Mari Morikawa

Illustrator: Bodax

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Fiancée No More

The Forsaken Lady, the Prince, and Their Make-Believe Love


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"Rather than react to such gossip, would you humor me for a moment?"
"Humor you? How so?"
"Let us pretend we are so immersed in each other that we do not even hear them. I do believe indifference is the most effective strategy against people of that sort."
"You may be right."
Arcrayne relaxed his expression, and Estelle felt the comforting weight of his arm on her shoulder. Entrusting herself to the prince, she could smell his usual scent.


"I knew it. Come. I'll carry you."
Arcrayne extended his hand.
While it was a little embarrassing, the mood dictated that Estelle couldn't refuse. Arcrayne bent down, and Estelle wrapped her arms around his neck, at which point he lifted her into his arms.
"I'll be taking her."

Character profiles:

Main Characters



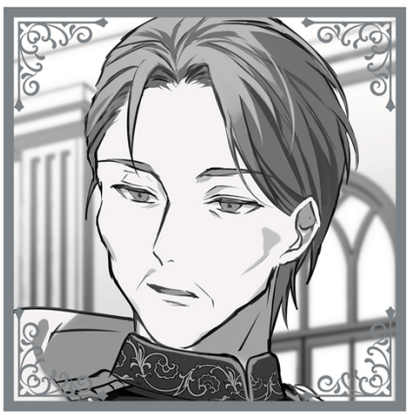
◆Estelle

The protagonist of the story. After slaying a dragon at the hunting contest, she became known as Princess Dragon Exterminator. While she loves Arcrayne, the darkness of his mana makes her think her feelings may not be reciprocated, but she resolves herself to support him nonetheless.

◆Arcrayne

The first prince of the Kingdom of Rosalia. He regrets not being by Estelle's side during the dragon attack. While he wasn't originally interested in the throne, he's now beginning to pursue it in order to protect Estelle from the second prince's faction.





◆Sachis

The king of Rosalia. He used to watch the succession struggle without intervening, aware of the princes' wants and actions. But now...

◆Truteliese

The queen consort of the Kingdom of Rosalia. She treats Estelle harshly because Truteliese wants to make her son Liedis the next king.



◆Liedis

The second prince of the Kingdom of Rosalia. He starts to doubt the queen's actions after the events at the hunting contest.

◆Duke Marwick

A Rosalian nobleman and Liedis's grandfather. He manipulates Liedis and works behind the scenes in order to make Rosalia his.

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Prologue

Clad in an evening dress, Estelle was riding in a coach with Arcrayne to the embassy of the neighboring Franciel. A soiree was to be held there this evening to mark the occasion of the ambassador's departure from office, and Estelle was attending as Arcrayne's partner.

"Are you nervous, Estelle?" asked the prince.

"I am. This is my first diplomatic event since becoming your fiancée," replied Estelle.

Since the soiree would be held in the Francien embassy, it was only natural to expect Francien to be used frequently at the venue. An extensive vocabulary was necessary for diplomatic and business events.

At present, Estelle could speak Francien just fluently enough for everyday conversation. She was still making efforts to correct her pronunciation and expand her vocabulary, so she couldn't help flinching at the thought of what was to come.

"Per the wishes of the ambassador's wife, the dancing will be the main event of this soiree. You need only accompany me for the opening quadrille," said Arcrayne.

"I understand." Estelle nodded, then was overcome with emotion.

In most balls, the quadrille was danced by four of the highest-status couples in attendance. Today, this would inevitably include the ambassador and his wife, as well as Estelle and Arcrayne.

Before she'd met the prince, Estelle had never imagined she would dance the opening quadrille at a high society soiree.

"I would like to dance with you after the quadrille too. Would that be all right?" asked Estelle.

She had practiced dancing with Arcrayne many times up to this point and wanted to use the opportunity to dance in public.

"By all means. We can dance together as much as you like," replied the prince.

"I doubt I could keep up for that long," said Estelle with an awkward smile.

Her injury from the hunting contest still affected her. It no longer hindered her in her daily life, but the stamina she'd lost

while recuperating had yet to fully return. She would likely need to take regular breaks during the upcoming soiree.

In his usual overprotective manner, Arcrayne treasured Estelle as though keeping her in a cocoon, which was why he'd suggested she sit out the event. However, since there was going to be a ball, if Estelle didn't attend, Arcrayne would've had to take another woman as his partner for the night. He'd intended to make a choice that absolutely wouldn't lead to any misunderstandings, but Estelle still wasn't satisfied with that, so she'd decided to go.

"I'll do my best to stay by your side, so all you need to do is stand next to me and smile," Arcrayne said kindly. "If someone starts talking about complicated matters or makes an annoyance of themselves, I'll handle it."

"Please do," replied Estelle with a smile.

He would surely do his absolute best to protect Estelle as promised. This slightly pricked Estelle's conscience, and she lowered her eyes to her lap, where her gloved hand rested.

While the wound on her hand from the pistol's explosion had almost fully healed, it still cramped from time to time. But what bothered her more was how light her ring finger felt. The engagement ring Estelle had received from Arcrayne and worn on that finger all the time was still being remade. Feeling uneasy at its absence, she placed the fingers of her right hand over her left.

Chapter 1: At the Embassy

When Estelle stepped into the ballroom of the embassy with Arcrayne, she was subjected to stares from every direction.

When she'd brought down the dragon, she'd earned the valiant nickname of Princess Dragon Exterminator—this was probably the reason for the looks she now got. Estelle shook at the sight of the various emotions in the mana all around her, like curiosity and malice.

Estelle felt Arcrayne place his large hand over her hand where it rested on his arm. When she looked up at the prince beside her, he gazed back down at her encouragingly with his deep blue eyes. On top of that, his bright, voluminous mana enveloped her.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Estelle was happy for how he showed with his whole body that he intended to protect her. No matter what emotions other people directed at her, she need not be intimidated as long as the prince was by her side.

Regardless of the terrible gossip, she had unconditional allies with her. It wasn't only Arcrayne protecting her today, but also members of the Royal Guard from the Libra Palace, as well as May.

They can say whatever they please, Estelle told herself and straightened her back. She then looked around the ballroom, endeavoring to carry herself with the confidence befitting the fiancée of this country's first prince.

That was when she saw the host of the soiree coming their way with his wife. It was Count Giscard, the Francien ambassador.

In many countries located in the western part of the Heredian continent, including Rosalia, it was considered a breach of etiquette to start a conversation with someone of higher status than you. This was why Arcrayne was the one to start a conversation with them.

He addressed the ambassador in fluent Francien, with clear pronunciation. "I am pleased to meet you on this fine night, Lord Giscard."

“Allow me to extend my greetings, Your Highness, the young sun of Rosalia,” intoned the ambassador. “I am Gérard Giscard, and this is my wife, Marie.”

“Marie Giscard, at your service. It is a pleasure to meet you on this fine night, Your Highness.”

The ambassador and his wife replied in Rosalian. As he was a diplomat, it was no surprise that the count’s Rosalian was on the level of a native speaker.

Estelle had heard that his wife wasn’t very good at it, and indeed, hers was somewhat awkward.

The two bowed, then looked at Estelle, at which point Arcrayne introduced her, speaking Francien.

“This is my fiancée, Estelle. I believe this is your first time seeing each other?”

“Pleased to meet you. My name is Estelle Flozeth.”

Arcrayne was probably speaking Francien out of consideration for the ambassador’s wife, so Estelle had followed his example.

At that point, the two’s mana slightly clouded over. Was it because of Estelle’s reputation? However, as they were a diplomat and his wife, they showed no outward sign of discomfort and directed friendly smiles at her instead.

“It is an honor to meet you, Lady Estelle.”

“It truly is. I only wish we’d gotten to meet you sooner, as we shall be returning to Franciel next week.”

Everybody wore a mask in high society. It wasn’t the slightest bit unusual for people to hide their true feelings behind a smile. So Estelle put a mask on too. Standing by Arcrayne’s side, she presented them with a sociable smile and bowed gracefully.

Estelle was here today to fulfill the role of Arcrayne’s dance partner. And if any difficult topics came up, she would take a step back to avoid spoiling the mood and become merely a beautiful flower. A smile was a weapon wielded for that purpose.

***

The opening quadrille was a square dance, which involved four pairs of dancers. Eight people made a square and swapped their partners while dancing in tune with the calm music.

“Would you like to accompany me for the next dance?” asked

Arcrayne once the quadrille was over.

Estelle nodded. “If that would be all right with you, then by all means.”

According to the program handed out beforehand, the next dance was to be a waltz.

The ambassador and his wife seemed intent on continuing to dance too. With Arcrayne leading her by the hand, Estelle came close to them.

When they were locked in a hold, Estelle’s heart pounded from the close proximity. Arcrayne gazed at her from up close with his handsome face.

Long ago, it had been frowned upon for men and women to come too close during a dance. Estelle felt like she understood why. Merely imagining Arcrayne dancing with another woman made jealousy well up in her.

But despite being his fiancée, she couldn’t monopolize him. Since he was the first prince, there would surely be plenty of situations in high society where he wouldn’t be able to refuse a dance. Estelle couldn’t tell him not to dance with others, no matter how much she wished to do so. Her pride wouldn’t allow it.

All she could do was attend events as his partner as frequently as possible and reduce the number of opportunities for other women to dance with him.

A popular piece of dance music began. Estelle adjusted to Arcrayne’s pace as she danced.

Ever since she’d moved to the Libra Palace, she’d practiced dancing with skilled male employees of the palace, like the guards and Haoran, but it was exceptionally easy to dance with the prince.

This was Estelle’s first time dancing in public like this since the ball at Marquess Rogell’s mansion, which had led to her engagement. But her mental state was completely different now.

Back then, she’d been too awed and nervous to enjoy it from the bottom of her heart. But now...

With his sweet gaze directed at her, it felt like she was in a dream.

Frankly, Estelle couldn’t tell if Arcrayne was acting or being genuine, but there was no doubt that they were special to each other as members of the opposite sex, especially after they’d

slept together so many times.

As she entrusted herself to Arcrayne's lead, Estelle felt as though they were the only people in the world, dancing as one.

Ever since she'd gotten a fever due to her injury, Arcrayne hadn't laid a finger on her, despite sleeping in the same shared bedroom. It was probably out of consideration for her health, but as a result, Estelle hadn't been this close to him in a really long time. She loved the heat where their bodies touched.

Their eyes met. Estelle wasn't the only one who felt differently from before—Arcrayne's attitude had changed too.

When they'd first danced at the ball at Marquess Rogell's mansion, he must've found it bothersome. His mana had been dark. Now, it was radiating silver light, which further enhanced his dazzling looks.

The music is about to end... Estelle reluctantly realized, growing sad. She'd wanted to dance some more.

As the orchestra played the final note, Arcrayne pulled away from Estelle.

She bowed, suppressing the pain she felt on the inside.

"Do you want to go on?" asked the prince, for the orchestra was about to start up again.

Estelle shook her head. "I wish I could, but I am out of breath."

She was bitter about having significantly less stamina than she used to.

"Let's take a moment to rest," said Arcrayne with a gentle smile, and he held out his hand to her once again.

***

The prince took Estelle to the retiring room. Since their attendants came with them, they naturally ended up moving as a large group.

Arcrayne led her to an open couch, then sat next to her.

There were a decent number of people in the room. Estelle felt them looking at her with all kinds of emotions.

She really was bad with high society. It was depressing to see such a mix of emotions when she didn't even want to.

Also, there were canapés and drinks in the room, but outside of banquets, Arcrayne didn't eat anything lest it be poisoned. Estelle felt conflicted seeing him like that.

When Estelle took a long breath, Arcrayne looked intently at her.

“Are you feeling well?” he asked.

“I think I shall be able to dance again after a brief rest.” She smiled, happy for the prince’s consideration.

But then…

“It’s her—the one who slew that dragon…”

“For all her heroic reputation, she certainly looks meek.”

Estelle overheard a quiet conversation.

“They say that in the north, even women learn to shoot.”

“That’s certainly unimaginable in these parts.”

“How brave of her. Why, she’s like a man.”

“I heard she got a wound on her left hand…”

“Doesn’t she also have a scar on her arm? And she’s so young too…”

Estelle casually looked in the direction of the voices. There, she found two women who seemed to be in their forties, chatting joyfully with their mana dark. They spoke just loudly enough that Estelle could hear them. While they didn’t use malicious words, it was clear from the looks on their faces and the tone of their voices that they were looking down on her.

Married noblewomen excelled at choosing their words. They never said anything *outright* contemptuous.

They probably didn’t openly speak ill of Estelle because Arcrayne was by her side. His position might have been threatened by the second prince’s faction, but he was still the first prince of this country. A direct attack on Estelle—his fiancée—incurred the risk of a counterattack.

Seeing Arcrayne’s mana begin to darken, Estelle looked over and saw that the prince had a blank look on his face.

“I am all right, so please do not make such a face,” she said, smiling at him.

“They’re from the second prince’s faction. One of them was at the hunting contest. You saved her, and look at the way she talks now,” Arcrayne spat.

Estelle shook her head. “Their goal is to wear us out mentally. The best thing we can do is pretend we do not hear it,” she said quietly, making sure to maintain her smile.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, you know that?”

“How rude.”

“Sorry, I meant that as a compliment. You’ve become strong.”

Estelle giggled, then resolved herself and laid her head on Arcrayne's shoulder.

"Estelle...?"

"Rather than react to such gossip, would you humor me for a moment?"

"Humor you? How so?"

"Let us pretend we are so immersed in each other that we do not even hear them. I do believe indifference is the most effective strategy against people of that sort."

"You may be right."

Arcrayne relaxed his expression, and Estelle felt the comforting weight of his arm around her shoulder. Entrusting herself to the prince, she could smell his familiar scent.

Estelle felt his lips brush her forehead. It was a little embarrassing to be so demonstratively intimate in public.

Asking the prince to put on an act as a way of dealing with the gossip had been little more than an excuse.

I just want him to be sweet with me and to look at me with tender eyes, thought Estelle, resenting her own wretchedness.

"I don't mind. I have allies." She might have told herself those things, but it wasn't as though their malice didn't hurt her.

Still, it felt like leaning into the prince's embrace healed her frayed heart.

***

After briefly resting on the couch, Estelle and Arcrayne returned to the ballroom together and made the rounds, greeting people.

Among those invited to this ball were not only diplomats, but also nobles, capitalists, and people of culture with whom the ambassador and his wife were friends.

It annoyed Estelle to have people direct negative emotions at her and stare at her left hand no matter where she went. But she told herself that worrying about it would only upset her.

Arcrayne pretty much only went to speak to people whose influence would benefit Estelle when she became crown princess in the future. She felt that she was being protected even here.

Over half of the guests at the soiree were Rosalians. Estelle was relieved that there wasn't as much complex Francien being

thrown around as she'd prepared herself for.

She would say a few words after Arcrayne, and should a complicated topic appear, she would take a step back. After repeating that over and over, putting on yet another smile for each new encounter, it felt like her face was about to cramp.

Meanwhile, as perhaps should've been expected, the prince looked completely natural with his calm smile and his gentle demeanor. It was amazing; he always seemed to know exactly what to say no matter what topic the other party brought up, and he never made a single slipup.

Politics, the economy, things going on in society, who was involved in what business enterprise—Arcrayne's head was tightly packed with highly diverse information.

Also, Estelle had heard that he spoke five languages fluently, and that his vocabulary was even more extensive in the realm of everyday conversation. She couldn't fathom how his head was organized.

"Estelle, are you tired?" asked the prince.

"I am all right," Estelle replied with a smile.

She could do her best at socializing in high society despite not being all that good at it because he showed consideration for her like this every now and then. And most importantly, because she loved him.

Estelle gazed furtively at Arcrayne's profile as he spoke to some capitalist about things she didn't quite understand.

She was happy to be allowed by his side. And when he was nice to her, it made her want to do anything *he* might want. But that wasn't a pure emotion that sought nothing in return.

Look at me more. And return my feelings in full, Estelle thought. She hated how greedy she became when thinking about Arcrayne. Sighing internally, she casually averted her eyes from the prince.

Which was when she sensed with her power that a strongly negative emotion was approaching from behind.

Estelle and Arcrayne had a prior agreement on what to do in such situations. She nonchalantly touched the ring on the middle finger of her left hand and directed mana into it. This ring was connected to the prince's cuff link.

Arcrayne twitched, then instantly shoved himself in the direction Estelle had casually indicated with her eyes.

Immediately afterward, the sound of breaking glass resonated through the room.

“Your Highness?”

A commotion began. Red drops spilled from Arcrayne’s frock coat. The scent of wine drifted from nearby. The floor was covered in the broken shards of a wine glass and splattered with a deep crimson liquid.

Estelle had been told that Arcrayne always had a barrier around himself thanks to his power, but apparently it didn’t extend to his clothes.

A maid stood nearby with a tray in hand, trembling and looking terribly pale.

“Are you all right, Your Highness?!” exclaimed May, who’d come running faster than anyone, with a small towel in hand.

May had come here as both a bodyguard and Estelle’s personal attendant. She pressed the towel against Arcrayne’s sleeve to try and mitigate the stain.

“Your Highness!” exclaimed the ambassador, Count Giscard, who’d rushed into the retiring room with his wife moments later. “Please accept my apologies! I cannot believe how careless the servants of this embassy can be…” He spoke in fluent Rosalian.

“It is not her fault. I saw somebody push her back,” said Estelle on an impulse, fearing the maid would get the blame.

“Did you see who it was?” asked Arcrayne.

Estelle nodded. The malice she’d sensed with her power had come not from this maid but from a noblewoman who’d been behind her—one who’d seemed to be a guest here.

“It was a woman in a moss green dress, with brown hair,” said Estelle.

“Would you recognize her if you saw her again?” the prince asked.

“I cannot say with confidence that I would… I only caught a glimpse of her back.”

The ballroom was full of people, and plenty of women had brown hair.

Arcrayne looked dejected, but then the ambassador’s wife spoke to him. She used Francien and spoke rather quickly, so Estelle could only make out roughly half of it, but she seemed to be offering to do something about his clothes for the time being.

“Forgive us, but we shall take our leave now,” Arcrayne replied

courteously in Francien.

“But Your Highness, does the sensation of your cuff not bother you? It may be warmer now, but nights are still cold…”

Lady Giscard slowed down her speech—perhaps she’d regained some presence of mind. Now Estelle could just barely make out everything she said.

“No need to worry,” Arcrayne replied. “Some of the wine splashed on Estelle’s dress too, and we would rather not be seen in an unseemly state any further…”

Due to diplomatic immunity, Rosalian law didn’t apply within the embassy. Arcrayne must’ve started talking about leaving because he was being cautious.

“It pains me to leave in this way, but I suspect that someone may have been targeting Estelle. So forgive me, but please understand,” he went on in Francien.

“But how can we let you go in such a state…?” Lady Giscard wasn’t backing down so easily.

“Lord Arc, why not borrow a change of clothes from them?” Estelle said quietly to the prince.

She thought that if they left like this, it might cause a rift in Arcrayne’s relationship with the Francien embassy.

Sighing, the prince turned his head back to Lady Giscard.

“Very well, I shall take you up on your kind offer and borrow a coat.”

When the prince gave in, the wife looked relieved. Estelle glanced at Count Giscard, who stood next to her, and saw him with a similar expression.

***

They went to another room, where Arcrayne started changing into the clothes of an embassy employee with a similar build. In the meantime, May was doing whatever she could about the wine stain on Estelle’s dress.

It wasn’t just the prince’s coat that was stained, but also the sleeve of his shirt. Glancing a little to the side, Estelle could see his muscular body as he changed. She’d seen it so many times, but it still made her heart pound, so she looked away.

“I’m glad it was just wine,” said Arcrayne as he buttoned up his borrowed shirt.

“Indeed. Good thing it was not acid or poison,” replied Estelle.

Now that the prince had put on a shirt, she could turn her eyes back to him.

He was just in the middle of putting on the coat he'd borrowed. It was a simple frock coat of noticeably lower quality than the one he'd worn to the ball, but anything looked good on him. That was just how finely chiseled his face was.

Arcrayne looked at Estelle all of a sudden. Somehow she was embarrassed to look him in the eye, so she casually lowered her eyes and spoke up to May, who was busy wrestling with the stain on Estelle's dress.

"Will it come out?" asked Estelle.

"If we deal with it right after we come back to the palace, I believe it can at least be made rather difficult to notice," replied May.

"If it remains, we can hide it with a decoration."

"Yes. Perhaps by sewing tulle lace over it."

May's suggestion put a smile on Estelle's face.

"You really treasure it, I see," said Arcrayne.

"This dress was a gift from you, after all."

Estelle's reply brightened the prince's mana.

"I hope what happened today does not lead to any strange rumors..." she added.

"Even if someone does say something to you, there's no need to worry about it. You haven't done anything wrong," replied Arcrayne.

At that point, a knock came at the door. Neil, who was next to Estelle and Arcrayne, exchanged glances with the latter. Seeing the prince nod, he went to open the door.

Huh...? Estelle's eyes widened when she saw the visitor across from Neil.

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Standing outside the door was a noblewoman in a moss green dress with brown hair. Since she looked the same as the woman who'd pushed the maid, her appearance at the door put everyone in the room on guard.

Estelle, on the other hand, was surprised. Because the woman's face looked familiar to her.

"Lady Cecilia...?"

Arcrayne's eyes widened at Estelle's words. And he wasn't the

only one—Neil and May too had surprised looks on their faces.

"Lady Wyntia…" uttered the prince.

Her name was Cecilia Wyntia. She was the wife of Earl Cedric Wyntia, and the mother of Lyle, Estelle's old fiancé. As the wife of a feudal lord, she appeared at New Year's dinner parties held at the palace every year, so naturally, Arcrayne and his close aides knew her.

Having recovered from his stupefaction, the prince glared at Cecilia, warily.

"I wasn't aware you were invited to this soiree, Lady Cecilia. I remember now that you were on good terms with Lady Giscard," he said.

She's friends with the ambassador's wife? The news took Estelle by surprise. She'd known Cecilia for as long as she could remember, and this was her first time hearing about it.

Arcrayne had a comprehensive list of people's faces, names, and relationships in his head, so it must've been just as he said.

"Marie Giscard is a distant relative of mine. She helped me with this."

"With what…?" asked Estelle.

Cecilia began her explanation, an apologetic look on her face. "I wanted to be alone with you no matter what, Lady Estelle, so I asked for Marie's cooperation and pushed the maid's back. I wanted to only slightly stain the bottom of your dress, take you to another room, and work on that stain myself… I never imagined it would cause such a large disturbance. I am so sorry, Your Highness and Lady Estelle." With that, she bowed deeply.

"Why would you do such a thing…?" asked Estelle in a blank amazement.

"This was my only way of getting a chance to talk to you. Though it is only natural, given what we have done to you…"

Estelle had an idea of what she was talking about. Ever since Estelle had told Arcrayne she wouldn't see Lyle, several requests for a meeting with Estelle had come to the Libra Palace from House Wyntia. She'd had to write a polite rejection every time.

She *was* concerned about Lyle, but now that she was Arcrayne's fiancée, she couldn't act rashly. If she carelessly visited her former betrothed just because he had become a drug addict and kept saying her name, it could cause a scandal if it were to become public.

"Please, Lady Estelle, go see Lyle! I am well aware it is beyond

my position to make such a request of you. But as his mother…"

As Cecilia pleaded desperately, Arcrayne moved between her and Estelle, protecting the latter.

"Lyle has been calling your name all this time, Lady Estelle. We were such fools. How could we have canceled your engagement…?"

Seeing Cecilia earnestly plead with a sorrowful look on her face actually served to calm Estelle.

"Lord Wyntia chose House Pautrier, not House Flozeth, yes? And as a result, you broke off my engagement with Sir Lyle without giving me a say in the matter. Supposing you had wanted to keep the engagement—does it matter?" Estelle didn't look away from Cecilia's pleading eyes and replied calmly. "I am aware of Sir Lyle's current state, and I can understand how you feel, Lady Wyntia. But I cannot visit him. I am the fiancée of His Highness Prince Arcrayne, who stands here before you, and so I would rather not do anything that could cause trouble for him. I ask for your understanding in the matter."

She wouldn't call her "Cecilia" anymore; to Estelle, she was no longer the mother of her childhood friend.

"Seeing Lyle…would cause trouble…?" uttered Cecilia in a daze.

Arcrayne cut into the conversation. "I'm painfully aware of how you feel, Lady Wyntia, but I must ask that you let go of the matter now. I sympathize with Sir Lyle's situation too. That's why I sent him to a sanatorium on Parama which specializes in treating drug addicts."

Cecilia was clearly shaken up by his words.

"Please, don't ask Estelle and the rest of us for anything more," the prince went on. "The things people said about her in high society when her engagement with Sir Lyle was broken off… Are you not aware of the fact that Baron Pautrier spread rumors about her to justify what he did?"

Huh…? This time, it wasn't only Cecilia who had a look of surprise on her face, but Estelle too.

When she'd gone to social events after her engagement was broken off, she'd wondered why people had talked so much and so negatively about her. How she'd "had her betrothed stolen from her," how she'd "gotten in between Diana and Lyle who'd been in love from the start," et cetera, et cetera.

So that was the baron's doing…? Estelle went pale. *But wait, now*

that I think about it, he comes from a family of merchants…

Schemes that put them at an advantage must've been their specialty. Diana was still in the hospital, and the baron had struck a deal with Arcrayne.

Anger toward them welled up in Estelle all over again.

Then again, I heard it caused a significant amount of damage, she thought to herself.

Apparently, when the baron had gradually distanced himself from the second prince's faction per his deal with Arcrayne, his company had lost several major clients.

As Estelle wrestled internally over what she'd just learned, Arcrayne coldly said, "We'll do our best to avoid a scandal regarding what happened here today. Please understand that this is an act of kindness on our part. Now I must ask that you leave."

At that point, Cecilia hung her head and began to tremble. "I am so sorry. Please, laugh at this foolish mother. But being his mother, I simply could not sit idly by…" As she began to cry, she looked awfully tired, and older than Estelle remembered her.

Estelle and her family had been friends with House Wyntia ever since she was a child. To her, Cecilia was someone who'd been kind to her after her parents had died. It pained Estelle to abandon her.

But being a mother didn't mean you could do whatever you wanted.

"Cecilia! I've been looking for you!" came a voice, and a pale Lady Giscard barged into the room through the door that had been left open. She immediately began rattling off a long apology in Francien, bowing to Arcrayne over and over.

Estelle's Francien wasn't good enough to make out everything she said, but she seemed to be desperately explaining that she was sorry, that Cecilia had been just that worried about her son, and asking the prince to settle the matter peacefully.

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"That must've been tiring," said Arcrayne, sitting across from Estelle.

She had been reclining wearily in her seat in the coach as they headed back to the palace.

Lady Giscard's apology had been followed by her husband

coming to the room as well. The dispute had been settled and they'd finally been allowed to leave.

"I could say the same to you, Lord Arc. I apologize for getting you caught up in something so strange," replied Estelle.

"It's not your fault. If anything, the blame lies with Mrs. Wyntia for acting in a manner so far removed from common sense."

It was somewhat dark in the coach as it drove through the evening streets of the city. Estelle couldn't tell what face the prince was making, but there was no doubt he was displeased. She could tell by the color of his mana.

After the discussion with the ambassador, it had been decided everyone would keep as quiet as they could about the wine incident, as it could potentially lead to a scandal for Estelle or a diplomatic incident.

Lord Wyntia would be summoned for a discussion at a future date, but Arcrayne said he would forbid Cecilia from approaching Estelle.

As for Lady Giscard, she'd gotten off with only disapproval. Arcrayne had decided there was no need to go any further, as she would be leaving the country in the near future.

"You can probably see it, but let me assure you that this negative emotion in me is not directed at you. Trust me."

