down.

“No need to be so on guard,” he said. “I won’t do anything today. I just pulled you to me because it’s cold.”

As Estelle felt relief at those words, Arcrayne sighed.

“It’s still hard for you, right? You bled yesterday. I’ll be upset if you think of me as the sort of terrible man who would desire a woman in such a state.”

“I am aware you are gentle. But you have...a young man’s appetites, do you not?”

“As a healthy man, I won’t deny I’m eager, but I’m not about to do it again with you until your pain fully goes away. I do enjoy teasing you and seeing your charming reactions, but I have no interest in bringing you pain.”

“Please do not tease me either...”

“I’ll have to try my best on that front.”

He’s definitely lying, thought Estelle. The fact he didn’t declare he wouldn’t even try was, perhaps, his conscience at work.

Giving up, Estelle let Arcrayne hold her. He had a high body temperature, perhaps owing to his firm musculature, though his build looked slender at first glance. Clinging to him felt so warm that Estelle didn’t even want a hot stone.

“You and Lord Sirius still get along really well,” said Arcrayne. “I got envious of you two earlier today.”

“We only have each other for siblings. *Oh...*” Estelle suddenly covered her mouth.

Just like she and Sirius only had each other for siblings, the same was true for Arcrayne and Liedis, even if they had different mothers. Estelle was proud of her relationship with Sirius, but the idea of saying it to Arcrayne felt insensitive.

“Don’t worry about it. Royals and feudal nobles grow up in different environments. In the first place, Liedis and I have different mothers, and we’re far apart in age. Also, unlike Lord Sirius, he has a difficult personality.”

“Oh, but my brother is no saint either. He is tactless and lazy...”

“He rules his domain in a sound way and cherishes his family. He’s plenty deserving of respect.”

Estelle felt awkward hearing praise for her brother. “Speaking of my brother, it sounds like he does not know of Lyle’s accident yet.”

“That’s because I’ve managed to hush it up pretty well so far, it seems. Still, I think it’s only a matter of time before he finds out. The engagement between Lyle Wyntia and Diana Pautrier is history.”

“Huh...?” Estelle held her breath.

“It seems Baron Pautrier has paid quite a large sum to House Wyntia to cut ties with them. I understand he doesn’t want a drug addict as his son-in-law, but I don’t know what to say at this point...”

Estelle felt the same way. The Pautriers had used money to steal Lyle from her, and now they were using it to cast him aside? She *did* think Lyle was completely at fault for turning to shady drugs, but to begin with, hadn’t he become that way because Baron Pautrier had forced him to swap one fiancée for another?

Estelle wondered if Diana was sad about what had happened to her beloved. Or was she angry instead? Since Estelle had never spoken to her directly, she could only guess, but somehow, she felt it was the latter.

“Estelle, would you like to see him?”

She went stiff at the sudden question. What answer would be correct here? As she hesitated, unable to give a quick reply, an uncomfortable smile appeared on Arcrayne’s lips.

“You can decide based on how you feel; no need to wonder how I’ll react,” said the prince. “Then again, I’m sure you’ll still try to read my emotions, so I’ll tell you up front: frankly, I’d rather you didn’t go to see him.” Arcrayne went silent for a moment. “He’s currently suffering from symptoms of withdrawal. I’ve been told he gets pretty violent due to the agony and hallucinations he’s experiencing, so apparently they keep him restrained in a hospital room with iron bars. There’s no way I’d want you to see your former betrothed like that. Imagining how you might feel a strange sort of sympathy towards him makes me uncomfortable, and I don’t want to see you suffer.”

Arcrayne’s feelings were only natural. Estelle was his fiancée now, so the correct choice here was surely not to see Lyle.

After some thought, Estelle said, “If you feel that way, why did you ask me if I

wanted to see him?”

“He was like another brother to you, wasn’t he? I just thought that if you have the resolve to see him the way he is now and ask to do so, I shouldn’t stop you.”

He really looks like he hates the idea, thought Estelle. Still, she was glad that Arcrayne wanted to respect her feelings.

Estelle closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she gazed at Arcrayne, and said, in no uncertain terms, “I shall not see him. I have put Lyle Wyntia behind me. I intend to stay away from him henceforth, and I do not believe it would be right to do otherwise.”

Her current betrothed was Arcrayne. If she were to see Lyle and it became a source of rumors, she would be holding the prince back.

“Very well. I’ll take appropriate measures to make sure he won’t cause you any worries anymore.”

“What do you intend to do to him?” asked Estelle.

“I don’t mean I’ll hurt him. I’ll just introduce him to a sanatorium for drug addicts. There’s a nice place in Parama,” explained Arcrayne, as though defending himself. Perhaps he had sensed Estelle’s wariness.

Estelle recalled what she’d hastily learned about geography as part of her education as a princess. Parama was a small island to the southwest of Great Rosalia. It was geographically close to Kildare, where Arcrayne had taken Estelle for their trip, so it was surely warm and comfortable even in winter.

“It’s an isolated island that only gets one ferry a day; nobody could get their hands on drugs in that environment. The facility is backed by the royal family and sees thorough inspections, so I can guarantee you it doesn’t have the sort of abusive and inhumane treatment that’s common with these kinds of sanatoriums.”

“Are you doing that much for Lyle for my sake?”

“I am. That’s how valuable you are as an Awoken.”

As an Awoken... thought Estelle. The arms pulling her close were so gentle, and yet, to Arcrayne, Estelle was hardly different from a pawn or a card after

all. Even then, she still loved the warmth beside her.

Estelle brought her cheek to Arcrayne's muscular chest and closed her eyes.

***

Diana Pautrier was on a visit to a hospital located on the outskirts of Albion.

"My lady, are you sure you wish to go...?" asked her attendant, who had accompanied her here in part to act as her bodyguard. He was knitting his brows in uneasiness.

"Oh, be silent, you. We're going. They said Lyle is here."

This hospital was for the wealthy. Thanks to the enormous donations from the upper class, it was even more luxurious both inside and outside than an estate of a run-of-the-mill noble.

"Are you visiting? Do you have an appointment?" asked a receptionist once Diana had entered the building.

Since this was the most prominent hospital in the entirety of Albion, the receptionist was as refined as a high ranking noble's butler.

"Yes, I do."

"In that case, please fill this application form."

To protect the privacy of the patients, this hospital didn't allow visits without appointments made in advance. Even if you had an appointment, you still had to state your relationship to the patient and prove your identity with a personal seal or something similar.

After filling the required fields on the form, Diana handed it back to the receptionist together with a ring bearing her seal.

"Your father has indeed contacted us," said the man after checking everything. "Allow me to show you the way." With a graceful bow, he invited Diana deeper in.

Once Diana had followed the employee into the ward where Lyle was supposed to be, she was shaken by the sudden transformation in the air.

Decorations like paintings and flowers were no longer anywhere to be seen; there was nothing but seemingly endless corridors with cold white walls and hardwood floors.

“Why is this ward so barren?” asked Diana.

“Because it is for those with mental disorders. We avoid putting anything here that could endanger our patients.”

Diana’s heartbeat grew unpleasantly loud as she listened to the man’s explanation.

She had been informed three days prior that her fiancé Lyle had been in an accident and got badly hurt.

Diana had been impatient to pay him a visit, but before she could learn the name of the hospital he had been taken to, she had been astounded by the fact her father had canceled her engagement. The reason he had given her was that Lyle had become addicted to drugs—something Diana had found hard to believe. Her father had said he couldn’t let Diana marry such a man.

Diana hadn’t been convinced. When she had protested, her father had told her to go see the hospitalized Lyle in person. He must’ve thought she would come to accept reality once she saw it with her own eyes.

After Diana entered the ward, the receptionist leading her switched places with a nurse in white. The occasional moans and screams she heard on her way through the hallways were terrifying.

“We’re here, my lady,” said the nurse. “Sir Lyle is currently suffering from drug withdrawal, so please don’t be too surprised.”

With that, she led Diana to a room where Lyle lay in bed. Diana gasped at the sight of him.

With a corset on his hips, casts on his legs, and his arms restrained by leather belts, Lyle looked emaciated. He stared at nothing in particular, muttering, “Estelle... Estelle...”

Once Diana realized he was saying Estelle Flozeth’s name, she was bewildered

and, at the same time, started to tremble in anger. *Why... Why is it always her...?* A different set of thoughts simultaneously passed through her mind: *I don't need this...* this *anymore. I don't need such a man. I don't care about him! This isn't the aristocratic young man I fell in love with. I should've realized it sooner.*

He had looked gallant and handsome when he had stopped Diana's runaway coach, which was why she had wanted him no matter what—why she had gone so far as to steal him from Estelle Flozeth. In retrospect, however, Lyle hadn't been thoughtful as Diana's betrothed. He hadn't visited her unless she had demanded it of him, and at first, he had always brought her the same gifts every time.

Granted, he had improved once she'd complained to him, and he had been gentlemanly and elegant when escorting her, but at the end of the day, Lyle was a rural noble. He couldn't stand comparison in any respect with the prince Estelle Flozeth had gotten for herself.

"Lady Diana..." her attendant hesitantly called out.

Diana merely stood there, her face beet red from jealousy and anger.

Then, as though Lyle had finally realized he had a visitor, his eyes became fixed on Diana. The next moment...

"AAAAAHHHHH!!!" A scream erupted from his throat. "You witch! Begone from my eyes! AAAAAGGGHHH!!!"

What? thought Diana, taken aback*. A witch? Did he just say that to me?*

"You witch! She-devil! Hellcat!"

Cursing at Diana with vitriolic, foul, unbearable language, Lyle struggled on the bed with such force that, had he not been restrained, he would probably have made a grab at her.

"Please calm down, Sir Lyle. There's no witch or deviless here," said the nurse gently, leaning over him. "My lady, Sir Lyle is most likely delirious. This is one of the symptoms of withdrawal that—"

"Don't bother. I'm leaving," said Diana with a cold look, then turned around.

