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Sarasa Nagase

ILLUSTRATION BY
Mai Murasaki



I'm the Villainess, so I'm Taming the Final Boss

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I’M THE VILLAINESS, SO I’M TAMING THE FINAL BOSS, Vol. 10
Sarasa Nagase

Translation by Taylor Engel
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Vica Tsar Kilvas
Emperor of the Kilvas Empire and the final boss of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*.
Claude Jean Ellmeyer
Emperor of Ellmeyer, demon king, and Aileen's husband. The final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*.
Aileen Jean Ellmeyer
A villainess who has remembered her past life. Empress of Ellmeyer.
I'm the VILLAINESS, So I'm Taming the Final Boss
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The Story Thus Far

When her engagement is broken, memories of Aileen's past life surface, and she realizes she's been reincarnated into the world of an *otome* game as its villainess. To escape destruction, she decides to romance Claude, the final boss! After many twists and turns, Claude becomes emperor of Imperial Ellmeyer, and Aileen becomes his empress. This is the tale of a villainess's fight to secure a happy ending that doesn't exist in the game, conquering all the final bosses that stand in her way.

Claude's Advisers



Keith Eigrid

Claude's adviser. Human.



Beelzebuth

Claude's right-hand man. Humanoid demon.



Almond

Crow demon. Colonel in the demon king's first air force.

Claude's Guards



Walt Lizanis

Former Nameless Priest of the church.



Kyle Elford

Former Nameless Priest of the church.

Claude's Body Double



Elefas Levi

Aileen and Claude's retainer. Mage from the Levi tribe of

magic grand dukes.

Aileen's Ladies-in-Waiting



Rachel Lombard

Aileen's first lady-in-waiting.
Isaac's wife.



Serena Gilbert

A bureaucrat. Auguste's wife.

Aileen's Lackeys



Isaac Lombard

Aileen's right-hand man and the third son of a count. President of the Oberon Trading Firm. Rachel's husband.



Jasper Varie

Newspaper journalist.



Denis

Architect.



Luc

Doctor.



Quartz

Botanist.



James Mirchetta

Aileen and Claude's retainer.
A young nobleman of the duchy of Mirchetta. Cambion.



Auguste Gilbert

Next captain of the Holy Knights of Imperial Ellmeyer. Serena's husband.

Claude and Aileen's Siblings-in-Law



Lilia Reinoise

The heroine of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*. Cedric's consort. Like Aileen, she's actually reincarnated.



Cedric Jean Ellmeyer

Claude's younger half brother. The second prince.

The Kingdom of Ashmael



Baal Shah Ashmael

The holy king of the Kingdom of Ashmael. Claude's friend.



Roxane Fusca

Baal's principal consort.



Neifa

Holy King Baal's former consort.

Kilvas Empire



Cattleya Tsar Kilvas

Vica's older sister, a Valkyrie, and the villainess of the *otome* game *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*.



Diana Nelasov

Vica's fiancée, a Valkyrie, and Cattleya's best friend. The heroine of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*.



Ernst Helken Dolf

The prime minister of the Kilvas Empire. The classic hero of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*.



✦ Prologue ✦

The Final Boss's First Love

He hears voices.

It isn't that his hearing is especially good. He isn't using magic, either. He hears them talking behind him, just after he passes them; for humans, that's a perfectly normal thing.

"There's no telling when he will show his true colors."

"Letting him strut about the palace when Prince Cedric is here… What can His Majesty be thinking?"

"Prince Cedric is still young. Who knows when he might be killed."

"Really! How long will they call that thing *the crown prince…?"*

…Do they think the demon king can't understand human speech?

"Master Claude, the room is to your right."

A voice cuts through the chatter. Claude, who's been all but bolting down the corridor, stops in his tracks. His attendant has followed him, wearing his usual gentle smile.

"…Ah, right. Of course."

"Yes. Even if she is your cousin, she is a princess of the Kilvas Empire. Arriving late because you got lost would reflect poorly on you, the crown prince of Ellmeyer."

His attendant stresses the words *crown prince*, and Claude's eyes skate away from his smile. "I know. I'm just not looking forward to this. I hope she hasn't come to complain about Mother's early death."

"It isn't wise to display such obvious hostility to someone you've never met before."

"What, are you saying I'm in the wrong?" Claude glares at him with cold red eyes. A single look is all he needs to silence his father, to elicit both fear and loathing. And yet this attendant never shuts

up, no matter how withering Claude's gaze.

"Yes, precisely. This is a case of misplaced anger and prejudice."

The things he says are also never wrong.

It's as if he's saying, *When these words stop getting through to you, you'll be truly lost.*

"…I'll pray that my anger and prejudice are actually misplaced, then."

"Please do. We received a very gracious letter from her before this meeting."

"She could have had someone else write it."

"You're on edge. Would you please believe me about this? I have already investigated her character. She's a relative who is your age. There's a chance you two could become friends."

This meeting with Claude's cousin has been permitted for purely diplomatic reasons. It's to prove that "*although the young lady who married into our family from yours has met an early death, we are not mistreating her son, even though the second empress has produced a second prince*." There's also the fact that Claude is the demon king, so there's also a thinly veiled hope that, if the stars align, this cousin may take the walking time bomb back with her.

Since the birth of his half brother, Cedric, the number of people trying to oust Claude has been growing by the day. However, Claude's indecisive father can't bring himself to get rid of Claude nor accept him fully; he's a man whose primary concern is keeping up appearances. The most he'll do is take temporary, stopgap measures, which only sow the seeds of future trouble. And of course, he hasn't noticed the empress dowager's covert maneuvering.

Even the family of Duke d'Autriche, the most powerful of the aristocrats, seems ready to abandon Claude. If they do, he's sure to be stripped of his titles and rights.

However, if he really has the good of the nation at heart, he can always voluntarily abdicate.

His half brother, Cedric, is healthy and thriving. Claude was moved when the boy called him "Bwother"; Cedric didn't quite manage to say the word properly. At this rate, a battle for the throne

will be inevitable. Even if the two of them don't want to fight, the people around them will force the issue.

And so before that happens…

…Why must it always be me?

"Master Claude."

It's the second time his attendant, Keith, has called his name, and Claude returns to himself with a jolt. The older boy takes Claude's clenched fist and gently uncurls his fingers one by one.

"I'm well aware that it isn't my place to say this, but please don't abandon *humanity*."

The way he says it makes the words sound like a prayer. Claude exhales and lets his shoulders fall. "…I know. I'm sorry."

"Good. Now come with me, Your Highness."

The imposing door that leads to the reception room meant for entertaining honored guests opens with a ponderous noise.

Although it's broad daylight, the location of the room and the angle of the sun have cast such deep shadows that they have completely swathed the visitor in darkness. The moment Claude is visible in the doorway, she comes forward.

She reminds me of pure-white snow, he thinks. *Is it because she's from the north?* Her silver hair gleams a radiant white when it catches the sunlight.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince Claude. I am Cattleya Tsar Kilvas, first princess of the Kilvas Empire." Her voice sounds slightly mechanical, giving a cool, dispassionate impression that Claude finds rather pleasant.

The heat that was smoldering in him just a moment ago slowly subsides, and his tone is milder than before. "An honor, Princess Cattleya. Have I kept you waiting? My apologies."

"No, there's no problem. You're right on time. Ah, thank you."

She takes the chair that Keith has courteously pulled out for her, sitting down without any sign of contempt or mockery. Claude sits down at the other end of the long, narrow table; they're seated too distantly to present any sense of intimacy. "May I ask the purpose of your visit? There were no details in your letter."

"I simply wished to see you in person, so I didn't think it was

necessary to explain in writing."

Black hair, red eyes—these are the iconic features of the demon king, and it isn't unusual for Claude to attract gawkers, but no one has ever told him right to his face before. That didn't make it any more enjoyable, however, and Claude frowns.

It's her next words that make his furrowed brow relax.

"You see, my little brother also has black hair and red eyes."

Keith seems startled; he's been skillfully making tea, but he freezes mid-motion.

"…Black hair and red eyes? Your brother? I hadn't heard…"

"It's only natural you wouldn't know. Vica has only just begun to walk. He still only has wisps of hair, and as we aren't truly certain it's black yet, we haven't disclosed any information to the public. The strong red cast to his eyes may not be permanent, either. At present, we're simply watching and waiting."

"Can two demon kings exist at once?" Keith interrupts.

Cattleya doesn't rebuke him. She seems placid, but perhaps she is actually quite anxious. "I came here because I wished to confirm that myself… In secret, since I couldn't wait for the Queendom of Hausel to grant permission."

"You didn't use Hausel's sea routes? That's reckless," Claude says.

The ocean splits the land into northern and southern continents, with the islands of the Holy Queendom of Hausel at its center. From Hausel, where the queen dwells, Imperial Ellmeyer is to the southwest, while the Kilvas Empire is one of the nations in the northeast of its continent. Some poet somewhere once likened the world to "a tilted hourglass."

When crossing between the northern and the southern continents, the stablest and safest route is the one that passes through the Queendom due to the tides and the convenience of resupplying on long voyages. To that end, if the nations in the southwest and the northeast wish to interact, by default, they need the Queendom of Hausel's permission.

As a result, visits from Kilvas to Ellmeyer happen only once a decade, if that. Commoners from either empire might not even know the other nation's name; to them, it's probably "that big country on

the other side of the Queendom."

"True, the trip was dangerous, but our empire's newest steamship is well built. Besides, it's too much work to secure the Queendom's permission, and it takes too long. Even my father is caught between those who say we should simply wait and others who claim we should seek guidance from the Queendom; he's bewildered, and I didn't get a chance to speak with him at all."

"Even so, not getting Hausel's permission must have required courage, particularly for you."

The Kilvas Empire is a large nation with a thriving steel industry, but the cold climate is harsh, crops are difficult to grow there, and demons are very active. As a result, for long years, the Queendom of Hausel has slain demons for them and provided humanitarian support. Although it is referred to as an empire, it's no exaggeration to say that the position of emperor is conferred by Hausel. Its queen can see the future, and her existence gives the Queendom godlike authority.

"I will be undergoing the Valkyrie surgery soon, so there were no issues with my leaving the country."

"Valkyrie… You're going to become a warrior who wields a magic lance? But you're a princess."

"Fighting demons is the duty of the Kilvas imperial family… Given that you are the demon king, perhaps I shouldn't mention it to you. However, I came here because I wished to know."

Her gaze is straight and unerring. Feeling strangely drawn by those eyes, Claude stares back at her. At that point, he realizes Cattleya is taller than he is.

"Would you tell me about yourself?"

Although they're close in age, that she asked the question feels like a sign that she is the more adult of the two.

"…Not about the demon king?"

His response makes him sound like a recalcitrant child.

"They're the same thing. You are the demon king as well as the crown prince. You have a dual nature, and I wish to know how you view humans and demons. Especially if my brother may also become a demon king."

"…What's the point of knowing that? Besides, he and I are different people."

"Yes, you are. However, I would like Vica to be as strong as you are. Even if those around him treat him coldly, I want him to have the strength not to misjudge what he must do."

Claude's eyes widen slightly as the girl makes a simple, genuine appeal.

"Your circumstances and my brother's are very similar. Our mother died soon after she bore Vica. For the moment, my father and those around us are attempting to hide my brother. However, there are limits to that. Whether or not he proves to be a demon king, no matter what the truth of the situation is, he's sure to be treated unfairly. People will say heartless things to him… No matter how I try to protect him."

"……"

"But even if he is the sort of being others will call a demon king, I want my brother to become someone splendid—and happy."

Claude is silent. Quietly, Keith sets a cup of black tea in front of him. Steam rises gently from it. The shadows in the room, which had been so deep, seem to be growing softer and lighter.

"And so I have a question for you, Prince Claude. Are you happy?"

"……"

"If you are not, is there anything I can do? That is what I want to know." For the first time, her lips curve into a clumsy smile.

"I…," he starts, but his voice has gone hoarse, and he can't get the words out.

He looks down, pressing a hand to his closed eyelids. More than tears or anything else, a feeling threatens to spill over. He's jealous of her little brother. She isn't wishing for the boy to become happy. She's decided that she'll make him happy, and that's why she's here.

In my case, just having a woman like you by my side would be…

But Claude is still too much of a child to say the words aloud. She said she considers him strong, which only convinces him all the more to refrain from saying anything pathetic in front of her.

Instead, they simply exchange a few words that day, followed by

a few letters later on.

To prove the strength she was kind enough to acknowledge, Claude relinquishes his inheritance rights, averting a struggle for the throne. Not long after, a letter inviting him to the Kilvas Empire arrives, but he declines. He doesn’t want to flee to her country and be an object of pity.

However, communication between the two nations has always been patchy, and that is the last he hears from her.

All he has to remember her by is their singular meeting and a handful of letters. Those memories are tinged with pain and loneliness that fade with the passage of time, eventually disappearing like so many bubbles.

That is how his first love ended.

✦ First Act ✦

The Villainess's Plot

The hall is filled with articles of clothing in all the colors of the rainbow. Blouses made of silk, vests, trousers, cloaks—even accessories like cuff links and ties and shoes. All men's clothing. It almost seems as if no one wants to go to the trouble of tidying them up, and there's hardly any room to do so, even if someone felt the urge. The bureaus and the door to the dressing room have also been left wide open, and garments lie atop couches and chests in stratified layers.

They're all one-of-a-kind pieces of clothing made by Imperial Ellmeyer's tailors and designers, who have put the nation's prestige and their pride as artisans on the line and spared no effort in materials or design.

"Master Claude isn't fond of gaudy items, so we'll keep the accessories to a minimum… Let's see. What if he casually wore those diamond-studded cuff links over there?"

The woman who's issuing instructions while lounging on a sofa at the back of the room is Empress Aileen Jean Ellmeyer, mistress of the imperial castle.

"What about these?" asks Aileen's lady-in-waiting Rachel. Working quickly but taking the utmost care not to damage any pieces of clothing, the servants hold them out for Aileen to examine.

"Yes, I think those cuff links would pair well with other shirts, too. That should be enough everyday wear. How many formal outfits will we need?"

"Between the wedding, soirees, and balls, there are five occasions that will require formalwear."

"In that case, let's go with seven, just to be safe. We'll choose

versatile pieces to err on the side of caution. Oh, but Master Claude is oblivious about these things. Master Keith will be there, so he should be fine, but…”

Aileen’s husband possesses such matchless beauty that he could be mistaken for a work of art even if he were dressed in rags, so he has never paid any attention to fashion. The man can’t even change clothes on his own. Without Keith, his brilliant adviser, he’d end up spending every day in the same random outfit, donned effortlessly by magic.

As Aileen ponders this, Rachel makes a suggestion: “If that is a major concern, shall we assemble several sets of outfits here in advance? Since you won’t be attending, Lady Aileen, there should be space in the luggage.”

“Oh, but wait. It’s colder over there, isn’t it? Will we need fur cloaks and coats that can keep out the chill?”

It would be poor form to become preoccupied with her husband’s appearance and end up letting him catch a cold.

Rachel tilts her head. “I wonder. The Kilvas Empire may be in the north, but it’s midsummer. I assume clothes meant for early spring would be more than enough.”

“But Master Claude will be staying for half a month, and I hear autumn doesn’t visit them over there…”

“I see. I’ll check.”

“Please do.”

Gazing at the intense sunlight that streams in through the window, Aileen leans against the sofa’s armrest with a sigh.

“Are you tired? How are you feeling?” Rachel asks.

“No, I’m all right. Thank you.” Accepting a glass of fruit-infused water, Aileen takes a sip. Then she grumbles, “Honestly, simply sending him is so much work… I’m glad I no longer need to make preparations for myself as well.”

She’s currently packing for her husband, who will be crossing the ocean to attend the wedding of the emperor of Kilvas in one week’s time. Both the emperor and the empress of Ellmeyer had originally planned to attend, right up until Aileen began carrying a child. They’d sent their response before learning of her pregnancy, and

there was a good chance that any refusal they sent would not make it in time. Moreover, missing this opportunity would be an extremely unwise move diplomatically, as it could impact future ties between the two empires. They ultimately decided that Claude would attend by himself.

An invitation to a wedding. At first glance, it seems like a simple occasion to celebrate, but Aileen suspects it's likely also a full-fledged diplomatic affair that will determine international relations in the wake of the queen of Hausel's passing.

Rachel issues an order to refresh the pitcher of water, then pauses. "…Lady Aileen, you aren't plotting something without telling me, are you?"

The other woman is gazing at her steadily, and Aileen frowns. "I don't have the slightest clue what you mean."

"Are you secretly planning to accompany Master Claude? With the excuse that you aren't experiencing morning sickness…?"

It's true that her morning sickness hasn't been as serious as what she'd braced for. In fact, it's almost nonexistent. She hasn't been able to handle the smell of butter, but that's all. There have been no changes to her figure yet, and even though people have told Aileen that new life has taken root inside of her, it still doesn't seem quite real.

However, that and this are different matters. Aileen sighs. "Listen, Rachel. Even I can't be a free spirit forever."

"That's true… Still, you are you, Lady Aileen."

"Besides, I'm currently preparing to give birth to an heir. It's an important duty for an empress. Are you implying I don't understand that?"

"Of course not. But this is you we're talking about, Lady Aileen."

"Why do you doubt me so much?!" She grimaces.

Aileen must admit she has pulled her fair share of reckless stunts in the past; she can't deny that. However, she can proudly say it was all in the name of securing Claude—the demon king—his rightful place on the throne and winning happiness for herself. To delve a bit deeper into the matter, that ambition was only a necessity because of the preposterous fact that this world is the same world as an

otome game she played in her previous life, *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*.