Estelle could see the sincerity in Arcrayne's eyes directed at her as his face was illuminated by the mana lights shining through the windows.

"I know," she replied and nodded. "If she was desperate enough to do what she did, does that mean Lyle's treatment is not going well...?"

"It seems to have its ups and downs. That kind of treatment takes time." Arcrayne lowered his eyes. "Are you worried about him?"

"I am. But he and the rest of House Wyntia are distant from me now. I remember saying this to you before, but it is enough for me to hear about his situation from you every now and then, and I believe I ought not to come any closer to him."

Flatly stating her decision, Estelle smiled at the prince.

Chapter 2: A New Ring

It was acceptable to sleep late the morning after a soiree.

Estelle had gone to sleep in the shared bedroom together with Arcrayne. It was the movement of his warmth that woke her up.

“Are you getting up already?” she asked, seeing the prince out of bed and starting to get dressed.

He planted a kiss on her cheek. “Might as well, since I’m awake. I was thinking of clearing out some office work. You can take your time, Estelle.”

“No, I shall get up too. That way we can have breakfast together.” Estelle sat up and smiled at the prince.

In response, his mana slightly clouded over.

There it is again… thought Estelle, confused by the incomprehensibility of Arcrayne’s emotions. His mana would darken slightly when Estelle smiled at him, but when had it started? *Was it shortly before the hunting contest…?*

She couldn’t be sure, but when she played with Snow—the cat—and practiced speaking foreign languages with the prince, every now and then she’d notice a slightly negative emotion in him, which would seize her with fear.

Have I done something to upset him…? Or does he hate me now? she wondered. Since their wedding was still ahead of them, she was too scared to ask the man himself.

Estelle sighed quietly.

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After they had eaten together, Arcrayne confined himself to his office, so Estelle decided to knit lace for her wedding dress in her usual spot—the adjacent room. She’d gotten started on the lace some time ago.

Shortly after she got tired of it and switched to reading a book, Arcrayne paid her a visit.

“Estelle, are you busy?”

“No, what can I do for you?”

“I want to take a break. Will you come with me?” His mana was still a little bit dark.

Though Estelle found it strange, she accepted the offer and got up.

Arcrayne brought her to the conservatory of the Libra Palace.

While the same could be seen in any residence of the nobility, this conservatory had roses—the national flower of Rosalia—blooming in full glory the whole year round.

Arcrayne led Estelle to a garden chair in the center of the conservatory, then took a small box out of his pocket and presented it to her.

“Lord Arc...?” said Estelle, confused.

The prince opened the box. There was a ring inside.

Between the flower-shaped prongs was a large diamond, and on its sides were rhodolite garnets of the same color as Estelle’s eyes.

The familiarity of the design made Estelle realize what it was, and a look of joy appeared on her face.

“A new engagement ring!” she exclaimed.

“That’s right. You should look at the inner part too.”

Arcrayne placed the box on the table, took out the ring, and put it on Estelle’s palm.

A small sapphire was embedded in the inside of the band as a secret stone, per Estelle’s request. It was the same deep blue as Arcrayne’s eyes.

“This makes me so happy!”

The workmanship was just as Estelle had pictured it in her mind. She had a huge smile on her face.

“Can I put it on?” she asked.

“I’d like to present it to you as a proper gift, so can you give it back to me for a moment?”

“Of course.”

Nodding, Estelle gave the ring back to the prince and held out her left hand. When the prince saw it, his mana clouded over.

I guess it’s because of the scar... thought Estelle. She concealed it with gloves or powder when going out, but normally, it was visible.

“It’s not as if I don’t like your hand,” Arcrayne explained, probably out of consideration for Estelle’s power.

“I know.” Estelle smiled. She wasn’t at all ashamed of this scar

either.

The reason Arcrayne's mana darkened every time he saw it must've been, in large part, self-reproach. He'd been deep in the forest and hadn't made it back in time when Estelle had gotten this scar.

Kneeling, he took Estelle's hand and put the ring on her ring finger. Then he pulled the hand toward himself and pressed his lips to the back of it, right where the scar was.



“Should I ask again that you marry me?” he said.

“No, you already have,” replied Estelle.

She smiled at Arcrayne, then looked at the ring on her hand, which the prince still held. The added weight of the extra stones made it feel a little heavier than the old one.

“Say, did you bring me to the conservatory in order to propose to me?” she asked.

Estelle recalled the time Arcrayne had formally proposed to her. It had happened in House Rogell’s conservatory.

“That’s part of it, but I also wanted to give it to you in a place like this,” replied the prince, his manner somewhat awkward.

“I suppose so. It makes me happy that you would choose such a beautiful place for it.”

From where they were, Estelle had a good view of the roses blooming gorgeously.

As usual, Arcrayne was a gentleman with her. And yet…

His mana is still a little dark… Estelle noticed. Unable to find the reason for Arcrayne’s darkened mana, she began to furrow her brow slightly. She wondered if she should ask him about it, but after some thought, decided against it. *I’m sure he’ll tell me one day,* she concluded.

The prince knew she could see emotions with her power. And no matter what he told her when the time came, Estelle intended to support him.

Even if you come to hate me, I’ll remain by your side until you say you don’t need me anymore, she told him inside her mind.

“How about we look around some more and then get back?” Arcrayne asked.

“Certainly.”

Estelle took the hand that the prince offered her.

***

When they returned from the conservatory, there was something of a commotion. Apparently, Liedis had sent a bouquet for Estelle.

“We’ve examined it and made sure it doesn’t contain poison or anything sharp… Would you like to accept it?” May asked Estelle, holding the large bouquet.

The bouquet was most lovely, full of delicately pink and white roses, but considering the sender, Estelle wasn’t sure if she could

simply accept it. Confused, she looked at Arcrayne and saw him wearing a grave expression, his mana dark.

“I guess it’s because I didn’t let him see you…” he said.

“He asked to see me?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to let him in here.”

The prince awkwardly averted his eyes. He was almost like a child who’d been caught doing mischief.

“I understand how you must have felt about it, so I do not mind…but what should I do about these flowers?” asked Estelle.

After a pause, the prince said, “The flowers themselves aren’t guilty of anything, so do as you like.”

From the pause and Arcrayne’s mana, Estelle picked up on his discomfort. It stood to reason, given his relationship with Liedis up to this point.

Even if I accept it, I can’t put them in my room or his… thought Estelle.

“They are beautiful, so can I put them in the hallway?” she asked, after thinking for a moment.

“You don’t want them in your room?”

“Would that be all right?”

“I’d rather you didn’t do that,” said Arcrayne, after another pause.

The sullen look on his face almost made Estelle burst into laughter.

“It is because they are from His Highness Prince Liedis; I understand,” said Estelle and giggled.

She handed the bouquet to May and told her to put them in the hallway.

“Lady Estelle, there is actually a letter that came with the flowers… Would you care to read it?” asked May, holding out a white envelope.

On the back of it was Liedis’s seal, a black panther.

“Do you mind if I read it with you?” asked Arcrayne.

“No, be my guest,” replied Estelle without hesitation.

It was a letter from his political enemy. Of course he’d be interested in its contents.

“Let’s go to the living room for now. We can sit down and talk.”

Estelle took the prince up on his offer.

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After they took a break in the living room, Arcrayne opened the envelope with a paper knife. The paper inside had harmless platitudes written on it in elegant handwriting, such as seasonal greetings and an inquiry on how Estelle was doing. Nonetheless, the prince looked glum.

"Is something wrong?" asked Estelle.

"This is written on special paper and with a special ink that is passed down among royalty. He must've written it knowing I would read it."

With a sour look on his face, Arcrayne channeled his mana into the paper. The paper turned deep blue, and glowing silver characters emerged on it.

"If you direct mana into it, it reveals hidden writing," explained Arcrayne.

"So it is like invisible ink," said Estelle.

She recalled how she'd played in her childhood by writing letters with fruit juice, waiting for the writing to disappear, and then heating the paper over a fire.

Estelle moved over to Arcrayne's side and looked at the letter.

Dear Lady Estelle,

You saved my life when you slew that dragon. It pains me to hear about the injury to your left hand. I sincerely pray that it heals as soon as possible.

Also, I'm aware they're attributing most of the success in slaying that dragon to you. Please accept the medal for it and don't mind me. I believe you deserve the honor, as you landed the killing blow.

Lastly, I'm sure my brother is already seeing to your safety, but please be wary of your surroundings.

Liedis Kainrod of Rosalia

"Is this what His Highness truly wanted to say?" Estelle wondered aloud after reading the silver writing.

"Since he went to the trouble of writing a letter in this way, I would say yes. He probably wanted to avoid it being seen by Duke Marwick's people..." Arcrayne still looked sour.

Estelle didn't know what face she should be making either. When she recalled Liedis, she couldn't help thinking of the time he'd showed up uninvited to the Libra Palace and hurt May. But while she couldn't forgive him for that, maybe Liedis wasn't so bad at heart.

Estelle looked at the letter once again. The handwriting was beautiful, even if it wasn't on par with Arcrayne's. The polite words gave off the impression of a sincere person.

"This must be a warning. I wonder if something will happen in the near future..." said Estelle.

"I don't need him to tell me about the dangers; I'm already looking out for them." The prince glared at the letter, looking highly tempted to click his tongue.

"Lord Arc, I am sure you have your reservations about this, but may I send His Highness a sympathy gift too?" Estelle asked timidly. "I believe I would not be here now had it not been for his help."

Arcrayne sighed. "Do as you like. Not that it won't bother me."

"But you will allow it."

"I guess so," replied the prince with an awkward smile.

Chapter 3: The Conferment of the Medal

In the Palace of Albion, medals were conferred in April of every year.

The ceremony was held at the Pisces Palace. That was also where Arcrayne and Estelle's engagement had been announced at the New Year's party.

The prince led Estelle inside the palace. Today, she would receive the Rosalian Cross for slaying the dragon.

As they stepped inside, they gathered the looks of those already present. To Estelle, who could see the mana of living things and the emotion contained within, such an environment was far from comfortable.

Aware of this, Arcrayne sneaked a glance at her and saw her facing forward, looking undaunted. She'd grown much stronger since the day he'd met her. Her strength dazzled him. At the same time, it made him somewhat uneasy.

Ever since he'd brought her to the Libra Palace as his betrothed, she'd grown dramatically more beautiful. She'd been lovely from the start, but her attendants at the palace must've further refined her into a city woman.

When Arcrayne had seen Estelle unconscious, injured in the dragon attack at the hunting contest, he'd become aware of it—aware of the fact that he'd become physically attracted to Estelle at some point. He'd wondered what he would do if he lost her.

Fortunately, she'd lived. But he couldn't forgive himself for not making it back in time during the dragon's attack. Had he been there, Estelle might not have been scarred.

Ever since that day, guilt had plagued Arcrayne every time he looked at her.

But that wasn't all. When they'd first met and he'd decided to marry her, he'd told her he would act like he was deeply in love with her—that was another thing he felt guilty about.

At some point, his fake love had become real. But how was he supposed to tell her that at this point?

Estelle had been somewhat cold with him as of late. That change in her attitude was another reason he hesitated to tell

her the truth.

His mana probably darkened every time he felt guilty. Estelle must've seen it, yet she didn't say anything. That was why he couldn't tell what was going through her mind.

If only my power weren't telekinesis but the ability to see mana... he thought to himself. Glancing at Estelle walking beside him, he shook his head slightly.

There was no use wishing for the impossible. And besides, it was thanks to his telekinesis that he'd survived to this day.

Shaking off these thoughts, Arcrayne led Estelle to the seats for those who would be awarded medals and quietly told her, "Good luck."

Estelle nodded, a stiff expression on her face. She seemed nervous.

Arcrayne put a hand on her shoulder to encourage her, then walked toward the throne.

***

Once the ceremony had ended and Estelle was free, she headed to Arcrayne straightaway.

"You were good out there, Estelle," said the prince.

Estelle replied with a smile. "Thank you, Lord Arc. Did I do everything right?"

"You did. You were dignified and striking."

"That is good to hear... I was so nervous." A look of relief appeared on Estelle's face.

"You didn't look it."

"I kept telling myself to stand proud and not think too much."

The newly attached Rosalian Cross on the chest of Estelle's dress shone brilliantly. Her robe montante—the formal afternoon wear—suited her well, but Arcrayne felt bitter inside.

"I am all right, so please do not make such a face," Estelle said with an awkward smile—she must've sensed how he felt with her power.

"It doesn't change that this puts us both in a more difficult position..."

Had it been possible, Arcrayne wished he could've prevented Estelle from becoming famous for slaying the dragon, as well as from receiving a medal for it. Unfortunately, there had been too many witnesses. All they could do at this point was accept their

fate.

I'll take the throne, the prince said to himself. He looked toward Sachis, who was still present and having a pleasant chat with other recipients of medals. The king had wanted to give him the throne for a long time, and soon his wish would come true. The thought of it got on Arcrayne's nerves somewhat.

"Medals are surprisingly heavy," uttered Estelle. "I never knew, as I've never worn one before."

Was she talking about their physical weight or the emotional one? Maybe both...?

It must be both, concluded the prince. He turned toward Estelle and looked intently at the medal shining on her chest.

Aiming for the throne meant coming into direct confrontation with the second prince's faction.

Appearing at the back of Arcrayne's mind were his stepmother, Queen Truteliese, and her father, Duke Marwick.

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Meanwhile...

Mircea Marwick was visiting Truteliese's private room in the Leo Palace.

"They must be giving her the medal in the Pisces Palace right now," he said.

"I suppose so," replied Truteliese.

Mircea struck his stick against the ground in anger and glared at her. "Damn you. Why didn't you stop it?"

"If I could, I would have. But too many people at the contest saw Lady Estelle land the killing blow on that dragon... If you still insist on blaming me, then please do tell me how I was meant to prevent the ceremony from taking place."

Her matter-of-fact tone further angered Mircea.

How dare you talk back to me... he said in his mind. As a woman and as his daughter, Truteliese was his property and his pawn. It was utterly humiliating to have someone like that talk back to him.

Despite everything, however, she was a queen, so he couldn't afford to lash out at her and had to suppress his anger.

"Things will certainly change after this ceremony," she said.

"Then we must make our next move," uttered Mircea.

"Is it not time to finally take a firm stance?"

“I suppose it is.” Mircea heaved a big sigh.

Chapter 4: Queen’s Treason

How did things come to this…? wondered Estelle, sighing for the umpteenth time and gazing listlessly at the white wall of her solitary confinement cell.

This was the Tower of Albion. Located in the center of the city, not far from the Palace of Albion, it was a tall tower that held political prisoners. Estelle was currently detained here.

Until yesterday, she’d lived in the Libra Palace. She’d been playing with Snow in the early afternoon, but then, all of a sudden, she’d been arrested and brought here.

“How strange. Why isn’t she reacting to it?” wondered Estelle.

She’d waved a rod with a mouse-shaped toy hanging from it in front of Snow, but the white cat wasn’t playing with it at all. She was chasing it with her eyes and waving her tail, so she did seem to have an interest in it, but she simply sat there, just moving her head.

“Is she tired of it?” suggested Leah, a worried look on her face.

“Perhaps it has to do with the way you move the toy. May I borrow it for a moment?” asked Cian, who was Estelle’s bodyguard today.

While he was a member of the Royal Guard serving Arcrayne, he was temporarily filling in for Neville as Estelle’s personal guard, since Neville had been badly injured in the dragon attack and was still recovering.

Furthermore, it was still unclear who’d brought that dragon there in the first place, so both the royal family and Albion Police were desperately looking for those responsible. Hopefully they’d find something soon, though they didn’t seem to be making much progress.

Estelle handed Cian the rod. He waved the toy mouse hanging from it in front of Snow, at which point the cat got up and leaped at it. Snow was absorbed in the play—she lay down on her belly, then ran chaotically around the floor like a lizard, then jumped about.

“What is this anger I feel…?” Leah uttered quietly.

And while Cian didn't deserve it, Estelle felt the same way.

"What makes us different?" she wondered, frowning.

"Try to think about how the cat feels."

Cian's reply didn't really explain much to Estelle. She recalled Neil expressing his dissatisfaction with how ridiculously popular Cian was with animals.

"Cheating is bad, Snow," Estelle complained, giving the cat a serious look.

One of the appeals of owning a cat was that you couldn't tell who actually owned whom, but it was unreasonable nonetheless.

"How do you do it? Could you try to be a little more descriptive?" asked Leah.

"Well... You have to imagine how a real mouse moves..." replied Cian, seeming at a loss.

Estelle took the rod from him to try again.

Suddenly, she could hear someone arguing outside. Snow put her front paws on a nearby couch and got up, then stared at the door with a face that said, *What's meowing on over there?!*

It appeared someone was being so rude as to try and force their way into the room. They were arguing back and forth with the guard who kept watch outside the door.

"What's going on? I'll go take a look," said Cian.

As he went over to the door, Snow hurried to hide. Immediately afterward, the door opened without so much as a knock, and an imposing group of men dressed in deep blue military uniforms entered the room. The color of their clothes startled Estelle.

The only ones allowed to wear royal blue—the exclusive deep blue color that symbolized the royal family—were members of the royal family and those with special permission from the king.

Which meant that these were no ordinary soldiers, but the Sovereign's Guard—troops under the king's personal command, formed separately from the Royal Guard.

Why are they here...? wondered Estelle. Cold sweat beaded on her back.

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"Are you Lady Flozeth?" asked one of the men, a fierce look on his face. He seemed to be of the highest rank in the group.

“I have no name to give someone who would barge in here without permission.” Though Estelle replied coldly, she was filled with apprehension and nervousness on the inside.

Arcrayne was out on official duties with Claus today, and he wasn’t coming back until that night. Which meant Estelle had to deal with this group herself.

“How rude of me. But stating your name is for your own sake. Her Majesty Queen Regent has issued a warrant for Lady Flozeth’s arrest,” said the man.

Queen Regent? A warrant? Estelle furrowed her brows, unable to comprehend the meaning of his words.

“Queen Regent…? His Majesty the King is in good health, is he not…?” she asked.

A regent was a person performing the functions of the king on his behalf. It was a temporary position created when a boy under eighteen became king, or when the king was in need of long-term recuperation due to illness.

“His Majesty fell into a coma in the early hours of yesterday morning,” explained the man. “In accordance with the Regency Act, by the combined will of Her Majesty the Queen, the leader of the House of Lords, and Lord Chief Justice, Her Majesty the Queen has become regent.”

While the king’s condition took Estelle by surprise, she was also astonished that Queen Truteliese would go over the head of Arcrayne and become regent herself.

“I beg your pardon, but in the event that a regent is required, does His Highness Prince Arcrayne not have higher priority than Her Majesty for that role, as the first in line for the throne?” asked Cian.

Estelle didn’t remember the details of the Regency Act, but it was clearly strange that the queen, who was merely the spouse of the king, would be granted precedence over Arcrayne, the first one in line for the throne.

While Estelle stood confused, the man glanced coldly at Cian.

“The brandy that His Majesty drank before bed last night had poison in it. That’s what put him in his current state.” The man paused for a moment. “His Highness Prince Arcrayne is suspected of attempted assassination. And so are you, Lady Flozeth.”

“Me?” Estelle’s eyes widened in surprise. “There is no way His Highness would do such a thing!”

“What does Lady Estelle have to do with this?!”

A commotion spread through the room.

“We are only here to carry out the arrest warrant. She may defend herself in court at a later date,” said the man.

“That is tyranny!”

“His Highness has been so busy recently that he could not have set foot anywhere near the Leo Palace! What would call for such a warrant…?”

“Wait! You can’t disobey them!” Estelle hurriedly stopped her attendants who’d started arguing back.

Members of the Sovereign’s Guard were known as elite soldiers. They were all brawny and had more mana than regular guards. Attempting resistance was sure to have dire consequences for everyone.

“If there is a warrant for my arrest, then I shall obey you,” said Estelle. “May I leave my valuables with my attendant?”

“Certainly. I’m glad you are a sensible woman,” said the man.

Having received permission, Estelle gave Leah the mana pistol she always had on her, as well as her engagement ring. Weapons would definitely be confiscated, and she wanted to make absolutely sure not to lose the ring.

Thus, Estelle had come quietly with the guards and had been brought here, to this prison.

She’d heard that there were hidden passages here and there in the Libra Palace that led outside. Perhaps it might have been possible to somehow buy time and escape through them, but Estelle hadn’t been able to make that choice because, had she done so, it would definitely have caused great trouble for not only the staff of the Libra Palace but also the people of House Flozeth.

Allowing herself to be arrested and insisting on her innocence would surely lessen the harm to the people around her, as opposed to a poorly planned escape.

Perhaps the silver lining in Estelle’s situation was that her cell wasn’t so terrible.

The clothes and accessories she’d worn at the Libra Palace had all been confiscated when she’d been brought here, and she’d been forced to change into different clothes—but said

clothes, while plain and completely bereft of adornment, were of high quality.

There was also a window here, though there were iron bars on it. Apparently the cell was ventilated and cleaned on a regular basis. While the place looked old overall, it was hygienic.

There was a rug on the floor and a mana lamp on the ceiling. And while the top half of the wall separating it was made out of glass, there was a toilet here too.

A bed, a desk, a chair, and a cupboard. It was a very simple set of furniture, but it met the minimum criteria. There were books here too, which Estelle could use to kill time.

The window had a good view of the city below—she could tell that she was rather high in the Tower of Albion. The view made Estelle recall something.

While the tower was notorious for its poor conditions, there were apparently special chambers for royals and nobles on the top floor. This must've been one of them.

The entrance had a plain metal door. There was a barred window in it, located at eye level.

Patrols came and looked inside on a regular basis. So far there had only been female guards. Estelle felt someone's consideration behind that too.

The conditions here were completely different from the underground jail of the Libra Palace, where Diana had been put after pretending to be Leah.

Estelle wondered why her treatment was different. Was it because she was only a suspect so far?

She sat down on the bed and then lay on it in an ill-mannered way.

It's completely impossible that Lord Arc would poison His Majesty... she thought to herself. Estelle was convinced that the charges were false.

While Arcrayne had a cunning side, he wasn't the kind of man who would use dirty tricks to get rid of his political opponents.

And it was strange enough in the first place that the Sovereign's Guard would come while he was away. Arcrayne was an Awoken. He wielded telekinesis and, as a member of royalty, had a high amount of mana. Now that Sachis was comatose, the only one who could stand up to him was Liedis. His maternal relative, Duke Marwick, was an Awoken too, but the infirmity of his age made him a nonfactor.

In other words, in order to shut down Arcrayne—the strongest person in Rosalia—someone must've waited for him to be away, then seized the Libra Palace and taken Estelle and its employees hostage.

While Estelle didn't want to jump to conclusions, she couldn't see it as anything but a plot by the second prince's faction. Arcrayne was currently the first in line for the throne, so if something were to happen to Sachis, he would normally become king. He couldn't wield the title of crown prince because the queen and the second prince's faction supporting her wouldn't allow it, but since the law of inheritance had yet to change, he was the closest to the throne.

Which meant that if Sachis were to perish now, Arcrayne would be the one who benefited from it the most.

Are they trying to force people to believe Lord Arc is behind all this simply because he would benefit from it...? wondered Estelle. That must've been it—it couldn't have been anything else.

The thought filled her with anger. It was obviously the queen who would've had the easiest time poisoning Sachis, as she lived in the Leo Palace with him. It was also too suspicious how she'd secretly proclaimed herself regent without telling Estelle or Arcrayne anything.

Estelle recalled historical events from her education as a princess, which she was currently revisiting.

A duke had once been charged with high treason and executed, simply because the writing engraved on a belfry that was donated to the church had smeared his name.

A queen had lost the affections of the king and had been executed on suspicion of adultery and incest. For various reasons, the king had married five times during his life and executed three of his wives. He was remembered as the worst tyrant in Rosalia's history.

Such events had seemed comically outrageous to her at the time, but now that she was involved in one of them, there was nothing funny about it.

Hopefully Arcrayne would manage to prove his innocence. For if he couldn't...

The thought of the gallows sent a shiver up Estelle's spine.

She didn't regret meeting him. But if she was executed because of her connection to him, it would cause trouble for Sirius.

You lied to me, Lord Arc, Estelle said inwardly. He'd told her he'd run before things became dangerous.

She wondered what he was up to now. Had the Sovereign's Guard surrounded him just like they'd done to Estelle, wherever he was?

Did he allow himself to be arrested? Or did he run? Estelle wondered.

If he were on the run or fighting back, her treatment would probably have been worse, so he must've done as he was told. Arcrayne was distrustful of people, but he treasured those he allowed near himself. He probably wouldn't do anything if Estelle or his close aides were taken hostage. Or rather, he surely couldn't.

While Estelle had been caught by surprise, she was sorry to be a burden on him as a result of her decision.

Should I have run...? Estelle immediately shook her head. *No. What would've happened to everyone else if I'd done so?*

The uneasiness about her future, her attendants, Arcrayne, and her family was overwhelming.

Estelle shut her eyes tight and covered them with her hands.

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The door of Estelle's cell had a smaller door built into it. It was used to bring in her food.

The food wasn't any worse in quality or taste than what she'd had at the Libra Palace, which made her suspect someone was looking out for her.

What also surprised her was that, along with the food, she'd received a newspaper.

"Why do I get newspapers?" asked Estelle.

"I was told it is per Her Majesty's wishes," replied the female guard who'd brought her food.

"Her Majesty...?" Estelle was taken aback by the unexpected answer, then hurriedly called out to the guard, who'd started to leave. "Wait! Where is His Highness Prince Arcrayne?"

"Pardon me, but I cannot say anything," the woman replied coldly and left.

Estelle drooped her shoulders and lowered her eyes to the food on the tray in her hands. But her anxiety kept her from getting any appetite at all.

Should I eat, since who knows how long I'll be here? But… Estelle couldn't shake the thought that the food might be poisoned and as a result, couldn't bring herself to eat.

She sighed, left the food on the desk, then took the newspaper and sat down on the bed. It was *The Albion Times*—a quality paper known for its conservative views. Calling a newspaper conservative was another way of saying it leaned toward the second prince's faction.

Though reading it made her feel bitter, Estelle looked through the articles. The story about Sachis's condition was widely covered from the first page on. However, the cause was being reported as food poisoning.

When Estelle read through the article on the first page, she went pale.

It has come to light that beef supplied to the palace was the cause. Not only has His Majesty been laid up, but Prince Arcrayne too. As neither of them are currently able to govern, Her Majesty the Queen has taken the regency in haste and shall fill in for His Majesty until he recovers…

So they covered it up, she concluded.

A king being intentionally poisoned was too sensational and would've negatively affected Rosalia's reputation. This must've been why they'd claimed it had been food poisoning. According to the article, the queen had only avoided the same fate because she didn't like beef.

Since they'd told the public that the king had been struck down with poison, it was only natural that the search for the culprit would begin. Even if the queen and Duke Marwick tried to pin things on Arcrayne, the public would surely suspect the queen too.

It was true that Arcrayne would've benefited from the king's death, but what if the queen had been behind this, trying to depose the prince? The masses loved conspiracy theories and frequently jumped to conclusions like that.

Estelle continued to read the article, gnashing her teeth in frustration. There was an explanation of the Regency Act, which she'd been curious about. Just as Estelle had remembered, when a regent was required, princes had higher priority than the queen.

Men have priority for inheritance, after all… thought Estelle. So

the queen must've gotten rid of both Sachis and Arcrayne at the same time in order to become regent.

A flash of realization hit Estelle—one that meant this situation might be quite dire.

If they'd secretly captured Arcrayne and disposed of him, claiming he'd perished from food poisoning, Liedis would eventually become king.