“M-My lady...” said her attendant, looking pale.

Ignoring him, Diana strode out of the room. This was the first time she had suffered such humiliation. *Estelle Flozeth...* The name passed through Diana’s mind. *It’s all that harlot’s fault.* All *of it.* As Diana bit her nails, the flames of her hatred grew ever hotter.

***

On the following day, Diana summoned her favorite fortune teller—Florica—to her mansion.

Florica was a woman with tanned skin who professed to have come from the Rupt people. The Rupt people were nomads; they lived on the move. Almost all of them led a wandering existence as farmers of livestock, traveling entertainers, and other, similar occupations.

Fortune-telling was their specialty too. It was said that the Rupt people were the ones who had brought tarot cards and crystal gazing to Rosalia.

Since they believed in their own god, they had to deal with deep-seated racism and persecution in regions where Messianism was the most popular religion. Even the Kingdom of Rosalia was no exception, as the Rupt people were partially forced to live in isolated districts for ethnic minorities.

Diana, too, would normally have avoided other ethnic groups. But she made an exception for Florica, since she saw her as a competent fortune teller. After all, Diana would use any means or people that she could, no matter how she felt about them. One could say it was a family precept the Pautriers had formed as they had come up in the world as merchants.

Clad in her Rupt attire, Florica gave off an air of mystery. The parlor where Diana had received her had the usual incense burning, filling the air with an exotic eastern scent. According to Florica, this incense apparently heightened her spiritual inspiration.

“My lady, what fortunes do you wish told today?” she asked.

“I summoned you for a different reason this time,” replied Diana, then told her servants to leave the parlor. She made them get out of the anteroom too.

“I see you’re much more privacy-conscious than usual,” said Florica.

“I don’t want anyone to hear what I want to talk to you about today.”

“Oh my... Whatever is it you wish to speak about?”

As Florica tilted her head in confusion, Diana sat down right in front of her and got straight to the point—no mincing words. “I’ve heard the Rupt people

can place curses. Is it true?”

“Curses, you say?”

“Yes. Curses, black magic... I’ve been told you’re skilled in such things.”

After a moment of thought, Florica replied, “The one you hate so much you want her cursed—it is Miss Flozeth, is it not?”

It must’ve been clear from the things Diana usually talked to Florica about. The former nodded.

“To get straight to the point, I can’t place curses. However...if an alternative would suit you...”

As she spoke, Florica rolled up the cuff of her left sleeve, revealing numerous thin, ring-shaped bracelets on her arm. She took off one of them and showed it to Diana. Embedded in the bracelet was a mineral that resembled a mana stone. The metallic part was crowded with engravings of what appeared to be wedge-shaped letters from Ancient La Tène.

“Is that by any chance an artifact...?” uttered Diana.

Florica smiled calmly. “Yes. It’s passed down through the generations among my people. This artifact has the power to alter a person’s appearance.”

“Altering...?”

“That’s right. Don’t you think it would let you personally deal with the one you hate instead of relying on something as uncertain as curses? For instance, you could transform into one of Lady Estelle’s maids—”

“Wait,” interrupted Diana. “I didn’t say I wanted to harm anyone *directly*. That would be going too far.”

“Why so? You hate her enough to want to curse her, yes?” asked Florica, tilting her head in puzzlement.

“I do, but... There’s a difference between cursing someone and directly harming them. Besides, it would be impossible to do anything to someone in the palace. That harlot always has guards escorting her.”

“Such a thing won’t be a problem if you use this artifact.”

Diana was mesmerized by Florica's jet-black eyes as she presented her bracelet. Diana felt like her head was spinning; it was as though she were being sucked into Florica's eyes. She became awfully sick of the smell of the incense. From somewhere beyond the purple smoke that hung over the room came a quiet voice, rather deep for a woman.

"You loathe her enough to want to curse her, yes? Then why not retaliate against her with your own hands, my lady?"

The sweet, calm murmur made Diana lightheaded. It was just like the temptation of the devil depicted in sacred scriptures, seeking to lead one astray. Diana knew she shouldn't agree with such statements, but for some reason she couldn't disobey Florica.

"You hate Estelle Flozeth, do you not? It was because of her that your relationship with Sir Lyle went awry—indeed, that he turned to drugs..."

"I hate her," murmured Diana.

That's right. I hate her. The thoughts came unbidden to Diana's mind. *She's always the fortunate one. Lyle couldn't keep his eyes off her even after he became my betrothed, and he's chasing after her even now. And yet that harlot goes and has a prince fall in love with her, and rumors say she's becoming a princess this autumn.*

It's unforgivable. I *won't forgive her for it. Why does everyone lavish such a dull woman with attention? I'm far more beautiful and richer than her. My rank in court may be low, but House Pautrier has more than enough wealth to make up for it. Perhaps it was different in the distant past, but nowadays money is what counts, not those old feudal titles.*

Florica held out her hands to Diana. "Make up your mind, Lady Diana. My friends and I will lend you our aid."



Chapter 12: Fool's Dance

It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts! passed through Diana's mind. *All of my bones... My flesh... It feels like they're getting torn to pieces.*

"Ugh... Kgh... AGGHH, AAAAAGGGHHH!!!" she screamed, ungracefully curled into a ball in front of Florica.

They were in a private house where Florica had taken Diana. It was located in Albion's suburbs, in a district known as the East End. Lying unconscious by Florica's side was a servant of the palace who attended Estelle—Leah Embrey. She had been abducted by Florica's associate.

"Just a little more, Lady Diana. Keep it up."

Even though Florica could clearly see how desperately Diana was enduring the pain, her calm smile never left her face.

This bitch is out of her mind, thought Diana. She wanted to hurl abuse at her, but the pain was too strong.

"Unfortunately," said Florica, "altering your form to perfectly copy that of another cannot go without pain. After all, people differ not only in their facial features, but also in their skeletal structure and the shape of their internal organs."

Diana wished she had gotten that explanation before she had used the bracelet.

"AAAGGGHH! It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts!!!"

She wished she could faint to escape the pain. Her body loudly creaked all over. This pain had started right after Diana had put on the bracelet she had received from Florica and dripped some of Leah Embrey's blood on the bracelet's mana stone. According to Florica, this had been necessary to let the bracelet import the physical information about Leah's body so it could reshape Diana's own to an identical one.

Diana wondered how much time had passed. She had screamed so much that she no longer even had the energy to raise her voice, and she was limply lying on the floor with vacant eyes. She could hear a hoarse breathing sound coming out of her throat.

“Well done, Lady Diana. Now please take a look. Nobody could tell you apart from that servant over there,” said Florica, sitting beside Diana and holding a hand-mirror out to her.

Diana’s eyes went wide at the sight of herself in the mirror. She had indeed become Leah herself. Even Leah’s moles and the pimples on her chin had been accurately reproduced.

Scolding her sluggish body to get it to move, Diana lifted her hand and was surprised once more. The shape of her hand, her nails, the color of her skin—everything about it told her it was a different person’s hand, and not the one Diana had been accustomed to. She trembled in terror, belated though it was.

“I’ve reall—!” She choked mid-sentence and broke off into a fit of coughing.

Diana’s throat burned from all the screaming. Florica immediately offered her a glass of water. Sitting up and snatching the glass, Diana emptied it in one draft. Although it was only regular water, it was extremely delicious. It seeped through her exhausted body.

Florica reached out for Diana’s left arm and removed the bracelet artifact from it with a snap.

“You’re taking it back?” asked Diana after a moment’s pause.

“I am, since it has served its purpose. And you won’t be able to bring any mana items to the palace without permission. Don’t worry, you’ll keep your new appearance for about a week even without the bracelet.”

“Is that so...” As might be expected, given that even Diana’s skeletal structure and internal organs had been remolded, the voice coming from her mouth was unfamiliar to her. “What should I do now...?”

“Take a bath first. You’re drenched in sweat. Once you feel better, let’s talk about what’s to come.” Smiling, Florica extended her hand to Diana.

Diana didn't know how exactly Florica had organized Leah's abduction, but apparently she had waited until Leah was out on her day off.

"Lady Diana, I'll be calling you Leah from now on. Let's pretend you hit your head hard while you were out in the city and your memory is fuzzy. Once you've snuck into the palace, stick to that story and hope for the best."

"Very well."

Diana agreed to the plan. Having seen Yufil work, she had a rough idea of what personal attendants did.

Diana had already concocted a story prior to this, one to explain her disappearance away—namely, that she had gone to a tourist spot far away from Albion to heal her broken heart. To make sure her family would tell the same story, she had relayed it through her maid Yufil. Yufil was the kind of calculating person who was as loyal as a dog so long as you gave her money. She was probably having fun at some tourist spot right around now, what with the large tip Diana had given her.

"Use this," said Florica, presenting Diana with a glass vial. "It contains lethal poison without taste or odor."

After a moment of thought, Diana replied, "I should put it in her drink when nobody's looking, right?"

"That's right. If it goes well, leave the palace as quickly as possible."

"Would I even have the chance?"

"The poison should take effect in about twenty minutes at the earliest and three hours at the latest. You should hurry as much as you can."

After another pause, Diana said, "I suppose."

She took the vial and held it tightly. She once again became aware of the murderous intent raging inside her. *I hate Estelle Flozeth. I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.*

Oddly enough, this house too smelled like the incense Florica had burned for her fortune-telling.

***

Once Florica saw Diana off to the palace, guided by a man Florica had hired, she heaved a deep sigh. Then she roughly wiped her lipstick off on her cuff, put the artifact she had gotten back from Diana on her left arm, and frowned.

This was an extremely powerful artifact known as the “Bracelet of Metamorphosis.” If you let it absorb someone’s blood, it allowed you to shapeshift into the spitting image of them—and it was terrifying how it went so far as to reproduce even their skeletal structure, moles, and pockmarks.

