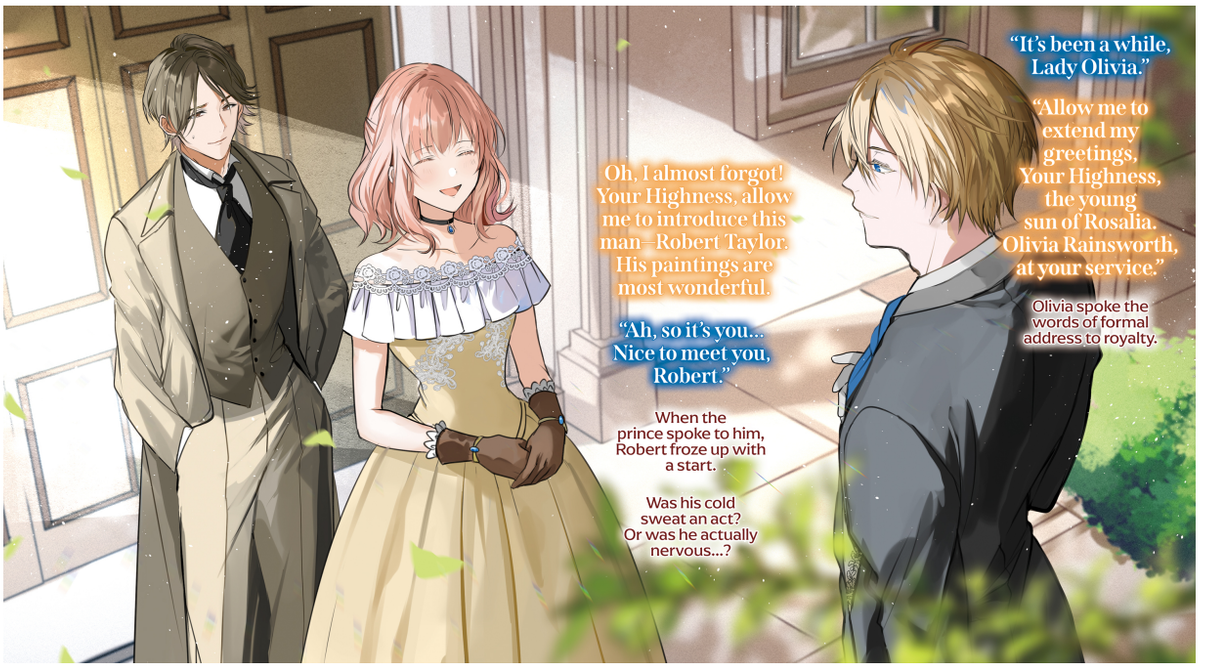
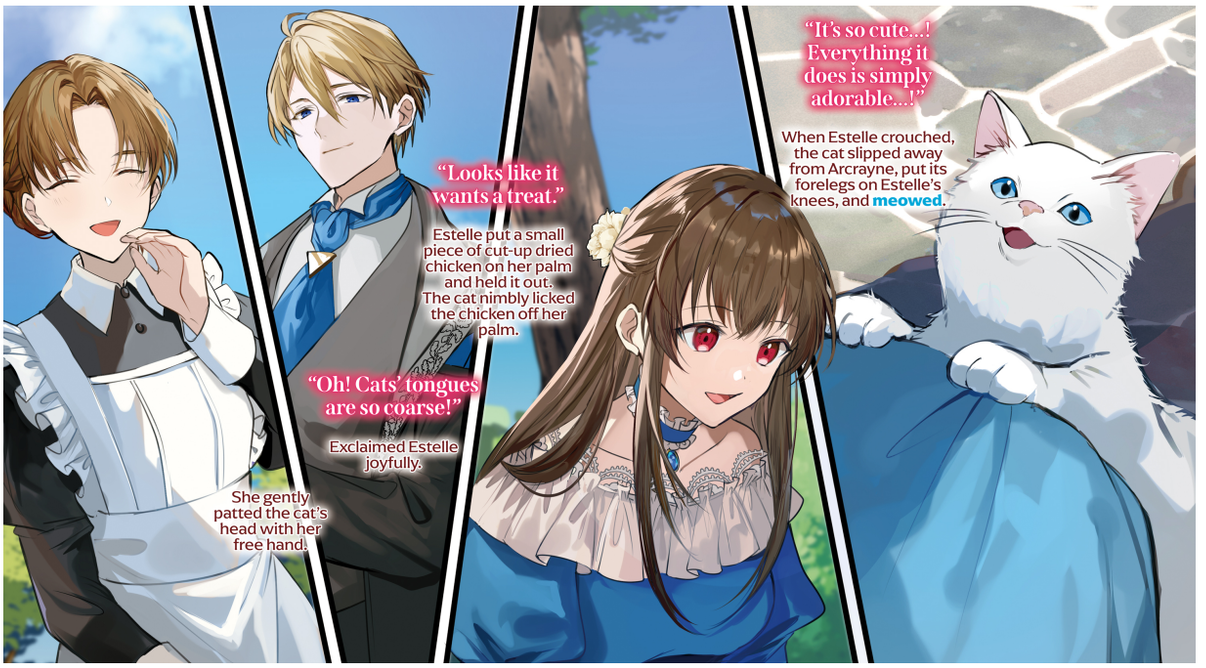

Mari Morikawa
Illustrator: Bodax
2
Fiancée No More
The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love


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Fiancée No More
The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love


Oh, I almost forgot! Your Highness, allow me to introduce this man—Robert Taylor. His paintings are most wonderful.
"Ah, so it's you... Nice to meet you, Robert."
When the prince spoke to him, Robert froze up with a start.
Was his cold sweat an act? Or was he actually nervous...?
"It's been a while, Lady Olivia."
"Allow me to extend my greetings, Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia. Olivia Rainsworth, at your service."
Olivia spoke the words of formal address to royalty.


She gently patted the cat's head with her free hand.
"Oh! Cats' tongues are so coarse!"
Exclaimed Estelle joyfully.
"Looks like it wants a treat."
Estelle put a small piece of cut-up dried chicken on her palm and held it out. The cat nimbly licked the chicken off her palm.
When Estelle crouched, the cat slipped away from Arcrayne, put its forelegs on Estelle's knees, and meowed.
"It's so cute...! Everything it does is simply adorable...!"

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Character profiles:



Estelle

The heroine of this work.
After her childhood friend broke off their engagement, the heartbroken Estelle goes to a soirée, where she has a fateful encounter with Arcrayne.
He takes an interest in her due to her power to see other people's mana.
Without any regard for her wishes, the prince makes her his fiancée.

Arcrayne

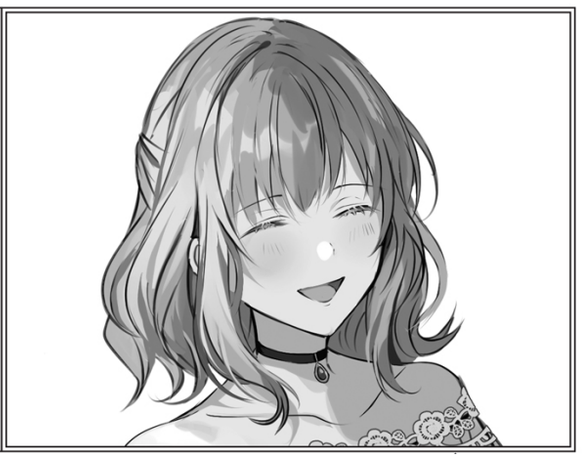
The first prince of the Kingdom of Rosalia.
Other than his status, he has been blessed with good looks and a keen mind, and he is considered impeccable.
However, there's no small amount of darkness in his heart, stemming from the complicated relations in his family, like the political strife with his half brother, the second prince.





Robert

An aspiring artist who suddenly shows up at House Rainsworth while the head of the family is away.
Highly favored by Adeline, he gradually spreads his influence over the family...



Olivia

The woman once thought to be the foremost candidate for Arcrayne's future wife.
While some part of her doesn't think well of Estelle, who took Arcrayne from her, she tries to stay positive and look toward the future.

Liedis

The second prince of the Kingdom of Rosalia.
As they are political opponents, Liedis seeks conflict with his half brother Arcrayne at every opportunity.

Adeline

Olivia's mother.
Works hard to protect her family after its head—her husband, Tohrmeyler—collapses.

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Prologue

Olivia Rainsworth remained composed as those around her began to look at her in a completely different way.

It was annoying to deal with the mix of derision, scorn, and pity in the looks she got on a regular basis.

One's position in high society could crumble in an instant. Olivia was currently becoming painfully aware of that fact. Ever since that day—the day of the New Year's party, held at the palace—people's attitudes toward Olivia had become the exact opposite of what they'd used to be.

The conversation she'd had with Arcrayne at the time was still stuck in her mind as though it were a dagger lodged in her flesh.

When she closed her eyes, she could vividly recall him from that day, as if it had been yesterday.

***

The New Year's party had been hosted by the king, but since that had been when Arcrayne and Estelle's engagement was announced, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say the two had had the leading roles that day.

When the banquet had started, Arcrayne had gone around the hall to greet those attending and, while he'd been at it, introduce his fiancée who'd been in his company. Eventually, it had been the Rainsworths' turn.

"Congratulations, Your Highness."

Insincere words, of course—spoken with a stiff expression. Arcrayne only offered his usual smile.

"This is so sudden; I must admit my surprise. To be honest…I still have not fully accepted it." *I thought you would choose me,* Olivia had thought at the time.

As she'd gazed at Arcrayne, full of unexpressed feelings, the smile had disappeared from his face and he'd spoken so quietly that only Olivia could hear him.

"I'm sorry. Had I never met her, I would've most likely chosen you."

Those words had given rise to an ugly emotion in Olivia—a mix of murky jealousy and scorching love.

Why? What does she have that I don't?

After returning to her mansion, she'd kept asking herself this, thinking things over as she cried her eyes out.

When she'd thought back on it, she'd realized that though she'd previously been lauded as the woman closest to becoming Arcrayne's consort, he hadn't once said anything to her that would seal the deal.

The first time he'd escorted her had been exactly a year prior. At the time, he'd had to quit military academy due to the king's illness and had started appearing in high society more frequently. Olivia's father, Tohrmeyler, who'd wanted to make his daughter into a princess for a long time, had seen this as a good opportunity and started acting as a leading figure of the first prince's faction.

Olivia, who had already admired the prince's gorgeous looks, couldn't have asked for more. As a daughter of a marquess, Olivia would have to marry someone suitable for the status of her family. And Arcrayne was the best possible candidate.

After that, whenever he'd needed a companion for a social event and she'd asked to take her with him, he'd done so.

A gentlemanly demeanor and a tender gaze would give anybody the wrong idea. It hadn't taken long for Olivia's admiration to turn into love.

She'd felt like a clown for becoming full of herself after the people around her had rumored her to be a princess in the making.

As she'd kept thinking in the midst of her sorrow, something strange had occurred to Olivia.

He only escorted me when I asked.

Arcrayne was a man of superior talent who made no mistakes in anything he did. He hid his emotions under a smile as he solemnly fulfilled his public duties. The prince had never been involved in any scandals at all, and he was also well regarded by members of parliament and government officials. Would such a man have granted Olivia's wish and let the rumors of their engagement spread unless he had a reason for it?

Was he perhaps taking advantage of my feelings...?

He'd said he would've chosen her, had Estelle never appeared. If one were to put it differently, didn't this mean Arcrayne had been leading Olivia on, making use of her love for him?

A chill had run down her spine when she'd arrived at that

possibility. At the same time, her love for him had faded as well.

Enraged by Arcrayne's attitude, Olivia's father had distanced himself from his faction. However, considering his company and his relationships with its clients, it appeared that he couldn't afford to immediately switch to the second prince's faction, so he currently wasn't allied with either.

At present, he was preoccupied with finding a spouse for Olivia, as she was of marriageable age. He appeared to be making a list of unmarried young men not only from Rosalia but also those in the colonies and neighboring countries.

While Olivia's father had this subject to worry about, her mother, Adeline, had constantly been in a bad mood of late. She couldn't bear the fact that not only would her daughter be marrying a man inferior to Arcrayne, but also that Olivia was a target of unkind rumors.

At the moment, the atmosphere in their family couldn't be any worse, which was another thing that brought down Olivia's spirits.

***

House Rainsworth was presently avoiding Arcrayne at social events.

However, a memorial ceremony commemorating King Sachis's thirtieth anniversary on the throne was to be held at the palace today. As a hereditary peer, Marquess Rainsworth naturally couldn't afford to be absent, and the whole family reluctantly attended.

"Poor girl. After everyone lauded her as a future princess..."

"Oh, but I was *so* fed up with the way she carried herself until a little while ago. Serves her right."

"I hear she is desperately looking for another man right now... Not that she can hope for someone on the level of His Highness Prince Arcrayne. She must be miserable."

"Is her mother not an émigré? It was overambitious from the start for Lady Olivia to set her sights on the position of princess."

As expected, Olivia could hear unkind whispers. And every time it happened, she sensed anger emanating from her mother Adeline who walked a short distance behind her.

From what Olivia had heard, her mother had had to flee the

neighboring Franciel after the revolution thirty-five years ago. While she'd barely escaped to Rosalia, her quality of life had gone down in an instant and she'd experienced considerable hardships. When people talked about her behind her back, the thing that irritated her the most was when they criticized her as an émigré.

Taking a good look at her mother, Olivia saw that while she didn't let her anger show on her face, her hand—holding a fan—was trembling.

"You didn't have to force yourselves to come," said Olivia's father, who was escorting the two women.

Olivia shook her head. "I'm not forcing myself. And besides, I couldn't possibly have left you alone in such an atmosphere, father."

"Exactly," added Adeline, who was here as Olivia's chaperone. "Who knows what people would say if we were absent today?"

Chaperones accompanied unmarried young noblewomen in high society to ensure the latter didn't get involved with questionable individuals. This role was generally fulfilled by an older female relative.

Previously, Olivia had often been accompanied by her father's younger sister, but ever since the incident at the New Year's party, said sister had begun blatantly distancing herself from House Rainsworth. Because of that, the role of Olivia's escort at recent social events had been taken up by her father, while her mother had taken on the responsibility of being her chaperone.

Only her father was required to appear at this memorial ceremony—that would've been enough to fulfill the Rainsworths' duty to the royal family. However, were the rest of them to skip it, it would've no doubt made for amusing gossip in society.

That could negatively affect Olivia's prospects of finding a suitable husband. Which was why, despite their reluctance, the whole family had decided to show up.

When they got to their appointed seats, Olivia was subjected to a series of piercing stares from those around her. Two of them belonged to Arcrayne and Estelle, who had already arrived.

The prince and his fiancée sat in the royal seats, which were of notably higher precedence than those of nobles. As wasn't uncommon for them, they wore clothing with matching elements as if to emphasize how happy they were together.

Arcrayne and Estelle both looked at Olivia. However, the former immediately turned to look at the latter, and the latter quickly looked away from Olivia as well, appearing awkward.

Olivia could feel the anger of her parents sitting beside her, fueled by the way Arcrayne and Estelle were acting. Of the two of them, she thought perhaps her mother's ire was greater.

Between this and all the gossip about her origins, Olivia's mother had been unstable recently.

But there's no need to get that *angry,* thought Olivia.

If somebody were to ask her how she felt about Estelle, Olivia would no doubt reply on the spot that she hated her. However, the anger and hatred she had felt toward Estelle at that New Year's party was already fading.

If anything, she loathed Arcrayne more than she did Estelle. Nevertheless, it wasn't like she held any lingering affection toward him. She wouldn't want to involve herself with such a schemer anyway.

And I have to keep enduring the sight of those two so long as I'm in this country…

Olivia had her pride, so she didn't look away. But if she were to be honest, she found those two an eyesore as long as they were so much as simply in her field of vision.

Perhaps at this point it would be better to try to find a spouse overseas, thought Olivia and sighed.

***

The ceremony was followed by a buffet-style dinner party. There, after paying one's respects to the king and queen, one was permitted to mingle with relative freedom.

This was an event to celebrate the king's thirty years of reign. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that all the members of the upper class who were currently in Albion had gathered here.

Adeline Rainsworth accompanied her husband who was busy making contact with various young noblemen in order to find a spouse for his daughter. And all along, she was furious on the inside.

Had that harlot never showed up, it would've been Olivia by His Highness's side right now…!

"That harlot" being Estelle Flozeth, naturally. To Adeline, she was a thief who had snatched the radiant position of the first prince's fiancée from her daughter right at the very end.

Adeline had been born into the distinguished Francien family of Count La Forges.

However, the revolution had turned her life upside down—she'd had to flee the country with nothing but the clothes on her back.

Relying on her aunt, who had married into a Rosalian family, she'd come to this country. However, said aunt had only seen her as a burden and treated her like a servant. There, Adeline had been forced to teach her young cousin her country's language, as well as be her chaperone, without any financial compensation.

And when Adeline had attended a ball as her cousin's chaperone, her life had turned around once again the moment Tohrmeyler had fallen in love with her at first sight.

It should be mentioned that the fact she'd stolen the fiancé of Sierra, a trueborn Rosalian noblewoman of distinguished lineage, had strongly bolstered her self-esteem.

That said, it wasn't as though their married life had been smooth sailing—there had been a lot of grief too. It had taken a while for her to give birth to a male successor. Adeline's second daughter had been stillborn. Her third one had had a weak constitution from birth and died just before her tenth birthday, when a cold had taken a turn for the worse. However, after giving birth to Olivia—her fourth daughter—she'd had a boy who could become the family's heir. Her mother-in-law and Tohrmeyler's other relatives had blamed her for being unable to produce a son; in the end, she'd put them all to shame.

Her first daughter had married a man who was a brilliant diplomat and politician. He was currently serving as the governor-general of Amerix—located in the New World, it was Rosalia's largest colony at the moment. The only thing left had been for Olivia to become the consort of the first prince, and everything would've been perfect.

House Rainsworth had a distinguished lineage. In spite of the bad rumors, there were families both in Rosalia and outside of it expressing their interest in having their sons marry Olivia.

However, none of them could stand comparison with Arcrayne, the first prince. Adeline simply couldn't find it in her to accept it.

At the moment, Olivia was chatting with a young man in front of Adeline—a Francien diplomat. He was one of Tohrmeyler's

candidates for Olivia's future husband.

Adeline seemed to recall him as the second son of some count-ranked family, but apparently said family had been established after the change of government, so she couldn't remember the name of it.

Do we have to consider even the likes of him *now...?*

She didn't want to look directly at her daughter having a jovial conversation with the man, so she slightly turned away—and that was when she spotted Estelle in the corner of her eye. Adeline immediately began to seethe with hatred.

Seeing her also made Adeline recall another person, which made her feel sick. Appearing at the back of her mind was a Rupt fortune teller by the name of Florica.

Among the upper class, Florica had a reputation for telling accurate fortunes. Adeline had summoned her in hopes of getting new topics to talk about.

When they'd first met, Adeline had quickly understood the reason Florica had become popular. Florica was skilled in the art of conversation—one could scarcely find a better listener when one wanted to grumble or share one's troubles.

Adeline had summoned her on a regular basis, and during one such visit Florica had hinted at her underworld connections. That had been right after Adeline had expressed her hatred for Estelle.

Though I make no promises of their success, I can send an assassin for the right pay, Florica had quietly told her at the time.

Since Arcrayne was keeping Estelle deep in the Libra Palace for her protection, the probability of failure had been higher than the alternative. However, simply sending someone after her life had been the perfect way to spite her.

Arcrayne had people of the second prince's faction targeting his life, so even were the assassin to get caught, they could simply lay the blame on said faction, keeping the Rainsworths out of trouble.

I could send someone who would try to kill her—and if they at least managed to injure her, would that not make it a good bargain for you?

To Adeline, Florica's words had been the Devil's temptation.

Had the assassination been successful or Estelle suffered an injury, Adeline would've had to pay a high sum in reward. The

deposit, however, hadn't been that large, so she'd taken Florica up on her offer. Right after that, however, Florica had vanished and become impossible to contact.

So basically, I was fooled.

While it wasn't like she'd given away all that much money, it was still a fact that she, the wife of Marquess Rainsworth, had fallen for a silly fraud. If the public were to find out, she would be so angry she might actually perish.

Luckily for Adeline, the only person who knew she'd been summoning Florica and grumbling to her was her trusty lady's maid. Her husband Tohrmeyler couldn't stand the occult—he refused to suffer any fortune-telling or spiritualism. Adeline hadn't wanted him to know she'd been seeing a fortune teller, so she'd always met up with Florica at a private room in a members-only tearoom where Adeline was a regular.

She'd decided to keep the whole thing to herself and forget about it, but she grew angry every time she remembered it.

In order to suppress the frustration she felt deep inside, Adeline turned her face away from Estelle.

Chapter 1: A Premonition of Trouble

Estelle was knitting lace in the usual room adjoining Arcrayne's office at the Libra Palace. When her eyes detected the prince's mana approaching, she hurriedly hid her unfinished work under a couch cushion.

Sitting beside her, Leah opened her eyes wide at Estelle's actions. Immediately afterward, someone knocked on the door.

"Estelle, may I come in?"

"Certainly!" she replied, after making sure that Leah had gotten up from the couch and prepared herself to greet the prince.

Arcrayne appeared at the door. "You didn't reply right away. Were you in the middle of something, perhaps?"

"Um..."

As Estelle hesitated, another court attendant—May—who was also in the room, gave her advice. "I believe it's safe to tell His Highness. In fact, it might be more problematic if he were to probe into the matter to learn what you're hiding..." She was busy making tea for Arcrayne.

Realizing that it would indeed probably be best not to hide it, Estelle decided to be frank. "I was knitting laces for my wedding dress. I wanted something I'd knitted myself to be used in it."

"After consulting the designer at the dressmaker, it was decided that Lady Estelle would knit the edging for the cuffs," added May.

"I see. It *would* be a problem if I laid eyes on them."

Here in Rosalia, there was an unspoken rule that couples weren't to show their wedding outfits to each other before the big day, so Arcrayne was immediately satisfied with the explanation.

"I hid them under this cushion, so please make sure you do not look," said Estelle.

"I won't. Married people have told me that grudges from weddings, pregnancy, and the early years after birth are forever—not that I ever asked."

Estelle considered Arcrayne's trusted aides who were married—perhaps he was talking about the chief officer of the palace in

charge of male servants, Haoran Cao, as well as Neville and Cian of the Royal Guard.

Arcrayne would be wearing a court uniform for the wedding—the formal dress of royals. From what Estelle had heard, however, he would be wearing a mantle over it, which would be newly made. The design was kept secret from Estelle, so she was looking forward to seeing it on the day.

"Decorating wedding outfits with something you made yourself is a custom where you were born, right?" asked the prince.

"It is. I am surprised you know of it."

"Isn't it only natural to leave no stone unturned when investigating one's future spouse? Aren't you also doing your best to learn about royal customs and the annual royal events?"

"I suppose that is true. Still, Lord Arc, it brings me joy to know that you are so familiar with my birthplace."

Estelle's eyes had a special power: they could perceive the mana of living creatures, as well as the general direction of their emotions, as silver light that could be either bright or dark. Positive emotions, such as joy or happiness, would brighten the mana; while anger, hatred, and other negative emotions would darken it instead.

As Estelle giggled, Arcrayne's mood seemed to improve, judging by his mana turning brighter. It had been a little dark when he'd arrived.

"While I doubt you plan to visit our rooms, that is where we keep the veil while working on it, so please make sure not to go inside," said May, coming closer to the two once she'd finished making tea.

"Leah is making the veil," added Estelle.

In the earldom of Flozeth, which was sealed with snow during winter, handicraft was highly developed. Lacemaking and embroidery work were important sources of income for rural women.

Leah, who was of rural birth, had been taught things like sewing, weaving, and lacemaking from a young age. She could create such beautiful lace that it was regrettable she'd seldom had the opportunity to put that skill on display ever since she'd become Estelle's lady's maid—and later, a servant of the palace. Leah used many bobbins when lacemaking—it was too complicated for Estelle and she hadn't the slightest idea how

Leah did it. When Leah had briefly shown her the unfinished veil, it was beautiful enough to elicit a sigh from Estelle.

"I decided long ago that I would be the one to make Lady Estelle's veil," Leah said bashfully.

"I'm glad to see you get along so well," replied Arcrayne, looking at her with gentle eyes.

"By the way, Lady Estelle, isn't your power getting stronger? You noticed His Highness today *before* he knocked on the door, yes?" asked Leah.

Back in her earldom, Estelle had kept her power secret even from her own brother, but when Leah had become a court attendant, Estelle had revealed it to her. Having said that, the only ones who knew the whole truth about her power—namely, that it let her see people's emotions—were Arcrayne and his aide Claus Rogell. All the other employees of the palace such as servants and members of the royal guard had only been told that she could visually perceive mana.

"Now that you mention it..." replied Estelle.

She was roughly four or five meters away from the door. That used to be the limit of how far she could sense mana without a direct line of sight. But now, if she focused, she could tell that Claus was in the office nearby, so her perception had definitely improved in the time since she'd met Arcrayne.

"Why, that's music to my ears. I'm glad I taught you how to train your mana," said the prince.

"I still cannot suppress my power at will..."

"It's just that I have some mildly bad news, so I'm genuinely happy that your power is improving."

"What bad news would that be?" asked Estelle, tilting her head.

Perhaps this was related to the fact Arcrayne's mana had been dark when he'd come in.

"I've been told Marquess Rainsworth collapsed and was carried to a hospital. Apparently, he's not looking good."

The prince's words made Estelle go stiff.

"I'm going to get into details now, so would you two mind leaving us alone?"

May and Leah nodded and left the room, looks of understanding on their faces. After listening to their footsteps to make sure they were far enough away, Arcrayne spoke again.

"Remember how, during my father's memorial ceremony, you

told me about the mana of every member of marquess-ranked families in the hall? And said that Mrs. Rainsworth's mana was particularly dark."

It appeared the prince had made the other two leave because he'd wanted to talk about Estelle's ability to see the overall nature of people's emotions as light of varying brightness.

"Yes," she replied.

It hadn't been long since Diana Pautrier had infiltrated the Libra Palace in Leah's guise, so Arcrayne was still on edge.

In fact, it wasn't just him—all of the pair's attendants were more sensitive than usual. Currently, Estelle couldn't even step out into the garden unless Arcrayne was accompanying her. Similarly, Estelle was only present at social events either when required or when it was advisable.

She'd only attended the ceremony two days ago commemorating King Sachis's thirty years on the throne because Arcrayne had judged that it was best to do so. All along, she'd been closely protected by him, as well as her attendants.

Estelle recalled the color of the Rainsworths' mana at that ceremony. When they'd laid eyes on her, their already-dark mana had grown even darker. Olivia's had darkened, and Mr. Rainsworth's had darkened even more; Mrs. Rainsworth's had grown very dark indeed.

"When the husband and wife looked at me or you, they felt rather strong negative emotions," said Estelle. "But Lady Olivia gave off a slightly different impression. I felt like she was trying to look to the future. This is but my speculation, however, so I could be wrong…"

She thought back on how Olivia had looked that day. During the dinner party which had followed the ceremony, Olivia had spoken with a smile on her face to what appeared to be new candidates for the role of her fiancé. Her mana had been bright too.

The sight of her staying positive and talking to various young noblemen while doing her best to keep Estelle and Arcrayne out of her field of vision had been rather memorable for Estelle. Just like it had been with Estelle herself when her engagement with Lyle had fallen through, people were saying nasty things about her. And yet Olivia kept her back straight and held her head high.

Estelle tried to recall what she herself had been like back in the day. It felt like she'd hated seeing everyone's ill will for her in

their mana, and that the best she could do at the time was to cling to her brother's hand.

"When my engagement with Lyle came to nothing, I was grief-stricken," continued Estelle, "but somehow I managed to come to terms with it. So I am certain it was—and will be—the same for Lady Olivia. Though, again, this is mere conjecture..."

"I think your conjectures are generally on point. It matches what my spy reports," replied the prince.

"You have a spy in House Rainsworth?"

"I only have so many of them, so I didn't send one until after the marquess announced he was breaking away from me. I want to know what he'll do from now on."

According to Arcrayne, he'd made the spy monitor who visited their mansion, as well as the marquess's tendencies.

As usual, he was prepared to the minutest details. Then again, his caution was probably the reason he was still alive.

"According to what the servants say between themselves," continued Arcrayne, "Lady Olivia asked the marquess to consider foreign options when looking for a husband for her. He was keen on it himself. I was told that Lady Adeline, however, didn't like the idea and it led to a big quarrel. Apparently, the marquess collapsed in the middle of them shouting at each other."

"Oh dear..."

Estelle knitted her brows. She knew Mr. Rainsworth didn't have a favorable opinion of her, but it still pained her to hear he'd collapsed.

"What will happen to him now?" she asked. "Is there any hope of him getting better?"

"That might be difficult. I think Lady Adeline will have to serve as his substitute for the time being."

Estelle searched her memory for the Rainsworth family structure she'd learned as part of her education to become a princess.

Olivia had an older sister and a younger brother, but both of them were quite far from her in age. The sister, named Eugenie, was living in the New World colony Amerix as the wife of the governor-general there.

If something were to happen to the marquess, Olivia's much younger brother Henry would inherit his title and everything else. However, he was still only thirteen years of age and was supposed to be currently attending the Royal College located on

the outskirts of Albion. It was a boarding school for male children of royalty and titled nobility.

"Hopefully the marquess will recover—but perhaps it's best to be a bit careful in case he doesn't," said Arcrayne. "I hear Lady Adeline said some pretty terrible things about you."

"Her mana *did* look awfully dark, so I can somehow imagine that," replied Estelle after a pause. "For reference, may I ask what exactly she said about me, if you know?"

The prince shook his head. "I don't want to say it. I don't want to hurt you."

With how nice he and everyone in this palace are to me, that much wouldn't really bother me... thought Estelle.

"You are overprotective, Lord Arc."

"I am. I believe in treasuring what's mine. So I'd like you to give up and let me protect you."

When Estelle saw the prince say that with a serious expression, her cheeks grew hot and she looked away on impulse.

"Thank you very much." As she barely managed to express her gratitude, Estelle thought she heard Arcrayne snicker. "Were you, perhaps, making fun of me again?"

"No, I was just thinking how adorable you look when you're bashful."

"Should I be grateful...?"

"Your reactions are fun to watch. It's not bad either that you don't get shaken up as much as you used to."

"So you *are* making fun of me."

Arcrayne finally burst out laughing—perhaps unable to contain it anymore.

Making a pouting face, Estelle reached out for the tea May had prepared.

"I wasn't trying to make fun of you. Honest. So please don't be angry," said the prince.

"I am not. I merely thought it was a good idea to make such a face based on the flow of the conversation."

Looking like he'd just been lied to, Arcrayne let out a small sigh.

"What is this feeling? It's almost like I just lost at something," he said.

"You really mean that?" This time, it was Estelle's turn to laugh. "Well, I am pleased to hear it."

The prince shrugged lightly and reclined on the back of the couch. Immediately after that, however, he straightened his posture and gave Estelle a serious look.

“I almost forgot the main topic,” he said.

“What would that be?”

“If Lady Adeline starts acting on her husband’s behalf, it will, in essence, mean that a person who doesn’t think well of you holds the power of House Rainsworth. It wouldn’t be strange if she tried something against you. Of course, I plan to protect you as best I can, but I want you to be careful anyway.”

“Now that you mention it, you are right. I appreciate the warning and will be on my guard.”

Estelle didn’t argue. She’d previously learned from Haoran that those under protection needed to be aware of their position.

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Located on the outskirts of Albion was a hospital for the upper classes. Olivia was here with her younger brother Henry on a visit to her father Tohrmeyler.

The Royal College, which Henry attended, was known not only for its prestigiousness but also for its strict rules. Its students couldn’t leave without permission outside of the long breaks in summer and winter.

Today was Sunday and, as Henry didn’t have classes, he’d left the dorm on a day trip to see his bedridden father.

As the hospital advertised itself to the upper class, its interior was as luxurious as a mansion. Tohrmeyler had been put in a private room, the number of which was limited even in this hospital.

After a nurse showed her the way, Olivia stepped into the room, went up to the bed her father was laid up in, and held out the rose bouquet she’d had in her arms.



“Father, I’ve brought you roses from our conservatory.”

The large-flowered, faintly pink roses—the same color as Adeline’s and Olivia’s hair—were a variety cultivated at House Rainsworth. The sort’s registered name was Lady Adeline, courtesy of Tohrmeyler. These roses were special—they pretty much symbolized the love between Tohrmeyler and his wife.

“They have a pleasant scent. I am certain your father can smell it too,” said the nurse.

“I hope so,” Olivia replied quietly with a sigh.

Tohrmeyler was peacefully sleeping in the bed. It had been three days since he’d fainted in the middle of a quarrel with Adeline, and he had yet to regain consciousness.

“I see you have brought his son today,” remarked the nurse.

“Yes. He finally received permission from the College to leave their grounds. I apologize, but would you mind leaving me with my family for a moment?”

The nurse readily agreed to Olivia’s request, bowing and leaving the room.

“Father will recover, right, sister?” asked Henry once the family was alone. He was looking at Olivia with worry in his eyes.

Among her siblings, only Henry had taken after his father. Just having his face—which resembled her father’s—in her field of vision made tears well up in Olivia’s eyes.

“The doctor said we should be prepared for the worst if he remains unconscious for two more days...” Olivia replied quietly.

Nobles had large supplies of mana, so they were built more sturdily and had better natural regeneration than commoners. As befitted the head of a family bearing the high rank of marquess, Tohrmeyler had copious amounts of mana. And since a man like him had been comatose for so long, the situation must’ve been rather serious.

The doctor had said that even if his consciousness were to return, there was a risk of complications, such as paralysis or having trouble speaking.

It was painful for Olivia to look at her sleeping father with a tube connected to his body that supplied water and nutrition.

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After leaving the hospital, Olivia saw Henry to the Royal College’s dormitory, then headed home. The Rainsworths’ town house in Albion was on a corner of a street lined with nobles’ residences.

“My lady! I awaited your return!” said the butler who had come running to Olivia once she’d set foot into the entrance hall. “The mistress has collapsed on her way back from a government office…”

“Mother too now?!” Startled, Olivia opened her eyes wide.

Tohrmeyler was in a bad state, so now House Rainsworth needed to consider who would become the next head of the family.

However, the eldest son Henry was still only thirteen. Even if he were to inherit the rank of marquess, his mother Adeline would have to become his advisor and handle all the formalities for him. That was supposed to be the reason Adeline had gone to a government office today.

Tohrmeyler’s condition wasn’t the only thing Adeline had to worry about—there was the family’s future as well. She had completely worn herself out by now.

The timing of Tohrmeyler’s collapse had played a part in it. It had happened all of a sudden when he and Adeline were loudly arguing over who Olivia could marry, so Adeline blamed herself.

“How is her condition?! Where is she right now?!” asked Olivia.