Because knowledge of the game came back to her along with memories of a past life, Aileen embarked on a campaign to systematically tear down the death flags that threatened herself and her husband. As both the demon king and the final boss, her husband was targeted for a variety of reasons, while the villainess, Aileen, had been long dead by the game's conclusion. She was forced to act recklessly to survive.

However, all of that was resolved. As far as Aileen can tell, she cleared every game in the series. Fan discs aside, the plot of the sequels no longer lines up with the timeline of events that Aileen has seen. In theory, this world shouldn't have any more connections with the original games… At least, that's what Aileen believes.

I won't stand for anything else! Nothing decent ever happens…!

Besides, she's managed to survive and marry Claude; they've become emperor and empress, and they're about to be blessed with a child. The *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* series was marketed as wholesome and designed for all ages. A husband who's fathered a child can't possibly be an object of romantic conquest or a final boss or anything like that in such a series…Aileen hopes. Probably.

At any rate, Aileen no longer has any reason to be reckless.

"I regret that I won't be able to visit the Kilvas Empire, of course. It is where Master Claude's mother was from, and this is his cousin's wedding. I would like to go and give them my regards as his wife. However, if they knew I was expecting, they would no doubt feel the need to be extremely careful with me."

"On the other hand, it's you, Lady Aileen…"

"Wh-what exactly do you think I am…?! Th-that's right; if I were plotting something, your husband, Isaac, would be my accomplice. You haven't heard anything, though, have you? Isn't that proof I'm not plotting anything?"

"If it were for your sake, Lady Aileen, I'm confident Isaac would betray me as often as he had to, so I can't believe him."

"My dear, don't you think the way you trust your husband is

rather odd?!”

“You’re too kind.”

“That wasn’t a compliment!”

Isaac, Aileen’s right-hand man and business associate, is undoubtedly brilliant. However, when it comes to navigating the subtleties in relationships between men and women, he’s rather careless. Aileen never realized it would backfire on them like this.

“In any case, I’ve decided that I shall trust Master Claude’s judgment on matters of public policy and will stay at home in his absence. Doesn’t that make me the epitome of a good wife?” Aileen holds her head high.

Rachel gazes at her steadily, then smiles. Her eyes are filled with affection. “I understand. I will pack so that you may leave whenever you wish, Lady Aileen.”

“You don’t understand in the slightest!”

“What’s all this racket?”

Rachel and the other ladies-in-waiting all bow their heads at once. Aileen glances in the direction where the voice came from, and then her eyes widen. “Master Claude, isn’t it time for your conference?”

“We’re taking a brief recess. There was something I wanted to confirm with you…but it looks as if we should take this elsewhere.”

“I will prepare a room for you.” Keith, who has been waiting just behind Claude, promptly turns on his heel.

Claude scans the room from the doorway. “So what happened here? Don’t tell me these are all my clothes.”

“That’s exactly what they are.”

Claude starts to take a step into the room, then thinks better of it. There isn’t anywhere to walk, and the dreadful spectacle must have overawed him. Smiling wryly, Aileen rises to her feet, and then her toes lift lightly off the ground. It’s Claude’s magic, and it carries her right into his arms.

“Don’t overdo it. I’d like to have tea, but how are you feeling?”

Since learning of her pregnancy, Claude asks about her condition every time they meet.

“No problems whatsoever.”

“Really?” He glances at Rachel, who’s waiting behind her, for confirmation. The man is the definition of overprotective.

“Yes. I am taking it easy, and there hasn’t been any trouble at all,” Aileen assures him.

“I see.” Claude nods, but he doesn’t look very convinced. He lost his mother early from the combined stress of a difficult delivery and the anxiety of having given birth to the demon king. It’s understandable why he can’t help but be uneasy. Out of consideration for this, Aileen has been doing whatever she can to set Claude’s mind at ease. This is why she doesn’t demand he put her down, even when he carries her all the way to the room where they’ll be taking tea.

“Good grief. There’s no need to pack all those clothes.”

“Gracious, Master Claude, what are you saying? You are the emperor. Not only that, but it isn’t just any court noble who’s getting married—it is the wedding of the emperor of Kilvas, your cousin. It would be rude if you arrived unprepared, no?”

“Still, there are limits. I’ve never even met this cousin. My aunt, my mother’s elder sister, already passed away.”

“But I heard you’d met the emperor of Kilvas’s sister.”

“…Yes. It was nearly twenty years ago, though.”

“That would have been during the confusion over whether you would be removed from the line of succession. That’s a good reason, all on its own.”

Claude tilts his head, glancing at her.

Smiling at him, Aileen presses her cheek to his chest as he walks slowly, perhaps out of consideration for the people who are preparing their tea. “You must let her know that you are a splendid emperor now and living happily.”

Aileen’s memories of that time are vague. She can’t deny the possibility that this princess from another land may have seen Claude as an unfortunate, unhappy crown prince. She’s heard rumors that, when the decision was made to disinherit him, there was talk of the Kilvas Empire taking him in.

“If you don’t, she’s sure to worry,” Aileen says.

After thinking for a moment, Claude starts coming around. “…I

see. That might be true."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"That mountain of clothes is a bit…"

"Oh, that won't be all. We'll be sending souvenirs with you as well."

"…I'll leave that to you."

What a troublesome husband. Aileen giggles. *Oh yes, I am the ultimate wife…*

What peaceful days. This is what Aileen has always dreamed of.

Thanks to their outstanding servants and adviser, by the time Aileen and Claude arrive, tea has been laid out for them in style. Lowering Aileen to a sofa, Claude cocks his head. "I wish we could bundle you up from head to toe in something soft."

However, she doesn't neglect to admonish her husband for his stranger ideas.

"As I've told you, swathing me in fabric will protect neither myself nor the baby."

"But can we really be sure of that unless we try?"

If she entertains this as something worth discussing, the sun is likely to set on them, so as her husband seats himself in front of her, she decides to distract him. "Now, what is it you wished to confirm with me? The packing is going according to schedule, if that's what concerns you."

Claude pauses in the act of raising a cup of black tea to his lips.

Aileen has picked up a fork, intending to help herself to some of the bite-size pieces of cut fruit, and her husband's steady gaze makes her blink.

Quietly, Claude begins, "I would like to confirm whether you genuinely intend to stay home."

"What?"

"Are you plotting something?"

One of Aileen's eyebrows jumps. Claude is insinuating the same thing as Rachel, who's serving them with a composed expression. Beneath half-lowered lids, his red eyes clearly convey his doubt to Aileen.

"…It was you who told me to stay here, was it not, Master

Claude?”

“However, when you agree to my proposals, it’s normal to suspect that there’s something behind it,” her husband says in all seriousness.

A vein stands out on Aileen’s temple. Holding her fork vertically, she viciously skewers a piece of fruit. “As I explained to Rachel a moment ago, I! Am! Pregnant! I am about to become the mother of imperial royalty!”

“You, the mother of imperial royalty…?”

“Why are you looking at me as if you can’t believe that?”

“No, I am the emperor, and you’re having my child, so it’s a fact that you will be the mother of imperial royalty. That said…the thought of you meekly staying home in my absence feels extremely implausible.”

“Exactly what do you think I am?!”

“You deceived me during the Mirchetta incident, and my heart hasn’t yet healed.”

Aileen chokes and falls silent. She can’t deny that Claude once left the imperial capital, telling her to behave, and instead she donned a disguise and passed herself off as a male student of the academy.

However, that was then, and this is now.

“At this point, I am the empress. I was still your fiancée back then; my position is different now.”

“You, concerned about positions…?”

“I-if anything comes up, I’ll discuss it with you, Master Claude. I am conscious of the fact that I am your wife!”

“You, discuss…?”

“May I pinch or slap you soon?” Aileen brandishes her palm at him, and Claude lowers his gaze, seeming distressed. This husband of hers is beautiful down to the tips of his eyelashes, and that movement alone is enough to make it seem as if he’s shouldered all the sorrow in the world.

“No… You’re right. I suppose the current situation is different…”

“Y-yes, you see? Now you may rest easy and leave it to me—”

“Your brother, Prime Minister Cyril, is here.”

Why has Claude mentioned her oldest brother now? Aileen's face tenses.

"I think he could stop you… Probably," Claude says with some uncertainty in his voice.

"It's true that I have never bested my brother Cyril, but—!"

"Also, your other brothers should be here by now."

"The way you take it for granted that I'm guaranteed to go out of control is quite— Wait. What?" Right as Aileen is about to launch an effort to correct her husband's thinking, her eyes widen. "Bram and Michael are at the imperial castle?"

"Yes, they said they wanted to say hello. I'm about to go speak with them. In preparation for attending this wedding, I had them survey the current state of the Kilvas Empire. It is a distant country, after all. It seems different from Ellmeyer in a number of ways… Particularly the demons."

"But the demons there should obey you, right, Master Claude?"

"No. I checked with Father, and for some reason, there have always been some demons who do not side with the demon king."

In this instance, Claude isn't referring to Pierre, the previous emperor, when he said "Father." He means Luciel, the former demon king who's often considered the god of demons.

"That may be the reason why the methods the people of Kilvas use to defeat demons are different. They rely on the Valkyries," Claude says.

"The Val…kyries…?"

I've heard that word somewhere before, Aileen thinks, and then a chill shoots through her… *For example, in a game, there was a very similar…*

Claude takes a sip of tea; it seems to calm him down, because he elaborates. "In their language, the word means 'warrior maiden.' Kilvas uses exclusively female soldiers to combat demons."

"Female soldiers…"

"The organization was created using technology supplied by the Queendom of Hausel. Not only that, but there also used to be rumors that revolution was brewing in their ranks."

"Revolution…"

"My cousin's fiancée is the young woman who was the leader of the would-be revolutionaries. In other words, this wedding is a political maneuver to head off civil war in Kilvas— What's wrong?"

"N-nothing!" Aileen sits up straighter. Everything is fine. The subject of the *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* series is the Maid of the Sacred Sword. The word *Valkyrie* doesn't make an appearance.

Valkyries who fight demons, a revolutionary leader, marriage to the emperor…

That means it is sheer coincidence that all this sounds oddly familiar, and it is definitely only her imagination.

It can't be, can it?!

As if she'd stand for that. Hiding her confusion, Aileen smiles at Claude, who's watching her dubiously. "I-in that case, I'll prepare to greet my elder brothers. If I commit some sort of error, who knows what they may say to me."

"…I understand how you feel, but why are your eyes darting around so much?"

"No, nothing!! They're not!!"

"Are you sure you aren't actually plotting something?"

"Not even a little!"

Pounding the table with her fists, she rises to her feet. Claude blinks at her, and she laughs. "Oh-ho-ho! I—I haven't fallen so far that any plot I made would be this transparent."

"…I suppose that's true."

What convinces her husband is decidedly insulting, but Aileen doesn't have the energy to get angry about it.

I'm not *plotting. Nothing like it.*

On the contrary, please don't make me plot. With that wish in the back of her mind, Aileen orders Rachel and the others to prepare to greet her brothers.

Aileen's family, the house of d'Autriche, has three sons. The eldest is Cyril, the prime minister; the second is Bram, captain of the Holy

Knights; and the third is Michael, a diplomat. Aileen is the youngest child and the only daughter.

Her brothers are all extremely brilliant, and they're constantly busy. Even at Aileen's wedding, they'd only stopped by briefly to give their regards. As a result, a rumor persists in certain quarters that her brothers are against her marriage to Claude; however, the truth is that they were speaking far too freely with Claude for Aileen's liking, so she chased them out.

Once, Aileen was unable to hide her frustration with her excessively capable brothers and rebelled. Her brothers meticulously crushed her in their own separate ways: by forcing her to witness a level of brilliance that brooked no argument, by looking at her as if she made no sense, and by cackling at her. It was a sad memory of her rebellious phase. If her husband ever finds out about that embarrassing past, she'll never survive it.

It's worth noting that these siblings get along surprisingly well. Her brothers seem to trust that their little sister is very capable, and when she can't accomplish something, they take care of it for her somehow. Besides, from what Claude says, Aileen's brothers dote on her. If not, they probably wouldn't have even considered becoming the vassals of a man saddled with a situation as tiresome as being *demon king*.

I really don't think my brothers would concern themselves with my decision, but…

Her outstanding brothers could make any emperor look good. What's more, Claude is just as brilliant, so there's no way her brothers would run into any trouble. On the contrary, the ones having trouble are Aileen and Claude. In fact, Claude often frowns at Cyril, who manipulates state affairs as if by magic.

In addition, Claude's been dealing with her two other brothers today. The conference must have been quite tiring. That he's bowed out of Aileen's tea party using the excuse that siblings should have some time alone together seems to confirm those suspicions… No doubt Cyril has already caught her husband, wherever he's made his escape to.

Still, for today, Aileen is grateful that Claude isn't here.

Not that I'm plotting anything!

As soon as Aileen enters the parlor, her brothers rise to their feet. Her second-eldest brother, Bram, is sharp-eyed and rather brusque, while her youngest brother, Michael, has dazzling hair that matches Aileen's. It's tied back today, and he's wearing a smile on his androgynous features. The brothers may look and act nothing alike, but they're actually twins.

"How've you been, Aileen?"

"Oh, Bram, that's no good. You can't greet her like that. Our little sister is the empress. Your beauty is as radiant as ever, Your Majesty, and being honored with an audience is an unparalleled delight."

"It's a pleasure to see you, Bram and Michael. There was something I wished to ask you today," Aileen responds, smiling primly.

Michael shrinks back in an adorable way. "Yikes. Isn't that where you're supposed to be all 'No need to be so formal, my brothers'? Who says something so ominous right from the start…? I guess you're my sweet little sister, so I'll forgive you. Oh, I'd like iced coffee. A jelly dessert, too; something refreshing and citrusy. Don't just stand there, Aileen. Hurry and sit down; you're expecting, aren't you?"

"That's right. How are you feeling?" Bram asks.

"They wouldn't have let her come if she wasn't feeling all right. Any ladies-in-waiting too incompetent to stop her would've been evicted by Cyril ages ago. Oh, right, we bought you a present. You can eat dried fruit, can't you? It'll keep quite a while. We also picked out cute clothes for the baby."

While Michael chatters away, Rachel and the others hastily fill his request for coffee and jellies.

Aileen reproaches her wayward brother with the best smile she can muster. "Thank you very much. Still, even if you are my brothers, I can't have you making decisions about the infant on your own. You haven't even discussed it with Master Claude."

"Well, that's true. But Mother is unbelievably excited. It would be awful if she got to decide everything, wouldn't it? There's no telling what she'd give you. So I convinced her to let us do it. Or, what,

could you have stopped her? Are you telling me you *are* happy to eat whatever bizarre variety of meat that might show up one day just because it's supposed to give you stamina or whatever?" Michael asks pointedly.

"……Thank you very much for stopping her."

"You're very welcome."

Michael 1, Aileen 0. As sarcastic as Michael can be, he's equally considerate. Incidentally, Aileen has never once beaten him in an argument, which explains how Michael talked her into a corner.

As Aileen stands there trembling, a fretful Bram comes over, scoops her into his arms, and sets her down gently on the sofa. He may be gruff, but he always takes the safety of those around him into consideration. Quite fitting for the captain of the Holy Knights.

"Are you in any danger? If you have enemies, tell me their names. Don't hold back."

At the same time, Bram gives off this air of a man who lives on the battlefield. He's constantly searching for strong foes. Aileen often hears the next candidate for captain lament that his training is "inhumane."

"This is the imperial castle, Bram. It would be a serious problem if there were enemies here. Please calm yourself," Aileen says.

"I see…"

"Could you not look so disappointed? I have no desire to be anywhere dangerous. Besides, we just got back from Kilvas," Michael says with a sigh.

"Y-yes, that's right! That's what I wanted to hear about!" If Aileen lets this chance slip past her, there's a good chance the conversation will be derailed indefinitely, so she jumps on it. "I'm told the two of you went to observe the Kilvas Empire."

"That's right. Me and this big lump," Michael answers readily, stirring his iced coffee with a straw.

"Did you accompany Michael as his guard, Bram?"

"Yes. They called me up while I was on a journey to improve my combat skills."

Aren't you the captain of the Holy Knights, pride of Imperial Ellmeyer? she thinks, but she opts not to say it. The vice captain or

a certain individual who's angling to be the next captain is probably hard at work climbing the ladder.

"I was coordinating our approach to the issue of Hausel with other nations when I got a message from some sort of squid demon, telling me to head to Kilvas. Seriously, I wish he'd send slightly cuter demons. The messenger said the demons on that continent might not be as friendly as ours, so I should meet up with this guy and take him along as a guard."

"H-how was it? The Kilvas Empire, I mean. I heard rumors about a revolution brewing…"

"Why don't you ask our uncute brother-in-law?" Michael asks.

"…Master Claude is very busy!" Aileen says, a little worked up.

"Making this report twice is a real pain."

"I am the empress, Michael!"

"And I'm your older brother, Sister." Michael gives a smug little laugh.

Aileen growls in frustration, and Bram raises his head, looking keen-eyed and efficient. "I could tell you about the demons and Valkyries, at least."

"Could you? Please tell me what you know, Bram."

"I only saw them from a distance, but the demons looked powerful. It's a pity they aren't organized. The Valkyries, who have always protected the people in that land, were splendid, well-trained soldiers. That is all."