With the help of this artifact, even a muscular giant of a man could shapeshift into a slim beauty. Florica didn’t know where the excess mass went, but she judged it pointless to think about. To begin with, artifacts had been created with lost technologies that were beyond human understanding. The only thing certain was that using this artifact to change one’s appearance always brought severe pain. Also, the process of reshaping the user’s body starting from their skeletal structure was, frankly, pretty revolting. Until the shapeshifting was over, your bones and flesh would bulge as though you were a monster.

Imagining the coming pain was depressing, but it was about time “Florica” discarded *his* current face. Taking a deep breath and bracing himself, he directed his mana into the bracelet. The effects of the bracelet’s shapeshifting would eventually wear off, even if you didn’t do anything, but you could also control it at will by feeding your mana to the bracelet.

“Kgh...” he groaned, curling into a ball from the intense pain all over his body.

The flesh of his arms bulged; his bones creaked.

Agh, shit, it hurts so bad... he thought. He could never get used to this pain, no matter how many times he had experienced it. However, it was none other than this bracelet that made “Florica”—or rather, Trickster, as people called him—a shady dweller of the underworld. He was an odd-job man who would do anything for the right pay—from searching for lost items to assassinations. The name “Trickster” came from how he’d stir up messes and then vanish, just like the mischievous gods that occasionally appeared in myths. The principle governing his behavior was “anything goes, so long as it’s fun.”

In the meantime, his pain had gradually subsided. Checking his arms, he saw

they were thicker than before. They were no longer the slender, frail arms of a woman; Trickster smiled at the sight of his rather developed forearm muscles.

Getting up, he went to a room deeper in the house, one that had a mirror on a dresser. Looking into the mirror, he saw a young man with jet-black hair and eyes, as well as the tanned skin that was characteristic of the Rupt people.

Everything was fine. Every part of him was back to the way it had used to be. Trickster breathed a sigh of relief gazing at his original form, which he hadn't seen in quite some time. Even he found it strange how his hairstyle and face were exactly the same as before he had become "Florica." It was outright uncanny how there wasn't even any indication that his facial hair had grown.

Now, who will I become next...? he wondered.

Fortune tellers of the Rupt people could get anywhere, and it was convenient for the purpose of searching for "customers," but what put them at a disadvantage was the discrimination they faced. Life wasn't easy for nomadic peoples in this kingdom. If he had to shapeshift again, he hoped he could take the form of a Rosalian man with an unremarkable face, the sort of man one could find anywhere. An ordinary face would let him blend into crowds, and a man's form would generally give him more freedom to act, given how Rosalia treated women as inferior to men. Fortunately, his foolish clients had paid him a large sum, so he wouldn't need to work for a while.

Hope it goes well for you, Mrs. Rainsworth and Mrs. Wyntia, thought Trickster, recalling the foolish clients in question. He had prepared Diana Pautrier to assassinate Estelle Flozeth, First Prince Arcrayne's betrothed, to grant those two's wish. Though if you considered Diana herself a client, it was a wish shared by three of his clients.

Mrs. Rainsworth had wanted her daughter Olivia to become a princess, and she hated Estelle for making the prince fall in love with her just before it happened. Mrs. Wyntia hated Diana for making her son Lyle turn to drugs. And Diana hated Estelle.

When he had heard each of his client's requests, this plan had come to him like a divine revelation. He had felt like a genius for it.

Diana was a rash, dim-witted high class lady. Using a pastille passed down

among his people to plant a thought in someone's head was as simple as it was effective. That being said, given how easily Diana had fallen for it, Trickster felt that the assassination was rather unlikely to succeed.

But it was no matter to him. His clients' requests were more about making trouble for Estelle and Diana than ensuring their deaths. He was more interested in seeing what kind of chaos a foreign substance—that is, Diana in Leah's form—would cause in the palace. The rich and powerful running around like chickens with their heads cut off, without a trace of their usual composure... Why, that was a more exciting spectacle than your average play.

As Trickster narrowed his eyes, a satisfied smile appeared on his face.

***

Leah had come back after sustaining an injury while out in the city. Estelle was rattled when May told her about it first thing in the morning.

"How bad is it? What in the world happened?" she asked.

"They say she fell down some stairs and hit her head rather hard. Her injury doesn't look so bad, but it seems her memories are muddled..."

Apparently there were rather large gaps in Leah's memory. When she had come back late at night the previous day with a man who claimed to be a doctor, she had said she could remember her name and the fact that she worked at the Libra Palace, but she couldn't remember what duties she had fulfilled as a servant here—or anything from the time she had worked at Flozeth.

"Why, in such a state as this... I imagine she'll have difficulty working as before," said Estelle, her expression cloudy in worry for Leah.

"I agree. Although she claims she'll have no trouble..." May's face was dark too.

"What is Leah up to right now?"

"For now, I've had her resting. Would you like me to call her over?"

"No, I'll go myself. Is she in the anteroom?"

As Estelle's personal servants, May and Leah spent their nights in a servants'

waiting room adjacent to Estelle's private one so that they could answer her summons even at night if necessary. Getting up, Estelle went to see Leah.

Leah seemed to be reading on a bed in the waiting room. Estelle opened her eyes wide the moment she saw her.

Is this...Leah...? she thought. The person in front of her was definitely Leah. Estelle furtively looked at the back of Leah's left hand and saw that the mole at the base of her thumb was there. Her brown hair and purplish blue eyes were just as before, too.

There was a red pimple on her chin. This too matched how Estelle remembered her—Leah had bawled about the pimple just before her day off.

And yet...

Why did Leah have so much mana? It was the amount one would expect a noble to possess. That wasn't the only strange thing about her: as soon as she had seen Estelle, her mana had clouded over. Estelle could sense strong negative emotions from her. Leah had never felt anything like that towards her even once before.

"Leah...?" she said.

"Estelle... Lady Estelle," replied Leah.

"Um... How do you feel? I heard about your accident..."

"My body is fine. But I don't remember anything..."

After some thought, Estelle suggested, "Would you like to go back to Flozeth? Wouldn't it be better for you to take it easy and recuperate with your family around you?"

Leah came from a farmer's family in Flozeth. Her family was by no means wealthy, but she had spoken with pride about how well they got along with each other.

"P-Please let me work by your side. I can't remember anything other than the fact I worked here... I feel like my memory is more likely to come back if I stay here."

“I see,” replied Estelle after another pause.

All the while she was pleading to stay, Leah’s emotions remained murky. Estelle frowned, puzzled.

After telling Leah to take it easy, Estelle returned to her private room together with May.

“That may not be Leah,” whispered Estelle.

“What...?” replied May.

“Leah didn’t have that much mana before. Now she has as much as a medium-ranked noble.”

May went silent, placing a hand on her chin in thought. Then, after a short while, she spoke again.

“She looks exactly like Leah, though, doesn’t she? The moles on her hands and face, the pimple on her chin, they’re all exactly the same as what Leah had before her day off.”

“Sorry,” replied Estelle. “I must be saying strange things.”

As Estelle sunk into low spirits, May shook her head and said, “No, I actually felt that something was off about her too.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Everyone has their little quirks. The way we walk, use silverware when eating—the way we speak... All of us differ in our little mannerisms, which show our birth, upbringing, the difference in our sex, age, and similar things.”

There was indeed a distinction between the working class and the upper class both in the way they carried themselves and in their language. No matter how far one might go in dressing up as another, it took extraordinary effort to make up for the difference in education and upbringing since birth.

“This Leah is definitely different from the one before her day off. How should I put it...? She gives off the impression of an upper class lady raised in Albion.”

Estelle went wide-eyed at those words. “What made you think so?”

“It’s what I gathered from her language and mannerisms combined. Unlike the Leah we knew, this Leah speaks Rosalian with very clear pronunciation. There is something refined about the way she carries herself, too... Don’t you think it fits with the amount of mana you saw she had with your power, Lady Estelle?”

After a moment of thought, Estelle replied, “So you’re saying some high class lady has taken Leah’s form?”

“The fact she claims to have amnesia is also suspicious, so I think that is quite likely. I’ve heard auctions in the underworld sometimes sell artifacts with the sort of effects you would never imagine. It seems wise to let His Highness know about this as soon as possible.”

Estelle’s heartbeat grew unpleasantly loud at May’s words.

***

In his office, Arcrayne made a sour face when he heard Estelle and May’s report about Leah.

“Given all the evidence, it’s funny just how overwhelmingly suspicious she is.”

“This is no laughing matter, Your Highness,” Claus cut in with a frown. He was in the office with the prince.

“I suppose you’re right. If we have an assassin in Leah’s form on our hands, Estelle is the most likely target,” muttered Arcrayne with a blank look, linking his hands in front of his chest.

He’s feeling a negative emotion... Is this...anger...? Estelle studied him. He was angry at her peril. That made Estelle happy.

A happiness that was terribly inappropriate, considering the situation. If this Leah was fake, then the real one was in danger. As her mistress, Estelle should’ve worried about her first. *I’m the worst,* she inwardly told herself, hanging her head in shame.

“I wonder if the real Leah is all right...” she murmured.

“I’ll have people track her down at once,” said Arcrayne, signaling to Claus with his eyes.

Claus nodded, then left the office, likely heading to instruct his men to search for Leah's whereabouts.

"You've told the fake Leah to rest for today, right?" asked the prince.

"I have," replied Estelle.

"Then for the time being let's leave her alone and see what she does. Estelle, make sure you're never by yourself. And I'd prefer you stayed by my side as much as possible. Let's suspend your lectures."

"Certainly... Thank you for your consideration."

Estelle didn't think she would be able to concentrate on anything, so she was grateful for Arcrayne's offer.

"I hope we can find the real Leah without much difficulty... Still, this is troubling. Since she has managed to so accurately make herself look like somebody else, there must be an artifact involved in this. I need to investigate both this and whether we have any other infiltrators here in the Libra Palace..." muttered the prince with a frown. "Regardless of how the search for Leah goes, I'll make my move once I finish investigating my palace. Estelle, I want you to be more or less prepared for it too."