I can't believe she'd poison His Majesty just to take the throne… Estelle thought. From an outsider's perspective, the king and the queen had a very harmonious relationship. So it was hard to believe that the queen had done it. *But wait, was His Majesty really poisoned…?*

Suddenly, the sight of Sachis pushing himself to use his power to the point that he'd coughed up blood during the dragon attack flashed through Estelle's mind.

Sachis had spent time recuperating from an illness about half a year prior, and rumors about him being in poor health had been quietly circulating since then. At the time, the cause had been announced as pneumonia, and instead of creating a regent, he'd entrusted some of his public duties to Arcrayne, and others to the queen. Because of that, the majority had believed his condition hadn't been all that dire. However, since the poor health of those in power could invite political instability, it was often covered up.

What if His Majesty is down with some regular illness, and they're claiming it was poisoning…? Estelle felt like it was a bit of a stretch. But the idea gave her goose bumps. The more she thought about things, the less she knew what was true and what she should believe.

The one thing she was completely certain about was that she was in extreme danger. If Arcrayne were to be killed in secret, Estelle would surely be next.

She didn't want to think that an Awoken like him could be killed so easily, but it was probably better to mentally prepare for the worst.

It was scary, however.

Estelle had always known her position might lead to her death, but now that she'd come face-to-face with the possibility, she realized how naive she'd been.

I don't want to die yet, she thought to herself and wrapped her arms around her body. *What if my brother and the earldom suffer*

too...?

The images of Sirius, their uncle and aunt, and even the earldom of Flozeth flashed through Estelle's mind.

Estelle definitely loved Arcrayne, but for a moment, she wished she'd never met him. The thought made her disgusted with herself.

Other than love for Arcrayne, Estelle's heart held love for her family and her earldom too, and she couldn't bear the thought of trouble coming their way because of her.

Tears welled up in her eyes and her vision grew blurry.

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Am I actually so shameless...? Estelle wondered with a self-deprecating smile after her hunger woke her up.

She didn't know what time it was, as there was no clock in the cell, but it was probably dawn, since light was starting to appear in the sky outside the window.

Estelle remembered crying herself to sleep. She was surprised that her body sought food even in a situation like this.

As she got up from the plain bed, she saw the food she'd left on the desk. The possibility of it being poisoned bothered her, but she'd heard that one couldn't live for more than three days without food or water.

And water is especially important... she reminded herself. If she didn't eat anything, she would starve to death.

Having resolved herself, Estelle reached out for the bread.

It tastes bad, she thought. As the bread had been left out for all this time, it had grown dry and hard. Even soaking it in apple compote wasn't enough to make Estelle able to eat the whole thing. That said, she didn't feel like touching the cold soup and meat, given how much time had passed.

Estelle sighed. She felt guilty toward whoever had prepared this meal. There didn't seem to be anything off about it, and Estelle felt normal so far.

Estelle went back to bed, holding her stomach, which protested in hunger. She didn't feel like she could fall asleep, but there was nothing else to do, so she lay down and closed her eyes. It had been quite a while since the last time she'd been in bed alone, and she missed Arcrayne's warmth.

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As Estelle had discovered over the two days she'd spent in her cell, meals were provided three times a day at specific times, and there was always something like a book or a newspaper brought with them to kill time.

She could clearly hear the bell of the nearby Albion Cathedral, so she more or less knew what time it was.

Apparently guards patrolled and brought Estelle food in shifts. All of them were women. But they all persisted in their refusal to talk, and Estelle hadn't managed to get any information out of them regarding the events outside. All she knew was what the newspapers told her.

The meals were served suitably warm and their taste and quality remained at a high level. They weren't laced with anything either. Estelle found all this eerie, unable to understand the queen's intentions.

Over the past two days, the newspapers had been extensively reporting on the queen's actions as regent. They'd also said the king's and Arcrayne's conditions were touch and go, which made Estelle feel like her premonition was gradually turning into reality.

Even when she tried to read the books she'd received, their contents didn't enter her head at all.

As she kept going in circles in her mind about the future of her and her loved ones, she would read the same articles over and over, sigh, and then repeat the process.

Was this how prisoners waiting on death row felt every day? Estelle didn't think her mind could stand to spend a few more days this way. She wished they'd hurry and tell her what lay in store for her.

I wish I had never met Lord Arc. I wish I didn't have this power, Estelle thought to herself. Her power was the reason Arcrayne had made her his betrothed. She hated herself for thinking this way. *I'm his fiancée, and yet…*

Frankly, her first impression of him hadn't been good. His mask of a calm and gentle prince hid a man who was sly and calculating. However, his awfully gentlemanly attitude and the way he'd striven so hard to treasure her after forcing her to move to the Libra Palace had enamored him to Estelle, little by little.

She'd hated his scheming nature at first. But gradually she'd come to notice the deep-rooted solitude and distrust of people hidden underneath it, and at some point, her dislike of him had turned into wanting to support him no matter what.

Even now, Estelle's love for him was overflowing. He was definitely the most important person to her in the whole world.

But at the same time, as a woman born into a family of hereditary nobles, she was just as concerned for House Flozeth.

If the king's condition were attributed to food poisoning, and Estelle and Arcrayne weren't accused of assassination, then her brother and uncle wouldn't come to harm. She hoped so.

Sighing listlessly, Estelle lowered her eyes back to an article she'd already read many times over.

Suddenly, she sensed with her power that a large mass of mana was approaching. There was too much of it to belong to an ordinary noble.

The mana was on the other side of a wall of her cell. Estelle thought a new prisoner had been brought into a nearby cell and sneaked a glance along the corridor, but things were utterly silent outside. While she found it strange, she stared in the direction of the owner of that mana.

Then, with a dragging sound, a door-sized section of the wall suddenly slid down. Behind it appeared an imposing man with a sword on his hip. Estelle's eyes went wide when she saw his face.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Lady Estelle."

The man looked like an older Arcrayne—it was the king, Sachis Ethelbert of Rosalia.

"Y-Your Majesty...?"

Sachis smiled sweetly at Estelle.

"My apologies that it's not a prince coming to save the imprisoned princess, but an old man like me. I'll explain things later, but for now, mind getting out of here with me?" He extended a hand toward her.

Estelle took it, not without hesitation.



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Beyond the opened wall was a passage made out of stone, only wide enough for one person. There were mana lamps on the ceiling, illuminating the area with orange light. Spiral stairs led far downward.

It was dusty and reeked of mold.

As Estelle followed Sachis inside, her face caught on a spider web, causing her to grimace.

“Is this a hidden passage?” she asked.

“Just like the palace, the Tower of Albion is a remnant of the Kingdom of Ancient La Tène. It’s interspersed with secret passages and escape routes of this sort,” replied Sachis while directing his mana into a panel embedded in the wall.

With the same sound it had made when it had slid open, the wall closed back up.

“This is incredible. The wall did not look like it could lead to a passage,” said Estelle.

She hadn’t seen any seams on the wall from inside her cell.

“This is the Kingdom of Ancient La Tène’s lost technology. We may understand how to use it, but we can’t make the same kinds of things. Even if our mana technology makes progress, who knows how many centuries it will take before it reaches the level of those times…” Sachis was gazing at a wall, but he had a distant look in his eyes. “Now, we must get going before someone finds out. Come.”

“Where are we headed?” asked Estelle as she started walking behind the king.

“For now, the palace. This passage leads to various places around the city, but it’s also a labyrinth. If you leave my side, you might never get out, so be sure to stay close.”

The king’s words made Estelle a little scared.

“Your Majesty, do you have all the paths memorized?”

“I do. They get etched in here when you take the throne.” Sachis pointed at his head.

Estelle tilted her own head, not understanding what he meant.

“When they put the crown on your head at the coronation, knowledge of remnants of La Tène is burned into your mind. Sounds eerie, doesn’t it?”

Imagining it was certainly off-putting.

The Crown, the Key, the Quill, and the Holy Sword—the four regalia passed down with every coronation—were famous for being extremely powerful artifacts.

“Are you sure you should be telling me this?” asked Estelle.

“You’ll be royalty in a few months, Lady Estelle, so you would’ve found out sooner or later regardless.” Sachis smiled at her.

So he approves of me now, realized Estelle. When Arcrayne had first introduced her to him, the king hadn’t sounded pleased, and his mana had been dark too. Estelle wondered what had changed his mind. Had it been the incident with the stray dragon?

She’d more or less felt goodwill from Sachis’s mana, but it was different to have it actually show in his words and attitude.

Estelle felt joy at having the approval of a member of her loved one’s family, but then she remembered that she didn’t know Arcrayne’s whereabouts.

“Um… Is Lord Arc safe? If you happen to know, please do tell me.”

“Arc is in the palace’s dungeon. Look.”

Stopping, Sachis took out a palm-sized key from a pocket of his frock coat. The Key was covered in fine engravings and had a large mana stone embedded into it. It was clear at a glance that this was an artifact.

“Is that, perchance, the Key of the regalia?” asked Estelle.

“That’s right,” replied Sachis as he directed his mana into the Key.

Silver light emanated from the Key, and inside the light appeared a three-dimensional image of a row of beautiful white buildings—the Palace of Albion. Estelle was fascinated by how detailed the model was.

The walls of the buildings were semitransparent, and one could faintly see what went on inside.

Sachis pinched a small area of the image of the Leo Palace with the thumb and index finger of his right hand, then spread the two fingers. This greatly magnified that area, making it easier to see inside the building.

It wasn’t only the building that appeared in the image, and one could clearly see what people in it were doing too.

“Wow… I never knew the Key had such a function,” said

Estelle.

The public was only told that the Key was meant for activating an ancient weapon located under the Palace of Albion. Estelle had never imagined it even let one observe what went on inside the palace.

"Does it let you see everything?" she asked.

"Nothing goes on in the palace without my knowing," replied the king.

Arcrayne had previously told Estelle that Sachis would know if someone used telekinesis inside the palace. Perhaps that too was a feature of this key.

A chill ran down Estelle's spine when she realized Sachis could spy on her going about her day in the palace if he wanted to.

"Allow me to make it clear that I haven't used this in a while," explained the king. "I swear I don't peek inside the Libra Palace, so don't look at me like that."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I can tell from the look on your face."

Estelle brought her hands to her cheeks in a hurry.

"You should work on hiding your emotions a little better," added Sachis.

"My apologies," Estelle replied dejectedly.

Giving her a faint smile, Sachis held out his hand toward the image projected from the Key and magnified a different place. Now one had a clear view of Queen Truteliese and Duke Marwick talking about something. Standing behind the queen was Liedis—apparently he'd been summoned from the Royal College.

"It looks as though they are plotting something," said Sachis, his mana heavily darkening as he looked coldly at the people in the image.

"Your Majesty, what in the world is going on? The Sovereign's Guard came to the Libra Palace all of a sudden, and I know not what to think..."

"I'm aware that a warrant for your and Arcrayne's arrests has been issued in Truteliese's name as the regent. They're accusing you of poisoning me, are they not?"

"Correct. But the newspapers I read in my cell said you and Lord Arc came down with food poisoning..."

"My food *was* poisoned. Though I only pretended to consume it and threw it away."

Estelle froze up in astonishment. "Who would do such a thing

to you…?”

“Judging by everything that happened, it must’ve been Truteliese.” Sachis spoke with a calm look on his face, but his mana was utterly dark. He appeared to be quite furious. “She chose her role as Duke Marwick’s daughter and Liedis’s mother over being my wife.”

Estelle saw it as Sachis reaping what he’d sown. He’d kept the queen near him despite her and Duke Marwick continuously making attempts on Arcrayne’s life, and now he was paying the price.

Royal marriages were no simple matter. In order to maintain the royal bloodline, Rosalian queens were expected to give birth to at least two children. As the former queen, Miriallia, had only given birth to Arcrayne before her death, Sachis had had to marry Truteliese.

What had made him so affectionate toward Truteliese? Had it been her charm, or the result of his efforts to maintain the power balance with his external relatives and the nobility…?

As Estelle gazed intently at Sachis, he forced a smile.

“Is it really that shocking?” he asked. “Public opinion is leaning toward Arcrayne more and more, in part thanks to you slaying that dragon. I expected them to grow bolder in their tactics right about now. So I took advantage of it to set *them* up instead.”

“Is the Leo Palace not in chaos right now, with you gone?”

“It should still be a while before they find out. I left my body double there.”

Next, Sachis enlarged the image to show what appeared to be the bedroom of a person of high rank. Sleeping on the bed in the center of it was a man with a face very similar to that of Sachis.

“He really looks like you,” she said.

“He’s from Shadow of the Rose. It’s downright eerie how closely he can make himself resemble me.”

Shadow of the Rose was an intelligence organization, and just like the Sovereign’s Guard, it was under the king’s direct control. There were credible rumors of it having a hand in inexplicable incidents such as former crown prince Gilfis dying in an accident in the story known as *the love with the crown at stake*.

“Wait, do I owe my good treatment in the Tower of Albion to you, Your Majesty?” asked Estelle.

“In order to make the queen believe her plot succeeded, there was a need to put you in a cell. I’m truly sorry to make you go

through something so frightening," Sachis confessed apologetically. "This is where Arcrayne is."

He'd zoomed in on another place. Between the front gate of the Palace of Albion and the twelve buildings named after the signs of the zodiac was a vast garden with a massive fountain at the center. Sachis had zoomed in on the underground space directly beneath the fountain in question. It was an intricate network of pathways and small rooms—practically a labyrinth.

Lord Arc! Estelle exclaimed inwardly, holding her breath when she saw Arcrayne in one of the rooms.

He sat leaning on the wall, shackles on his wrists and ankles. The sight made Estelle feel pity for him and anger at the queen.

"This is a special jail for the Awoken, built on the remnants of the ancient kingdom. It's made to block your mana," explained Sachis.

The room Arcrayne was kept in was made entirely out of a white material—the walls, the floors, and the ceiling. On top of that, the prince's clothes and shackles were white too.

Estelle had heard about keeping a prisoner in an entirely white room as a form of torture. Apparently it was damaging to the mind to be locked in a small, purely white room with nothing in it. Recalling it made Estelle even more worried for Arcrayne.

"Now, I need to go rescue the captured prince next, but what about you?" asked the king. "You can wait in the Libra Palace if you like."

"May I accompany you? If I would not be a burden?"

"By all means come, if that's what you wish. I'm sure Arc will feel relieved when he sees you. He let himself be caught because you and his close attendants were taken hostage."

His words made Estelle realize something that had slipped her mind. "Are the people of the Libra Palace safe?"

While she'd been through a lot recently, she was still ashamed to have forgotten about this until now.

"Don't worry. The Sovereign's Guard unit that came to seize the Libra Palace was acting under my command. They simply made it look as though they were following the queen's orders, so they haven't been rough with anyone. I told them to explain the situation to the employees of the Libra Palace and ask for their help in apprehending Truteliese and Duke Marwick."

The king's words brought Estelle relief.

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Sachis returned the Key to his pocket, signaled with his eyes for Estelle to follow, and started walking down the hidden passage. Estelle chased after his back.

As they descended a narrow stairway with Sachis taking the lead, something started to bother Estelle.

There's much less of his mana than there used to be... I wonder why, she thought to herself.

The last time she'd seen Sachis had been roughly a month ago, at the award ceremony.

Generally, the amount of mana in humans increased as they grew up, and after peaking in their twenties or thirties, it would start slowly decreasing in volume. Also, your mana greatly decreased when you were seriously ill or badly injured, since it was used for your recovery. This was also true for when an Awoken used their powers too much at a time.

Sachis had possessed almost the same amount of mana as Arcrayne and Liedis a month ago, but now, Estelle could see with her eyes that he only had about as much as a regular noble.

Did he use a lot of it to escape...? No, I can't imagine that's the only reason, she thought.

Something about him looked different from before. Estelle closely observed him as they walked.

And then she noticed it. The king's skin—where she could see it, such as the neck and the hands—was too pale. His hands bothered her in particular. Not only were they pale, but they also looked swollen, and his rings dug into his fingers.

His face wasn't pale, but that could be hidden with makeup.

The queen had suddenly stepped up her game and tried to poison Sachis. The king had collapsed a year and a half ago, and there'd been constant rumors about his health ever since. Also, when he'd used his power at the hunting contest, he'd coughed up blood.

If he were to come down with an illness now, the kingship would fall into Arcrayne's hands regardless of whether he'd been invested as crown prince or not.

Arcrayne was the prince first in line for the throne and was of age. He was the first in line for regency too. Which meant that no matter what kind of political influence Duke Marwick exerted, it would be difficult for him to do anything.

Estelle felt like all the pieces had fallen into place.

"Your Majesty, you are unwell, are you not?" asked Estelle.

"I'm as healthy as can be."

"That is a lie. Did Her Majesty not resort to such drastic measures because of your condition?"

"What makes you think I'm lying?"

The king's displeased voice and darkening mana were intimidating, but Estelle decided she couldn't back down.

"The skin on your hands and neck is too pale compared to your face. And your hands are terribly swollen. Might you be masking your complexion with powder and rouge...?"

Sachis stopped and didn't say anything for a moment.

"Is that the sharpshooter in you talking? Looks like I wasn't thorough enough." The king turned around with a sigh.

He'd admitted it—he really wasn't in good condition.

"I pushed myself to use my power too much during the dragon attack. And while there's no imminent danger, I can't use large amounts of mana now. My current condition will hinder any rituals that need to be held, so I want to pass on the crown as soon as possible."

"Will you be passing it to His Highness Prince Arcrayne...?"

"Liedis is still too young. There have been precedents in wartime when the throne was succeeded by the heir with stronger powers, but we live in a time of peace, and there's no reason to make such an exception." Sachis had a bitter look on his face. "I'm truly sorry for making this burden fall on you and Arc. This is all my fault. When Miriallia passed away, I couldn't refuse Truteliese or ignore Duke Marwick... It was also difficult to fully rid the palace of assassins. Arc must've only survived to this day thanks to his quick wits and luck."

Direct descendants of royalty were separated from their parents at the age of seven and given a palace, where they lived surrounded by their close aides. That coupled with the fact that Queen Truteliese had come to the Palace of Albion soon after the death of the previous queen, Miriallia, meant the relationship between Arcrayne and Sachis was rather distant, from what Estelle had heard.

So he tried to protect Lord Arc... she thought to herself. She looked at the king with surprise as the latter made the face of a father.

"I kept telling the duke that I didn't want to bend the law, but

he just wouldn't listen. Maybe that's because he believes the throne was taken from him…" said Sachis, drooping his shoulders.

Estelle cocked her head in confusion.

"Is that because the previous king and Duke Marwick are twins? But even then, the one who left his mother's womb first would be the oldest son."

"She had a C-section."

Estelle was astonished by the king's words.

"It's not made public, as they would be called disembowelers if the people knew, but my father and uncle weren't born naturally."

C-sections were a last-resort measure for when the mother was in danger. It was a taboo in this country, as there was a rather high risk of her dying in the process. It was believed the children would bear the sin of matricide from birth.

"Royals don't have many children of their own. From what I've been told, it was decided to save the newborns even at the expense of the mother, hence the C-section." Sachis spoke in a grave tone.

When she'd given birth to Ethelbert and Mircea Marwick, their mother had perished.

Giving birth to twins is dangerous enough, so it must've been reported as a normal postpartum death, thought Estelle, holding her breath.

"My uncle's anger comes from the fact that he only became the younger twin because of someone's interference," continued Sachis. "Though I think he would've given up if the firstborn prince, Gilfis, had taken the throne…"

The king of two generations prior had had three sons. Ethelbert and Mircea had an older brother by the name of Gilfis. However, he'd fallen in love with a divorcée from the lesser nobility and abandoned the crown, fleeing to the New World with his beloved.

"I was told the fury of my uncle knew no bounds when my father became crown prince. His obsession with the throne has already entered the realm of illness."

"That is yet another royal family secret I have learned today," said Estelle, making a pitiful look.

Sachis gave her a small smile.

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After going down the long stairway for what felt like ten minutes, they finally reached a somewhat spacious area. This time, there was a corridor before them, so long that it seemed to go on endlessly.

“Sorry, but let me rest for a moment. I’ll confess, since you’ve already figured me out, this is physically draining for me,” Sachis said listlessly and sat on the lowest step of the stairway.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty…?” asked Estelle, sitting next to him and looking closely at his face.

There was greasy sweat on his forehead.

It frustrated Estelle that she didn’t have anything on her to offer him, since she’d been locked up in a cell until now. She gently put a hand on the king’s back.

“I’m sorry. I should recover after a short rest…” Sachis sighed. Then, he took the gun from his belt along with its holster and held it out to Estelle. “I’m sure I can’t use it properly in this condition, so I think it’s better off in your hands.”

Accepting the gun, Estelle was astonished. It wasn’t a mana pistol like she’d used all this time, but a revolver that used gunpowder.

“This…” she began.

“Do you know how to use it?”

“My apologies. I do not.”

Gunpowder-based guns were used by commoners who had little mana. Not only did they have more recoil and make more noise compared to mana-based weaponry, but they also needed ammunition. For nobles, who could use guns that harnessed mana, using the alternative brought nothing but drawbacks.

“It’s simple. Pull on the hammer like this, then pull on the trigger. And this is how you reload.” Sachis lectured Estelle on how to use the gun. “It has more recoil than mana-based guns, but a woman should be able to use a handgun of this size.”

Unlike mana weaponry, which used mana as ammunition, this was loaded with actual bullets. The possibility of an accidental discharge scared Estelle somewhat.

“Why do you carry something like this…?” she asked.

“After rescuing Arc, I’m going to restrict the use of mana throughout the entire Palace of Albion.”

“You can do that?”

“I can. This is a power granted exclusively to the king by the Key. Duke Marwick has his private troops in the palace… If nobody can use mana, they won’t be able to make use of their mana guns, nor will Liedis and the duke have use of their powers.” Going silent for a moment, Sachis showed a mischievous smile. “Of course, I’ve already equipped my own troops accordingly.”

“Well, that is going to be quite one-sided…”

“It will. The less blood spilled, the better.”

Sachis was, without a shred of doubt, a country’s leader.

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After a short rest, Estelle and Sachis started walking again. Their pace was naturally slow due to the king’s condition. The corridor was filled with turns, but Sachis walked straight ahead without hesitation.

At some point, Estelle grabbed the king’s sleeve in a fluster. “There is somebody ahead,” she said, having seen the mana of multiple people around the next corner.

“You’re quite sharp, Lady Estelle. That path leads outside. My subordinates should be guarding it.”

Estelle froze up under Sachis’s mildly questioning look.

Should I tell him about my power? But… Estelle hesitated for a moment but shrugged off the thought. She wanted to discuss it with Arcrayne first.

“I grew up in the mountains, so I have good hearing,” she said instead, coming up with this explanation on the spot.

Fortunately, Sachis seemed satisfied with that and didn’t inquire any further. As the two collected themselves and resumed walking, they got to the end of the corridor. There was a panel on the wall, similar to the one in the hidden path outside Estelle’s cell in the Tower of Albion.

“I should check, just in case.”

With that preamble, Sachis took out the Key, directed his mana into it, and summoned a three-dimensional image of the palace. He then magnified a certain point and their current location came into view.

Estelle knew this because she saw herself and the king in the image. She moved a bit to test it, and the image of her moved accordingly. It left quite the impression.

Beyond one of the walls was a storage room tightly packed with barrels and crates. There were five soldiers clad in Sovereign's Guard uniforms on standby inside.

"I had them wait here," said Sachis. "There's nobody in the Guard I trust more than them, so I've told them about my condition."

Putting away the Key, Sachis once again turned to the panel and, this time, directed his mana into it. With the same heavy sliding sound as the secret door in Estelle's cell, a door-sized segment of the wall slid down below the floor. On the other side, Estelle saw what the Key had just shown them.

"Your Majesty! You are safe!"

"We were worried to death about you..."

All the Guardsmen came running, saying this and that to Sachis. It was really intense to have brawny soldiers close in on you all at once like that.

"Only members of royalty are allowed to know the secret passages that lead outside," Sachis said grumpily, then started giving out orders.

Per his orders, one would be sent as a messenger to another unit under Sachis's command, waiting elsewhere; the remaining four would accompany Estelle and the king on their mission to rescue Arcrayne.

As they headed to the dungeon where the prince was held, a man with a fierce look on his face spoke up. "Lady Estelle, I apologize for my rude behavior toward you in the Libra Palace the other day." He seemed to be in command of this unit.

At that point, Estelle noticed that he was the one who'd arrested her.

"His Majesty has informed me about the necessity of that charade. So please don't let it bother you."

The man looked relieved.

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The Sovereign's Guard took point, with Estelle and Sachis walking behind them.

"Turn right at the second intersection. Then, at the three-way junction at the end of the corridor, turn right again."

The hidden passage leading to the dungeon was a labyrinth too. Sachis gave directions.

Apparently, the vast majority of members of the Sovereign's Guard in the Leo Palace were under Sachis's command and only pretended to be following the queen's orders, but there were quite a lot of Duke Marwick's private troops in the whole Palace of Albion right now, and it didn't look like a fight could be avoided.

If one were to break out, the Sovereign's Guard would bear the brunt of the attack, while Sachis and Estelle were told to wait behind them. The soldiers would also be the ones rescuing Arcrayne when they reached his cell.

The Key had shown them several men, who seemed to be the duke's private soldiers, keeping watch over Arcrayne's cell.

"Please stay back no matter what, Your Majesty."

"Exactly. Please mind your condition, and make absolutely sure not to use your power."

"Lady Estelle, don't let His Majesty do anything. I'd hate to go through what I felt at the hunting contest once more."

With all these members of the Sovereign's Guard asking her, Estelle was so overwhelmed she could only nod like a puppet.

So they were at the contest too... she mused.

They must've been harrowed by a feeling of powerlessness back then, just like Estelle's aides from the Libra Palace. Bodyguards and members of the Sovereign's Guard alike were thoroughly trained to put their lives on the line for their charges.

Ordinary people were helpless before dragons. The prerequisite for fighting one was distance and a Dragon Slayer in hand. Royal Awoken who could hold off a dragon's charge with their powers were on a whole different level.

The thought of said Royal Awoken coming into all-out conflict with each other was terrifying. There were stories of Royal Awoken fighting one another in rebellions, and apparently large areas had been turned into scorched earth as a result.

And that's exactly why His Majesty will make it so nobody can use mana... concluded Estelle, touching the gun on her waist as she walked.

It was her first time carrying a gun that used gunpowder, and she'd never shot a person either. Shooting people was completely different from shooting dragons or ordinary animals. Estelle wondered if she'd manage to pull the trigger, should such a need arise.

The touch of cold metal on her fingers made her uneasy.

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Meanwhile…

That bitch… She won't get away with it once I'm out of here. Arcrayne berated Truteliese in his mind using the full extent of his vocabulary. The stream of insults he directed at his political enemy included the kinds of indecent language he'd never use normally.

Being locked in a pure white cell, he saw this as the only way he could maintain his sanity.

Arcrayne had shackles on his hands and feet preventing the release of mana. And on top of being tied down in such a way, he was locked in a white cell.

This was a jail for Awoken located under the palace. Its walls, floors, and ceilings were all painted white.

The shackles already made it impossible for him to use his power, but they'd been "kind" enough to put him in such a cell on top of that. They must've been just that wary of him, as Royal Awoken wielded monstrous power.

Either way, it took a warped mind to build a jail like this. Not only were the cells white, but also the clothes Arcrayne had received, his shackles, and everything else in view.

Also, the thick walls and door of this cell prevented sounds from getting in. This was a form of psychological torture through sensory deprivation. It was said that people thoroughly deprived of color and sound lost their sanity little by little.

Even the food was white. All they gave him was rice pudding, porridge, and similar foods, colorless and tasteless. Arcrayne felt like he'd become livestock.

Though I suppose I should consider it good treatment to get food at all, given my situation… Arcrayne sighed deeply.