Her brother has talked about nothing but strength, and before Aileen can say anything, Michael bursts out laughing. "Could you have picked anyone worse to ask?!"

"Better than you, Michael! You won't tell me anything!"

"If you can convince the Oberon Trading Firm to custom-make some souvenirs for me, I'll think about it."

Isaac has already taken over the Oberon Trading Firm, but if Aileen leans on him, he'll probably grant her brother's wish. Asking Claude for more information would only make him suspicious, and who knows what might happen then.

Plus, her brother will most likely be using the gifts on diplomatic missions. Convincing herself it will ultimately benefit the nation,

Aileen nods grudgingly. “Very well. I’ll arrange it. However, if you don’t tell me anything worthwhile, I have no intention of keeping my word.”

“We have a deal, then. What you want to know involves the demon king or the demons, right?” Scooping up a spoonful of jelly and popping it into his mouth, Michael begins, “Like Bram said earlier, there are demons in the Kilvas Empire. There’s a legend that demons who turned away from the demon king gathered there, but no one knows if it’s true. Granted, the things the demon king says really don’t seem to reach them.”

“Is it safe to assume that means there are demons who won’t obey Master Claude?”

“That’s currently under investigation. We should have our answer after my uncute brother-in-law goes over there. It may just be an issue of distance. However, from what I saw, the demons over there don’t resemble the ones we see in Ellmeyer.”

“…Now that you mention it, you’re right,” Bram agrees.

Bram is the captain of the Holy Knights, an organization formed to fight demons, and he has plenty of experience defeating them. If he says Kilvas and Ellmeyer have different demon species, it seems credible.

“Can you be more specific? How exactly are they different?” Aileen asks.

Michael launches into his explanation. “You know how most of Ellmeyer’s demons seem to have developed from animals? That’s not true over there. How should I put it…? They seemed like true monsters. The sort you’d expect to find in the demon realm. If I had to describe them, I’d say they resembled dragons… The fact that they all had roughly the same shape was another thing that made me wonder about their nature.”

“True, their sizes varied, but there were no major differences.” Bram confirms everything Michael said.

“…Does that mean only one species lives there, perhaps?”

Aileen’s brothers don’t answer her question. They may not have seen a large enough sampling or learned enough about them to be able to say with certainty.

"In any case," Michael says, speaking up again, "since the distant past, Kilvas has relied on a cadre of women who specialize in fighting demons to keep them at bay. Those are the warrior maidens, the Valkyries. And the creator of this elite fighting force was none other than the Queendom of Hausel."

"The Queendom of Hausel…" Aileen frowns.

Michael nods, looking grave. "Apparently, after they undergo surgery in the Queendom, they're armed with magic lances and then sent to fight demons."

Magic lances. Surgery. Warrior maidens. These words evoke flashes of a certain title and its art in the back of Aileen's mind, but that's probably just her imagination. It has to be. For now, she should focus on more immediate concerns.

The Queendom of Hausel declared war on the Ellmeyer Empire because Claude, their emperor, is the demon king. After taking on Ellmeyer, the Queendom lost and subsequently collapsed. At present, it is essentially a failed nation.

"Incidentally… If the Queendom of Hausel was supporting Kilvas's imperial family, and Ellmeyer defeated the Queendom, does that not put us in a rather awkward position…?" Aileen's concerns are growing.

"Well, that's a bit complicated. Earlier, you mentioned a close call with revolution. The Valkyries are the ones who were responsible for that. They're making excuses now, saying it was only a misunderstanding, but I suspect they were just shy of rising up in open rebellion." Michael scoops a spoonful of jelly out of his glass. "The revolutionary army insists that the Valkyrie system was nothing more than the Queendom experimenting on humans: turning women into weapons. The general claim is that the Kilvas imperial family has been selling out its citizens in return for the Queendom's support. 'This is unforgivable. Valkyries, now is the hour to rise up and transform this nation,' or something to that effect."

"…Regardless of what the truth is, how do they plan to deal with the demons?" Aileen asks this while thinking of the concerns of the common people of Kilvas.

Michael doesn't turn a hair. "They won't be a problem. If the

Valkyries overthrow Kilvas's imperial family and eliminate the Queendom, the demons will disappear. After all, they're being sent from Imperial Ellmeyer, home of the demon king. And they enter Kilvas via the Queendom. What more proof of that do the Valkyries need when Kilvas's current emperor has black hair and red eyes? That makes him the same as Ellmeyer's demon king, and yet he can't make the demons withdraw—because the demons are secretly communicating with the demon king."

Aileen's eyes widen, and she puts a hand to her forehead. "…And he is Master Claude's cousin, isn't he?"

"Right. But here's where it gets really complicated. The Valkyries got furious and attempted a revolution, but before they could do away with their imperial family, the Queendom of Hausel fell. Not only that, but it was the Kingdom of Ashmael and Imperial Ellmeyer that took it down. The revolutionary army raised its fist, but it no longer had anything to strike." Michael eats another spoonful of jelly. "There's no knowing whether the fight between the Valkyries and the demons was really human experimentation, joint research between the imperial family and Hausel. The most important thing is that Kilvas can't make Valkyries anymore. Hausel's gone, and while they exported completed 'products,' they wouldn't let the technology leave the Queendom."

"But if Hausel hadn't fallen, those revolutionary Valkyries might have attacked us next, correct? That *is* rather complicated."

"Well, I for one am glad we took the wind out of their sails. And all of that is what's behind this wedding."

Apparently the motives surrounding this event are more diverse and tangled than Aileen first assumed. "Now that you mention it, he is marrying the young woman who was leading the revolutionary forces, isn't he…?"

"The princess, Emperor Kilvas's elder sister, is a Valkyrie. So they had someone in common."

So Claude's cousin is a Valkyrie princess?

Oh, the villainess—no, no, no!

With his spoon still in his mouth, Michael goes on, sounding bored: "It's a perfect match for both sides: an imperial family whose

authority is so weak, they were a step from being deposed, and the leader of the Valkyries, a group with an abundance of energy but no direction. That princess is a clever one. Recommending the Valkyrie who led the revolution as a wife for the emperor of Kilvas isn't something just anyone could think of. I hear she's extraordinarily capable on the battlefield, too."

In other words, the leader of the revolutionaries, a nobleman's daughter who became a Valkyrie, is marrying the emperor on a recommendation from the emperor's elder sister, a fellow Valkyrie. With a buildup like that, she could easily be the heroine of an *otome* game.

No, that isn't what we're focusing on here!

This sounds like a certain game, but it didn't have *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* in its title. It wasn't part of the same series, and it wasn't a spin-off.

That means this shouldn't be possible. This is the world of an *otome* game called *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*, so there's no way *a different game* can force its way in. It shouldn't be possible.

"In other words, this wedding is an important turning point where we'll see whether the imperial family and the revolutionary Valkyries can join hands and avoid civil war," Michael concludes succinctly.

"Like a broken engagement event that raises a death flag?!" Aileen is verging on panic.

"Huh?"

"N-no, it's nothing—"

"Lady Aileeeeeeeen!"

The voice that suddenly reaches Aileen's ears makes her lightheaded. Her brothers also look startled when the doors fly open. Bram hasn't moved, but only because there are technically no enemies to confront.

"L-Lady…Lilia…" Aileen barely gets the name out.

The heroine has arrived. Like Aileen, she has memories of her past life. With a smile so bright that it could convince people spring has just arrived, she comes right up to Aileen, pressing so close that it's almost hard for Aileen to breathe. "Lady Aileen, I just heard! Why

didn't you tell me right away?! Honestly, you're so mean! I have no interest in diplomacy, but if this is about the Kilvas Empire, that's an *entirely* different matter!"

"Y-y-you… You've evaded your guards again…"

"Oh—I might be pregnant, Lady Aileen! I came for a medical exam." Lilia just casually dropped a bombshell, but she keeps rolling along. "I can't believe myself! I thought there really were no more sequels. If there was anything at all, it would just be a fan disc. I was so sure of it that I got careless and overlooked another possibility! We've lost our All Ages rating, so I thought it couldn't happen. Plus, if I really am pregnant, I assumed I wouldn't be the protagonist anymore, and that made me a bit sad… What a blind spot. Not only that, but the wedding means the game is in full swing, and it's about to heat up! The fight's just beginning!"

"Wait! Please don't say anything else!" A nasty chill turns into goose bumps that spread all over Aileen's body. She's turned pale, and Lilia stares at her blankly.

"Wait. Lady Aileen, haven't you played that one? *Valkyrie of the Magic*—"

"Lilia! Why would you run in your condition?! Please think before you act!"

Cedric, the younger prince and Lilia's husband, dashes into the room. And not far behind is Marcus, the one in charge of watching Lilia. The room has rapidly grown noisy, but the words Aileen can't afford to hear still echo in her ears.

That's right. Valkyrie of the Magic Lance. *Yes…*

That was the title. Aileen's pondering whether that's better or worse than a fan disc is, for her, just another attempt at escapism.

In her previous life, Aileen lived in a country called Japan. Science and civilization were far more advanced there; at the same time, it had neither demons nor magic… None that were publicly acknowledged, at least. *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* was only one of countless *otome* games sold in Japan. As a fairly serious

gamer, Aileen played more than a few of them.

That was all, though. The world Aileen has reincarnated into belongs exclusively to the *otome* game known as *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*.

"Don't talk about impossible things like other games. You've stopped being the player and decided to live your life properly, haven't you?! Not only that, but you may be expecting!" Aileen strikes the table with her fist.

Across the table from her, Lilia laughs a little. "Don't worry. I've decided I'll give birth on the exact same day as you, and we'll raise our children as twins. They'll be *our* children, Lady Aileen. I can't wait."

"Stop that. Don't be creepy. I really do feel sorry for Master Cedric! Besides, if you're pregnant now, I'm definitely a month further along…!"

"I believe I can do it! It's me, after all."

"Well, I believe that is absolutely *not* going to happen!"

No one interrupts Aileen and Lilia's incessant shouting. Aileen's brothers are nowhere to be seen now. Cedric insulted Aileen and the rest of the d'Autriche household when he broke off their engagement. Given Lilia's and Marcus's involvement, it's not surprising that Aileen's brothers loathe the lot of them. The moment Michael and Bram saw the trio's faces, they left without so much as a good-bye.

Aileen has no plans to forgive Cedric, Lilia, or Marcus, and she certainly doesn't consider them close friends, but Cedric is her husband's half brother. Not only that, but because Claude is still childless, Cedric and Lilia are currently Ellmeyer's crown prince and princess. Pretending they don't exist isn't an option for Aileen.

She assures Cedric and Marcus that she'll speak with Master Claude on their behalf and manages to convince them to leave Lilia in her care. It was quite rude of Cedric to doubt her, so of course she won't actually give her husband an explanation. If anything, Aileen hopes Cedric gets a good talking-to about Lilia going out without permission yet again.

Never mind that. I have more important things to worry about!

Lilia was apparently an even more hopeless *otome* fanatic in her previous life. This means she has more game knowledge, Aileen can only presume. They certainly aren't on such good terms that they would casually congratulate each other on their pregnancies.

"You're always such a square, Lady Aileen. We already have all this game knowledge. We might as well enjoy it, or we'll miss out. So getting back to what we were talking about—"

"Don't. I don't want to think about it yet. Stop."

"You need to accept reality, Lady Aileen."

"It is extremely aggravating when that's coming from you!" she yells. Telling herself to calm down, Aileen inhales deeply.

Rachel and her other ladies-in-waiting are still in the room, and this conversation probably makes no sense to them, but none seem even a little fazed. They simply continue working silently. They're certainly well trained, but it's also entirely possible that they just consider Aileen and Lilia as members of the same strange species.

After taking a sip from a fresh glass of fruit-flavored water, Aileen composes herself. "Okay, don't get the wrong idea. I absolutely do *not* want to hear about the game. I'm simply appraising your manners."

"Oh…?" Lilia laughs. Using the motions Aileen has taught her in the correct order, she elegantly picks up her cup. The gesture is beyond reproach, and Aileen *tsk*s in irritation. Lilia might have mastered some things, but what she chooses to talk about makes her sound nothing like a crown princess.

"Wanting to talk to me means you *do* remember something, right?"

"…Only to the extent that it sounds like a story I may have heard once."

"Even though the name of the country is exactly the same?"

"As a rule, I don't remember things like that with any confidence…"

Character names were one thing, but unless the names of regions and countries were unique or she had an intense memory associated with them, Aileen never bothered to remember every last one. Only the most intense players remember every proper noun that comes

up in a game.

"Meaning you haven't played through it? In that one, instead of the story splitting depending on your affection levels, you just get more choices and branch points after the first playthrough. The basic story doesn't change, but choices you didn't originally have show up in your second playthrough, and you find out what actually happened during different events. There's a mystery-solving aspect to it."

"Wait. I thought I told you I haven't acknowledged that's what this is yet."

"Oh, come on…"

"I mean, it can't be, right? It's a different game! A fan disc or a spin-off would be one thing, but it's not even part of the same series. Why would it appear in this world?!"

"Hold on. I thought you knew, Lady Aileen? Both games had the same dev team."

"Huh?" Aileen makes a foolish noise that's rather unbecoming for an empress.

"It was the company that was different." Lilia quietly sets her cup down and smiles. It almost seems like she's doing it out of spite. "Still, it was pretty well known that the team behind *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* also worked on *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*."

"E-even though the company was different?"

"The devs apparently argued with the higher-ups ever since the first *Regalia*. Management forced them to change to completely different specifications, and they told the devs to not include sci-fi or battle elements because they weren't popular in *otome* games. On top of that, they one-sidedly declared, 'This game won't sell,' and slashed the budget midway through development."

"…But it did sell fairly well, didn't it?"

The series had five numbered installments, and fan discs were released as well. As the villainess, Aileen had issues with the way they'd thoughtlessly made her death a sidenote, but she acknowledged that the voice actors and the art were good. They created that husband of hers, the demon king whose beauty could

ruin entire nations.

"It sold like hotcakes. That just made the resentment grow during the production of the second game."

"Wh-why would that happen…?"

"From what I hear, the development team planned to set the sequel in Hausel, right from the beginning, and they wanted to do the *Regalia 4* story in *Regalia 2*. However, since *Regalia 1* sold so well, the higher-ups ordered them to also set the sequel in an academy. The first two entries in the series are both school stories, and *2* follows *1* chronologically; there were a lot of similarities, right? And Serena, the heroine, idolized the Maid of the Sacred Sword."

Regalia 3 was set in a harem, and although *Regalia 4* was also set at a school, the focus was decidedly the royal test. Compared to them, *Regalia 1* and *2* had a lot more in common.

"That's mostly the stuff of rumors. Still," Lilia continues, "after *Regalia 2* was released, the development team went independent and set up their own company, so I doubt the stuff about fighting with management is a total lie."

"You really know a lot about this…," Aileen says, trailing off.

"When I like a game, I at least check to see who made it, obviously. Games aren't cheap, you know. Besides, *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* was specifically called out as the *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance* development team's flagship work in promo material."

Was that a thing most people did? Compared to Aileen, who only ever checked the art and the voice actors at most, Lilia was apparently the type to gather as much information as she could before deciding whether to purchase a game.

"But even if the development team was the same, it's still a different game, isn't it?"

"How naive can you get, Lady Aileen?" Lilia tuts, waving a spoonful of jelly from side to side. "As I said earlier, they fought with upper management. Then both games 1 and 2 sold well, in ways the development team was unhappy with."

"U-unhappy…"

"*Valkyrie of the Magic Lance* was a creation born from their

despair—the *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* that the original development team actually wanted to make."

"B-but that doesn't mean the world is the same!"

"Incidentally, the same illustrator did the character designs!"

"……"

"The dev team even ended up in court with their former company, which sued them for plagiarism."

Aileen buries her face in her hands.

Lilia continues cheerfully, "Both the game system and the story were different, so the original company lost their suit. *Valkyrie* isn't set at a school, and the tone of the story is more refined than *Regalia 1*. Still, the character distribution and design were strikingly similar. While the exact same names weren't used, occasionally there'd be bits of background info that made you think, 'Oh, this could be Ellmeyer, and that could be Hausel.'"

"…You're talking about the mastermind behind the revolution, right?" Aileen asks timidly.

Lilia nods. "Yes. The country ruled by the demon king, and the blue country a queen controls with her predictions. It feels like they turned *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* into the villain, doesn't it? And that perfectly matches up with reality, no?"

Strictly speaking, Imperial Ellmeyer did depose the Maid of the Sacred Sword and is currently ruled by the demon king, while the Queendom of Hausel was undoubtedly a *blue* country—a country of the sky—which a queen ruled with precognition.

"It can't be… Are you suggesting that because the world no longer aligns with *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*, it's triggered the start of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance*, which it *does* resemble? That's why, even though that game is different, the setting has overlapped…with this reality…"

"It's thanks to all that hard work you put in to warp the game, Lady Aileen. I think you should be proud!"

Aileen doesn't find this the slightest bit amusing. Planting her elbows on the table, she dredges up vague, distant memories. "…If I recall, in the first ending with the hero, the revolution in the Kilvas Empire succeeded, but the demon attacks didn't stop. Correct?"

"Right, because Hausel and Ellmeyer were the root of the trouble. On the second playthrough, your stats carry over, and you dispatch troops to Hausel and Ellmeyer."

"And win, I assume, if the game progresses as expected."

"Mm-hmm. Ultimately, the heroine becomes empress of Kilvas and tries to unify the continent in order to rid it of conflict."

In other words, if everything plays out according to the game, Imperial Ellmeyer will become a battlefield.