Estelle held her breath at Arcrayne's words. She had only now realized that there was no guarantee Leah would come back in one piece.

If something happens to Leah... The thought passed through Estelle's mind as she hung her head and bit her lip. If such a thing were to happen, she might resent the prince for it.

***

Why do I have to do all this? thought Diana Pautrier, her mind full of complaints. While she had successfully gotten into the Palace of Albion disguised as Estelle's personal servant Leah Embrey, she had been woken up early in the morning and told to work again and again.

She hated to admit it, but Estelle was the mistress here in the Libra Palace. This was work her personal servants had to do. Diana had thought she would only have to do her mistress's hair and talk to her. She had never imagined she

would have to make Estelle's bed and clean her room. *Yufil doesn't do these things,* she thought to herself. At least in Baron Pautrier's mansion, cleaning was a housemaid's job.

At the residences of wealthy nobles, servants specialized in different tasks. For example, the laundry was done by a laundry maid, the cooking by a kitchen maid, and so on. They didn't do work that was outside of their area of responsibility. The fact these households employed many highly specialized servants was proof of their wealth.

And yet it seemed this Libra Palace was constantly short-handed. Apparently this was due to Arcrayne's wish to only have trustworthy personnel in his vicinity. From the workers' perspective, though, this was quite difficult to bear.

"You generally go from top to bottom when cleaning. Have you forgotten even that? First, you dust the higher areas and bring all the dust to the floor."

"You sweep corners in a circle? What's wrong with you?"

"You have to pull the sheets tighter. Go on, put your back into it!"

Shut up, shut up! inwardly repeated Diana. Estelle's other personal attendant, Maybel Cao, kept finding fault with everything she did. What made Diana even more irritated was the fact Maybel's name and looks made it clear she was an immigrant from the Yang Empire. *You're forgetting your place, immigrant. Foreigners like you should stay in Yanfatown.*

The occasional glimpse of Estelle—who seemed quite intimate with Prince Arcrayne now—only served to fuel Diana's anger.

Another thing Diana couldn't tolerate was the way she looked now, thanks to the artifact.

Leah Embrey was an unattractive woman. Her plain brown hair, her purplish-blue eyes that betrayed her as a countrywoman from the north, her rough skin with all its blemishes—Diana was dissatisfied with every part of this new appearance.

What especially annoyed her was something that was always in her field of vision—Leah's hands, with their uncouth shape. The skin on them was chapped from cold and dryness, and the nails were cut short. These hands weren't pretty

in the slightest. Diana missed her original hands—white, thin, and refined to the tips of her nails.

She wondered if her body would actually regain its original form in time. Florica had said that it would, but wouldn't Diana have to go through the same excruciating pain she had experienced the first time her body had undergone the transformation?

As she calmly thought about this, more and more worries surfaced in her mind. Still, she would have to endure that pain no matter what, so long as it meant returning to how she had used to be. This was how much she couldn't stand this Leah's looks. Diana had a prince around—a rare opportunity—but in her current form, she was too embarrassed to even come anywhere close to him.

The suggestion that had been planted in Diana's mind with a special Rupt pastille was starting to warp her in ways even Trickster, the one responsible, hadn't predicted.

My real self is far, far prettier than Estelle. Wouldn't His Highness become mine if he saw my true form, just like Lyle did? thought Diana. *That's right—this shiny palace was meant for someone as beautiful as me, not that harlot. And to make sure His Highness sees me, I have to get rid of this woman in my way. To that end, I must endure for now. I'll do my work as a servant of the palace and wait for an opportunity to poison her.*

Keeping her anger inside, Diana reluctantly put effort into the work she was assigned.

***

The chance to lace Estelle Flozeth's drink finally arrived in the early afternoon.

"You really can't clean at all, can you...? Do you remember *any* kind of work you can do as a servant?" asked Maybel.

"I think I can make tea," replied Diana ambiguously. While this was for the

sake of poisoning it, Diana had confidence in her tea-making skill.

House Pautrier had originally built a fortune through trading with the East—mainly Gandia. Having given their attention to tea clippers—newly-developed, high-speed, mana-powered ships—before everyone else, they had greatly reduced the transportation time of black tea from Gandia, which had become the foundation for their current wealth.

Even now, tea was the flagship product of Pautrier's. Which was why Diana had been taught to make various kinds of tea from a young age. This was so she could present new products in high society and thus create business opportunities as a member of House Pautrier.

"Very well," said Maybel. "Then why don't you try making the afternoon tea? Lady Estelle was worried about you and said she wanted to see you."

"Really?"

Diana beamed. A chance to get close to Estelle had finally arrived. *Let's put that poison in her drink and get out of this place already,* she thought. *And then I'll need to create an opportunity to see His Highness once I'm back to my original looks.*

"What sort of tea should I make?" she asked.

In her cheer, Diana didn't notice that Maybel's stare had grown terribly cold.

Finally allowed to set foot into Estelle's room, Diana saw it overflowing with historical value. *Recian furniture, a chandelier made in the Cortona Atelier...and this flower vase is porcelain from Hairan in the Yang Empire,* she remarked. All of them were extremely valuable antiques that wouldn't have been strange to find on display in a museum.

Hairan porcelain in particular was famous for being not only the first porcelain to have ever been manufactured, but also for being the pinnacle of its craft, and the vase in this room was probably one of the most valuable among its kind.

Faced with such a refined room—with antiques she could never have hoped to get hold of, no matter how much money she accumulated—Diana once again felt jealousy towards Estelle flare up in her.

Who does this country bumpkin from the north think she is? I *should be the one living in this room,* inwardly complained Diana as she deftly prepared a tea set. The tea set too was luxurious, made by a famous domestic manufacturer.

Though in truth she would have liked to squeeze water out of a dirty mop into the tea, she unfortunately couldn't do so in front of Maybel and Estelle. Left with no other option, she exercised her skill to the fullest, making the most delicious tea she could. This would be the last drink Estelle would ever have, so she might as well give her a proper sendoff.

Diana minded everything: the amount of tea leaves, water temperature, and the brewing time. Then, at the end, she secretly poured the contents of the vial she kept hidden in the cuff of her sleeve into the tea cup.

"Wait." Maybel stopped her the moment she tried to serve it. "It needs to be tested for substances first."

"Huh...?" replied Diana.

"It's a necessary step to prevent assassinations. When serving food or drink to His Highness or Lady Estelle, the one who prepared it must taste it for poison."

What? I've never heard of such a thing... thought Diana.

As she stood perplexed, Maybel walked over to a shelf and took out a pipette and a small receptacle. Then she took a sample of the tea, transferred it to the receptacle, and held the latter out to Diana.

"Drink," she said.

Not a chance. There's no way I could. That's deadly poison, thought Diana.

"What's wrong, Leah? It's a simple formality," Estelle urged her.

Maybel pressed the receptacle for poison-testing against Diana's hands as the latter hesitated, her eyes wandering. "Why won't you drink?" she asked, giving her a threatening look.

Gnashing her teeth, Diana threw the receptacle onto the floor. Then she tried to make an escape, but her eyes snapped wide at a sudden change in her perspective. A moment later, a powerful impact on her back left her unable to breathe.

“Kah...!” she groaned, wondering what had happened.

Before she knew it, she was lying on the floor, pinned down by Maybel from above, who was choking her by the collar of her uniform. She couldn’t breathe. As tears welled up in Diana’s eyes, she realized the muzzle of a mana pistol was pressed against her head. The one holding the weapon was Estelle, looking pale.

“Spit it out. Who are you, impostor?” asked Maybel with intensity, causing cold sweat to trickle down Diana’s back.

She wondered how she’d been found out. Her face, her build, her bone structure, even the location of her pimples and moles—everything about her current self was supposed to say she was Leah Embrey.

“Where’s the real Leah? I won’t forgive you if there’s so much as a scratch on her,” said Estelle angrily, trembling.

“What impostor are you talking about? I’m Leah Embrey, and I work in...”

Diana wasn’t the smart type. Even she, however, could understand that being found out here would be problematic. She had assumed another’s form and infiltrated a palace. There was a chance she wouldn’t get away with a mere arrest.

“In all of us, our language reveals our upbringing. You don’t speak with Leah’s northern accent. The way you walk is different too. If you’re going to take someone’s form, you should at least put on a better act,” spat Maybel.

“This is a misunderstanding! Really, I’m Leah!”

“Those eyes... Leah never looked at me like that,” uttered Estelle. There was something sad about her gaze.

“How terrible of you, Lady Estelle! I *am* Leah! Please believe me!” insisted Diana, desperate now.

Several guards came barreling into the room, probably having overheard the commotion. A moment later, Diana was restrained and dragged away.

This couldn’t get any worse. How did this happen? she asked herself, though the answers wouldn’t come.

***

Maybel and the members of the Royal Guard serving in the Libra Palace took Diana to an underground jail with uncouth iron bars.

For a moment she was surprised there was such a room under the palace, but then the gruesome history of the royal family crossed her mind.

Rosalia was a kingdom with over five hundred years of history. Its throne had been stained with blood on countless occasions over the centuries. It wouldn't be strange for a few secret dungeons or torture chambers to exist.

The jail was cold and musty. There was nothing like a carpet or wallpaper anywhere to be seen, and the floor and the walls were all bare stone. The only thing in the center of the room was an oddly-shaped chair. Diana only realized it was for restraining criminals after being forced to sit in it: the chair had restraints for arms and legs. Before she knew it, Diana couldn't move anymore.

What am I to do...? I'm in a terrible spot, she thought to herself. As she went pale, finally realizing the scale of what she'd done, a set of well-polished boots appeared in her field of vision. Looking up in surprise, she saw Arcrayne, the master of the Libra Palace.

He looked down at Diana coldly, his handsome face made utterly sublime by a mixture of features that were already ideal by themselves. His shiny blond hair and blue eyes, like the finest sapphires, were stunning.

As Diana stared at him, enraptured to the point of forgetting the situation she was in, Arcrayne spoke to her.