“Fortunately, a kind passerby looked after her. She is now resting in her bedroom.”

“I see…”

“I have already called a doctor who checked up on her. He said she had likely overworked herself, told her to properly rest, eat nutritious meals, and prescribed her an infusion.”

Olivia sighed, finding relief in the butler’s words for the time being.

When she got to Adeline’s bedroom, she found her sitting up in bed and having a pleasant conversation with a young man Olivia didn’t recognize.

Then, it occurred to her—this man must’ve been the one who’d helped her mother.

“Let me introduce you, Olivia. This is Robert Taylor—he’s the one who helped me.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Olivia. Robert Taylor, at your service.”

The man’s looks were as plain as his name. His dark brown hair was thick and unruly, with bangs so long that they partially hid his eyes. His clothes were too big for him, which made him

look uncouth—perhaps they were ready-made.

"The pleasure is mine. My name is Olivia Rainsworth."

Returning the greeting, Olivia observed Robert, careful to avoid appearing ill-mannered.

Upon closer inspection, he had shapely features, which was a waste given his clothes and hairstyle. Especially the bangs—he would surely look much better if he raised or cut those.

"Robert says he's a student at the Albion School of Applied Fine Arts. He's striving to be an artist," explained Adeline.

"Oh! Will you be painting?" asked Olivia.

"Correct. Ideally, I can keep food on the table just by painting, but even if that doesn't work, I could become a picture dealer or an art teacher... I'm aspiring to do something related to painting," said Robert, looking bashful.

Sure enough, his hands did look like those of a person who painted as a hobby. There was paint under his nails.

"Thank you for helping my mother," said Olivia.

"I simply happened to be the first one to come running to her."

"As fate would have it, he was sketching nearby," explained Adeline. In her hand was a sketch pad with a landscape drawn on it.

"Did you draw this, Robert?"

"I did. Though it's a little awkward to show it..."

"May I take a look?"

"It pleases me that you would show interest too."

Adeline, who'd been listening to the two's exchange, handed Olivia the sketch pad.

Flipping through the pages, Olivia saw what appeared to be several pencil-drawn landscape paintings.

"You are very good," she said.

Frankly, she couldn't really tell, since the sketches were quite rough, but this was the diplomatic thing to say.

"I'm considering purchasing some of his paintings as gratitude," said Adeline.

"I hope you will take a liking to any of my works... I will bring some of them next time."

"Please let me be present when you do. I'd like to see your paintings too," said Olivia.

He's lucky, in a way, she thought.

It must've been a coincidence that he'd helped her mother,

but it had given him a connection with members of the nobility while he was still a student.

In order to make a living as an artist or a musician, one needed not only skill, but also luck and connections. It was especially helpful to secure patrons among the upper class.

Olivia looked at Robert's sketch pad once more.

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"I believe now is the time to consolidate your family. Please consider my second son as the spouse for Lady Olivia."

"Your husband had promised to look at my business plan. I would be most grateful for an opportunity to talk to you at some point."

"Your husband and I have discussed some investments…"

Faced with all the letters that had arrived at the mansion, Adeline sighed. She wanted to tear them up and burn them, but to her irritation, she had to write replies, since she was waiting to see what would happen with Tohrmeyler.

Adeline was currently exhausted from having to manage House Rainsworth's daily routine tasks and everything related to Tohrmeyler's hospitalization.

Right after her husband had collapsed, she'd been bothered by all the relatives and self-proclaimed friends showing up one after another without any prior arrangements. Ever since she'd realized there would be no end to it if she dealt with all of them, she'd had them turned away at the door, but this had resulted in her being barraged with letters instead.

The worthlessness of the contents of each one made her head hurt. There was no doubt they were after House Rainsworth's wealth. They were like starving wolves, setting their sights on a family in the process of a power transfer in hopes of getting leftovers.

If they were actually concerned about *her*, she wished they would leave her alone.

"Um… Mistress…" came a voice and a knock on the door of Adeline's private room. As she gave permission to enter, her lady's maid showed herself. "Mr. Taylor is here."

Adeline's face brightened up at the news. Robert may have looked uncouth, but he was a good listener. His recent visits had been therapeutic for Adeline.

Heading to the parlor in high spirits, she found Robert sitting

there, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

“Um, Mrs. Rainsworth, I’ve brought another painting…”

In front of him was what appeared to be a painting, wrapped in cloth.

“Thank you. Let’s take a look, then, shall we?”

As Adeline removed the cloth, the smell of turpentine oil assaulted her nostrils.

Robert’s paintings were abstract, so she couldn’t really tell what was painted on them, but oddly enough, something about them touched her heart. For that reason, Adeline was considering introducing him to an art dealer who regularly visited her family.

But with looks such as these… she thought.

His tousled hair and his oversized clothing were unacceptable.

“Robert. I want to introduce you to an art dealer I know, but those looks simply won’t do. I’ll gift you some clothing, so go have your measurements taken.”

“Huh…?” Robert looked taken aback.

“Just do as I say.”

At that, her lady’s maid stepped forward with a knowing look.

“Please follow me,” she said, pulling Robert into another room by force.

Robert’s paintings really are *good,* thought Adeline.

As she appreciated the painting without haste, Robert came back, looking somehow tired.

“Mrs. Rainsworth… Is it really appropriate for you to have clothes made for me? You already bought so many oils for me the other day…”

“You needn’t worry. I’m just doing what I want to,” said Adeline with a radiant smile. “Your paintings are so wonderful. They’re calming to look at.”

“Thank you very much.”

All flushed and self-effacing, Robert seemed so artless and sweet. She looked at him with fondness in her eyes.

“That said, if you wish to thank me, why don’t you make the usual tea for me?” asked Adeline.

“Certainly. If that tea pleases you, I’d be happy to.”

Adeline’s lady’s maid excelled at her job. Once she saw Robert gladly accept the request, she quickly brought a tea set and a mana-based teapot from the servants’ waiting room.

Shortly afterward, a fragrant scent permeated the room as Robert brought a cup to Adeline.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

Accepting the cup, Adeline wasted no time in taking a sip.

Apparently, this was a special blended herbal tea from Robert's mother which soothed the spirit. It didn't seem to have suited Olivia's tastes, but Adeline was extremely fond of it.

"How have things fared with your daughter since then?" asked Robert somewhat timidly.

Adeline's lips broke into a small smile. "Considering the situation in which my husband collapsed, we've been struggling to have a conversation. She seems to be still set on marrying into a foreign family. It's most vexing to think where she would've been now, had Estelle Flozeth never appeared…"

"Indeed. It is such a waste, considering her lineage could have allowed her to become a princess."

"Exactly! All those new candidates my husband brings—some diplomat or some heir of an earl-ranked family—they're all so unsatisfactory… I'd feel so sorry for Olivia if we couldn't find someone at least as suitable as my oldest daughter's husband, if not better."

"It must be frustrating to have some noblewoman just up from the country take His Highness away from your daughter…"

Robert's low, resounding voice easily found its way into Adeline's heart.

He's good, she thought once again. He understood her better than anyone else.

At Robert's prompting, Adeline let out everything that was on her mind.

***

Upon returning to her mansion after visiting her father at the hospital, Olivia frowned when a servant informed her of Robert Taylor's presence.

"He's here again…?"

Recently, Adeline seemed to be quite fond of this aspiring artist who had helped her out when she'd collapsed from overwork. She summoned him to the mansion practically every day.

Thinking back on it, Olivia realized that it had all begun with

her mother inviting him to a meal when he'd brought one of his paintings.

Apparently, he came from a provincial town in the west of Great Rosalia, his father was a portrait painter, and he'd lived a life surrounded by art since a young age, which had naturally made him aspire to be an artist himself.

However, while he'd successfully made his way into an art school in Albion, his father had unfortunately perished of an illness a year ago, which had made his life take a sudden turn for the worse.

Attending an art school came with more expenses than tuition and living expenses—one had to buy art supplies too. He made do with the inheritance from his father and worked at a coffee shop at night, cutting down on expenses as much as possible to work toward his dream—Adeline had deeply sympathized with him when she'd heard this life story of his.

Thus, Robert started frequenting the mansion and immediately gained Adeline's favor.

Olivia *did* find it a little suspicious at this point in time.

However, they *were* indebted to him for helping Adeline, and talking to a good listener like him seemed to be a good diversion for her mother in the midst of the overwhelming tension, so Olivia couldn't say anything.

But Adeline's behavior over the past few days had been simply too much. She'd stopped visiting her husband at the hospital, and when her butler had politely admonished her for it, she'd kicked him out of the house.

It began that day... recalled Olivia, remembering what had caused a rapid shift in Adeline's behavior. She heaved a deep sigh.

It had been when Adeline had gifted Robert the clothes she'd had made for him on the pretext of wanting to introduce him to a picture dealer. Ever since that day, she'd been coming to adore him more and more.

With his unruly hair fixed and in appropriately sized clothes, Robert looked like a whole different person—he had transformed into a handsome man with shapely features. And as if that weren't enough, his face looked just like that of Adeline's favorite opera singer Chester Astley.

That man is dangerous. I must pry him away from mother as soon as possible, thought Olivia.

At some point Robert had turned not only her mother into his ally, but the chief servants of the mansion as well. That included Olivia's lady's maid.

Perhaps things would've been a little different had her sister been here, but she was currently at sea. To Olivia's knowledge, when she had told her sister about their father coming down with an illness, she'd immediately boarded a ship, but even on the newest mana-powered high-speed ship, a journey from Amerix to Rosalia would take over two weeks.

Now that the butler—the only one among the upper servants who had been critical of Robert—had been kicked out, Olivia was the only one who could do something about the man.

Making up her mind, she headed to the living room where Adeline and Robert currently were.

"Hello, Olivia! Robert has brought another one of his paintings," said her mother as soon as she'd set foot into the room.

On the table was a large oil painting. Adeline and Robert seemed to have been chatting with it lying between them.

Adeline was in such high spirits it was as though she were a little girl. Robert was now sophisticated. Together, they looked like a married woman secretly meeting up with her lover in the early afternoon.

Olivia didn't have the slightest idea what was so good about his extremely abstract paintings. But they were popular with Adeline and the Rainsworths' usual art dealer.

"We can talk about the painting later, but may I have a moment of your time, mother?"

She felt melancholic already.

Chapter 2: A Strange Occurrence

From the second half of February to the end of March, a string of major events played out in high society.

First, there had been King Sachis's memorial ceremony; then there would be a memorial service for those who had died in wartime; and lastly, the hunting contest.

This memorial service was for mourning those who had died in the large-scale war which had occurred when a change of government in Franciel thirty-five years ago had spread its repercussions over the entire Heredian continent. The war had lasted four years.

Sachis's predecessor and Arcrayne's grandfather King Ethelbert had been a wise ruler who'd elevated Rosalia's status to that of a great power worthy of the moniker "Conqueror of the Seas," but sending troops into the war on the Heredian continent was considered the only blot on his name.

Using its alliance with Franciel as pretext, Rosalia had sent out troops to further expand its overseas territories, but lost a swath of them as the war dragged on and on. The number was said to be as high as five hundred thousand. Estelle and Sirius, too, had lost an uncle in that war—a different one from Oscar.

This death toll included the mobilized troops and civilians from each colony, but the reality was that nobody knew the exact numbers.

A year after treaties between all the countries had been signed to end the hostilities, King Ethelbert had abdicated, feeling responsible for this outcome, and giving the throne to Sachis. This served to further darken the only blot on the name of the wise monarch.

Clad in black as dictated by the dress code, Estelle disembarked from the coach with Arcrayne's help.

They had arrived at the central park, which was where the ceremony would be held. There was a cenotaph for the victims of the war on the Heredian continent set up in an open space ahead.

This was the same place where a traveling funfair had come

at the end of the previous year. In stark contrast to that time, however, a solemn ambience now hung over the whole park.

As soon as Estelle had set foot on the ground, Arcrayne's mana enveloped her.

It was always like this when she went outside as of late. The prince used his own power—telekinesis—to form a barrier around Estelle for protection. Apparently even with his copious amounts of mana, he could only do this for roughly two hours at most. Because of that, she'd once told him he didn't need to go that far; but he wouldn't listen, so Estelle had decided to gratefully accept his protection.

"Thank you very much," she said.

It was a bit suffocating, but she *was* happy about his feelings. Estelle smiled at Arcrayne with gratitude.

He was wearing a uniform of the Foot Guards today. That was because, even though he'd retired from military service when King Sachis had taken ill the previous year, he was a Royal Colonel of the Foot Guards as was the royal custom. Arcrayne looked good in just about anything, so his appearance today would no doubt get a lot of attention from women as usual.

Just like with the other day's ceremony to commemorate the king's thirty years on the throne, this memorial service too was something Arcrayne had judged worth attending for Estelle.

Estelle was related to someone who had died in the war, and none of the other members of House Flozeth—Sirius and the siblings' uncle, along with his wife—could leave the earldom at the moment.

The earldom of Flozeth had a dragon habitat on its territory.

On a normal year, the whole family would attend this service and then return to the earldom, but because the winter this year was warm, thaw came early. This meant that culling the dragon population—by hunting them in their nests where they hibernated—had to be done early too.

The war on the Heredian continent had taken place before Estelle had been born, so she hadn't been personally acquainted with the uncle who'd died in it. However, if Estelle—a member of a bereaved family, and the fiancée of the first prince—didn't attend despite being in Albion, her reputation would suffer.

Estelle herself had seen the strength of her late parents' and Oscar's emotional attachment to this service and how they'd

cherished the memory of the deceased, so she too had wanted to attend, if possible.

Also, after the service's main event with laying flowers, Estelle was to make an early return to the Libra Palace, claiming that she felt unwell. The rest of the day was actually full of events for those who had died or been wounded in the war even after the service: a charity concert in support of the bereaved families, a dinner party, and so on. Arcrayne's mana wouldn't last that long, however.

Estelle felt guilty, remembering how she'd always stayed until the end until now. At the same time, there was faint relief in her too, which made her hate herself for it.

And as for *why* she felt relieved...

"Welcome to the royal seats, Lady Estelle. Normally you wouldn't have been allowed here just yet..."

When Estelle and Arcrayne got to the royal seats, which had been placed the closest to the memorial monument, Truteliese, who had already sat down, addressed Estelle. Her tone and mana were both full of displeasure.

"Stop it. Everybody grieves for the fallen soldiers. She was attacked at the riding ground, correct? And it hasn't even been that long. It's only natural that Arcrayne would want to stay close to his fiancée and protect her."

The one chiding Truteliese was Sachis.

He didn't know about Diana taking Leah's form and infiltrating the Libra Palace, but he *had* been told about Estelle getting shot with a crossbow during riding practice before that. The culprit had yet to be caught.

Sachis looked at Truteliese with the eyes of someone who had something to say.

"How terrifying. I wonder if some extremists are behind it, seeking to overthrow the government." After saying all that with a complete deadpan, Truteliese irritably turned her face away. "Please, sit down. Given the circumstances, I shall turn a blind eye."

Ever since the ceremony commemorating the king's reign, Truteliese's mana had been constantly dark.

Previously, when Estelle had been invited to the Royal Opera House to watch an opera together, the queen's emotions had appeared irregular—had that been Estelle's misunderstanding?

Or had there been a reason for it? Thinking too much made Estelle's head hurt, so she gave up trying to make sense of it and sat beside Arcrayne.

Since she hadn't married Arcrayne yet, Estelle didn't actually have a right to sit in the royal seats. However, in order to protect Estelle at this service, Arcrayne had made use of his authority as the first prince to forcibly allow her to sit here. This meant that she'd have to spend the whole service right next to the king and queen. Obviously, it was enough to make anyone lose their nerve and be in low spirits.

Estelle wanted to attend the service. But she didn't want to sit in the royal seats. She especially hated being close to Truteliese. Yet it was the only way, for her protection... Her feelings were in disarray, and she didn't know how to express them.

What was more, ever since the moment she'd sat down, she could sense a mix of emotions directed at her. She'd found the pressure overwhelming even at the recent ceremony commemorating the king's reign—perhaps this was because her perception of mana had improved.

It wasn't like *all* the emotions she sensed were negative, but the overwhelming majority of the mana was dark. Its owners must've been thinking something along the lines of, "Why is *she* sitting *there?*"

Sighing inwardly, Estelle endeavored to keep her presence of mind and directed her eyes toward the memorial monument. *I don't care,* she told herself, then concentrated on the mana enveloping her, coming from the one sitting closest to her.

Arcrayne's mana was a little dark. Estelle sneaked a glance at him and found him looking at her with concern, at which point she understood that his mana was dark because he was worried about her.

It's all right, she said inside her mind and smiled at the prince.

In response, Arcrayne looked a little surprised, then relaxed his expression.

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The main event of the memorial service for the war dead was laying white roses on the memorial monument. That said, only flowers made out of paper would be used. As for why artificial flowers were used instead of natural ones—it was because they'd be burned at the end.

Once the flowers were laid during the service, the table for

memorial flowers would be opened to the general public for a week. Then, after that, the paper roses would be burnt in a large fire, and the bereaved families would scatter the ashes into the Albion River flowing through the center of the capital, with the wish that they reach the land of the dead believed to lie beyond the river.

The king was the first to lay flowers, after which people went up to the memorial monument in the order of the seating precedence. After the king came the queen, then Arcrayne, and then Estelle.

It was hard for her to endure doing this inappropriately early for her social status, but she once again told herself that she didn't care. Estelle was getting special treatment today for her protection. Even she valued her life.

There's no other way, she told herself.

If anyone wanted to criticize her, she wanted them to find themselves in her position first. She believed most people would agree there was no helping it.

Trying to stay calm, Estelle straightened her back and went to lay flowers after Arcrayne.

It was when she was about to head back that she noticed something strange.

Among those attending the service, one person had mana that looked peculiar.

It's white... Estelle remarked internally.

Normally, she saw mana as silver light, but this woman's mana was covered in a white fog; she couldn't see the color of her emotions.

She'd never seen mana like that before. Taking care not to be obvious about it, she checked who the woman was. And when she did, she froze in place.



It was Olivia Rainsworth.

Furtively inspecting her surroundings, Estelle saw that Olivia appeared to be the only member of House Rainsworth present.

When it was her turn to lay flowers, she got up and headed to the table in front of the memorial monument. She looked as graceful as always. However, the white fog obstructing her mana made her appear somewhat otherworldly.

Why...? wondered Estelle. Was this caused by some mana-based item or an artifact? She couldn't think of any other reasons why only Olivia would have mana that looked like that.

Estelle stared at her with bated breath.

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Estelle had gone pale, lost in thought about Olivia; thanks to that, her excuse of being unwell was easily accepted and she returned to the Libra Palace early.

Truteliese had made a catty remark to her: "So if I get laid up in a day or two, it's your fault." However, Estelle had no choice, since Arcrayne's mana had its limits.

The prince saw her back to the palace. The king and queen had been astounded at such a display of overprotectiveness, but this was all to keep Estelle safe.

Arcrayne was planning to show up late to the charity concert afterward, so the next day's newspapers would surely talk about his passionate love. In the eyes of the public, Estelle was Cinderella, ardently loved by a devoted prince.

She knew it wasn't the case, but nonetheless there was a part of her that felt a sense of superiority from it. A self-deprecating smile appeared on her face.

"Estelle, sometime during the ceremony, you began to look strange. Any reason for it? Do you actually feel unwell?" asked Arcrayne as soon as they were alone in the coach.

"I feel fine."

"Then why? I asked you to let me know through the ring if you sensed any strange mana."

"Oh..."

That's right... I forgot about the ring, realized Estelle. Other than her engagement ring, she was always wearing a mana ring connected to one of Arcrayne's cuff links.

She hadn't gotten the impression that any danger was approaching, so it hadn't occurred to her to use it.

“I apologize. There was no malice, so I completely forgot.”

Gripping her left hand, which had the ring on it, with her right, Estelle lowered her head to Arcrayne who sat across from her.

“I’m sorry,” replied the prince immediately, “I made it sound like I was blaming you. That wasn’t my intention.”

His expression clouded over. Estelle could tell he was worried.

“I know. I was in the wrong too. I should have let you know if I saw strange mana, even if there was no malice. I shall be more careful next time.”

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing,” Arcrayne insisted.

The two were getting stuck in an apology loop. Shaking her head, Estelle resolved herself and got to the main topic.

“Lady Olivia’s mana was strange. It was as though there was a white fog over it… I have never seen mana such as that before.”

“You see mana as silver light, right?”

“Yes. It swirls with the heart at the center. After seeing many people’s mana, I have come to suspect that it is connected to the beating of the heart.”

“I see. Maybe it’s because mana comes from the heart.” Arcrayne lowered his eyes to his chest.

“Going back to Lady Olivia—for a moment, she looked like a ghost to me. And yet her skin had a healthy color… I thought she might be under the effect of some mana-based item or an artifact.”

“So that’s how she appeared in your eyes,” muttered Arcrayne. He reclined on the back of his seat, a serious look on his face. “Thank you for letting me know, Estelle. I’ll keep an eye on Olivia during the rest of today’s events. In the meantime, I’d like you to wait in the palace.”

“As you wish.”

“That said, knowing you, I’m sure you’ll worry about it… I’ll let you know if I learned anything when I come back. It might be hard to do today, since it’s very likely I’ll be late, but I’ll make sure to make time for you tomorrow.”

I’ll wait for you for as long as it takes, Estelle nearly said, but stopped herself at the last moment.

It would’ve been a selfish thing to say. Arcrayne was going to spend the rest of the day together with the king and queen. He would certainly return tired.

“Um, there is no rush,” said Estelle. “It would be perfectly fine during lunch or at night. I shall be happy if you let me know whenever it is convenient for you tomorrow.”

At those words, an uncomfortable smile appeared on Arcrayne’s face. “You’re too reasonable, Estelle. You could stand to be a little more assertive.”

Estelle thought for a moment, then replied, “That I cannot do.”

Arcrayne had once told her that he was looking for a different candidate for the role of his fiancée because he didn’t like Olivia’s arrogance. Those words had been stuck in Estelle’s mind like a painful splinter ever since.

She didn’t know the extent of his tolerance. Which was why she had to act like an obedient woman who knew her place.

It wasn’t just because she liked Arcrayne and didn’t want him to hate her. She dreaded to think what would happen to her brother and House Flozeth if she incurred the displeasure of the first prince.

“I guess I’m the one who’s causing you to be that way…”

Arcrayne was perceptive. Estelle had barely said anything, and it appeared to have been enough for him to realize the reason she couldn’t be selfish.

“This is why…” he began, but went silent partway.

What was meant to follow that? wondered Estelle. She tilted her head, but after a delay, the prince only said, “Never mind.”

She was curious, but couldn’t ask. Until they got to the Libra Palace, an uncomfortable silence hung over the inside of the coach.

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Arcrayne found time for her in the afternoon of the following day.

When Estelle answered his summons and stepped into his office, her eyes widened at the sight of not only Claus and Haoran—who were, after all, regular visitors—but also Cian, a Royal Guard personally serving Arcrayne. Neil and May were also there, whom Estelle hadn’t seen since that morning. On top of that, all of them had dark mana.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” said the prince. “I had something to discuss with everyone for a bit before telling you about this.”

“I understand that you are a busy man, Your Highness… If anything, I am grateful you found time for me.”

So I'm the last one he's taking this to? The hurtful thought made its way into Estelle's mind, but she desperately suppressed it. She hated how narrow-minded she became when dealing with him.

Seeing Estelle shake her head, Arcrayne gave her a faint smile. "Right, I forgot you're like this. Take a seat over there."

Unable to say she was holding herself back, Estelle vaguely smiled and took Arcrayne up on his offer, sitting on the sofa across from him. Everyone else in the room was behind him, which made things rather intense.

"Where do I begin…? Maybe I should start with what happened yesterday." With that preamble, Arcrayne said that Olivia hadn't appeared at the previous day's charity concert held after the service. "Looks like she only attended the service and then left, just like you. The reasons she gave were that her father is in a hospital and her mother had collapsed from stress. If I didn't know better, I probably would've been convinced."

"Huh…? Lady Adeline collapsed too…?" asked Estelle.

"It appears that's what Lady Olivia said at the reception. Unfortunately, it contradicts my spy's reports."

"What do you mean?" Estelle knitted her brows.

"Apparently it's true that Lady Adeline collapsed at one point, but it seems she's already recovered and is enjoying herself."

"Enjoying herself…? While her husband is in the hospital?"

Arcrayne frowned. "Apparently she's lavishing money on a certain young man."

"Wh-What…? Is he her lover…?" Estelle was staring with her mouth open.

"Objectively, that *is* how it looks."

"Wait a moment, please. Did Mr. and Mrs. Rainsworth not marry after a fateful encounter?"

When Tohrmeyler Rainsworth had been young, he'd been engaged to Sierra, and yet he'd cast her aside after being captivated by Adeline—an émigré fleeing her warring country. Their love story was famous.

The husband and wife still had a good relationship. Before coming down with an illness, Tohrmeyler had been seen frequently appearing at various events in high society with his wife, and they had looked to be on good terms.

"Considering the reason the marquess collapsed… Even I first thought she was just escaping reality…" replied Arcrayne.

With a serious look on his face, he laid out to Estelle

everything he'd learned from his spy about the recent affairs of House Rainsworth, observing the order of events and bringing up even things Estelle already knew.

Tohrmeyler had collapsed while arguing with Adeline about Olivia's marriage partners. Apparently Adeline blamed herself quite a lot for that.

His condition didn't look good, so the Rainsworths had ended up starting the transfer of power to a new head of the family. However, Henry, the eldest son and heir, was still only thirteen. His mother Adeline would have to become his advisor and act as the substitute head of the family until he came of age.

Between visiting Tohrmeyler, handling the formalities for the transfer of leadership, taking care of the family's routine tasks, and dealing with people's inquiries, Adeline had a whole lot of work to do, which had pushed her to the brink both mentally and physically. As a result, she had apparently collapsed on her way back from Albion's government office area to a coach station. And it appeared that it had been the man in question who'd gallantly come to her rescue at the time.

"His name's Robert Taylor. He claims to be a student at the Department of Visual Arts of the Albion School of Applied Fine Arts. Apparently he's unsophisticated and levelheaded, and he found his way into Lady Adeline's heart in an instant. I've also checked with the school just in case—he really is a student there."

Robert was an aspiring artist. It seemed that Adeline had taken an interest in his paintings and decided to support him as his patroness. And then, when she'd had clothes made for him and fixed his appearance in order to introduce him to an art dealer she knew...

"Cleans up well, apparently. Are you familiar with Chester Astley? He's an opera singer who's very popular with married women of the upper class. Apparently, Robert turned out to have a face just like his."

Estelle had heard the name. She knitted her brows.

"Estelle, does this story remind you of anything?" asked the prince, a listless expression on his face.

Springing to Estelle's mind was that time Diana Pautrier had taken on Leah's form to infiltrate the Libra Palace.

"I was thinking about the fake Leah. Did you have the same

thing on your mind?" she replied, bringing the conversation back to the main topic.

Arcrayne nodded. "It hasn't even been long since then."

Not even a month had passed since that whole matter had concluded.

"Lady Adeline was a fan of Chester Astley from the start. Apparently she always rushed to see his performances. And then a man with a face just like his makes an appearance. She immediately adores him, summons him to her mansion practically every day, and starts supporting him financially—buying him art supplies, having clothes made for him. If it had ended there, I would've surely overlooked the matter...but after having put together the rumors circulating among the servants, it seems that, over this short period of time, Robert has not only charmed Lady Adeline, but also won over the hearts of those around her, one after another. Her lady's maid, the housekeeper... Though of course, it's not like they're *all* fond of him."

"How revolting..." replied Estelle.

"Anyone would feel that way. As I wondered what could be done about this, I found out that even Lady Olivia, who was supposed to be critical of Robert, has started acting strangely too. She began going on friendly outings with him and her mother all of a sudden, and her daily hospital visits have stopped too... This started four days ago."

Estelle was dumbfounded.

"House Rainsworth is falling apart on the inside. The butler was kicked out all of a sudden after admonishing Lady Adeline. He was replaced with the marquess's valet, but because the new butler never got guidance from the old one, he can't keep up with his duties. The ranks of the upper servants are full of Robert's supporters—and those of them who aren't, find him repulsive."

Upper servants referred to supervisors of other servants, such as the butler and the housekeeper, as well as those who took personal care of the family members—valets and lady's maids. Whereas those who cleaned, cooked, did the laundry, and took care of other direct manual labor were known as lower servants.

"It looks like the lower servants aren't under Robert's influence. Maybe he doesn't even consider them worth controlling."

A ridiculing smile appeared on Arcrayne's face. Was it anger that Estelle saw in his mana?

In a noble household, lower servants couldn't disobey upper servants. That was because, if they were to be dismissed without a letter of introduction, they were certain to have trouble finding another job. The working conditions of servants handling chores were better in households of wealthy nobles with advanced division of labor. If one were to be kicked out without a letter of introduction, there was no hope of employment anywhere with similar working conditions. That left them with no option other than to turn a blind eye to things somewhat unreasonable and strange.

"If you say Lady Olivia's mana was abnormal, then there can be no doubt. Catching Robert might give us leads on that 'Florica,'" said Arcrayne.

"Florica" was a Rupt fortune teller believed to have instigated Diana Pautrier to infiltrate the Libra Palace and attempt to assassinate Estelle. She was an underworld criminal apparently in possession of an extremely powerful artifact that could remold a human body, starting from the skeletal structure.

"Catch him? But how…?" asked Estelle.

"As a matter of fact, I received something interesting this morning." Arcrayne signaled with his eyes to Haoran, who stood next to the office desk.

At that, Haoran picked up a sealed letter off the desk and brought it to Estelle and the rest. And as soon as he did, the already dark mana of everyone in the room got even worse.

"That is…"

Printed on the sealed letter was House Rainsworth's crest.

"This is an invitation to a tea party from Lady Olivia. She's asking me to come see this artist who makes such wonderful paintings." With that, Arcrayne smiled cheerfully.

After a brief period of silence, Estelle spoke up. "Why would she send this…? I fail to grasp her intentions…" Her voice was trembling badly enough to make her realize how unsettled she was.

"Something must've gone wrong with Lady Olivia. She now seems desperate to become my fiancée, as if she's lost her mind. Despite the fact you exist." After saying that, Arcrayne continued to smile cheerfully, even as his mana remained dark. "And

apparently Lady Olivia sent this on her own initiative."

"What...?"

"It seems neither her mother nor any of the servants are aware of the tea party."

Estelle went speechless.

Olivia was planning to hold a tea party and not only Adeline, but even the servants—many of whom would need to prepare things—didn't know about this? It was way too ridiculous.

"I figure I might as well go."

Startled, Estelle opened her eyes wide at Arcrayne's words.

"But it is dangerous!" she exclaimed.

"You're saying the same thing as everyone else."

"Of course I am! How could you go to a place with something so strange going on...?"

"But it's also an opportunity to get a lead on this 'Florica.' If nobody at House Rainsworth knows, that means I can catch Robert off guard."

"I...suppose that is true..."

"I'll bring bodyguards, and I won't eat or drink anything. As long as I'm careful about that, there's not much that can hurt me. You already know I always have a mana barrier around my body automatically protecting me, right?"

"I do...but..."

It was dangerous, so Estelle didn't want him to go. Though that wasn't the only reason—she didn't want him to make contact with Olivia, who'd once been rumored to be close to being engaged to him.

Noticing the feeling of uncertainty in herself, Estelle went pale at the fact she couldn't stay calm.

"Could it be that you're worried about the rumors about me and Lady Olivia that used to go around?"

Arcrayne had guessed correctly. Estelle shook and went silent for a moment. There was no point in trying to hide it from someone as perceptive as him; she gave up and came clean.

"I would be lying if I said I...do not feel something akin to jealousy. This is not only about the rumors—you must have spent much longer with Lady Olivia than me, Lord Arc."

"I'm accepting this invitation to try to find something out about this 'Florica' woman. I don't feel anything special for Lady Olivia whatsoever. I've chosen *you.* And nothing will change that fact."

“As you say…”

“Your Highness. Pardon my arrogance, but I believe it would be best for you to talk to Lady Estelle in private,” May interrupted timidly. “The rest of us shall excuse ourselves for a moment.”

It was a breach of etiquette for a person of lower standing to speak without permission, so she must’ve been prepared to be reprimanded.

While Estelle was grateful to her, she shook her head. “I shall be fine, since you denied it so flatly, Lord Arc. I think I just need to cool down a little.”

I just need to come to terms with it. The last thing I want to do is cause him trouble. I don’t want him to find me a bother.

With her thoughts going around in circles, Estelle closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she met Arcrayne’s gaze directly.

“I am aware of your power. But please be careful, and return safely.”

“So you’re letting me go.”

“I believe you have made things clear by speaking to me about it after everyone else. Even if all of us here tried to stop you, you would still go, yes?”

“That I would,” replied the prince after a pause.

“In that case, all I can do is await your return. Worry not about me. Dragon hunts have made me accustomed to seeing people off.”

A moment of silence later, Arcrayne said, “You’re amazing to arrive at that thought.”

Chapter 3: Erosion

Let us go back to right after the memorial service.

“Hello, Olivia,” said Adeline with a gentle smile, greeting her daughter, who’d just come home in House Rainsworth’s coach.

“Hello, mother.”

As Olivia replied with a smile of her own, Adeline gently took her in her arms.

Olivia hadn’t been alone in the coach—Robert Taylor had ridden with her. He watched the pair’s embrace with a pleasant smile on his face.

“It’s about time I refilled it with mana,” said Adeline with a faraway look, touching Olivia’s choker with her right hand.

The mana stone embedded in the center of the choker began to glow with a silver light. Creases appeared between Adeline’s eyebrows—too much of her mana must’ve been sapped at once.

To Robert—or rather, Trickster—the sight of it was absolutely delightful.

People are fascinating. Shake them up just a little and they’ll do things you never expected them to.

After “playing” with Diana Pautrier, Trickster had planned to disappear. What had made him change his mind was the fact that Diana had been caught much more quickly than expected.

I thought that young lady would hold out a bit longer, he mused.

He’d used his artifact to completely change her appearance to that of a servant of the Libra Palace. Her skeletal structure, her type of hair, the color of her eyes—he’d made everything exactly the same.

Trickster wished she’d at the very least injured her target, Estelle Flozeth, to the slightest degree, before she’d gotten caught. He’d quickly realized she’d gone unharmed because he’d seen her accompany the first prince at a party that had followed.

Meanwhile, Diana’s father had been summoned to the Libra Palace and a coach had departed from there to a hospital with jail cells. When Trickster had found out that Diana had been the

one inside and that she'd been confined and put under strict observation, he'd been utterly disappointed.

He'd expected an idiot like her to get caught easily, but it had happened too quickly. He'd wanted her to cause a bit more chaos at the palace.