Aileen is on the verge of collapsing to the floor in a shattered heap, but something abruptly occurs to her. "No, wait. Hausel's already been defeated…and this is absolutely, positively a different game, isn't it?! Even if the character designer was the same!"

"Oh, well, yes. The country names were camouflaged as well; they were technically just 'the demon king's country' and 'the queen's blue country.'"

"And none of the same characters appear. At least, they didn't on the first playthrough; I've done that!"

"That's probably because the dev team changed companies and didn't have the rights, so they couldn't openly use the same character names, don't you think?"

"You don't know that for sure, though! In that case, the mastermind might be someone else!"

Lilia stops scarfing down jelly and considers this possibility. "They did hide the queen of Hausel's and the demon king's faces in the game. Those were definitely their silhouettes, though, and that makes me think there's no mistake. If they'd been different characters, the dev team would have come up with new character designs and given them names. You could practically feel the hatred oozing from the way the developers deliberately made them duplicates and then denied it."

"Ngh… Still, we don't appear in the game! This has nothing to do with the game; this is just reality! Even the wedding is a political one, meant to prevent civil war."

"Oh, the heroine initiates the revolution at the ceremony! The 'revolutionary in a wedding dress' still image was really good."

"As I said! It won't be like the game—"

“Lady Aileen, are you sure you want to let the demon king go by himself?” Lilia’s probing question shuts down Aileen’s attempt to deny her claims. “They’ve invited both the queen of Hausel and the demon king to the ceremony, haven’t they? That’s exactly what happens in the game.”

“The queen of Hausel, Lady Amelia, is gone. It won’t be the same.”

“But the demon king’s attending. After that first playthrough, Kilvas considers him the final boss and mastermind, and he’s just sauntering over there of his own accord.”

With the spoon in her mouth, Lilia shoots Aileen a sidelong glance. There’s nothing well mannered about the way she’s eating now, but Aileen doesn’t have the spare energy to point this out.

This world isn’t a game; it’s her life. However, her life to date has made Aileen understand very keenly that she can’t afford to ignore the game’s events. In the first place, without the memories from her previous life guiding her, Aileen would never have considered marrying Claude.

“But…without the sacred sword, they can’t defeat the demon king! Master Claude won’t be in dange—”

Lilia interrupts Aileen. “They’ve got a sacred sword over there, too.”

Aileen’s heart freezes when she hears that.

“Even though the title says *Magic Lance*…?”

“It’s a hidden element. You have to fulfill a certain condition to make it show up. It’s ‘the ultimate weapon that can take out even a human demon king in one attack. ★’”

That completely ruins the game’s title. Aileen groans. “If the developers matched the details of this game’s setting, the sacred sword shouldn’t work on humans…! Why would they upgrade *that* and nothing else?!”

“Maybe it was one of the development team’s original ideas. I bet the company complained about having a protagonist who could hurt humans in a game aimed at a female audience and watered it down. This is spite, pure and simple. As a result, that overlapped brilliantly with reality as well. After all, the real sacred sword passes judgment

on humans, too."

Lilia is cackling, but Aileen doesn't find any of this the least bit funny.

"On top of that, *Valkyrie* presents itself as sophisticated and refined, but it's really just tragedy porn. I really doubt either side is going to get a happy ending. Just give up and accept reality already, Lady Aileen."

"…You're just trying to toy with me again. You won't fool me."

"But *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance* was a story created by the developers—the gods—in order to make up for *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*, you know?"

If one views the game as the world and the development team as gods, then what Lilia is saying makes perfect sense.

"In order to save the Valkyries, the heroine, Diana, wins the help of the hero, Ernst, and the Valkyries themselves. She slays the final boss and his sister, who tries to protect him—that would be Emperor Vica and Cattleya, the villainess—through a revolution. Then she exposes the wicked deeds of the powerful nations Hausel and Ellmeyer, wins back her freedom, and leads the world to true peace… While being completely self-absorbed and generating countless sacrifices."

"……"

"The wedding event is a route branch point. Exactly how it plays out depends on the route, but it's also the event where the heroine declares the start of the revolution. Shouldn't you see it for yourself?"

Balling her hands into fists, Aileen raises her head. She forces a smile, trying to appear as elegant as possible. "I won't fall for that."

"Hmm."

"I am an empress now. I can't act recklessly because of something as childish as a game."

"Hmm."

"In addition, I am expecting. I've already begun thinking and living like a virtuous wife and good mother…"

"Hmm."

"There will be no more plotting!"

Which is why she decides to declare it boldly to her husband's face.

"Master Claude! I am accompanying you to the Kilvas Empire!"

"What?"

Her husband is seated at his desk when she walks in to make that declaration, sweeping back the long train of her dress in a dashing gesture. He stares at her blankly. Drawing herself up to her full height, Aileen crosses her arms. "You don't mind, do you? We'd originally planned to attend together. Our hosts are already expecting me, so it shouldn't be any trouble."

"But we'd just decided that you wouldn't attend because of your pregnancy…"

"What of it? Are you telling me I should seclude myself? That would be detrimental to my health!"

"Being abroad isn't the same as being at home. What if something happens?"

"In that case, you will simply have to do something about it, Master Claude. Pushing all the responsibility onto me like this—are you aware that you are going to be a father soon?!"

"I'd like to be, but your leap in logic was extremely strange."

"You mustn't just stop thinking like that. It's all right: You are my husband, Master Claude. You can make the impossible possible!"

Claude shuts his mouth. While everyone around them is simply stunned by her reckless argument, Aileen continues modestly, "I am going to be a mother soon. I understand that what I am saying is unreasonable. I promise you I won't do anything dangerous."

"Considering your track record, I have no reason to believe you."

Although those around them are still dazed by Aileen's sheer momentum, her husband is calm and unyielding. With an irritated *tch!*, Aileen changes tactics.

"Something recently occurred to me, Master Claude. Family ties!" Claude looks puzzled, and Aileen pounces on the opportunity to push harder. "It is your cousin's wedding, Master Claude. Won't that make it my first meeting with your relations?!"

"…My father and my grandmother are technically both alive and well, you know."

"Goodness, are you certain? I believe the cold over there is quite harsh."

"As the demon king, I can say that my parents are definitely in good health in the demon realm."

"Your parents can't be publicly introduced to others, and of course that is not their fault, but as your wife, I've always longed to form good relationships with your human relatives! I'll send them seasonal gifts and go to greet them formally…"

"You?"

"After all, so far, your relatives have always opposed me and treated me harshly."

Aileen smiles brightly, and Claude falls silent. It's true that most of his immediate family have tried to either eliminate Aileen or drive a wedge between them. She's sure he won't be able to be too heavy-handed here.

"When that thought occurred to me, I was unable to contain myself. Please let me come with you."

"…You never intended to listen to me, did you?"

"Oh, I can't wait to meet your family!"

Claude frowns but says nothing. His adviser and guards watch them both with bated breath.

Sighing, Aileen calls to the lady-in-waiting behind her. "Rachel."

"Yes, Lady Aileen. The preparations have all been made so that you could make your suggestion at any time. You may depart whenever you wish."

She's demonstrating that whether Claude agrees at this point or not, it won't change what she does.

Claude's face goes blank. Although it was a still, cloudless midsummer day just a moment earlier, a strong wind abruptly rattles the windows. It's probably less confusion than wordless intimidation.

Aileen only giggles. "You will take me with you, won't you? Or would you prefer a repeat of Mirchetta?"

"……What are you plotting?"

"Why, nothing at all. I originally intended to thoroughly enjoy

myself while my husband was away."

This is completely true, but Aileen believes it's more convenient if he gets the wrong idea. Considering his experiences to date, Claude will probably want to keep Aileen where he can see her.

In fact, as he looks at her, there's an ominous, suspicious light in his eyes.

"On the other hand, life grows stale without a little plotting between couples, no?" Aileen smiles at him with the expression of a woman who's been plotting all along.

She'll use anything at her disposal, whether it's how little her husband and those around them trust her or her game knowledge.

If she can't do at least that much, she'll never last as the wife of the demon king.

✦ Second Act ✦

The Villainess Poses as a Sweet Young Thing

The Kilvas Empire sits on the far side of the islands of the Queendom of Hausel, on another continent across the sea.

It takes half a month to sail from Imperial Ellmeyer to the port at the southernmost tip of the Kilvas Empire. Even then, using an engine powered by demon stones has halved the time required for the voyage. The Levi tribe are the ones who work with demon stones. When Claude mended the empire's relations with the tribe, he promptly commissioned them to build this ship, and this is the cutting-edge vessel's maiden voyage.

The majestic ship was designed to carry the imperial family. Each of its cabins is spacious, and it even has a fully equipped theater. At present, its only passengers are a small group of elites accompanying Aileen and Claude. Even when she stands on the deck, gazing at the waves, very few people are around. They practically have the vessel to themselves.

The voyage makes for a more leisurely change of pace than if she'd stayed in the imperial capital. She might even call it comfortable. The journey across the calm ocean seems almost too smooth, and when they arrive and disembark ahead of schedule, Aileen is a little reluctant to get off.

"I tell you what, your uncle Jasper has never had such a comfortable voyage in his life. I'd already heard about it from Denis, but this is one heck of a ship," Jasper says, turning back to look as soon as he's stepped off onto the pier. No matter where he is, the journalist is never without his trademark beret. He's already made

several trips to the Kilvas Empire to gather information and do public relations work, and Claude has taken the opportunity to assign him as one of Aileen's minders. The journalist knows Aileen better than Claude, though, and he seems secretly delighted that she's come with them. He struck up conversations with her on the ship every chance he got.

"It really is. I hope the train ride will be just as pleasant, but…"

"It'll take a full day to get from here to the capital, you said?"

"So we finally get out of the water, but we're still not there?"

This is Aileen's other minder: Isaac, whom Claude has directly ordered to accompany them. He's basically being treated like he's in charge, even though he holds no official position. Aileen heard he tried to refuse with all his might. Unfortunately, the one asking was the emperor. He still hasn't been able to defy him.

I didn't expect Master Claude to choose Isaac, though…

Isaac himself said, "He probably wants a reason to execute me," but Aileen also preferred her right-hand man to an unfamiliar guard. In the end, compelled by both the emperor and the empress, Isaac reworked his schedule and accompanied them.

"This trip put all my work on hold, and frankly, I'm bored out of my skull."

Isaac never seemed fond of traveling to begin with. He's been complaining as if this whole thing is a chore.

"But it will be useful to see the Kilvas Empire with your own eyes, won't it? When Master Claude took you to Ashmael, it became a good opportunity to expand your business," Aileen reminded him.

"Well, it would be irritating to go through all that and not get anything out of it."

"You could treat this as a substitute honeymoon with Rachel, you know." Aileen mentions this while fully aware that Rachel is right behind her.

Isaac rejects the suggestion out of hand. "We're both here for work. You think we'd have that kind of time?"

"Gracious, I'm not so gauche that I'd interrupt you two taking a leisurely stroll through town by yourselves. Am I, Rachel?"

"Master Claude has ordered us not to leave you alone under any

circumstances, Lady Aileen. That is why he selected Isaac. Please don't concern yourself with us."

What a formidable couple.

"I'm genuinely not plotting anything. I'm only here to get to know Master Claude's family."

"Yes, Lady Aileen. Mind the step," Luc warns her, smiling; he's disembarked ahead of them. Claude has provisionally appointed him as Aileen's physician. "When you do plot something, be sure to discuss it with me first, for the sake of your health."

His smile contains a different sort of fortitude than Isaac's or Rachel's.

Aileen has known most of these people longer than she's known Claude, but he seems to have very astutely assembled the members of her circle who are particularly adept at keeping her in check. Is that just her imagination?

Claude is waiting at the end of the pier, accompanied by Keith.

"How are you feeling, Aileen?"

""She's fine.""

Luc and Rachel answer for her, and Claude appears relieved. Aileen gives them a look from beneath half-lowered eyelids, and Keith turns his face, laughing. However, he promptly reassumes the expression of the demon king's adviser. "Your welcoming committee is here."

A woman is approaching the docks, accompanied by several soldiers. Her steps are gallant; a short cape flares around her shoulders, and she wears a sword. *How unusual. A lady knight*, Aileen thinks, and then realizes her error: All the soldiers she's leading are women as well. Aileen whispers to Claude, who's standing beside her: "Are they Valkyries, Master Claude? …Master Claude?"

He doesn't respond. Puzzled, she looks up at his face. Claude, without blinking, is staring at the woman heading the group. The woman is gazing right back at him.

The measured sound of military boots stops a few paces in front of them.

"Welcome to the Kilvas Empire, Your Majesty. I have been

assigned as your escort.”

“…You?” Claude asks.

“Yes. We will be taking the carriages over there. The train is already waiting at the station.”

Claude starts to say something, then stops. This isn’t like him. He seems hesitant.

“Is this Her Majesty the empress?” The woman turns her attention to Aileen, who’s been watching Claude’s behavior closely. Swiftly switching gears, Aileen flashes her an elegant smile.

“Yes, I’ll be in your care. Might you be a Valkyrie?”

For just a moment, Aileen gets the feeling that the woman has swiftly sized her up. Even when dealing with honored guests, it’s only natural to confirm that there’s nothing suspicious about them. However, the appraising look is promptly replaced with a mild smile. “Yes, I am. To guests from another land, male guards may be a more familiar sight, but as you see, our empire’s security is primarily handled by female soldiers—the Valkyries. I hope you’ll put your trust in us.”

“If anything, I feel safer with women. I’ll be relying on you.”

“Of course.”

The woman sets a hand over her heart, accepting the duty with all due gravity; she looks just right. The Kilvas Empire is also welcoming guests from other countries on the northern continent. No doubt she’s had this conversation multiple times by now.

“Master Claude, it’s cold here. Let’s get going. Think of our poor escorts,” Aileen prompts him.

“Oh yes… My apologies.” Claude nods stiffly, but that’s all.

“Oh, one last thing,” Aileen says, speaking with intentional brightness as she faces the woman again. “May I ask your name?”

“Ah, I should have introduced myself earlier. I am Cattleya.”

“Cattleya? Would you be Her Highness Princess Cattleya?”

Aileen acts a little startled, and Cattleya nods, smiling wryly. “I am called that as well.”

“I heard that you had become a Valkyrie, so I guessed, but…”

In truth, what Aileen remembered was the still image from the game. This is the first time they’ve met in real life. She should

probably at least pretend to be surprised.

"I didn't intend to deceive you," Cattleya adds, as if she's making excuses. "We're shorthanded at the moment, so my options for greeting you were limited. Do forgive me."

"Oh, no, I'm glad. I'd been looking forward to meeting Master Claude's relations."

"I'm terribly sorry, but until we reach the castle, I would like to conduct myself as a Valkyrie—what you would call a knight. It will set a bad example for the others if I do not."

"Gracious, my apologies; that was tactless of me. Once more, then, thank you for your help, Lady Cattleya."

"You may count on me."

Cattleya turns on her heel, and the others start after her. Aileen tucks in her chin, her lips curving.

Before coming here, she reluctantly compared notes with Lilia and reviewed what they knew. Naturally, the woman with the familiar face is one of the game's major characters.

Villainess Cattleya Tsar Kilvas: Claude's cousin and a princess of Kilvas. At this point, she's the elder sister of the emperor.

Aileen guessed she would be here, although she didn't want that guess to be correct.

Still, if Master Claude is going to stare at her like that, I can't possibly ignore her.

Perhaps she should have expected no less from a villainess. Or is it due to her pride as the emperor's sister or the fact that she's trained as a Valkyrie?

Either way, coming here appears to have been the right answer. As Aileen walks along lightly, she hears Rachel's quiet voice behind her. "Are you plotting something?"

"Goodness, has anything happened that would make me act that way?" Aileen laughs.

"…You're quite right," Rachel says, sounding completely resigned.

The vast, rectangular territory of the Kilvas Empire is surrounded by

steep mountains. The northernmost mountain is said to be covered with snow all year round, but there are many mines as well, fueling a prosperous steel industry. Thanks to that, the empire enjoys many benefits, including its long-distance railways, which don't yet exist in Ellmeyer.

However, one even more noteworthy peculiarity of this nation is its wall.

A long, tall, defensive wall was built as a deterrent to the demons who descend from the north. Part of that wall is visible from the steam train as it races over the plain. The structure, which has been patched and reinforced over and over again, was also in the game. The explanation for tourists is that the Valkyries' battleground lies on its other side; that also matches the story from the game.

It was referred to as the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall, if I remember correctly.

They manage to reach the castle without incident, and at that point, Aileen steels herself. The moment Cattleya leads them into the great hall, which acts as the entrance of the imperial castle, a voice speaks above them.

"Sister, are you home—?"

The youth who's appeared at the top of a spiral staircase stops partway down. When the group looks up, they all catch their breath, startled. Aileen had prepared herself to some extent, and even she is captivated for a moment.

His glossy black hair is simply tied back, and his red eyes are like jewels. That isn't all: His face is as shapely as the most exquisite sculpture, and his proportions seem to perfectly match the golden ratio. In all these things, he bears a strong resemblance to Claude. The only clear differences are his height and the timbre of his voice. The main reason being that he isn't yet twenty. If this youth and Claude stood side by side, only someone who was very familiar to one or the other could have told them apart at a glance.

Cattleya sighs. "Vica, I told you to wait— I'm sorry, Master Claude. This is my brother, Vica. Has he startled you?"