"I'll give you a chance to explain yourself, *fake Leah Embrey*."

She couldn't possibly tell him the truth. If she did, it would cause trouble for House Pautrier. As she remained silent, Arcrayne continued.

"You should tell me while I'm asking nicely. There's no shortage of ways to make you talk."

The prince signaled with his eyes. A man nearby with eastern looks who seemed to be a chief servant handed the prince a thick needle.

"Wh...What are you going to do to me...?" involuntarily asked Diana.

As Arcrayne came closer to her, the blank look on his face frightened Diana.

Arcrayne sneered at the question. “This. It should be very painful.” He pointed the tip of the needle between the flesh on Diana’s finger and her nail. “I wonder how many fingernails you’ll have to lose before you speak?”

Diana turned pale. Wasn’t this a famous torture method?

Fingertips were densely packed with nerve endings. Diana had heard that torture methods that involved stabbing needles under nails required exceptional willpower to endure, and even grown men broke under it. Even if you could bear it as you lost a nail or two, you had twenty in total, counting those on your hands *and* on your feet. Apparently, most gave up halfway in, begging in tears for forgiveness.

Arcrayne slipped his needle under Diana’s fingernail.

“No! Stop! I’ll say anything you want!”

The needle had yet to pierce anything. However, the mere touch of the thick tip of the needle on her nail made her realize she couldn’t handle this.

“My name is Diana Pautrier! I became like this with the power of an artifact! Please don’t hurt me!”

“So you admit to being a fake? Regardless of whether you really are Diana Pautrier or not.”

“I do! I admit it.”

“And this impressive artifact that supposedly let you change your appearance—here in the world did you get that?”

“I-It was something a Rupt fortune teller let me use.”

“Interesting...” Suddenly narrowing his eyes, Arcrayne was about to mercilessly push the needle forward.

“Agh!” Diana shrieked at the pain. “Stop, stop, stop it! I’m talking, aren’t I? I’ll say anything you want, so please! Don’t do any more!” she desperately pleaded.

She was terrified. The bizarre air of intimidation the prince had about him

evoked a primal fear in her.

“Who’s that Rupt fortune teller you mentioned?”

“Her name is Florica... She told me to kill Estelle...”

That’s right, realized Diana. *That bitch instigated me. But what made me feel like I had to commit murder?*

Diana hated Estelle for remaining inside Lyle’s heart. She also didn’t like how she’d easily landed herself a prince despite having been forsaken by Lyle—and how Lyle had continued to love her all along, and had turned to shady drugs in the end because of it.

She hated her so much she had wanted to curse her; it was true. But that didn’t mean she had ever wanted to *kill* her.

Diana trembled, face pale. She had only just now realized how abnormal her thought process had been up until moments ago.

“That poison you had... It comes from the neurotoxin of a puffer fish. How cunning of you to use something that’s easy to come by.”

Since puffer fish had terrible poison, in Rosalia it was the kind of fish you threw away even if it got into your net; but in the east it was known as fugu and eaten as a delicacy.

“That’s the first I’ve heard of this! Florica gave me that too...”

“Where’s the real Leah? Was it your people who abducted her?”

“No! My father and my family have nothing to do with this! Florica organized everything! Leah should be at Florica’s house!”

“Where?”

“There’s a private house in the East End...but if she’s gone from there, then I don’t know either...”

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear... inwardly repeated Diana. Not only had she snuck into a palace, but she had done so with poison in hand. High treason was a grave offense punishable by death.

Am I going to be exec— As the thought began to form in Diana’s head, she

broke into tears under the extreme tension and fear.

“No, please, don’t execute me! I didn’t mean to do this! I’m sorry! It’s Florica! She planned all this!”

As she made a disgrace of herself, crying and miserably appealing to his sympathy, Arcrayne looked at her with a terribly cold gaze.

***

Roughly two hours after the fake Leah had been taken away by the guards, May told Estelle that the real one had been found. Apparently, she had been in a working class neighborhood and was terribly haggard.

Estelle rushed to the parlor Leah had been taken to. She found Arcrayne inside, who faced her and brought his index finger to his lips.

“She’s just fallen asleep.”

“Lord Arc, is everything all right with her...?”

Leah looked pale as she slept on the bed.

“She’s weak, since it seems she hasn’t had anything to eat or drink since she was abducted, but the doctor said she’ll live. Apparently somebody attacked her, she lost consciousness, and when she woke up, she was tied and locked up all alone,” explained the prince.

There were scratches on Leah’s hands and feet, but she appeared to have gotten those from trying to somehow undo the ropes binding her.

“I’m surprised you could find her. Did the fake Leah confess?”

“I threatened her just a bit and she immediately talked. It was anticlimactic how easy it was. She even told me things I never asked about.”

Estelle couldn’t help but look dismayed, wondering what exactly the prince had threatened her with.

Arcrayne seemed to have interrogated the fake Leah together with Haoran. Estelle had asked to be present too, but Arcrayne hadn’t let her, claiming a woman shouldn’t see such things. She wondered what had taken place behind closed doors, but perhaps it was best not to press the subject.

“You don’t trust me, do you?” asked Arcrayne. “I’ve hardly done anything to her. Just told her I’d stick a needle under her nails if she didn’t answer my questions.”

It sounded painful. Estelle frowned, but Arcrayne only gave a light shrug.

“In my defense, I barely touched the needle to the underside of her nail; I

haven't gone any further. It was enough to make her bawl and beg me to stop, saying she'd tell me anything."

After a brief pause, Estelle replied, "It was truly enough?"

Arcrayne nodded, looking somewhat fed up, then heaved a deep sigh. "Leah might wake up if we talk here for too long. Mind if we go to my room?"

"Not at all."

With that, Arcrayne held out his hand, and Estelle took it.

It had been over two months since Estelle had started living here, but it was only her second time being invited to Arcrayne's room after the day she had been given a tour of the Libra Palace.

The furnishings in his room gave off a similar impression to those in Estelle's, but the interior design felt more masculine. Estelle hadn't noticed it during her previous visit, but there was a mana-based object for storing spirits in the corner of the room. When she noticed it, her eyes widened.

He doesn't even enjoy alcohol much... Estelle remarked.

"Would you have preferred something alcoholic over tea?" asked Arcrayne, who was about to make tea. "You don't handle it very well, though, right?"

"Yes."

It would be more accurate to say she *claimed* to be bad at holding her liquor, but there was no need to reveal that now.

When Estelle drank more than a certain amount, she couldn't remember anything afterwards. And apparently she became quite difficult to deal with during that time. Which was why, when she'd come to the Libra Palace, her brother and uncle had cautioned her to mind how much she drank.

Since they both said the same thing to me, I must be quite a bad drunk, she thought to herself in disappointment. As she did, Arcrayne brought her some fragrant tea, then sat beside her—at such a closeness that would've been unthinkable until recently. Estelle was surprised at how naturally she accepted it.

“I did not expect you to keep alcohol in your room,” she said, hiding her inner agitation.

“It’s for research. You might’ve already noticed I’m not very fond of drink.”

“Then it is just as I thought.”

“It’s not that I can’t handle it, but I don’t like the burning sensation you get when it passes through your throat,” said the prince with a faint smile. “I can’t go around saying in high society that I can’t drink at all or know what certain drinks taste like. So I’ll taste one kind of spirit or another out of necessity, and give the rest of the bottle to my close aides. I’m actually glad you can’t drink either.”

Hearing that, Estelle felt just a little guilty for lying to him.

“Now, about that fake Leah,” began Arcrayne, suddenly getting to the main topic. “She claimed to be Diana Pautrier. While we can’t take that on faith yet, I think there’s a high chance she’s telling the truth.”

Estelle gulped. “Unbelievable...”

“You saw that she had as much mana as a noble, and that she directed negative emotions at you. Honestly, I can’t think of any other noblewoman who fits the profile. Just in case, I checked with my man keeping an eye on Diana, and it turns out that dunce lost sight of her. Apparently she left the house after claiming she was going on a trip since she’d been badly hurt by what happened with Lyle, then vanished on her way.”

“It does sound quite suspicious.”

Estelle recalled that among all the people she’d met in high society, Diana had directed darker negative emotions at her than anybody else. She also thought of Olivia, but given that she had more mana as the daughter of a marquess, it seemed safe to rule out that possibility.

Incidentally, while Marquess Rainsworth had distanced himself from Arcrayne’s faction after the prince had announced his engagement to Estelle, he was currently taking a neutral stance. He seemed to have scruples about switching over to the second prince’s faction right away.

“She said she took on Leah’s form with the power of an artifact,” said Arcrayne. “She also claimed she should return to her previous form in about a week, but it’s unclear where that artifact came from... For now, I plan to wait and see if it goes as she said.”

Thinking for a moment, Estelle replied, “I agree. Even if you were to let the law deal with her, she would only be seen as an unidentifiable suspicious woman who looks like Leah.”

“Yeah. Also, there may be somebody pulling the strings in this incident.”

“You mean like a mastermind?” asked Estelle after a pause.

“Precisely. The fake Leah claimed she’d been instigated by a Rupt fortune teller by the name of Florica. The spy I had following Diana Pautrier has also reported that a female fortune teller by that name had been frequenting the Pautrier mansion.” Arcrayne heaved a large sigh; it seemed melancholic. “Things would get difficult if the Rupt people are involved. These nomadic peoples who live on the move have plenty of spies, information brokers, and other individuals among their ranks who have secret occupations.”

Itinerant entertainers, fortune tellers, doctors using herbal medicines—considering what professions were common among the Rupt people, it didn’t seem strange for some of them to do shady things like that on the side.

“Perhaps some noble hired her... It’s also possible anti-governmental organizations of ethnic minorities are involved,” continued Arcrayne. “I do hope we manage to catch this Florica, but if she’s already disappeared, it will be difficult to find her. After all, if what the fake Leah said is true, she has an artifact that can reshape people’s bodies.”