When he closed his eyes, Estelle's face appeared at the back of his mind. What if she was being treated the same way? The mere thought of it was heartrending.

Arcrayne had allowed himself to be arrested because they'd come for Estelle first. Had they only taken in his people from the Libra Palace, he would've fought back and escaped.

He'd discussed this with his aides in advance. They were to scatter in all directions the moment they sensed danger. If they failed to do so in time, they were to exercise their wits to the fullest and do their best to escape. And if they lost their lives as a

result, they weren't to resent Arcrayne, nor he them. That had been the agreement.

However, Estelle's appearance had disrupted that plan. Arcrayne couldn't disobey if she was involved.

I'd never meant to make anyone special to me, he thought to himself.

People who were special to you became your weak point, which was why he'd meant to protect the one person who was special to him to the best of his ability. He lamented his foolishness for thinking she'd be safe if he locked her up in the birdcage called the Libra Palace.

I should've at least had her come with me, he thought, before shaking off the idea. Even if they'd already been married, he couldn't bring her with him every time he had to go out for his public duties. His unstable position frustrated him and made him feel pathetic.

He'd never imagined the queen would resort to targeting Sachis. Especially when Arcrayne's duties had taken him out of the palace.

That day, he'd had to attend an army ceremony, and it was known that he wouldn't be in. After the ceremony, when he'd parted with his aide Claus and was about to head back to the palace, the Sovereign's Guard had surrounded him.

Arcrayne had doubted his ears when he'd heard Sachis had been poisoned. He *had* expected the queen to do something in the near future, and he'd been wary of her, but her political power came from his father's love for her. So Arcrayne had never expected her to harm him.

If Sachis became indisposed before the order of succession were changed, that would be a problem for the queen—Arcrayne was disgusted with himself for having been naive enough to think that way.

The fact that Estelle had been awarded a medal for slaying a dragon and the advantage her newfound reputation brought to Arcrayne must've been what had driven the second prince's faction to the wall.

Looking back on things, the timing with which they'd come for Sachis and for him showed signs of meticulous planning.

Arcrayne was more worried about Estelle than his own future. He'd once again failed to protect the ones dearest to him. The

frustration and the feeling of worthlessness made him bite his lip.

He wondered what had become of his attendants. Had they been captured like him and Estelle?

He brought unhappiness to those around him simply by existing. He was like an angel of death.

I wish I had never been born, he thought to himself. Had he not existed, there would've been no political strife. He'd never have gotten Estelle and his aides caught up in all of this.

While he wished that at least Estelle was safe, imagining her happy in a world without him made him feel sick. If he couldn't even wish for the happiness of someone special to him, how base and despicable was he?

Arcrayne heaved a deep sigh, caught up in his dark thoughts. But then he thought he heard something and looked up. Had he finally started hallucinating, having been deprived of color and sound? As he drooped his shoulders and smiled in a self-deprecating way, his ears picked up some sound once more.

The sound was heavy. He also heard what seemed like people shouting, which caused him to widen his eyes.

He wondered if someone had come to his rescue before deciding not to get his hopes up just yet, lest they be crushed.

As Arcrayne wrestled with this, the door of the white room opened.

"Your Highness! Are you all right?!"

Barging into the room were soldiers in blue uniforms, their color vivid to the prince's eyes. The sight of brawny men clad in the uniform of the same Sovereign's Guard that had thrown him in here confused the prince.

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"Lord Arc!"

Estelle came running out from behind the soldiers. Arcrayne was dumbfounded, unable to process what was going on. But since she was running, she at least seemed to be in good health, which brought the prince relief.

As she clung to him, her softness and sweet scent made him dizzy, but at the same time, he remembered he hadn't taken a bath since being arrested, which made the situation difficult to

bear. All the same, he couldn't resist her warmth.

"Sorry to interrupt your lovers' reunion, but Lady Estelle, would you mind letting me talk to Arcrayne for a moment?"

The one separating them was Sachis, which served to surprise the prince once again.

"Father? Weren't you poisoned...?"

"I pretended to consume it but threw it out. I'll explain later. Give me your hands—I'll take off your shackles."

Estelle moved away, maybe because of what Sachis said. Reluctant to part with her warmth, Arcrayne couldn't help looking at his father with resentment in his eye.

Shrugging lightly, Sachis drew the sword from his hip. Its appearance took the prince by surprise.

"That looks like Caledfwlch," said Arcrayne.

"Of course it does. That's because it is," the king replied casually, surprising Estelle too.

Caledfwlch—also known as the Holy Sword—was one of the regalia, and an artifact. It was an extremely powerful mana blade said to be capable of splitting oceans and earth alike.

"Why did you bring out something like that?" asked the prince.

"I'll need it later."

With that short reply, Sachis used Caledfwlch to cut off the shackles binding Arcrayne's hands and feet. The tough metal chains split like butter, making the prince feel light in an instant.

Arcrayne released some of his mana as a test to see if he could move the chains that had been binding him. His telekinesis worked as intended, causing the chain to float in the air. The room itself was supposed to block the use of mana, but apparently everyone's presence had disabled this feature.

"You can handle the rest yourself. I wouldn't want to cut your hands off by accident."

Estelle couldn't laugh at the king's joke.

Taking a light breath, Arcrayne used his telekinesis to break the joints of the shackles on his hands and feet.

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Sachis explained the situation to Arcrayne, leaving out the matter of his own condition. Estelle couldn't keep from frowning. Perhaps having noticed that, the king looked her way.

It felt like he was telling her not to say anything uncalled for.

After they got out of the jail, the group split into two.

In order to restrict the use of mana throughout the palace, the king needed to head to the deepest level of the palace's underground and personally use the Key on an Ancient La Tène structure.

Arcrayne and the Sovereign's Guard unit, meanwhile, would join forces with soldiers loyal to the king. Once Sachis activated the mana restriction, the prince would lead the soldiers and quickly take Duke Marwick and the queen into custody.

Everyone unanimously advised Estelle to go with Sachis. They must've not wanted her to see bloodshed.

Estelle felt conflicted about them trying to distance her from danger, but she'd never shot anyone, and neither was she prepared to do it. Even if she went to the surface with Arcrayne and the soldiers, she'd only be getting in the way.

She was also worried about Sachis's condition, so she decided to do as she was told.

"Arc, take this with you." Sachis handed Arcrayne the holy sword Caledfwlch.



“Old records say that even when the use of mana is restricted, this sword can still be used as a mana blade,” the king went on. “Though apparently it still loses a lot of its power.”

“Is that really okay?” asked Arcrayne.

“You should do a better job wielding it than me, since your mana is in its prime. And besides, if you have it, it might help avoid needless bloodshed.”

Giving Arcrayne regalia in this situation was equivalent to proclaiming him the next king.

The prince took Caledfwlch, then grimaced. “It’s quite heavy.”

“Haven’t you prepared yourself for this?” asked Sachis.

“That I have…” Arcrayne looked displeased in both his mana and the look on his face.

He might have readied himself mentally when Estelle had received the award, but actually wielding a sacred sword must’ve been another thing entirely.

If Arcrayne became king, Estelle would naturally become queen. As the future she’d once vaguely imagined started to feel more and more real, she suddenly grew uneasy.

Can I really handle it…? she wondered, lowering her eyes and linking her hands together on her chest.

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To Liedis, who’d been summoned from the Royal College’s dorm, the news of his father and brother becoming indisposed at the same time was hard to believe. As well as the fact that his mother Truteliese had become regent because someone had to rule the country in the meantime.

When he’d first heard all this, the first thought in his mind had been that either his grandfather or his mother had done something. He’d been told that it had been food poisoning from beef, but that reason had sounded entirely forced.

Sachis had used his power at the hunting contest, coughed up blood, and collapsed. It wasn’t the first time he’d come down with something, so there was a possibility he was gravely ill in some way. If he became unable to function as the king now, Liedis would lose his chance to take the throne.

As he headed to the Leo Palace with his chief officer, negative thoughts on his mind, he saw, besides the regular employees, soldiers in unfamiliar uniforms walking around for some reason.

Something big seemed to be going on.

"Who are these soldiers…?" asked Liedis.

"They serve House Marwick and are here to guard Her Majesty," replied his chief officer.

A female employee saw Liedis at the entrance and led him to the parlor, where Queen Truteliese and Duke Marwick awaited him. Behind his grandfather stood his uncle Silvio.

"Things have become quite messy, but you have me and Her Majesty, Your Highness," began his grandfather. "We shall support you with all we have, so please rest assured."

"That's right, Liedis. If His Majesty… You know. If it comes to that, I'll support you as the regent until you reach the age of maturity," continued his mother.

It felt like their pained expressions were masks hiding their smiles. Liedis found it sickening.

Did they make up this story about food poisoning to get rid of Sachis and Arcrayne at the same time? Once he'd had that thought, it refused to leave his head.

"How is father's condition…?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, it cannot be described as good."

Truteliese's clear statement shocked the prince.

"Let me see him," he said.

"Very well. Let's go." Nodding, Truteliese got up.

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"What about my brother and Lady Estelle?" Liedis asked as they walked to Sachis's bedroom.

"Unfortunately, they're both bedridden too, as far as I know. I can't go see them—the employees of the Libra Palace are wary of me and won't let me in. So I can't know their condition for sure."

It was only natural, given the relationship Liedis's mother and brother had had so far. The prince was dejected on the inside.

"Look, Liedis, if His Majesty and Arcrayne don't…"

"Stop," Liedis interrupted her.

If his father and half brother were to disappear, the throne would automatically become his. But he didn't even want to think about it.

The condition of the king was a state secret. Members of the Sovereign's Guard stood watch outside his bedroom. Only Liedis

and Truteliese were allowed inside.

Sleeping in the bed, Sachis looked pallid. It was clear he was alive, as his chest slightly rose and fell. However, he seemed to be emaciated from illness, and looked significantly older than usual.

Numerous tubes were connected to his arms. It was painful to look at.

“He’s not regaining consciousness. The court physician is saying we should be prepared for the worst…” said Truteliese.

Father… Liedis said inwardly.

Passing through his mind were thoughts of how his father had collapsed a year and a half ago, how he’d coughed blood when fighting the dragon, and how there’d been all those rumors of assassination plots surrounding the late Queen Miriallia and the previous Marquess Rogell.

“Was it really food poisoning?” he asked.

“What is that supposed to mean?” replied Truteliese after a pause.

“Is that not simply what you’re making it out to be? While making my brother and father disappear at the same time in order to make me king.”

Liedis’s bold question was met with a calm smile.

“What if I said it is? Would you despise me?”

His mother’s beautiful smile sent a chill up Liedis’s spine.

“What are you saying, mother…?”

“Even you’ve always thought you were more fit for the throne, haven’t you? You’ve grown up hearing it from your grandfather all the time.”

“That’s…”

Recalling the things he himself had said before, Liedis couldn’t deny it on the spot. However…

“Even so, scheming for it is wrong. I don’t want to sit on such a dirty throne.”

“Well, aren’t you fastidious?” Truteliese giggled. “The throne was smeared with blood from the start. No matter how peaceful a kingdom is at any given time, there’s no throne without blood on it. Even if things are calm in the country, the king still sends felons to the gallows.” With a bewitching smile adorning her beautiful face, which was often compared to a red rose, Truteliese spoke quietly, almost as though reciting a poem.

“There’s a difference between executing criminals and

attacking my brother, who's done nothing wrong!"

"Oh, but he *has* done something wrong. He was born before you." Truteliese spewed venom with a radiant smile on her face.

"Is he already...?"

"I'm keeping him alive for now. It would be boring if he died right away."

Liedis gulped.

"He was always an eyesore. I want to at least have some fun with him first..."

"What have you done to him...?"

"There's no need for you to know. Leave everything to your mother."

The way his mother's smile never left her face made her seem like a ghastly monster in Liedis's eyes.

"Did you come after Lady Estelle too?"

"I had no choice. She was an eyesore too. They haven't married yet and people were already calling her Princess Dragon Exterminator..."

After Estelle had bravely fought the dragon, she'd become more than just the woman Arcrayne had fallen in love with at first sight. She was now a hero, and just as Liedis had feared, his mother and grandfather wanted to get rid of her.

"Did you do something to my father too...? Or is he ill...?"

"Who knows?"

Liedis couldn't read anything from Truteliese's smile.

"You don't need to know anything. Your mother will take on all the shady matters."

A chill ran down Liedis's spine. He got goose bumps and began to tremble.

"Why did it come to this...?"

He didn't want such a throne. It disgusted him. But if he became the last member of royalty of direct descent, he'd have no choice but to take it. Several artifacts in the royal family's possession could only be used by those of appropriate lineage—they rejected anyone not of direct royal descent.

A particularly important one was the so-called Foundation Monument lying under the palace. This artifact controlled the water supply and defenses of the island of Great Rosalia.

The absence of a king would make the people suffer. But this wasn't how Liedis wanted to take the throne.

In fact, he'd even thought he had no right to become king.

That was how sinful his grandfather's actions at the hunting contest had been.

"I never knew you were so fainthearted." With an affectionate smile, Truteliese put her hand on Liedis's cheek as he trembled.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran through him, as though he'd been stabbed in the neck with a needle. He became dizzy in an instant.

"Huh... Wha...?"

"Get some rest. While you sleep, your mother will do everything that needs to be done."

Liedis saw that the ring on Truteliese's middle finger had a needle attached to it. By the time he realized she'd drugged him with something, it was already too late. His vision swayed and his consciousness became hazy.

His mother caught him as he began to fall. Her warmth was the last thing Liedis felt as he sank into darkness.

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After parting with Arcrayne, Estelle followed Sachis into the depths of the palace.

The Palace of Albion was built on the remains of the residence of the governor-general left from when Rosalia had been under the rule of Ancient La Tène. That was why things from that era could be found underneath it.

At the end of the labyrinthine underground corridor was a closed double door made out of stone that glowed milky white. Vines were engraved into it—this was something often seen on ruins of Ancient La Tène.

"This used to be the hub of the Government-General. It's called the Shrine," said Sachis.

As usual, there was a panel next to the door.

The king took out the Key, stuck it in the keyhole under the panel, and channeled his mana into it.

The door opened with a heavy sound of grinding stone. Silver light leaked out from inside. Estelle squinted from its brightness.

Beyond the door, an enormous mass of mana swirled. That was what Estelle's eyes had perceived as light.

"No matter how many times I come here, it's hard to believe this place is underground," said Sachis.

Estelle blinked a few times to adjust her eyes. Little by little, she became able to see what things were like beyond the door.

Indeed, it was quite unbelievable that the space ahead was located under the surface.

A stone path, surrounded by pillars with fine, milky white engravings, led to an elevated area. The place was bright as day. It was a garden; flowers bloomed in riotous profusion on each side of the path. There were lily of the valley, regular lilies, daisies, snowdrops, and other flowers Estelle didn't know the names of. With no regard for the season, white flowers of all kinds bloomed in full glory and with a feeling of purity.

"Are these real flowers…? While there may be light, this is still underground…" said Estelle.

It's also hard to imagine that there's somebody taking care of them, she thought to herself. After all, no one could enter this place without the Key. Now that Estelle had arrived at that thought, this beautiful garden began to look bizarre to her.

"It's made with lost technologies. It's best you don't dwell on it." Sachis held out his arm. "Will you let me escort you?"

"It would be an honor." Placing her hand on the king's elbow, Estelle walked with him deeper inside.

The elevated area in the center of the deepest part had a stone monument with enormous mana stones engraved into it. It was the source of the large mass of mana permeating the area.

An altar stood in front of the monument. Estelle could more or less see why it was called the Shrine. With everything around being white, including the flowers, the Shrine felt highly sacred and solemn.

"Is that, perhaps, the Foundation Monument…?" asked Estelle.

"That's right," replied Sachis.

It was an artifact protected by generations of royalty—the very foundation supporting this country. Estelle had learned as part of her education as a princess that various rituals were held here.

The most important one was held on New Year's Eve. It was said that the king would pour his blood and mana into the Foundation Monument and pray for a peaceful year for the nation. In reality, however, the ritual held here was apparently for the maintenance of the water supply systems and the palace's defenses.

Once Estelle married Arcrayne and officially became a

princess, she'd attend the events held here.

Sachis led Estelle to the front of the altar. It had a keyhole just like the one at the entrance. The king inserted the Key and channeled his mana into it, at which point a two-dimensional image appeared before him.

The image contained writing that appeared to be in the La Tène language. Sachis touched it and the image changed without making a sound.

It seemed to be a mana-based console. Estelle was captivated by the piece of lost technology.

After a while, the image faded away—perhaps the king had finished his business with it. Next, he touched the Key and started directing his mana into it again. Estelle could see an enormous amount of mana flow through the Key, where it was absorbed by the altar.

Ancient writing appeared on the Foundation Monument, and the whole thing began emitting silver light. Estelle was overwhelmed by the mystical and solemn view. Which was why she was a moment late in noticing the change in Sachis.

At the edge of her vision, she saw the king crouch.

"Your Majesty?" she said, rushing to his side.

He began to cough violently.

"Are you all right?" asked Estelle. "Let me borrow the mana communicator, I shall notify Lord Arc immediately."

Estelle remembered Sachis carrying a mana-based communicator on him in order to contact his troops and aides. She reached out to feel around his jacket, but the king stopped her.

"It won't work. You can't use mana devices anymore." Sachis's mouth and sleeve were stained with red.

He'd coughed up blood again, making Estelle recall the hunting contest.

She could treat injuries, but she didn't know what to do about someone who was ill. All she could do for Sachis was rub his back.

"I don't like growing old... This is what happens when I use too much mana," he said.

"Are you all right...?"

"I'll recover after a short rest." With that, he sat on the ground

and sighed wearily.

His finely chiseled face, which so closely resembled Arcrayne's, looked terribly haggard and exhausted. And while it was hard to spot because he was blond, upon closer inspection, he had quite a lot of white hairs, which spoke of his accumulated hardship.

As far as Estelle remembered, he was in his early fifties. He looked as though he'd rapidly aged over the past month.

"What is your condition like? Is there a name for what afflicts you…? If it is all right to ask, could you tell me?"

"It's a mana deficiency that you get if you use too much of it throughout your life. You could say it's an occupational hazard for kings," said Sachis with a self-deprecating smile as Estelle looked on with widened eyes. "Once you take the throne, you have to keep channeling great amounts of mana into the Foundation Monument. And a lot has happened during my reign… When large wars and natural disasters occur, they make the king reach his limit that much faster."

"Oh dear…"

Estelle was lost for words. She'd never known *this* was what it meant to be king.

Sachis's rule had begun with cleaning up the aftermath of the four-year war which had broken out across the entire Heredian continent thirty-five years ago after a change of government in the neighboring Franciel. And during his thirty-year rule, two major natural disasters had occurred.

"No need to make such a face. Once I abdicate, this won't affect my daily life as long as I'm careful not to spend my mana. And royals live quite a long time," the king said with a faint smile.

"I suppose so. I remember now," replied Estelle, thinking of how long the royals of previous generations had lived.

"Once this is all over with, I plan to hold an investiture of the crown prince and entrust all of my functions requiring the use of mana to Arcrayne."

His words made Estelle tremble.

"Oh dear. I thought I was ready for it… But I suppose that is how things will be, if Lord Arc manages to stop Duke Marwick and Her Majesty…" Estelle spoke haltingly with lowered eyes. "I do not believe Lord Arc had planned on becoming king either, until recently. He used to say his biggest hope was becoming lord of a royally owned domain somewhere in the countryside… And he had prepared means of fleeing the country if he found

himself in a life-threatening situation."

"And I'm the one who forced him to do that..." said Sachis with a bitter look on his face.

"Why did you not protect him? Did you not always see him as your heir? I do believe you knew what kind of relationship he had with Her Majesty. And yet, why...?"

"I tried to protect him in what ways I could. But I couldn't ignore the influence of Duke Marwick either... I could only do so much. The same goes for dealing with the queen," explained the king, sighing. "I only married Truteliese out of necessity...though I'm sure that doesn't sound very persuasive."

"'Necessity'...? What do you mean?"

"I had to show respect for her in order to maintain a favorable relationship with House Marwick."

Estelle's eyes went wide. "So you and Her Majesty only looked so close on the surface?"

"I do have some attachment to her, after spending so many years with her. But it's different from what I felt for Miriallia."

Estelle couldn't help sympathizing with Truteliese somewhat, as a fellow woman.

"Though it might sound awful to you, as an unmarried woman," the king went on. "I'm sure Truteliese felt similarly about me. She had a fiancé she was on good terms with, but after Miriallia suddenly passed away, she was forced to part with him in order to marry me."

"Oh goodness..."

"That's politics for you. When something can benefit your family, personal emotions get trampled on," said Sachis with a humorless smile.

Estelle couldn't find what to say.

"All of this was brought on by a large mix of motives and various circumstances. I'm ashamed of myself." Right after he finished speaking, Sachis began to cough.

"My apologies," Estelle said in a hurry. "I should not have asked so many things, given your condition."

Sachis shook his head lightly. "I cannot force you, but please, support Arc by his side if you can."

"I intended to do that from the start," Estelle said without hesitation.

Sachis's eyes widened slightly, then a smile appeared on his face.

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After splitting up with Sachis and Estelle, Arcrayne first got in touch with the employees of the Libra Palace. He borrowed a mana communicator from a member of the Sovereign's Guard.

"Your Highness! You are safe!" Coming in through the device was the voice of his chief officer, Haoran.

"My father and Estelle rescued me. How are things on your end?"

"We are all safe too. Though it was frightening when the Sovereign's Guard came all of a sudden and took control of the Libra Palace..."

Apparently, after arresting Estelle in order to deceive the queen, the Sovereign's Guard had explained the situation to Haoran and other employees. At present, they all pretended to be under control and were watching the events unfold.

"We shall make our way to you at once. Where may we find you?"

Arcrayne gave concise directions and cut the call. Then, the leader of the Sovereign's Guard unit spoke up to him. The prince seemed to remember the man introducing himself as Pascar. He'd etched himself in Arcrayne's memory thanks to his muscular build and his face, which was scarier than those of the others.

"It must be hard to walk in that. My apologies that the best we can offer you is one of our spares, but please put these on." Pascar held out a royal blue military uniform, its color invigorating to Arcrayne's eyes.

He wasn't wrong, so the prince did as told. Once he was done, they all headed to the Leo Palace, where the queen and the duke would be. The lights of the underground passage went out all of a sudden as they walked. Immediately after everything was shrouded in darkness, Arcrayne felt like a thin membrane had enveloped him whole. Sachis must've restricted the use of mana across the palace.

The prince concentrated to see if he could use telekinesis, but the membrane prevented the release of his mana.

"It appears His Majesty has reached the underground Shrine," said Pascar.

"Indeed. I can't use my power anymore," replied Arcrayne, grimacing.

Why did this feel so suffocating? Was it anxiety stemming

from being unable to use the power he'd grown so accustomed to since childhood? He couldn't tell if the mana barrier that had always enveloped him was functioning either.

I better be careful not to get hurt... he noted.

As he recalled the time he'd gotten badly injured at Olivia's mansion, Estelle's face from when he'd woken up appeared at the back of his head. He'd seemed to have caused her a great deal of worry, and she'd looked thoroughly haggard. He wanted to make sure she'd never make a face like that again.

From this point on, he wouldn't be able to use any mana objects at all, including mana communicators. A commotion was no doubt spreading through the palace at the moment over the fact that all mana objects had stopped working.

Arcrayne and the Sovereign's Guard unit with him had prepared for the situation, bringing oil lamps and guns operating on gunpowder.

Also, since apparently Sachis's aides were only pretending to have sided with the queen, the way her rebellion would end was clear as day.

Arcrayne pulled out Caledfwlch, which the king had given him, to check if it still worked. He could feel mana flowing into the handle, and the blade glowed silver.

"Looks like it still works as a mana blade, as His Majesty said. A holy sword indeed," said Pascar.

"Right." With that short reply, Arcrayne began issuing orders. "Arrest the rebels! Kill whoever stands in our way if necessary, but leave the masterminds alive and spare those who surrender!"

***

Mircea Marwick sat down on the throne in the Pisces Palace.

This throne was a symbol of royal authority, used by Rosalian kings across generations. Sitting here had always been Mircea's greatest wish.

So this is what kings see, he thought to himself, looking over the audience chamber from the throne and smiling.

He'd planned on giving the throne to Liedis, but perhaps he ought to take it for himself first.

The king had to support the country with his powerful mana. As Mircea was past his prime, he probably couldn't handle all of

it, but he could have Liedis help with the rest. The prince could surely be persuaded if Mircea told him about his passionate attachment to the throne.

He smiled as Liedis's face appeared in the back of his mind. Since the prince was born with features so similar to his, Mircea loved him so much more than Truteliese or Silvio, both of whom resembled his late wife.

Liedis had been rather shaken up by the news of Sachis's and Arcrayne's poisoning. Truteliese must've been doing a good job calming him down right about now. His daughter had been born a failure and used to be rebellious at one point, but by now, she was a talented and loyal pawn.

Closing his eyes, Mircea imagined himself bearing the regalia. He was immediately pulled back to reality, however, when the light he could see through his eyelids vanished and a strange sensation came over him.

When the revolting sensation of a thin membrane enveloping his body made him open his eyes, all the lights in the chamber had gone out, and it was quite dark.

"What is going on?!" he shouted.

"I-I do not know...!" replied one of his aides who stood nearby, restlessly looking around with a pale face.

Mana lamps were set up all over the palace and were powered by mana stones embedded in the walls. Another of Mircea's aides went over to one of these. "It doesn't seem to be absorbing my mana," he said after a moment. "It might be broken..."

Sighing, Mircea got up from the throne. His good mood was now ruined.

"Hurry up and call a repairman," he commanded and left the attendance chamber.

As he walked through the long corridor, heading back to the Leo Palace, he noticed another change—the servants looked restless and pale.

"What's the matter?" Mircea asked, frowning in displeasure.

It was only common sense to him that servants should do their best not to get noticed by nobles and royals.

"I shall go ask," replied his aide who'd been by his side. Upon his return, he said, "We have a situation, Your Grace! They say mana objects everywhere have stopped working!"

The report was astonishing to the duke.

It wasn't only mana objects that weren't working anymore.

I can't use my power, realized Mircea. He was of direct royal descent and an Awoken who wielded telekinesis.

He took out his pocket watch from his waistcoat and tried making it float, but he couldn't release his mana properly.

So this is the cause of the strange feeling I've been getting... he concluded. Mircea stared at his palm, then gripped it into a fist. He could only think of one person capable of such a feat. *Sachis...!*

After calling his nephew's name in his mind, Mircea walked briskly to the bedroom where the king was supposed to be sleeping.

But the room was deserted.

"Where is Truteliese?!" Mircea shouted in rage.

His aides bolted. And just as they left, a unit of stern-faced soldiers shuffled in—soldiers clad in the royal blue uniforms of the Sovereign's Guard.

***

Though Arcrayne kept offering to spare those who surrendered, there was no end to the soldiers standing in his way. He swung the Holy Sword at them, trying his best to aim in such a way that he wouldn't inflict lethal wounds.

"Why won't they surrender...?" he wondered aloud.

"They seem to think they would rather be cut down here if the alternative is to be executed anyway," said Pascar next to him.

"But I'm telling them I'll spare them."

"They must think you're lying..."

I'm not like you people. Arcrayne frowned, then looked over the defeated private soldiers of House Marwick.

At that point, a member of the Sovereign's Guard came running to the prince.

"We have captured Queen Truteliese, Duke Marwick, and Lord Silvio!"

The report made Arcrayne widen his eyes.

"We found His Highness Prince Liedis in Her Majesty's bedroom... For some reason he has shackles that seal his powers, and he is unconscious. Though, he must be only asleep, since his breathing and pulse are normal..."

“Sounds like we should ask him what happened once he wakes up,” said Pascar.