"…No. I've heard we resemble each other…"

Did he now? Who exactly told Claude about this? Aileen's

brothers haven't had an audience with Emperor Kilvas, so it can't have been them. The thought tugs at Aileen, but she keeps her pleasant expression in place like a good wife and says nothing.

Beckoning Vica to her side, Cattleya flashes an awkward smile. "Did you think the resemblance couldn't possibly be this close?"

"That's true for me as well, Sister. You are Emperor Claude Jean Ellmeyer, aren't you?"

The young man looks at him warmly. It's almost as if Claude has turned on the charm, and a shock runs through the group behind Aileen. Brutally honest as always, Isaac quietly mutters, "Creepy!"

"Thank you very much for coming so far. I'm honored to meet you," Claude says graciously.

"No, we were honored by your invitation."

"Vica! How many times must I tell you not to wander around without— Oh."

Spotting them, the man who's peering down from the top of the spiral staircase falls silent. Calmly looking up at the newcomer, Vica presses an index finger to his lips. "They're guests, Ernst. Can the lecture wait until later?"

When Aileen hears that name, she swiftly examines the face of the individual at the top of the stairs. If her memories are correct, Ernst is the name of the classic hero. His light hair has a loose wave to it, and there's a nobility in his features. He looks exactly like the package illustration and the game art she once saw.

"Please allow me to greet you properly later on, Emperor Claude. We can't have a pleasant chat with my noisy prime minister here. I'll see you later as well, Cattleya."





"Yes. Make sure to humor Diana."

After the friendly exchange, Vica turns on his heel. He climbs the stairs to join Ernst, and then both men disappear into the depths of the castle.

Claude murmurs quietly, "If I recall, Diana is the name of his bride, isn't it?"

It's also the name of the heroine.

She probably looks exactly like her game art as well. In any case, Aileen realized this from the moment she first planned to attend the wedding, when she heard Diana's name and how she was involved. Feeling rather resigned, she listens in.

"Yes. However, she's busy preparing for the wedding, so she may not be able to greet you until after the ceremony," Cattleya explains.

"That's fine. My wife has taught me that preparing for a wedding is a monumental task for women."

Aileen smiles dismissively, ignoring Claude. Cattleya nods diplomatically, then resumes their tour.

The imperial castle of Kilvas is more solid than splendid. All the windows are double-glazed to keep out the cold, while the walls are thick and heavily painted to seal any cracks. The carpet that's spread all the way to the corners of the guest room is thick as well. Since the nights can get quite cold, there's firewood stacked by the hearths so that the hearths may be used at any time.

Since Aileen is expecting, the room has a connecting bedroom just for her. No doubt their hosts considerately assumed that if she begins to feel ill, it will be best for her to have a place where she and her ladies-in-waiting can shut themselves in and have some privacy. When she thanks Cattleya, the other woman responds as if she were a servant: "If you need anything, please don't hesitate to call me."

Aileen seats herself on a couch by the window and watches the servants as they inspect the room to make sure nothing is lacking, then begin to unpack.

I wonder if the Valkyries are treated as nobles who've been demoted…

In basic terms, the story of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance* is as

follows:

Kilvas is a northern country that is under assault by demons. The demons' invasion is held at bay by a mysterious wall, but on the other side of that barrier is a constant battlefield. The ones who fight there are not men but the Valkyries, who have strong magical power. Since they've had divine stones surgically implanted in their bodies, the Valkyries are able to use magic lances to annihilate the demons. Serving as a Valkyrie is an honorable profession, and the empire pays them generously, but it is extraordinarily dangerous. Most spend their whole lives on the far side of the wall and die there.

To save their impoverished families or to defend their land from demons, soldiers, who range from young girls to grown women, spend long years fighting beyond the wall.

It is the heroine, Diana, who begins to change things. She is the daughter of a minor, rural lord who would have held the rank of baron in Imperial Ellmeyer. One day, a demon who slips through the wall attacks her tiny hometown, leaving it engulfed in flames. In the burning town, Diana spots a demon with red eyes. Swearing to take revenge on the creature, she volunteers to join the Valkyries.

Diana loses her smile along with her home. However, she meets the hero, Ernst, a senior officer who refuses to treat the Valkyries as disposable weapons; the great Cattleya, a more experienced warrior who became a Valkyrie for the sake of her nation, in spite of her royal birth; and Vica, the young emperor whose heart is pained by the war. These encounters make Diana's abilities as a Valkyrie blossom, and she gradually learns to smile again.

As the fighting grows fiercer, more and more of her companions fall on the battlefield. One day, Diana is seriously wounded while shielding a fellow Valkyrie, and is taken to a country whose queen is said to have the ability to see the future. While there, she learns that the fighting is a scheme, with roots in the queen's precognition. The Kilvas Empire is being used to run an experiment. Diana confides the truth to Ernst and Cattleya and begins to plot a revolution. In the process, she finds out that the red-eyed demon she's sworn revenge on is actually Vica and that he is fated to awaken as king of the

demons. When she learns that Vica is frightened of becoming a demon, and of Cattleya's and Ernst's agony as they attempt to save him, what choices will Diana make, and where will the revolution lead…?

The fan opinion could generally be summed up as "Don't write this one off as 'just an *otome* game.'"

There were two major reasons for this.

The first was that there was no salvation. With every playthrough, the player's available choices increased, various mysteries and character backgrounds deepened, and there were several different endings. However, the route was very nearly a straight line, and none of the endings were completely happy. It was what many would call "a downer game."

For example, take the route belonging to Ernst, the classic hero. His mother had been Vica's wet nurse, and he was also childhood friends with Cattleya. He cooperated with the revolution, and it set him on the path to be a conqueror. He betrayed his childhood friends and became the new ruler of the Kilvas Empire. At the end, he joined Diana in swearing revenge on the Queendom, which had masterminded the whole affair. At least there was still room for hope there. For Vica, the final boss, there was absolutely no hope of salvation under any circumstances. Even though he bonded with Diana emotionally, he couldn't abandon his elder sister and the others, who obeyed Hausel to keep him from transforming into a demon. Thinking that the world would be saved if the demon king died, he chose death and took his sister and the others with him. However, in the final scene of his ending, the Queendom was shown descending from the sky along with the demons in order to rule over the ruined Kilvas Empire. Not only was no one saved, but the core problem wasn't resolved, and the situation has actually gotten worse.

The second major reason fans said this wasn't "just an *otome* game" was because there was an ending with Cattleya, the villainess.

On every route, in order to save Vica, she pretended to help Diana but tried to stall the revolution. She and Ernst even seemed to

have feelings for each other. And yet in her very own ending, she cut off Vica and even Ernst, helped the revolution succeed, and destroyed the Kilvas Empire. Then, as coconspirators who'd destroyed each other's homelands, she and Diana led the Valkyries, attempted to unite the continent under the banner of peace, and then threw themselves into an unending war to destroy the Queendom.

In other words, no matter what happens, the fighting doesn't end. It actually gets worse!

Aileen would like them all to apologize to the common people of Kilvas, whose fate usually involved getting dragged into the mess and being doomed. Of course, that wasn't to say there was nothing wrong with a country that put the Valkyries on the front lines and exploited them for peace, but…

The largest branch point was the upcoming ceremony: Diana and Vica's wedding. In the game, it happened after Diana was badly injured and taken to Hausel. As a reward for her feats in battle as a Valkyrie—or possibly to keep her from talking—she was forced to marry Vica, the puppet emperor. Diana's choices at this point will lock in the route she takes.

And on every route, at a wedding where a messenger from Hausel was among the guests, Diana declared her revolution.

But the Queendom of Hausel is gone. Naturally, they haven't been invited to the wedding. The Valkyries' current claims are nearly the same as they were in the game, so the event where Diana was injured and taken to Hausel may have happened in reality as well, but…

Either way, Diana no longer has a reason to launch her revolution. Now that Hausel is gone, the Valkyrie surgery can't be performed. Both the Valkyries and the system surrounding them may die out soon.

That means the wedding should end without incident—and Aileen needs to confirm that it will.

"Aileen, I'm going to give my regards to everyone. You rest here."

Claude, who's removed his overcoat, returns in a more relaxed outfit. Rising to her feet, Aileen swiftly inspects him, then reaches

for his tie pin and repositions it. He may have said "to give his regards," but he and the people he's greeting will be sounding one another out. He must take advantage of his appearance.

"This suits you better, Master Claude. Will Master Keith be accompanying you?"

"Yes. I've asked Lady Cattleya to make the introductions and show us around. It sounds as if we'll be able to visit the castle town as well."

She steps back, examining Claude's appearance. He's perfect. "If you're visiting the town, I'll look forward to my souvenir."

"…I doubt it will be easy to find one that will win your favor. I'll be back."

"Have a good time."

Claude drops a light kiss on her cheek, then turns to go. Keith follows him. She makes eye contact with Cattleya, who's been waiting a short distance away. Wearing a tranquil expression, the woman acknowledges her with a nod. As she turns to guide Claude and Keith, her back is perfectly straight. As expected of a soldier.

Once the door has closed behind them, Rachel approaches to set down a pitcher of water. "It's unusual for you to coax Master Claude for a present, Lady Aileen."

"There's nothing strange about it. I'm not able to go outside."

"Coaxing in the first place is unusual. In front of others, at that." Rachel gazes at her steadily. She seems to suspect something.

Deflecting her doubt with a smile, Aileen turns to look out the window. "Tell me when Isaac and Jasper return, if you would."

Jasper's original reason for coming here was gathering information, so he's staying in the castle town. Isaac has followed suit. Since Isaac and Jasper are being treated as servants, they're free to do as they please.

Her brothers have given her a certain amount of information, and she'd like to compare it to the reality on the ground.

"Very well. Is there anything else—?"

A knock at the door interrupts her. When Rachel answers it, the individual who peeks in is a servant wearing castle livery. They exchange a few words, and then Rachel returns. "You've received an

invitation to tea from Lady Diana."

Aileen frowns. Rachel looks perplexed as well. "Shall I decline it? We haven't finished unpacking."

"No, I'll accept. I would imagine she's far busier than we are."

Diana's wedding to Emperor Kilvas is approaching. Aileen has lived through a similar event herself. If Diana is asking people over for tea in the middle of all that, she must have an extremely good reason.

"Tell her I would love to. We must prepare, Rachel. This is an empress's duty."

"Of course." Rachel bows, then searches Aileen's opened luggage for a suitable outfit for the empress of Ellmeyer to wear for a meeting with the future empress of Kilvas.

Sunlight streams into the conservatory. Inside, a profusion of small vivid flowers bloom and songbirds twitter. The weather is reminiscent of the warm days at the beginning of autumn. Some sort of spell or device must be at work.

When Aileen steps inside, a woman rises to greet her on the other side of a white table. "I am Diana, Your Majesty."

Her voice is hard as steel, but there's a translucent quality to it. Setting a hand to her chest, she bows lightly. It's the same way Cattleya greeted them; that must be the Valkyries' salute. Between that and the straightforward greeting, there isn't a scrap of sociability in the woman's manner. However, the blue-gray hair that reaches her shoulders and her silken, snow-white skin are unspeakably perfect, and they seem to hold a mysterious power that makes her look like a work of art.

Responding by spreading her skirts and curtsying in the manner of Ellmeyer, Aileen offers a friendly greeting. "Thank you for your invitation, Lady Diana."

"I thought you'd probably be bored."

Aileen hesitates for a moment, then nods. "I do have outstanding servants accompanying me, so that is true. But you must be quite

busy, Lady Diana. Are the wedding preparations going smoothly? It's the day after tomorrow, isn't it? I'm looking forward to it."

"I just have to do predetermined things in the proper order. Even a monkey could manage it. Far too much of it is pointless. Oh, I know some women like that sort of thing. I didn't want to get married in the first place, you see, and I have no dreams or expectations for it."

Aileen decides to think of the other woman as being rather socially awkward.

She is supposed to have "forgotten how to smile," so it makes sense, I guess.

Aileen wouldn't claim that simply lacking in charm is a bad thing in general. Roxane, Aileen's friend and the principal consort of neighboring Ashmael, is also far from charming. However, she's able to socially support her diplomacy-loving husband magnificently with her meticulous consideration, insight that allows her to grasp what's important, and flawless manners.

In addition, even if the other woman happens to be lacking in charm, consideration, insight, and manners, Aileen must not be rude to her. It would be a blot on her title as empress of Ellmeyer.

"I'm sure your feelings will change once the ceremony's over."

"Are you glad you married, Lady Aileen?"

"Yes, of course."

"—I'd imagine so. It looks like you're more suited to that sort of thing."

Aileen tilts her head quizzically.

Diana sighs, touching the rim of her teacup. "I really wanted to speak with the demon king directly. I wasn't allowed to, though, so I had to call you instead. Can you talk about the demons?"

"…I'm told that a discussion has been arranged between my husband and Emperor Kilvas."

"You know men who have no clue what it's like on the field won't be able to have a decent discussion." She snorts dismissively. "Oh, I'm not blaming you. *One could hardly expect otherwise*, after all. I'll ask anyway, though: Is it true that demons and humans live side by side in Ellmeyer, in accordance with the demon king's wishes?"

Under the table, Aileen shifts her feet so that her toes are even with each other. At times like these, things tend to fall apart beginning in places that can't be seen. She must be careful. Even if she ignores the game's scenario, the Kilvas Empire has been plagued by demons for long years. The wrong answer on her part could escalate into an international issue.

"Yes. Both humans and demons are searching for ways to get along with one another, and—"

"Actually, never mind. I see you'll only give by-the-book answers. In that case, what is Lilia Reinoise doing?"

Even though Aileen has just regrouped, she almost frowns. Diana looks at her as if she suspects she hasn't understood the question and begins to elaborate. "I mean the Maid of the Sacred Sword. I've heard she's alive. Is she really the crown princess? If she possesses the sacred sword, she should have been able to defeat both demons and the demon king, and yet… How on earth did you win her over? A man?"

"……"

"Or did she avoid battle, even though she's the Maid of the Sacred Sword? In that case, what's become of the sword?"

Diplomacy is the art of negotiation. Sometimes a snap decision and being quick on your feet can carry the day. Her brother Michael has taught her as much. For that reason, here and now, Aileen sets her future policy. "I'm sorry, Lady Diana. You're speaking of complicated things, and I'm afraid I don't really understand. I'm sure Master Claude would know, but…" She feigns bewilderment.

At that, Diana stops attempting to hide her disgust. "It's incredible that you can manage to be empress like that. Unbelievable… Leaving everything to a man."

Carefully, Aileen returns her cup to its saucer. There's a fragile sound of porcelain on porcelain. "I'm very sorry I can't be of use to you. However…I would like to be friends with you. After all, you will be the empress of Kilvas. It is my duty to be friends with everyone."

That is the job of an empress. Aileen smiles gently, and Diana sighs. "The way you think is enviably peaceful."

"But Kilvas will also be peaceful now, won't it? I was told that that

is the purpose of this marriage."

"A country where marriage solves everything must be nice. The women of this empire can't afford to be so easygoing. Excuse me, it's time I took my leave."

Diana stands, her expression prim. She clearly has no use for Aileen.





“Oh, I’m sorry. I was having such a good time that I stayed longer than I ought to.” Aileen lets the rude treatment roll right off her, appearing unconcerned. Her expression remains perfectly placid, setting an example for the new empress who is about to shoulder a nation. “Do ask me to tea again, please.”

“I don’t like tea, and I don’t have that kind of time… Oh, I’m sorry; I’m not implying that you have too much time on your hands. Dressing yourself up and ingratiating yourself to your husband must keep you very busy. I think it’s fine to have people like that around as well. That’s what it means to be at peace.”

“As one who’s spent time on the battlefield, Lady Diana, your perspective is very educational.” Diana’s eyes are apathetic, but Aileen tries to be as charming as she can. “I’m sure you are busy, but I do have delicious sweets. When you have time, please do speak with me again. Let’s see… I’d love to hear about life on the battlefield, for example.”

“……I really doubt you’d understand even if I told you.”

“Oh, but I’d feel awful taking up your time for nothing, Lady Diana. If only there was something I could do for you…” She assumes a thinking pose, evidently falling deep in thought.

Reluctantly, Diana makes a suggestion. “In that case, maybe you could tell me about the demon king next time—about Emperor Claude.”

“Gracious, Master Claude? I’m particularly good at that. I’m quite proud of my husband, you know.”

“…Cattleya was very preoccupied with him, you see.”

“In that case, I’d love to hear about Lady Cattleya as well. She was terribly dashing; I confess I was captivated by her,” Aileen says gaily.

Diana gives her a pitying look. That’s clinched it.

“All right. Until next time,” Aileen tells her, then turns away. Since learning of her pregnancy, she’s taken care to move as slowly and carefully as she can, but she walks with particular caution now. There’s no telling who may be watching from where.

“Rachel, Lady Diana is a splendid person, isn’t she? I really must become her friend.”

Aileen and Rachel have reached the straight corridor that leads to their guest room. Rachel, who stood silently behind Aileen all through the tea, nods quietly. "Very well. I will see to it."

"With Lady Cattleya as well. They're both very practical, so I'm concerned I may make a careless blunder. Please make sure we don't do anything rude. I so want to be friends with them."

"Lady Aileen, frolicking like that is unseemly."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

The work of unpacking isn't yet finished, and Aileen's ladies-in-waiting are still bustling around the room. Once she's heard the door shut behind her, Aileen breaks into a grin. "After all, it's been a long time since I dealt with such an easy woman." Diana has underestimated Aileen as someone who's foolish and easily used. "Becoming empress doesn't seem likely to make her give up on her revolution. She's hostile toward Ellmeyer as well. She was good enough to blab away honestly; it's saved me a lot of trouble. Having people make light of you really is a valuable thing."