Trickster had made Diana transform into a servant of the Libra Palace in order to harm Estelle because, at the time, he'd disguised himself as a fortune teller by the name of Florica, and he'd wanted to fulfill the requests of several of his clients at once. Those were Diana Pautrier and Adeline Rainsworth, who'd borne a grudge against Estelle, and Mrs. Wyntia, who'd resented Diana for messing up the life of her son Lyle.

In the end, however, the only one who'd been satisfied with the outcome was Mrs. Wyntia.

Diana could be ruled out, since it was safe to say she'd never enter the spotlight again, but that still left Adeline, whom he'd swindled out of a deposit. Trickster had figured it would be entertaining if she'd become hell-bent on finding him. That had been the reason he'd stayed in Albion.

Unfortunately, however, Adeline appeared to have chosen to silently put up with the matter, which had been another source of disappointment for Trickster.

When he'd made contact with her as "Florica," Adeline had been a stereotypical proud noblewoman, so she must've decided not to kick up a fuss about it to avoid making things public.

It's boring here, so it's about time I stopped watching these people and left Albion—but just as Trickster had thought that and started preparing for a trip, Marquess Rainsworth had collapsed. And apparently it had happened right in the middle of a quarrel with Adeline. On top of that, they'd been arguing over who Olivia could marry.

Trickster had sensed that things were about to get fun.

At that point he'd changed his plans, borrowed the face of Adeline's favorite opera singer with the help of his Bracelet of Metamorphosis, and waited for an opportunity to make contact with her naturally.

It had come quicker than he'd expected, and he'd successfully gained Adeline's trust as aspiring artist Robert Taylor, which had

been surprisingly easy.

The reason he'd chosen uncouth clothing and hairstyle and hidden his appearance of the opera singer under the guise of an unsophisticated countryman had been to lower everyone's guard. Also, he'd counted on arousing even more of Adeline's interest if she only found out later on that he looked just like the tenor she was so partial to.

Trickster had a powerful ally—the secret drugs of his people. He'd been confident he could make Adeline take a liking to the paintings he'd prepared ahead of time. This time he'd chosen a different drug from the pastille he'd used on Diana. It had been a blended tea made of several herbs—some chosen for their medicinal properties, others for their fragrance.

Adeline had drunk "Robert's" tea without any suspicion, so Trickster had had no difficulty in planting a suggestion in her head to feel affection toward him. How much a person liked you from the start influenced your chances of success. This was one of the reasons he'd bothered to take on the appearance of the opera singer.

He could barely keep from laughing when he'd met the art dealer. Perhaps to humor Adeline, the man had sung the praises of Trickster's works and bought them at fairly high prices. Trickster himself didn't know what was so good about those paintings.

Since Trickster had made Adeline drink it in tea, the drug had had even more effect than that of a pastille. It was highly addictive—he'd felt a little pity for her, thinking about what awaited her in the future. However, he hadn't wanted to use incense this time, since there had been a risk of Diana having told the first prince about it.

Oh well, he'd thought irresponsibly.

The drawback of tea was that people had different tastes. Adeline and almost all of her personal servants had drunk it with a surprising lack of resistance, but some, such as Olivia and the butler, had refused as if it didn't suit their taste.

However, the discord caused by those he couldn't control with his drug was precisely what Trickster sought.

Olivia's face had been a particularly amusing sight.

She'd wanted to admonish her mother for bringing a

suspicious man into the house, but couldn't, because she'd believed she was partly to blame for her father collapsing. Trickster had found great satisfaction in the beautiful sight of a young noblewoman beset with anguish.

Olivia had finally made her move when Adeline had dismissed the butler for admonishing her.

Since she'd talked with her mother in private, Trickster didn't know what they'd said to each other. However, as he'd waited in another room, the two appeared to have begun to quarrel. A smile appeared on his face as he remembered that time.

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"Oh Robert, how dreadful! Olivia... She..."

After the quarrel was followed by a loud sound, a pale Adeline came running to the room in which Trickster had been waiting.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Rainsworth?"

"She insulted you, calling you my lover, and I got so angry that I hit her on the spur of the moment... It looks like I put too much strength into it. She lost her balance and..."

When Adeline told him the details, Trickster learned that, apparently, there had unfortunately been a cupboard where Olivia had fallen, and she'd hit her head hard on it.

With Adeline pulling him by the hand, Trickster made his way to Olivia.

"Lady Olivia! Are you all right?"

When he called out to the collapsed Olivia, her eyelids moved slightly. She was also breathing at least.

"She has probably simply lost consciousness... What would you like to do? Call a doctor, or...?"

"*Or* what?"

Instead of replying, Robert gave Adeline a vague smile and spoke quietly in the same voice as that of her beloved tenor.

"If she regards me with disfavor, then I cannot come here anymore. It would sadden me to be hated by your family, Mrs. Rainsworth..."

"That simply won't do!"

Affected by the drug, Adeline shook her head like a little girl. She was terribly honest with her desires right now.

"But as long as Lady Olivia is against me, I cannot see you. I also feel guilty before you if she thinks of me as your lover..."

"That's right; it's not as though you're my lover... Where on Earth did Olivia get that idea...?"

Trickster and Adeline weren't in such a relationship yet. The drugs had made Adeline captivated with "Robert," but unfortunately for her, he wasn't interested in sleeping with middle-aged women, so he kept dodging her advances.

"If she changed her mind about me, I could even start coming every day...or even take you up on your earlier offer to start living here..." Trickster said quietly, making an apologetic face.

As long as Olivia was opposed to him, he couldn't stay here. He'd have to leave Adeline.

"If Olivia is here...you can't come..." muttered Adeline, an expression of shock on her face. "That's right. If she stands in our way, you'll leave me..."

What will you do, Mrs. Rainsworth? wondered Trickster. Would she take the opportunity to get rid of her? Or would she hold back? What choice would appear in her mind as the drugs continued to erode it?

Putting on an apologetic expression, Trickster looked at Adeline with eyes full of curiosity and malice.

"Olivia used to be meek and lovable back in the day... She'd listen to her mother in anything—told her she loved her..." mumbled Adeline, her eyes out of focus. "She's not only like this with you, Robert. There's the search for her future husband too. Even if we can't hope for someone with the status of His Highness Prince Arcrayne, why would she try to settle for such bad candidates...? How did it come to this? She used to be as charming as a doll... She was so nice as a child. When Olivia was only just born, she was so small..."

Adeline began to tell Trickster how adorable Olivia had been in her early childhood.

This looks like it's going to take a while... She always starts repeating the same things over and over when she becomes like this...

Fed up with Adeline on the inside, Trickster nonetheless put on the mask of a pleasant young man and listened to her, making all the appropriate responses.

"That's right," began Adeline, quietly and suddenly. "I have something good. Why haven't I thought of it until now?"

"Something good? What would that be?"

"Ah, but I have to call a doctor first... Robert, would you be so kind as to lay Olivia on that couch?"

So she's not going to get rid of her, huh.

Trickster inwardly clicked his tongue, but showed no sign of it and readily accepted the request, taking the unconscious Olivia into his arms.

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As he laid Olivia down on the couch and waited, Adeline, who'd left to call a doctor, returned after a while in a half run.

Trickster wondered what had taken her so long, and it appeared that she'd gone to take something. In her hands was a jewelry box, covered in fine-looking cloth.

"I'm thinking of using this," said Adeline, opening the box and showing its contents to Trickster.

Inside the box was a choker with a stone embedded in it—presumably a mana stone. Judging by the small patterns engraved into the metallic parts, it was most likely an artifact.

"What is that, Mrs. Rainsworth?"

"Something passed down through generations in my parents' family."

With a giggle, Adeline put the choker on Olivia's neck and poured mana into it.

"Kgh..." Adeline knitted her brows. It appeared the bracelet had absorbed quite a lot of mana from her.

The mana stone on the choker began to glow with a silver light. Adeline, on the other hand, looked like she was in pain.

Trickster felt like over ten minutes had passed. It seemed to be finally over at that point, and the choker stopped glowing with a silver light.

"Haah... Haah... Haah..."

Adeline, meanwhile, was breathing heavily, agony written on her face.

"That was no ordinary mana stone but an artifact, yes?" asked Trickster. "I cannot imagine what effect it might have..."

"It makes a person into a doll who does your bidding. In exchange, it uses up an awful lot of mana. It is also said that you pay the price in your life span." Visibly drained and smiling, Adeline's face was a sight to behold. "Olivia won't say anything bad about you anymore. So please don't hold back—come live at the mansion. I'll have an atelier prepared for you."

Some noble families with long-lasting lineages were secretly in possession of artifacts with incredible power. Trickster got goose bumps at the sight of it.

It thrilled him. If the artifact made Adeline, a noble, this exhausted, there was a high probability that Trickster himself, who had only about as much mana as a member of lesser nobility, couldn't use it. But if he helped himself to it before he went into hiding and put it on the black market, it would probably fetch quite a high price.

That wasn't the only reason Trickster was in high spirits.

It was amazing that Adeline would even come up with the idea of turning her rebellious daughter into a doll using an artifact, which could potentially even shorten Adeline's life span. All for the sake of keeping "Robert" around.

You're incredible, Mrs. Rainsworth. Trickster smiled inwardly.

He was planning to suddenly disappear after making a mess at House Rainsworth large enough to satisfy himself.

Between the addictive drug masked as tea, and an artifact, the cost of using which was one's life span, Adeline's body would no doubt be a wreck by the end of it all.

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As Trickster had expected, Adeline's face, which had looked haggard from the start, aged visibly, and she got more gray hairs. All in a mere three days since she'd turned Olivia into a doll.

The effect is amazing, but I sure would never use that thing, he thought to himself as a twisted puppet play between a mother and daughter unfolded before his eyes.

"I'm sorry for making you attend the service all by yourself, Olivia."

"Don't worry, mother. I know you haven't been feeling well recently." Olivia looked up at Adeline with worry.

Her feeling unwell is a big lie, young lady, thought Trickster.

The true reason was different. Adeline didn't want to deal with all the looks of pity and contempt. The tea and the planted suggestion had made her honest with her desires, and she'd simply forced the unpleasant duty on her daughter.

"How was His Highness Prince Arcrayne?"

At Adeline's question, Olivia made a chagrined face. "He was constantly with Estelle Flozeth. That harlot... She shouldn't even be allowed to sit with royals yet."

"I see... Don't worry. Your mother will do something about it. That place was supposed to be yours."

Poor thing, thought Trickster while listening to the two's

conversation. While he sympathized with Olivia, he was secretly laughing at her too.

She'd gotten over the first prince and had tried to search for someone else, but the choker had ended up twisting her feelings.

The one with an attachment to the prince was Adeline. After all, she'd spent much of her youth living a life hardly different from that of a servant after she'd had to flee her homeland; perhaps because of this, she was obstinate about the idea of living better than others.

Her oldest daughter had married the governor-general of Amerix. She'd given birth to a boy who could become an heir. If, on top of all that, Olivia had become a princess, Adeline's self-esteem would've been satisfied to the utmost. That was her true motive.

Until recently, she'd pretended to have given up on the prince and had been saying she'd accept someone on the level of the governor-general of Amerix, but deep inside, she'd never actually given up. Trickster's drug and planted suggestion had revealed that truth.

If you ask me, though, you didn't exactly lead an impoverished existence, even in the past, thought Trickster.

Adeline had told him her life story in great detail, both when he'd been "Florica" and "Robert," even though he'd never asked.

Born into a count-ranked family, she'd had to flee her country and work as a governess for her aunt without any compensation, which had apparently been quite humiliating for her. However, she'd had food, clothing, and shelter, so she'd been sufficiently blessed. She should've seen children living in the slums before talking like she'd had a miserable life.

Inside his mind, Trickster looked down on Adeline.

"Say, Robert, how could I get rid of Estelle Flozeth?" asked Adeline.

Robert smiled amicably. "I shall give it some thought myself to see if something can be done."

Trickster didn't have the slightest intention of keeping his promise. After what had happened with Diana, doing anything to Estelle Flozeth was going to be impossible for a while. The first prince and those around him were being extra cautious.

"While she's a hindrance, so is my husband. I wish my application to transfer the court rank to Henry would pass

already.”

Adeline’s malice was directed at her hospitalized husband too. This was because Trickster was refusing her advances on the grounds of not laying his hands on married women.

What was also fascinating was the fact she had the sense to know it was a bad idea to get rid of him until the transfer of the court rank was over.

After Olivia had become a doll, Trickster had moved in with the Rainsworths. Frankly, he *did* find it a bother to deal with Adeline, but it wasn’t so bad since it let him watch the chaos from up close.

Smiling with his whole face, Trickster directed eyes filled with overwhelming affection at the mother and daughter.

Chapter 4: The Sudden Change and the Collapse

Three days after the memorial service, in the early afternoon…

The first prince's sudden visit confused nearly everyone in the mansion—including Trickster.

When he'd been talking to Adeline in the living room, the butler had appeared and informed them of the visit. Trickster and Adeline's first reaction had been blank amazement.

"Why is His Highness here?!" exclaimed Adeline.

"I do not know! Somehow he has an invitation to a tea party with the Rainsworth crest…"

Adeline was questioning Tohrmeyler's former valet who had been promoted to butler when she'd dismissed the previous one. The new butler replied in confusion, his entire body breaking out into cold sweat.

"What's with all the noise?" Suddenly, Olivia showed up.

"This is terrible, Olivia. It looks like His Highness Prince Arcrayne has visited all of a sudden…" replied Adeline.

"Oh, he's here?! I'm so happy!"

Seeing Olivia's face brighten up, everyone else in the room opened their eyes wide in shock.

"Could it be that *you* were the one who sent him an invitation?" asked Adeline.

"That's right. I wanted to see him," said Olivia and giggled.

Adeline was dumbfounded. "Why…? You know His Highness has Lady Estelle, yes…?"

"Es…telle…?" Olivia tilted her head in confusion. Immediately afterward, she clapped her hands together. "Oh, I guess there was a woman by that name! But the fact he came means he's chosen me."

The hell is she talking about? wondered Trickster. Why would she send an invitation to a man who'd rejected her? Why hadn't she mentioned it to Adeline or the butler?

Thoughts like that immediately began to race through his head.

Did she get brainworms or something...? Though I suppose it's just her being weird now. Trickster involuntarily looked at Olivia's choker.

In any case, Arcrayne didn't exactly seem to be right in the head either. He had Estelle, his fiancée, so why had he accepted the invitation? He was supposed to be estranged from House Rainsworth after he had forsaken Olivia.

Had he, perhaps, somehow learned of Trickster's relationship with Adeline and come to check on things? House Rainsworth had supported him for many years, so he couldn't overlook it falling prey to some strange man—when Trickster thought of it that way, the purpose of the prince's visit seemed to make sense.

"You can't be sending invitations as you please! Why didn't you discuss it with me in advance?!" exclaimed Adeline.

"I'm sorry, I might have forgotten..." Olivia sounded absent-minded as she gave her reply. "I told His Highness we have someone who makes wonderful paintings, so he should come look at them together with us. So make sure you're present, Robert. It'll be amazing if His Highness takes a liking to your paintings!"

"I suppose you're right... This *will* be an opportunity to promote Robert..."

When he heard the two say those things, Trickster had to resist the urge to punch them both in their faces.

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Arcrayne had brought three people with him to the Rainsworths' mansion: Haoran, Cian, and Neil. He couldn't help sympathizing with the servants running around in confusion.

The letter of invitation he had on hand was something Olivia had sent without consulting anyone; in a way, it was only natural that the servants, who had suddenly found themselves having to receive a member of royalty, weren't exactly having a good day.

Arcrayne had come to this tea party to capture the man by the name of Robert and take him to the Libra Palace.

A chief officer and two guards. This was the size of the retinue he could bring with him to House Rainsworth as dictated by common sense. He'd brought Neil—Estelle's personal guard—because he was the best among the young guards and easy to put to use.

Furthermore, Arcrayne had already stationed people around the mansion to cut off Robert's escape routes. He'd borrowed the

power of House Rogell for the purpose.

She looked worried, he thought to himself, suddenly recalling Estelle's face when she'd seen him off at the entrance hall of the Libra Palace.

Her face had said she wasn't only concerned for his safety. She'd claimed that she only needed to cool down, but in the end, she must've been unable to shake off the uneasiness she felt toward Olivia.

Maybel had advised him beforehand that this was "just how women are," but he couldn't help finding it complicated and bothersome.

I denied it in no uncertain terms, so why?

As far as he was concerned, he'd sufficiently displayed it in his behavior too.

Scandals were trouble. And Arcrayne had been doing everything in his power to avoid them since before making Estelle his fiancée. Between the end of his nanny's employment and Estelle's coming to the Libra Palace, the only female attendant at his palace had been Maybel, whom he'd hired to manage jewelry inherited from his mother.

It was fundamentally Haoran taking personal care of him, and he even made manservants clean his room instead of maids, so Estelle had been the first woman he'd allowed by his side on a regular basis.

Also, he believed he took care to be more than courteous enough toward Estelle. What more was he supposed to do?

As these thoughts passed through his head, the "preparations" were apparently finished—whatever that meant—and Arcrayne was led to the entrance hall.

When he stepped into the hall, he found Olivia waiting for him, together with a man who seemed to be Robert, and a servant. Arcrayne didn't need to be introduced to understand who they were—their looks were enough. The man accompanying Olivia did, indeed, look just like the opera singer Chester Astley.

All three went up to Arcrayne and bowed simultaneously.

"It's been a while, Lady Olivia," he said.

Etiquette dictated that Olivia and Robert couldn't raise their faces until Arcrayne had spoken to them.

"Allow me to extend my greetings, Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia. Olivia Rainsworth, at your service." Olivia spoke

the words of formal address to royalty, representing everyone present. Then, she looked at Arcrayne with enraptured eyes. “It has been a while, Your Highness. I am so happy you accepted my invitation!”

Strangely, the look in her eyes was as passionate as it had been back when the rumors of the two’s engagement were in circulation—even more so, in fact.

I should try not to excite her, concluded Arcrayne instantly and smiled at Olivia. “Thank you for inviting me today.”

“I missed you, Your Highness—you have not let me see you for so long…”

“You have my apologies on that front. I’ve been constantly busy. I’ll make sure to keep you company today to make up for it.”

“I am aware you are busy, Your Highness… If that is what you say, then I shall forgive you.” The way she turned her face away in an aloof manner looked arrogant, reminding Arcrayne of the way she’d used to be. “Oh, I almost forgot! Your Highness, allow me to introduce this man—Robert Taylor. As I have mentioned in the letter of invitation, his paintings are most wonderful. He is still a student of the Albion School of Applied Fine Arts, but I am certain he will gain popularity after he graduates!”

“Ah, so it’s you… Nice to meet you, Robert.”

When the prince spoke to him, Robert froze up with a start. “Robert Taylor, a-at your service.”

Compared to Olivia’s graceful address, Robert was nervous to the point of stiffness. If he were playing the role of a student from the middle class who was meeting royalty for the first time, he was doing a good job.

Arcrayne flashed a cheerful smile as he observed Robert. “Be sure to show your paintings to me today,” he said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I-I am most grateful…”

Was his cold sweat an act? Or was he actually nervous…?

He might just be, thought Arcrayne.

If Robert knew anything at all about the relationship between the first prince and House Rainsworth, he should’ve easily been able to realize that this visit was anything but normal.

Observing Olivia and Robert, the prince ran calculations inside his mind at dizzying speed.

Arcrayne had visited the Rainsworths' town house several times in the past, so he more or less knew his way around the place. He recalled what he knew.

The mansion was built around a garden. The oblong structure at the center was the main building. The west-side building had rooms for guests, while the one to the east had the kitchen, the laundry room, and other facilities for servants to do the housework.

Olivia led Arcrayne to the west building. Only Robert had joined their group, while the servants had seemed to return to their posts.

Arcrayne recalled that the hallway of the west-side building's first floor doubled as an art gallery, and that it was connected to a main hall, a recreation room, a parlor, and other rooms.

"What about Lady Adeline? I was sure she'd be present too," said the prince as they walked through a hallway, addressing Olivia.

Her face clouded over. "Mother is rather unwell... It has been hard on her ever since father was hospitalized..."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Would you mind asking her on my behalf to take care of herself?"

"Not at all. I think she will be pleased!"

Arcrayne had heard from his spy that Adeline had visibly aged quite significantly over a short period of time. It was likely true that she was in bad shape. And if Robert was "Florica," Adeline's condition might've been a result of more than just stress.

Arcrayne made sure not to be obvious about it, but he was observing Robert, who walked one step behind Olivia.

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The servants had scrambled to prepare the parlor in the corner of the west-side building's first floor as the venue for the tea party.

The hallway on the way to it was also an art gallery. Until recently, it had been decorated with pictures made by famous artists that had been collected by the heads of the family over generations, but now, they had been replaced with abstract paintings that "Robert Taylor," also known as Trickster, had made without thinking too much.

"How do you like them, Your Highness?" asked Olivia, elatedly showing Arcrayne the paintings.

"Sorry, I'm not an expert on abstract art," replied the prince

with a bright smile.

Trickster inwardly clicked his tongue at the sight of that. *He really must suspect something,* he thought to himself.

When Trickster had been informed of Arcrayne's visit, he'd had two options: make up an excuse and run, or see the prince and find out what he'd come for.

The option to make an escape had instantly disappeared when he'd looked out of the window. That was because he'd noticed unusual figures stationed next to the mansion's entrance, attempting to look like waiting coachmen and passersby.

That had left him with no option other than to see Arcrayne and probe into his true motives. He had prepared himself for the worst-case scenario.

The appearance of the members of Rosalian royalty was well-known among the populace thanks to the numerous portraits and newspaper reports in wide circulation. This was how Trickster had already known about Arcrayne's outstanding looks —however, when he saw him in person, Arcrayne proved to be even more dazzling than expected.

I hate this guy already. The moment he'd laid eyes on Arcrayne, a sort of envy had arisen in Trickster.

It was irritating enough that the prince was tall and had a fair face and figure, but he also had status, high birth, money, and even a power. Heaven had given this man too much.

Hiding his rebelliousness under the mask of "a countryman nervous from meeting royalty in person for the first time," Trickster continued to observe Arcrayne.

And in the end, he gave up.

Despite Olivia's strange behavior, Arcrayne was giving her serious replies with a calm smile on his face. It indicated that he had been aware of what was going on in this mansion before coming here.

The prince knew Diana Pautrier. Trickster couldn't imagine that that imbecile could endure Arcrayne's interrogation. There was no doubt whatsoever that his MO had been leaked. And if this disgusting prince knew about the Bracelet of Metamorphosis, and about "Florica," a member of the Rupt

people, who'd been pulling the strings…

Though he'd done it to arouse Adeline's interest, Trickster now regretted borrowing the opera singer's looks. That and the fact he'd let Adeline turn Olivia into a doll with the help of her artifact.

He wanted to punch himself from a few days ago who'd sneered at Adeline for the choice she'd made. Trickster had never expected a doll to act on her own and summon Arcrayne.

Perhaps getting involved with House Rainsworth had been a mistake to begin with. After all, it was connected to Arcrayne, and Arcrayne—to Diana.

There was no doubt that the prince had come to search for leads on "Florica" who had made an attempt on his fiancée's life.

Royal Awoken were indisputably the strongest people in this country. It was safe to say that, if they had it in for you, you were done for. On top of that, Arcrayne had brought a significant retinue with him. Two young Royal Guards, and a middle-aged man with a sharp look in his eye who seemed to be the prince's chief officer. They kept a tight watch on Trickster's surroundings, preventing his escape.

If the alternative is getting caught and forced to confess who I am and every single thing I've ever done, I'd rather…

Trickster was wearing a ring with a secret gimmick to it. Making up his mind, he took it off his finger and shifted the bezel holding the stone.

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Something strange happened without any warning. All of a sudden, Robert was in pain and crouched on the spot.

"Robert?!" exclaimed Olivia in surprise.

She was about to run up to him, but Arcrayne grabbed her hand on reflex. While Olivia stared at the prince in puzzlement, Arcrayne and his retinue put themselves on guard.

The first thought springing to the prince's mind was "poison," but he immediately scratched it out when he saw Robert's body begin to swell up in an eerie way, making creaking sounds.

It was by no means something a woman could look at directly. An earsplitting scream tore from Olivia's throat.

Next, as if in response to the scream, a maid appeared from a nearby room.

“Stay away!” stopped her Cian.

At the same time, Robert began to roar with laughter despite the expression of anguish on his face.

“All right, prince… You’re here…to catch me…aren’t you…? Haah… Haah… Haah…” Breathing heavily, Robert glared at Arcrayne. His body was still undergoing a transformation even now.



With ominous creaking sounds, his bones and flesh continued to grow and swell. His hair fell out all at once.

It was just like when Arcrayne had seen the fake Leah, who had gotten into the Libra Palace, transform into Diana Pautrier.

"Were you 'Florica'...?" asked the prince, overcome with surprise.

"Like I'd...tell you..."

Though Robert didn't give Arcrayne a clear answer, the way his body transformed served as the best evidence the prince could ever have that Robert had something to do with "Florica."

It's just like with Diana, thought Arcrayne, before correcting himself. Robert's body was growing bigger, little by little.

"How about a wager, prince...? I'll wager my life...and if it works, you're all going to die!"

Pitch-black scales grew on Robert's uncovered arms. Next, terrifyingly, his shoulder blades bulged out and unfurled into large wings with membranes. Batlike, they looked just like those of—

"A dragon?!" exclaimed Arcrayne, his eyes widening in shock.

He can shape-shift into nonhumans too?!

Robert must've used an artifact that allowed one to transform into someone else.

According to Diana's testimony, her looks had changed when a bracelet-shaped artifact absorbed Leah's blood and "Florica's" mana. And if this man had secretly poured dragon blood on it...

Dragons were bigger than elephants—unusual animals found in Gandia—and were said to be the biggest and strongest creatures on land. If such a creature were to suddenly appear here, the mansion would be destroyed.

Pulling out the mana pistol he'd kept hidden under his frock coat for self-defense, Arcrayne fired at Robert to stop his transformation.

However, the mana bullet bounced off an invisible barrier. Robert must've been protected by his shape-shifting artifact.

We can't stop his transformation, realized the prince immediately. Forming a telekinetic barrier in front of himself, he charged Robert.

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As Arcrayne had correctly guessed, Trickster's ring contained the blood of dragons living in Dragonbone Mountains. He'd let it drip on the Bracelet of Metamorphosis, which he always had on,

then poured as much mana as he could into the artifact. At the same time, a memory had appeared at the back of his mind—a conversation he'd had with his mother when he'd inherited the bracelet from her.

"Hey, old bag, can you shape-shift into other creatures with this thing?"

"How would I know? I've never used it that way. What would you even do if it worked? If you end up with an animal's head, well, what do you think happens to the inside *of your head? You might be unable to go back to your old form. Look, I'm sure you'll lead a life as dishonest as mine, so if you're curious, why don't you save it as a last resort for when you're prepared to die?"*

After saying that, his mother had burst out laughing. She'd spent her selfish, worthless life making the most of the bracelet's power, going from one victim to another as she used the artifact for evil. And from what Trickster had heard, his grandmother—the original owner of the bracelet—had led a similar life until her very end.

"You know, your grandma caused too much trouble and was killed by a man. Even I lived a better life, since I get to die in a bed."

Leaving him with those words, she'd perished in her late thirties. The cause had been a venereal disease. As far as Trickster was concerned, she'd been no better than his grandmother.

Perhaps the reason he'd acquired dragon blood to use as his last resort was that he'd once visited Dragonbone Mountains out of curiosity and was captivated by the dragons wheeling gracefully through the sky.

Enduring the intense pain, Trickster lost himself in a reverie of his new form.

"Agh… Gah… Kgh…!"

It hurt much more than usual. He felt like the bones all over his body had scattered, and his flesh was being torn off.

Ah, but look, my arms have grown claws and scales. And this cramping feeling coming from around my shoulder blade—is it because I've grown wings?

Looking frantic, Arcrayne shot at him with a mana pistol, probably in an attempt to stop the transformation. However, an invisible barrier protected Trickster, repelling the mana bullet. Trickster himself hadn't known this, but it appeared that the

bracelet had a feature that protected the user during shape-shifting.

The expression of astonishment on the face of the prince who so annoyed him brought Trickster satisfaction.

"Everyone, get as far away from here as you can!"

With that shout, the prince came running straight at him. And for some reason, Trickster's body was sent flying backward.

Ah, he must've used his power as an Awoken, realized Trickster. But even that wasn't enough to impede his transformation. *You're wasting your efforts,* he thought, but in the next moment, he noticed he was outside and realized why the prince had done it.

Apparently he'd wanted to prevent Trickster from transforming inside the building. It appeared the prince had charged him earlier to break the wall and force him out into the garden.

Hah! It's no use, he thought. The only thing that had changed was *where* Trickster took on a dragon's form. He was already big enough to look down on Arcrayne from above.

Trickster chuckled to himself. But in the next moment...

His body emitted silver light. It was just like when a mana stone absorbed mana.

Ah...?

That was Trickster's last thought. Because the very next moment, his body...

***

Breaking the hallway wall and throwing him outside would lessen the damage compared to letting him shape-shift inside the mansion. Arcrayne had reached this conclusion in an instant, and that had been why he'd created a telekinetic barrier in front of himself and run directly at Robert. Releasing as much mana as he could in one burst while apologizing to the ladies of House Rainsworth inside his mind, he'd sent Robert flying into the garden right through the wall.

Fortunately, his plan had worked, but now he had to come up with a way to defeat the dragon.

A dragon's weak spots were the spot between the eyebrows, and the heart. He knew this, but he only had his handgun and mana blade on hand which he carried for self-defense.

Ideally, he could make the most of these two and his telekinesis and bring the dragon down. But even if he couldn't, in

order to prevent damage to the mansion and the area around it, he had to hold out against the dragon until reinforcements equipped with Dragon Slayers arrived.

Was it possible?

Cold sweat trickled down Arcrayne's back. At the moment, Robert had already swelled up to more than twice the size of the prince, both in height and in width.

Then suddenly...

Robert's body, which had partially transformed into that of a dragon, began to emit silver light.

This is bad! realized the prince.

He didn't know why he'd had that thought. Perhaps it was his sixth sense as an Awoken at work.

Feeling something sinister about the silver light suddenly appearing in front of him, Arcrayne was about to form a barrier to protect himself. He was a split second too late, however. Robert's body emitted an even more dazzling light and the prince thought he heard an explosion go off. Immediately afterward, the light turned into a rapid stream of unnatural force coming down on him.

Arcrayne was supposed to have a mana barrier deployed around him at all times—his additional ability. But either it had been overpowered by the light released from Robert's transformation, or perhaps the prince had used too much of his power to drive him out into the garden—for whatever reason it didn't work, and Arcrayne was sent flying far backward.

His back slammed against something—maybe it was an outer wall of the mansion, or a tree in the garden.

Arcrayne's body hurt all over. Checking himself amid his dimming vision, he saw what looked like plants and glass shards stuck in his body.

This might be pretty bad...

With that as his last thought, Arcrayne lost consciousness.

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In the evening, at the Libra Palace...

Estelle was waiting for Arcrayne's return from the Rainsworths' mansion. When she thought about him being with Olivia at this very moment, a feeling of uncertainty grew within her.

He flatly denied it, and yet…

Olivia was currently in deep trouble due to the strange man in her house. And here Estelle was, worried about such things. How unseemly could she be, she wondered.

Her feelings were a mess—she was both concerned for Arcrayne and jealous of Olivia.

"His Highness only has eyes for you, Lady Estelle. He's not the type to carelessly approach ladies," said May.

"I'm sure it's still worrying, though… I understand why Lady Estelle doesn't feel good about this," added Leah.

Estelle hated herself for the fact the pair's words of consolation didn't resonate with her.

Sitting by the window in her private room, Estelle heaved another sigh in a countless chain today. That was when a knock came on her door. When she gave permission to enter, a pale-looking May came in.

"Lady Estelle, come to His Highness's room immediately! He's returned badly wounded!"

The news made Estelle open her eyes very wide. "Lord Arc got hurt?! How is he?!"

"Pieces of wood and glass shards pierced the front of his body… The abdomen is in a particularly bad state. A thick branch went through it… The doctor said it reached his organs and there's a risk of infection…"

Estelle's vision went dark.

"He said we'll have to have faith in his capacity for regeneration, since His Highness has a particularly high amount of mana even among royals…" continued May. "It will all hinge on whether His Highness can get through today and tomorrow…"

Before asking *how* he'd gotten hurt, Estelle was dying to see Arcrayne's face. She ran to his private bedroom.

When she stepped inside, it was dim, and a strong medicinal smell assaulted her nostrils.

Neil was standing next to the bed where Arcrayne must've

been. Estelle had heard that he'd become her personal guard because he was the best among young guards and also highly loyal to Arcrayne.

That was precisely why he'd been relieved of guarding Estelle for today and made to guard the prince instead.

Arcrayne himself didn't need guards, but Neil had been picked in preparation for the unexpected.

He was supposed to have no need for guards in the first place… thought Estelle.

Noticing Estelle, Neil gave her a deep bow. "My apologies, Lady Estelle! We were supposed to protect His Highness, but he protected us instead…"

When she approached the bed, she saw Arcrayne lying down. It was painful to look at his head wrapped in bandages. His face looked white as wax from the Yang Empire. As he slept peacefully, his refined features made him look almost like a doll, despite everything else.

Estelle could tell by his mana that he was alive. However, he was weakened quite severely. Estelle wondered if the silver light in him was much fainter than usual because his mana was being used to heal his wounds.

"What about you, Neil? Are you hurt?"

"Thank you for your concern, Lady Estelle. I got away with just bruises. His Highness protected me…"

"I'm glad to hear that." Estelle sighed in relief for the time being.

"Where should I begin…?"

"Tell me how bad His Highness's wounds are, first."

"He's injured all over," replied Neil after a pause. "Branches and glass shards got stuck in him… The wound in the abdomen is particularly bad. A branch pierced it deeply…"

"What in the world happened?"

"This is mere conjecture…but I suspect the man who'd come into House Rainsworth caused his artifact to run out of control… As a result, an explosion took place and wounded His Highness. To make things worse, there was a conservatory nearby. Its glass broke and the shards went flying everywhere…"

"Lord Arc has a mana barrier protecting him at all times. How could it happen…?"

"Maybe he used too much of his power to protect us, or the explosion was more powerful than the barrier… I think it has to

be one or the other.” Neil’s voice was trembling. To a Royal Guard like him, it must’ve been quite disgraceful to have his charge get wounded.

“Could you tell me what happened in detail?”

“Lady Estelle, this will likely take quite a while, so please take a seat.”

Cutting into the conversation from behind Estelle was May, who’d followed her here. She brought a chair near Arcrayne’s bed. Estelle gratefully took her up on the offer and sat down. Seeing that, Neil began telling what happened, speaking slowly and haltingly.