Arcrayne was dumbfounded—things were over too soon. “Let’s go see the queen for now,” he finally said, after he’d recovered from stupefaction. But as he began to slowly walk…

“Um… It has been a while since we last saw His Majesty…” a member of the Sovereign’s Guard said hesitantly.

He had a point. They’d agreed to meet up here after the king had put the mana restriction into place.

A commotion began to spread.

“Your Highness, His Majesty might be stuck down below and unable to move,” said Pascar after a short while. “His Majesty headed to the Shrine, correct? Could it be that he had to channel a vast amount of mana into the altar to activate the mana restriction? And while His Majesty told us to keep quiet about it, he has been rather unwell as of late…”

Pascar’s words made Arcrayne recall Sachis coughing up blood during the fight with the dragon.

“How is he? Is he sick with something?” asked the prince.

“Well… I am afraid I cannot speak of it.”

Arcrayne knew that Pascar was right to keep it to himself. He gave up trying to get more out of the man and put the matter behind him.

“I’m going to the Shrine,” said the prince.

He wanted to deal with the traitors too, but for the time being, he put them out of his mind.

For whatever reason, the Shrine only permitted the entry of either royals or those with special approval from the king, so Arcrayne had to go there in person.

“Please let us come with you,” said a member of the Sovereign’s Guard.

“Bring the court physician just in case,” commanded Arcrayne and he hurried to the entrance to the underground passage.

***

Arcrayne walked through a long underground labyrinth and reached the Shrine. Its door, normally closed, was open.

“So this is the Shrine…” uttered Sachis’s physician in charge, who Arcrayne had met up with on the way here.

All kinds of royal rituals held at the palace were held here, at

the Shrine. Unlike the Sovereign's Guard, who got to come here as bodyguards, a physician should've never had such an opportunity.

"Everybody wait here," Arcrayne commanded and entered the Shrine.

Once inside, he felt the membrane blocking the release of his mana disappear.

This place always looked strange, no matter how many times he'd come here. Despite being underground, it was bright as day. There couldn't have been anyone looking after them, and yet all kinds of white flowers bloomed profusely here. They weren't artificial either. The area was always filled with a fragrant scent, making it feel tranquil and solemn.

Towering at the center of the garden was the Foundation Monument. It was enveloped in silver light. The sight of it filled Arcrayne with awe for the hyperadvanced civilization of Ancient La Tène. Many technologies of the time had yet to be understood despite mana engineering having made tremendous progress in recent years.

The Shrine rejected anyone who wasn't of royal blood. If someone tried to enter without permission, an invisible wall would appear and block their way. Estelle must've managed to enter because Sachis had led her in.

As Arcrayne walked to the center, where the Foundation Monument and the altar were, he found Sachis lying down, his head on Estelle's lap.

"Father!" exclaimed the prince.

Upon noticing the blood staining his mouth and clothes, he ran to Sachis. The king slowly lifted his eyelids.

"It's you, Arcrayne... How did things go up there...?" said Sachis while trying to lift himself.

"Please do not push yourself, Your Majesty..." said Estelle, hurriedly propping him up.

Arcrayne also squatted and helped the king.

"We've taken control of the Leo Palace and arrested Queen Truteliese, Mircea Marwick, and Silvio Marwick."

The news took Sachis and Estelle by surprise.

"I see," said the king, with a grave look on his face. "What about Liedis? I was told the queen summoned him to the palace."

"For some reason he'd been put to sleep and had shackles on

him, which sealed his powers. We've taken him into custody and will ask what happened when he wakes up."

"Maybe he tried to stop the queen..." Sachis heaved a deep sigh.

Upon closer inspection, his complexion was unnatural. The area around his mouth, where he'd wiped his blood away, was of a different color than the rest of his face. Which meant he'd used makeup to hide its sickly color. It made Arcrayne angry with himself for not noticing.

"Why did you hide that you're in bad health...?" asked the prince.

"Because there was no point in saying it. Only I could activate the mana restriction."

"I could've at least come with you and helped."

"If even you had come down here, who would have taken the lead above and dealt with the—" Sachis broke into a coughing fit before he could finish.

"I'm sorry I've made you talk too much," said Arcrayne. "Come, the court physician is waiting outside."

"Wait. If everything's over, then the palace must be returned to its original state. Will you assist me?"

Arcrayne nodded.

In order to lift the mana restriction, you had to operate the Shrine and then channel a large amount of mana into it, and only the king could do the former. Arcrayne took on the duty of providing mana.

"Do it, Arc," said Sachis after he was done with the Shrine.

Arcrayne touched the Key and winced from the sensation of his mana being drained quite rapidly.

"I've heard about this before, but actually experiencing it is...quite something," he said.

"You'll get used to it eventually. And actually, it would be a problem for me if you didn't. I'm reaching my limit as the king. I have mana deficiency."

The king's confession shocked Arcrayne.

"Isn't it too early...?" he asked.

Mana deficiency was an occupational disease for kings. However, Sachis had only sat on the throne for thirty years. It was too early for him to be afflicted with mana deficiency compared to the kings of the past.

“I never had as much mana as you or Liedis. And several major natural disasters happened during my reign…”

The prince’s expression clouded over.

“I’m planning to abdicate as soon as possible. I want you to be ready for it.”

“I understand,” said Arcrayne, left with no other choice.

As he directed his mana into the Key, Arcrayne looked at Estelle, who was next to Sachis. She gazed at him with an anxious look on her face.

After what felt like five minutes, the sensation of Arcrayne’s mana being drained by the Key ceased. The silver light enveloping the Foundation Monument began to flicker.

“Looks like it finished reconfiguring,” said Sachis.

Arcrayne and Estelle lent their shoulders to the king and left the Shrine, at which point the court physician and the members of the Sovereign’s Guard waiting outside came running to them.

Entrusting the king to them, Arcrayne turned to speak to Estelle. “Sorry I scared you.”

“It is all right…” Estelle shook her head and stared back at the prince. “Are you hurt?” she asked, looking with worry at the dark red stains on his clothes.

“None of this blood is mine.”

“Is that true…?”

“It is.”

At that point, tears welled up in Estelle’s purplish-red eyes. “I am so glad you are safe…”

The look on her face made Arcrayne feel guilty. But at the same time, some part of him felt a faintly dark sort of pleasure too. The prince laughed at himself for it.

Estelle’s tears seemed to prove that her affection for him hadn’t completely disappeared.

***

By the time Estelle, Arcrayne, and Sachis returned topside, it was nighttime, and the grounds were dark.

“Your Highness! Lady Estelle!” shouted Leah, who’d been waiting at the exit along with other employees of the Libra Palace. She was the first to come running their way. “I’m so glad you’re safe! You look a little pale. Have you been eating

properly?”

“I was too anxious to eat, so that must be why,” replied Estelle. “But as for looking pale, you should see yourself.”

“We were anxious too…”

May, Haoran, Neil, Cian… Seeing the familiar faces of the Libra Palace put Estelle’s mind at ease.

“Estelle, I want you to head back to the Libra Palace with everyone else for today,” said Arcrayne, while Estelle and the employees of his palace enjoyed their reunion.

“What will you do?” asked Estelle.

“I have to discuss our future course of action with my father, and do some other things… I might not be able to return to the Libra Palace for a while.”

No. I don’t want to be away from you, Estelle thought reflexively. While things had ended on an unsatisfying note, they were finally safe. She had many questions for the prince: How had he been after getting arrested? Had he been in danger when securing the palace…? *He doesn’t seem to be hurt, at least.*

Estelle wanted to stop him, but kept it to herself. The thought that she might’ve been able to help in some way if they’d already married and she was part of the royal family made her frustrated with her current position as fiancée.

“I shall await your return at the Libra Palace,” said Estelle, suppressing her feelings, though they threatened to come spilling out at any moment.

She forced a smile, telling herself that all she could do right now was make the Libra Palace a comfortable place that Arcrayne could return to at any time, and wait for him. The prince reached out and lightly embraced her.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said.

“I know.” Estelle returned the embrace.

***

After they held each other for a moment, Estelle parted with Arcrayne and made her way back to the Libra Palace. There, she found Snow waiting at the entrance hall. With a meow, she rubbed herself on Estelle’s legs.



“Were you worried about me?” asked Estelle.

“She was constantly restless. It was really hard on us. Maybe she’s somehow realized things are safe now,” said Leah.

Estelle squatted to pat the cat’s head.

Petting Snow, a warm meal, a bath with floral balm… The employees of the Libra Palace had shown consideration for Estelle in many ways.

When she thought of Arcrayne, busy taking care of the aftermath at the Leo Palace right now, she felt sorry for him.

As Estelle was exhausted in both mind and body, she went to bed early. She chose to sleep in the shared bedroom. While she knew Arcrayne wasn’t coming back, she wanted to feel his presence to whatever extent she could, no matter how small. But she was too full of emotion to fall asleep so easily.

I need to sleep… she told herself. If she didn’t live a healthy lifestyle, eating and sleeping properly, she couldn’t welcome the prince with a genuine smile on her face.

Estelle closed her eyes, lying in bed. Even if she couldn’t sleep, simply lying down and cutting off any information coming in through her eyes might allow her body to rest.

She fell asleep at some point, and she was hungry when she woke up. Estelle once again found herself shameless, just as she’d thought back in the cell, and laughed at herself on the inside.

She got dressed as always, ate, then headed to the office. It was deserted, as its owner was still away.

Estelle brought her unfinished embroidery, which she’d started as a way of killing time, but she wasn’t making progress on it today at all.

“Your mind seems to be somewhere else, Lady Estelle,” said Leah, who’d brought tea.

“I can’t help but feel uneasy when I think about what’s to come,” replied Estelle.

“His Highness Prince Arcrayne will finally become crown prince, yes…? Which would make you crown princess…”

“Don’t say it…”

Having reality shoved in her face made it feel like the weight of responsibility could crush her. Getting away from Arcrayne was no longer an option for Estelle.

Perhaps she had no right to all this, given that, back in the Tower of Albion, she'd wished—if only for a moment—that Arcrayne had never chosen her.

Estelle lowered her eyes and laid her hand on her chest.

"Lady Estelle, may I come in?" asked May after knocking. She entered once Estelle gave permission. "His Highness has called for you. He wants you to come to the Leo Palace."

"He said that?" Estelle shot up from the couch.

***

When Estelle got to the Leo Palace, she was led into the parlor where she sat down on the sofa. Soon after, Arcrayne entered the room.

"Thanks for coming, Estelle. Sorry for the trouble."

The prince came closer and sat diagonally opposite her. Exhaustion showed clearly on his face.

"Did you sleep last night?" asked Estelle, furrowing her brow.

Arcrayne replied with an awkward smile. "I napped for a few hours. I got a lot of sleep in jail out of boredom, though, so I can still go on."

"Were you not treated awfully in jail? I cannot believe they would lock you up in such a white room... It was the so-called 'white room torture,' yes?"

"I was served food and wasn't hurt physically, so I'm fine. Psychological torture takes a while to show results, and you and father came to my rescue quickly. It had no effect on me." His smile looked no different from usual. "What about you, Estelle? I was told you were locked up in the Tower of Albion. That must have been scary."

"I would be lying if I said it was not, but my treatment in the tower was not that bad... My cell was special, was it not?"

"That's right." The prince nodded. "It's one of the chambers reserved for prisoners of war and political criminals that we don't want dying in prison."

"His Majesty said he arranged it. The guards were women and my meals were almost the same as usual..."

"I'm really glad you weren't treated cruelly."

Estelle could tell from Arcrayne's mana that his smile was genuine.

"How is His Majesty doing?" she asked.

“His condition seems stable for now… The physician says he should focus on treatment for a while, though, so we’ll be holding the investiture of me as the crown prince on short notice.”

His words made Estelle shake. “Are congratulations in order?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, all things considered.” Arcrayne had a somewhat bitter look on his face. “What happened here at the palace will be announced to the public tomorrow morning. I called you here to tell you that in advance.” He stopped to take a deep breath. “We plan to let the public know pretty much the whole truth about the whole ‘food poisoning’ situation. That the queen and Duke Marwick conspired to kill me and my father, but my father found out about their plot in advance and caught them all in a trap.”

“I see… Does that mean all the conspirators will be charged with high treason…?”

“I suppose so. House Marwick will become history, and I don’t think the masterminds and those directly involved with them can escape capital punishment.”

Estelle trembled.

It was only natural for Duke Marwick and Truteliese to be executed, given the severity of their crimes, but the thought of how many people would be put on death row made her scared.

“As promised, we’re sparing the private soldiers who surrendered, and we’ll offer a plea bargain to those who want to proactively help with the investigation… But even then, they’ll all either be imprisoned for life or sentenced to manual labor, I think.”

“What about His Highness Prince Liedis? Did he not oppose the duke and queen’s methods, and was he not put to sleep, his powers sealed?”

“He did, and he was. So he can be left alone, given the situation. He won’t be stripped of his rights to the throne either. If we did that, we’d be forced to introduce a rather distant relative as the second man in line. Compared to direct descendants of the royal family, collateral descendants have less mana, so if something were to happen to me and that man got the throne, it would hinder the rituals.”

Estelle recalled the royal family tree. The one following Liedis in his rights to the throne was Duke Marwick. Now that the duke

and those involved with his family were all arrested, the next candidate for inheritance would have to be pulled from rather distant relatives.

"I was told to hurry up and make an heir," said Arcrayne in a somewhat glum manner, causing Estelle to freeze up. "And more than one, if possible... Father and the Cabinet don't want any more royals in Liedis's family tree, you see..." The prince awkwardly lowered his eyes. "Maybe you don't want this. I know the position of the crown princess will be a burden on you. But I can't imagine having anyone other than you by my side. So..." He raised his face and fixed his deep blue eyes on Estelle. "You don't have to do public duties or attend social events if you don't want to. All I ask is that you be by my side and spend time with me once a month. I know it's cruel to ask this of you. But I need heirs no matter what...and I want to have them with you."

Estelle was confused to see Arcrayne say all this, his mana a little dark all along. *Why does he go so far...?*

As she racked her brains trying to pick up on his intentions, Arcrayne smiled in self-deprecation.

"I guess I should've known it wouldn't work... Of course it wouldn't. I was awful to you when we first met. I proposed to you solely because of your power and acted like I'd fallen in love with you at first sight in order to deceive everyone else... It's only natural you'd give up on a man like that."

The prince's words took Estelle by surprise.

"But I'm sorry. I can't let you go anymore. Even if you don't want this, I'll use the full extent of my position and political power to make you crown princess, tie you to me, and have you bear my children."

"Um, Lord Arc, I suspect we have a misunderstanding brewing here. Is it just me...?" Estelle asked, having resolved herself. She could no longer endure seeing Arcrayne's mana grow darker and darker. "It is true that the thought of becoming a crown princess or a queen makes me flinch. But I have no intention of calling off my marriage to you. Why would I give up on you...? I cannot fathom how you arrived at that thought..."

"Your attitude changed at some point," Arcrayne said after a pause.

"What?!" Estelle was shocked to hear that.

"I was sure you had grown to hate me... I think it started when I got hurt at the Rainsworths' mansion..."

Estelle had an idea of what he was talking about. When she'd seen Arcrayne be on the brink of death, she'd resolved herself to support him no matter what. She felt like the way she'd carried herself with him since then had become somewhat stoic.

"Um, I do not hate you at all. Back then, I was filled with so much regret…" said Estelle.

"Regret?"

"Yes. When I sent you off to the Rainsworths' mansion, I was jealous of Lady Olivia. But when I saw you return with a bad injury…when I thought how I would go on if you never recovered…I couldn't forgive myself for being so foolishly jealous when you had left. And so I made up my mind. I would support you no matter what."

Estelle's confession made Arcrayne's eyes widen. Immediately afterward, he blushed and his mana turned bright silver.

"Wait, you like me…?" he asked hesitantly.

At that point, Estelle realized she hadn't told the prince her feelings yet.

"Yes. I love you." It was a little embarrassing to put it into words.

At that, Arcrayne covered his mouth. "Since when…?" he asked. "You were against it at first, right…?"

"Well, when you used your position to force me to become your fiancée, I thought you were awful."

Arcrayne's mana darkened. He must've been remembering those days.

"But you were gentle and courteous with me…so before I knew it, I was in love with you," she said without hesitation, at which point Arcrayne started to tremble. "You…feel the same way about me, do you not…?"

"I do," replied the prince after a moment's pause and nodded. "I should be the one saying these things first, as a man… It's pathetic to get left behind."

Estelle couldn't contain a smile at the awkward look on his face. "Please say it regardless."

The prince remained silent.

"Is that too much to ask?"

"No… I love you too. At some point, my act became the real thing."

What he said immediately filled Estelle with joy. While she'd more or less picked up on it from his attitude up to this point, it

was a whole different matter to have it put into words.

"Since when?" she asked.

Arcrayne was stumped for words. "That's pretty hard to answer..." he said.

"But you asked me the same thing a moment ago."

"I guess it started when I recovered and felt that you were cold with me..."

"You should have told me." Estelle grew reproachful and pouted.

A bitter look appeared on Arcrayne's face. "I thought you'd come to hate me, so I couldn't say it."

"Is that why your mana has been growing dark whenever you look at me lately...?"

"Yeah. I thought the fact that you never asked about it, despite seeing it with your power, was proof."

"I thought *you* hated *me*... That was why I was too scared to ask." As Estelle lowered her eyes, she could hear the prince sigh.

"Looks like our fear of each other puts us at odds for no good reason."

"So it would appear." A faint smile appeared on Estelle's face.

"Estelle, are you really okay with a man who has such a shameful side...?"

"Everyone has a weakness or two."

"I'm sure you can see it with your power, but the emotions I feel toward you aren't entirely pure."

"Is there such a thing as an entirely pure love?"

The sight of Arcrayne's slightly dark attachment to her filled Estelle with an equally dark form of joy.

Look at me more. Love me, she said inwardly. To the same extent as she wanted him to whisper sweet things in her ear, she wanted him to desire her profoundly, with a hint of dark passion.

"I am certain I will be extremely jealous if other women catch your eye," said Estelle.

"That won't happen, rest assured," replied Arcrayne.

"I believe in you."



Estelle smiled at the prince, then looked at the ring on the ring finger of her left hand. Perhaps what had brought Estelle the most relief after she'd come back to the Libra Palace had been getting her engagement ring back from Leah.

Arcrayne reached out and placed his hand on Estelle's left.

Unfortunately, however, the sweet mood ended there, interrupted by a knocking on the door. Looking upset, Arcrayne reluctantly got up and went to open it.

On the other side was Claus. He whispered something to Arcrayne, at which point the prince's expression underwent a sudden change and murky mana began to rise from his body like a haze.

As if reacting to it, various objects around the room began to float.

"Your Highness! You must contain it!"

Claus's words made Estelle realize Arcrayne was responsible for this phenomenon.

"You could hurt Estelle if your power goes out of control!" continued Claus.

But as he reached out for the prince, sparks began to fly, making Claus grimace. It must've been painful.

Arcrayne turned Estelle's way and called her name. His deep blue eyes landed on her. At the same time, the mana swirling around the room wavered.

The prince took repeated deep breaths. It looked like he was trying to get the mana raging in him under control. Gradually, its darkness abated, and with heavy sounds, the floating objects fell on the floor.

He seemed to have calmed down. His face was pale, however.

"Are you all right, Lord Arc?" asked Estelle, running up to him.

"I'm sorry for scaring you." The prince was trembling.

"You are suffering from the aftereffects of having to suppress your power that almost went out of control, are you not? You should rest in a different room," said Claus, a worried look on his face.

"But my work..."

"We are not so incompetent as to have to rely on you when you are in a state like that, Your Highness."

Flatly shutting down Arcrayne's attempt at resistance, Claus went to call someone.

***

Employees of the Leo Palace came running and immediately prepared a bedroom for Arcrayne. Estelle accompanied the prince to it. He looked unwell all along.

“I’m sorry… I couldn’t keep my anger in check,” he said after getting in the bed.

“It surprised me. What happened?” asked Estelle.

The change in Arcrayne had occurred right after Claus had whispered something to him.

“Mircea Marwick is dead.”

The unexpected news took Estelle’s breath away.

“How…?” she asked.

“Apparently he hung himself while the guards weren’t looking.”

Estelle acutely felt the prince’s anger through his deeply dark mana and the look on his face.

“I was told he remained silent all this time. So he chose death as a means of escape?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

“How awful…”

It was hard to accept the sudden death of their political opponent. This was the case even for Estelle, so it must’ve been even worse for Arcrayne.

“Lord Arc, you look too pale. Please rest for now.”

“I don’t think I can. I’m too angry for that,” he said, looking glum.

Estelle wasn’t about to back down, however. “Lying down with your eyes closed will still make a difference.”

“All right,” the prince reluctantly said after a pause.

Forcing a smile, Estelle pulled the bedclothes over him. Suddenly, he grabbed her by the arm, pulled her onto the bed too, and embraced her tightly.

“L-Lord Arc?! What are you doing?!” she asked in confusion.

“Sorry. Let me do this for a minute,” he said quietly, sounding miserable.

Estelle stopped resisting and looked at his face, at which point he tightened his arms around her.

“At least let me take off my shoes,” said Estelle.

“All right.” Arcrayne reluctantly let go of her.

Once she was done with that, the prince once again pulled

her into the bed and buried his face in her chest.

"I can hear your heart," he said.

The way he acted reminded Estelle of Snow, when the cat would nuzzle up to her. It triggered something like a motherly instinct in her, and she put a hand on Arcrayne's head.

His hair was silky and soft, which further reminded Estelle of a cat. As she combed it, Arcrayne lowered his eyes and relaxed his arms around her. Estelle didn't have anything against her own chestnut locks, but she admired flashy blond hair. To make things even better, Arcrayne's hair was smooth, and her fingers passed through it easily.

And he's a man, unlike me, she thought with a hint of jealousy as she continued to stroke the prince's hair.

"I wanted the duke to pay for his crimes," said Arcrayne.

"Of course."

With his death, so many answers were lost forever—including those pertaining to attempts on Arcrayne's life. Estelle was frustrated too.

"Silvio insists everything was on Mircea's and the queen's orders... The queen has been relatively honest, but who knows how much of what she says is the truth..." uttered the prince, stumbling over words here and there.

Estelle listened without a word.

"I'm visiting the queen tomorrow...but I'm not sure I can stay calm... Can you come with me...?"

Arcrayne had never relied on Estelle in such ways before. It made her happy, despite the situation they were in.

"If my presence would help, certainly," she said.

Having him rely on her in his weakened state made Estelle feel like they were a little more equal than usual.

"Thank you..." The prince was visibly dozing off.

"If you feel sleepy, you should sleep."

Estelle stopped stroking Arcrayne's hair and let her hand rest motionlessly on it. Not long after, she heard rhythmical breathing coming from the prince.

She'd meant to leave once he'd fallen asleep, but given the proximity, she couldn't get away. Quickly giving up, she entrusted herself to Arcrayne's warmth.

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The warmth of another person's skin was pleasant. Feeling it from Arcrayne as he clung to her made Estelle fall asleep too.

Things had been hectic ever since the day she'd gotten locked up in the Tower of Albion, so she must not have slept off all of that exhaustion yet.

When she woke up, it was already dark in the room. The clock showed just past five, which meant she'd slept for approximately three hours.

Arcrayne still slept in Estelle's arms. She closely observed his handsome face; at that moment, it looked a little younger than usual.

The prince had lost his biological mother at the age of five and had started to live with his aides at the Libra Palace at the age of seven. Had he ever had the opportunity to depend on someone like this?

It was said that the royal custom of parting with one's parents at a young age was part of fostering a future king.

Growing up with one's parents made one dependent. Having to live with one's aides from a very young age and learning to put people to use fostered a sense of self-reliance—this was what Estelle had heard.

However, the thought of her and Arcrayne's children having to live a life like that didn't sit right with her.

Then again, it surely wouldn't have been the same if the child's parents were both alive.

Because then he could've frequently gone to see them, unable to endure their absence, she thought to herself.

Arcrayne, however, had surely seldom had such gentle moments in his childhood.

If this gives him at least some peace of mind... Or am I being too presumptuous...? Estelle gazed at the prince in her arms. Long eyelashes, a prominent forehead, a shapely nose bridge, and thin lips—Estelle could look at his handsome face forever.

She didn't put looks first, but there were inevitably some whose appearance she instinctively found repulsive. Estelle was unmistakably lucky that the man who'd used his power to force her to come and live in the palace had been as handsome as Arcrayne. It wasn't just his face, but also his proportions, his deep, penetrating voice, and his graceful manner—he was, in practically every way, the ideal prince.

His personality was flawed, and his position as first prince and

future king seemed to bring him more bad than good.

However, Estelle loved him from the bottom of her heart. And it took a miracle for the one you loved to desire you as well. Which was why Estelle didn't want to let go of him, no matter what.

I wonder what will happen if I can't bear a child... she thought to herself. The main role of a crown princess and a queen was to give birth to an heir. If said heir didn't inherit the great reserve of mana that was typical of royals, or wasn't born in the first place... Would people around them allow the royal authority to be passed on to Liedis's family line?

The word "mistress" passed through Estelle's mind. However, she found the idea of sharing Arcrayne with another woman completely unacceptable.

Estelle appeared to be emotionally fragile. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

She shifted her position a little to wipe them away. But that might have just been what made Arcrayne's firmly shut eyelids twitch.

They opened slowly, exposing his blue eyes. They were unfocused, but when they perceived Estelle, they opened wide. The prince instantly sat up and pulled away from her.

"Sorry, Estelle. Was I too heavy? I didn't think I'd fall asleep..."

His flustered attitude made Estelle burst into laughter. "You were not heavy at all. And most importantly, I am glad you managed to sleep. How do you feel?"

"A lot better. Much of my exhaustion is gone." The prince awkwardly averted his eyes.

"I slept well too. Your warmth was too pleasant."

As Estelle sat up, Arcrayne reached out for her hair. "Your hair was done so well, and now it's a mess. I'll call an attendant for you."

"Thank you."

Estelle smiled at the prince, then took the pins and ornaments out of her hair to make it easier for the attendant to work on it.

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"I'll go look at how things are in the office. What will you do, Estelle? You can stay here if you like, or return to the Libra Palace," said Arcrayne, after he'd gotten dressed.

“I would like to stay here,” Estelle immediately replied. “Is there anything I can help with?”

Arcrayne thought for a moment. “Can you go check up on my father? He seems to be bored, since his physician forbade him from leaving the bed.”

“Very well. I wanted to see him regardless.”

“Let’s eat dinner together. I’ll send someone for you.” The prince smiled at Estelle and planted a light kiss on her cheek, then left.

Estelle had an employee of the palace lead her to Sachis’s bedroom. Once she arrived, Sachis sat up in bed and welcomed her.

“Glad to see you, Lady Estelle.”

“How do you feel?”

“Much better, but I’m still not allowed to get out of bed.”

His face did, in fact, look significantly healthier now.

Sachis invited Estelle to sit on the chair by the bed, and she took him up on the offer.

There was a chessboard on the king’s lap, and next to his hand, a practice book on chess tactics. He seemed to have been solving chess problems to kill time.

“I was told you have been forbidden from leaving the bed for a while. Please do not force yourself.”

“I know this is necessary, but I’m so bored. How about a match, Lady Estelle?”

Estelle froze up. She’d learned the rules as a pastime, but her lack of skill was dreadful.

“Um, I am embarrassingly bad at it…” she said.

“Let’s start off by playing without any handicaps for the first one.”

So much for Estelle’s hopes to decline amicably. Sachis’s enthusiasm about the upcoming match made her dejected.

“You weren’t exaggerating,” said the king in a serious tone.

“Like I said, it is embarrassing how bad I am at it,” Estelle replied, looking glum.

“How about I play with a handicap?” Sachis offered with an awkward smile.