Between her position and her pregnancy, Aileen isn't able to move too freely or stand out too much. By using that to her advantage, she's managed to gather some good information.

"I'll send a letter of thanks to Lady Diana at once. It would be best to include sweets of some sort. Rachel, you understand, don't you? I am a sheltered young woman who knows nothing. A sweet young thing."

"Would you like your clothes and makeup to reflect this?"

"Yes, please. Can you procure something?"

The tools Rachel has to work with right now must be limited. However, her brilliant lady-in-waiting nods with no hesitation. "I can't do anything as elaborate as I normally would, but leave it to me."

"Master Claude hasn't returned yet, has he? Heh-heh. Perhaps I'll go to greet him. After all, I'm lonely."

"Lady Aileen, your expression doesn't match what you're saying in the slightest. I would prefer it if you behaved yourself and rested. Is there a reason you would like to go to meet him?"

"Goodness, Rachel. You must have noticed it yourself. Master Claude is hiding something from me. Lady Cattleya must be on his

mind in some way. As more than a cousin, I mean."

When Cattleya had greeted them, he'd reacted strangely. He can't have imagined his wife would miss that, can he? And the crowning blow was how Diana pitied Aileen, implying Aileen knew nothing.

Aileen gives Rachel a sidelong glance, but Rachel isn't surprised. She keeps a careful eye on Aileen's reactions and, through Aileen, the reactions of those around them. Something must already have struck her as odd.

"I believe they haven't spoken in years. Will you question him about it?"

"I wouldn't do anything so vulgar. It's only natural for spouses to have a secret or two. However, a good wife makes sure to know everything while pretending she does not."

"All right. In that case, let's change your clothes and adjust your makeup at once."

"It's a pity, really. I quite like this lip rouge."

Putting a hand to her lips, Aileen's reflection smiles in the mirror. The pad of her index finger picks up a smear of lip rouge too lustrous for one who intends to play the part of some sweet young thing. It looks an awful lot like blood.

A chill seems to crawl up from Claude's feet, and he stops in his tracks. Cattleya, who's been walking ahead as their guide, blinks. Almost immediately, her expression softens.

"Let's stop and rest soon. The room over there is empty; I'll go and get permission to use it. I'll have tea prepared as well. I'm very sorry to drag you around when you've just arrived."

"I'm the one who asked you to. I apologize for making you work without rest."

"No, it's a place I'm used to. Come, this way—"

Cattleya is about to show them through a door, but Claude catches the handle first, and their hands nearly touch. She withdraws hers at the last moment.

"You rest, too. Keith, can you prepare the tea?" Claude asks.

"Leave it to me."

Keith promptly calls to a servant who's walking down the corridor. Thinking that although Keith may be from another country, he'll probably handle this well, Claude opens the door. "…This is the imperial castle. Is it all right to call you Princess Cattleya now?"

Cattleya broods for a little while, then breaks into a smile. "If you'll be kind enough to do so again."

"Then after you—although this isn't my castle."

Laughing, Cattleya steps through the door.

The room she's chosen for their recess is small but tidy. The flowers in the vase by the window appear a bit wilted, but that's probably because evening is near. Based on their colors, the chairs that face each other across the round, cat-footed table are a set. When he pulls out one of the amber-colored chairs with bright red upholstery, Cattleya slowly lowers herself into it. She may be dressed like a knight, but she's conducting herself like a perfect lady.

"I didn't think you'd be coming to meet us. That startled me," Claude began.

"I am the only one in this nation who's ever met you. I don't think the fact that I was selected is so surprising." Her voice is a bit gentler than it was before. She may be switching tones to match her role.

"It's been more than a decade since we met in person, though. I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Your beauty isn't so easily forgotten, Master Claude. It was branded onto my heart as a child. I wondered whether my brother would grow up to be that lovely as well."

"…It's odd for me to say it, but your brother seems to be growing up splendidly. I was relieved to see it."

In front of Claude, Cattleya smiles. It isn't the gallant one she showed him as a girl. There's a hint of resignation in it; it's the smile of a grown woman. "Yes, he's already old enough to marry. I was surprised as well, though. I didn't expect you to have become emperor or that you'd be married…"

"All sorts of things happened. I believe that's true of you as well… Let's get down to business."

Claude turns his left hand so that it's palm up, and a card materializes on it. As Cattleya's eyes widen, he turns the card face up and holds it out to her. "This arrived along with the wedding invitation and gifts, addressed specifically to me."

Save me from this place.

"…This was sent to you?" Cattleya frowns.

Watching her reaction carefully, Claude checks with her. "The sender didn't give their name. It wasn't you?"

"No, not me."

"But you're the only acquaintance I have in Kilvas," he tells her, echoing the excuse she'd given him a moment earlier.

Even so, Cattleya shakes her head. "As I said, it wasn't me. On the contrary, I think it may be a trap." Claude gives her a questioning look, and she raises her head, facing him squarely. "You're aware that this nation came to the brink of revolution. What do you think that would mean if, in the middle of all that, I sought the help of the demon king?"

"I see. So people would think the imperial family of Kilvas really was inviting demons into the country." Claude strokes the card with an index finger, and it fades, then vanishes. "In that case, we'll say I never saw this. You don't have to worry: The only ones who know of this card are myself and Keith—the adviser who was just here."

"…Your wife doesn't know? You mustn't do that. She'll suspect you."

"My wife is more jealous than one might assume. Not only that, but as you know, she's pregnant. I can't have her finding out something unnecessary that will make her embark on some sort of scheme."

Claude emits a long sigh. Cattleya stares at him blankly, then giggles. "That sounds quite trying. However, you were disinherited, and yet you've still managed to become emperor. Your wife had much to do with that, did she not? I'm told she's the daughter of a duke and that she was once engaged to your half brother…"

"That's right. She was kind enough to switch over to me." He chuckles quietly.

Cattleya looks rather appalled. "Don't tell me you deceived her.

You bad man; she's such a sweet woman."

"I am the demon king. Obviously, I'm a bad man. I'm also arrogant enough to think that if you're really in trouble, I want to help you." Leaning back in his chair, Claude smiles. "If something's wrong, tell me. I'd like to do all I can. That includes handling the demons."

"…Why would you go that far…?"

"When I was disinherited, you tried to extend a helping hand and invite me to your country, remember? It's thanks for that." That isn't actually all it is, but he genuinely does want to help her. "I've heard that the demons' offensive has slackened. I intend to do my best to ensure that you never have to set foot on the battlefield as a Valkyrie again."

Cattleya looks down at her feet. This is when Keith enters, carrying a tea tray he accepted in the corridor. The sounds of the tea service being set out and of hot water being poured, along with the light fragrance of black tea, soften the stark silence into a simple hush.

"…Master Claude, where do you suppose the demons came from?" Perhaps she's feeling wary; Cattleya doesn't touch her tea.

"I don't know."

"You aren't saying that they didn't come from Ellmeyer or Hausel, then."

Claude picks up his teacup and drinks first. He's acting as her poison taster. "I can assure you that I didn't send them. However, if it happened before I was born, I can't speak with any confidence. Frankly, the Queendom of Hausel was shrouded in mystery until the end. The remaining relics vanished before we managed to secure them, to say nothing of the floating palace."

"The floating palace did vanish as well, didn't it…? I've heard rumors that it's actually still in the sky and that the Queendom is thriving."

"With all that lost wisdom, conspiracy theories will inevitably run rampant."

To be completely accurate, the floating palace has vanished from this world and is currently in the demon realm. A palace that

constantly repairs itself is too much for humans to handle. As a result, his father—Luciel, the god of demons—and his father's wife, Grace, have agreed to be its caretakers until the time is right. It's a very vague matter, but Baal, the holy king of Ashmael, has given his consent, too.

This means their two nations are concealing the floating palace, but it certainly isn't the sort of thing that could be allowed to stay out in the open. It would definitely spark an unnecessary war. Conspiracy theories are preferable.

"Hausel has definitely fallen, though. People still live on those islands, but the majority have begun to emigrate to other lands. Most of them seem to have headed to Ashmael, but geographically speaking, it's Ellmeyer's issue as well. That's probably true of Kilvas, too," Claude says.

"Our climate is harsh, and we haven't had much trouble with immigration. I would imagine the rumors of revolution kept them away."

"Sometimes you'll be targeted precisely because your situation is unstable. I'll have to discuss that with your brother."

"Diana would probably be a better choice than Vica. I'll mention it to her, too. She's fought beyond the wall as a Valkyrie, so she knows what the demons are like."

Cattleya must be very close to Diana; she's even recommended her as a bride for her precious little brother. Claude nods. "I want to hear opinions from those with experience in the field, of course. I'd like to see the wall itself, if possible, and the demons on its other side; could I ask you to show me?"

"Let's see. I'll discuss it with Diana first—"

A light knock at the door interrupts them. Keith swiftly glances in that direction, but before he can ask who it is, the door opens. When Claude sees the individual who enters, it makes sense to him.

It's Vica. Prime Minister Ernst is there as well. Vica nods to them. "Excuse me; I heard you were here. Cattleya, Diana's calling. She says she needs to talk to you."

"She does? You haven't made her angry again, have you?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but…"

It feels strange to Claude to see such a tranquil expression on a face that's identical to his. Especially when his eyes meet those red ones. Does the other man feel the same way?

"I'm currently showing Emperor Claude around, though," Cattleya protests.

"No, I should be returning to my room," Claude says diplomatically.

Claude has completed the minimum of required meetings and greetings. No doubt it would be rude for him to loiter around the castle on the very day he arrives. This nation has suffered from demons, and Claude is the demon king. He's done nothing to be ashamed of, but he doesn't want to attract unnecessary suspicion.

"I can get back if you'll send a guide with me. Can I trouble you to clean up here?"

"Of course. Please ask the guard outside to show you the way. Ernst." Vica glances at Ernst, who promptly steps out of the room. He's probably calling servants to tidy away their tea things. Even though he's the prime minster, he's capable of being meticulously considerate.

"…I'll take you up on that, then. Master Claude, I'll contact you later about the matter we were speaking of." Cattleya rises to her feet, bows, and leaves, carrying herself briskly to the last.

"Have you made some sort of promise with my sister?" Settling in the chair Cattleya has just vacated, Vica crosses his legs.

"Yes." Claude nods. "I told her I wanted to tour the other side of the wall."

"And if I refuse to allow it?"

Claude blinks.

However, as Vica rests his elbows on the table, he's smiling.

It's as if there's a mirror in front of him that isn't copying his movements. Feeling very strange, Claude chooses his words carefully. "If you do, then of course I'll refrain. However, I have been requested to do something about the demons as the demon king, and it will mean I'll be unable to."

"…I was joking. I just wanted to see how it felt to say it. I don't have much of a voice in matters of policy anyway. I've been a

puppet emperor since I was a child."

"You really don't look like it."

Vica's smile vanishes, and his expression goes blank. For the first time, Claude feels as if he's facing himself.

He's technically received official information regarding Vica, emperor of Kilvas, from his brothers-in-law; mostly from Michael. The previous emperor passed away suddenly, and this boy became emperor at the tender age of ten. His sister, Cattleya, was already a Valkyrie, away on the battlefield. Surrounded by treacherous courtiers, the child became a puppet emperor.

He has black hair and red eyes, and he wields magic, but he can't control the demons, and unlike his sister, he doesn't race across battlefields. Claude heard he's often thought of as a terribly ominous, albeit physically attractive doll.

However, he really can't think of the identical face that's seated across from him as being like a doll's now.

"…You and Ernst may be the only ones who will say that to my face, Big Brother Claude."

Claude nearly fumbles his teacup. The indescribable emotion that wells up inside him becomes a blast of wind that rattles the windows. "…'Big brother'?"

"If we're cousins, that isn't the strangest thing to say, is it?"

"I see…!"

How can this be?

What an unexpected blind spot. The feeling it provokes in Claude is complex in a different way from what he feels when Cedric calls him that.

"Feel free to call me Brother, Vica."

"…Apparently that made you happy. I'm glad," Vica murmurs, gazing at the abruptly glossy flowers by the window. He seems to know about Claude's nature. That boosts his score as well.

"Let's get down to business: Is anything troubling you, Vica?"

"You're kind, aren't you, Brother Claude. However, instead of me, can I ask you to save my sister?"

Claude studies him intently. The boy gazes back. He seems to be implying that Claude already knows the answer. Being similar may

not always be a good thing. Before Claude can respond, Vica gets to his feet. "I'll take my leave, then. Ernst."

As if he's been waiting for this, the prime minister peeks into the room from the hall. Vica walks away, signaling that the conversation is over. Claude calls after him: "So it isn't your wife you want me to save?"

They aren't technically married yet, but the other man will know what he means. Vica turns back. "Yes, that's correct," he responds briefly. The expression on his face is one Claude has seen in the mirror. Then he leaves, taking Ernst with him. In exchange, the servants who've been sent to tidy up enter, as does the guard who's been waiting to show Claude back to his room.

"Those two are quite the rogues, aren't they?" Keith asks the moment Claude steps out into the hall.

Claude shrugs. "It would be disturbing if he acted spineless with my face, wouldn't it?"

There's no telling what about that is funny, but Keith bursts out laughing. Claude finds it quite rude.

They're scheduled to stay in Kilvas for the week surrounding the marriage. The wedding ceremony is the main event, naturally, but there are also soirees and tea parties before and after it, and they have conferences and observation tours scheduled as well. Claude will be handling most of the latter, but Aileen can't neglect the former. Who should she meet, and what sort of publicity should she attempt to win during that limited time, with those limited chances? Particularly in the world of noblewomen, which Claude isn't able to enter, she'll need to choose carefully.

However, Kilvas doesn't seem to operate in the fashion to which she is accustomed.

Music plays beneath the crystal chandeliers, and the dance forms are also quite similar, but the women's costumes are divided equally between splendid dresses and knights' uniforms. Considering the fact that some of the women in ball gowns are from other countries,

it almost appears as if more women in Kilvas are Valkyries than not.

She may have chosen the right approach. Behind her open fan, Aileen narrows her eyes. Her husband, who's holding her hand, murmurs quietly, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She smiles back at him.

Claude looks Aileen over once from head to toe, then offers his opinion. "…You aren't your usual self tonight. It's quite novel. Have you had some sort of change of heart?"

She expected no less of him: His choice of words is extremely skillful.

"You don't like it?"

"No, that isn't what I meant. It's just… I have a terribly bad feeling about it."

Once again, this is Claude all over: His instincts are extremely good as well.

"It's simply a change of pace."

Tonight, Aileen is dressed in pastel colors. If she walks slowly, her skirts drift lightly around her, and the collar is generously ornamented with fine frills. The ribbon that gently gathers the bodice beneath her bosom is made of pearl-adorned lace, giving it the appearance of fairy wings. The heels of her shoes are low, and she's wearing her hair loose. Although the upturned outer corners of her eyes generally give her a rather aggressive look, they've been softened with cosmetics, and her lip rouge is an innocent pale pink. She looks more like a young noblewoman than an empress, and more adorable than beautiful. The image she's tried to achieve is that of a pampered pet of a woman who's been extravagantly dressed up.

She hasn't worn anything this cute in a long time. Naturally, she's matching her behavior and every little gesture to her outfit. She's rather uneasy about it, but Rachel has given it her stamp of approval, confidently declaring, "As long as you don't revert to your usual self, you'll be fine."

"I thought I'd wear the sort of thing I have very little occasion to wear in Ellmeyer, since I had the chance. It's less constricting than the usual. And yes, I've dressed with my condition in mind."

"…You thought up that excuse just now, didn't you?"

"Lord Claude, Lady Aileen, are you enjoying yourselves?"

Although Claude has drawn his handsome eyebrows down to their limit, he swiftly reverts to his usual expression. Nestling modestly into his side, Aileen smiles. "Yes, Lady Cattleya. It's a lovely soiree. And Lady Diana as well; how do you do?"

"…Evening," Diana responds brusquely. She's wearing a very elegant gown, a lovely thing made with layer upon layer of silk and edged with silver thread. The ensemble's refinement is emphasized by the fact that the only notable splash of color comes from the small jeweled hair ornament she wears. It actually makes her lack of expression seem mystical.

"Lady Diana, what a splendid dress."

In terms of displaying the sacredness of the Valkyries, it's a fine costume. Aileen's compliment is genuine.

Diana gazes back at her. "You are adorable as well. Those clothes suit you."

"Thank you very much, Lady Diana. Lady Cattleya, you haven't changed yet?"

There are more braids on her shoulders and more tassels on her cape, but she's dressed as a knight. Cattleya sets a hand on her chest. "I am Diana and Vica's guard, so I will stay like this."

"That's a pity. I'd been looking forward to seeing your gown…"

"You do like dresses, don't you, Lady Aileen." Diana says pointedly.

"Yes, I love makeup and dresses both. I can't wait for the wedding, either."

Diana shrugs, and Cattleya forces a smile. "I'm planning to wear a dress for the ceremony. I'm not sure whether it will be to your liking, but…"

"My, we'll certainly be looking forward to that. Won't we, Master Claude."

"Y-yes… We will." Claude nods back awkwardly while Aileen clings to his arm.

Cattleya's gaze shifts, and her eyebrows draw together. "Master Claude, is something the matter? Your expression seems stiff."

"No… Being surrounded by beautiful women is simply making me nervous."