As reported by the spy, nobody else had been aware of the invitation Olivia had sent to Arcrayne, so he and his retinue had had to wait at the door for a while. Eventually Olivia and that man—Robert—showed up and let them in…

“On our way to where the tea party would be held, we passed through a hallway that doubled as an art gallery, and it had many paintings apparently made by Robert. At that point, Lady Olivia started promoting Robert and his paintings to His Highness… And in the middle of that, Robert was suddenly in pain…” Neil paused for a moment. “At first we thought he’d poisoned himself. But that wasn’t the case. His body started to squirm eerily… It was just like when the fake Leah who’d come here had turned back into Diana. But then suddenly, his body began to take on a different form…”

“Are you saying Robert was ‘Florica’…?”

“Presumably. Taking into consideration the fact he’d come into the Rainsworths’ mansion looking exactly like that opera singer, and then he started shape-shifting just like Diana Pautrier, one has to surmise that he was none other than ‘Florica.’ Though now that he’s gone, we’ll never hear it from his mouth to know for sure…”

“He’s gone…?”

“Yes. He tried to become a dragon.”

Estelle’s eyes widened at Neil’s words. “A dragon…? Did his artifact let him transform into nonhumans?”

“No… In the end, he couldn’t become one. His body emitted dazzling light all of a sudden as he was transforming. It was silver in color. Then suddenly, it expanded and scattered in all directions with the sound of an explosion…”

“It scattered…? Is that the explosion that hurt Lord Arc?”

“In all likelihood, yes. Because once the light abated, the surroundings looked as horrible as pictured recordings of battlefields.”

“I’m surprised you weren’t badly hurt in the explosion, considering what it did to His Highness…”

“That’s all thanks to him pushing Robert away from us. He must’ve realized it would be dangerous if that man transformed into a dragon inside the mansion. His Highness used his power to force Robert into the garden right through a wall in the hallway. He told us to get away from there as far as we could, but I just couldn’t bring myself to move…”

“Was that when you got your bruises?”

“Yes. As the light burst out, I was sent flying back. I seem to have lost consciousness for a brief moment. When I came to, I looked through the hole His Highness had made in the wall and saw him in a terrible state…”

Estelle bit her lip. It must’ve been quite the powerful explosion if it had managed to hurt Arcrayne.

“What about everyone else? Are Cian and Haoran all right?”

“They got away with minor injuries and are currently staying at the Rainsworths’ mansion to deal with the aftermath. Lord Claus headed there too, just as I left.”

“What about Lady Olivia?”

“I saw her faint after she witnessed Robert’s transformation, but I don’t know how she’s doing right now. Maybe she’s already regained consciousness…”

“And everyone else at the mansion? I’m sure there were many servants present.”

“Fortunately, nobody was in the garden, so the only ones who got hurt were the few that were in the west-side building, which was close to the explosion. They all got away with minor injuries, however. Apparently, Lady Adeline was in her room and luckily wasn’t hurt, but when she came frantically running to the garden, she let out a piercing scream and fainted. His Highness was the only one who got badly wounded…”

Estelle turned her eyes to look at Arcrayne’s sleeping face. He had small cuts on his cheeks and his head was bandaged, but he still looked very good for someone who’d been at the center of an explosion.

“It’s hard to believe he’s so badly hurt…” she said.

“It looks like His Highness managed to protect his head in that moment. But the rest of his body… It would be best if you didn’t look.”

Estelle was lost for words. Just what did it look like under that blanket? She wanted to check, but was too scared to touch them.

As she hesitated, Neil spoke up again. “When I ran up to His Highness, he regained consciousness for a moment and said to me, ‘Cover it up.’ It was a rather big explosion, so I doubt we can do it in full, but I think we’ll at least arrange matters so that the public never learns His Highness was at that mansion.”

“It’s true that if word was to get out that he got badly hurt at the mansion of Lady Olivia, whom he’d been rumored to be soon engaged to, who knows how big an uproar it would cause…?” Estelle heaved a deep sigh.

She was curious about the state of House Rainsworth, now that Robert had thrown not only its relationships but also the mansion itself into chaos. But she was worried about Arcrayne even more.

Lord Arc…

What if he dies…?

The moment Estelle had that thought, her vision went dark.

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When he came to, Arcrayne was floating high in the sky. It wasn’t like he was using his power, so how?

Tilting his head and looking around him, he saw a child down below. The child was *him*—a much younger version of himself—which gave Arcrayne an idea of what was happening.

This is probably a dream. It must be one of those “lucid dreams,” where you’re aware that you’re dreaming, thought Arcrayne.

Little Arcrayne was in the garden of the palace.

I want to see him. Arcrayne could hear his younger self’s voice inside his head. He started to realize what was going on. *I’ll go see my brother who was just born, and my stepmother!* the voice continued.

Arcrayne realized that these were the thoughts he’d once had as a child. It wasn’t only the thoughts that had reached him—the emotions had too. He also noticed that this dream showed what had actually happened in the past.

“Don’t go!” he called out, extending his hands toward his younger self to stop him. The hands passed right through the boy, however.

This dream was from when his half-brother had just been born. Arcrayne’s relationship with Queen Truteliese had still been good back then.

Arcrayne had been seven at the time. He’d already been given the Libra Palace and had started living with his close aides, chosen for him by his father and House Rogell, who were related to him on his mother’s side.

Making sure not to draw attention, the Arcrayne from the past stepped through a thicket in the garden and headed to a secret path that only royals knew about. There was a stone path in the garden of the Leo Palace. If you poured mana into one corner of it in a specific sequence, a hidden passage for emergencies would appear.

The Palace of Albion had countless mechanisms of this kind. It wasn’t as though even Arcrayne knew them all. Only Rosalian kings did.

He’d decided to sneak into the Leo Palace because he hadn’t been able to see Truteliese since she’d entered her final month of pregnancy. The grown-ups had told him that women who were close to giving birth had trouble moving around, so the young Arcrayne had put up with being unable to see her.

But it had been days since he’d been told about the success of the delivery and he still hadn’t been allowed to see Truteliese, so Arcrayne’s patience had reached its limit.

Which was why, on this day, he’d decided to sneak into the Leo Palace to see the queen and his half-brother. Skirting the attendants and quietly getting inside had been easy for Arcrayne, who had already Awakened to his power.

The older Arcrayne’s body moved on its own to follow his younger self, and the scenery changed. He didn’t want to see what was about to happen to him, but he wasn’t at liberty to do anything about it.

The prince watched his younger self from above with unease.

Meanwhile, little Arcrayne reached Truteliese’s room. At the time, Truteliese was sitting up in bed and singing a lullaby with the newborn Liedis in her arms. It was like a painting of the

Virgin and Child.

Suddenly, Truteliese looked up and noticed the little intruder. Arcrayne hadn't taken notice of it at the time, but when she saw him, her face froze up.

"Stepmother! Show me my brother, please!" exclaimed little Arcrayne, his face bright as he ran up to Truteliese. He then took a close look at Liedis in her arms.

His brother was sleeping peacefully.

Liedis was still only two weeks old. The female attendants of the palace had told Arcrayne that his brother might have a red, creased-up face and resemble a monkey, but he looked much cuter than the prince had imagined.

It was true that his face was red. But it was round and much more chubby than he'd expected.

Liedis's adorable hand was even smaller than Arcrayne's own at seven years of age. It was adorned with little pink nails. Arcrayne was strangely moved by the thought of it having the same shape as his own hand despite being so different in size, and so he reached out to touch Liedis's fingers.

That was when Truteliese slapped his hand.

"Don't touch him!" she exclaimed in a sharp voice.

Arcrayne was bewildered.

"Your Majesty! Is something wrong?!" Truteliese's lady-in-waiting entered the room. She opened her eyes wide at the sight of Arcrayne. "Your Highness?! How in the world did you…?"

"Out with him!" shouted Truteliese, throwing a nearby stuffed toy at Arcrayne.

It was a toy made out of cloth for newborns. The impact of it didn't hurt, but Arcrayne froze up with shock at the sudden change in the queen's attitude, as she had been kind before.

"I won't let you touch Liedis, you fiend! Get out of here!"

She kept throwing things from the bed at him—pillows, cushions… The lady-in-waiting intervened and pulled Arcrayne away from the rampaging Truteliese.

"Her Majesty has been unwell since giving birth. I apologize, Your Highness, but please leave for today," she said, looking at her wit's end.

To Arcrayne in his childhood, Truteliese's confused rampage was unbelievable, given how kind she'd once been.

Arcrayne's surroundings blurred and the scene changed.

When his younger self returned to the Libra Palace, he was consoled by those of his employees who were married—Haoran, Neville, and his old nanny, who had long since quit after her services were no longer needed.

"Your Highness, some women become like wild animals for a while after giving birth. My wife too became unstable for a time after delivery and snapped at me quite vigorously."

"Exactly. Some female cats, for example, turn ferocious for a time after giving birth in order to protect their kittens. It seems that Her Majesty has become emotionally unstable in the same way. Apparently that was why they'd decided to keep you away from her for a while..."

King Sachis, too, later explained the state Truteliese was in. She'd become high-strung as a result of giving birth, seeing everything and everyone around her as enemies. Sachis himself had apparently had cushions thrown at him after saying something careless. He told Arcrayne to stay away from the Leo Palace for a while.

The scene changed again.

Little Arcrayne was sitting in a gazebo in Leo Palace's garden, with Truteliese sitting across from him.

"I'm sorry, Arcrayne. Something seems to have been wrong with me back then," she said.

Truteliese, whom people compared to a red rose because of her deep red hair, flashed him a gentle smile from her gorgeous face. She then stood next to the wagon brought by a maidservant of the palace and personally poured tea—red with clear depth like her hair—in a white porcelain cup made in the great Yang Empire far to the east, with a rose painted on it.

It appeared Arcrayne could even smell things in this dream.

The scent of the tea started to gently permeate the surroundings. This was elderflower-scented black tea, a favorite of Truteliese's.

Even though it was a dream, Arcrayne felt sick from the sweet smell, which resembled that of white grapes.

He hated this smell. Arcrayne involuntarily covered his mouth. His younger self, on the other hand, directed a happy smile at

Truteliese.

"Please don't worry about it, stepmother. I've been told women who go through life-threatening delivery often become restless as a result. It doesn't bother me."

"I'm glad you're so kind, Arcrayne. Let's get along as well as we used to, shall we?" A radiant smile on her face, Truteliese put the teacup in front of Arcrayne.

The young Arcrayne happily reached out for it.

"No! Don't drink it!" exclaimed his older self.

His words didn't reach the boy, who proceeded to tilt the cup. The moment the tea entered his mouth, an abnormal bitterness and heat spread through the older Arcrayne's mouth too...

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When Arcrayne woke up from the sharp pain in his throat, an entirely different kind of pain came over him. His throat didn't hurt, but now the rest of his body did. In front of his eyes was a familiar canopy.

This place...

He understood from the shape of the canopy that he was in his private bedroom in the Libra Palace. Next, he searched his most recent memories and more or less understood his situation.

Seeing Robert's body begin to emit silver light, the prince had had a bad premonition and tried to protect himself with telekinesis, but couldn't make it in time. Robert, who'd been transforming into a dragon, had suddenly turned into a massive torrent of light, which had sent Arcrayne flying backward.

He recalled the state he'd seen his body in before he'd lost consciousness. Glass shards and tree branches had been stuck in it, which must've been the reason his body hurt all over now.

No doubt one of his aides had brought him here.

Other than the pain all over his body, Arcrayne felt terribly hot too. He seemed to have a fever. Which meant that this heat might've been the very thing that had triggered that nightmare.

On that day, Arcrayne's tea had detergent in it. Thankfully, the dose hadn't been lethal, but the contaminated tea had burnt the inside of his mouth.

As he'd coughed it out, Truteliese had watched him with joy on her face. The way she'd looked like a witch was still etched in

the back of Arcrayne's mind.

It was clear: it had been that shrew who'd made him drink detergent. However, the whole thing had been treated as an accident resulting from the clumsiness of the maidservant who'd prepared the tea set.

What had been particularly nasty about this incident was that Arcrayne's tea had been laced not with poison, but with the detergent commonly used for cleaning in the palace.

Ever since that day, Truteliese had begun to display ill will toward him through her smile.

She'd casually bump into him, advise his father to reduce the money Arcrayne received for his status, pester Arcrayne to let her borrow the accessories he'd inherited from Miriallia… Sachis had scolded her, refusing to cut Arcrayne's status money and forbidding her from taking Arcrayne's mother's accessories, so the only actual harm she'd done was some of the physical kind when she'd bumped into him. Still, the sudden change in the attitude of his previously kind stepmother had left a deep scar on Arcrayne's heart.

Also, strange incidents had begun to take place in the Libra Palace from around that time. There'd be poison or rotten food mixed in his meals, assassins would find their way in…

While there hadn't been any decisive evidence, there had been no doubt that the queen, as well as Duke Marwick behind her, had been pulling the strings.

Arcrayne could no longer have any peace of mind in his palace until he'd borrowed the help of his uncle and Claus's father—the previous Marquess Rogell—and changed all the employees of his palace, as well as reexamined the security of the place.

Had he not Awakened to a power, perhaps he'd have breathed his last long ago.

It was common for the relationship between parents and children unrelated by blood to go wrong after the birth of a biologically related child. Truteliese must've started to detest her stepson Arcrayne after Liedis's birth. He could understand how she felt. Still…

If things were going to turn out this way, he wished she had never been kind to him to begin with.

That witch had been the source of Arcrayne's distrust of other people. He'd been forced to learn, at the young age of seven, what *betrayal* was.

That poisoned tea was the reason he disliked not only the smell of elderflowers, but also the taste of alcohol. He particularly couldn't stand strong alcohol, because when it passed down his throat it made him recall that memory.

Heaving a sigh, Arcrayne looked around him. He'd done so to look for water, as his throat was parched, but then he noticed somebody staring at him.

"Lord Arc…?"

It was Estelle. Her purplish-red eyes were large to begin with, and she'd opened them even wider as she gazed at Arcrayne's face. They rapidly grew moist, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

He'd made her cry. A feeling of guilt welled up in Arcrayne.

It seemed to be daytime, but the room was dim because of the closed curtains. And even in this light he could tell how haggard Estelle looked.

"I am so glad you have regained consciousness…" Broadly smiling with tears streaming down from her eyes, she looked ephemeral, as though she could disappear at any moment.

"You were…by my side…all along…?"

Even Arcrayne was surprised at the hoarseness of his voice.

"Oh, I shall fetch you some water!"

Raising her face with a start, Estelle quickly took the pitcher from the bedside table and poured water into a spout cup, which she then held to Arcrayne's mouth.

"You are covered in sweat… Does it feel unpleasant?" she asked.

Seeing that Arcrayne had had enough water, Estelle returned the spout cup to the table, then took a wet linen cloth out of the bowl beside the pitcher. Next, she thoroughly wrung it and held it against Arcrayne's cheeks.

"Please endure it on the rest of your body. You are covered in bandages…" said Estelle.

She held the cold linen to the prince's forehead, then to the

bottom of his neck.

“What day and time is it? How long has it been since I was wounded?” Likely owing to the fact he’d wet his throat, Arcrayne’s voice now sounded much better than it had earlier.

“Today is the second of March. It is currently two in the afternoon.”

This meant that almost an entire day had passed.

“You were on the verge of death last night,” said Estelle. “I am so glad you have regained consciousness… Were you not royalty, you might have already been…”

“Royals are tough. There have been times when I wished I had less mana, but I guess I have to be grateful this time…”

In the back of his mind, Arcrayne recalled when he had only just Awakened to his power. Royal Awoken generally went through trouble until they learned to control their powers.

“Do you know what happened after I fainted? I want to know what’s going on in that mansion at the moment.”

Estelle shook her head. “I apologize, Lord Arc. I still do not know anything myself. It would appear Lord Claus headed there and is dealing with the aftermath together with Haoran and Cian, but they have yet to return… I do think they are working to cover it up, as you had instructed before losing consciousness…”

Arcrayne recalled that, indeed, while his consciousness had been hazy from the pain, someone had come to take care of him. It felt like he’d told that person to “cover it up.”

“What about my public duties…?” asked the prince.

“Officially, you have caught a bad cold. And I plan to collapse and be on the brink of death in two days, from nursing you. We have people believing that you are madly in love with me, so it should be enough to convince them for four or five more days.”

“Right…”

After all, not only had Arcrayne let Estelle sit with royals at the memorial service despite the fact she wouldn’t normally be allowed to just yet, but he’d also escorted her back to the Libra Palace when she’d supposedly felt unwell, which had made him late to the charity concert afterward.

The prince was about to offer an awkward smile, but it hurt so much that he ended up grimacing instead. In fact, he was nearly at his limit.

“Would you mind waking me up if you learn anything? I’m sleepy…” he said.

“Not at all. Please take your time and rest.”

“I want you to rest too.”

“I will. Once you have fallen asleep, I shall have a brief lie down as well.”

Arcrayne didn’t have much faith in her words, but the pain and the fever made it hard to so much as keep his eyes open, so he closed his eyelids.

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Meanwhile, at the Rainsworths’ mansion…

Olivia Rainsworth was spacing out in the drawing room located in the easternmost part of the first floor of her mansion’s central building.

She didn’t remember how she’d gotten there. There was a woman in the room with her who looked somehow familiar, but while Olivia wanted to ask who she was—and why Olivia herself was in this room and not her own—she didn’t have the energy to do so.

The interpersonal relationships of the people in the mansion, as well as Olivia herself, were in disarray. All it had taken was one contaminant who’d come into her house after her father had collapsed, and everything had turned into a mess.

That louse—Robert Taylor—who on Earth had he been? Olivia could only see as a nightmare everything that had happened since he’d shown up at the mansion.

Perhaps, however, there was a more fitting event that could be called the beginning of the nightmare—the New Year’s party where Arcrayne and Estelle’s engagement had been announced. That day, when it had become clear that Olivia couldn’t become a princess, the air in her mansion had become tense.

Sure, Olivia had lost in love, but her parents had become unsettled too. It had been particularly terrible in her mother’s case.

Olivia had first started to wonder about Adeline’s attitude when Olivia’s own feelings toward Arcrayne had settled down. Her mother kept finding fault with every candidate for the role of her future husband suggested by her father.

Adeline had claimed that she’d feel bad for Olivia if she lost to her sister, but to Olivia herself, it would’ve been enough to marry someone from a moderately prestigious family, so long as the

man wanted her and she could establish a peaceful household with him.

If she could ask for more, she'd want him not to look repulsive, and to be kind… Olivia could think of all sorts of things, but his pedigree and the social standing of his family weren't all that important to her despite how much fuss her mother made over those matters.

Mother must've wanted to be surrounded by "such wonderful children," thought Olivia.

Adeline had had Marquess Rainsworth choose her as his wife. She'd given birth to the wife of the governor-general of Amerix and a boy who would become heir. If, on top of all that, Olivia had become a princess, that would've made Adeline superior to all other noblewomen. This ideal must've been the reason she kept finding fault with her potential husbands. But as Olivia loved her mother dearly, she didn't want to admit this.

When marriage talk wasn't involved, Adeline had been an affectionate mother. She'd help Olivia choose when ordering clothes and accessories, go out with her to picnics and the theater… Olivia thought they were as free of constraint with each other as friends or sisters would be.

Just as she'd grown suspicious of her mother, her father had collapsed, right in the middle of a quarrel with Adeline. As usual, they'd been arguing over who Olivia could marry.

Olivia had found herself on the same wavelength with a Francien diplomat at the king's memorial ceremony the day before—a man her father had considered a candidate for her future husband. Adeline seemed to have been rather displeased with that.

And so, her father had been hospitalized, the stress had led her mother to collapse too, and then Robert Taylor had come into her house.

After she'd chided her mother for her excessive admiration of Robert and the growing oddity of her conduct, an even worse nightmare had come over Olivia.

Olivia's decision had led to a quarrel, and she'd reeled after Adeline had given her a strong slap on the cheek. When she next woke, her own body wouldn't listen to her anymore. Without any regard for the astonished Olivia, someone other than her had begun to move her body. She'd smiled at Adeline, who'd stood by

her all along, and said, “I’m sorry, mother, I was wrong. Robert is a very good person.”

Olivia herself could only watch in silence as somebody controlled her body. Not only had it been inexcusable, it had also been creepy and nauseating to watch.

Eventually, she’d realized the truth from Robert and Adeline’s conversation. Her current sickening state had been brought about by the choker-shaped artifact on her neck. Not only that, but it had been Adeline who’d brought it out and controlled Olivia with it.

She didn’t even want to remember how she’d acted afterward. The detestable choker had made her do things she’d never do, over and over. It had turned her into the “ideal Olivia” Adeline had wished for, who’d sung Robert’s praises, talked about her lingering affection for Arcrayne, and had been openly jealous toward Estelle Flozeth.

In the end, without any regard for shame or what people would think, she’d sent an invitation to Arcrayne…

No! I don’t want to remember it! thought Olivia, curling herself into a ball on the couch and holding her head.

A little while later, something strange occurred to her. Why had Arcrayne accepted such a strange invitation?

Next, she recalled how he’d acted when he’d come to the mansion. Despite how incoherent Olivia had been at the time, he’d attuned himself to her. Then suddenly, Robert, who’d been present as well, had begun to suffer and transform into something eerie…

“Ugh…”

It was a nauseating thing to recall. His bones and flesh had bulged, his hair had fallen out, then all of a sudden he’d swollen up, black scales appearing on his exposed skin…

The other Olivia had screamed upon seeing it. That had been the only time the two had been in harmony. She’d screamed and screamed, after which point Olivia didn’t remember anything, so she figured she must’ve fainted from how sickening the sight had been.

When she’d next woken up, it had been morning, and the other Olivia had been gone.

Having regained control of her body, Olivia had screamed once again from the confusion.

Even now that she'd somewhat calmed down, there was still chaos inside her mind. The most unbearable thing for her had been the fact that her disgraceful behavior in the morning had been witnessed by Claus Rogell, who was staying at the mansion for some reason—most likely on Arcrayne's orders.

Olivia was somewhat acquainted with him, since he'd always accompanied Arcrayne and had been in the same faction as her. However, she found him hard to deal with because his facial expression almost never changed and she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Olivia glanced at the woman who stood upright in front of the door and was staring at her. She must've been keeping watch to make sure Olivia didn't do anything stupid. Olivia was glad that the woman didn't bother her, but it was depressing to think she was being monitored.

The woman's distinctive eastern features looked familiar to Olivia. She remembered seeing her at the Libra Palace back when she'd been close with Arcrayne.

There's no need to keep watch over me... uttered Olivia inside her mind. She had no plans of taking her own life. Dying required courage. And Olivia dreaded pain.

Come to think of it, what happened to His Highness and that man, I wonder? Suddenly, she grew curious about the last thing "the other Olivia" had seen. Those two weren't the only people on her mind—what was going on with Adeline, who didn't seem to be coming to check up on Olivia at all despite the state the latter was in?

Since this woman served Arcrayne, perhaps she knew something?

After a bit of hesitation, Olivia made up her mind.

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"I'm not authorized to speak of His Highness's current whereabouts," said the woman, shaking her head. She'd introduced herself as Maybel Cao, an attendant of the Libra Palace.

Olivia's courage in speaking up to her had gone to waste. The woman then went to talk to someone who seemed to be keeping

watch on the other side of the door. A short while later, Claus Rogell entered the room.

“Have you calmed down, Lady Olivia?” he asked.

“Yes.”

It couldn’t get any worse. Why did she have to talk to the man who’d seen her do something embarrassing?

“Hope you don’t mind if I sit down,” he said and took a seat in front of Olivia. “You seem to have regained control over yourself.”

“I wonder about that,” she replied.

Olivia couldn’t tell her current state. It felt like her mind was adrift as though she were in a dream. Her thought processes were sluggish. Still, if it looked that way to Claus, who always kept a cool head, then Olivia felt like it was proof she was in her right mind.

“Where do I begin…? Let me start by explaining why I’m here. To get straight to the point, His Highness and I were aware of everything that happened in this mansion—that a suspicious man by the name of Robert Taylor had come here and that you and Lady Adeline were acting strange.”

Olivia’s eyes widened at those words. “What…? How…?”

“I can’t tell you how exactly it was done, but when His Highness Prince Arcrayne became engaged to Lady Estelle, your father announced his break from his faction. His Highness has been monitoring House Rainsworth since then.”

The words “Shadow of the Rose” appeared in Olivia’s mind—the name of the royal secret service.

Is there a spy in this mansion…?

A chill ran down Olivia’s spine as she saw Arcrayne’s royal side.

He wasn’t just a kind prince with a calm personality. Though that was only natural. After all, he lived in the swirl of expectations and ulterior motives that was the Palace of Albion, and was in conflict with the queen who was his stepmother.

“You should be aware that we know almost everything that has happened to you. With that in mind, there’s something I need to ask you about.”

After calmly saying that, Claus signaled with his eyes to Maybel, who was still present. She brought something from a corner of the room and placed it on the desk. The sight of it stole Olivia’s breath away.

It was the detestable choker that had put Olivia under control.

“Firstly, when one day your behavior dramatically changed, this choker-shaped artifact was the cause, correct?”

The metal choker had dense ancient writing engraved on it, as well as a mana stone embedded into it. Anyone could tell at a glance it was an artifact.

“Yes. I stopped being myself after it was put on me,” replied Olivia.

She remembered getting so irritated when she’d woken up confused in the morning that she’d torn it off her neck and thrown it on the floor. Olivia hadn’t kept track of where it had gone, but Maybel had probably picked it up somewhere.

“Did Robert use this artifact?” asked Claus.

“No.”

Olivia’s reply caused Claus to knit his brows and tilt his head. “Then who?”

“My mother.”

Claus didn’t seem to have expected to hear such a thing. Rare as it was for someone as lacking in expressiveness as him, he looked astonished.

“Lady Adeline used it? On you—her own daughter?”

“That’s right. I must’ve been an impediment to her since I tried to get Robert out of the house. She said that artifact has been passed down through generations in her parents’ family!” exclaimed Olivia, venting her anger.

“Her family…” muttered Claus. “The distinguished, count-ranked Francien House La Forges. If I remember correctly, it’s a family with a long history that has even produced a chief minister.”

“It doesn’t exist anymore. It was ruined during the change of government thirty-five years ago.”

“It wouldn’t be strange for a family with a long history to be in possession of an artifact… But did Lady Adeline do *that* much for Robert…?”

“She did. It’s laughable, is it not? By the way, what in the world is she up to? I haven’t seen her at all today!”

“She’s in no condition to come here.” Claus awkwardly lowered his gaze.

“What do you mean…?”

“It appears that Robert made Lady Adeline consume addictive drugs and planted a suggestion in her mind to become captivated with him. Would you happen to know of a tea with a

strange, excessively sweet smell?”

“Oh…”

Olivia *did* know about it. Her mother, the lady’s maids, the housekeeper, and many others had taken it happily, but Olivia couldn’t bring herself to like it so she hadn’t drunk it.

“Think carefully about it—didn’t everyone who was friendly toward Robert enjoy drinking that tea?” asked Claus.

“Now that you mention it…”

“Those who drank it frequently are currently unable to think coherently. They want the tea and can’t think of anything else.”

Olivia gasped and covered her mouth. “I…had it too… Though it was only after the choker was put on me…”

As desired by Adeline, the “Olivia” created by that choker had put up with the unpleasant taste and had drunk the tea anyway.

“Even if you feel fine now, you might be affected in some way later on. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, please let me know immediately,” said Claus with a serious expression to the trembling Olivia.

The antagonism between Adeline and Claus’s mother Sierra was well-known. It made Olivia reluctant to rely on him just like that. However, there was nobody else Olivia could depend on at the moment. Tears began to appear in her eyes.

She didn’t want to cry over something like this, so she blinked repeatedly to disperse the tears.

“It’s difficult to tell you this right now…but Lady Adeline is in a particularly bad state,” said Claus. “She’s become rather haggard over a short period of time…”

“That might be not only because of the tea, but that artifact too—the Choker of Puppetry. Mother said it shortens the user’s life span as its price…”

“The life span…?”

“Yes. I must’ve been enough of an eyesore for her to go that far…”

Claus went silent, a grave look on his face. He probably didn’t know what to say to Olivia. She much preferred it over thoughtless consolation. Olivia lowered her eyes.

“By the way, what of the one responsible for messing up our lives? Where is Robert now?”

“He’s…gone.”

“What?” Olivia was taken aback.

“We believe him to have been connected to a criminal behind

another case whom we were trying to catch. When His Highness came to this mansion and acted normally toward you while you clearly acted strangely, Robert realized we'd come to catch him, so he used an artifact he had on him to take His Highness down with him…it seems."

"I remember seeing him turn into a large black monster just before I fainted…" muttered Olivia with a dumbfounded expression.

Claus heaved a deep sigh. "What he had was an artifact that could remold a person's body starting from the skeletal structure—shape-shifting, as it were. We believe he used it to take the form of Lady Adeline's favorite opera singer in order to get into this mansion."

"What…?"

"Quite cunning, was he not? He purposely made himself look and feel rustic at first to make Lady Adeline lower her guard, and once he got her to order clothes for him and fix his appearance, he turned out to have the face of her favorite opera singer."

That bastard had had an artifact too. And he'd made the most of it in order to get into this house. The words coming out of Claus's mouth felt too unrealistic—Olivia's head struggled to process them.

"Apparently the artifact he had would activate when you dripped the blood of the one whose form you wanted to take on it, and poured in mana. It seems he wanted to shape-shift into a dragon with it. However, either he didn't have enough mana for that, or the artifact didn't allow one to become something other than human… We don't know why, but as we've learned from those who were at the scene, his body disintegrated mid-transformation and caused an explosion."

It must've been Arcrayne's retinue—the guards and the officer he'd brought to the tea party with him—who'd attested to this.

"An explosion…? What about His Highness…? Being an Awoken, he should be all right, yes…?"

"He used his power to force Robert into the garden to prevent him from transforming inside the mansion…but he ended up caught in the explosion and got hurt. Right now he's being treated in the Libra Palace."

"No way… You can't be serious…"

"Why don't you take a look at the garden if you don't believe me? You were brought to a room unaffected by the explosion for

the time being, but the garden and the conservatory are in an awful state. The west side of the mansion, which was relatively close to the point of the explosion's origin, had all of its garden-facing windows broken."

Olivia took Claus up on his offer.

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At Claus's urging, Olivia looked out from the drawing room window and saw the garden in a chaotic state, as well as the conservatory, only the framework of which remained. And just as she'd heard from Claus, all the windows in the west-side building facing the garden had only the frames remaining.

Her mouth hanging open, Olivia gazed at the garden in its tragic state with fallen trees. She could see servants near the ruins of the conservatory—primarily men, like the gardener and coachmen. They appeared to be clearing out the rubble.

"Apparently His Highness gave the order to 'cover it up' before losing consciousness," said Claus.

"'Cover it up'...?"

"Given the circumstances, it wouldn't have been strange if people suspected there had been an assassination attempt on His Highness... It wouldn't be of benefit to anyone if it came to light that he'd been here. We judged the order appropriate, so we're carrying it out."

"I suppose it is, now that you mention it..."

"However, the explosion was too big...and too many people are displaying symptoms of addiction to the tea. It was too difficult to fully cover it up, so we've come up with a story for the public. I've come here to ensure things proceed smoothly, as well as to put pressure on any Albion Police and reporters who try to stick their heads into the matter. I'm sorry we took things into our own hands while you were unconscious, but please understand."

Olivia didn't reply.

"Lord Claus, Lady Olivia appears to be tired. She has only just recovered, so may I suggest letting her get some rest?" Maybel cut into the conversation. She must've found it hard to watch Olivia, whose brain wasn't working so well anymore and whose reactions had become sluggish.

"You're right, Maybel," replied Claus after a moment of thought. "My apologies, Lady Olivia. I have trouble inferring how people feel."

“It’s all right… I’m aware…” replied Olivia.

She knew Claus as an exceptional civil servant with an extremely good memory who, on the other hand, was lacking in emotions.

What on Earth is in store for House Rainsworth? wondered Olivia, gazing at the badly damaged mansion with vacant eyes.

***

When Estelle woke up from a nap, an unfamiliar ceiling came into her view.

This place…

The material of the ceiling was the same as she’d grown used to seeing, but the light fell on it in a different way. And when she moved her eyes to a wall, she saw a bookshelf and a closet—all the furniture in the room was dark brown.

Unlike Estelle’s own room, which was feminine and cute, this one was stately and felt more masculine—it belonged to Arcrayne.

I must’ve finally gotten so tired I fell asleep, realized Estelle. She was lying down, having borrowed the couch in Arcrayne’s bedroom. It was smaller than a bed, but big enough for Estelle to sleep on, so she’d slept off a good deal of her fatigue.

Slowly raising herself, Estelle gave a big stretch. It seemed to be already night as it was pitch-dark in the room, but a lamp on a table next to the couch served as indirect light. Relying on that light to check the clock, she saw the hour hand point at seven.

Since Estelle had lain down after making sure Arcrayne was asleep, that meant she’d slept for over four hours.

She’d left the lamp on because it was hard to look after the prince without any light. Putting on the slippers she’d left by the couch, Estelle made her way over to Arcrayne’s bed. She found Leah sitting on a chair next to it.

The only close aide of Arcrayne he had taking personal care of his daily necessities was Haoran. Cian, the Royal Guard personally serving the prince, partially fulfilled the role of his lord-in-waiting. Both of them were currently staying in the Rainsworths’ mansion together with Claus and had yet to return.

Estelle’s own personal attendant May had left for the mansion too, as a woman’s help had been requested. Thus, the one currently taking care of all of Estelle’s daily necessities, as well as helping her look after Arcrayne, was Leah. Because of that, she

too must've been exhausted from getting barely any sleep. She had her eyes closed as she sat on the chair.

"Leah," called out Estelle, causing her to start. "I'm sorry, did I surprise you?"

"Not at all! My apologies, Lady Estelle, I was spacing out!"

"How is Lord Arc?"

"He's been asleep all this time. The doctor came in the evening and changed his bandages. Apparently his wounds are starting to heal. The doctor was astonished at the royals' capacity for regeneration."

"I see. That's good to hear." Estelle felt some relief.

The doctor in charge at the Libra Palace was the same man who'd examined Estelle's bullet wound. He was related to House Rogell, so there was no risk of him leaking any secrets, and Estelle had been told he was competent.

By his diagnosis, the wound left by the branch which had deeply pierced his abdomen was particularly bad, and there were a few other places that might leave a scar even with royals' regenerative powers.

"Leah, I'll take over, so go sleep in the anteroom," said Estelle. "I'll call you if something happens."

"Thank you. I'll take you up on that." Normally, Leah would often hold back, but today she did as ordered.

Emergencies required stamina. And the source of stamina was food and sleep. Having previously assisted with dragon hunts in the earldom of Flozeth, Leah knew it well. She left the room.

Left alone with Arcrayne, Estelle gazed at his face. He was sleeping peacefully.

Estelle herself had been so worried she hadn't managed to get a wink of sleep the night before, when she'd heard his life had been in danger. Apparently his condition was now stable, and all that was left was to wait for him to heal. The doctor's diagnosis had relieved some of Estelle's uneasiness, but it wasn't like it had gone away completely.