“Then please play without a queen,” said Estelle, giving him a reproachful look.

“That would be too much. You can make the first three moves

instead.”

While it wasn’t the same as giving up chess pieces, letting your opponent make several moves before you first made yours could allow them to create an advantage for themselves early on.

Estelle happily moved her pieces, but victory didn’t seem any closer than before. She was bad at games that made one use one’s head.

As the king was moving a knight, he asked, “I’m thinking of going with lily of the valley. How does that sound?”

Estelle blinked in surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“Your seal, once you’re officially in the family. After excluding the flowers used in seals of royal women of the past few generations and considering the language of flowers, lily of the valley seemed like a good choice.”

In the language of flowers, lily of the valley signified purity and the return of happiness. Estelle blushed at the thought.

“They are pretty, so that would make me happy,” she said.

While she felt like it was beyond her position, she probably would’ve felt that way no matter what flower the king had chosen, so she limited herself to expressing gratitude.

“Very well, then I’ll have a design prepared,” said Sachis.

“I look forward to it.”

It was customary for every member of the royal family to have a personal seal, separately from the royal crest. Estelle straightened herself on impulse when the king brought up the topic.

“We’re actually thinking of holding your wedding sooner than originally planned,” he said.

“When would that be?”

“As soon as possible. Though even if we rush to prepare for it, it will probably be in the summer…”

Estelle furrowed her brow. The wedding had originally been planned for autumn.

“We need heirs as soon as we can. Sorry to rush you like that…”

What bothered her more than being pressured to bear children was the fact that the king felt the need to move up her wedding, even if only by a few months.

“Is this to avoid letting those of His Highness Prince Liedis’s

family line take the throne?" she asked.

"Everyone involved in what happened the other day will be charged with high treason." The king closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

"How is His Highness Prince Liedis faring?"

"He seems to have been dosed with a rather powerful hypnotic. There have been some aftereffects. I'm having him rest in the palace."

"I see..."

It pained Estelle to think of how Liedis must've felt. He was still only fifteen. The world he'd live in from now on would definitely be anything but carefree.

"I don't want to leave the position of the palace's mistress open for too long," the king went on. "It might be too much to ask not to let it get to you, but we'll do what we can to minimize your duties as crown princess."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness." Despite her reply, Estelle felt an increasing weight on her shoulders.

The palace's mistress... she repeated inwardly.

Considering what Queen Truteliese had done, she probably had the death penalty waiting for her. While Estelle had always known it, marrying Arcrayne would mean immediately becoming the top woman in Rosalia. Her hand, with which she'd reached out for a pawn, trembled.

"You're still twenty, if I'm not mistaken... I'm really sorry to burden you with so many things," said Sachis.

"Worry not... I understand it is not your fault, Your Majesty..."

Forcing a smile, Estelle moved her pawn; then, with the same hand, she placed her fingers on the ring finger of her left hand. She touched the gem of her engagement ring and took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Is that the remade engagement ring?" asked the king.

"Yes." Estelle nodded. "Thank you for giving permission to use sapphires on the inner part."

"Don't worry about it. You'll eventually be able to wear sapphires normally, without permission."

"It still makes me happy." Estelle smiled at Sachis.

"I hear the central diamond used to belong to Miriallia."

"It did." Estelle nodded.

There was something painful in Sachis's gaze as he looked at the ring.

Chapter 5: Truth Kept Inside

After visiting Sachis and having dinner with Arcrayne, Estelle decided to stay over at the Leo Palace. But even though she was given a bedroom, she couldn't get a wink of sleep.

While she was tired and worried, the main cause of it might've been the fact that she'd gone to bed with Arcrayne at an unusual hour.

"Your lack of sleep shows on your face, Lady Estelle. Are you all right?" asked Leah with a worried look. She'd come over from the Libra Palace for Estelle.

"I have to go with Lord Arc to visit Queen Truteliese today. Could you do something to make my complexion appear well-rested?"

"Oh, I had no idea. Very well, I'll do everything I can to freshen you up."

"Don't overdo it, though. We're visiting the prison," said Estelle, seeing Leah getting fired up a little too much.

Arcrayne didn't seem to have gotten much sleep either. Leah pointed it out when he came to pick up Estelle, and applied makeup to him to hide it.

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Queen Truteliese was imprisoned in a special chamber in the Tower of Albion. It was a different one from where Estelle had been held. Apparently putting the queen here had been Sachis's final act of mercy.

By the king's order, a special team of investigators had been formed to look into the case at hand. Once the investigation was over, Truteliese would be tried and most likely given the death penalty.

Arcrayne wanted to talk to her before that happened.

Visitations took place in a parlor-like room inside the tower, with sofas and a table inside. Estelle and Arcrayne sat next to each other.

After a short while, Truteliese entered the room, escorted by two guards.

"I am sure Your Highness is not in any danger, being an Awoken…but we will be waiting outside the room, so please call us if something happens," said one of the guards, then they both stepped outside.

"It's an honor to have you visit me, given how busy you are, Your Royal Highness. And you even have Lady Estelle with you," said Truteliese, her manner somewhat affected. Then, with a graceful motion, she sat down opposite Arcrayne.

While she looked emaciated, she was still beautiful enough to be compared to a red rose, as she'd always been. Even the signs of tiredness on her face looked bewitching.

And as always, there was a mismatch between her mana and the look on her face. Her speech and facial expression were utterly snide and malicious, but her mana was radiant. She even looked somewhat happy.

Estelle couldn't stop wondering about the reason for it and stared intently at the queen's face.

"I'm not a crown prince yet," said Arcrayne. "*Someone* has been putting in work all this time to ensure I wouldn't be invested as one."

Here in the Kingdom of Rosalia, being the first in line for the throne wasn't enough for you to call yourself crown prince. According to the custom, you had to be invested as the crown prince first, and only then would you be recognized as the king's heir both in name and reality.

"It's only a matter of time. Good for you—you won, and we lost. I suppose the one unfortunate thing is that you allowed Mircea Marwick to end his life." The moment she brought up the subject of the duke's death, Truteliese's mana turned pitch black.

What…? Estelle went pale. It wasn't normal for mana to be this dark. It was even darker than Arcrayne's mana when he'd learned about Duke Marwick's death.

The queen's expression remained completely unchanged, however. If anything, her smile had even begun to look mocking.

"It's quite inept of you to let him escape through death. What were you so busy with, pray tell?" The sneer on her face practically said, *Serves you right.*

In contrast with her scornful giggling, however, the entirety of her mana was jet-black. Estelle saw deep hatred in it, with

murderous intent mixed in.

It was too frightening to look at, so she averted her eyes nonchalantly. But as Estelle couldn't control her power, she continued to perceive the queen's emotions, even when Truteliese was fully out of her field of vision.

"I find it deeply vexing too, of course," said Arcrayne. "No doubt they will start interrogating you more rigorously now that they can't have Mircea's testimony."

"And you've come just to tell me that? How kind of you."

Truteliese's mana began to normalize—she seemed to have calmed down a little. Estelle casually looked her way once more. The queen still had the same sneer on her face.

"While I'm told you're being quite honest with the interrogators, stepmother, are you still plotting anything?"

The moment Arcrayne called her "stepmother," the queen's mana began to shine bright.

"Oh, you still call me your stepmother? Well, it's true; I don't remember giving birth to you." Despite the sour look on her face, Truteliese's mana indicated joy.

What's the meaning of this? wondered Estelle. She had to think—think why the queen's emotions didn't match what she said and did. It felt like if Estelle didn't uncover this now, it would be too late.

She desperately racked her brain while staring at the queen's face.

"You're still my stepmother, despite everything," replied the prince. "And you've still got a comeback for everything I say. I just hope you won't hide anything from the interrogators either."

"I *am* telling them what they want to know. Have you not heard?"

"As long as all of it is true... It's suspicious to see you so honest."

The spiteful exchange between Arcrayne and Truteliese continued.

Why does she seem to be in such a good mood...? Estelle frowned. And then a thought came to her like a divine revelation. *What if she deeply resents Mircea Marwick but likes Lord Arc...?*

In retrospect, the first time Estelle had found Truteliese's mana strange had been at the party she'd hosted in the Leo Palace, before Estelle's engagement. Estelle was of lower birth and upbringing than Olivia Rainsworth, who'd been considered

the most likely candidate for Arcrayne's future wife. Because of that, Arcrayne had expected Truteliese to approve of Estelle, but that hadn't been the case.

The emotions Truteliese had directed at Arcrayne when they'd all gone to see an opera together had been strange too. Estelle recalled how, even as the queen had said spiteful things to the prince, her dark mana had made Estelle suspect she'd done so with reluctance.

Duke Marwick had hated Arcrayne. There was no doubt about that. Estelle recalled how, at the New Year's dinner party where her engagement had been announced, he'd regarded her with joy while directing negative emotions at Arcrayne.

The duke had taken all the answers to the grave with him. His son Silvio shifted all the blame onto his father.

The queen, meanwhile, answered with honesty. Her testimony continued to reveal Duke Marwick's previously unknown offenses, one after another. It was looking like a rather large series of arrests would be taking place soon.

The rebellion, which had started with an attempt on Sachis's life, had only resulted in the arrest of those related to Mircea Marwick. Not much harm had come to Arcrayne and Sachis, or people close to them.

The fact that Liedis had gotten away without any punishment and had instead been placed under protection felt like a clue too.

Estelle went pale, an artificial sort of unpleasantness coming over her. The words "controlled rebellion" appeared in her mind all of a sudden. She also recalled what Sachis had said at the Shrine, in the depths of the palace.

"All of this was brought on by a large mix of motives and various circumstances."

If the king and the queen had colluded to get rid of Mircea Marwick…

Even Estelle thought the idea was wild. But once it had appeared in her mind, it wouldn't leave her.

"Estelle, you're pale as a ghost. Are you unwell?" asked Arcrayne.

Before Estelle knew it, she'd begun to tremble, and the prince must've noticed it.

"Oh, I am all right…" she replied.

"Your complexion says otherwise. Why don't you go now?" said Truteliese. Her tone was overbearing, but her mana

suggested she was concerned for Estelle.

Estelle must've perceived the queen's actions as favorable because of the conjectures she'd just made.

I have to ask, she felt impulsively. If she missed this chance, she would surely never get to talk to Truteliese again.

"Lady Truteliese... There is something I would like to ask you..."

"No need for the formal address. I'm a criminal. Your position is higher than mine, as it's a fact you'll be a crown princess soon."

Estelle shook her head. Truteliese was still royalty on paper, so Estelle felt the bare minimum of respect was due.

"Was this rebellion your and His Majesty's doing?" asked Estelle with a do-or-die spirit.

Truteliese looked caught off guard for a moment, then burst into laughter. "And here I thought you had something smart to say... Arcrayne, is your fiancée an aspiring writer, perchance?"

Estelle almost lost courage, but stood her ground and continued. "Things have come to a rather smooth conclusion. Too smooth, if you ask me. So I thought you did this to give Lord Arc the throne after getting rid of his political enemy," Estelle said hesitantly.

Truteliese burst into laughter again. "You're not suited to be a detective or a writer, Lady Estelle. I can't imagine where you got such strange ideas... Are you tired, maybe?" She gave Estelle a look of pity.

Arcrayne's mana darkened in an instant. He opened his mouth to say something back, but before he could, Estelle grabbed his elbow to stop him, and resolved herself to ask the next question.

"Um... Lady Truteliese, are you...fond of Lord Arc?"

Both Arcrayne and Truteliese stared at Estelle.

The queen was the first to recover from stupefaction. "What gave you that idea?" she asked.

Estelle was lost for words, as she couldn't say that her power let her see these things.

"I'm not sure if there's a problem with your eyes or with your head... Arcrayne, you might want to get yourself a different fiancée before it's too late."

"Estelle is an Awoken, stepmother," cut in the prince after a pause. "Her power lets her see people's emotions. So if this is what she says..."

“What’re you talking about all of a sudden? What do you mean, ‘see emotions’…?” asked Truteliese, looking confused and staring at Estelle’s face.

The gaze of a woman who’d been a queen for a long time was intense. Estelle froze up like a mouse under a cat’s stare.

After a few moments, Truteliese spoke up again. “If you claim to be an Awoken, can you tell me what I’m thinking about right now?”

Estelle looked at Arcrayne, not knowing how she should reply. She hadn’t expected him to reveal her power, which he’d previously asked Estelle to keep a secret from everyone.

“Estelle’s power doesn’t let her read minds. She can only see the general direction of people’s emotions.”

“The direction…?” Truteliese looked confused.

“She can see if you’re happy or angry, if your emotions are positive or negative.”

Truteliese’s cheek twitched. “If what you say is true, then why hasn’t she announced it to the public? And don’t act like she—as someone born into nobility—wasn’t aware that Awoken are regarded as national treasures.” Her relentless gaze shot through Estelle.

“That…” mumbled Estelle in hesitation.

“It’s because she thought that people would be revolted by someone who could see their emotions, even if she couldn’t perceive the details,” explained Arcrayne on her behalf. “And in addition, if she’d let people know she was an Awoken, she would’ve had to leave her home. Estelle told me she didn’t want that to happen.”

“Are you saying her whole family kept it a secret?”

“My family has nothing to do with this!” said Estelle in a hurry. “I Awoke to my power at the age of fourteen, when I contracted scarlet fever. There was an epidemic in the north that summer. I managed to recover without aftereffects, but my parents…”

“That epidemic from six years ago. I remember.” Truteliese lowered her eyes.

“My brother had to inherit the earldom in haste and worked desperately to put the domain back on its feet, especially considering how many of our people had died. I could not possibly tell him, given the ongoing situation. In the meantime, my engagement to my old fiancé was arranged. I loved Lyle—my former fiancé—and I loathed the idea of moving to Albion, so

could not tell anyone about my power."

"So that's how it was... I suppose it would be difficult to tell anyone in such a situation," said Truteliese.

"I found Estelle in November of last year—thanks to the snake you people sent to Marquess Rogell's mansion at that time." Arcrayne's words made Truteliese twitch. "I was the one who told Estelle to keep her power a secret, later that night. Some people were quite persistent in aiming for my life, and I wanted Estelle as an ace up my sleeve—a walking alarm."

"If you go so far as to insist she's an Awoken who can see emotions, I would like some sort of proof," said Truteliese, looking provocatively at Estelle.

"On our first meeting, when you invited me to a tea party at the Leo Palace..." began Estelle, "you hated me, did you not? Even if you acted friendly toward me... You found me unsatisfactory as Lord Arc's fiancée, yes? Since I was less suitable than Miss Rainsworth, who was said to be the main candidate for the role of his fiancée at the time."

Truteliese didn't reply and only directed a stern look at Estelle.

"I noticed your emotions toward me change when we went to see the opera together," continued Estelle. "I know not why, but I felt that you had come to approve of me."

The queen's expression turned blank.

"Also, although you said spiteful things to Lord Arc at the time, you bore negative emotions in the process. It looked to me as though, in truth, you did not want to say such things."

Truteliese remained silent.

"Since you don't deny it right away, can I take it as an admission?" asked Arcrayne. "But that can't be right, can it? You always sought to bring me down."

Truteliese's eyes wavered for a moment. "You won't get the truth from me," she finally said.

"What...?" uttered Arcrayne.

"No man or woman shall be forced to testify against themselves regardless of the circumstances."

Truteliese had recited the part of Rosalian law that granted the right to remain silent.

"Do you really think that will work in this situation?" asked Arcrayne.

"Oh? Is Rosalia no longer a constitutional state?" Truteliese gave a bewitching smile and didn't say a word.



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Truteliese didn’t say a word after that. In the end, Arcrayne and Estelle were unable to get any answers out of her, so they gave up and left the Tower of Albion.

No matter what tone they’d used with her, the queen had maintained her silence with a blank look on her face. Because of that, Arcrayne looked on edge.

“I’m sorry for telling her about your power without your permission.” This was the first thing he said since they’d left, once they were alone in the coach.

“Did you tell her because she will eventually be executed?”

The expression “dead men tell no tales” appeared in Estelle’s mind, making her feel unpleasant. Even if Truteliese were to tell people about Estelle’s power, it was now possible to hush it up by calling it the lies of a criminal.

“I won’t deny I had that thought for a moment. But the bigger factor was my surprise at the emotions you saw in her and the conclusions you came to.” Leaning back in his seat, Arcrayne sighed dejectedly. “You aren’t the only one who found the course of events of the rebellion and its conclusion unnatural. That’s what shook me up.”

“Lord Arc…”

“Sorry, I need a moment to collect my thoughts.” With that, Arcrayne furrowed his brows and directed his eyes outside the window.

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After returning from the Tower of Albion to the palace, Estelle and Arcrayne were told that Sachis had called for them, so they both went to the Leo Palace.

As he lay in his bedroom, the king’s face looked even better than when Estelle had visited him the day before.

“I’m glad you came,” he said from his bed, then told his chief officer to leave the room.

Estelle and Arcrayne sat on chairs that had been placed next to the bed ahead of time.

“I don’t like beating around the bush, so I’ll get straight to the point. Is it true that Lady Estelle is an Awoken?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Arcrayne after a pause but without changing his expression in the slightest.

“Strange… I just heard it from Truteliese.”

The prince twitched. “What does she have to do with this?”

“I gave her a small mana communicator which can only reach me.”

Arcrayne brought his hand to his temple as if he had a headache. “That makes it sound like you and the queen worked together.”

“That’s exactly right.”

Arcrayne’s mana darkened. “May I ask for a full explanation?”

“It’s simple. Truteliese is my accomplice.”

The king’s words confirmed the conclusions Estelle had drawn.

“Since when?” asked the prince, his anger palpable.

“‘Since when’? Since the very beginning. If you want a more concrete answer—I suppose it began when Truteliese became pregnant with Liedis.”

Thus, Sachis began his story, a somewhat distant look in his eye.

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Sachis had taken Truteliese as his second wife seventeen years ago, right after the end of the mourning period for Miriallia, Arcrayne’s birth mother and the previous queen.

“Miriallia died of an illness. There was nothing suspicious about it. She wasn’t all that healthy to begin with… The cause was a cold she got soon after giving birth—she developed complications while she was in a weakened state.” Sachis lowered his eyes. “My marriage to Truteliese was something neither of us wanted. To me, she was someone I had no choice but to marry as people around me expressed their concerns about having only one son for a potential successor.”

“So you didn’t love her?” asked Arcrayne with a hint of reproach.

Sachis nodded. “The one woman I’ve loved sincerely, then and now, is Miriallia.” His reply made Arcrayne widen his eyes. “But it was the same for Truteliese. At the time, she had a fiancé with whom she was on good terms. And yet, Mircea tore them apart, and she had to marry me. While she seemed to have been

pragmatic about it, realizing it was necessary for political reasons, our union was one of obligation."

The king had previously told Estelle about Truteliese's fiancé at the underground Shrine. And besides, now that she gave it more thought, it occurred to her that Truteliese and Sachis were ten years apart in age, as she'd married him at the age of eighteen. Even had the king been a charming man, marrying him must've required resolve nonetheless.

"Truteliese is a victim of Mircea's obsession with the throne. While she'd been pragmatic about our marriage, deep inside, she'd resented her father for forcing her to marry into royalty. Then again, I only found out how she truly felt after we'd been married for quite some time. When we'd only just married, it wasn't the kind of relationship where we could lay everything on the table. The one who changed our union from pure obligation into something more was you, Arc."

Arcrayne's mana wavered. The look on his face was composed, but he seemed shaken up on the inside.

"It was your actions at a young age that changed Truteliese's life in the palace. You went to see her, excited and curious to meet your new mother, didn't you?"

"I don't remember," said Arcrayne after a moment's pause.

"It's no surprise. You were only six at the time."

Sachis seemed convinced, a faint smile on his face, but Estelle thought Arcrayne was lying. He had an exceptional memory, so he must've only pretended to forget.

"It seems that your affection saved her in many ways. She may have been only a stepmother to you, but the love she gave you was real."

"Then why did she make me drink tea with detergent in it?!"

Estelle couldn't contain a "Huh...?"

"There was an incident like that. It happened after Liedis was born," explained Sachis.

"It made me averse to the smell of alcohol and elderflowers," Arcrayne spat out hatefully.

Come to think of it, he did mention once that he has problems with elderflowers. And how he doesn't like the burning sensation when alcohol passes down his throat... thought Estelle, turning to look at Arcrayne's profile. *So he doesn't like elderflowers because he drank elderflower tea that was contaminated...?* That must've been the case. And it must've been the reason for his dislike of alcohol

too.

Having discovered the truth behind Arcrayne's preferences, Estelle clenched a fist against her chest.

"She told me it was to protect you. That's why she used detergent instead of lethal poison," explained Sachis, lowering his eyes. "With swift first aid and a royal's capacity for recovery, it wouldn't leave any aftereffects. And out of the chemicals fit for the purpose that she could get her hands on with relative ease, she chose detergent."

"Did you know about this?" asked the prince.

Estelle didn't need to look at his mana to know he was angry.

"Yes. It was dangerous if you kept going to the Leo Palace to see her and Liedis. Many of Truteliese's aides were loyal to Mircea and were waiting for an opportunity to hurt you."

"So it couldn't be helped. Is that what you're saying…?"

"I won't ask you to forgive me. I'm aware of the weight of the things I've done." Sachis didn't avert his eyes from the prince. "What must've made things worse was Liedis showing high amounts of mana since the day he was born. But I can't say giving birth to him was a mistake. I couldn't disregard Truteliese after she'd given up so much to marry me." The king's anguish showed on his face—as a husband, and as a father. "Arc… I wanted to protect not only you, but Truteliese and Liedis too. Driving Mircea into a corner could've led to consequences for Truteliese. I looked for ways to bring him down without getting Truteliese and Liedis caught in the process. This is how long it took—and on top of that, you suffered for it."

"So you're saying this is the result of you trying to kill not two, but three birds with one stone…?"

Estelle saw Arcrayne's mana begin to rise. She had a premonition that his anger would make his power go out of control again, so she grabbed his elbow on an impulse. His mana settled down at that point.

"Before I could find a way to save all three of you, my body reached its limit…and this is what everything has led to." Sachis heaved a deep sigh and closed his eyes. "It was Truteliese who orchestrated the recent events. She told me to give up on saving all three. She chose to sacrifice herself and take Mircea down with her."

"Why did she go that far…?" uttered Arcrayne.

Estelle had the same question on her mind. *Marrying for*

political reasons is the norm for those born into nobility, she thought to herself. Would being forced into an unwanted marriage make her resent her father that much? Perhaps she'd hated it at first, but she had a good relationship with her stepson, and she and Sachis had given birth to Liedis.

"Is there not another reason Lady Truteliese resented Mircea Marwick?" Estelle asked, having made up her mind. She simply couldn't understand putting one's life on the line to bring down one's biological father for the sake of one's stepson.

"What other reason would there be?" asked Sachis, not seeming intent to answer Estelle's question.

She went on. "When I put myself in her shoes, it feels unthinkable. While I am not familiar with Lady Truteliese's temperament, as I have had little contact with her, I have been told she carried out her public duties with vigor and was serious about her role as queen. It is hard to imagine a person like that wanting to bring her biological father and her family to ruin simply because they forced her into a political marriage."

"Lady Estelle, Truteliese said your power lets you see the direction of people's emotions. Did you 'see' the emotions of Truteliese?"

Estelle trembled. After a moment of silence, she said hesitantly, "I did. The moment Mircea's name came up, a terribly negative emotion came over her. Its darkness was abnormal. It felt like hatred mixed with murderous intent." Estelle recalled the abyssal darkness of Truteliese's mana.

The king sighed deeply. "She was abused quite badly."

His words took both Estelle and Arcrayne by surprise.

"Mircea was deeply attached to the throne and bore an abnormal sense of rivalry toward my father, who had become king instead of him. What especially bothered him was that his children Truteliese and Silvio had less mana than me, and that they hadn't Awoken. He blamed it on his wife's pedigree and took it out on her and their children, from what I hear. This caused his wife's early death from emotional distress, while Truteliese had to suffer through many beatings as she grew up."

An awkward silence hung over the room.

"When Truteliese became pregnant with Liedis, she found out that her aides planned to kill Arc on Mircea's orders, and she decided to break away from her father. That was when we became accomplices."

No way... Estelle didn't know what kind of face she should be making. Glancing at Arcrayne sitting next to her, she saw him look dejected, his mana dark.

"We tried ways both honest and less so, but he was an Awoken too. It's not easy to assassinate an Awoken, and we were forced to give up quickly. That said, he also made it difficult to get anything on him through honest means." At that point, Sachis sighed deeply.

"And you want me to believe that...?" said Arcrayne, breaking the silence.

"It's up to you whether to believe it or not," replied the king.

The air in the room was heavy. The tense atmosphere made Estelle's stomach hurt.

"What will happen to my stepmother?" asked Arcrayne after everyone was silent for a while.

"She's the mastermind behind a rebellion. She can't avoid capital punishment," the king said flatly. "Truteliese set up her father and brother knowing it would end like this. I can't let her resolve go to waste—but I do plan to arrange a secret escape for her."

When Sachis's words made Estelle look up, their eyes met. The king had a calm smile on his face.

"She'll be in the duchy of Marwick by the end of it. Eventually, that domain will belong to Liedis."

Arcrayne stared at Sachis. "You plan to give Marwick's duchies to Liedis?"

"Probably not all of them. But he needs the bare minimum of assets to maintain his status as a member of royalty, and I should be able to give him that much."

"Even so, he will no doubt be reviled as the son of a traitor."

"He will. I feel terribly sorry for him, given all that happened. I do plan to tell him the truth, but will he be able to bear it...? Arcrayne, you're not obligated to do this for me, but will you support him as his brother...?"

"I was going to do it even if you didn't ask," the prince spat. The stern look on his face conveyed his dreariness. "I have one last question, father. Had Estelle not picked up on my stepmother's emotions with her power, were you going to bury the truth?"

"Truteliese herself wanted to be punished for being a bad stepmother. But I intended to secretly save her from the start. I

was only going to tell Liedis the truth."

Estelle heard Arcrayne grinding his teeth. "Your Majesty, that is simply too cruel to Lord Arc…" she said.

Perhaps she was forgetting her place. But she couldn't stay silent on the matter.

"I suppose. But I couldn't disregard Truteliese's feelings either."

"I understand now how you and she felt. But I can't accept it at all," said Arcrayne.

"I'm not surprised." Sachis's face was full of anguish.

***

Once the conversation with Arcrayne and Estelle was over, Sachis, now alone, lay on the bed and heaved a long sigh.

Arcrayne excelled at picking up on people's feelings. After all, he'd been paying close attention to others since he was very young, careful not to say anything they could find fault with, for he had many enemies in high society. While Sachis pitied his son, he also found this skill of his bothersome.

And to make matters worse, this time he'd had to deal not only with Arcrayne, but also Estelle, whose power let her see people's emotions.

Wish I could take things slow and get some rest, but I can't afford to do so yet, thought Sachis. There was somebody waiting for him to get in touch.

Sachis took out a pocket watch from the drawer of his bedside table. This watch doubled as a mana communicator. The king slid the dial and a console appeared, displaying numbers. He placed a call to the mana communicator he'd given Truteliese in secret.

"Is it you, Your Majesty?" came Truteliese's voice from the watch shortly thereafter.

"Yes. I just talked to Arc and Lady Estelle."

"How did it go?"

"I think they bought my story about you-know-what."

"Thank you," said the queen after a pause, her voice dark. She must've recalled her abominable past.

Sachis had lied about Mircea beating Truteliese. The duke *had* abused her, but apparently even he couldn't raise a hand against a little girl, so the abuse had been mental—primarily in the form

of abusive language.

Apparently he'd particularly blamed his children for how little mana they had and the fact that they hadn't Awoken to any powers.

That fool, thought the king.