"Gracious, Master Claude. Beautiful? I'm quite childish; I can't hold a candle to these two." Aileen blushes and giggles behind her fan. Her husband looks as if someone has shoved the most foul-tasting object in the world into his mouth. However, he prudently says nothing; he just opts to look at anything other than his wife.

Ernst bustles into view from the direction Claude just happens to be looking. He's alone, though.

"…Come to think of it, Lady Diana, has Emperor Vica not arrived yet?" Aileen asks.

"I imagine he'll be here soon."

The brisk answer causes Aileen to fall silent.

Vica is the host of this soiree, and he technically should have escorted Diana to it. It isn't an absolute must, though, and this isn't considered a breach of etiquette; it's simply an issue of appearances. Vica may have sent her on ahead. Every situation has its exceptions and reasons.

What tugs at Aileen is that neither Diana nor Cattleya seems concerned.

Of course, if Claude is late to a soiree he is hosting, Aileen will enter first and take charge. However, that is because Claude is not present, and Aileen is the empress.

If Vica is here, then unless he and Diana perform the first dance, the soiree cannot begin. Or does Kilvas consider it natural for Princess Cattleya and Diana, who isn't yet queen, to take charge?

"Cattleya, Diana, may I have a moment? Vica is—" Belatedly, Ernst finally notices Claude and Aileen. The fact that he's addressed the women without their titles makes him appear anxious and rushed. When Aileen pulls gently on Claude's arm, he seems to understand.

"On that note, we'll take our leave," Aileen says in parting.

Ernst gives them an apologetic nod. Looking as if she's heard nothing, Aileen sets off with Claude.

As soon as they've put some distance between themselves and the others, Claude sighs, long and bitterly. "What on earth are you

plotting? This is hard on the heart."

"My, how awful. Are you certain you aren't tired from the journey?"

"…No doubt there isn't another woman in the world who could rattle me as much as you have with only a dress and some makeup."

That evaluation isn't bad. Spotting one of Kilvas's influential aristocrats nearby, Aileen nods in response to Claude's questioning look, sending him off in high spirits. *Now then, what about me?* As she scans the venue, Ernst steps into the center of the hall, accompanied by Cattleya and Diana.

"Assembled guests, I regret to inform you that His Imperial Majesty is feeling unwell and, as a precaution, will not be attending tonight. Please accept my deepest apologies. However, he has told me that he wishes for all of you to enjoy yourselves this evening, so Her Highness Princess Cattleya will deliver the opening remarks—"

The wedding is tomorrow. Will he be all right, if he's feeling unwell now?

In terms of the game, Vica being absent from the wedding is an impossible development…

Aileen has a bad feeling about this. When she glances around, the Valkyries are leaving the venue in a hurry.

Something's happened.

Aileen narrows her eyes. Both Cattleya's and Diana's expressions are tense, confirming her apprehensions.

"The situation's pretty much what your brothers said."

The next morning, Isaac stops by just after Luc has finished her morning exam. Jasper agrees with him. "The fight between the demons and Valkyries on the other side of the wall was definitely a case of human experimentation by the Queendom of Hausel. Kilvas's imperial family tolerated it because they wanted support, and they kept mass-producing Valkyries like they were told. Rumor has it that the demons were imported from Ellmeyer through the Queendom."

"It's remained a mere rumor?"

The chances of a civil war erupting are affected by the number of people who believe in it.

Isaac picks up on Aileen's concern accurately. "I'd say about fifty-fifty. The Valkyries and the people close to them believe it; everyone else knows about the fight beyond the wall but thinks it's not their problem. Right, guy?"

Jasper sits down at Luc's desk, since Luc is recording Aileen's condition in her file. "Yeah. Even if they wanted to suspect the imperial family, the princess is a Valkyrie, and the emperor's a notorious puppet. There's no clear bad guy to blame. Some folks are using the fact that the demons' invasion stopped when Hausel fell as circumstantial evidence, but as long as it's settled down, most people don't care why."

"Then there's the wedding. Having a Valkyrie with a phenomenal war record marry the emperor seems like a reconciliation."

The political marriage Cattleya has arranged is working as it should. However, Aileen's brow is still furrowed. "Then the suspicions regarding Hausel and Ellmeyer haven't cleared away…"

"Yeah, because the current stance is to simply set aside suspicions for now. If the empire stays peaceful, then that's fine; if it doesn't, it's more than possible that the country will focus that hostility outside its borders. It's an old trick by those who hold the reins of power. Anyway, what's with the new look? What are you fighting?" Isaac asks.

Rachel has been with Aileen since last night, and Isaac stayed at an inn in town with Jasper to help him gather information, so he doesn't know about the business with Diana. Even so, he's picked up on the fact that the change in Aileen's makeup isn't a mere whimsy; it's preparation for battle.

She'd expect no less from her right-hand man. Crossing her legs, Aileen smiles. "That should be obvious. It's a battle between women."

"Fine. I won't butt in. Just gimme intel. I don't need to hear the rest of it," Isaac says, raising his hands in mock surrender. Still facing the desk, Luc chuckles quietly. Rachel, Isaac's wife, is serving tea to Luc and Jasper.

"Lady Diana is hostile toward us. It doesn't look as if she respects Emperor Vica, either. However…even Lady Cattleya seems to be making light of Emperor Vica. I find that concerning."

"The word on the street is that the siblings are supposed to be close. Do they actually not get along or something?" Jasper wonders.

"No, they do. It's subtle, but she dotes on her little brother. She just doesn't seem to respect him as an emperor. She is close to Lady Diana, though."

"Making an enemy of Diana right now wouldn't be a great move."

Folding her arms, Aileen thinks. "It really wouldn't be… For the moment, hold off on making a decision. I'm still investigating."

"Don't tell me that's why you're dressed like that. C'mon, somebody stop her." Isaac shoots a glance at Rachel.

Smiling, she simply offers him tea. "Thank you for all your hard work."

Isaac accepts the tea silently. The fact that his wife hasn't broken character as a lady-in-waiting seems to have made him realize that Aileen can't be stopped.

"And?" Jasper asks. "What's the emperor actually like? Does he seem pretty unreliable? Young Master Isaac told me he's the spitting image of the demon king."

"I've barely seen Emperor Vica at all. I'm no different from Isaac there."

"I'm gonna bet he's not incompetent. Having the demon king's face and being incompetent would just be a horror story." Isaac sips his tea, looking glum.

The sight makes Luc burst out laughing. Then he turns to Aileen. "At any rate, do put your health first, Lady Aileen."

"Don't worry. At this point, doing nothing would be more in line with what they expect from me, no?"

"If anything happens, I'll have you sent home by force. I won't fail to keep the demon king updated on this matter." The fact that Luc beams while he says that makes it even scarier. "Please don't make that face. I will permit you to attend the wedding."

"Come to think of it, I wonder how Master Vica is feeling."

Like Jasper, Isaac has also noticed something might be up. “Yeah, the emperor wasn’t at the soiree last night, was he? Things at the castle seem sort of panicky, too.”

“They’ll make it happen no matter what it takes. They’ve invited guests from abroad; this isn’t just any old wedding.”

If this wedding ceremony falls apart, the danger of civil war will rear its head again.

“At any rate, we must prevent that hostility from turning on Ellmeyer at all costs. Please continue your investigation, you two. No discovery is too small,” Aileen concludes.

Jasper nods. “Understood. I hope we find something that’ll work up into a good article.”

“Actually, where’s the demon king? Working?” Isaac asks Aileen.

“Sir Ernst summoned him a little before you arrived, and he went out with Master Keith. I believe they may be talking about the demons.”

“That seems sort of sketchy… I hope this isn’t about demon snuff again.”

“It’s time to get ready, Lady Aileen,” Rachel says, glancing at the clock. When Aileen nods, Isaac and the rest set their cups on the tray and leave the room, and Aileen promptly begins to get dressed.

Rachel curls the tips of Aileen’s hair loosely. It is Aileen’s cherished view that when attempting to appear adorable, no effort should be spared.

“I wonder if Master Claude will be ready in time. He hasn’t returned yet, has he?”

“I’m sure it will be all right. Master Keith is with him, so they must have an accurate grasp of the hour.”

“Lady Aileen, are you there?”

Speaking of Keith seems to have summoned him. Aileen checks her appearance in the full-length mirror, and she glances at Rachel in the glass. Rachel swiftly opens the door and lets Keith in.

“Lady Aileen, I’m very sorry. Would you come with me?”

“What’s the matter? There’s still time before the wedding.”

“Milord is in trouble. It seems like a job for you, so I came to get you.”

Aileen turns to look at him, and Keith flashes her a bright smile.

Keith simply starts down the corridor, without explaining a thing. Aileen follows him, breaking her own rule just this once and walking as quickly as possible.

The castle's velvet-carpeted halls are bustling with servants, but as soon as they cut through the garden gallery and enter the inner palace, everything is quiet. Apparently, everyone has been sent away.

As a result, once they've walked a short distance down the corridor, they can clearly hear the quarrel from the inner room.

"Please, Master Claude."

"Cattleya, this is reckless. I object!"

"But it's the only way, Ernst. You understand, don't you, Diana?"

"…If you say so, Cattleya, I'm fine with it."

When Aileen glances at Keith, he retreats a step, taking up a position beside the door. Seems like she's supposed to look and decide for herself.

Aileen sets a hand on the door, which is standing slightly ajar. Then she grimaces. The door hasn't been left open; it can't be closed. It's broken.

"You are the only one who can substitute for Vica, Master Claude."

At the double shock of the words she's heard and the horrible state of the room beyond the door, Aileen's eyes fly open. Startled, Ernst and Cattleya turn. A little belatedly, so does Diana, but any greetings will have to wait. Aileen pushes her way in, looking around.

Broken windows, slashed curtains. Overturned chairs and cupboards, scattered documents and books. Even the water from the broken vase hasn't been cleaned up.

It looks as if the room's been ransacked.

"…What happened here?"

"Keith, I wondered where you'd disappeared to. Why have you

brought Aileen?" Claude asks.

"Because a discussion of standing in for the emperor isn't the sort of thing you can exclude Lady Aileen from."

Before Claude can say anything, Cattleya steps in front of her. "Lady Aileen… Now that you've seen this, we have no choice. Please help us. I want Master Claude to become Vica."

Aileen cocks her head, genuinely perplexed. Cattleya speaks rapidly—she's clearly anxious. "This is Vica's room. It appears he was attacked by someone last night. By the time Ernst called us, the room was as you see it now. Look over there."

When she looks where Cattleya is pointing, she sees a fine trail of bloodstains on the floor leading to the window. It appears as if someone was dragged.

"…It can't be. Is it Emperor Vica's?"

"We don't know. We're searching for him all over, but we have no clues…"

"We do have a clue."

"Ernst! That's—"

"If you seriously mean to send in a substitute, you shouldn't hide this from her, Cattleya."

Ernst has brought a small bundle over, and he opens it to reveal what looks like a shattered crystal. A few fragments are stained with blood.

Aileen recognizes those shards. During the war with the Queendom of Hausel, she struck down several dozen holy swords set with similar objects. "Is this…a divine stone?"

"You knew? Impressive. Yes, that's right. It was lying in the bloodstains by the window. In Kilvas, they're used in the Valkyries' magic lances."

When she looks up, Ernst is gazing at her steadily. He's clearly trying to turn her thoughts in a certain direction. Gratefully, Aileen clasps her hands in front of her chest, venturing a question in a tiny voice. "Then… Um, do you mean to say that the Valkyries were behind this?"

"Don't be stupid. You know nothing," Diana cuts in sharply. "And you, Ernst. Dispose of that at once. If a Valkyrie were the culprit,

she wouldn't leave a thing like that at the scene. Use your head a little. Or what, do you doubt the warriors who've given everything for their country?"

She's speaking far too quickly. Despite appearances, she may actually be rattled.

Pretending to be bewildered, Aileen listens carefully to Ernst, Diana, and Cattleya.

"That isn't what I meant. However, it's a fact that there is a shattered divine stone here. It's also true that only the Valkyries are capable of attacking Vica."

"That's because you men have always made us women do all the fighting!"

"Stop it, you two; that isn't the problem. The problem is that Vica isn't here. The wedding will begin soon. We need to make a decision, and fast."

For the moment, Aileen has gotten a handle on the situation.

This is why Vica was absent last night. They've been searching for him quietly and keeping things under wraps to avoid causing chaos, but they still haven't been able to find him, and the ceremony is drawing near. They're being forced to decide whether to reveal that Vica is missing.

Cattleya turns back to Aileen. "Lady Aileen, please allow Master Claude to serve as Vica's body double. For the moment, if we don't at least conduct the ceremony, the people will grow uneasy."

She understands Cattleya's desperation. The peace of the nation is riding on this wedding.

Ernst pulls a sour face. "If we go on with the ceremony anyway, there's no telling what may happen to Vica."

"Considering the timing, this was clearly intended to obstruct the wedding. If we cancel it, we'll be playing right into the culprit's hands."

"They're trying to cast suspicion on the Valkyries, too. I'm also in favor of holding the wedding."

…Well then, what should Aileen do in this situation?

As she feigns bewilderment at their quarrel, her mind is racing a mile a minute. These three are anxious over the possibility of a

domestic internal rift, and she feels bad for them, but her only goal is to keep Ellmeyer out of the crosshairs. Demonstrating friendship by helping them deal with their demons and so on would be one solution—but, of course, she can also resolve the issue by thoroughly studying their weaknesses.

This is a golden opportunity.

Right now, Vica and these three are the ones who are steering the Kilvas Empire. No matter who the culprit is, simply lending them Claude as Vica's replacement will put them deeply in Ellmeyer's debt. In addition, the most effective time to indebt someone is when they are most desperate.

Only a handful of people are able to interact with the groom at a wedding, and Claude could pass as Vica's twin. It would take far more than a passing glance to see through the ruse. The emperor's behavior is sure to be beyond reproach. It will mean learning the ritual formalities at the last minute, but Claude can do it.

The problem is how to get him to consent to it.

Although he is practically indecency incarnate, Claude tends to take a romantic view of things like marriage and love. If Aileen told him to take another wife, Ellmeyer would be engulfed by a furious blizzard even at the height of summer. She can't visualize her simple, honest husband agreeing to secretly pose as someone else at a wedding. Not only that, but if she takes the initiative and tries to sell him off, things will get extremely complicated. In spite of herself, Aileen steals a glance at her husband…

…and makes eye contact.

His red eyes narrow, but a moment later, his blank expression is replaced by a smile. The transformation makes her groan.

Oh no!

He's realized she's trying to find a way to loan him out at a high price, and he's come up with a countermeasure in the blink of an eye. Claude is brilliant. If he moves first, she'll lose.

"Um, everyone—"

"If I'll do, then I'd like to help." At the sound of Claude's clear, reliable voice, the other three turn to him. "Vica is my relative. I can hardly consider this someone else's problem. Besides, I would also

prefer to avoid an outbreak of violence in Kilvas. There's the matter of the demons as well. I can't have people suddenly suspecting Ellmeyer."

Diana's eyebrows knit together in a frown. Aileen feels like groaning: He's good. He's shown that he's aware of the suspicions surrounding Ellmeyer and, in the same breath, declared that he will help Kilvas. The message is clear: *I'll cooperate with you, so don't even think about threatening my empire.*

"We can extend our stay here. In the meantime, we'll help search for Vica and think of what to do. Even if something has happened to him, it would be better for it to 'happen' after the wedding."

"What do you mean?" Diana's voice is practically dripping with suspicion, but Claude doesn't falter.

"At this point, there is no crown prince and no one appropriate who can take charge. However, how will things stand after the wedding?"

"…Oh, I see. Because I will be empress then…"

"Exactly."

"In that case, we really should conduct the ceremony," Diana concludes.

Cattleya nods.

Ernst sighs bitterly. "…We'll only be buying time."

"On the battlefield, we buy time to find a way out, Ernst."

"Master Claude, I'm terribly sorry, but may we ask for your cooperation…?!" Cattleya pleads.

"Of course. It's for the peace of both our nations."

The group quickly reaches a consensus. Aileen stares at them, her face drawn and tense.

These three probably think this was their decision, but they're wrong. Claude has led them to it. He acts as if it's only natural for him to stand above others, and it's given them that illusion.

That natural demon king demeanor of his…!

"However, Aileen, the greatest problem is you," Claude declares.

"E-excuse me?!"

When Claude gently catches her by the shoulders and turns his smile on her, Aileen remembers: She was the one who was trying to

loan Claude to Kilvas and put them in their debt. She was planning to say something along the lines of, *They're in trouble, after all, and it's only a wedding ceremony. I'll endure it. I'm capable of conducting myself like an empress. I won't hold Master Claude back*. She would have played the part of an adorable woman whose head is positively bursting with flowers and butterflies, who's a sandwich or two short of a picnic.

Thanks to Claude, though, that act is no longer necessary. He picked up on the fact that she was about to sell him off and immediately took the initiative.

"You must return to Ellmeyer at once. We'll say you're feeling unwell."

"Wha…? B-but why? I'm in perfect health."

"It would be strange if you were here and I was not at your side, wouldn't it?"

If Claude acts as a stand-in for Vica, naturally, there will be no Claude. The emperor of Ellmeyer is expected to be in attendance, and they'll need a reason for his absence.

He's planning to say we've returned to Ellmeyer because I'm unwell?!

The health of his pregnant wife prevented him from attending the ceremony. That isn't so strange. No doubt some people will think, *Then don't come in the first place; what a nuisance.* But as far as excuses go, it's persuasive.