Arcrayne crudely pushed his bangs out of his face and leaned back in the couch. Occasionally now he showed a rather casual side to Estelle—one he didn’t show to anyone else.

“If that fake truly is Lady Diana... I did not think she bore that deep a grudge against me...” uttered Estelle.

She was genuinely shocked that Diana hated her enough to go so far as to change her own looks with the help of an artifact and try to poison her.

“It’s true that she resented you, but she claims she didn’t think about killing you... She insists it was that Rupt fortune teller who manipulated her to sneak in here and make an attempt on your life.”

“But that is unbelievable... Surely not even the Rupt people can pull someone’s strings as though they were puppets...?”

“They are said to be well versed in a unique kind of pharmacology, so I don’t think we can completely write it off. According to the fake Leah, this Florica always burned incense with a strange smell when telling her fortune.”

“So you are saying she brainwashed her or planted a suggestion in her head with that incense? Is that even possible?”

“There are known precedents of mind control performed by fortune tellers and new cults, so I don’t think it’s out of the question. Besides, the Rupt people are nomadic and live outside the legal framework of countries. It wouldn’t be strange if there were secret Awoken like you among them.”

It made sense when Estelle thought about it.

“Still,” continued the prince, “this is all based on what the fake Leah said, so I’m having someone investigate the matter to find concrete evidence. The poison Diana had was easy to get a hold of, so it’s honestly hard to follow that trail... If only the real Leah had at least seen the culprit...”

Unfortunately, she had apparently been attacked from behind and hadn’t seen the attacker’s face.

“If only I had not let her go out so carelessly...” lamented Estelle.

“It’s not all on you. I never expected this to happen.”

Almost all the employees of the palace were commoners—ordinary servants. To Estelle, Leah was a precious close aide, but one normally couldn’t threaten regular royals and nobles by abducting a mere servant of theirs. However, an artifact that could let one take another’s appearance changed everything.

“May I go see this self-proclaimed Lady Diana?”

It took Arcrayne a moment to reply. “It might be unpleasant for you.”

“I am well aware.”

She stared at the prince beside her. After a short while, he sighed as though giving in.

“I’ll go with you. That’s my condition.”

Estelle had no objections. It was already late, so they decided to visit the jail the next day.

***

Before they went to see the fake Leah, Estelle dropped by the room where the real one was recuperating. She had been assigned a room for guests instead of one in the staff dorm, surely out of Arcrayne’s consideration.

“I’m sorry, Leah. You had to go through something terrifying just because you’re my personal attendant.”

“It’s not your fault, Lady Estelle. It’s all on the people who abducted me.”

Lying in bed, Leah looked unexpectedly well. *She* had the same amount of mana as the Leah Estelle remembered—and reacted to her the right way too. It was a relief, and she was once again reminded of all the differences between this Leah and the fake one.

“By the way, did the fake me look *that* similar to me?”

“Repulsively so. Everything about her looks was exactly like yours—not just her face, but the shape of her nails and the location of her moles as well,” said May, who was waiting on Estelle beside her.

Leah seemed to find her reply eerie. “Wow... I kind of want to see her, but I also kind of don’t...” she muttered.

“You’ll have to get permission from the doctor and Lord Arc to see her,” said Estelle. “You should take it easy and recover for now.”

Leah had apparently gone two full days without food or drink after being abducted, so she had been dehydrated when she’d been found. There was color in her cheeks now that she’d received treatment, but she still couldn’t get up.

“You’re right,” replied Leah. “It’s a good opportunity to get proper rest, so I’ll take you up on that.” She smiled at Estelle from the bed. “Lady Estelle, the people responsible are those who planned this and who put that plan into

action. So please, don’t blame yourself.”

“Leah...”

Estelle felt like crying in spite of herself. Leah was her precious close aide, completely honest in every thought and expression of emotion, whom Estelle had kept by her side without any issue even after Awakening to her power. However, that was exactly why Estelle had to make sure of something.

“Leah, what with everything that has happened... Are you not terrified to stay here?”

After a moment’s pause, Leah replied, “What do you mean?”

“My position changed after His Highness chose me as his betrothed. The palace isn’t like Flozeth. If you stay here, something even scarier could happen to you. If you want to quit this job, I’ll let my brother know so he can hire—”

“I won’t quit,” Leah assertively interrupted her. “I love you, so I don’t want to quit. Unless you have no need of me anymore...”

“Leah... Thank you,” replied Estelle.

She held Leah’s hand as she expressed her sincere gratitude.

***

The basement jail of the Libra Palace was musty and damp. Its indecorous stone corridors were thoroughly chilly. It felt like one could get sick just by staying here for long enough.

“So there was a place like this in the palace all along,” remarked Estelle, looking around.

She hadn’t been shown this jail back when she’d only just started living here.

“I didn’t show you because it’s connected to the dark side of the royal family. I was going to tell you about the existence of this place after our wedding.”

Estelle could sense he was reluctant to talk about this.

“There’s not only jails in the palace, but various hidden passages and mechanisms as well. I obviously can’t tell you about those until you’re proper royalty.”

Albion had been made Government-General when the kingdom of Ancient La Tène had conquered Great Rosalia. The palace had been constructed using La Tène's structural remnants, and was said to be hiding numerous mechanisms based on lost technologies.

Arcrayne had taken Estelle to a room built for visiting criminals. It was partitioned by a window with iron bars, and was made to remind you of a church confessional.

Dragged into the interview room by guards, the fake Leah initially looked angry at Estelle, but then immediately went pale. Her eyes were focused on Arcrayne, who stood behind Estelle.

Estelle wondered if Arcrayne was telling the truth about not torturing her. She couldn't help inspecting the fake Leah's body. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary for the time being, although when the prince had made his threats regarding her nails, perhaps he *had* lightly poked them—at most.

"Is there...something else you wish to ask me...?" asked the fake Leah, trembling and frightened.

"Lord Arc, I do not think we can have a conversation like this. Could you leave us alone?"

"I do believe you agreed to the condition that I remain here if you want to see this woman."

"You have guards keeping watch regardless, do you not?"

There were four in the room, strictly observing that nothing went wrong.

Estelle waited for Arcrayne's reply. He looked away from her and heaved a small sigh.

"Very well. But if I sense that something is off, I'll return at once," said the prince with a sour look, then left the interview room.

"So you called yourself Diana Pautrier? Fake Leah," Estelle addressed her after checking that the prince was gone.

After a moment of silence, the woman replied with a somewhat tired look on her face, “I can’t prove it because of the artifact that changed my looks, but I *am* Diana Pautrier.” She bit her lip in frustration. “What did you come here for? To laugh at me? I know you must think I’m a fool—getting instigated by a Rupt fortune teller and doing something so outrageous! My life is a mess because of you!”

“Watch your tongue!” exclaimed a guard on the self-proclaimed Diana’s side of the room, moving to silence her.

Estelle waved to stop him. “Let her speak her mind.”

All she could do was bark, in any case. Estelle wasn’t bothered in the slightest by what this woman might say to her. Born as a feudal noble, she knew how to handle criminals.

The fake Leah must’ve sensed the scorn in Estelle’s attitude. Filling those bluish purple eyes—same as those of the real Leah—with rage, she glared hatefully at Estelle.

“You claim that somebody took advantage of your grudge against me, correct?” asked Estelle.

“That’s right! Look into Florica! I really hate and detest you, but that doesn’t mean I wanted to kill you! Please. They might execute me for high treason! And I don’t want that!”

Seeing the desperate pleas of the fake Leah, astonishment welled up in Estelle. She could see very clearly why Arcrayne had said this fake Leah had “a unique thought process.” She didn’t admit her guilt or reflect on her actions, and everything she said involved excuses—shifting the responsibility onto someone else.

“What did I do to deserve your hate?” asked Estelle. If the fake Leah really was Diana, Estelle was the one who wanted to hate *her* instead.

“Because Lyle always looks only at you! How is that even possible?! I’m far prettier and lovelier than you!” the woman spat out.

Estelle was taken aback.

“How does someone like you have His Highness fall in love with you at first sight?” continued the fake Leah. “He and Lyle both are all over you! This is plain wrong! It’s unfair!”

Estelle wondered why she had to take such insults from someone she barely knew. It felt like she was dealing with an unknown creature.

“And it’s your fault Lyle turned to drugs! Estelle Flozeth! If only it wasn’t for you...!”

The probability of this fake Leah being Diana had just gone up. Only a limited amount of people should’ve known about Lyle having done drugs, due to the gag order.

“You used your body, didn’t you?! With those cow breasts of yours!”

In inverse proportion to the fake Leah heating up, Estelle lost more and more interest.

“Why don’t you say anything back to me, pray tell? Do you admit everything?” finished the fake Leah.

“Because there’s no worth in even talking back to you,” replied Estelle, meeting the provocation with an utterly icy look—one that made the fake Leah shrink back.

If she really was Diana, Estelle felt like she could understand why Lyle had turned to drugs. She was like a child throwing a tantrum. Estelle knew Lyle as a gentle and quiet man, so it wasn’t strange that he might have a nervous breakdown if he’d been at the mercy of such a woman.

Estelle got up and turned around without a word.

Behind her, the fake Leah cried out, “Wait! I hate you, it’s true, but I really didn’t plan to kill you! It’s Florica! She’s the one who gave me the poison!”



Ignoring the fake Leah, Estelle left the interview room.

“I heard your conversation even out here. Did she spoil your mood?” asked Arcrayne, who had been waiting outside.

“Not at all. She is not worth such a reaction,” replied Estelle with a smile.

The prince’s eyes widened slightly for a moment; then his expression relaxed. “You’re right. That fake doesn’t deserve it.”

Estelle took the hand extended to her and let Arcrayne escort her out of the jail.

“What is in store for her?” she asked on the way.

“Let’s see... What degree of punishment do you wish for her?”

“Why do you ask me such a thing?”

“Because the victims in this incident are you and Leah. When I asked Leah about it, she said she would entrust it to you. I want to know how much you want her punished—severely, or taking extenuating circumstances into consideration?”