The reason his children had less mana and hadn't Awoken was a ritual held in the palace's underground. Then again, this was one of the pieces of information that Rosalian kings inherited through an artifact known as the Crown—one of the four regalia. It wasn't public knowledge, so it was only natural that Mircea hadn't known about it.

When a future queen entered the royal family, a ritual was held at the altar in the underground Shrine. The ritual "registered" one as a member of royalty. A woman who'd gone through it was said to have her body remade by the Foundation Monument into one that could bear superior heirs.

Mircea, Sachis, Arcrayne, Liedis—all royals of direct descent were born with similar features, and this was the reason.

When the previous king Ethelbert had inherited the throne, Sachis had already been born, so Mircea had never become crown prince. This was the reason the volume of his children's mana hadn't exceeded that of ordinary high-ranking nobles, and they'd never Awoken.

Not only had his blame for his wife and children been misdirected, but the constant verbal abuse the people of his mansion had been subjected to had molded Silvio into an unambitious man who was submissive to his father. Meanwhile, the sharp and strong-willed Truteliese had quickly learned to let her father's bad language go in one ear and out the other.

As she'd grown up in a house completely devoid of love, she'd always disliked her father, but her dislike had turned into intense hatred after a certain truly appalling event.

Those with thick royal blood flowing through their veins tended to be rather devoted. Once they'd found a member of the opposite sex who was special to them, they tended to only ever love that person.

For Sachis, Miriallia had been the one. While he'd been with Truteliese out of obligation, their married life had brought him suffering.

When Arcrayne and Truteliese had grown close, the distance

in the relationship between the king and queen had started to shrink, but the time they'd spent as husband and wife had still remained at a minimum.

This, however, had brought tragedy with it.

Growing irritated at the lack of progress in Sachis and Truteliese's marriage, Mircea had done something unbelievable.

He must've originally planned on getting rid of Arcrayne once Truteliese had given birth.

"You think you can bear a child if you only lie with him once a month? Won't it solve everything if you bear *my* child instead?"

Those were the things he'd said before doing the unforgivable.

When the deed had been done, Truteliese had bravely and calmly told Sachis about it and asked him to punish Duke Marwick even if it meant she'd suffer for it too.

But Sachis couldn't do it, because when a doctor had examined her right after the assault, she'd been found to be pregnant with Liedis.

Had the king made Mircea's actions public, he could've charged the duke with high treason, but Truteliese would've inevitably come under harm as well.

Also, the timing of when she'd been found to be pregnant had made it clear Liedis was Sachis's child, but there would definitely have been cruel people who would slander her, doubting her son's legitimacy.

And most of all, Truteliese had already been in pieces, and he hadn't wanted her to be hurt any more.

Thinking back on it now, Sachis saw himself as a failure of a king.

"Did he really kill himself?"

Truteliese's question coming from the mana communicator brought Sachis back from his recollection to reality.

I wasn't going to tell her if she never asked... he thought to himself and sighed inwardly.

"He didn't. I had an experimental drug administered to him—a type of painkiller. The dose was intentionally kept small so that it would take time before he died. I was told that the hour and fifty-two minutes between the injection and his death were

excruciating.”

The king heard Truteliese gasp. He’d just confessed to taking the law into his own hands.

Did that put her off…? Sachis wondered. Truteliese’s hatred might have run deep, but the man on the receiving end of it had still been her biological father. The king waited nervously for her to speak.

“That was intensely satisfying,” came the reply. “And he was my *father*, despite all his faults… I’m such an awful woman.”

“I’m no better, as I gave the order.”

The capital punishment for high treason had once been drawing, hanging until dead, and posthumous beheading and quartering. But as it was simply too brutal, it had been abolished a long time ago.

Nowadays, death penalties in Rosalia were all carried out through hanging, as they were seen as more humane. But some part of Sachis found it too mild a punishment.

“Was it for my sake that you disposed of him before he was questioned…?”

“I didn’t want him to say anything unnecessary.”

Dead men tell no tales.

Mircea had believed Liedis to be his son. Sachis had needed to act quickly, before the duke had blurted out something inconvenient.

Also, the doctor who’d examined Truteliese after the abominable incident had already died from old age, and all of Truteliese’s attendants who’d helped Mircea had been *dealt with*.

Sachis and Truteliese intended to take the duke’s unforgivable sin to the grave with them.

“How is Liedis?” asked Truteliese.

“He regained consciousness yesterday and said many things. He cried as he insisted he had no right to be a member of royalty.” Remembering it made Sachis’s heart ache. “He also said Mircea had a hand in the dragon attack at the hunting contest.”

“What…?!” Truteliese’s breath was taken away.

“Do you remember the endless rains that hit the north two years ago?”

“Yes.”

“A landslide occurred in one of his domains at the time, revealing previously undiscovered ruins. Apparently they held an artifact that could control animals.”

“Please don’t say he used it to control that dragon.”

“He did. He wanted to create a situation where Liedis could distinguish himself. But the artifact broke in the process.”

“That bastard! How foolish could he be?” Truteliese raised her voice.

Sachis felt the same way.

“As for Liedis, he said he wants to study theology. He must be looking for a way to take responsibility.”

Studying theology meant becoming a Messianist clergyman. While the Rosalian Church—the denomination of Messianism that was the state religion in Rosalia—was more lenient than the other denominations, becoming a clergyman meant adhering to rigorous precepts and spending one’s days in prayer.

“Liedis’s misfortune is the result of his being my son…” uttered Truteliese.

“I’ve told him to take his time and think things through until he graduates from the College.”

“Even there, at the College, people will be harsh with him. Perhaps he will be forced to deal with it his whole life…”

“I promise to protect him to the best of my ability. Arcrayne and Lady Estelle also promised to support him. And Truteliese… Will you do it too?”

“What are you asking from a woman who is due for an execution…?”

“I plan to let you escape in secret.”

“What…?” Truteliese sounded taken aback. “I refuse! Someone like me shouldn’t be allowed to be in this world to begin with!”

“I understand how you feel. But I also want *you* to understand that if I grant your wish and have you executed, many would be hurt by that decision.”

She went silent.

“Somehow or other, I’ll get Liedis to change his mind while he’s at the College, and eventually give him some of Duke Marwick’s territories,” Sachis told the queen about the same imagined future he’d brought up with Arcrayne and Estelle. “I want you to spend the rest of your days there, living in peace.”

“I don’t believe I have the right to live by Liedis’s side.”

Truteliese felt a mix of love and hate for her child. She’d wanted to end her life after being raped, and it had been thanks to Liedis that she’d gone on living. However, she felt that he’d been stained while he was in her womb, so she hadn’t been able

to love him properly, and the matter had bothered her all along.

Also, he'd been surrounded by servants loyal to Duke Marwick since the day of his birth. This had made it extra difficult for Truteliese to love her son.

"I believe your worries show that you are very much his mother. And if there's anything else you want, I'll do everything in my power to make it happen. Though I'm aware that it's cruel to ask this of someone who always wanted to die."

Truteliese went silent again. Sachis would speak no more until she gave some kind of reply.

"Give me a little time..." she finally said quietly, as if struggling to get the voice out.

***

Let us go back in time somewhat.

When Arcrayne left Sachis's room after the long conversation, his face was clouded over. Estelle's eyes saw that his mana was utterly dark.

No wonder... she thought.

He'd just been told that Truteliese, whom he'd seen as his enemy all this time, had in fact been working together with Sachis and plotting to bring down Mircea Marwick. Arcrayne must've had indescribable feelings swirling around inside him.

After they had walked some distance from Sachis's room, Arcrayne stopped.

"I hate myself for being so small-minded. Why does this anger me so much?" he said.

"I believe it is only natural for you to feel that way about this matter. It made me angry too, and I had to wonder if there had not been a better way of going about things," replied Estelle.

Arcrayne walked up to a window in the corridor and looked outside. As this was the second floor, the window had a clear view of the whole garden.

The garden of the Leo Palace was split into two parts. One was a hedge maze, while the other was an Eastern-style garden with a folly in the style of the Yang Empire at the center.

"This used to be purely a rose garden, back in the day," uttered Arcrayne, calmly gazing out at the garden. "She gave me the contaminated tea at the gazebo that used to be there."

Estelle gently placed her hand on Arcrayne's arm out of

concern.

“After that, I was given the Libra Palace… When I next set foot here in the Leo Palace, the garden had changed completely. And not just the garden, but everything inside the building too. They’d gotten rid of everything that had been left from when my real mother was alive.” The prince clenched his fist on the window frame. “That’s why it’s hard to believe, even now. I always thought my father came to love *her* instead.”

Arcrayne was deeply hurt. Estelle was painfully aware of it, but she couldn’t find what to say to him.

“She used to be kind. It should make me happy to know it wasn’t fake…” With that preamble, Arcrayne began telling Estelle about his childhood. “When she first came to the palace, she seemed sad, as though she had something dark weighing on her heart.”

However, as Truteliese had grown used to life in the palace, she’d brightened up, little by little. According to Arcrayne, talking to her had filled the hole left in him by the death of his biological mother.

“That’s why I couldn’t forgive her for poisoning my tea right after Liedis was born. Father said it was to protect me, but I can’t rein in my emotions so easily…”

It’s only natural… remarked Estelle. She felt like she was seeing the very thing that had made Arcrayne the man he was right now. As she’d been blessed with a good family environment, she couldn’t imagine how deep a scar it must’ve left to be betrayed by someone you’d trusted unconditionally.

“I’m glad you have that power, though,” said the prince. “I’d rather know the truth than have it hidden from me forever…”

His words took Estelle by surprise. “It is a relief to hear you say that.”

Her eyes had laid Truteliese’s real intentions bare. Estelle couldn’t confidently say that knowing the truth always made one happier than the alternative. She’d been feeling guilty because of that. That guilt felt a little lighter after what the prince had said.

“Maybe everything would’ve gone smoothly if I had never existed.”

“Why would you say that?!” exclaimed Estelle.

“Think about it. If I was never born, Mircea wouldn’t have become so recklessly violent. And in the first place, my real mother might’ve still been alive.”

“Stop it!” Not wanting to hear any more, Estelle clung to Arcrayne’s back before she knew it. “I think I understand the feelings that make you give yourself up to despair, but you cannot say that! I do not even want to imagine a world without you!” Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision. “I love you! What am I supposed to do with these feelings?”

Arcrayne trembled, perhaps shaken up by Estelle’s words.

“Please do not say you wish you never existed—it is simply too sad…”

As Estelle pleaded in tears, her arms around the prince, a much larger hand enveloped her own.

“Be with me today,” asked Arcrayne, turning around and making eye contact.

Estelle nodded and buried her face in his broad back.

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When the light of morning hit Arcrayne’s face and woke him up, he found Estelle sleeping in his arms and buried his face in her hair.

Remembering how he’d whined to her the day before made his face burn with embarrassment. But at the same time, the fact that Estelle had accepted him whole, including his weak and pathetic side, made him love her all the more.

Arcrayne was surprised to notice just how much he’d calmed down overnight. Without a doubt, he owed it to the warmth in his arms.

Thank you, he said inwardly, before placing his lips on Estelle’s forehead.

Estelle woke up approximately thirty minutes later, and they had breakfast together. After reluctantly parting with her, Arcrayne headed to his office.

Estelle had expressed a wish to live in the Leo Palace for a while, so she seemed intent on getting things ready for it today.

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“Your Highness, you look much better today,” said Claus, who’d already been inside the office when Arcrayne came in.

“If it looks that way, it must be thanks to Estelle.” The prince

sat in the chair normally used by Sachis.

Since the previous king Ethelbert's reign, capitalists had been gaining prominence thanks to advancements in mana technology, and the common people had increasing influence; Rosalia had been shifting toward a system that respected the Parliament's decisions. That said, the Parliament, the Cabinet, the military, and the Church were still under the king's rule. No change would ever take place without his approval. Which was why the desk was stacked with paperwork that needed to be reviewed by either Sachis or Arcrayne.

At present, Arcrayne's duties were mostly limited to paperwork, but normally, they would also include participating in social events, diplomatic activity, and attending ceremonies.

As the power struggle was expected to intensify with the fall of Duke Marwick, it was important to pay attention to the nobles' actions, but the reality was that Arcrayne would be forced to put someone else on that task.

There were too many things to do—handle the aftermath of "Marwick's High Treason," as it had been named; prepare for his investiture as crown prince; prepare for the wedding… Arcrayne could barely keep up with everything.

Sachis planned to go back to work in two days if his condition would allow it, so that should reduce the prince's workload somewhat, but for the time being, it seemed he was stuck here.

Sighing, he began by sorting the paperwork.

***

Estelle went to the Libra Palace to get her things, then returned to the Leo Palace. She was having a pleasant chat with May and Leah in the room that had been prepared for her when suddenly, she sensed the release of a large amount of mana from the floor above. It was followed by a dull sound, and then the building shook.

An earthquake? she wondered. Her attendants exchanged glances too.

Fortunately, the vibrations ceased right away. May and Leah looked relieved, but Estelle couldn't let her guard down yet.

Two large masses of mana… What is going on…? she thought to herself. Training her power might have expanded the range of her perception, but it wasn't like she could see mana from

dozens of meters away. She'd only been able to sense that it was there because it was so big. *They're both big, but it's like the bigger one is pinning down the slightly smaller one…* Estelle went pale. *It must be Lord Arc and His Highness Prince Liedis…*

She got up, unable to sit still.

"Lady Estelle, is something the matter?" asked May.

"I sensed with my power that something seems to be happening on the second floor." As she spoke, Estelle looked at the clock—it was pointing at fifteen minutes past two in the afternoon. "They planned to visit His Highness Prince Liedis in the afternoon and tell him the summary of what happened."

Estelle had heard that Sachis and Arcrayne would go to him by themselves and tell him about Marwick's High Treason.

"It looks like a clash of two large masses of mana. Maybe His Highness's mana went out of control when he learned what happened…" said Estelle.

"If that's what your senses tell you, then you mustn't get too close. In fact, you should consider relocating somewhere safe," said May.

Leah nodded in agreement. The two of them were tasked with protecting Estelle, risking their lives if the need arose.

Suddenly, Estelle couldn't sense mana from the upper floor anymore.

"Looks like things have calmed down up there," she said, looking at the ceiling. "May, can I go see what's going on?"

May shook her head. "No, my lady."

"It looks safe. If I see anything with my power, I'll let you know right away."

As Estelle persisted, a bitter look appeared on May's face.

"May, please," Estelle went on.

"Then I shall check the situation upstairs myself first."

"I think it's best if I come with you. I'll be able to see any strange mana."

May didn't reply immediately. Estelle stared at her. "Very well," she finally said with reluctance, appearing to have lost to Estelle's persistence. "I'll bring a guard and walk ahead. Stay behind us, and let me know immediately if you sense anything."

"I will. Thank you, May!" said Estelle, her face filling with joy.

***

Together with May and Neil, Estelle went to the second floor and headed in the direction where she'd sensed mana. There, they saw the chief officer of the palace lead Sachis and Arcrayne into a room. In Arcrayne's arms was Liedis, looking listless.

"Estelle..." uttered Arcrayne, having noticed them.

"Um, Lord Arc, what happened...?" asked Estelle. She'd passed her escorts and went up to the prince in a half run.

"It didn't go so smoothly when we talked to Liedis. Mind if I carry him to the bed before we talk?"

Estelle nodded. Arcrayne and Sachis were going into what appeared to be a guest bedroom.

Lying in Arcrayne's arms, Liedis had his eyes shut tight.

"As we expected, he lost control of his mana," explained Sachis, while Arcrayne laid his brother on the bed.

"I think it's only natural, given the subject matter," said Arcrayne, directing a look of resentment at the king.

He too had lost control of his mana when he'd learned about Mircea's death. Things must've gone the same way when Liedis had been told about the recent events.

"I'll look after Liedis. You should rest, father. Aren't you tired after using your mana to protect yourself?"

"I suppose so. Excuse me, then. I'll take you up on that offer," replied Sachis, looking somewhat tired, then left the room together with the chief officer of the Leo Palace.

"Brother... Lady Estelle..." came a hoarse voice from the bed, prompting Estelle to look in that direction. She saw that Liedis had his eyes open.

Arcrayne signaled with his eyes to May and the other attendants. With a look of understanding, they all left the room and closed the door.

"I'm...sorry..." said Liedis.

"You don't have to apologize for what happened with your mana. It was a lot to take in."

"That's not the whole problem! What my grandfather did to you is unforgivable! And my mother too! Even if it was for your sake, the things she did were so terrible..." Liedis looked haggard as he vented his thoughts.

"No need to apologize. I'm not angry at you," said Arcrayne, then sighed lightly. "If anything, I see you as a victim in this. So trust me, and take it easy today."

"I'm not a victim! I was complicit in the dragon attack at the

hunting contest…”

Many of Mircea’s previously unknown crimes had come to light from Truteliese’s testimony and the investigation into House Marwick. His involvement in the dragon attack was one of them.

“I’m sorry, Lady Estelle. I bear some of the responsibility for the scar on your hand.” Liedis’s eyes were on Estelle’s left hand.

Estelle shook her head. “It is not your fault, Your Highness. So please do not let it bother you.” She placed her left hand on one of Liedis’s hands.

“I’m told Mircea was the mastermind,” added Arcrayne. “I harbor no ill feelings toward you, and I don’t fault you for the scar on Estelle’s hand. I *would* have preferred it if you’d told us, but I can understand why you kept quiet about it.”

Estelle felt the same way. The one thing Liedis might’ve been guilty of was insolent behavior. But when she considered that it could be attributed to the way Mircea had raised him, she could see that too as him being a victim of the duke. If anything, it seemed amazing that Liedis could feel remorse despite his upbringing.

By Sachis’s decision, the dragon attack was going to continue to be treated as the work of anti-government organizations. He didn’t want Liedis’s name to suffer any further, as the prince already bore the stigma of blood relation to traitors. This decision, too, must’ve been hurting Liedis.

Estelle gripped his hand.

“I’m told you want to study theology,” said Arcrayne.

“Yes,” replied Liedis. “Father allowed it on the condition that I graduate from the College and go on to study theology at the University of Albion.”

“Just give the word if you change your mind.”

“Father said the same thing. But I won’t abandon my decision. Even if I were to change my mind, no one would forgive me,” Liedis said in a resolute tone.

“You’re still a child—don’t fuss over things like that. You should look for what you really want to do in life.” Arcrayne reached out to pat Liedis’s head.



Epilogue

The pure white wedding dress, which was the finest work of who was said to be the best dressmaker in Albion, was beautiful enough to draw a sigh from Estelle. Its sleeves were long, but since the wedding was to be held in summer, they were made out of lace. At the same time, they were designed to hide the scar on Estelle's left arm. The dress had a long train and didn't expose much skin. It was a tasteful design.

The tiara holding down the veil had once belonged to Miriallia, and as for the earrings, Estelle had borrowed them from Sierra in order to uphold the tradition of wearing the three "somethings."

Here in the Kingdom of Rosalia, it was said that a bride who wore "something new," "something old," and "something borrowed" would be happy for the rest of her life.

The tiara and the earrings were made out of pearls, matching the pure image of the dress.

The veil was Leah's work, while the gloves and parts of the dress used laces knit by Estelle.

"You look beautiful, Lady Estelle," said May, tears welling up in her eyes. She'd put extra effort into Estelle's makeup today.

Leah, who stood behind Estelle and who'd done her hair, also looked ready to cry.

"Thank you two for making me beautiful." Estelle felt tears on the way too.

"You mustn't cry yet, Lady Estelle. Your beautiful makeup will go to waste," warned Leah.

Estelle hurried to blink the tears away.

This was the day of Arcrayne and Estelle's wedding.

Since Arcrayne had already been invested as crown prince, many important people from both in and out of Rosalia had been invited to his wedding.

The wedding would be held at Albion Cathedral, which was located between the palace and the Tower of Albion. This was the headquarters of the Rosalian Church—the denomination of Messianism that was the state religion in Rosalia.

Sirius would be the one escorting Estelle to the cathedral and delivering her to the bridegroom. He'd volunteered to fill in for Estelle's father, but when she'd met up with him in the morning, he'd looked terribly pale—probably because of all the high-ranking guests.

Arcrayne had gone to the cathedral ahead of Estelle and was waiting for her there.

The schedule was tight today—the wedding would be followed by a parade, then there would be the ritual at the underground Shrine, and then a dinner party with the guests. Estelle was slightly worried about whether she could physically keep up with all of this.

Roughly two months had already passed since Marwick's High Treason. After the failed rebellion orchestrated by the queen and her father had been disclosed to the public in full, the royal family had become swamped with questions for a while—both from inside Rosalia and from the neighboring states. It had been a massive uproar.

The investigation had made much progress in those two months.

Mircea Marwick had used every means at his disposal to attack Arcrayne for a long time.

Apparently, a hidden chamber found in the duke's mansion had held plentiful evidence of him basically doing whatever he'd wanted. While Queen Miriallia had died a natural death, he'd been involved in the death of the previous Marquess Rogell, and he'd used his underworld connections to damage the standing of nobles supporting the first prince's faction.

When Sierra and Claus had learned the truth about the death of their family member, they'd both looked disconsolate. Recalling it made Estelle cast her eyes down.

These things had become clear because Silvio, who'd been trying to shift responsibility until now, had finally started testifying properly after all this time. Threatening him with speeding up his punishment appeared to have worked.

Among the things he'd said, his testimony about the second most recent conspiracy—the dragon attack—had been nauseating to hear. In order to bury a part of the artifact in the dragon's forehead, Mircea had used a rifleman from the earldom of Wyntia.

The rifleman and his family had been found dead. They'd been killed so they wouldn't talk.

To make matters worse, there'd apparently been inhumane experiments held in the name of "examining the artifact." Since the mana scientists involved had already made their escape, they'd been put on the wanted list with made-up charges.

As there were a lot of the duke's additional crimes to work through, it would probably be years until all the investigation and court processes came to an end and Silvio's punishment was decided.

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After getting ready, Estelle headed to the parlor of the Libra Palace. It currently functioned as the waiting room for Estelle's relatives—the people of House Flozeth.

When she stepped inside, her eyes met those of her uncle and aunt.

"You're so beautiful, Estelle."

Estelle's aunt Pamela was the first to speak. She was the wife of Oscar—the younger brother of Estelle's father.

"It feels like I'm marrying off my own daughter..." said Oscar, looking sad.

Estelle hadn't seen him since he'd brought her favorite horse Lunaris to the Libra Palace. As for Pamela, the last time Estelle had seen her had been when she'd left her earldom for Albion in late autumn the previous year.

"We're planning to stay in Albion for a while after the wedding. We'd be happy if you could tell us in more detail about your life at some point," said Pamela, eyes filled with curiosity.

The pressure made Estelle's face cramp. She remembered how excited her aunt had sounded over the mana communicator when Estelle had told her about her engagement with Arcrayne.

"Don't trouble His Highness and Estelle too much, dear. Either way, I'm glad everything worked out. Make sure to live well and be happy," said Oscar.

Estelle nodded.

When her engagement had just been decided, she'd been sure she couldn't establish an ideal household with Arcrayne. Now, things were different.

"Thank you, uncle, aunt. Lord Arc and I *will* be happy," she said

with resolve and smiled. “By the way, where did my brother go?” Estelle couldn’t see Sirius in the room.

“He went to get some outside air,” replied Pamela.

“He was stiff with nerves, after all… I hope he doesn’t mess up at the wedding…” added Oscar.

Their answers made Estelle uneasy.

No, I have more important things to worry about right now, she said inwardly. She herself had to be careful.

In order to balance out the height difference with the tall Arcrayne, today Estelle wore shoes with higher heels than she usually did. Her footing was unstable, which was quite scary.

To make matters worse, the train of her dress, as well as her veil, were so long that she needed help.

I better be careful… she told herself.

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The wedding was to begin at eleven in the morning.

The road from the palace to the cathedral was crowded with citizens who’d come to see the royal wedding.

Walking in an orderly formation at the head of the bride’s procession were the Foot Guards. Behind them was the six-horse coach with Estelle and Sirius in it. Surrounding the coach were members of the Royal Guard. One of them was Neville, who’d managed to recover and return to work in time.

An extravagant ceremonial coach had been prepared for Estelle. It was decorated with gold here and there. But while the seats in it were excellent, Estelle’s dress took up seventy percent of the space inside, which made Sirius’s face twitch.

“Isn’t the train too long?” he asked, sitting next to her.

“It has already been made shorter on my request. I’m told that at Her Majesty Queen Miriallia’s wedding, her train was so long it became creased up on the way.”

“Great, you’ve just made me afraid to move around…” Sirius began to fidget uncomfortably. He sighed with a degree of sadness. “Never thought you’d actually be marrying into the royal family.”

“Me neither.”

Just about a year ago, Estelle had been crying over the end of her engagement to Lyle.

She’d been told that his treatment was going well for now.

Estelle hoped he would manage to successfully escape his addiction.

Estelle and Sirius smiled and waved at the crowds outside the coach.

At some point, the tall Tower of Albion came into view.

Officially, Truteliese was imprisoned there, but in reality, Sachis had already gotten her out of there and she was living in secrecy in the Leo Palace. Apparently she'd wanted to die, and Sachis had had trouble persuading her, but eventually, she'd given in.

From now on, she would abandon her real name and position and live as someone else entirely. The king planned to eventually make her one of Liedis's attendants.

This must've had a major influence on Liedis. Compared to right after the rebellion, he was doing unrecognizably well. Normally he lived in the Royal College's dorm, but as it was currently on long summer break, he was back at the palace and he intended to be present at today's wedding.

He must've already been at the cathedral together with Sachis and Arcrayne, waiting for Estelle to arrive.

Since Sachis hadn't charged Liedis with anything and Arcrayne had told the public about his reconciliation with his half brother, people weren't as harsh with him as had been expected at the time.

At the end of the day, he was the second prince. Showing insolence toward him would be disrespecting royalty, so even if someone didn't like him, they probably couldn't put it on display.

I suppose we should be glad, concluded Estelle, recalling Liedis's face. His relationship with Arcrayne had improved, and he was now closer to Estelle too. The relationships of people around Estelle were becoming incomparably better than when she'd just met Arcrayne. *I met him at the start of November, which was eight months ago…*

It was hard to believe it had only been that long. That was how much had happened over that time.

"Make sure you become happy, Estelle."

"You too, brother."

Sirius too had found himself a potential fiancée. It was a woman from an earl-ranked family whose domain lay in central Rosalia. He'd promised to introduce her to Estelle once the

marriage talks had progressed further, and Estelle was looking forward to it.

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Once the bride's procession reached the cathedral, a cheer resonated through the area—so loud it resembled angry shouts.

"It's Princess Dragon Exterminator!"

"God bless the new princess!"

"Congratulations, Your Highness Princess Estelle!"

To the cheering of the people, Estelle took Sirius's hand and got out of the coach. Then, her aunt Pamela and May came out of the coach which had followed theirs, and carefully brought out the train of Estelle's dress, as well as her veil. May went on to carry the train and the veil as bridesmaid.

Leah handed Estelle a bouquet.

Estelle waved broadly to the masses and let Sirius escort her to the cathedral. A red carpet had been laid from the coach to the cathedral's entrance. It was surrounded on each side by guards of honor armed with bayonets.

The air in the chapel, where the wedding would be held, was sacred and solemn.

When Estelle and Sirius stepped inside, a pipe organ began to play, celebrating the union that was about to form. At the same time, Estelle gathered the looks of important guests from both in and out of Rosalia who'd been waiting for the bride's arrival.

Marwick's High Treason had made the emotions directed at Arcrayne and Estelle in high society much more favorable than before. It was a world of difference from when Arcrayne had announced their engagement. There *had* been some of Estelle's old friends from her academy, such as Keira, who'd given their blessings at the time, and Estelle saw them here too, which put a happy smile on her face.