When Arcrayne's life had hung in the balance, Estelle had become aware of how she felt toward him. As long as he was alive, she didn't need anything else.

Regret had welled up in her too. Why had she felt that silly jealousy before he'd left for the Rainsworths' mansion?

"Please wake up soon..." she said quietly.

***

After getting away from the window and seeing Claus leave the room, Olivia listlessly reclined against the back of the couch. She heaved a deep sigh, then began to process what he'd told her. She struggled to form thoughts, however.

Anger, unease, impatience, sorrow... Negative emotions swirled in her head.

Sighing once again, Olivia hugged a cushion that had been on the couch.

At night, Claus visited her again after a meal had been brought to her and she'd returned it untouched.

"I've been told you haven't touched your food," he said.

Olivia felt like he was reproaching her. "I can't eat in a situation like this."

"So I'd imagine. When a kitchen maid saw it, however, she demanded to see you," replied Claus, then turned toward the door. "Come in."

A kitchen maid showed herself. "We've made your favorite raspberry sorbet, my lady. Do you think you'll be able to eat it...?"

She had a tray in her hands on which, indeed, was a glass bowl with a neat-looking sorbet in it.

"Thank you," replied Olivia.

Sorbet went down smoothly, so she might be able to eat it. Olivia took the glass bowl and scooped up some sorbet with a spoon.

"If there's anything you'd like to eat, please don't hesitate to tell me. You have our support, my lady." Bowing, the kitchen maid left the room.

"I see the servants are quite fond of the family here," said Claus. "They've been extremely cooperative thanks to that, which I appreciate."

"Cooperative?"

"They're proactively helping with covering up the incident. 'To protect House Rainsworth,' as they put it."

"I see..." Olivia thought of the servants she'd seen clearing out rubble during the day.

"They say there's not a lot of workplaces with such good working conditions."

Olivia didn't reply. Her mind was numb and she didn't feel anything, but for some reason a tear trickled down her cheek.

***

It's hot.

Arcrayne's whole body was burning up. He frowned at the sensation; he had not had a fever in quite some time.

Next, something pleasantly cold touched his face. When he opened his eyes, he saw Estelle looking at him. She was touching his cheek. It appeared the thing he'd found so pleasant had been her hand.

"I apologize, Lord Arc. It seemed your fever had gone up, so I wanted to check, but it looks like I woke you."

"No, I just... The pleasantly cold sensation woke me up. A bit too cold, in fact—is it chilly in the room?"

"Not at all. I am certain my hand felt cold to you because of your fever." Estelle looked almost as if she were crying and smiling at the same time. "How do you feel?"

"Not well, I guess... It hurts and it's hot..."

"An injury brings fever in its wake. It was the same for me."

Estelle's words reminded the prince of the assassination attempt at Marquess Rogell's mansion which had brought them together. After suffering a wound on her upper arm, Estelle had been laid up with a bad fever.

"Your face," said Arcrayne.

"Huh?"

"It looks tired. Have you been by my side all this time...?"

It seemed to be nighttime, as the room was enveloped in darkness, but a lamp beyond the bed curtains was on, illuminating Estelle's face with an orange light.

"Not *all* the time, unfortunately. I had Leah take over for me at one point and got some sleep. It is only natural that my face would look tired. I have been worried about you, considering the state you came back in."

The anxiety on her face made Arcrayne feel guilty. Without a doubt, this outcome had been brought on by his carelessness. He'd put too much faith into his power.

"You should take this medicine now that you are awake. I have an infusion from the doctor."

"An infusion..."

Arcrayne grimaced. The infusions prescribed by the Libra Palace's doctor in charge were bitter to the point that the prince suspected the doctor of ill will.

Just as soon as Arcrayne had downed the infusion, which was as intensely bitter as he'd expected, Estelle offered him the spout cup filled with cold water.

"It's too bitter. Can't he make something that tastes just a little better...?" the prince complained on impulse, which finally brought the smile back to Estelle's face.

"You are like a child," she said.

"You say that like it has nothing to do with you. Have a taste yourself. Then you should understand how I feel."

Estelle traced her fingertip on the bottom of the vessel, then gave it a taste. A massive frown appeared on her face immediately afterward.

"It truly does taste awful..." she said.

It was the sort of thing one would've preferred to knock back in one go while holding one's breath, but Estelle had had to give it to the prince with a spoon little by little, as he couldn't sit up. He'd ended up tasting it in full, which had been a horrible experience.

"It's hard when you can't move..." he complained.

"I am certain you will get better right away. You *are* a member of royalty, Lord Arc."

"I suppose so."

Perhaps owing to the fact he had much more mana than almost everyone else, he was in far less pain than when he'd woken up during the day.

"Did you find out anything new after that?" asked Arcrayne.

"A report has come in from Haoran. Apparently House Rainsworth is in a considerable state of chaos." Estelle told him everything she knew about the situation there. "It seems Lady Adeline *had* in fact been made to consume drugs. It is said to be a dangerous, rather addictive drug masked as tea. Those who drank it regularly are apparently showing symptoms common with drug addiction and are in no condition to have a proper conversation."

After Arcrayne had lost consciousness, Adeline had come running into the garden and fainted too when she'd seen the horrible spectacle. Ever since she'd come to, she'd apparently been unable to think of anything but that tea.

"About three years ago...a play with a ghoul in it was popular in Albion. Have you heard of it?" asked Estelle.

Ghouls were monsters appearing in other countries' folklore.

They were said to show up at graveyards every night, dig up graves, and eat corpses.

"'The Forest of Corpses'?" the prince replied.

"That is the one! Lady Adeline was just like the hungry ghoul that appears in it."

"I don't know what to say..."

Arcrayne had secretly watched that play once. The actor had been good and so had his peculiar makeup, so it had been quite the impactful sight. The prince remembered how dreadful his bloodshot eyes had looked, as well as the drool spilling out of his mouth.

And he'd use a drug that would put people in such a state...

Anger toward Robert began to simmer inside Arcrayne.

"Are any servants in their right mind?" he asked. "As far as I know, not everyone in that place drank that tea."

"Lady Adeline and Lady Olivia became strange because of Robert, but Robert hurt *you*. If this came to light, not only Lady Adeline and Lady Olivia, but even the servants of the mansion might be charged with complicity in high treason—this is what the servants were told when they were asked to assist with covering things up. Luckily, the members of House Rainsworth seem to have been quite adored by the servants. Apparently they are helping proactively."

"My spy has told me the working conditions in that place are particularly good, even among upper-class households."

It was surprising, especially considering how loyal they were to Adeline. But she'd been at an impressionable age when the revolution had changed her life forever, and she'd gone through many hardships. Perhaps that was why she was apparently a steady mistress—kind toward her servants, yet strict when the situation required it.

"What about Lady Olivia?" asked the prince. "Is she showing signs of addiction to the tea too?"

"Fortunately no, at least not at the moment... Lady Olivia became strange not because of the tea, but because of the artifact, so her situation seems to be different."

Never for the life of him would Arcrayne have expected to hear the tragedy that had befallen Olivia, which Estelle told him about next.

"The Choker of Puppetry... And to make things worse, it was

Lady Adeline who controlled her…" uttered the prince once he'd heard the whole story. He heaved a deep sigh.

Since apparently Olivia had retained her sense of self even in that state, it must've been hell.

"How is she now?" asked Arcrayne.

"Dazed, apparently. I hope she can recover somehow…"

Olivia had drunk Robert's tea too. She might show some symptoms in the future. Fortunately, the servants appeared to be set on supporting her, but the situation was full of causes for concern.

"Considering the scale of the explosion and the amount of people affected by the drug, your people could not completely cover things up as per your order, Lord Arc. Lord Claus is using his authority as a marquess to suppress the police and the reporters gathering at the mansion…but something had to be said to the public, so Lord Claus and Haoran are telling people a story they made up."

"What kind of story?"

"Here is how it goes: Robert Taylor was a devil-worshipper who approached Lady Adeline while she was weakened by overwork and stress. He offered to perform a magic ritual to make the marquess recover. She unfortunately believed him and ended up performing the eerie ritual together with her servants —a ritual involving drugs. The end. Lord Claus wanted to simply say the family had dealt with a swindler, but Haoran suggested that it would be easier to draw people's sympathy to Lady Olivia if the story had an occult element to it."

"True… And it would help draw the attention away from me."

Spiritualists, religious groups, secret societies advocating for magic and mysticism… They caused the kind of trouble that would normally be unthinkable. Arcrayne could think of a few precedents.

"How did they explain the explosion?" he asked.

"When Lady Olivia ended up completely on her own after even her trusted lady's maid was brainwashed, Lord Claus, who'd already been concerned about her for some time, came to the mansion to help her. Robert attempted an escape and ran into the garden where he committed suicide out of desperation. He used a gunpowder-based pistol, but unluckily, there was a flammable soil disinfectant nearby left by the gardener, and it caused the explosion."

After a moment's pause, Arcrayne said, "Feels a little forced, but it *is* coherent, at least." He sighed deeply.

"The public is in an uproar. People are talking about the devil-worshipper who caused the eerie incident, about Lord Claus offering his help to Lady Olivia when she was beset with numerous misfortunes... They are making a particularly big deal about a supposed love between Lady Olivia and Lord Claus, greatly exaggerating things. People are calling it a 'pure love story that has transcended the two's parents' antagonism.'"

"I suppose it *would* end up like that, if Claus used his authority to put pressure on reporters and the police..."

I wonder if my aunt knows about this...

Appearing in the back of Arcrayne's mind was Sierra, Claus's mother, who abhorred House Rainsworth. If she hadn't given her approval, it was scary to think what she might do in the future.

It's Claus we're talking about... thought the prince. His cousin was bad at inferring people's emotions. He might not have told Sierra anything.

A bad premonition made Arcrayne's head hurt.

"I apologize; I talked for too long. You still have not fully recovered..." said Estelle when Arcrayne frowned.

"That's all right. It was I who insisted that you tell me. I couldn't rest unless I knew the situation..."

That said, his mind was foggy, perhaps from having absorbed too much information in a short period of time while he had a fever.

"It would be best not to force yourself. Please go to sleep," said Estelle, getting up from the chair and adjusting the blanket and the quilt on top of Arcrayne.

"Thank you," he said, at which Estelle shook her head.

The prince closed his eyes and sank into the ocean of thought. In the midst of that, he suddenly realized with concern that Estelle had looked calm when she'd talked about Olivia.

***

While Claus Rogell stayed at the Rainsworths' mansion and supervised the efforts to clean up the garden and the structures around it messed up in the explosion, he searched for leads on Robert's identity.

It turned his stomach to think of when he might finally be able to leave this place. He was also worried about Arcrayne's work piling up.

The search for traces of anything related to Robert was making little progress. Claus had looked around the whole mansion, but he hadn't found anything that could identify the man. The artifact he was believed to have had before disappearing had been crushed out of shape.

Adeline and the others in the mansion who were suffering from withdrawal were acting violently, craving the tea, so Claus had had them all put in straitjackets and kept in one room. This morning, he'd received instructions from Arcrayne to arrange them a stay in a sanatorium.

The royals' mana was truly superb. A mere two days prior, Arcrayne's life had been said to be in danger—and here he was now, recovered enough to give instructions.

At the moment, Claus had confined himself to the mansion's study and was inspecting the account books. Looking over the numbers, he saw what Adeline had bought for Robert and how much it had cost.

As he was counting on an abacus while checking the accounts, there was a knock at the door.

"May I come in?" came a voice.

When Claus gave permission, it was Olivia who entered the room. His eyes slightly widened when he saw the look on her face.

Light had returned to her eyes.

"Would you let me see my mother?" she asked.

After thinking for a moment, Claus replied, "May I ask what brought this on?"

"I simply thought, I can't keep looking away from reality forever. I have to do this—for the servants, and for Henry."

What had made her change her mind overnight?

Still, better she recovered sooner than later, since it would help with cleaning up the aftermath of the incident. Coming to that conclusion, Claus closed the account books and got up.

"Honestly, I would advise against it. But if you want to see her, you should prepare yourself," he said.

"I'm ready," said Olivia, determination in her voice.

***

When Leah took over for Estelle and made her leave Arcrayne's room, Estelle, left with no other option, returned to her own and went to bed.

When she woke up, it was the evening of the next day.

Dressing herself and heading to Arcrayne's room, she found him sitting in bed and reading some documents.

The bandages on his arms and head had already been removed, and there were scabs where his arms had been wounded.

"Is it safe for you to be up?!" exclaimed Estelle.

"The doctor gave his permission," replied the prince.

Estelle involuntarily looked at Leah, who stood beside Arcrayne.

Leah nodded. "The doctor was surprised too."

It was true that Arcrayne had incredible amounts of mana, but it was still way too quick. Estelle stared fixedly at the prince.

"Of course, he told me not to leave the bed except when relieving myself."

"And you are working in such a state…?"

"I am. Otherwise work would pile up. It already has, in fact."

Glancing at one of the documents, Estelle saw it read "List of Personages to be Invited to the Summer Garden Party."

"Is this for the party hosted by His Majesty…?" asked Estelle.

"I took over my father's public duties when he collapsed… I want to return them to him, but he won't accept them." Arcrayne looked thoroughly displeased as he said it.

"Does His Majesty still feel unwell after all?"

Sachis had officially recovered and frequently appeared before the public, looking healthy, but it would affect the political situation in a country if those in power were known to be in poor health, so this sort of thing was often covered up.

"Maybe. Or maybe he's laying the groundwork to forcibly make me his heir." Sighing, Arcrayne put the paper down on his lap and turned toward Estelle.

"Are you all right simply working like that? Please rest if it becomes painful."

"You're saying the same thing as everyone else."

"Of course I am. I *am* worried about you."

"I know. I'll put it away at some point and lie down." The prince looked somewhat dissatisfied.

"I see most of your bandages are gone."

"They are. I still have the ones on my torso, though. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, please show me."

Estelle's immediate reply appeared to have taken Arcrayne by

surprise. He cracked a smile.

"Were you, perhaps, trying to tease me?" she asked.

"I was."

"I *do* want to know what state your wounds are in," said Estelle with a serious look on her face.

"Sorry, I still can't show you after all. I think you'd find the sight repulsive, since I'm covered in scars."

"I would do no such thing. Perhaps I have not mentioned it before, but I helped with dragon-hunting, so I am used to seeing terrible wounds," replied Estelle, staring at the prince's face.

With a sigh of resignation, Arcrayne unbuttoned his nightshirt, showing his upper body.

His abdomen was covered in bandages, and the parts that weren't, such as the area below the collarbone, were covered in scabs like his arms.

The prince pointed near the center of his abdomen and at the biggest scar on his chest.

"These two places might leave a scar. I'll still put up some useless resistance though, just in case."

"What kind of useless resistance?"

"If I focus my mana on these spots, they'll heal more quickly and will be less likely to leave scars."

"You will still be attractive even if they do."

"Why, thank you."

"Is that not what you always tell me? I can now feel that you were telling the truth," said Estelle, touching her left upper arm.

Arcrayne narrowed his eyes and smiled. "It's not often you talk about what happens in bed."

"That is *not* what I meant! Oh, come now..."

Seeing Estelle sulk, the prince snickered. It was true that it was usually night when he touched the scar on her upper arm, but he wasn't very fond of her teasing him about it at every opportunity.

"I just remembered something I should let you know about House Rainsworth, just in case," he said after laughing for a while.

Estelle could tell he was about to say something important, so she straightened herself.

"It seems those showing symptoms of addiction aren't doing very well, so I've given the order to put them in a sanatorium."

“The one on Parama?”

“That’s right. The one where Lyle Wyntia is. The one exception is Lady Adeline—I’m putting her in a hospital in Albion. Figured it would be easier on Lady Olivia.”

“Her father is hospitalized too, after all.”

Arcrayne nodded.

“I am concerned about the mental state of Lady Olivia and Earl Rainsworth,” said Estelle.

“Earl Rainsworth” referred to Olivia’s younger brother, Henry. As he was the heir of House Rainsworth, he used one of Tohrmeyler’s titles as his courtesy title, as was traditional.

Rosalian nobles ranked at earl and above often had many titles. Estelle’s brother was not only Earl Flozeth, but also Viscount Flozeth and Baron Rainham.

“There seems to have been a change in Lady Olivia’s mental state today—Claus says she’s beginning to recover.”

Estelle’s eyes widened when she heard this. At the same time, she noticed that even though Arcrayne was talking about Olivia, she didn’t feel as sad or jealous as she’d used to.

It must’ve been because she’d decided she would support Arcrayne no matter what.

She didn’t mind if the love he gave her was mere pretense. It was an undeniable fact that he valued her and treated her as he would something fragile.

Estelle had ended up falling in love with not only his kind and calm front, but the wily part of him too. When she’d seen him badly hurt, she’d realized that losing him would be the most unbearable thing for her. Which was why...

“Please help Lady Olivia. If there is some way I can assist you, you need only ask.”

Arcrayne’s eyes opened wide at Estelle’s words.



Chapter 5: Restoration from Destruction

On March the seventh of the year 534 of the Rosalian calendar, in the center of Albion…

In a private room far at the back of a certain members-only tearoom, Olivia Rainsworth, accompanied by her older sister Eugenie who'd only just returned to Rosalia three days prior, was seeing Arcrayne.

He, a member of royalty, had been badly hurt at the Rainsworths' mansion. Since both Olivia's parents were hospitalized, she and Eugenie had to apologize on their behalf.

When Olivia had requested a meeting, the prince had designated this place for the purpose. He must've decided not to choose the Libra Palace or the Rainsworths' mansion because it would've had an adverse effect if people saw him meeting up with Olivia, whom he'd once been rumored to be nearly engaged to when he'd only just become engaged to someone else. Especially because Olivia currently had the public's eyes of pity on her.

It had been a week since the explosion at the mansion.

Arcrayne appeared to be in good health as he sat in front of Olivia. She'd heard he'd been on the brink of death right after getting wounded, but he'd apparently returned to his public duties two days ago, which had brought home that royals were special.

It had been good news for House Rainsworth, however. Had the prince died, things would've been beyond recovery for them.

At the moment, House Rainsworth was in the middle of getting back on its feet with the help of the employees of the Libra Palace, as well as Claus Rogell.

Tabloids loved scandals among the upper class. Their extensive reports on the whole affair had caused a big commotion in society, and Olivia, who had (purportedly) fought all alone at her mansion, was now gathering looks of curiosity and sympathy from all around.

Her sister Eugenie had returned to Rosalia in the midst of all

this. Henry had taken a temporary absence from College and returned to the mansion too. The disastrous state of the garden had rendered them both speechless. They'd been told the whole truth and were persuaded to become complicit in the cover-up. By now, both were powerful allies for Olivia.

Also, the butler who'd previously been kicked out by Adeline had returned after the situation had been explained to him. Because of his age, he'd been planning to retire one of those days, so his main job was now guiding the new butler in his duties. He was going to receive a generous retirement payment when he stepped down after everything was over.

As for Adeline, it was hard to look at her directly at the moment.

She'd aged terribly. Craving Robert's tea with a haggard face, she looked like a hungry vampire. Had Olivia not retained memories of when she'd had the choker on her, perhaps it would've been hard to believe that this Adeline was the same person as her mother.

Also, she didn't have the Choker of Puppetry in her possession at the moment—the artifact her mother had brought out to control her. Under the pretext of having found it while cleaning up after the explosion, Claus's people had taken it to a research facility—the Royal Mana Engineering Research Institute.

This artifact had a restriction in terms of the user's lineage, and using it was made even more difficult by the fact it cost one's life span to do so, but considering the effect, there was apparently a high probability Rosalia would be taking charge of it after it was fully examined.

When the siblings had discussed it between themselves, they'd reached the conclusion that that was for the best, so they'd offered to donate it and were currently waiting for the application to be accepted.

"Your Highness, I am truly sorry for the massive trouble inflicted upon you in connection to my House," said Eugenie after the words of the formal address to royalty. She deeply inclined her head.

"Please accept my deepest apologies," added Olivia, bowing just as deeply.

"No need to apologize," replied Arcrayne. "Please raise your

heads. If anything, it was I who carelessly stuck my head into the matter and caused trouble for you."

"Perish the thought...! I shudder to think what would have become of my family had you not intervened when you did..." said Eugenie. The sisters had agreed that she'd be the one doing most of the talking today.

Arcrayne shook his head. "Had I been more cautious, I believe that man would've never blown himself up and caused so much damage to the garden and the mansion. I'm sorry for my actions."

The explosion that had occurred upon Robert's disappearance had not only destroyed the garden and conservatory, but had also blown out all the west side windows of the town house, as they'd been close to the blast.

Arcrayne had taken it upon himself to pay for all the repairs, with the implication that it was out of sympathy for House Rainsworth. The family had firmly tried to refuse, but their attempts had been overridden.

"So in the end, who *was* Robert Taylor?" asked Eugenie.

"We don't know. We never found anything connected to his identity at your mansion," said Arcrayne with a sigh.

Judging by his reply, it didn't look like the matter was heading toward a satisfying conclusion.

"How have you been since then, Lady Olivia? Have you noticed anything strange about your physical condition?" asked the prince.

Since he'd addressed Olivia, she had no choice but to reply. She nodded. "I have not experienced anything serious. Sometimes my throat would temporarily become awfully parched, but that has gone away now."

"I'm glad to hear that. I was worried you might suffer from withdrawal too."

"Thank you for your concern." As she bowed, Olivia moved her eyes away from Arcrayne.

Had he not accepted her strange invitation, perhaps House Rainsworth would still have been victimized by Robert even now. While Olivia was grateful to him, she also simply couldn't keep from blaming him for her father's collapse. When one got down to it, the quarrel that had led to her father's hospitalization had stemmed from Arcrayne letting her family see the dream of Olivia becoming a princess in the first place.

If time could be turned back, she wished he'd flatly refused her requests to become her escort.

Eugenie had taken on the task of doing the talking today because Olivia could barely keep from wanting to complain when she had Arcrayne in front of her.

Feeling tears on the way, Olivia blinked repeatedly to disperse them.

"My apologies, Your Highness. My sister is still mentally unstable…" said Eugenie, covering up for Olivia. Perhaps she'd found it hard to watch her sister hanging her head and keeping her eyes down for too long.

"I can't blame her, given how much she's been through," replied the prince. "If anything, it helped that she recovered unexpectedly quickly and bravely dealt with various matters."

That was thanks to our servants' care, inwardly said Olivia.

After the raspberry sorbet, she'd gotten an oat milk porridge full of pear compote and honey. And after that, a hearty cream soup with chicken. Not only had they been thoughtful enough to make things that were as palatable for Olivia as possible, but they'd talked to her too.

Olivia then recalled that, as their mistress, she had to protect their current lives. Not only that, but she would also now have to support Henry, who was going to become head of the family despite being underage.

"If you need anything in the future, just let me know. I can't support you publicly, but I want to do what I can," said Arcrayne.

"It is reassuring to hear you say that," said Olivia.

In truth, she didn't want to accept his support. Regrettably, in her current situation, she had to.

I need to get House Rainsworth back on its feet as soon as I can, she thought to herself. It would let her put Arcrayne behind her once and for all.

Listening to the conversation between her sister and Arcrayne like it didn't concern her too much, Olivia made up her mind.

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Once the meeting with Arcrayne was over, Olivia returned to her mansion in her coach together with Eugenie. When they were close, the conservatory, of which now only the framework remained, came into view.

Because of what had transpired here, her mother's roses—the

ones named after Lady Adeline—had all perished.

While Olivia *could* grow more of them because her domain had the parent plant, this outcome just seemed to symbolize the crumbling of the relationships in the mansion and among the family members. It had brought her to tears many times already, and this time was no different. Lowering her eyes, she pressed a handkerchief to them.

Suddenly, Eugenie spoke up. “It’s Henry. He looks rather flustered. What’s the matter, I wonder?”

Olivia once again looked out of the coach window. And when she did, she saw Henry running toward them at full speed.

“Sister! Our father, I was told he’s woken up!” he shouted, prompting Olivia and Eugenie to look at each other. When Henry finally reached the coach, he threw the door open. “Apparently he can’t speak well and can barely move the right half of his body… But they said you can communicate with him through writing!” loudly reported Henry, out of breath and looking somewhat excited.

“Olivia, when do visiting hours end?”

“At seven, sister,” replied Olivia.

“Then let us be off at once! You get in too, Henry!”

“Of course!”

With a spirited reply, Henry embarked on the coach.

Interlude: The Mountains Where Dragons Live

In late January of the year 534 of the Rosalian calendar...

In the north of Great Rosalia was a steep mountain range known as Dragonbone Mountains, spanning the Léger, Flozeth, and Wyntia earldoms. It had earned its name for being home to dragons and for their bones sleeping among its slopes. The mountains themselves were like a backbone for those who lived there, supporting their way of life.

This mountain range was one of the few snowy regions on Great Rosalia. It was buried under white snow from December to around March every year. This year, however, temperatures had been higher than usual, and there wasn't much snow, so there was talk of dragons potentially waking up early.

Taking a firm step in the snow in his high boots fitted with snowshoes, a rifleman serving in the earldom of Wyntia by the name of Odo wiped the sweat from his forehead and took a breather.

Guess it's below my knees here...

Measuring the volume of snow with his body, Odo frowned. In a normal year, this area would've gathered a layer of snow over a meter in thickness. Odo sensed that the rumors about dragons waking up early were likely going to become reality, which dampened his spirits.

Dragons were enormous reptiles, so to speak. Just like how most reptiles went to sleep underground during winter, dragons hibernated deep in their lairs when it became cold.

Taking advantage of this behavior was the large-scale dragon-hunting carried out all across the Dragonbone Mountains from late winter to the beginning of spring. Basically, the hunters searched for lairs with hibernating dragons and attacked them in their sleep. This was known as "lair-hunting" and was considered a relatively safe way of culling the dragon population.

Being omnivorous, dragons ate anything. If they were hungry, they would ravage fields and attack livestock and people, which made them the biggest menace to those living near the Dragonbone Mountains.

The only things that could stand up to them were Dragon Slayers—special mana-based rifles tuned for high power and long effective range. Because of this, it was inevitably customary that those born with high supplies of mana in these lands would become riflemen. That included Odo.

Hunting dragons was dangerous, but it was profitable too. A dragon corpse could be sold for the price of a bar of gold. The tough hide and bones were used in weapons and mana-based items, the meat was a delicacy, and the organs were used in medicine.

Damn it. They'll pay for what they've done... grumbled Odo inwardly.

Appearing at the back of his mind was his daughter Kaena. He'd come to this mountain in secret because his precious daughter had been kidnapped by thugs.

Your father will save you, dear, just you wait.

Riflemen led lives no different from those of regular villagers, other than when they were called up by their lord for the annual dragon-hunting, or when a dragon had been spotted. In Odo's case, he normally made a living as a hunter.

Kaena had disappeared two days prior. When Odo had returned from his hunt, he couldn't find her anywhere in the house, and his wife had been trembling with a mana-based communicator in her hands—one with a kind of shape he'd never seen before.

She'd told him that their daughter had gone to her friend's place in the same village and had been taking too long to return. His wife had been about to go out for her, but as she'd come to the entrance, she'd found a letter at the door saying, "We have your daughter," along with a mana-based communicator and a mana-based gun.

The kidnappers had made one demand—Odo was to assist in an experiment involving a mana-based item and a dragon.

Specifically, he had been ordered to use the special gun to shoot a mana-based component into the spot between the

eyebrows of a hibernating dragon. It was a dragon's weak spot, known as its vital zone, and was involved in keeping them alive.

A dragon's heart was another vital zone, but it was very difficult to land a pinpoint shot on it unless you and the dragon were positioned just right in relation to each other.

Once heavily wounded, a dragon would enter a berserk state, losing all reason. Also, since the speed of a dragon's flight was said to be faster than mana-based locomotives, if one attacked a human, said human didn't stand a chance.

Another reason it was best to aim for the spot between the eyebrows was to ensure the dragon's corpse could be fully harvested.

After learning the structure of a dragon's body, wielders of Dragon Slayers trained to shoot the spot between the eyebrows. Because of that, Odo was confident that, as long as he managed to find a hibernating dragon, he could land the shot.

The problem was that the caliber of the gun he'd received from the kidnappers was smaller than that of his Dragon Slayer, so he didn't have much faith in it. Dragons had tough hides. There was a reason special guns were used for hunting them.

How dare they kidnap Kaena for something like this... thought Odo as he glared at the gun in his hand with a mana-based component inserted in it.

They must've targeted him because he could smell dragon lairs better than anyone. Odo was famous in his earldom for being an expert at finding dragons.

Kaena's cries and screams that he'd heard over the mana-based communicator were still stuck in his ears.

Biting his lip, Odo took another firm step in the snow, setting out to search for signs of dragons.

Chapter 6: An Uninvited Guest

When Estelle, clad in a riding habit, made her way to the entrance hall of the Libra Palace, she found Arcrayne waiting for her, dressed accordingly.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting, Lord Arc.”

“I haven’t been waiting long,” replied the prince, a gentle smile appearing on his face when he saw Estelle.

The situation at House Rainsworth was returning to normal, and Haoran and May had already come back from their long stay there. Everyday life had finally returned to the Libra Palace, but the annual royal events kept coming unrelentingly. The hunting contest was five days away, so it was time to practice horseback riding.

Women didn’t hunt at this contest, so once everyone had arrived on-site, the men and the women would be doing different things. For this reason, the overprotective Arcrayne had told Estelle to be absent on a pretext.

Arcrayne was the only one between the two of them who needed to practice horseback riding, so Estelle was only accompanying him for a change of scenery. She still couldn’t really go outside without the prince’s accompaniment. Estelle had a disposition for staying at home, so she wasn’t really discontented about this state of affairs. It *had* bothered her, however, that she hadn’t been able to see her beloved horse Lunaris for some time, so she’d happily accepted the prince’s offer.

That said, she was a little worried, since it hadn’t been long since Arcrayne had been badly wounded.

“I am aware you are robust, Lord Arc, but please make sure not to strain yourself too much,” said Estelle with a look of unease, to which the prince responded with a calm smile.

“Why, you know my wounds are fully closed—you’ve seen them, after all.”

Startled for an instant, Estelle replied, “I have…”

The prince didn’t miss her momentary agitation and snickered.

Royals’ capacity for regeneration was abnormal. Arcrayne’s

wounds had, in fact, fully healed already. However, just as he and his doctor had expected, a scar had remained on his chest and abdomen.

"It's more dangerous if I *don't* get exercise. Besides, I'm worried about Azure…" he said, furrowing his brows.

Azure was Arcrayne's favorite horse. Unlike the calm Lunaris, Azure apparently had considerable vices. Estelle had heard all sorts of stories about him: how picky he was in terms of whom he let near him, not tolerating grooms who aren't his favorite; trying to kill those he hated if they were near him…

Fortunately, Estelle had yet to have any dangerous experiences coming near Azure, so she seemed to be in his good graces.

"He starts acting up if his favorite groom doesn't play with him every day, and sulks just because I'm too busy to come see him. He's probably in a bad mood today," said the prince.

"You could not possibly have come to see him, since you were bedridden."

"If only he could understand that…" Arcrayne said quietly, looking troubled.

Arcrayne always protected Estelle with his power when she was outside. She'd recently grown used to having his mana envelop her. The prince escorted her in this state to the stables. But as they neared the stalls, Arcrayne stopped and frowned.

"Guess he really *is* angry…" said the prince.

Following his eyes, Estelle found a pitch-black horse which seemed to be Azure. He was irritably pawing at the ground in his stall.

"You should keep your distance," Arcrayne told her.

"Is that necessary?"

"It is. Wait here."

With that, Arcrayne approached Azure. At that point a groom went up to the prince at a half-run, appearing to have noticed him at last.

"Your Highness! I am so glad you could come! Pacifying him has become hell for us by now!"

Is it that bad? wondered Estelle, staring in astonishment.

The groom spoke to her next. "You should wait here for a short while, Lady Estelle. Also, I am sorry that you had to come here without knowing this, but Lunaris is not feeling well."

“What? Is she all right?” asked Estelle.

“I sent someone to inform you first thing in the morning, but perhaps the messenger missed you… My apologies. Lunaris seems to have a slight inflammation in her muscles, so she should rest today.”

Estelle’s face darkened in concern for her horse.

Then, she heard fierce neighing and sensed a powerful wave of mana. Looking over, Estelle saw Arcrayne blocking a frenzied Azure’s attack with a mana barrier.

“So it’s come to this after all…” uttered the groom, drooping his shoulders.

“Quite the violent sight,” remarked Estelle.

“Azure loves His Highness… He’s rather angry after being left alone for too long…”

Estelle watched the fight between a man and a horse for a while, but then it finally came to an end. Arcrayne appeared to have succeeded in pacifying Azure.

“It should be safe now. Let us go,” said the groom. He approached the prince together with Estelle. “My apologies, Your Highness, my messenger must have missed you. As it happens…” He explained to Arcrayne that Lunaris wasn’t fit for riding today.

“That *is* concerning. Let us go check up on her for now,” suggested Arcrayne.

“Of course,” replied Estelle.

“After that, we can ride Azure together, since you’re already here.”

“Um… Would that really be a good idea?”

“Azure is only picky about males—humans or animals. He’s a gentleman toward the ladies. Right?”

As the prince patted Azure’s back, the horse snorted lightly.

“It is as His Highness says, Lady Estelle,” said the groom. “This guy here loves females, and he’s popular with them. Some mares who don’t want him to service them—”

“Enough,” interrupted Arcrayne. “We are in the company of a lady.”

Faced with the prince’s glare, the groom looked startled and closed his mouth.

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Lunaris looked unexpectedly healthy in her stall. According to

the groom, the muscles on her back were swollen, and it was painful for her if you pressed on them with your finger.

"It should be minor since she can walk without any problems…but please let us monitor the situation for a while," said the groom.

"Very well, thank you," replied Estelle. "Get well soon, Lunaris."

As she gave the horse the sugar cubes she'd brought with her, Lunaris neighed happily.

Once they were done visiting Lunaris, they headed to the riding ground. Estelle had been looking forward to riding a horse today.

Since she was going to be absent from the hunting contest, there was no longer a need for her to practice riding sidesaddle. Because of that, she was wearing a riding costume with trousers today.

At the riding ground, they found Azure with a saddle for two already on his back. He was waiting calmly, with the groom holding the reins.

"It is almost as though he did not act up just a little earlier," remarked Estelle.

"I think that's because he's been saddled. He knows he's going to get a chance to run soon," Arcrayne replied with a pleasant smile. "You get on first, Estelle. It will be easier to deal with anything unexpected if you're in front."

But that means even more physical contact with you than if I were in the back… Then again, considering how many times we've already slept together…

With those thoughts out of the way, Estelle nervously approached Azure.

Azure was a stallion and a warhorse, so he was much bigger than Lunaris.

I wonder if I can ride him well…

As though sensing Estelle's worries, Azure neighed softly and lowered his head.