Estelle went silent in thought. After a short while, she concluded, “Please allow me some time to think. I cannot give you an answer at this moment.”

It couldn’t yet be said for sure if the fake Leah really was Diana, or if there really was a Rupt fortune teller who had pulled the strings in the background.

“Very well. Let me know once you’ve decided,” said Arcrayne.

It seemed he liked Estelle’s reply. As Estelle read his emotions from the color of his mana, her lips curled in a smile.

***

The matter of the fake Leah saw progress two days later. Arcrayne received a report that something was wrong with the prisoner, and when he came running and looked into the cell, what he saw made him catch his breath.

In the cell was a woman curled into a ball. Her back was eerily undulating.

“AAAAAGGGHHH!” She screamed like a beast.

As she writhed in agony, burying her nails in the cold floor and with anguish written on her face, it was painful to watch.

More than anything, it was grotesque how her body undulated without regard for the shape of its bones and muscles. Her shoulder blade bulged heavily, then sunk back; next, a bone in her hand twisted in an impossible direction with a creaking sound. Her entire body was moving in such bizarre ways. Arcrayne couldn't believe his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," said the guard who had called him here. "She suddenly started moaning, and a moment later she was like this... It didn't seem like a good idea to just carelessly touch her, so we didn't know what to do..." The man looked flustered.

Claus, who had been with Arcrayne in his office and accompanied him down here, looked pale too.

"IT HUUURTS! It hurts it hurts it hurts, ugh... AAAAAGGGHHH!!!"

The fake Leah's brown hair fell out, only to be completely replaced by the blonde kind, growing from the roots.

A word appeared in Arcrayne's mind: "price." Some powerful artifacts demanded that their user paid an unthinkable price.

For example, there was an ancient weapon owned by the Rosalian royal family. Held in the basement of the palace, this artifact was thought to summon lightning of judgment from the sky, capable of scorching the land, but legends said that to power it on, one needed to offer it a sacrifice from the royal family and an enormous volume of mana.

As this artifact allowed you to change your body to that of someone else, it was incomparably more powerful than the bracelet Arcrayne had previously used to change the color of his hair and eyes. Considering it recreated not only the face, but also the bone structure, moles, and even the little scratches, this wretched spectacle was unsurprising.

Hopefully, the price of altering your flesh was limited to the physical pain experienced during the shapeshifting...

Taking the place of the perfectly straight brown hair was now the curly, magnificent blonde kind. Of a worker's unrefined hands—the slender, white

hands of a noblewoman. The fake Leah was changing her shape in front of Arcrayne's eyes, squirming eerily.

When the transformation was over, the one who appeared was...

Diana Pautrier, thought Arcrayne. It was the woman who had badly hurt Estelle. Which also lent credibility to her confession.

However, he had yet to find any trace of the Rupt fortune teller Florica. He had managed to ascertain that such a woman actually existed and had a house in an isolated part of the city, but the house had already been abandoned by the time his men had searched it, so they hadn't found anything.

That area was the dark side of Albion. As it was a lawless district of sorts, it was difficult to search it thoroughly. And in the first place, after she'd done something so outrageous, it was hard to imagine that she was still staying in the city. Searching for the mastermind in this incident would probably be difficult.

The one thing Arcrayne could say for certain, however, was that it was likely that the queen and Duke Marwick weren't involved.

Duke Marwick was well-known for his nationalism. For a long time now, he had stirred up the public with his blithely racist statements. Since he hated immigrants and nomadic peoples, it was unimaginable that he would give them work.

However, this meant there was an unknown enemy wielding an artifact with shapeshifting capabilities. The importance of Estelle's power had risen even further. Arcrayne lightly sighed, the face of his fiancée on his mind.

Something about him was strange recently. His heart was astir when he saw Estelle's face. He had thought this feeling would die down once he'd had sex with her, but it had only served to make him more nervous instead.

Arcrayne felt restless as he glanced at the cell where Diana was locked up.

***

Arcrayne searched for Estelle to let her know about the identity of the fake Leah and found her playing the piano in the living room of the Libra Palace.

Playing the piano was part of the compulsory education for upper-class

women. That was because they were sometimes asked to play when participating in music salons. Just like tea parties, salons were important social events for women.

Estelle was playing a lovely dance piece currently popular in high society.

Unfortunately, Arcrayne couldn't call her performance good even as flattery. She kept making mistakes in the same places and sometimes halted. However, he could tell she was trying to play as carefully as she could, which was very much like her.

Estelle must've been too concentrated to notice Arcrayne come into the living room—she kept playing the piano. She only noticed him once she'd more or less finished playing the current piece.

"You could have let me know you were here," said Estelle. Her cheeks were flushed; her apparent embarrassment made her protest cute.

"Just thought I shouldn't interrupt."

"Please do let me know from now on," she sullenly added, then started to put away the musical score.

"There's something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

"The fake Leah has returned to her original form. She was Diana Pautrier."

"I see," Estelle calmly replied after a moment of silence, then stared at Arcrayne. "Have you found anything out about that Rupt fortune teller?"

"Unfortunately not. It's looking difficult to track her down."

"Do you believe there is a mastermind behind this incident?"

"I suppose so. Looking at Diana Pautrier, it's hard to imagine she could do something like this by herself. And since there's a powerful artifact involved, I think it's very likely somebody made use of her negative feelings towards you.

Diana's father, Baron Pautrier, probably had nothing to do with this. Diana was too dim-witted for him to involve her in such a plan. She must've been used as a sacrificial pawn, expected to fail, in order to threaten Arcrayne—Arcrayne

felt like that was the most reasonable way of thinking.

“You have previously asked me how much I wanted her punished. May I give my answer now?” asked Estelle.

“Go ahead. I want to hear your opinion.”

After a moment of thought, she said, “I cannot forgive her for making an attempt on my life, or for abducting Leah and letting her grow weak. Lyle, too, turned to drugs because she had set her eyes on him. Even if she was manipulated by a mastermind, I do wish for her to be fairly judged in accordance with the law. However...” Estelle went silent for a moment, hesitating and seeming to find something hard to say. “If she was judged in accordance with the law, she would be charged with high treason, yes?”

“I suppose she would,” said the prince. “She brought poison into this palace.”

In Rosalian criminal law, people who plotted to kill the sovereign, his wife, or his eldest child and heir—as well as those who attempted to violate the king’s wife, his eldest unmarried daughter, or his eldest son’s wife—were charged with high treason.

Malice towards the royal family was seen as equal to treason, which was why it was a grave offense once punished with the most serious form of capital punishment—drawing, hanging until dead, and posthumous beheading and quartering. This cruel form of execution had been abolished due to its inhumane nature, replaced with only hanging the criminal, but even planning high treason was a grave offense that could get you convicted.

“Normally, this should surely be left for the law to deal with,” said Estelle. “However, if she were executed for this, I think it would bring me pain.”

“I can’t say for sure it’ll come to that. This concerns the honor of her family and the reputation of her father’s company, so I imagine Baron Pautrier won’t spare any expense in pleading for the commutation of her death sentence. And if proof comes up that the Rupt people are mixed up in this, extenuating circumstances might be taken into consideration.”

“I have looked into the precedents of capital punishment in the past. Even plotting high treason ended with the criminal being hung at worst, and

imprisoned for life at best.”

Slowly Arcrayne said, “I suppose so. Do you think that’s too drastic?”

Estelle’s eyes wavered at the question. The prince could sense her discomposure.

“I...” she began. “I am scared of how my opinion could influence whether a person lives or dies.” She paused for a moment. “I do think it is only natural that one be adequately punished for one’s crimes. However...” Going silent, Estelle cast her eyes down. After a short while, she opened her mouth again, as though having made up her mind. “Perhaps you will see this as a shifting of responsibility, but may I leave this matter to you, Lord Arc?” Raising her face, Estelle looked directly at the prince. Her purplish-red gaze—that gaze which could see people’s emotions—mingled with Arcrayne’s own. “Deep inside, are you not thinking how you could make a deal with Baron Pautrier by using this matter to your advantage?”

Arcrayne felt a small pang at her words. She had seen right through him, revealing his true, calculating nature.

I’ve shown her that side of me plenty of times before. It’s only natural she would know my game. And yet why does it unsettle me? he wondered.

“You have the power to ignore my opinion and do as you please, Lord Arc. But you were trying to respect my wishes, were you not? While I am happy about that, it also weighs on me, since this concerns high treason... I apologize. I cannot put the thoughts in my head into words very well, and cannot explain myself properly...” Though Estelle spoke in disconnected phrases, they conveyed her emotional turmoil and the sincerity of her feelings. “So if this matter would be of benefit to you...I cannot deny I would feel happiness at that fact. I am a terrible mistress, am I not? Leah almost died.”

As Estelle smiled in self-deprecation, Arcrayne reached out for her on impulse, running his fingers through her glossy, well-cared-for chestnut hair.

“You don’t have to continue. I think I can tell what you’re trying to say.”

Estelle went silent and awkwardly looked away.

“So you’ll let me handle this. Are you sure?”

Estelle nodded at Arcrayne's words. "All I ask is that you keep me and her away from each other, if possible. So please...use this incident to your advantage."

"Very well," replied the prince after a moment's pause.

Arcrayne wondered if the practical approach here was to put Diana in a convent known for its strictness and force her to take the perpetual vows.

The perpetual vows were vows made to offer one's life to God until one's death. A woman who took them and entered a convent had to renounce secular life and live as a nun until the end of her days. And if, on top of that, Arcrayne could sever the ties between the Baron's company and the second prince's faction...

While he calculated how much leverage he could gain from this, he noticed that a part of him was disgusted with such a mercenary side of his. He should've been glad that he could bring the matter to a conclusion that was ideal to him, and yet his heart was heavy—and even more astir than before from the fact he had made Estelle say she wanted him to *take advantage* of something.