Next to the altar were the people of House Rogell and members of the royal family. Claus and Olivia still seemed to be talking to each other regularly. And while Sierra wasn't pleased, perhaps it wouldn't be long before something good came of the two's relationship.

The place of honor among the royal seats belonged to Sachis and Liedis. The color of their mana almost moved Estelle to

tears. She'd always wanted to become a bride who would have everyone's blessing—and now, she felt that that dream of hers had come true.

With Sirius pulling on her arm, Estelle headed to the end of the wedding aisle, where Arcrayne waited.

Clad in a wedding suit, he looked even more dazzling than usual. The enormous mass of mana overflowing from his body was radiant with silver light, conveying his joy to Estelle.

I'm glad I have this power. It was the first time Estelle had thought that way. Her power allowed her to truly feel Arcrayne's love for her.

Perhaps it was also the reason she wasn't bothered much by the looks of strangers.

The throne Arcrayne would be taking in the near future wasn't anything pure. As seen during Marwick's High Treason only two months ago, plenty of blood had been spilled over it.

The throne was inseparable from heavy responsibility and duty. The prospect of supporting Arcrayne from beside him when he became king was still a little scary.

But Estelle wasn't going to give away the place she stood in right now—it was out of the question. All she did was gaze at the prince, not looking away.

Estelle finally reached the altar. Sirius handed her over to Arcrayne.

The prince extended his hand to her, and as she took it, his deep blue eyes—their color proof of his royalty—became filled with affection.

Standing before God, Estelle would swear her eternal love for Arcrayne and become his wife—in sickness and in health, until death do them part.



Afterstory 1: After the Wedding

“—up. Wake up, Lady Estelle.”

When Estelle felt somebody shaking her, her eyes snapped open.

“Oh, was I asleep…?” she asked, sitting up in a fluster and finding Leah looking at her with sympathy.

“You must’ve been tired. We’ve finished working on you,” said May with a giggle and handed Estelle pure white nightwear.

Estelle had somehow managed to get through the long events following the wedding, and while her attendants had honed her appearance to perfection, she’d dozed off in the process.

The nightwear they’d prepared for her was easy to take off, but had a refined design.

When Estelle thought of how she was about to spend her first night with Arcrayne as his wife, it made her heart race. They’d slept together many times already, but that had been as fiancés, and then as lovers. Tonight was special.

Estelle had already returned to Sachis the ring she’d worn as contraception. Which meant that starting from today, her nights would bear the purpose of making children. Merely imagining it made Estelle beet red with embarrassment.

But just as she sighed listlessly, the door of her bedroom opened.

“Lord Arc?!” she exclaimed.

Estelle widened her eyes at the sight of Arcrayne entering in his nightclothes. It was the first time he’d come in here without asking for her permission. While she remained confused by the sudden turn of events, he came closer.

“I asked May to call me once you were ready. You looked somewhat unsteady on your feet when you walked here after the dinner party.”

His words took Estelle by surprise.

“How are your feet? Were your shoes a poor fit?” asked the prince.

“Um… It is probably because the heels I wore at the wedding were higher than what I normally wear.”

The heels had been that high so that she would look good standing next to Arcrayne, who was quite tall. They had placed significant stress on her feet, which had reached the point of exhaustion.

Estelle had done her best to maintain a beautiful posture until all the events were over, but the fact that Arcrayne had seen through her meant she needed more training. Estelle drooped her shoulders.

"I knew it. Come, I'll carry you." Arcrayne extended his hand.

May was looking away and pretending not to notice, but Leah looked on with eyes full of anticipation.

While it was a little embarrassing, the mood dictated that Estelle couldn't refuse. Arcrayne bent down, and Estelle wrapped her arms around his neck, at which point he lifted her into his arms.

"I'll be taking her," he said to Estelle's attendants and started walking.

Arcrayne's step and the way he held her felt stable and reassuring. Smiling, Estelle leaned in and entrusted herself to the prince.

When she closed her eyes, the events of the day flashed vividly before her.

The wedding at the cathedral had been followed by a parade, and after they'd gone back to the palace, there'd been the ritual at the underground Shrine.

His Majesty called it a ritual…but if anything, it was more of a registration, remarked Estelle, thinking over what had happened at the Shrine.

The only people present at the ritual had been Sachis, Arcrayne, and Estelle. After activating the altar with the Key, Sachis had given Estelle the Quill—another of the regalia.

"Write your name there using your mana." Sachis pointed at a semitransparent board that had appeared above the altar.

Estelle did as she was told and wrote,

Estelle of Rosalia.

That was her new name, now that she was married to Arcrayne.

Once she was done, Arcrayne channeled his mana into the Key in Sachis's stead. Then, the Foundation Monument at the center of the Shrine began to emit silver light and surrounded Estelle with an incredible volume of mana.

Apparently, this ritual granted Estelle the right to use the regalia and remade her body into one capable of bearing a royal heir.

She looked at herself. What she'd been through today, including the underground ritual, didn't feel real—like it had all been a dream.

Before Estelle knew it, Arcrayne had brought her to the shared bedroom and carefully sat her down on the bed.

She stared at his face from up close. It was still hard to believe he'd become her husband.

Arcrayne knelt on one knee and lifted Estelle's foot. "They're red," he said.

Estelle saw that, indeed, her toes were red. "It was probably the pressure from the high heels," she replied.

Arcrayne put Estelle's feet back down for the time being and got up. He poured hot water into a bowl that had sat on the bedside table and brought it over. Then, he immersed a piece of linen in it, wrung it, and wrapped Estelle's right foot with it to start.

"I cannot make you do this, Lord Arc..."

"I want to do it. Let me know if it hurts."

"It feels pleasant," Estelle replied after a pause.

The massage through the linen felt really good.

After the right foot, Arcrayne switched to the left one. His touch was gentle and soothing.

Pleasant as it was, the thought that she had the crown prince kneeling before her made Estelle feel like she was doing something naughty.

After he was done with the massage, Arcrayne lifted Estelle's left foot and kissed the top of it.

It caught her by surprise. "Stop! You must not do this."

"Why not?"

"B-Because that is my foot..."

"Do you not like my lips on your foot, my queen?"

The prince's teasing smile rendered Estelle speechless.

Afterstory 2: Honeymoon

The fastest way to get from Albion to the earldom of Flozeth was by train. Getting off at the train station in the City of Flozeth, which was located at the center of the earldom, Estelle took a deep breath.

It was colder here compared to Albion, but Estelle had missed the clear air of this place.

Located in a mountainous region in the northern part of the island of Great Rosalia, the earldom of Flozeth was slightly looked down upon by people in Albion as “the far north.”

But despite its remote location, this place was connected by railroad, and that was because of its rich mines of mana stone. A station had been built here relatively quickly in order to facilitate its transportation.

The station was made out of stone. From here, you could see the Dragonbone Mountains, their peaks covered in snow all year round. Since autumn came early in these parts, the trees at the bottom of the mountains were already covered in red leaves.

“I see Flozeth is beautiful at this time of the year,” said Arcrayne, who’d disembarked ahead of Estelle in order to give her a hand.

“It is the countryside and there is nothing but the mountains around, but it makes me happy to hear you say that.” Estelle smiled at the prince.

It was both a honeymoon trip for the two of them, as well as Estelle’s first time coming home since she’d gotten married.

They’d originally planned to come here in summer, but that had been pushed back by Marwick’s High Treason and the shifting of their wedding to an earlier date. And if they couldn’t come in summer, they figured they might as well do so in the best part of autumn, when the Dragonbone Mountains were covered in so many different colors.

It was Arcrayne’s second time coming here. His public duties as a royal took him all around the country. Last time, however, he’d been on a tight schedule, having to traverse the north in three days; this was going to be his first time staying in Flozeth and taking his time.

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When they left the station, they found Sirius waiting for them with his servants.

"Welcome home, Estelle," Estelle's brother said happily upon seeing her.

"Brother!" she exclaimed, running to him with a smile. They hadn't seen each other since her wedding three months ago.

"Have you put on some weight?"

"It's true, but some things are better left unsaid."

Estelle got sulky—her brother was as insensitive as always.

In her defense, she'd been the slimmest she'd ever been at the wedding, so in total, she'd gained only a slight amount of weight.

It's really only just a little, she said inwardly.

"It's been a while, my brother-in-law," said Arcrayne with a faint smile on his face.

"Lord Arc. Thank you for coming all the way out here." After the wedding, Sirius had started calling Arcrayne the same name as Estelle did.

Seeing her brother and husband stand next to each other, their relationship now closer, felt somehow awkward.

"I'm sure our stay will be bothersome to you, but thank you for having us," said the prince.

"Oh, it pleases me that you would choose this place for your honeymoon. Though I have to wonder if there were no better options..." Sirius's expression slightly clouded over.

"We decided on it after talking things through," said Arcrayne.

"But do you not also intend to visit the sugar factory and the mines during your stay? That makes it sound like an inspection."

"I only added those to my schedule out of pure interest. One of the reasons I'm here is to see where Estelle grew up," replied the prince with a radiant smile and looked at Estelle.

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When they got to the Flozeths' town house, Oscar and Pamela met them there. Estelle had left the earldom in the autumn of the previous year, and it had been almost a full year since then.

Their family's servants were behind Estelle's uncle and aunt. The nostalgic sight of their faces almost moved her to tears.

On account of travel fatigue, they'd decided to take things slow in the family estate for their first day in Flozeth.

Since they were on a honeymoon, one bedroom had been prepared for the two of them. However, when Sirius personally led them there, Estelle became lost for words—the reason being that the walls were covered in numerous portraits of her as a child.

"What is this?!" she exclaimed, glaring at Sirius.

An awful smirk appeared on her brother's face. "Lord Arc asked me to show him these. And, well, I figured it would be more fun to put them in the room you'll be using during your stay..."

"There's nothing fun about it! How am I supposed to relax in a room with my face plastered all over it?!"

"Can't you just close the bed curtains when you go to bed?"

"That's not the problem here!"

As Estelle continued laying into Sirius, she heard someone stifle a laugh behind her. Upon turning around, she saw Arcrayne desperately trying to keep from laughing.

"Lord Arc! How terrible of you to laugh."

"Sorry, it was just so funny. This room is nice, though. I like it."

Estelle didn't know what to say.

"It gives me a good perspective on how you grew up. And besides, weren't you happy to see portraits of me as a child too?"

"Ngh... Well, yes, but..."

The Libra Palace had a room where things Arcrayne had used as a child were stored with care. Estelle recalled how happily she'd looked through it upon learning about it.

"I remember how the uniform I wore in my early years at the College *excited* you..."

"What...? *That's* the kind of stuff you're into...?" said Sirius. It was clear as day that he'd simply jumped on the opportunity to tease Estelle.

"It wasn't like that! I merely said it was cute!" she replied.

"Didn't you later ask me to wear a Royal College uniform, though?"

"Wow, seriously?" cut in Sirius again, looking at Estelle as though she were a sexual deviant.

"Ngh... I did, but I seem to remember you asking me to wear my academy uniform too, Lord Arc."

“I merely offered it as the condition for making me wear my uniform.”

Unfortunately, Estelle did remember it that way. There was no winning when the two of them ganged up on her like this, so she went silent.

“If you want her academy uniform, it is probably in the room she used back in the day. Would you like me to look for it?” asked Sirius, unnecessarily complicating things for Estelle.

“Hush, brother,” she said, glaring at him.

“All right, no need to give me such a scary look. Lord Arc, are you sure you want her as your wife?”

“Well… I do love her from the bottom of my heart, so…”

Arcrayne said it so openly that not only Estelle, but also Sirius stared at him in astonishment.

“All right, then. Enjoy yourselves, newlyweds…” said Sirius and left the room in visible discomfort, his enthusiasm appearing dampened by what the prince had said.

“My brother-in-law is an interesting man. We were in different years at College, so we didn’t really ever talk, but he was famous and was often at the center of attention.”

“He was?” asked Estelle in surprise. She’d never known that about her brother.

“He had good physical ability, so he would get invited to many different clubs. I believe he was one of the best at shooting and horseback riding.”

“Oh… Yes, that is inevitable for those from Flozeth. When a dragon attacks, we have to drop everything and rush to the people’s aid.”

The people of Flozeth also had to learn to ski and walk in snowshoes in order to traverse snowy areas. Estelle’s brother might have been slim, and he looked somewhat unreliable, but he was surprisingly well-built underneath his clothes, and his physical strength was unbelievable.

“It’s also important that he’s cheerful and honest,” said the prince. “While I was initially only after your power, your relatives are one of the things that make me sincerely glad I chose you.”

“Oh… Thank you.”

“You don’t look like you believe it.”

“That is not true… My uncle and aunt are good people too, and I am well aware of how grateful I should be for it.”

Arcrayne placed his hand on Estelle’s head.

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The plan for the second day was to visit the graves of Estelle's parents in the morning and tour the city in the afternoon.

However, that plan suddenly came apart. When Estelle and Arcrayne returned to the estate after their visit to the graveyard, they found the mood in the building had turned solemn. Riflemen of the earldom were assembled in the garden. Sirius, clad in a military uniform, was talking to them with a serious look on his face.

"What happened?" Estelle asked the first maid she ran into in the estate.

"A dragon appeared in Echire, I'm told. They're preparing to head out."

The reply was just as Estelle had predicted after seeing the garden. She clenched her fist over her chest.

Echire was a village that could be reached from the City of Flozeth in just under an hour by horse, if it ran at full speed.

Arcrayne placed a hand on Estelle's back. "Let's go see Sirius. We might be able to help in some way."

"While we are on our honeymoon?"

"I can't have fun while this is going on and do nothing to help." The prince smiled reassuringly.

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While Estelle was on standby in Sirius's office, May brought tea.

"Here you go, Lady Estelle."

"Thank you." Estelle looked up from the book she'd been killing time with and smiled at May.

Given Arcrayne's and Estelle's positions, they weren't alone on their honeymoon; their close aides were with them, acting as bodyguards and seeing after their needs. Leah was the only one on break today. She'd been with Estelle until they got to the station, but she was currently off to visit her own home, as she'd been away for a long time.

"Such bad luck to have this happen on your honeymoon..." said May, her face clouded over as she placed the teacup in front of Estelle.

"It ruined our plans, yes—but on behalf of our people, I'm

glad we're here. After all, Lord Arc went with my brother."

"I suppose so..."

"Even if something happens, he will protect everyone, just like Liedis did at the hunting contest. So I'm not worried about them." Estelle smiled at May.

Sirius had departed from the estate with his riflemen in tow to slay the dragon spotted near Echire.

It was rare for dragons to leave the mountains at this time of the year. They were intelligent creatures and knew how dangerous humans were.

Generally, they raided human settlements when there wasn't much food to be found in the mountains, often after waking up from hibernation at the beginning of spring and during abnormal weather.

When Arcrayne offered to help, he'd had to argue with his aides, who tried to stop him, and Sirius, who'd been holding back. Eventually, however, it had been agreed upon that he would accompany the riflemen led by Sirius, while Estelle would stay at the estate. Somebody had to remain to act on behalf of the earl in an emergency.

Estelle understood that, but this role must've been carried out by Oscar or Pamela before her engagement. She hated how her current position forced her to be extra careful in her actions.

It's almost like they found a good excuse to put me somewhere safe, thought Estelle, sighing and reaching out for the tea May had brought.

***

"...Lord Arc was amazing. He kept the dragon busy using his power..."

"Brother, this is the third time. How many times are you going to tell me about the two of you defeating that dragon?" asked Estelle, looking fed up.

A small smile appeared on Arcrayne's face as he watched her.

Sirius was merrier than usual—probably because of the alcohol.

Arcrayne didn't like alcohol, but the bigger problem was that he couldn't get drunk no matter how much he drank due to his physical makeup. He was slightly envious of the earl, who was

actually able to enjoy drinking.

Two days had passed since they'd gone to Echire. They'd successfully slain the dragon and returned today in the early afternoon, at which point they'd raised a small toast. That brought them to the current moment.

The dragon hunt hadn't taken long at all. Arcrayne had wanted to go back to Estelle as soon as possible, so he'd restrained the dragon with his telekinesis and forced it down on the ground.

Normally dragon hunts were done with more caution.

When hunting hibernating dragons, riflemen would shoot them in their lairs, and as for the dragons who'd raided settlements, they'd lie in hiding and lure out the dragon with livestock, at which point they'd shoot from the maximum range Dragon Slayers could be fired at.

Arcrayne would've preferred not to use his power and instead observe how the locals hunted dragons, but that would've meant the hunt taking much longer. The prince couldn't wait that long.

Maybe I should come here again at the start of spring, as was the original plan, he thought to himself. Sirius had previously invited him to see the lair hunting during the thaw. Arcrayne intended to make time to visit Flozeth again next year.

"That's quite enough, brother!" said Estelle in anger, her patience having evidently reached its limit. She grabbed a nearby glass and drank from it.

"Hey, that's...whiskey..." said Sirius.

Estelle had accidentally taken Arcrayne's glass.

"Estelle! How do you feel?!" he exclaimed.

If a person who couldn't hold their liquor drank a lot of strong alcohol at once, they could faint. Arcrayne stared at Estelle's face in panic.

"Looord Aaarc." She glared at him with moist eyes. "Why're you... Why're you sho *mean* to me...?"

The prince was taken aback by Estelle reproaching him with intoxicated eyes and poor enunciation.

"Am I really like that...?" he asked.

"Yesss... *You*...tease me. Every chance you *get*. An' you have thish happy look on your face, like...like..." Her eyes were completely glazed.

“Sorry.”

His apology elicited a satisfied smile from Estelle, who went for another gulp of whiskey. Next, she turned to Sirius.

“An’ *you*. Yer so persh…pershishtent… You keep shaying the *shame thingsh* over and over. *Brother*.”

“Looks like she’s gone over her limit,” murmured Oscar, who sat next to Sirius.

“She told me she was bad with alcohol…” said Arcrayne.

“That is what we told her to say…” replied Pamela. “She can handle two glasses of wine without issue, but if she drinks too much, her personality changes, you could say… She is a rather bad drunk…” She looked terribly sorry.

People like Estelle were called “mean drunks.” It certainly wasn’t anything to be proud of.

“We thought there would be no trouble if she claimed she could not drink in the slightest… We should have told you, Lord Arc.”

“Yes, I would’ve preferred to know about this.” The prince looked at Estelle.

“You…should be more dishcreet with other women, brother. Or you will never get married.” Estelle was still giving Sirius a hard time.

“I get it, I get it. I’ll do everything as you say, so stop already. You wouldn’t want Lord Arc to fall out of love with you.”

What Sirius said created trouble for Arcrayne, as Estelle turned to look at him. “Looord Aaarc… Do you not…*love* me anymore…?” Her large, purplish-red eyes became even more moist.

“No… This wouldn’t be enough to change my mind about you…”

“Sho you looove me?”

Arcrayne was at a loss for what to say in response to a question so difficult to answer in front of other people.

Estelle began to cry bitterly. “Sho you really don’t like me anymore… You’re gonna get a mishtress one of these daysh…”

“I wouldn’t do something like that. You’re the only one for me,” Arcrayne replied in a fluster.

“Then whyyy won’t you shay you love me?!”

“I love you. A whole lot. Is that good enough?!”

“You don’t sound very sh-sherioush… Put a li’l more heart into it.”

I had no idea she could be this much trouble when she's drunk, thought the prince. As he hesitated, searching for an answer, Estelle began to topple over.

"Estelle!" Arcrayne caught her in a hurry, at which point she snuggled into his embrace.

"So she's finally asleep…" said Sirius, sounding relieved.

In contrast to the flustered Arcrayne, the people of the earldom were calm.

"Is she all right? Shouldn't we call a doctor…?" he asked.

"She falls asleep when she goes over her true limit. She will probably wake up refreshed tomorrow and not remember a thing," explained Sirius.

Arcrayne looked at Estelle in his arms. Indeed, her rhythmic breathing indicated she was already asleep.

"It would not be so bad if she did not lose her memory. It would at least have been endearing if she had to suffer a hangover…" said Sirius.

"That's quite the relationship to have with alcohol…"

"Please forgive me for not telling you before. I was not trying to hide it, it was more like I simply forgot to mention it…"

"No need to apologize. I'm not blaming you." Arcrayne shook his head.

When he'd first met Estelle, he'd forced her into an engagement with him because of her power and told her he would act as if he were in love with her. In retrospect, he'd done a lot of terrible things. Considering how much the people of House Flozeth loved Estelle, if they knew the truth, they surely wouldn't forgive him.

"She seems to drink in moderation normally, and if she somehow ends up drinking too much, I'll be on the lookout so she doesn't put on a shameful display in public. If anything, I feel sorry if I've made her hold back from drinking when she wanted to." The prince looked down at Estelle sleeping in his arms.

"I do not think she had to hold back. We told her to quit and so she did. She probably likes juice more than ale or wine, which taste like alcohol, after all."

"That's good to hear," said Arcrayne with relief.

"It is reassuring to see that you treasure her."

"What can I say? I'm really glad that fate brought the two of us together." After saying so in a resolute tone, the prince lifted Estelle in his arms. "I'll take her to the bedroom."

“Well, it is late already, so why not call it a night? Please feel free to go to bed when you get there.”

“Then I’ll take you up on your offer.”

Giving the people of the earldom a light bow, Arcrayne headed to the bedroom without hesitation.

***

Even after he’d laid Estelle on the bed, she showed no signs of waking up. Arcrayne sat next to her and reached out for her cheek.

They love you so much, he thought to himself.

It wasn’t just her family—the servants and other people of the earldom treasured her too. While he’d already known about this, seeing it in person had made ugly jealousy well up in him.

He didn’t envy her as much as he had once. Instead, he envied everyone who came close to her. Even the dog in her childhood portraits.

Though I’m sure she can see it, the prince noted with an awkward smile.

While every little thing here made him jealous, it also fueled his love for her. These lands, these people were what had made Estelle who she was. The earldom of Flozeth was special to Arcrayne. He’d never thought there’d come a day in his life when he’d feel this way.

Being with Estelle spurred continuous change in him. He used to be afraid of it and even find it unpleasant. Now, it was different.

Fixing Estelle’s disheveled bangs, the prince smiled.

Afterword

Thank you for reading until the end! Volume 3 concludes this story. It's thanks to all of my readers that I've been able to release it.

I'd been warned that the series might end in two volumes, so it's only thanks to you that I was able to write a great deal of additional content for volume 2 to expand the story.

As usual, the illustrations—both colored and colorless—were handled by Bodax-sensei. It was really moving to see Estelle and Arcrayne looking happy in their wedding outfits on the cover of the book. All those white clothes, and red as the highlight—your sense of color is really amazing, sensei… There was still time to make changes to the text, so that's what I did.

In the web version, Arcrayne wears a court uniform (a black military uniform), while Estelle holds a white bouquet. It changed in print because that's just how gorgeous the colored version is.

Bodax-sensei, thank you for adorning the story with so many beautiful illustrations from volume 1 to volume 3.

Like I mentioned in the afterword of volume 2, this series has been turned into a webtoon.

Some things in the webtoon version are different from what appears in the light novel. Some parts of it are higher in sugar content, so you might find it interesting to compare the two.

For example, in the light novel, Estelle's power lets her see mana as silver light, which can be brighter or darker, while in the webtoon, positive emotions are yellow, while negative ones are dark purple, blue, black, and the like. This change was made to make mana more colorful and easier to distinguish visually, given that the webtoon version is in full color.

It makes me nostalgic to recall the time someone suggested this change, telling me that using shades of silver to express color would be like grayscale.

Also, when Estelle goes on a short trip in the middle of volume 1, the scene where she and Arcrayne launch sky lanterns was made more exciting.

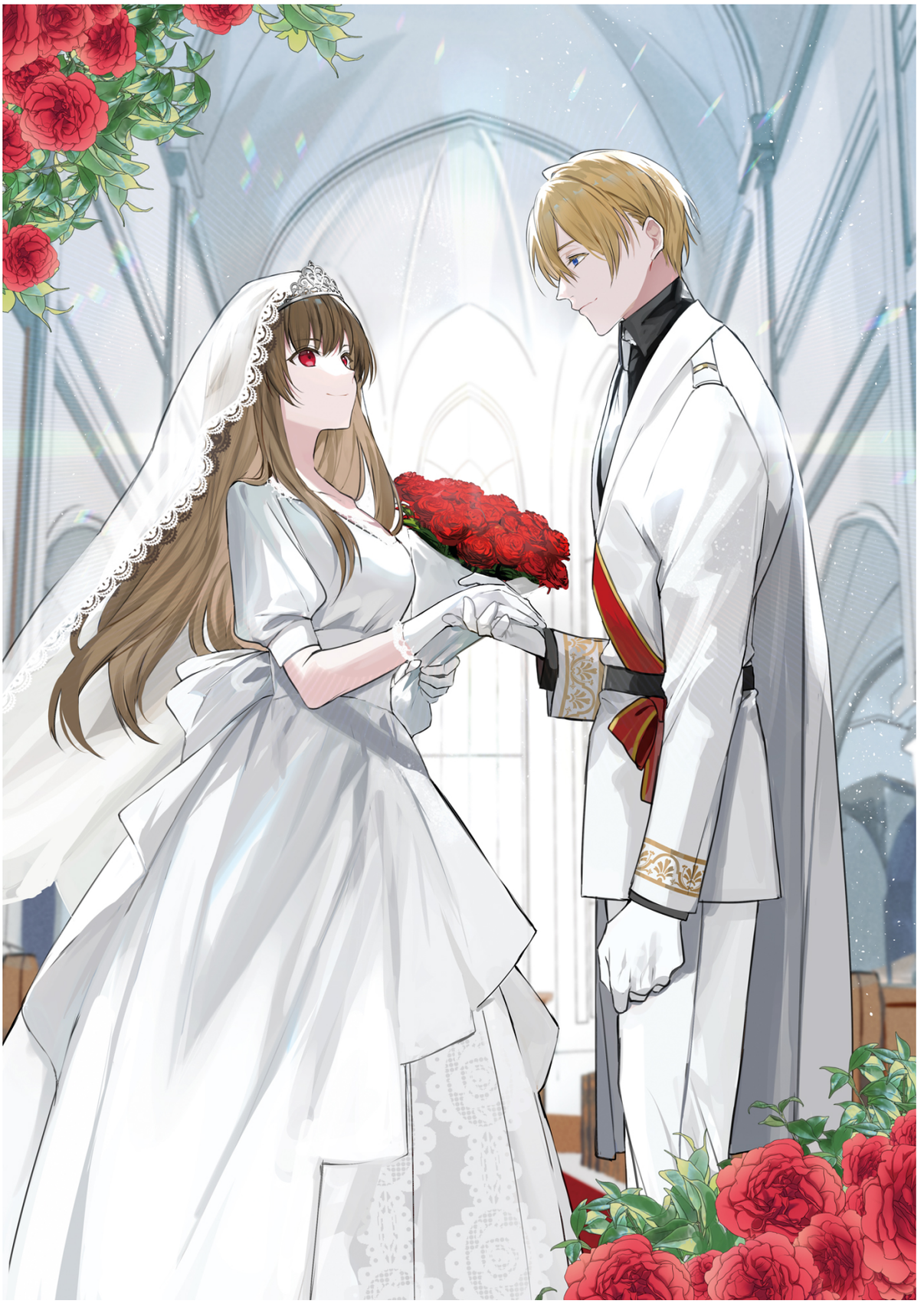
Shoko-sensei's storyboards were amazing—it was always fun

reading them.

At the time of volume 2's release, the webtoon version was a Mechacomic exclusive, but now it's available on various platforms. It would make me happy if you gave it a try.

Finally, I want to express my thanks to Ohara-sama who took over the editing for volume 3, as well as everyone else involved with the project.

Mari Morikawa









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by Mari Morikawa

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