"Wow… Thank you, Azure!" uttered Estelle.

It seemed to be true that this horse was nice to women. Stroking his brown coat, Estelle put her hands on the saddle and jumped on. Once Arcrayne saw that Estelle was sitting firmly and her feet were in the stirrups, he got behind her on the horse.

Estelle was an average height for a woman, and Arcrayne was tall. Riding a horse together, he ended up snugly wrapping her body.

Though Estelle did more amazing things with Arcrayne on a regular basis, her heart still beat fast at being in this position with him for the first time.

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Arcrayne would be taking the reins, since he was the one who needed riding practice. Receiving the reins from the groom, he signaled to Azure with his feet to start walking.

Ngh...

Estelle was surprised at just how close Arcrayne felt to her when they rode together. His warmth on her back and his usual scent made her heart pound without end.

“Are you scared of Azure, by any chance? Don’t worry. He’s loyal to me,” said the prince.

“Um... It is simply that my eyes are higher than they would normally be...” replied Estelle, coming up with a fitting excuse.

I’m sorry, Azure, it’s not your fault... she apologized inside her mind. She didn’t want the prince to find out her heart was beating wildly; sitting in front of him like this, in such close quarters, it was almost like he was making love to her from behind.

Arcrayne wasn’t the kind of person who normally touched her without a good reason, so that was probably why she was nervous.

“Being like this makes me realize how small you are,” he said. “Women are so slender and petite...”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. You’re also soft and smell sweet, by the way.”

“Hey... Please do not smell me!”

Somehow Estelle didn’t like the idea of it. As she began to fidget, Azure shook his head in protest.

“Be still now,” said the prince.

“Hardly *my* fault, when you say such strange things!”

“Sorry, sorry.” Arcrayne snickered and made the horse pick up speed.

They went from a walk to a trot. Azure’s size made the ride exhilarating.

“Mind if we go a bit faster?” asked Arcrayne once they’d made

a lap across the riding ground.

“Not at all,” replied Estelle, at which point Azure broke into a gallop. “Wow! A warhorse is so fast!”

“Is it scary?”

“No!”

In fact, Estelle was having fun.

“Looks like you’ll be okay if we go even faster,” said the prince.

“I think I want to see what Azure is capable of…”

Estelle thought she could hear Arcrayne snicker behind her. Immediately afterward, they picked up even more speed.

“Amazing! There’s barely any jostling!” exclaimed Estelle.

“They’re trained that way for the sake of mounted shooters.”

If you tried to shoot a gun on horseback, the up-and-down movement would get in the way. Apparently, warhorses were taught a special gait for this reason. They also needed to have an aptitude for keeping calm at the smell of blood or the sound of gunshots, as well being able to trample people if necessary.

“Will you be training to shoot after this?” asked Estelle.

The riding ground had targets for shooting practice. Being able to shoot on horseback was an essential skill for those participating in hunting contests.

“No, I don’t plan to do that today. I’m more interested in making sure Azure can run well.”

“Am I not in the way? Surely things are different for Azure when he has the weight of two people on him.”

“I’m not sure he cares much. You’re good at shifting your weight.”

“I am? Thank you very much.”

“You’re not good at riding sidesaddle, but that’s it. I hear you’re quite the rider normally. How about we trade places later?”

Estelle’s eyes went wide at the suggestion. “Would that be all right? Will Azure listen to what I say…?”

“He’s a gentleman, so it should be fine.”

She’d seen the horse turn violent from sulking just a bit earlier, so Estelle couldn’t help smiling at Arcrayne’s words.

Going forward and backward, turning, jumping—Arcrayne skillfully controlled Azure, making him move in various ways.

Then, once he’d made several laps on the riding ground and finished checking everything about the way Azure moved, the

prince stopped and passed the reins to Estelle.

Would Azure really move as Estelle bid him? As she lightly nudged his belly with her leg, Azure glanced backward, then began to walk.

“Did he just check who was giving directions?” asked Estelle.

“That’s right. He obeys, though, see?” Arcrayne snickered in delight.

While Estelle wasn’t entirely satisfied with the way things were playing out, she used her legs to instruct Azure to pick up speed.

***

Azure obeyed Estelle’s directions no less faithfully than Lunaris. Was he so obedient because she had Arcrayne riding behind her?

However, their fun riding time came to a sudden end when Estelle’s eyes sensed abnormally copious mana. As she went stiff, Arcrayne seemed to have sensed something too.

“Someone’s here,” he said.

Other than the guards and a groom of the Libra Palace, Estelle could see three human figures and one horse. They stood at the entrance to the riding ground.

Estelle had gone stiff because one of the people there had a strangely large amount of mana. A mass of silver light so big it protruded from the body, shimmering like a heat haze—only royals of direct descent had that much mana.

“I…believe it is His Highness Prince Liedis,” said Estelle. She’d come to that conclusion from the person’s small build, which was apparent even from a distance.

Estelle could feel through her back that Arcrayne, who was in close contact with it, had become guarded.

Azure seemed to notice what was going on with his riders. He must’ve sensed their tension.

As they approached the entrance to the riding grounds, the figures became clearer. Prince Liedis really was here, accompanied by what appeared to be bodyguards and a chief officer of his palace.

Arcrayne’s bodyguards and the groom were kneeling a step away from them.

“I see you get along quite well, brother, future stepsister,” said Liedis once Arcrayne and Estelle got to the entrance. He had a taunting, somewhat contemptuous smile on his face.

Liedis was still only growing. While he was slightly taller than Estelle, he was slim and small when compared to the tall Arcrayne and the brawny bodyguards. He *was*, however, the most bigheaded of everyone present.

“What have you come here for?” asked Arcrayne, the look on his face colder than Estelle had ever seen it. His chilling blue eyes threateningly pierced Liedis.

“What do you mean? To practice shooting on horseback, of course. I’m going to participate in the hunting contest too,” replied the second prince.

“Did you come all the way from the Royal College just for that?”

“This place has better facilities than those at school, which you can’t even use without a great deal of annoying red tape. You know that, right, brother?”

He was as impudent as always. The brothers had similar features despite having been born from different mothers, but the impression they gave off was quite different. If Arcrayne was an ideal prince, Liedis was a self-important child.

“I only have so much time to use this place, so I would appreciate it if you yielded it to me, brother.”

“Use it as you please. I can come here any other time,” replied Arcrayne, smiling with his whole face.

Nimbly leaping down from Azure, he extended a hand to Estelle, who took it and got off the horse too. In truth, she was able to get down by herself, but accepting a gentleman’s help was the ladylike thing to do in this situation.

“Would you look at that... I see you *really* get along, just as the rumors say. What has drawn you so strongly to Lady Estelle, brother? She seems to be a good rider, at the very least,” Liedis ridiculed them.

“It’s not something specific—it’s everything,” replied Arcrayne with a sneer. “I hope you can find someone you can love from the bottom of your heart soon.”

Estelle had kind of expected it, but these half-brothers treated each other as strangers even more than actual strangers would. Watching their exchange, both of them steeped in dark mana, made Estelle’s stomach hurt.

“In any case, Lady Estelle’s skill is simply marvelous,” said Liedis. “I’ve heard women of the north can use Dragon Slayers, but she’s skilled at riding too. She must’ve run around hills and

fields from a young age.”

Was he indirectly making fun of her for being a countrywoman? Not that Estelle would be bothered by anything Liedis could say about her.

“Estelle has good physical abilities,” replied Arcrayne. “She’s not only good at riding and shooting, but also dancing. You should choose a woman like her for yourself too. You wouldn’t want a woman who steps on your feet at every ball, would you?”

“I appreciate the advice. Not that I would choose a woman from the north,” said Liedis with a light shrug, then turned his eyes toward Estelle. “Oh yes, I wanted to ask you something, Lady Estelle.”

“What might it be?” she replied cautiously, after a pause.

Liedis smiled cheerfully. “Remember how you shot at me in order to save your attendant? Did you aim where you did on purpose?”

“What exactly are you asking me?”

“I was just thinking you aimed at a good spot for someone who was supposed to be shooting in a frightened state. It occurred to me later that you skillfully severed my telekinesis. It’s been on my mind ever since.”

“What are you talking about…?”

“I never knew you could interrupt powers that way. Did my brother teach you that?”

Liedis took a step toward Estelle. Without a moment’s delay, Arcrayne stood between them, hiding Estelle behind himself.

“I don’t know what it is you want to ascertain, but may I ask you to stop? I would appreciate it if you didn’t bother my lovely fiancée,” said Arcrayne.

After a moment of thought, Liedis replied, “People sure change. I never expected you to behave that way, brother. It makes me even more interested in Lady Estelle.”

“I’m afraid I become quite intolerant on the subject of Estelle. You don’t need to know about her.” With that, Arcrayne turned around to face Estelle. “Estelle, let us return to the Libra Palace. Sorry our uninvited guest put a damper on things.”

“Please do not worry.” Estelle took the hand offered by Arcrayne.

It was unfortunate that they had to end things early, but she would rather not be stuck between these half-brothers any further.

Arcrayne called the groom over with his eyes and handed him Azure's reins. Leading Estelle by the hand, he walked past Liedis without stopping.

"Stepsister, I will invite you to the Aquarius Palace when I'm on break from school—please do come," said the second prince. "I'm sure it's tiring to be with a jealous man all the time."

The Aquarius Palace was one of the twelve buildings of the Palace of Albion—the one the king had given to Liedis as he was the second prince.

"Ignore him," Arcrayne said coldly.

Minors generally couldn't take part in social events, but the hunting contest was the sole exception; sons of nobility aged over fifteen were allowed, since the contest doubled as a military exercise. Fifteen was the age of eligibility for military service.

Thinking how these two would see each other again at the hunting contest gave Estelle a bad premonition.

"I'm sorry I put you through something unpleasant," said Arcrayne on their way from the riding ground back to the stables to return Azure.

Estelle shook her head. "Please do not apologize. It does not bother me."

Nobody had expected Liedis to show up, so it hadn't been Arcrayne's fault.

"Is Azure not the one you should rather apologize to instead?" she asked, looking over to the horse being led by Arcrayne.

The pitch-black warhorse snorted lightly.

"It is almost as though he is saying he does not mind," said Estelle.

"Horses are intelligent animals, so he probably understands." Arcrayne gazed at Azure with affectionate eyes.

***

After returning Azure to the stables, the two checked up on Lunaris again, then returned to the Libra Palace. There, they found the employees acting strangely.

"His Highness has returned!"

"I better call Mr. Cao quick!"

Overhearing such whispers, Arcrayne and his guards tensed up.

"I shall investigate," said Neil, who'd accompanied them to the stalls. He went up to a nearby maidservant and asked her what

the matter was.

"As it happens, a cat has made its way in…" she began. Apparently, they'd opened a window while cleaning; that was how it had slipped in. "I'm so sorry! It's too quick and we haven't been able to catch it…"

"Is that why all of you grown men and women are running about in confusion…?" uttered Arcrayne in exasperation, relaxing his guard.

"Good thing nothing serious happened," added Neil, tension gone from his face.

"Now, why don't we go take a look at that nasty cat's face…?" said Arcrayne, looking in the direction of sounds of a disturbance. He headed there with the rest of his group.

"What did the cat look like?" asked Estelle.

"It was white, with blue eyes," replied the maidservant stopped by Neil earlier, who'd ended up coming with them given the circumstances. She was ghastly pale—perhaps she was too awed from speaking to Arcrayne.

"Neil, could it be the cat you've been feeding in secret?" asked Arcrayne with a glance, making the guard freeze up.

"So you knew…" he replied.

"You've been feeding a cat?" Estelle asked him, looking up at Neil on an impulse.

His eyes began to wander awkwardly. "I found it when it strayed into the garden at the end of last year… It was emaciated, so I took pity on it…"

"I overlooked the matter because it's just a cat. I know you and the cook have been looking after it. I also know you've been talking to it using baby words, which is a little creepy."

"Aaargh, please stop!" cried out Neil as the prince divulged his secrets in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Cats are cute, so anyone would do that," interceded Estelle on Neil's behalf.

"Exactly! Cats are cute." He nodded several times.

"I wish you had told me about it too." Estelle looked up at Neil reproachfully.

"It *was* a secret…" replied the guard with a pitiful look on his face.

Suddenly, they saw Haoran running with a basket from across the hallway, accompanied by a maidservant. He seemed to have

noticed Arcrayne and his group too. As they approached each other, Estelle noticed a white object inside the basket, and once they were close enough, she could tell it was a cat curled up into a ball.

“Your Highness, you have returned!” exclaimed Haoran. “Please accept my apologies for my current appearance. As a matter of fact, we had a terrible intruder running amok…”

“So I’ve heard,” replied Arcrayne. “Is that our trespasser you have there?”

“Yes, Your Highness. It finally quieted down just moments ago.”

The cat was making itself comfortable in the center of the basket. Just as they’d been told, it had blue eyes. They were beautiful—the light blue color made them look like glass beads.



As Arcrayne stared at it, the cat glanced up, then gave a big yawn. Doing things at its own pace was very catlike of it indeed.

“Neil, I get the feeling this cat looks suspiciously like the one you’ve been feeding,” said the prince.

“It probably is, yes…” replied Neil. He was drooping his shoulders—perhaps he felt guilty.

“I’m surprised you managed to catch it, given how much of a racket it seems to have made. Was it you who got it, Haoran?” asked Arcrayne.

“No, Your Highness, nobody really caught it. It ran amok for a while, and before I knew it, it was lying down in this basket. It did not budge even when I lifted the basket.” Haoran directed an amazed look at the cat.

“Um!” began the maidservant who’d been with Haoran. Not only was she terribly pale, but trembling too. “I-I apologize. When I was cleaning the exhibition room, this cat… I-It was me being careless, but… This cat began to run around and…a vase…b-broke…” She began to weep quietly partway through.

“I must apologize for this too, Your Highness,” added Haoran. “A Yang flower vase has broken.”

“Which one?” asked the prince.

“The white porcelain one with grapes and vines painted all over it in blue.”

“Oh, that one…” Arcrayne frowned. After thinking for a short while, he addressed the maidservant. “I’m not going to hold you responsible for it, so no need to cry. Are you hurt?”

“N-No, not at all!” she replied.

“Good. I want to see the situation myself, so can you take me to the exhibition room?”

With the prince smiling at her, the maidservant’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed.

“R-Right this way,” she said.

“One moment, Your Highness. What should I do about this heinous criminal?” asked Haoran.

“You can let it go.”

“Understood. I shall let it outside. Though I suspect it might return in the future…”

Haoran directed a chilly look at Neil. He seemed to know the guard’s secret too.

“If it keeps coming to the garden, why not keep it at the palace officially?” suggested Estelle.

“Let me think about it…” uttered Arcrayne, his face somewhat sullen. He watched Haoran leave with the cat in the basket.

Maybe he’s not an animal person? wondered Estelle. But then why was he so fond of Azure? Were horses an exception?

She tilted her head in puzzlement.

***

The exhibition room was like a museum decorated with works of art in Arcrayne’s possession.

As the maidservant led Arcrayne inside, he saw the broken flower vase on the floor.

“Well this is broken quite badly…” he said, kneeling and reaching out to pick up a shard.

“Your Highness, you might injure yourself. Please leave the cleanup to us,” Neil stopped him quickly.

“Don’t throw it out, even the smallest shards. The Yang Empire has a way of repairing these, if memory serves.”

“It can be repaired?” asked Estelle, prompting a smile from the prince.

“I don’t know, but no harm in trying.”

“I’m so sorry…” uttered the maidservant. It was painful to see how badly she was shrinking.

“Don’t worry about it; I wasn’t all that attached to this vase. I feel like I bought it out of obligation at some point.”

Judging by how he appeared to be thinking hard about the matter, the vase didn’t seem to have been important after all.

Apparently this room was filled with things Arcrayne had bought, inherited from his parents, or had presented to him by nobles, foreign ambassadors, and the like.

Suddenly, a cameo brooch displayed in a glass case caught Estelle’s eye. It had the letter M engraved into its white rose. The brooch was so beautiful that it was clear at a glance it had been made by a skilled artisan.

Was it there before…? wondered Estelle. She didn’t remember seeing it when Arcrayne had shown her around back when she’d moved to the Libra Palace.

“Lord Arc, this cameo was not there before, was it?”

“Oh, this was found among my mother’s things when I had a room prepared for you.”

That explained why it hadn’t been here before.

“Mother wore it often, but I thought you might not find it easy to wear since it has an initial. That’s why I put it there. Still, if you

like it, you can have it."

"Um... It is not that I like it or not—there is just something that bothers me..." Stopping there, Estelle neared Arcrayne and whispered in his ear. "I see mana in it. It might be no ordinary brooch."

Estelle whispered so that only the prince could hear because a maidservant was present, and she hadn't been told about Estelle's power.

Arcrayne opened his eyes wide.

***

Damn you, father...

As usual, Arcrayne was swamped with office work pushed onto him by Sachis. He was currently choosing guests to be invited to a different event from the Summer Garden Party hosted by the king.

The earl-ranked House Poulett had had a change of headship the other day, and Viscount Stanley was supposed to be battling an illness at the moment.

Why hasn't the register of names been updated since the last time? The king's secretaries who prepared this must all be incompetent.

Inwardly hurling abuse at them, Arcrayne dipped his quill pen in the ink and added notes to the register. It was then that a shadow appeared over his office desk.

"Your Highness, may I have a moment of your time?"

Looking up, Arcrayne saw Claus standing in front of his desk with a document and a small velvet-covered box in his hands.

"Sure, but make it quick," replied the prince.

"I have the results of the examination of that brooch Lady Estelle found the other day."

"Well, that didn't take long."

It had only been two days since the cat had gotten into the exhibition room of the Libra Palace and run amok—and since Estelle had noticed that his mother's cameo brooch displayed in the room emitted mana.

The brooch was unlikely to be anything strange since his mother had worn it, but Arcrayne had given it to the Royal Mana Engineering Research Institute to find out if it were mana-based or not. And if it were—what effect it had.

"It appears there was no need to examine it in the first place. The institute had made that brooch for Her Majesty Queen

Miriallia on His Majesty's orders," said Claus, presenting Arcrayne with the document and the small box he was carrying.

The document was a report from the institute, while the box had the brooch in it.

"There is a trick to the bezel, which is what makes the brooch mana-based," said Claus. "According to the report, this brooch automatically projects a mana barrier upon receiving a powerful impact, protecting its wearer. However, apparently it can only be used once, and will break and become useless once it fulfills its duty."

"So it's like a good-luck charm," replied Arcrayne.

"Correct. I've been told they're trying to make something that could be used more than once, but making it strong enough to be reusable leads to issues with durability, so they're having trouble with it."

"So that's why mother often wore it…"

Opening the small box, Arcrayne gazed at the white rose cameo. He felt something bitter as he did.

The prince recalled the sight of his parents close together back when his mother had been alive. At the moment, however, Sachis cherished Truteliese so much one would think he had forgotten about Miriallia.

"Would it not be wise for you to wear it to avoid the sort of thing you recently went through?" asked Claus. He must've been referring to the time Arcrayne had been badly wounded at the Rainsworths' mansion.

"I doubt that kind of affair will happen often, so if someone should wear it, it's probably Estelle," replied the prince.

She might be bothered if a piece of jewelry left to Arcrayne by his late mother with her initial on it broke upon fulfilling its duty, so perhaps it would be a good idea to remove the cameo and put something else in the bezel instead.

Sighing lightly, Arcrayne got up.

"Where are you headed?"

"I've lost my focus, so I'm going to take a break and tell Estelle about this while I'm at it."

"Understood," said Claus in a detached manner and returned to his seat.

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As Arcrayne got to the usual room adjoining his office, he found Estelle clinging to a window together with Leah.

“Lord Arc, come look! It’s here again!” exclaimed Estelle with a cheerful look on her face. She was pointing at a white cat that looked familiar.

The cat was asleep, curled up in a ball in a sunny spot in the garden.

Estelle had Neil guarding her today. As Arcrayne glanced at him, he averted his eyes, possibly feeling guilty about having fed the cat.

Checking the clock, the prince decided it wasn’t a problem to take a break for thirty minutes or so.

“How about we visit the garden?”

Estelle’s face lit up at Arcrayne’s suggestion.

Regrettably, Neil had snacks for the cat hidden on him—chicken meat dried as much as possible, apparently prepared by the cook. When he entered the garden with it in hand, the cat woke up, perhaps having caught the scent.

Slowly getting up and doing a wide stretch, it briskly walked to Neil. For a stray cat, it was chubby and its coat was in good condition—there was no doubt it had Neil and the cook to thank for that.

“It’s so cute...! Everything it does is simply adorable...!” uttered Estelle.

“I suppose so,” replied the prince.

Estelle wasn’t the only one who found the cat soothing to look at. Neil and Leah were all smiles at the sight of it too.

“Do you not like cats, Lord Arc...?” Estelle asked hesitantly. Perhaps she’d picked up on his faint sadness from his mana.

“I do agree that it’s cute.”

“But...” Estelle looked somewhat unsatisfied with his reply.

In order to prove he wasn’t lying, Arcrayne crouched and petted the cat after it walked over to him. The cat then looked up at the snack in Estelle’s hands, swayed its tail, and rubbed its head on Arcrayne. The smooth sensation of a cat’s fur felt pleasant.

When Estelle crouched, the cat slipped away from Arcrayne, put its forelegs on Estelle’s knees, and meowed.

“Looks like it wants a treat,” said Estelle. Giggling, she put a small piece of cut-up dried chicken on her palm and held it out.

The cat nimbly licked the chicken off her palm. It must’ve tasted really good, because once it was done eating, it started

licking Estelle's palm—maybe it smelled like chicken.

"Oh! Cats' tongues are so coarse!" exclaimed Estelle joyfully. She gently patted the cat's head with her free hand.

"If it's gotten this deep into everyone's hearts, it might be better to give it proper protection. Small animals might be targeted," said Arcrayne, smiling to hide his bitter emotions.

Estelle looked worried when she saw him like that. She must've sensed his melancholy from his mana.

Arcrayne had once kept a dog here in the Libra Palace. He'd only just received this palace and had been seven or eight at the time. He'd happened upon a hound deemed unfit to be a hunting dog and taken it into his care.

He'd doted on it, but at the time, he had been unable to protect it. When he'd carelessly let it out into the garden...

Arcrayne directed his eyes to the garden's gazebo. There was a yew sapling planted next to it. Yews had a long life span and were covered in green foliage all year long, which made them symbolize the immortality of the soul and its rebirth.

Those who'd been serving at the Libra Palace for a long time knew it was a grave marker.

I won't make a mistake this time, the prince told himself, returning his gaze to Estelle whose attention was on the cat.

Chapter 7: The Hunting Contest

The hunting contest hosted by the royal family was held in the middle of March. It took place in a royal forest in the vicinity of Albion.

Since it doubled as a military exercise, all participants would have to ride horses and line up in an open space in front of the palace before heading out.

Arcrayne was worried about Estelle, who'd ended up attending and was sitting in a coach.

At the hunting contest, the men would go first and set up a base camp with pavilions outside the forest. Then they would enter the forest to hunt. The women wouldn't be going with them and would instead stand by inside the pavilions. The men and women would be away from each other for a long time, so Arcrayne had actually wanted Estelle to be absent for this event. Unfortunately, it had been a bad idea to claim she'd sprained her leg and try to use that as an excuse.

Estelle had feigned illnesses both at the memorial service and when Arcrayne had been badly hurt. People would've likely thought she had a weak constitution if she'd done it again in such a short period of time, so he'd gone for faking an injury instead, but this had led to the queen putting pressure on them.

"It is unacceptable for a future princess to be absent on the grounds of a sprain. If she cannot ride a horse, she can go in a coach."

Arcrayne had found himself unable to refuse.

He didn't know why he felt so uneasy. Was it because something had been feeling different about Estelle as of late? Mounted on Azure, Arcrayne glanced at Estelle's profile as she sat in the coach. He couldn't clearly put it into words. However, he felt something like a wall between them compared to before. Had she been appalled by his disgrace when he'd tried to catch Robert and her affection had dwindled as a result?

It gave the prince much to think about, but at the end of the day, the strength of Estelle's feelings for him didn't matter. She and her power belonged to him already. Their engagement had been announced, and he was already providing some support to

the earldom of Flozeth. They'd come far enough that subtle changes in how one of them felt couldn't undo anything.

Coming to that conclusion and heaving a light sigh, Arcrayne knocked on the coach window. It opened and Estelle showed her face.

"We're heading out soon. Be careful, and make sure you're never alone," he said, checking Estelle's chest area.

There, over the dress for outdoor activities that she wore today, was the late Miriallia's brooch which he had given to her. The cameo had been removed from this "good-luck charm" and replaced with a nacre—which was pretty but didn't have much monetary value, so it wouldn't be a problem if the brooch fulfilled its duty and broke.

It had been lucky to discover the brooch's function just before the hunting contest.

"You are such a worrywart, Your Highness. I shall be with her, so nothing shall happen."

The one speaking was Sierra, who was in the coach with Estelle. Maybel was inside too. Among Estelle's usual attendants, Leah was the only one absent, as she lacked any means of self-defense.

"Will His Majesty not scold you if you spend too much time here?" asked Estelle.

Just as she said, it was about time for Arcrayne to return to the formation before things got problematic.

Sighing softly, Arcrayne looked over the Royal Guards of the Libra Palace escorting the coach, then turned Azure and headed to his designated spot.

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"I see you're still getting along very well with His Highness," said Sierra, giving Estelle a somewhat vague look.

"I suppose so. He's nice to me to the point where it's a little oppressive." Estelle smiled uncomfortably. "I'm sorry you had to come with me. I've heard you like riding horses."

"It's all right. I've just reached the age where I want to avoid getting a tan." As Sierra tittered, a gentle smile appeared on her face, the beauty of which made one think of an ice spirit. "I hear you've started keeping a cat at the Libra Palace? I'd be happy if you could introduce me to it sometime soon."

"Certainly. I'll send you an invitation," replied Estelle.

They'd ended up officially keeping that intruder cat as a pet at

the Libra Palace. Arcrayne had said that, if they were going to keep a cat, it was best to do so indoors, where it would be safer. A room adjacent to his office had been dedicated to the cat. Also, outside that room, the construction of a special courtyard with fences for the cat had begun.

Finding it similar to her own situation, Estelle smiled unconsciously.

The cat had turned out to be female. On account of her coat, everyone had agreed to name her Snow. Although she had lived outside as she pleased all this time, she made no attempts to escape and acted like she'd owned her new room all along. Bit of a brazen one, that cat.

Incidentally, the maidservant who'd let Snow into the exhibition room had been appointed to take care of the cat as punishment. She seemed to be fond of cats and had said, "That's a reward, not a punishment!" at the time, looking grateful. But she still had to perform her regular maidservant duties all day and now also find time to take care of Snow on top of that, as well as sleep in the cat's room, so Estelle considered it quite an onerous job.

"You're the one who embroidered His Highness's mantle, right? It looked marvelous," said Sierra.

Since the hunting contest was also a military exercise, all the men were wearing military uniforms. Arcrayne and Claus both had handsome, clear-cut features, so they were dazzlingly beautiful.

Liedis had taken a break from Royal College to participate in today's hunting contest too. His features were no less shapely than Arcrayne's, but unfortunately, he was still too young. Instead of him, it was Arcrayne—a representation of a fairy tale prince—and Claus—who was like a knight of ice—gathering the looks of primarily unmarried ladies.

As they were going to enter the forest, the men were supposed to be far ahead in the formation.

"Thank you for your kind words," replied Estelle. "Lord Claus's mantle suited him very well too. Did you prepare it, Lady Sierra?"

Sierra's mana darkened all of a sudden. "Yes... I've never heard a single amorous rumor about him until now and he doesn't like it when I find marriage candidates for him, so I've been growing nervous, wondering when I'll get to hold my grandchildren. But I was wrong... I wish he'd stayed single rather than developing an

interest in strange women…”

Her lips were smiling, but her mana was not. It was plain scary when a beauty like her acted that way, and Estelle’s face went stiff.

“You might already know about it from all the rumors,” continued Sierra. “He seems to be interested in Olivia Rainsworth…” The folding fan in her hand creaked.

While Arcrayne had been recuperating, it had been Claus with some other employees of the Libra Palace who had gone to sort things out at House Rainsworth in Arcrayne’s stead. Since the explosion had taken place inside the Rainsworths’ mansion, Albion Police and reporters had been trying to stick their noses into the matter—to put pressure on them, Claus had used the power of his own House Rogell. The reason he’d given for it had been that he’d “been concerned about Olivia all along after Arcrayne had turned his back on her.”

The public was excited about not only the sensational incident at House Rainsworth, but also the new love story. Now that he’d made such an announcement, Claus couldn’t simply take it back right away—and even after all the employees of the Libra Palace had returned to their usual workplace, he seemed to still occasionally visit the mansion to check up on Olivia.

Estelle didn’t know how Claus planned to bring the matter under control. Apparently, however, he hadn’t talked about it with Sierra in advance, and was still keeping the whole truth from her.

Which was why Sierra thought he was serious about Olivia, and was angry under a calm surface.

“‘Overcoming the antagonism between their parents, Marquess Rogell extended a hand to a tragic lady,’ they say…” Sierra tittered. “Everyone knows how deeply troubled her family is at the moment, so if I carelessly intervened, people would see me as a villain…”

Uh-oh. Estelle seemed to have hit upon a sensitive topic for Sierra. Cold sweat beaded on Estelle’s back.

Incidentally, as House Rainsworth was still in the process of restoration, its members probably wouldn’t appear in high society for a while. Naturally, they were absent today too.

“It’s not like I hate Olivia herself, you know? But she resembles Adeline too much… I wonder what I should do if Claus decides to marry her…” Despite the smile on her face, Sierra was seething

with anger.

If she raised an objection to such a development, she would be seen as narrow-minded, and her pride wouldn't allow that. Nevertheless, she also couldn't accept a bond between Olivia, who looked like Adeline, and her son. Sensing such internal conflict from Sierra, Estelle couldn't find what to say to her.

"I'm sorry I bothered you with all that talk. This is quite embarrassing."

After venting her displeasure about Claus and Olivia to Estelle, Sierra apologized. It appeared that she had, in fact, merely wanted Estelle to hear her complaints on the subject.

After that, May joined the conversation and the coach ride became a pleasant one, all things considered.

The weather was good too. Spring in Albion came earlier than it did in the earldom of Flozeth, so colorful flowers were covering the road, and buds were opening up.

Back in Estelle's snowy birthplace, spring would come all at once. Spring flowers bloomed instantly after thaw. Spectacular as that was, Estelle found it refreshing to see spring in the south where flowers bloomed gradually.

She thought of her favorite horse Lunaris, wondering how much fun it would be to gallop through these parts to her heart's content. Estelle hadn't been able to ride her the other day due to the latter being indisposed, but fortunately, that had been a temporary matter, and Lunaris was supposed to be all fine and healthy in the stables of the Libra Palace at the moment.

While the men would compete in the score they earned for the game they'd hunted, for the women, hunting contests were something of a picnic. They'd be leisurely enjoying tea and snacks at the base camp pavilions while waiting for the men to return.

Estelle relished the scenery while the coach moved at an unhurried pace. Finally, they arrived at the forest. There, she saw that the gentlemen and servants, who had gotten there first, had already put up pavilions at the forest's entrance. A cursory glance revealed thirty to forty of them—quite the magnificent sight.

Estelle headed to Arcrayne's pavilion together with Sierra and

her aides. The pavilions belonging to royalty were set up closest to the forest and stood out by being considerably more imposing than the rest.

Sierra was going to be with Estelle all day today, helping deal with any visitors to this pavilion.

“Let me say this again, Estelle—you must stay in here as much as possible.”

Leaving Estelle with those words, the overprotective Arcrayne headed out to start hunting.

“How nice. This must be the most enjoyable time for you,” said Sierra.

Estelle responded with a vague smile.

It was true that Arcrayne cherished her, but it wasn’t the sweet kind of relationship Sierra imagined. All it was was a make-believe love that was beneficial to them both. Granted, she’d made up her mind to support Arcrayne despite that, but she couldn’t help feeling just a little sad about it.

“Why don’t we get the unpleasant matter out of the way first? Let us be off to His Majesty’s pavilion.”

Sierra’s suggestion brought Estelle back to reality.

Among the cluster of pavilions was one belonging to the king and queen. That was the only place Estelle had to visit of her own accord and pay her respects. It was frank of Sierra to refer to visiting Her Majesty as an “unpleasant matter.”

“You’re supposed to have a sprain, so you must drag your leg as you walk, Lady Estelle,” she said.

As they spoke, things suddenly got noisy outside. Next, Neil, who was supposed to be outside, came rushing into the pavilion.

“Lady Estelle, Lady Sierra, Th-Their Majesties are here!”

As her eyes widened at the news, Estelle exchanged glances with Sierra.

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“I heard your injury is bad enough that you can’t ride a horse, so I thought we ought to visit you ourselves,” said the king.

“Though under ordinary circumstances it should be *you* coming to His Majesty’s pavilion,” added the queen.

They were sitting on seats hurriedly prepared by May and the guards.

“Thank you for your kind visit, Your Majesties,” replied Estelle, her face pale.

The king and queen’s visit was not unlike a surprise attack.

Not only Estelle, but also her aides were all pallid. Sierra was the only one who looked no different from usual, her mana included.

"We are grateful that you took the time to come here. Though I have heard Your Majesty is unwell too..." said Sierra.

At that, Sachis shrugged, looking tired of the topic. "*Was* unwell, to be precise. I'm fine already, but people around me make a fuss about it and won't let me into the forest."

Sachis wasn't participating in the hunt this time. Officially, it was because he'd caught a cold a week prior and still hadn't fully recovered. However, the hushed talks of his failing health from when he'd first collapsed were threatening to come up again.

As he was before Estelle now, his complexion didn't look unhealthy, but considering it was possible to hide the paleness of cheeks and lips with makeup, she couldn't know for sure.

"It has been quite a while since I last saw you, Lady Sierra," said Truteliese, covering the lower half of her face with the folding fan in her hand.

"It certainly has. Assisting my son and other matters have left me rather busy, so I have not been able to visit in a long time," Sierra replied.

"Oh, I must admit I thought you were avoiding me, since you didn't come see me for so long."

"I apologize if it felt that way. As ever, you have my love and respect, Your Majesty."

"Why, I'm most pleased to hear that, if you're telling the truth."

There were smiles on Sierra and Truteliese's faces as they had their chilling exchange. Both their mana was dark, and Estelle could tell at a glance they hated each other. The fact both of them were beautiful made their back-and-forth rather intense.

"As for you, Lady Estelle, I suppose I haven't seen you since the memorial service."

With the queen setting her sights on Estelle, the latter grew nervous.

"That is correct, Your Majesty. Thank you for inviting me to the royal seats that day."

"Yes, you weren't supposed to be able to sit there yet. He's such a troublemaker. And then you up and leave because you feel unwell. Perhaps His Majesty collapsed because he caught your cold."