These fluctuations in his mental state were dangerous. Alarm bells went off in his head.

Emotional volatility created openings that could be exploited. Humanlike emotions were unnecessary for his current self, a man with an uncertain future.

He had to sever this feeling. Seal it inside his heart.

However, the sensation of her hair refused to leave his fingertips. Arcrayne softly clenched his right hand.

***

Diana had snuck into the Libra Palace and gotten herself caught. What was more, she apparently had poison on her at the moment of her arrest. When he heard the news from Arcrayne, Diana's father, Hughes Pautrier, couldn't believe his ears.

Diana was supposed to have been on a trip to heal her broken heart from the break-off of her engagement with Lyle, accompanied by her maid Yufil. When

Hughes hurriedly got in touch with Yufil through the mana-based communicator he had made her carry around, he learned that apparently Diana had given her a substantial tip and disappeared somewhere—together with a Rupt fortune teller who had regularly visited the mansion.

That foolish girl... said Hughes inwardly. He was aware that his daughter had had Estelle Flozeth on her mind ever since Diana stole her fiancé, Lyle Wyntia. He also knew she had regularly invited a suspicious fortune teller to the mansion and grumbled to her without end regarding Estelle and Lyle.

However, since he often took advice from fortune tellers himself in operating his company, he hadn't found it in him to force her to stop. Plus, to Hughes, Diana was his adorable youngest daughter.

He was aware he had spoiled her quite a bit. But he'd never expected she would commit such an outrage.

Was it a mistake to try to get rid of Lyle, making it look like an accident? he wondered. It had been him who had hired someone to push Lyle—as he walked down the street, unsteady on his feet—in front of a coach. Hughes couldn't possibly accept a drug addict as his son-in-law. It had been parental affection that spurred him on. However, if his actions had led to Diana's reckless deed, perhaps he should rather have properly talked to her about Lyle and persuaded her. Regret welled up in him.

Though Yufil said she would return at once, Hughes thought she was more likely to disappear instead. Even if she were to return, she would only be reprimanded and sacked. There was no reason for her to come back.

Things were quite dire for Hughes. Upon receiving Arcrayne's summons, he held his head.

There was a risk of his daughter being charged with high treason for directing malice at Arcrayne, the sovereign's eldest child and heir. If this became public knowledge, not only would Diana be charged with a crime, but Hughes's company would no doubt be heavily affected as well.

First, he had to ascertain that everything the prince told him was true. If Diana really was locked up in the Libra Palace, he somehow had to settle the matter peacefully. Still holding his head, he started preparing to head to the

palace.

***

“I wish I had gotten to see my spitting image when I still could,” said Leah, sounding disappointed, as Estelle was relaxing in her room.

Her mistress involuntarily gave her an awkward smile. By the time Leah had recovered, the fake Leah had already returned to her original looks, so in the end, the two had never managed to see each other face-to-face.

“I’m surprised you can say that. You would’ve been dead had things played out any worse,” said May rather calmly.

Estelle agreed with her. “They say a person can live for up to three days without water. If it had taken one more day to find you...”

“The thought of that makes my flesh creep,” replied Leah, her expression darkening. She shuddered.

The incident with the fake Leah had cast a shadow over the ever-cheerful real one. She had been abducted, and upon waking up, she had found herself tied up in some private house, completely by herself, with no food or water. Imagining how helpless she must’ve felt pained Estelle’s heart.

Baron Pautrier was currently on a visit to the Libra Palace, discussing with Arcrayne how to deal with Diana.

Diana herself was still in the basement jail. It was hard to call the basement a good environment, but apparently Diana remained in good health and was still spiritedly grumbling about Florica.

Estelle had been told the reversal of Diana’s shapeshifting had been a ghastly sight—that her body had twisted in impossible directions and all of her hair had fallen out at one point—but thankfully, the shapeshifting artifact didn’t seem to have left any harmful side effects on her original body.

Arcrayne didn’t wish to let her hear today’s discussion, so Estelle had been told to spend the entire day in her room.

While it was nothing new, the prince was overprotective. However, something was seriously wrong with Estelle too—she felt a little stifled in this

cocoon he had put her in, but she was also starting to feel *happy* in it.

Arcrayne was very gentle in his treatment of Estelle. He respected and treasured her as though she were some fragile object. It almost made her get the wrong idea that he loved her.

Looking back on when she had moved into the Libra Palace, she realized she had completely adapted to the palace life now. Back in Flozeth, she'd often had to go out for various reasons, so she had never realized before now that if there was no reason to go outside, she was perfectly comfortable staying inside.

"So Leah, are you okay with me letting Lord Arc handle Diana Pautrier?" asked Estelle.

Leah nodded. "It's what you've decided, my lady. I'm uneducated, so I can't judge how strong a punishment would be appropriate."

The working class had a low literacy rate, and Leah was just barely able to read and write.

While industrialization had progressed with the advancement of mana items and, in Albion and royally-owned domains, elementary education was in the process of becoming compulsory, rural areas were still below that standard. Compared to Albion's children, those in Flozeth were undeniably falling behind. The thought of it made something bitter well up in Estelle.

***

By the time Arcrayne had told Estelle the results of his discussion with Baron Pautrier, it was the night of the same day. She had been sitting beside him on the couch in the shared bedroom as the two were having their teatime before bed.

"Diana Pautrier will be taken to a hospital with iron bars under the pretext of a mental illness," he said.

"What...?" Estelle was at a loss.

The prince continued. "I suggested putting her in a convent...but he wanted her to be somewhere he could keep an eye on her better. Of course, I plan to have someone keep an eye on her too."

“I see,” replied Estelle after a pause.

A convent or a hospital—Estelle couldn’t tell which of the two was a harsher punishment for Diana. However, the thought that she’d never appear on center stage again made Estelle feel like laughing at her. Made her feel superior.

Estelle’s disgust and guilt over this ugly side of herself mixed together, bringing her mood down.

“I’ve made a few deals that will be of advantage to me,” said Arcrayne. “Thank you for letting me handle this as I pleased.” Arcrayne’s mana was a little dark, perhaps due to Estelle’s hesitation about how she should react. “Do you have mixed feelings?”

Estelle shook her head. “Diana Pautrier is a criminal. I believe punishment is due for her. However, I feel uneasy thinking that someone may have been pulling the strings, and most of all, I feel sorry before you...”

Estelle had carefully chosen her words. The prince knitted his brows. “And what does this have to do with me?”

“She had snuck in here because of me. You already have the political game wearing your nerves out, and now this...”

The moment Estelle had said her piece, Arcrayne’s mana clouded over even further. “A husband and wife help each other *in sickness and in health*.” Arcrayne quoted a passage from the vows exchanged by the bride and groom in Messianist weddings. “You’re being targeted by assassins because of me. Have you already forgotten about the time you were shot with a crossbow?”

“You protected me with your power back then.”

“One wrong move and you might’ve fallen from your horse. In terms of inconveniencing each other, I’ve put a far greater burden on you.”

At those words, Estelle lifted her face slightly.

“I don’t plan to reflect on forcing you to become my betrothed; neither do I intend to undo it.” The prince paused. “Still, it’s not like I don’t feel sorry for getting you involved in all this.” As Estelle’s eyes widened, Arcrayne continued with an embittered expression. “I have a duty to protect you. In the first place,

the motive for Diana's actions may have partially lain with me too."

"But that seems..."

"She looked down on you, and yet you've attained the position of a future princess. On top of that, Lyle seems to still have feelings for you. There's no doubt her strong jealousy was the trigger for what happened."

"You are mistaken! It is not your...!" began Estelle, hurrying to deny it.

"By that logic, it's not your fault either. It's completely on her for getting jealous all on her own and then doing what she did," calmly replied Arcrayne, leaving Estelle at a loss. "I'll do everything I can. It's the price I'll pay for putting a burden on you."

Arcrayne's words wrung Estelle's heart. It wasn't the first time he had told her such a thing, and he did actually treasure her. However...

Duty and *price*—she was sick of herself for getting hurt by such trifling words. In addition, judging by the color of Arcrayne's mana, she appeared to have angered him with her careless words.

I have to say something, she thought. Yet no words would leave her mouth. "Thank...you..." she finally managed to squeeze out, prompting a questioning look from the prince. However, she didn't have the courage to ask about its meaning, so she looked away instead.

Then Estelle heard the rustling of clothes, and immediately after, Arcrayne extended his fingertips towards her. In the next moment, she was in his arms. Arcrayne's emotions remained somewhat obscure.

Is he trying to humor me...? she wondered. While she was perplexed by his actions, Estelle entrusted herself to Arcrayne's warmth.

Afterword

My name is Morikawa Mari. Nice to meet you.

Thank you for giving this book a read.

This work won the silver prize and the DRE STUDIOS award in the first Drecom Media Award. I never expected to win such major awards, so ever since I was contacted about receiving them, I've felt like I was in a dream.

Had it not been for my family supporting my dream to publish a printed book, as well as the readers who cheered for me when I submitted this work on the web, I don't think it would ever have seen the light of day.

In addition, many people helped me with publishing this work.

To Bodax-sensei, who was in charge of the illustrations—thank you for your beautiful work, both in color and colorless. I cannot express in words my joy when I learned that you took on this project.

To my editor Mr. Ueyama, who guided me on my way through publishing, clueless as I was on the subject—I think I asked you a lot of bothersome questions and made many requests, so thank you for politely dealing with those every time.

Thanks to the efforts of the designer who lettered the title, the proofreader, and other people working behind the scenes who went uncredited, this work managed to be published without issue. Let me take this opportunity to thank all of you.

This work is getting turned into a webtoon.

At the time of writing this afterword, I still can't imagine what the result will be like, but I have a feeling it will be amazing.

While I'm involved in its creation as the author of the original work, I'm also

really looking forward to seeing the finished product as a reader. Please give the webtoon a read too once it’s available.

Finally, this story is, in fact, not over. I’ll be happy if you read the continuation once it’s published.

Morikawa Mari