"I apologize if that was the case," replied Estelle after a pause.

The queen's words were strict. Oddly enough, however, her

mana wasn't all that dark. Although it was dark, Estelle felt like it wasn't *as* dark as the queen's words either.

She was strange today. The mismatch between the queen's mana and what she said was the same as it had been at the opera house.

"Enough, Truteliese. My fever began more than a week after the service. I don't suspect I caught it from Lady Estelle," Sachis cut in.

Every time Estelle saw Sachis, the negative emotions he felt toward her subsided more and more. She didn't know if he'd given up or approved of her, but either way, she was happy about it.

"I wasn't blaming her," said the queen. "I simply heard she came down with a cold on a different occasion afterward, so I was worried she might have a weak constitution." Looking embarrassed, she snapped shut the folding fan in her hand.

Sighing at her high-handed and hostile attitude, Sachis stepped in again to mediate. "Lady Sierra, Lady Estelle, I believe it's about time we took our leave. Truteliese, I know you want to talk to Lady Estelle more, but we should be going back to our pavilion soon."

Making a bored face at his words, the queen got up.

"Thank you for your visit," Estelle said once again. She was about to get up in a hurry in order to see them off, but Sachis stopped her.

"No need. Your foot hurts, does it not?"

Giving Estelle a smile, Sachis left the pavilion together with Truteliese and his bodyguards, known as the Sovereign's Guard.

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Liedis was irritated, because Lucius, the chief officer of his palace, hadn't planned things well, leaving Liedis unable to set off deeper into the forest.

While the hunting contest was a military exercise, it was also a competition: participants earned points for hunted game, depending on type and weight. This forest had various kinds of wild animals. Hunting bears would earn you the most points, with deer coming in second.

Liedis wanted to head deeper in as soon as possible in order to get the highest score. For as long as he could remember, Liedis had always had to be superior to his half brother. He'd always been compared to the way his half brother had

previously done in all fields—not just studies, but his physical ability and aptitude in art too.

Fortunately, Liedis had proven more talented in almost everything. Pretty much the only area in which he couldn't win was playing musical instruments.

Which was why everyone around him said Liedis should become the next king. He agreed with that notion. It was in Rosalia's best interests that the superior man sat on the throne. And yet, his father wouldn't accept the application submitted by Duke Marwick—Liedis's maternal grandfather—to change the order of inheritance.

That was because, even though he was superior to everyone, had ample mana, a special power, and stronger backing than his half brother, the law of inheritance prioritized the oldest sibling. And Sachis had said there would have to be a good reason to pervert the law.

Liedis had to continually prove his superiority over his half brother. Which was why his patience was at its limit as he was stuck at the entrance to the forest.

He'd taken a break from the Royal College and joined this hunting contest because Duke Marwick had strongly requested it. His grandfather must've wanted to take as many opportunities to display Liedis's superiority over Arcrayne as possible for the next three years, until Liedis became an adult.

"Hey, when will things be ready? My brother must be killing game as we speak," he said irritably.

No matter how outstanding Liedis was, he might not be able to win against his half brother if he didn't have enough time to search for game.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I shall accept full responsibility. Please wait a little longer," replied Lucius, bowing with a humble look on his face.

If Liedis ended up losing to Arcrayne, Lucius would surely be punished by the duke. All employees of Liedis's palace were related to Duke Marwick.

Frankly, Liedis couldn't come to like that part of his grandfather. He found it unpleasant that they could be mercilessly replaced at any moment if the duke wished so, no matter how much Liedis liked them.

Unfortunately, however, Liedis currently didn't have the authority to manage the personnel of his Aquarius Palace. His

birth mother Queen Truteliese held that right at the moment.

She was his grandfather's puppet. She couldn't oppose him, though that may have been only natural in Rosalia where women didn't have much power.

Liedis didn't hate his grandfather, who was nice to him, but as he had gotten older, the prince came to notice things about him that he didn't like. Frankly, sometimes he was bothered by how his grandfather tried to always be in control and have his way, as well as by his grandfather's nationalism.

When he became an adult, he would be less shackled by his grandfather and have more freedom. One part of it would be the authority to manage the employees of the Aquarius Palace. Liedis couldn't wait to grow up.

Hunting at these contests was generally done in pairs of hunting dogs and huntsmen; the former would drive the game toward its master, who would then shoot the prey.

As Liedis waited in annoyance, wondering when things would finally be ready, one of his palace's senior staff ran up to Lucius and whispered something in his ear.

"Your Highness," said Lucius, approaching the prince.

"Is everything finally ready?" Liedis asked.

"It is. You will not be able to find better game than the kind which shall appear before you shortly. Please use this."

Lucius handed the prince a heavy saber.



“And what am I supposed to hunt with a sword?” asked the prince after a pause.

“A dragon.”

“What?” Liedis was taken aback.

Rosalia had two dragon habitats—the Dragonbone Mountains to the north and Avalon to the west. Generally, dragons didn’t go very far from where they lived.

In extremely rare cases, a stray dragon would come to a land far away from its habitat and cause a lot of damage, but it was so uncommon that it happened once in twenty years at worst.

So how could Lucius say with certainty that a stray dragon would appear here and now? As Liedis frowned, Lucius smiled at him.

“His Grace will bring one to this forest shortly.”

There was only one person Lucius referred to as “His Grace”—Liedis’s grandfather, Duke Mircea Marwick.

“My grandfather? But how…?”

“It appears he has come into possession of an artifact that allows one to control animals at will.”

“And he wants to control a dragon with it? Where in the world did he find such an artifact…?”

“There was a long spell of rain in the north of Great Rosalia two years ago. At the time, a large-scale landslide occurred in His Grace’s domain.”

Liedis could immediately tell this was about the duchy of Limerick. This exclave was the only northern domain owned by Duke Marwick. It was a tourist destination famous for its beautiful Mirror Lake.

“The landslide apparently revealed unexplored ruins,” said Lucius.

“And that’s where that artifact was found?”

Lucius nodded.

“Even if you can control a dragon, this is absurd. Do you have any idea how scary it would be for the women waiting outside the forest if a dragon came flying here…?”

As if that weren’t enough, Liedis’s parents—the king and queen—were currently there too.

“After two years of repeated experimentation, it was concluded that using it wouldn’t be a problem. His Grace wishes you to be hailed as a slayer of dragons. He would like you to bring down a dragon in a controlled environment and become a

hero in the public's eyes." Lucius spoke passionately. "This saber may not look special at a glance, but it is a custom-made mana blade forged out of dragonbone steel. It should be able to cut a dragon's hide so long as Your Highness charges it with mana."

Dragonbone steel was a special alloy containing the bones of dragons. It was a most powerful metal, both hard and supple, and was mainly used in Dragon Slayers and military gear. Its rarity made it extremely expensive.

"As I am certain you are aware, a dragon's weak spots are its heart and the spot between its eyes."

"I know," replied the prince. "Still, while it may be controlled by an artifact, am I really supposed to fight a dragon with just a sword...?"

"My apologies. Had we prepared a Dragon Slayer ahead of time, it could have raised suspicions of a charade."

A bitter look appeared on Liedis's face.

Dragons were generally hunted with Dragon Slayers. Liedis *did* think a sword imbued with a royal's mana would be able to cut through a dragon's thick hide, but going against a dragon with just a sword was something one would expect a knight from children's stories to do. People like that only appeared in fiction. To Liedis's knowledge, even before Dragon Slayers had been developed, dragons had been hunted with bows and arrows.

To make matters worse, he was to go up against a reptile that was the strongest creature on the continent. Even if he had the help of an artifact, would things really go just as planned?

Dragon Slayers weren't carried on a daily basis, as they were both heavy and too powerful. Shooting one at a regular animal would ruin the meat. One also needed permission from the state to have such a weapon in one's possession. And it had to be used with care. It was safe to say that nobody would bring one to a hunting contest hosted by the royal family. A person might even be suspected of treason if they did.

If Liedis couldn't bring down the dragon as planned, the participants of the hunting contest would come to great harm.

Liedis had his pride as a member of royalty. He didn't like doing things in ways that posed risks to the people of Rosalia.

This was just one more reason for Liedis to doubt his grandfather.

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As Estelle and Sierra relaxed in their pavilion, things became loud outside, prompting them to look at each other. At that point Neville showed up, looking flurried.

“Lady Estelle, Lady Sierra, you must run!” he exclaimed.

“Just what is going on…?”

“There’s a stray dragon in the sky!”

At that, Estelle rushed out of the pavilion. Indeed, there was a dragon soaring high above. Its mana was plentiful, as was always the case with dragons.

The bigger the animal, the more mana it had, but dragons were on a whole different level. Perhaps their hides were so tough because of their mana.

Still, why had it appeared here of all places? Dragons generally didn’t go far from their habitats. Stray dragons were pretty rare.

The dragon was black. The color of their hides differed depending on the habitat. Since it was black, that meant it had come from the distant Dragonbone Mountains.

Dragons from the Dragonbone Mountains were smaller than those found on Avalon, but they were more mobile. They searched for prey while flying through the skies, then swooped down once they’d found a target. Their hunting style resembled that of a hawk.

Looking around, Estelle saw many women move about in confusion. Some stood in place and trembled in fear, others scrambled to get on horses and try to escape—they were acting in countless different ways.

“Over here, Lady Estelle. Sorry to trouble you, but please climb on behind me,” said Neil, approaching while leading his horse.

Estelle shook her head at that proposal, however. “It’s best not to make any careless movements when a dragon is like that,” she said.

“My Lady, this is not the time…”

“It will target you if you leave the group! That only makes it more dangerous!” she replied harshly.

Suddenly, the dragon stopped circling overhead and swooped down. It was headed straight for a woman who was trying to escape, spurring her horse on ahead of everyone else.

Estelle involuntarily looked away.

The next moment, however, she heard crackling, followed by a commotion spreading around her.

“It’s His Highness Prince Liedis!”

“He’s returned!”

Looking over, Estelle saw a boy with strawberry-blond hair standing between the woman and the dragon, releasing his mana. He was using his power. He’d formed a telekinetic barrier to protect the woman from the dragon’s descent at the last moment. Perhaps he’d managed to return from the depths of the forest before everyone else because he’d used his power of teleportation.

“Everyone, keep your heads low and slowly make your way inside the pavilions! It will increase your chances of survival if you don’t carelessly try to run away!” a dignified voice rang out. It belonged to King Sachis.

“Your Majesty! You mustn’t go alone! Please bring guards at the very least!” exclaimed the queen.

“They would only get in the way! Truteliese, form groups with the rest and lead everyone into pavilions!”

Ignoring the queen’s attempts to stop him, Sachis drew his saber and ran toward the dragon.

Seeing how the saber had mana flowing through it, Estelle could tell it was a mana blade. Most melee weapons carried by members of nobility, royalty, and the army, were mana blades.

Biting her lip in frustration, the queen began issuing orders in a strict voice. “Do as His Majesty says and take cover inside pavilions!”

“Lady Estelle, you too!” added Neil. He pulled her by the arm and forced her inside the pavilion as everyone around was panicking.

As perhaps should’ve been expected from the king, his orders had been on point.

Those living near Dragonbone Mountains immediately took shelter indoors when they saw dragons. A dragon who’d come to a human settlement wouldn’t return to the mountain until it was either sated or slain. This was why people stayed in sturdy cellars and waited patiently for the dragon to leave, sacrificing their livestock.

Hopefully, Liedis and Sachis would manage to bring the dragon down by themselves. If they couldn’t, there was a risk of quite a few people losing their lives. Dragons in early spring were particularly ferocious. In the best-case scenario, it would be

sated with just the horses left outside, but everything would depend on how hungry it was.

"Lady Estelle!" exclaimed Sierra. She clung to Estelle as soon as the latter entered the pavilion. "It'll be fine, I'm sure. His Majesty and His Highness are both Awoken. I'm certain they'll manage something."

Perhaps she was even more worried than Estelle. Estelle embraced Sierra tightly as the latter quivered.

They may be Awoken, but can they bring down a dragon without a Dragon Slayer...? wondered Estelle.

Mana-based guns condensed the user's mana and fired it as bullets. Dragon Slayers were particularly powerful among them. This was why it was considered good if an ordinary rifleman could shoot it two times. Even Sirius and Estelle—hereditary nobles—couldn't fire one more than five times a day. And if they went that far, their mana would be practically dried up afterward.

Perhaps a mana blade with a royal's mana in it could pierce a dragon's thick hide. But compared to a gun, a blade's reach was too short.

Something was a little strange about the flow of that dragon's mana too, noted Estelle. She couldn't say for sure because she'd only caught a glimpse of it, but it had felt like its mana had been concentrated between its eyebrows. *Normally a creature's mana is only concentrated at its heart...*

Estelle had a terrible premonition.

"Neil, stay here and guard Lady Estelle."

Neville's words suddenly brought Estelle back from her thoughts to reality.

"What're you talking about, Neville?! Don't tell me you want to go outside," Neil lashed out.

"We Royal Guards can't be standing around doing nothing while His Majesty and His Highness are putting their lives on the line," Neville replied calmly.

He was probably intent on standing in front of the dragon as a human shield, should worse come to worst. Estelle could tell painfully well how determined he was.

Arcrayne had assigned more guards to Estelle today, but there was no sign of them coming to the pavilion. Were they outside, having prepared themselves for the worst like Neville had?

Pulling away from Sierra, who was still clinging to her, Estelle

looked up at Neville. “Neville, you will only get in the way if you simply go out like that. His Majesty warned against it too.”

“But I can become its food at the very least. Correct me if I’m wrong, but stray dragons leave once they’ve sated their appetites.”

“I suppose…”

At this time of the year, however, dragons were particularly ferocious as they’d just woken up from hibernation. Not only were they hungry, but they also liked to stuff themselves with food in preparation for the breeding season from spring to early summer. The dragon had surely devoured a lot of “food” on its way here too.

Taking a deep breath, Estelle gave Neville a serious look. “Are you prepared to sacrifice an arm?”

“What do you mean?” Neville knitted his brows.

Estelle took her favorite mana pistol out of the holster on her hip. “Take this pistol if you’re prepared. Callisto’s guns have a single-use feature that allows them to fire a shot as powerful as that of a Dragon Slayer.”

Callisto was a gun manufacturer with its headquarters in the earldom of Flozeth. Some models of Callisto’s mana-based guns had a gimmick that allowed those living near Dragonbone Mountains to protect themselves.

“Are you saying its limiter can be removed?” asked Neville, to which Estelle nodded.

Limiters were parts of mana-based guns that tuned the power of each bullet. Depending on what the gun was meant to be used for, the requirements for firepower were different. Shooting a bullet that was too powerful would be too much for an ordinary mana-based gun to handle, and it would break. Limiters were installed to prevent that from happening.

To make the gun barrel strong enough not to break upon firing powerful bullets, Dragon Slayers were made out of dragonbone steel. Considering the costs, however, one couldn’t use dragonbone steel so easily.

“Removing the limiter will allow you to make one extremely powerful shot,” explained Estelle. “But it will be sure to break the gun. And depending on *how* it breaks…”

“It might badly injure my hand?” Neville finished Estelle’s sentence.

Removing the limiter was a last resort meant for encounters

with dragons when one didn't have a Dragon Slayer on hand. The resolve required for it was close to what would be necessary for a suicide attack.

"May I have that gun, Lady Estelle? An arm is a small price to pay for protecting everyone," said Neville.

Estelle thought for a moment. "Very well. But mind the range—this pistol doesn't shoot very far."

What Estelle had was a small mana pistol for self-defense. Its effective range was about twenty meters at most.

"It's much preferable to going out there empty-handed," Neville said firmly.

Nodding, Estelle began to remove the limiter. Removing a pin holding her hair, she stuck the tip into a part of the gun close to the trigger. This was the limiter. On this pistol, it was possible to remove it through a prescribed procedure. One had to push in something pointed, and pull it downward.

With a click, the limiter came off.

The next moment, however, a dreadful roar came from the outside. Immediately afterward, something forcefully collided with the pavilion. The beams supporting the pavilion severely bent out of shape.

"Lady Estelle!" exclaimed Neville, who was the closest to her. He pushed her away.

A beam was falling in their direction, dragging the fabric of the pavilion down with it. To Estelle, the motion of it looked awfully slow.

A woman's piercing cry came from nearby. Was it Sierra's voice?

Estelle heard creaking and a roar before a cloud of dust blocked her vision...

***

Faced with the dragon who'd come flying to the outside of the forest, Liedis clicked his tongue and lamented inwardly.

So much for controlling it with that artifact, he thought to himself.

Liedis had seen the dragon target the woman running away, so he'd used his teleportation to get between them, at which point the dragon had switched its target to the prince.

There was nothing to suggest the dragon's strength was

being kept in check.

Roaring up at the sky, it charged Liedis. The prince formed a barrier with telekinesis and somehow managed to land a hit between the dragon's eyebrows with his saber while protecting himself, but the area proved abnormally tough and repelled the attack. All despite the fact he'd poured mana into his saber made out of dragonbone steel.

Thinking he might not have put enough mana in it, he poured in a higher amount before the next attack, but the result was the same.

That was when Liedis realized something was strange here. Looking closely at the forehead of the pitch-black dragon, he noticed an object embedded into it with a mana stone attached —it looked like an artifact. A strange silver light was emanating from it.

Dragons were said to be over three meters in height—over six with their wings spread. They were bigger than elephants, which were rare animals found in Gandia. Dragons' attacks were fierce and powerful.

Damn it, Liedis cursed inwardly. He couldn't keep defending against the dragon's charges forever. Cold sweat trickled down his back.

Running wasn't an option for him, however. He had his pride as a member of royalty. There were helpless noblewomen in this place. His pride wouldn't allow him to abandon them.

"Liedis! If the spot between the eyebrows doesn't work, go for the heart!" came Sachis's voice from the other side of the dragon.

Seeing his father run this way with his saber drawn, the prince opened his eyes wide.

"Father! Please return to the pavilions!"

"You fool! What do you think we royals have our powers for?!"

Sachis was supposed to be unwell today, having refrained from hunting. He'd previously come down with an illness around this time a year ago. Liedis was worried about him; people had been talking among themselves ever since that the king might still be in poor health.

Defending against the dragon's charge ended up easier on the prince this time—perhaps Sachis had used telekinesis.

"I'll keep it in check, and you go for the heart!" shouted the king.

“Understood!” replied Liedis.

The fight would be less mentally taxing on the prince if he didn’t have to worry about defending himself. Pouring mana into his saber, he closed the distance on the rampaging dragon and thrust the blade into its torso.

“GRAAAAAAAAR!” came a ground-shaking roar.

Pulling his saber out, Liedis jumped back and saw red blood gush from the dragon’s torso.

Is this it? he wondered.

As he looked on, his eyes met those of the dragon. He found its amber eyes beautiful, despite the situation. The next moment, however, they turned crimson.

It went berserk.

Upon being wounded, dragons would sometimes lose all reason and go on a rampage until they destroyed everything around them. This state was known as “going berserk”—it was indicated by the change in the color of their eyes.

The dragon raised its foreleg toward Liedis.

This is bad. I can’t defend with my telekinesis in time.

The moment he prepared for the worst, he heard crackling, and the dragon’s claws stopped just short of him.

Sachis had protected him with his telekinesis.

The telekinetic barrier lasted only a few seconds, however. A cracking sound could be heard, and then the foreleg came down again.

Liedis leaped backward and dodged it, then formed a telekinetic barrier between himself and the dragon.

“Ghah…”

Hearing violent coughing behind him, the prince turned around and saw Sachis collapsed in a heap. He covered his mouth and coughed, and when his hand came away, there was fresh blood on it.

“Father!”

The distraction proved to be his downfall. As Liedis’s telekinetic barrier grew weaker, the dragon’s foreleg came down on him again. He attempted to reinforce the barrier…

“Kgh!”

Something—probably the dragon’s leg—hit the prince, and he found himself flying through the air. In the midst of his

consciousness fading from the pain, Liedis cursed himself for leaving an opening.

***

What in the world had happened? Estelle couldn't tell.

What was certain, however, was that the pavilion had collapsed from a powerful impact.

Fortunately, Estelle was unhurt. She'd felt something on her chest burst right after Neville had pushed her away, so her "good-luck charm" must've protected her.

However, Neville himself was buried under the pavilion's fallen metal beams.

Sierra, May, Neil... Estelle couldn't see anyone else who'd been in the pavilion with her. They'd probably been buried under the collapsed pavilion. There was supposed to be a coach near the pavilion—the one Estelle had come here in—as well as guardsmen's horses...

But there was no time to check what state anyone was in.

The dragon was right in front of Estelle's eyes. On top of that, it was in a berserk state. Estelle went pale at the sight of its bloodshot eyes. Red blood was gushing from the chest of the pitch-black dragon.

Estelle understood the situation in an instant. It had been wounded. And attacks on the spot between its eyebrows must've failed.

Her power let her see the silver mana swirling around the spot between the dragon's eyebrows. It resembled Arcrayne's telekinetic barriers, as well as the silver light emitted by mana-based items upon activation.

Whoever attacked the dragon in the chest must've gone for the heart because attacks on the spot between its eyebrows hadn't worked. The dragon's heart was in a different area, however.

It depended on the angle when you were facing the dragon, but it was difficult even for experienced riflemen to target the heart precisely. Normally a headshot on the spot between the eyes would secure the kill, but in situations where there was no choice but to aim for the heart, several riflemen would shoot the torso at once.

Estelle's eyes could *see it,* however. The heart was the source of mana in any creature, and it glowed with much brighter silver

light than everything else.

That wound must've been left by either Liedis or Sachis. Estelle couldn't see either of them. Had they, perhaps, already…?

Estelle stopped her thoughts as the situation took a turn for the worse—her eyes met those of the dragon.

If a dragon which had gone berserk set its sights on you, you were done for. The speed of a dragon's flight was said to rival that of mana locomotives.

In Estelle's hands was her favorite mana pistol with its limiter removed. But she was paralyzed with fear.

"GRAR!"

With a short roar, the dragon charged. Estelle had to shoot, or she would die. And yet…

Prepared for death, Estelle closed her eyes.

The pain and impact she expected never came, however.

"GARRR…" came a growl, along with the sound of sparks.

Slowly opening her eyes, Estelle saw a mana barrier deployed in front of her like a shield separating her and the dragon.

"Don't…touch her…"

Turning toward the voice, Estelle saw a battered Liedis, rising up from underneath the fabric of the collapsed pavilion and extending his hand this way while releasing mana. It appeared that the mana barrier had come from Liedis's power.

"Run, Lady Estelle, quick… I can't keep it up for long…"

She knew that much. Estelle could see that the prince's mana was nearly depleted.

Estelle prepared herself. If she didn't kill the dragon here and now, who knew how many people in this place would lose their lives?

Even if she lost her hand as a result.

Estelle gripped her favorite mana pistol firmly with both hands. She aimed it at the heart of the roaring dragon as it clawed persistently at the mana barrier.

It's all right. I can do this.

Estelle could tell the exact location of the heart, and there was no risk of her missing at this range.

Putting all the mana she had into the pistol, Estelle pulled the trigger.

Chapter 8: Cracks

Estelle's body wobbled.

There was what seemed to be a cushion under her head, but whatever she felt against her whole back was awfully hard. It was as though someone had laid her down directly on a wooden floor. On top of that, said floor shook constantly, forcing her to put up with the vibrations.

It hurt all over. Estelle's left hand hurt particularly badly. She must've hurt it when shooting at the dragon because she'd put it over her right one, holding the mana pistol with both hands to improve aim.

The dragon.

That's right, I shot a dragon, recalled Estelle. And when she'd pulled the trigger, the recoil had been so terrible that it had sent her flying backward.

She didn't remember anything after that, so she'd probably lost consciousness from the impact.

Estelle slowly opened her eyes, at which point a white cloth roof came into view. Its rounded shape, the sound of hoof steps outside, and the vibration she felt made Estelle realize she was in a covered wagon.

"Ngh..." Estelle groaned as she tried to move and it hurt badly.

Then, May's face appeared before her. "Lady Estelle, you're awake! I'm so glad..."

She looked terribly haggard. Unusually for someone as typically calm as her, she had tears in her eyes.

"You're alive... Are you hurt...?" asked Estelle.

"I'm all right. It's all thanks to you bringing down that dragon..."

"So it worked..." Estelle quietly uttered, feeling relieved.

As May nodded, tears began to stream from her eyes. "I couldn't do anything—just like back then..."

"It was a dragon... What could you d—"

Estelle began to cough as she spoke. May hurriedly raised Estelle to a half-sitting position and brought a flask to her

mouth. The mana-based flask retained heat, and it had tea in it, which was appropriately warm.

"I-It's okay now," said Estelle once her throat was no longer parched.

May carefully laid Estelle's head on the cushion, returning her to her previous position.

"The shaking bothers you, doesn't it?" said May. "My apologies. The coach we took to the forest has broken, so we could only arrange a wagon like this..."

Estelle shook her head. It was true that her back and her buttocks hurt, but she was grateful to get to lie down at all as she was being transported.

Having finally calmed down a little, she took a closer look at May and saw she was battered. There were bandages on her head and arms, making Estelle realize she'd lied about being unhurt.

"What about everyone else?" asked Estelle, afraid as she was that she might not get a truthful answer to this question.

"Out of those who were with us in the pavilion, Neville was hurt badly. I still don't know the extent of his injuries... As for the rest...Neil and Lady Sierra have light injuries."

"And His Highness Prince Liedis...?"

"I saw His Highness carried out on a stretcher, but I don't know how badly he was hurt... He *was* fully conscious, however. His Highness is a member of royalty, so I'm sure he'll recover right away."

"I suppose so. He *is* royalty."

He had the same astounding capacity for regeneration as Arcrayne.

"I never expected him to save me," added Estelle.

She'd managed to shoot the dragon's heart because Liedis had protected her with his power. Had it not been for that telekinetic barrier, she wouldn't have had the chance to take aim.

A memory of him hurting May appeared at the back of Estelle's mind. May herself had a faint smile on her face, as though she didn't particularly care about what he'd done to her.

"I don't know His Highness's thought process, but we were saved as a result," uttered May. "You were able to shoot the dragon because he protected you, which saved the rest of us too."

It was just as she said. Estelle nodded.

“What about the other participants? Were they all right?” asked Estelle.

“I don’t know. Our pavilion wasn’t the only one that collapsed… Fortunately, nobody died at the pavilion of the Libra Palace, but I can’t speak for the rest.”

“I see…”

“When His Highness Prince Arcrayne returned from the forest, he got right down to bringing the situation under control. His Majesty collapsed and Her Majesty was terrified…”

It was true that, in such a situation, only Arcrayne could take command.

“His Highness asked me to tell you he’s sorry he couldn’t be by your side.”

“Nothing can be done about that, considering his position.” Estelle smiled limply.

It was a little sad not to have him there with her, but when she thought how, in the earldom of Flozeth, her brother would be the one swamped with work in situations like this, she could accept it.

“What happened to my hand…?” asked Estelle, looking over to her badly aching left hand.

It was covered in white bandages from her fingertips to the wrist, so she couldn’t tell what was going on underneath.

There was throbbing pain in her head too. This was probably a symptom of her mana being depleted.

“When you shot the dragon, the gun barrel broke, and numerous fragments were lodged into your hand,” explained May. “You’ve only received first aid for now, so a doctor will have to look at it to tell you more. The doctor who’d come to the hunting contest couldn’t spare the time…”

“He’d have to prioritize those with more grave injuries,” replied Estelle with a smile.

May’s expression remained dark, however.

“When the pavilion collapsed, it felt like something burst on my chest. Is my ‘good-luck charm’ undamaged?”

“No, there’s a crack… Would you like to see it?”

Estelle nodded.

“Excuse me.”

With that preamble, May removed the brooch from the chest area of Estelle’s dress and showed it to her. Both the decoration and the bezel indeed had small cracks in them.

“Good thing the cameo was changed…” said Estelle.

This mana-based brooch belonged to the late Miriallia. The cameo had been swapped to a nacre of rather low value. Arcrayne had given it to Estelle, prefacing it with “even if it does its job and breaks, you don’t have to worry.”

“Lady Estelle… I must tell you that this brooch wasn’t the only thing that broke…”

Tears spilled from May’s eyes again, causing Estelle’s own eyes to widen.

“What’s the matter, May…?”

“Y-Your ring… There are cracks in it… The mana-based one is undamaged, but the wedding ring…”

Trembling, May took out a handkerchief from a pocket of her work uniform. The handkerchief seemed to be wrapped around something. May carefully unfolded it, taking out the rhodolite garden ring from the inside.

The stone and the metal base both had large cracks in them. Estelle always wore it, so the fragments of the broken mana pistol must’ve hit it.



“It will probably have to be recut…” said May.

“It’s sad, but there’s no helping this either… I should be grateful I’m still alive.”

Estelle thought she felt that way from the bottom of her heart, and yet…

Tears spilled from her eyes.

***

When Estelle next woke up, what came into her view was the ceiling of her personal bedroom in the Libra Palace.

The last thing she remembered was being carried in a wagon, but her head had hurt badly from her mana running dry, so apparently she’d lost consciousness at some point.

The headache was gone now, but Estelle’s whole body felt a little hot.

Getting hurt led to a fever. It had been that way when Estelle’s left arm had been shot, and the same had been true for Arcrayne when he’d been badly wounded.

She’d probably been taken to her personal bedroom and not the shared one because of her condition.

I wonder how long I slept… thought Estelle. It was bright around her, so clearly it was daytime. She looked around the room to try to check the clock, then opened her eyes wide when she saw Arcrayne napping in the chair placed right by her bed.

Over the two and a half months they’d spent together since Estelle had come to the palace, she’d never seen his sleeping face until now. He had trouble falling asleep and woke up early. On top of that, he would immediately wake up from the slightest sound.

The man himself had said he was a light sleeper by nature, but putting together everything Estelle had heard from the employees of the Libra Palace, he’d apparently become that way due to having been targeted by assassins from a young age.

Judging by the fact he didn’t wake up even when Estelle sat up in bed and stared at him, he must’ve been considerably tired. His face, shapely like a sculpture, looked somewhat emaciated.

When did he even get back? wondered Estelle. She couldn’t imagine one or two days would’ve been enough to take care of the aftermath of everything that had happened. A worried look appeared on Estelle’s face.

Her head felt heavy and sluggish—perhaps she’d slept too

much—but her body didn't hurt nearly as badly compared to when she'd been carried in a wagon. There was still throbbing pain in her left hand, but now her back and buttocks only hurt if she pressed on them.

Softly lifting the hem of her nightwear to check the parts that hurt, Estelle saw that quite a large area was covered in bruises. She remembered the mana pistol's recoil sending her flying back with considerable momentum, so that must've been from when she'd hit something. Even she herself found those dark red areas repulsive.

She couldn't show those to Arcrayne until they healed. Even at the best of times, she wasn't as beautiful as him. Estelle absolutely hated the idea of him seeing her body when it was covered in such unsightly bruises.

With a light sigh, Estelle turned to look at Arcrayne again. His body would hurt later if he had a nap like this.

Suddenly, Estelle recalled how he'd told her to lie down and get some sleep when she'd looked after him. As she thought how, back then, he might've felt the same way she felt now, a smile appeared on her face.

"Lord Arc," she said, extending her fingers on her less-injured right hand.

The prince's eyes snapped open. He grabbed Estelle's arm and pushed her down on the bed a moment later. His deep blue eyes, fiery like those of an animal, shot right through her. Immediately after, however, they opened wide in surprise.

"Es…telle…?"

"Yes."

As Estelle gave her reply, Arcrayne hurriedly pulled away from her and returned to the chair.

"Sorry, I thought someone came for my life, so I did that on reflex… Did it hurt?"

"Worry not. *I* should be the one apologizing for touching you all of a sudden."

In reality, it *had* hurt like her body had been creaking, but Estelle lied on the spot. She'd surely hurt him if she said the truth.

"It's not your fault. It's just…" Arcrayne's face contorted in pain. "I'm glad you woke up…"

It was almost like he was crying and smiling at the same time. Estelle was taken aback by the sight.

“Did I sleep that long…?” she asked.

“For about two full days. I was worried since I heard you weren’t waking up at all.”

At Arcrayne’s words, Estelle hurriedly checked the clock on the wall and saw the hour hand point at just past ten.

“How do you feel?” asked the prince.

“Some places hurt and I feel sluggish, but it could be much worse.”

Estelle suspected it had a lot to do with the fact almost all of her mana had recovered from being depleted.

“When did you return?” she asked.

“Today. Around dawn, I guess. I’m tired since I had Azure galloping under me all night.”

“Why did you push yourself so hard…?”

“Because I was worried about what was going on here—what else? It’s not like I’ve dealt with all the aftermath already, so things will probably remain busy for a while. I’ve done all that needed doing on-site, though. I’m sorry I couldn’t come running to you right away.”

“Please, Lord Arc! I understand your position!” replied Estelle in a fluster.

Had he abandoned everything and come running to her despite being the first prince, she might’ve felt contempt for him instead.

“You’re *really* understanding,” said Arcrayne after a pause. Closing his eyes, he heaved a deep sigh.

“Um… Would you mind letting me know how things have been while I was asleep? For example, how badly Neville is hurt…” Estelle asked timidly.

Lifting his face, the prince turned to look at Estelle again. With a preamble that he’d stop early if Estelle felt unwell, he started telling her various things he knew at the moment.

Neville had broken bones in his waist and legs and was currently in the hospital. It was unclear if they’d return to their previous state even after fully healing, but Neville himself seemed to be motivated. If going back to being a Royal Guard proved difficult, he was apparently going to be assigned to instruct the younger generations of guards.

Neil and May, who’d been lightly injured, had already returned to their posts in the palace. Sierra too had returned to the

Rogells' town house.

Liedis had survived and was currently recuperating in his Aquarius Palace. Arcrayne's face clouded over when he talked about his half brother.

"I think he saved you because he felt the need to protect Rosalians as a member of royalty," said the prince.

"Does that not apply to May too…?"

"Apparently he told father that he 'just gave her a fright.' I don't know what goes on inside that head of his, but maybe he thought that if it's someone serving me, he can hurt them just a little."

On the subject of how Liedis had tried to harm May in the garden of the Libra Palace, Arcrayne heaved a sigh.

"From what I hear about his behavior at the Royal College, he's apparently kind to his juniors, despite everything, and they're fond of him in return. So I don't think he's rotten to the core, but considering his maternal grandfather, who sticks so closely to him…"

Liedis's maternal grandfather Duke Marwick was, for better or worse, a typical nobleman. He was the younger brother of the previous king—Arcrayne's grandfather. He gave off the impression of an obstinate, old-fashioned old man. He was particularly famous for his nationalism and his hatred of immigrants.

So it's not as though Lord Arc completely hates His Highness Prince Liedis… thought Estelle. He approved of some things about Liedis, and maybe that was why he wasn't attached to the idea of taking the throne.

Estelle thought of how serious Arcrayne was when taking care of his daily public duties at the Libra Palace. To Estelle, it looked like Arcrayne had a proper sense of responsibility too, as a member of royalty. And he didn't seem the type to cast it away lightly.

Perhaps he thought it might be best to step aside in Liedis's favor because the latter could still grow up to be a better man.

Sitting deep in the chair, Arcrayne heaved a large sigh, then began talking about his father's health.

"My father hadn't fully recovered from his cold to begin with, and he forced himself to use his power. Officially, this worsened his condition, but I don't really know the whole picture."

Apparently the prince had been to see him first thing that morning, in order to make his report but hadn't received a clear answer.

And as for the damage caused by the dragon, there seemed to have been deaths, unfortunately.

"This is why I was unable to return until this morning. Mrs. Poulett and her maid perished when they were buried under a collapsed canopy."

Two had died, but more had been injured. Since there had been casualties at an event hosted by the royal family, visits to the bereaved families would have to be made and condolence money paid out—those duties had fallen on Arcrayne's shoulders due to Sachis announcing his need for recuperation.

"Father said it's nothing major and he'll recover right away... I guess I have no choice but to believe that." Arcrayne sighed for the umpteenth time.

For a violent incident with a stray dragon—and one which had gone berserk, at that—the damage done was low, but it pained Estelle to think that some had died.

"Stray dragons are like a natural disaster... But to think one would come so far south..." uttered Estelle.

"No. There was nothing natural about that. It was intentional."

"Huh...?" Estelle's eyes widened.

"There was what appeared to be a component of an artifact embedded in its forehead."

The prince's words made Estelle recall something like a mana barrier that she'd seen on the dragon's head.

"Since it was a black dragon, it came from Dragonbone Mountains, yes? Could an artifact control it over such a long distance...?"

Estelle went silent as she spoke. Though there were few of them, there certainly were powerful artifacts out there which made the impossible possible.

"Whoever it was targeted a hunting contest hosted by the royal family. It might be underground organizations or secret societies plotting to overthrow the state. I'm investigating the matter with those as the chief possibilities." Arcrayne looked melancholic as he spoke.

"I cannot imagine someone would try to overthrow the state... We owe our civilized lives to the royal family..."

Rosalia, Franciel, Ascania, Iberes—almost all the royalty of

various countries lying in the western part of the Heredian continent were said to be the descendants of the royal family of Ancient La Tène.

Its lineage was special. Many of the artifacts passed down in each royal family only reacted to the royals' mana. It was widely known that these artifacts included water filtration devices that were the cornerstone of water and sewer services.

In the first place, commoners and nobles were born with different amounts of mana. Mana-based items and artifacts were necessary to lead civilized lives. Due to their power, one needed sufficiently high amounts of mana to use them effectively.

One could say royalty and titled nobility ruled their country as statesmen in order to share the benefits of mana with those who had little of it.

"People hold different beliefs," replied the prince. "I'll thoroughly investigate who's behind this, so I want you to focus on recovering. Thank you for what you did. I shudder to think of the damage that could've been caused had you not been there..."

Despite his cloudy expression, a smile appeared on his face. Then it looked like something had just occurred to him.

"I forgot to mention... We went fully public with the incident, not hiding anything. That includes *who* slew the dragon... There were too many witnesses, so there was no way of imposing a gag order..."

Arcrayne looked somewhat awkward. Estelle tilted her head, not understanding what he was getting at.

"You're being lauded in the papers right now—as the one who did the most to bring down that dragon."

Estelle finally understood.

"I shot the dragon, yes, but that was thanks to His Highness Prince Liedis protecting me."

"They're making a grand story out of the whole thing. 'Two people who were believed to be political enemies joined forces to bring down a dragon.' Saint Estelle, Dragon Exterminator; the Lady Who Took Down the Beast; Princess Dragon Slayer—different papers are giving you different titles, but you're getting the hero treatment in every single one of them."

Cold sweat trickled down Estelle's back. As a woman, Estelle couldn't simply be happy about such fame.

"No doubt people will call me a savage or a barbarian..." Estelle quietly said with a sigh.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t keep things from going public…”

“Do not worry…” Estelle gave the matter some thought. After some silence, she spoke up. “Please *use* those merits too. I care not what people say behind my back if it can help you.”

“I understand,” replied the prince after a moment of hesitation, which felt like a sign of internal conflict. “In fact, my father has expressed an interest in awarding you a medal—the Rosalian Cross.”

“What…?”

Estelle was surprised. The Rosalian Cross was awarded for contributions to the state. It could be given for many things, but was a high honor nonetheless.

“Though even if we accept his offer, it won’t be until the end of the year until you actually get the medal. But if you *do* get it, it will be highly advantageous to me,” replied Arcrayne, then added, “I was told it was time I prepared myself.”

“You mean, to become crown prince…?”

“Pretty much. It will put me in open conflict with the queen and Duke Marwick.” Arcrayne sighed.

If he resolved himself to that fate, Estelle would have to prepare herself for the worst too.

The crown, the key, the quill, the holy sword—bearing the four regalia, he would surely look dazzling at his coronation. But if it came to that, Estelle would also have to wear sapphire jewelry passed down through generations of queens, known as the Queen’s Blue.

The queen was her country’s mother. Frankly, Estelle found such a position to be a heavy burden. But since she’d decided to stand by Arcrayne’s side, she would have to carry that burden.

“I shall leave it to you to decide whether I should receive a medal or not,” said Estelle. “My apologies if it sounds as though I wish to simply leave all of this up to you.”

“No, that helps, honestly. I want some more time to think about it,” replied the prince.

A calm smile appeared on Estelle’s face. No matter what decision Arcrayne came to, she would only support him.

“Lastly… About that left hand,” began Arcrayne, seeming to find it hard to say.

At that, Estelle cast her eyes to her bandaged left hand. She

then recalled that she still didn't know the state of her injury.

If she tried to move the hand even a little bit, it hurt terribly. Her fingers hurt particularly badly from the middle joint to the knuckle. They must've been cut up by the fragments of the broken pistol because they'd been the closest to the muzzle when she'd held the weapon with both hands.

"Will I be able to move this hand in the future...?"

Arcrayne's eyes widened at Estelle's question. He immediately gave a firm reply. "You *should* be able to. Luckily, the tendons weren't damaged, from what I was told. It might feel like something is wrong with it for a while, but with training, I'm sure you'll be able to move it like before."

"Will it leave a scar?" Estelle asked after a moment's pause.

"Well... It's likely."

"Of course it would be... I was prepared for it."

Estelle tried to smile, but failed. The muscles in her face went stiff.

"You should be able to make the scar somewhat smaller if you direct your mana into the wound as it heals. But even if it does leave a scar, it's not like I would see any less value in you, so please don't depreciate yourself."

"I am well aware... I know I should be glad to be still alive."

This time she managed to make a proper smile. Arcrayne looked like he was enduring something, then placed his hand on the fingertips of Estelle's left hand.

"Let's remake the cracked ring," he said. "May actually scolded me after I gave you the last one. Said you and I should've made it together."

"Um, I was happy, though. I liked the design..."

A smile—a genuine one this time—appeared on Estelle's face as she recalled how Arcrayne had looked when he'd given her that ring.

"I'd like you to think about what kind of ring you want. I can't give you something better than other Rosalian princesses and queens have had, but I'll fulfill any other request to the best of my ability."

"I suppose so. If I wore a ring more luxurious than that of Her Majesty, she would surely glare at me."

Still smiling, Estelle gazed at her fingertips with Arcrayne's hand over them.

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Perhaps owing to the fact she'd had a good sleep, come the next day, Estelle felt well enough to get out of bed.

That said, her back and buttocks still hurt, and the bandages on her left hand remained, so she'd been told to stay in her room.

"Lady Estelle, I've brought Snow!"

Since Estelle couldn't use her left hand, the only activity she could come up with was reading. Amid her boredom, Leah showed up with Snow, whom she'd kidnapped... That is, brought in a basket from the cat's room.

The white cat with eyes like blue glass beads nimbly got out of the basket and came close to Estelle as she sat on the couch. Looking curious about the bandage on Estelle's left hand, she brought her face to it, nose twitching. Then she made a face that said, "It stinks!" and ran away.

"Does it really stink that much...?" asked Estelle.

"She probably found the smell of the medicine on your fingers irritating... Ah, hey!"

Leah shouted at Snow when the latter stretched and began to sharpen her claws on the carpet.

"No need to get angry at her, we can just buy a new carpet. Let her do as she likes," said Estelle.

Snow appeared to be fond of how it felt to scratch her claws on cloth, which was why she sharpened them on carpets and upholstered couches. She didn't seem to like wood, so she didn't show any interest in wooden furniture or columns. It felt like Snow was the good kind of cat.

Perhaps having had her fill of scratching, Snow looked around herself, then began exploring Estelle's room.

Estelle found it amazing how animals could heal your soul just by being there because of how adorable they were. The cat was simply walking around, but she was really cute. Estelle even wanted to keep Snow in this room, but unfortunately, she'd have to return the cat to hers at some point because this one didn't have any of Snow's things.

Leah had brought a ribbon toy she'd made for Snow. Estelle took it in her right hand and waved it around, which immediately piqued the cat's interest.

As Estelle sat on the couch and played with Snow, May came

rushing into the room, looking panicked.

"Lady Estelle, we have a situation! Lord Sirius is here!"

Estelle was amazed by the news.

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Ever since the public had been informed of the incident with the stray dragon without anything being covered up, Rosalia had been in an uproar.

As Estelle herself had seen in several of the quality papers to which the Libra Palace was subscribed, all the newspapers seemed convinced that the incident had been the work of radical groups looking to overthrow the state.

The government had stated it would not submit to extremists. Putting its prestige at stake, it announced it would catch those responsible.

As for Estelle herself... Rather embarrassingly, the papers had been waxing poetically about her. It made her back itch and she couldn't bring herself to read to the end. Recently, the papers had settled on Princess Dragon Exterminator for Estelle's nickname. Not that she was a princess yet, since her wedding was still in the future...

Sirius appeared to have seen those articles and made his way to Albion in great haste from his earldom on a mana locomotive. While it was a visit with no prior notice, it made sense given the circumstances. He'd been let into the parlor for the time being, but then it was decided that Estelle probably wouldn't mind if he came to her room, as he was her blood relative.

Estelle didn't want Snow to be stressed out at the sight of a stranger. Passing like ships in the night, the white cat was returned to her room, and in came Sirius—tears budded in his eyes when he saw Estelle.

"I'm so glad you're in one piece..." he said. "When I heard you'd been hurt in a dragon attack, I just couldn't sit still..."

"I do have terrible bruises and a bad injury on my hand, but I got away with just that."

Sirius had seen the horrific sight of bodies mangled by dragons countless times. He heaved a deep sigh of exhaustion.

"Please, sit down, brother. I'm happy you've come running to me, but what of the dragon-hunting?"

"Since the thaw came early, we won't be able to continue hunting them in their lairs for long. I've asked Earl Léger to give

us aid if something happens, just in case."

Earl Léger was the lord of a domain neighboring Flozeth, which similarly had Dragonbone Mountains on its territory. Heidi, the woman who would inherit the Léger earldom, was also a childhood friend of the Flozeth siblings.

Sirius must've contacted only Earl Léger about this because the Flozeths' relations with their neighbors to the south, the Wyntias, had been severed. Estelle's former fiancé Lyle had turned to drugs and caused trouble to House Léger too, so the Wyntias were on their own at the moment.

"By the way, the papers say you're the one who killed that dragon..."

Sirius's question brought Estelle back from her thoughts about House Wyntia.

"That they do," she replied.

"Is it true?"

"It is. Though I only managed it because His Highness Prince Liedis protected me."

At that, Sirius sat back on the couch and hung his head. Estelle wondered if he was going to scold her for unladylike behavior. Her brother's mana was slightly dark.

"Um... Brother... Are you angry...?" she asked timidly, unable to put up with the silence.

Sirius shook his head. "Quite the opposite—you did well. That is the way of Flozeth's women... I just feel conflicted as your brother. After all, my sister ended up in danger..."

He gave Estelle a worried look.

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"Any progress on your search for a wife, brother? Have you found anybody who seems nice?"

"Still considering various options—with His Highness's help too. I'd rather hear what happened to the corpse of that dragon you killed, though."

"The Royal Mana Engineering Research Institute bought it to investigate and research it. Somebody offered a reward for it, but I refused, asking that person to use the money for the bereaved families and the injured."

"That's pretty considerate, for you. Was it His Highness's idea?"

"Rude. It was my own."

"Huh... Guess you've grown up too, mm? Was it thanks to your

education as a princess?”

“Why are most things you say so rude, brother...?”

As Estelle and Sirius told each other about the recent happenings in their lives, Arcrayne returned to the palace. Apparently he’d come in a hurry after learning of Sirius’s visit.

Upon entering Estelle’s room and seeing her brother, the prince bowed deeply.

“I’m sorry for breaking my promise to treasure Estelle and letting her get hurt badly enough to leave a scar,” he said.

Seeing that, Sirius and Estelle both gaped.

“Your Highness! A member of royalty must not lower his head so easily!” said Sirius, the first of the two to recover from stupefaction. Hurriedly getting up from the couch, he ran up to Arcrayne in a fluster. “Please raise your face, Your Highness. I have not come here to lay blame on you.”

“Precisely! He simply came here to check up on me!” added Estelle.

“I have heard about the wound on her left hand. I do not think it could have been avoided. In fact, I even praised her for doing well.”

With all that said to him, Arcrayne finally raised his head.

“I couldn’t make it in time because I was deep in the forest. If I had the power of teleportation, like Liedis...” There was remorse in the prince’s voice.

“Your Highness, have you ever seen a dragon hunt in progress?” asked Sirius.

“No, I’ve never had the chance.”

“It overlaps with the Season, so I imagine you are busy during that time, but please come see it once. When you do, I think you will understand just how lucky Estelle was. I suppose this time she was able to take her time and aim at the heart thanks to His Highness Prince Liedis protecting her with his power, but normally, dragon hunts are much more brutal.” Unlike his usual self, Sirius had the face of a feudal lord at this moment.

“I’ll make time and be sure to visit.” Arcrayne too replied with the face of the first prince, prompting a relaxed smile out of Sirius.

“I am looking forward to it. And I wanted to update you on the progress of that venture we talked about.”

Venture...? wondered Estelle, tilting her head.

Sirius explained. “His Highness has proposed a new venture to me. Apparently, a way to make sugar out of sugar beets has been developed in a research facility that enjoys His Highness’s support.”

Sugar beets were widely grown on pastures in the north of Great Rosalia.

“Sugar out of sugar beets…?” asked Estelle, a frown on her face.

It was Arcrayne’s turn to explain. “It’s been known for a long time that sweet liquid comes out of the root of sugar beet, but one researcher found out that it has the same composition as the sugar we get from sugarcanes. They say the technology to make sugar out of it has finally reached the level of practical use, so I’ve suggested the earldom of Flozeth as the location for the factory.”

Sugar was expensive, as it had to be imported from southern countries. Making it out of sugar beet was a major business opportunity, as long as it was successful.

“How much profit would it make…?” asked Estelle.

“I can show you the business plan if you’re curious, though I’m not sure you’d understand it…” uttered Sirius as though making fun of Estelle.

She was at a loss for words.

“Factory accounting might be a bit difficult for Estelle,” said the prince. “She would need to know accounting on a somewhat high level. Though if you’re curious, I can arrange an accounting teacher for you.”

“No need, thank you,” she replied without a moment’s delay.

Estelle hated the idea of having even more classes than she did at the moment. And right now, there were more important things for her to learn than high-level accounting.

Seeing how she’d rejected the whole idea out of hand, Sirius laughed.

As soon as Arcrayne and Estelle’s marriage had been decided, the prince had sent modern Dragon Slayers to the earldom of Flozeth. However, that hadn’t been the only grace Sirius had received from him.

Estelle gazed at the profiles of her brother and fiancé, who began discussing a difficult topic.

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Meanwhile…

After confronting a dragon at the hunting contest hosted by the royal family as plotted by his grandfather, Liedis had yet to return to the Royal College and was recuperating from his injuries in his Aquarius Palace.

His ribs were broken and his internal organs had been injured, but for someone who'd been on the receiving end of a dragon's strike, this was trivial. His telekinetic barrier had probably softened the blow somewhat.

Also, being a member of royalty, Liedis was sturdy and had an exceptionally high capacity for regeneration. Even his doctor was surprised at how quickly he was recovering.

However, in order to protect his ribs, the prince had to wear a corset. His days were now thoroughly boring as he kept rolling around in bed.

While he was spacing out, the sight of his half brother's fiancée facing off against a dragon flashed through his mind.

When the dragon had charged her in its berserk state, Estelle Flozeth had frozen up with fear at first, but after Liedis had protected her with his power, she'd immediately recovered from her daze. The brave look of a soldier had appeared on her face. It had been the same face she'd shown that time when curiosity had driven Liedis to sneak into the Libra Palace and cause some trouble for his brother's talented subordinates.

It was said that women with ample mana living near dragon habitats—the Dragonbone Mountains and Avalon—learned to use Dragon Slayers. Did all of them have another face, just like her?

Her pedigree and capabilities were both average, and her looks were plain. She *did,* however, fulfill the minimum requirements for marrying into royalty, and upon closer inspection, her face wasn't all that bad. Shooting wasn't a skill that a princess would need, but Liedis had impulsively been drawn to the sight of her as she'd faced danger.

Arriving at that thought, the prince clicked his tongue. It was undesirable that a rather outstanding woman like her was to become the wife of his biggest rival.

Trying to shake off the hazy feeling he felt, Liedis traced his eyes over the lines of a book he used to kill time. That was when his chief officer entered his bedroom.

"Your Highness, His Grace Duke Marwick and Lord Silvio have

come to check up on you."

"My grandfather and uncle are here?" Liedis's eyes widened slightly as he lifted his face.

They've come to give me a warning, the prince thought on reflex.

Anyone who'd seen the corpse of that stray dragon could tell at a glance that its attack had been intentional. After all, it had clearly had what looked like a component of an artifact embedded into the spot between its eyebrows.

The public rumor was that it had been the work of some insurrectionist organization, seeking to overthrow the state. By making a stray dragon go on a rampage at a hunting contest hosted by the royal family, this unknown group had aimed to kill both the royal family and whatever nobleman had hired said organization.

In order to calm the citizens down, Sachis had named both Estelle and Liedis "Dragon Exterminators."

He'd particularly exalted Estelle, who'd fired at the dragon's heart despite the injury the gun would cause her, and given her the most recognition. Sachis was also intent on curbing the second prince's faction's activities.

It was possible that the nickname of "Princess Dragon Exterminator" for Estelle was already taking hold despite the fact she hadn't married into the family yet because Sachis was doing something behind the scenes. The same went for the awfully strong emphasis that reporters put on her and Liedis—political enemies—joining hands to slay the dragon.

Sachis had been in favor of Arcrayne from the beginning; he stood by the idea that the law should be upheld. He probably wanted to make the investiture of Liedis's half brother as crown prince more favorable by extolling the virtues of Estelle, his future wife.

Liedis's grandfather was certain to be furious—not only had his original plan gone wrong, but it had actually put Arcrayne at an advantage as a result.

Just as Liedis had expected, his grandfather Mircea Marwick, who'd brought the prince's uncle Silvio with him, looked displeased as he flumped into a chair by Liedis's bed.

Mircea was the younger brother of the previous king. This old

man had features similar to those of Sachis and Liedis, and had a sharp look in his eye.

"How do you feel, Your Highness?" he asked.

"Much better than before. I apologize for not meeting your expectations, grandfather."

Mircea closed his eyes and shook his head. "I should be the one apologizing. The truth is that the artifact broke when I brought the dragon to the forest."

"It broke?"

What a poor excuse. Liedis had expected more as he'd wondered how his grandfather would explain the fact that the dragon hadn't been controlled and the whole incident had caused a wild uproar as a result.

"I *did* say it was a reckless plan and tried to stop him..." timidly uttered his grandfather's accessory... Or rather, the prince's uncle, Silvio. He was Truteliese's brother, who was younger than her by ten years.

Truteliese and Silvio both strongly resembled Mircea's late wife.

Silvio's fainthearted personality showed in his looks too, however. His stooped shoulders and hung head put his shapely features to waste despite his resemblance to the queen. This unreliable, unambitious man was to be the next head of House Marwick after Mircea.

"You be quiet," said Mircea with a click of his tongue, glaring at Silvio, which prompted the latter to freeze up.

Liedis wasn't very fond of his uncle, who was always daunted and timid before his grandfather—but this time, he was of completely the same opinion as him.

The prince had been told that the artifact had been studied since its discovery two years ago. Evidently, it hadn't been enough time to properly examine the unknown artifact.

Held responsible for the incident, Lucius, the chief officer who'd served Liedis for a long time, had been replaced. Some other employees had also disappeared from the Aquarius Palace—a fact that angered Liedis.

"Why did you make such a dangerous plan?" asked the prince. "I and everyone else in that place might have died, had we been less lucky."

"Much to my vexation, everything I try against the first prince ends in failure," replied Mircea. "So I wanted you to distinguish

yourself in a way that left a vivid impression, Your Highness."

Astonishment and anger welled up in Liedis. He desperately kept it inside, however, as it would've been annoying to deal with a sulking Mircea.

Carelessly upsetting his grandfather would make him go on and on about how much he struggled to make Liedis king, as well as his own fixation on the throne.

After Prince Gilfis had cast away his position as crown prince and left for the New World—the famous *love with the crown at stake*—the position had been taken over by Liedis's other grandfather: Ethelbert, the previous king.

Ethelbert and Mircea had been twins. It wasn't known to the public, but they'd been born in exchange for their mother's life, who'd needed to have a C-section. The fact they'd been born this way was kept secret because, in Rosalia, such children were shunned and called "disembowelers."

The secret of his birth, however, had been the very thing that had warped Mircea. He believed he'd missed his chance to become king because the doctor had delivered his twin brother before him. Mircea still held a grudge about it.

Ethelbert and Mircea were both Awoken, and being twins, they had equal amounts of mana too. That must've made it even harder for Mircea to give up his attachment to the throne.

Sachis, Ethelbert's son, had Awoken to a power, but Truteliese and Silvio, Mircea's children, had not. Even though they had both been born with high amounts of mana.

The difference in his and his twin brother's children had worsened Mircea's inferiority complex. "Compared to my older twin who inherited the throne, I had to marry a woman of much lesser birth, and *that* is why my children are inferior to his"—this was something Mircea said often.

Liedis wondered if his grandmother had died prematurely because Mircea had oppressed her. He was sure everyone with a connection to House Marwick suspected as much, even if they never said it out loud.

Mircea insisted he didn't want his grandchild Liedis to suffer the same fate as him, which was why he was so obsessed with defeating Arcrayne.

Rosalian kings had high authority. Officially, they respected the parliament's decisions, but ultimately it was up to the king to

approve them or not.

Mircea insisted that the greatest man should inherit the throne. He'd been saying this to Liedis all along, wanting him to outshine Arcrayne. Now, however, Liedis's trust in his grandfather wavered.

What was it that made a man great in the eyes of the public? A special power, a high amount of mana, and his performance at College. Liedis had surpassed Arcrayne in everything.

It was one thing to study and another to put your knowledge into practice, however. Liedis didn't know if, when he grew up, he could do as well as his brother who had already shown good results in his public duties.

And that wasn't all. Liedis wasn't as good at dealing with people as his half brother.

Arcrayne was a cheat. He was skilled in the art of conversation, weaponizing his quick wit and his gentle smile to get you caught up in his personality.

In the first place, he didn't have any bothersome maternal relatives. Marquess Rogell wasn't pushy like Mircea and humbly supported Arcrayne.

Considering how calm Liedis's grandfather looked after putting his dangerous plan into action and getting innocent bystanders involved, could one not call him a pest to this country?

At this point, Liedis couldn't give an immediate answer on who was more fit to be king.

"Grandfather, please do not resort to such measures anymore," said the prince.

"I suppose you are correct, Your Highness. Even I was terrified of the consequences this time. I shall try to come up with more certain methods from now on."

With a calm smile on his face, Mircea looked like a hideous monster in Liedis's eyes.

There were always dark rumors surrounding his grandfather. People talked in hushed voices about the possibility that Arcrayne's birth mother, the late Queen Miriallia, as well as her brother, the previous Marquess Rogell, had died young due to Mircea's schemes.

Until now, Liedis had laughed it all off as mere rumors.

But what if not only were they true, but he'd done things to his half brother that went beyond trying to make him lose his political standing? Such a suspicion crept into the prince.

"More importantly, Your Highness, make sure you do not say anything unnecessary about the dragon incident to anyone."

"I will not," replied Liedis after a pause. "How could I?"

He really has *come to hush me up,* noted the prince, clicking his tongue inwardly.

It was said that the incident was being investigated not only by Albion Police, but also the royal secret service—Shadow of the Rose. They seemed to be looking into the wrong kind of suspects, however.

Mircea didn't need to tell the prince to keep the truth to himself—he'd never intended to reveal it to anyone. If he leaked this secret, it would put not only him and his grandfather, but also many other people in danger, including the employees of the Aquarius Palace.

Liedis felt like he'd become awfully base for having to hide the truth to protect himself.

"Is mother aware?" he asked.

"She is not. My sister loathes conflict—I am certain she would faint if she learned we made you fight a dragon," replied Silvio.

Clicking his tongue, Mircea struck his cane against the floor as if to vent his anger.

"But how vexing it is that the fiancée of the first prince would steal the merit of slaying a dragon from you!" he exclaimed.

"Had it not been for Lady Estelle, I am certain the dragon would have done more damage. At the very least, I would have no longer been of this world," retorted Liedis, hiding the storm raging inside him.

"I *am* grateful for that, but make no mistake—she has become a nuisance to us."

Seeing the loathing on Mircea's face, Liedis realized he was going to try to get rid of his half brother's fiancée.

He wondered what he should do. The prince thought he had to stop his grandfather, but he didn't know how. It made him realize he was still a child, which frustrated him to no end.

Liedis wondered if Arcrayne could think of a good way.

The prince's powerlessness irritated him. Unable to look at his grandfather directly, he averted his eyes.

Epilogue

“Please take care of Estelle, Your Highness.”

Leaving Arcrayne with those words, Sirius returned to his earldom after spending only one night at the Libra Palace. Returning to the earldom of Flozeth would take him two days even by mana locomotive. The dragon-hunting would end once all the snow had thawed, but Sirius would then have to prepare to deal with dragons getting ferocious after waking up from hibernation, so things were busy in the earldom at this time of the year.

Arcrayne was swamped with work too, so he’d seen Sirius off at the entrance to the Libra Palace. Seeing him off to the station had been too difficult to fit into Arcrayne’s schedule, and also, Estelle still hadn’t fully recovered.

As Sirius’s coach departed, Arcrayne heaved a deep sigh. His face looked exhausted.

“Lord Arc, thank you for making time for my brother despite how busy and tired you are these days,” said Estelle.

The prince shook his head. “It’s only natural that Lord Sirius would worry about you… It’s just, I feel nervous when seeing him in person. After all, he’s like a father-in-law to me…”

Yesterday it had looked like the two had found kindred spirits in each other as they’d spent time in the recreation room together until late at night, but apparently that hadn’t been the case. Arcrayne cracked a smile as Estelle stared at him in round-eyed wonder.

“My future brother-in-law cherishes you. The pressure I feel from him is pretty amazing every time we get in touch.”

“What…?”

This was Sirius they were talking about, so Estelle was worried he might’ve said something rude to the prince. She went pale.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I understand your brother’s worries well,” said Arcrayne. A pleasant smile appeared on his face as he looked at Estelle. His mana was bright too, so he didn’t seem to be displeased with Sirius. “I’m looking forward to summer.”

“Me too.” Estelle smiled at the prince’s words.

Apparently Arcrayne and Sirius had agreed the night before

that the prince would visit the earldom of Flozeth at some point in either July or August on the occasion of inspecting the sugar factory.

Estelle's return to her earldom was likely to become grandiose and overblown if Arcrayne was with her, but she *was* genuinely happy about being able to come home.

"We still have time. How about a brief walk in the garden?" suggested Arcrayne after checking his pocket watch. When Estelle nodded, he held out his left hand. "I've been told you hurt your back and buttocks. Do let me know if it's hard to walk."

"They are much better now. They only hurt if I strongly press on them," replied Estelle, putting her hand around Arcrayne's left arm.

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"It's been a while since you've last been outside, so I want you to let me know immediately if you get tired."

"Careful, there's a stone on the ground there. I should let a gardener know later..."

"The sun is bright today. Are you all right? Is it not blinding?"

Arcrayne had been quite overprotective ever since they'd stepped out into the garden. Estelle was bewildered at his consideration, which could even be described as oppressive.

"There is no need to be *that* cautious of me..." said Estelle.

"It's not like you've fully recovered from your injuries yet, though, right?" replied the prince. His gaze was on Estelle's left hand, still bandaged.

"Almost all of my injuries are healed. Apparently, I can begin training to move my left hand starting tomorrow at the earliest."

As Estelle brought the hand in front of her eyes, Arcrayne's mana darkened and he looked at her with concern. He blamed himself quite strongly for not being there when the dragon had attacked.

"If there's anything I can help with, let me know," he said.

"Very well. Then please help with my training."

Estelle's unreserved reply made Arcrayne's mana just a little brighter. Estelle had chosen to behave this way, seeing as the prince was currently filled with guilt, and apparently her decision had been correct.

The days had been warm recently, so the garden of the Libra

Palace looked very beautiful, the spring flowers blooming rapidly.

However, since it had been a week since Estelle's last outing, her stamina had gone down. She was starting to run out of breath after simply walking for a short while.

"Why don't we rest for a bit?" suggested Arcrayne.

The prince was observant of Estelle. Having immediately noticed her state, he led her to a bench located in the middle of a path.

"This will not do. I get easily tired now, likely because I was in bed all this time," said Estelle.

"If walking is hard, I can carry—"

"No, that would be embarrassing. I shall walk on my own."

Arcrayne looked at Estelle with discontent in his eyes.

"I shall be fine if I rest," she said. "And I *do* need to walk at least a little bit to regain my stamina."

"I suppose so." The prince's expression was still somewhat clouded over.

"About your engagement ring," began Arcrayne, breaking the awkward silence. "Have you decided what kind you'd like? Is it a good time for me to arrange a meeting with a jeweler for you?"

"Um... Rather than an appointment with a jeweler, I would appreciate it if you arranged one with a designer for me."

Arcrayne knitted his brows at Estelle's words.

"If you would allow it, I would like the ring remade with some jewel currently in your possession together with the stone that had been in the original wedding ring," said Estelle.

She'd put the cracked rhodolite garnet ring on a chain and now routinely wore it as a necklace. Estelle pulled the ring out from under her clothes.

"Ideally it would be a deep blue sapphire, but then I would not be able to wear the ring before our wedding..." she said. "If possible, a stone with a color that goes well with purplish red would make me happy."

Arcrayne was deep in thought, a serious look on his face.

"Though it is cracked, this ring was the first piece of jewelry I ever received from you; I would rather not replace it with an entirely different ring," said Estelle. "Even if the stone is smaller after it has been recut, I want to wear it in the new wedding ring. Would that be all right...?"

“You’re reluctant to have me buy a new jewel for it?”

“You already buy so many things for me, Lord Arc: dresses, shoes… And besides—truth be told, I have always admired such rings. My mother’s engagement ring was the same.”

Estelle’s mother’s engagement ring had been fitted with a remade jewel passed down through generations in House Flozeth. Arcrayne’s eyes widened as Estelle told him about this.

The prince was lost in thought for a while, but then he removed the lapel pin adorning the collar of his frock coat. Decorated with a large diamond, it was an item he liked and wore frequently.



“I’d like you to use this, if it pleases you,” said Arcrayne, handing the lapel pin to Estelle.

As she took it and held it in her palm, she found the diamond to be really large. It shone dazzlingly in the sun.

“It’s remade from the ring my mother inherited from her grandmother from House Rogell. But if it’s not to your liking, let us go look for a different stone later on.”

“Perish the thought! How could I *not* like it? Still, it is from a ring that belonged to Her Majesty Queen Miriallia… Is it really all right for me to accept something so precious?”

“I think my mother would be happy if you wore it.”

A smile finally returned to Arcrayne’s face.

“I like the design of the ring, so I would rather not change it much,” said Estelle. “I do not know how much smaller the stone will become when recut, so I think it will be necessary to consult a designer and a craftsman…”

“If you want to use a sapphire, you can fit it inside as a secret stone. I think father would allow that much if I talked to him about it.”

Estelle’s eyes widened at Arcrayne’s suggestion.

“It can’t be a big one, though, since it will be hidden inside…” said the prince.

“It can be small, I do not mind! As long as it is the same color as your eyes!”

The moment Estelle uttered those words, Arcrayne’s mana turned bright. As she stared at him in surprise, he swiftly averted his eyes.

“Lord Arc…?”

“I think anyone would be like this if you caught them by surprise with such a line.” Arcrayne sighed. His mana darkened.

“Your emotions are quite volatile today.”

A moment of silence later, the prince replied, “Your power is such a bother.”

“I apologize… I should have pretended not to see it.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I was well aware of your power when I chose you.”

The brightness of Arcrayne’s mana returned to normal. As Estelle looked at him, she found him calmly gazing back at her. It felt like there was passion in his eyes that she’d never seen there before, which made her heart skip a beat.

Afterword

It’s volume two now, and once again, thank you for reading this book.

This time, I’ve added an episode that wasn’t in the original webnovel. How did you like it? Did you find it enjoyable?

A webtoon of this series has been running since November last year. When, two years ago, I learned that I had received an award, I never imagined how many people would get involved with this work. It’s astonishing.

To voice actors Ikumi Hasegawa and Takuya Eguchi, who already did the PV and the voice drama that was out at the time of the first volume’s release—thank you for lending your voice to the voice comic as well.

To my illustrator, Bodax-sensei, thank you once again for your beautiful work, both in color and colorless. All the illustrations are wonderful, but I’m particularly fond of the one with the white cat Snow! It’s my treasure.

The webtoon of this series is bringing this story to life in full color. The captions and the drawings are simply marvelous, so those who haven’t read it yet, please give it a try. The first and second chapters are available for free and have been turned into a voice comic, which can be viewed on Drecom Media’s official website.

To those who worked hard on the production and distribution side of things—Shoko-sensei, Search Field Inc., as well as everyone else who has been involved with this work—thank you so much.

To my editor Mr. Ueyama—I don’t think either the webtoon or this light novel series would have ever seen the light of day, had it not been for you. Thank you for consulting me countless times for this volume, starting from the plot.

Lastly, as those of you who've read the webnovel version might've noticed, there is still a continuation to this story. The support of my readers has allowed me to write a third volume. It will make me happy if you give it a read when it comes out.

Mari Morikawa



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Fiancée No More: The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love Volume 2
by Mari Morikawa

Translated by Adam
Edited by Lyn Hall

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