"U-um, Master Claude… No matter how you look at it, won't that be a little too, er, abrupt…?"

"I beg you, Aileen. If you leave, it won't seem suspicious that I'm gone."

His earnest expression is very pained. However, as Aileen looks around uncertainly, she notices that an oddly ominous wind has begun to blow, making the shredded curtains billow and flap.

"Please understand, Aileen. This is for the good of the country. More than anything, even if it's something I must do, I don't want you to see me exchanging vows with another woman."

Claude intends to send Aileen back to the safety of her own country in a way that will seem beyond reproach.

“Well, yes, that would probably be for the best. It would be more tiresome to have you here,” Diana says, as if she feels sorry for her.

“I apologize, but, Lady Aileen… Just for now…”

Since Aileen is acting the part of a sheltered woman who has nothing to offer but her rank, she has no grounds to argue with Diana or Cattleya. If she lets them unmask her here, it will prevent her from moving freely in Kilvas, even if she stays. On the contrary, Diana and the others will be all the more wary of her, and she may end up holding Claude back.

With complete knowledge of all this, Claude and his red eyes are laughing right in her face. “Make preparations to leave Kilvas immediately.”

“I-immediately? You say that so easily, but…”

“I will make the arrangements. You are in danger as well, Lady Aileen; do you understand that?”

“…Because whoever attacked Vica will realize that Emperor Claude has taken his place,” Ernst mutters bitterly.

As things stand, there’s truly nothing more she can do.

Perhaps her defeat was assured the moment Claude took the initiative. At this point, all Aileen can do is stamp on his toes, hiding the motion under her skirts. Naturally, he doesn’t even twitch.

“Very well… I shall do as you say.”

This isn’t all bad. Taken the other way around, it means she’ll be able to evade Claude’s watchful eye. Just as she’s starting to consider leaving the imperial castle to hunt for Vica, Claude takes her cheeks in his hands—gently, but with enough strength that she can’t break free—and smiles. “I’m glad you understand. I know; let me send Keith with you.”

“What?!”

“I’m worried about you. Besides, it would be odd if I returned but Keith stayed, wouldn’t it? You don’t need to worry about a thing. Just leave it to me; I’ll make sure everything comes out all right.”

“I-in that case, Master Claude…” She refuses to let herself be swept along like this. In an attempt to keep Claude’s scheme from washing her away like a muddy torrent, she stamps on his toes harder. “…at least let me leave my attendants as liaisons.”

Diana and the others swiftly exchange glances, but they don't object. They probably think she means her ladies-in-waiting or something. However, Claude will understand who she's referring to.

In response to Aileen's modest counterstrike, Claude makes an amused face. "I see; so it will be a trade for Keith. That's fine. If it will dispel your unease, I agree."

"I—I can't go home and leave you here by yourself, Master Claude."

"You are the only woman who'd say a thing like that to the demon king.

"And also the only one who would try to sell him off, of course."

The words he whispers just before dropping a kiss on her cheek draw a tiny, stifled shriek from her. "Oh no, don't look like that. Smiles always suit you best."

Uttering more sweet nothings to her with irritating magnificence, Claude offers her a beautiful smile, even though she's still stamping on his toes.

✦ Third Act ✦

The Villainess Refuses to Fall for Nothing

Grand bells ring out to celebrate the newly wedded couple. Unusually, the sky over Kilvas is clear, and the flock of white doves that's released into it is more than enough to suggest the beginning of a new era.

In the game, a declaration of revolution would have echoed through the imperial capital, but it hasn't done so in reality. Since this was what Aileen had come to confirm, one could say she had achieved her objective. However…

"As if I'd let Master Claude trounce me like that and get away with it…!"

"You're speaking in the presence of your minder, you know. Has the luggage all been loaded, Rachel?"

"Yes, Sir Keith. May I ask you to conduct the final check with me? We're short on both time and people. Luc, would you take care of Lady Aileen?"

"Of course. This way, Lady Aileen. Let me take your pulse before we depart." Luc beckons Aileen into the platform's deserted waiting room.

The train Cattleya has hastily arranged for them is the very latest model, luxurious even for Kilvas. From what Aileen overheard, it's the imperial family's exclusive train. The station platform has been temporarily sealed off, with only the bare minimum of people allowed to enter and leave. They've probably done it out of consideration for Aileen's group, who need to depart almost as soon as they arrived, and in the service of keeping the secret.

It wouldn't do for watchful eyes to notice that Master Claude isn't here.

They'll be traveling back to the port town by train, then returning home on the ship from Ellmeyer, which is still moored there.

"I'm sure you're unhappy about it, Lady Aileen, but I'm personally in favor of going home," Luc tells her while taking her pulse in the waiting room. Although the bench is made of wood, it's padded with water-resistant cushions. No doubt each country can obtain different materials, but the infrastructure in Kilvas is more advanced than it is in Ellmeyer.

"I would imagine so. Isaac probably shares your opinion."

"He did agree to babysit the demon king, after all. Jasper turned pale, though."

"Doesn't he think it's unfair to Rachel?"

"Master Isaac? I doubt it. After the wedding, the demon king will keep an eye on the situation for a time, then come home as if nothing's happened. His greatest objective is keeping you away from danger, Lady Aileen."

"I'm not so certain," Aileen says wryly.

Luc looks up. "Should I get the details on that? I am your physician; confidentiality is part of my job."

"It's nothing important. The truth is quite simple, really. There's something Master Claude doesn't want me to see."

"An affair, you mean?"

With a contemptuous laugh, Aileen crosses her legs. "I'm still trying to decide whether I should consider it that. However—do you really suppose Master Claude would take his eyes off me and think, 'Now I can relax'?"

Luc has finished his exam and is putting his instruments back into his bag. She leans down to peek at his face. He's frowning. There's her answer.

"Unfortunately, I have the most freedom when Master Claude isn't keeping an eye on me."

"…When you put it that way, I have to admit you're right…"

"And Master Claude has intentionally stopped watching me. It's almost as if he's telling me to do as I please."

"I'm positive that isn't what he meant."

"Since he has, in fact, taken his eyes off me, that is how I choose

to interpret it. In any case, Master Claude is plotting something. Isn't he, Master Keith?"

Apparently having finished checking the luggage, Keith has stepped into the waiting room. Behind his glasses, his eyes are twinkling. "Oh, that can't possibly be true. I'm simply a minder, Lady Aileen."

"A minder meant to stop me or adjust my path if I do anything that diverges from Master Claude's intentions, correct? In the first place, it was you who called me to the room where they were debating whether to use Master Claude as a substitute… Doesn't that mean it was really Master Claude who summoned me?"

Claude must have already decided to take Vica's place by then. He might have been angry that Aileen had been willing to sell him off, but only a little; he had her witness that scene for a reason.

"If there's something behind this, I would be very glad if you'd tell me about it soon."

"Please rest assured, I truly know nothing. I can guess at certain things, though."

"Don't you know Master Claude better than he knows himself?"

"Presumptuous as it may be of me, that's correct. As a result, I believe I know milord's intentions. —He sold me off to Lady Aileen, blast him. Does he hate being scolded that much?" Apparently, Keith has been sent to her against his will. Pushing up his glasses, he smiles. "What does he think a man who can't even change clothes by himself can do? He should just drink bad tea and reflect on his actions."

As Claude's adviser curses him, Aileen begins to feel concerned about her husband's life in Kilvas.

Well, Lady Cattleya will probably help him.

There's a small, rough sensation in the depths of her heart, but there's no helping that now. Emotions are what they are. More than that, though, Aileen has her pride as Claude's wife.

"Now then, Lady Aileen, it's time for the train to depart," Keith says; he's heard the whistle.

She looks up at him through her lashes. "Aren't you worried about Master Claude?"

“Unfortunately, not in the slightest. I think a little pain would be good for him.”

“Why don’t we stealthily watch from somewhere nearby to see whether he meets with unpleasantness?”

“Now there’s a delightful suggestion.”

“Isn’t it? On top of that, if we could find Emperor Vica, I imagine it would frustrate Master Claude to no end.”

“Shall I tell you the answer in a way that’s easy to understand? You mustn’t.”

That smile of his is quite clear. Resigning herself, Aileen rises to her feet. When she looks, Rachel is standing outside the waiting room. There’s no escape.

Immediately after boarding the train, Aileen looks to the left and sees a splendid dining car. In front of its door, one of Kilvas’s lady knights—a Valkyrie—bows her head. There are a few guards provided by Kilvas on the train, but she’d prefer not to trouble them too much.

“Now that I’ve come this far, I’ll behave. Is there somewhere I could rest by myself?”

“The car to your right is divided into private compartments. There are seats that unfold into a bed as well. Rachel, is everything ready?”

“Yes, Master Keith. Your room is waiting for you, Lady Aileen. It is a little cramped; you won’t mind?”

When Aileen confirms that she won’t, Keith sets off in the lead. Rachel falls in behind Aileen, and Luc walks beside her. She’s completely surrounded.

They’re this wary? As she thinks that in exasperation, there’s a clatter, and the train begins to sway. They’ve set off. Outside the window, the station platform streams past.

“This way, Lady Aileen.”

“I’ll be fine on my own, Rachel. There isn’t much room in here, you know.”

Aileen’s response makes Keith, Rachel, and Luc grimace openly. She points out the window. “Even I can’t escape now. I wouldn’t leap from a moving train, not without the sacred sword.”

"So if you had the sword, you'd jump," Luc interprets, and Keith's and Rachel's eyes gleam.

Aileen presses a finger to the spot between her eyebrows. "I don't have it, so I can't. There's something I'd like to think about alone. If I need anything, I'll call right away."

"But, Lady Aileen—"

"Stay in the next compartment over, please. I won't even be able to stretch my bare legs if you don't."

Due to their professions, it isn't unusual for either Keith or Luc to see women's bare legs. However, generally speaking, most people would consider that outrageous. What's more, since Aileen is married to Claude…

"I'll bring you tea later, Lady Aileen. You may sleep if you wish. Just leave the door unlocked."

Aileen nods, accepting Rachel's compromise. After opening the door on her own, she lowers herself into the compartment's seat. It's softer and more comfortable than she expected. This train is even better than the one they arrived in. Kicking out her legs as she claimed she would do, she sinks into the backrest and exhales.

Thinking is all she can do right now anyway.

At present, she's confirmed that reality isn't progressing in accordance with the game's plot. Revolution has not been declared. However, the attack on Vica doesn't sit right with her. Of course, skillful maneuvering on Claude's part should quell any latent hostility toward Ellmeyer, but is it really going to be so easy?

What will happen next? Are there any hints? …Even in the game?

At the very least, the four principal characters look exactly as they did in the game's art. Although she's extremely reluctant to do so, as a thought experiment, Aileen decides to compare what's currently happening in the Kilvas Empire to the events of the *otome* game. Of the game's developments, the one that's most likely to trouble Ellmeyer is Vica's transformation into the red-eyed demon.

Come to think of it, why does Vica become a demon?

In the game, in addition to the same legend that's passed down in Ellmeyer—those born with black hair and red eyes are the reincarnation of the demon king—it's explained that males from

Kilvas's imperial family are occasionally born as grotesques. Simply put, the imperial bloodline can produce demons. The scene where Vica turns into a demon is one of the so-called "true self revealed" episodes. Emotional agitation—his anger and sadness—destabilizes his magic, and this is depicted as the direct trigger of his transformation.

The biggest issue is that we don't know how to reverse the transformation.

In the game, Vica believed the legend that he would become a demon if he left the imperial capital. However, once he was a demon, he ultimately attacked the capital. This meant that even if there was some sort of mechanism in the city, it wasn't directly preventing his transformation. Naturally, it wouldn't be able to reverse the transformation, either.

In any case, there is no ending in the game where Vica reverts from the red-eyed demon to his human form.

If I had the sacred sword, at least…

Aileen is still lying down when a light wind from behind her stirs her disheveled hair.

With a start, she sits up. The window was closed, but now it's open. The *clackety-clack* of the train's wheels on the rails has grown louder.

More than anything, there's a shadow on the floor that is not hers.

Before she can fill her lungs with air to scream, a dagger gleams at her throat.

"Don't shout. I mean you no harm. I just want you to hide me for a while."

"Y-you're…"

Her eyes dart to the left, then right, until she finds the mirror on the wall. The glass is meant to allow guests to check their appearance before they leave the compartment. Now it's reflecting Aileen and the youth standing behind her.

"…Master Vica."

Meeting Aileen's eyes in the mirror, the young man offers a troubled smile on a face that looks just like her husband's.

"Emperor Vica has been attacked, and Master Claude is going to act as his body double, so I'd like the two of you to stay here. Thank you in advance for your help."

That bare-bones explanation was all Aileen had given Isaac and Jasper before foisting all the troublesome work onto them. Was that trust or just laziness? Scratching the back of his neck, Isaac heaves a deep sigh. Some say that every sigh lets a little happiness escape, but he doesn't care.

"This sucks…"

"Did you say something?" The woman with good posture who's walking ahead of him looks back.

The demon king turns his way, too. His black hair is done up for a change, and he's wearing a grand white Kilvas-style cloak. "You aren't used to the cold yet, are you? I'm sure you'd prefer to hurry back to Ellmeyer, but put up with it for a little while."

The dangerous red eyes that are focusing a mountain of hostility on Isaac are exactly the same, though. *Shut up and obey me.* That order comes through loud and clear.

"Your palace is warm, Master Clau— Er, Vica." The woman leading the way quickly corrects herself. "Divine stones are used to adjust the temperature inside. This way, please."

After they step into the palace, the air grows warmer. It feels weird, though. It isn't the sort of heat one would feel from basking in spring sunlight. Beside Isaac, Jasper is also looking around uncomfortably.

This is a waiting room for attendants; this is a reception room; this is the bedroom. As they're shown around, Isaac rapidly memorizes the layout. While Jasper isn't allowed to take notes or photos, he's still taking this chance to stroll around the rooms, acting as if he's admiring art objects and things.

It doesn't look as if there are any listening devices or what have you.

The defense industry is a high priority in Kilvas, and their technology is very advanced. People call Ellmeyer a military power as well, but since the previous emperor got rid of magic and demon-stone technology after Demon King Claude was born, they've

stagnated for twenty years or so. At this point, Claude and Aileen are scrambling to do something about it before they run through all their banked technology.

On top of that, Kilvas once enjoyed support from Hausel. The fact that they've incorporated something as sophisticated as the Valkyrie system in their defense policy shows the progress they've made.

Well, there are pros and cons, I guess. Overreliance on another country for technology and resources can destabilize your nation.

This was what made diplomacy such a pain. Commerce was better.

"This is the office."

The room is the last stop on their tour, and Isaac guesses it's probably the one Claude wanted to see.

The office of Emperor Vica of Kilvas—a room completely filled with the emperor's work.

However, the individual who's boldly sitting at the ebony work desk is a bride who's just come from her wedding. When Isaac glances at Jasper, the man silently mouths the words for him. Her name is Diana Nelasov—or Diana Tsar Kilvas, at this point.

The woman who guided them here looks surprised. "…Why are you here? What about the preparations for the banquet?"

"The court ladies like soirees; I can leave it to them. Governing is more important. Cattleya, these are the documents I've approved."

"You used the state seal? Without the emperor's permission?" Claude asks Diana, looking at the tray of documents.

Diana gives him a weary look. "The emperor isn't here, is he? I'm supposed to do it. That's why I got married. It's my job."

"I see. However, isn't the upcoming banquet also your job as empress?"

"I'm not the sort of woman who can get by with just smiling at soirees, like your wife."

I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Isaac averts his eyes, and then a man with light hair hurries in. When Isaac glances at Jasper again, Jasper gives him the answer.

Ernst Helken Dolf, prime minister of Kilvas.

"Diana and Cattleya, what are you doing?! There's practically no

time left until the banquet. Hurry and get ready. It's right after the wedding. Not attending isn't an option!"

"…In that case, pass those documents at tomorrow's council, Ernst." In response to the man's threatening look, Diana reluctantly rises to her feet.

"Make sure to take Cattleya wherever you go, please. Empresses don't wander around on their own. I'll take charge of Master Claude."

"This when you've always ordered me to charge at demons alone."

That comment from Diana shuts Ernst up. *The guy's stupidly honest*, Isaac thinks. Cattleya sighs and pushes Diana's back, steering her through the door.

Ernst turns to face Claude. "I'm very sorry. We asked you to substitute for Vica, and yet we're being so careless."

"You're the one who's been making all the arrangements, right? You've been a great help."

Ernst blinks, then smiles. "I really should be saying that to you. You've even handled our various blunders so calmly… Your retainers in Ellmeyer are fortunate. I would imagine their lives are quite untroubled."

There's a moment's pause, and then Claude assumes a competent, serious expression. "I do my best to ensure that is the case."

When lies are that bold, commenting on them doesn't even feel worth it. Beside Isaac, Jasper wears a faint smile.

"Now then, I was supposed to prepare for the banquet, wasn't I? Leave the clothes over there. I'll be changing with magic. Do we need anything else, Isaac?"

Claude has called on him out of nowhere, and Isaac frowns. "I'm just a liaison. So's Jasper."

"You can't mean you don't want to go back to Ellmeyer, can you?" Claude pulls a deliberately startled expression, and Isaac's face tenses. "Let me introduce you again, Ernst. These are Isaac and Jasper. They're my wife's subordinates, but they're very reliable. However, please refrain from informing others about this."

"Y-yes, Your Majesty. That's fine, but why…? It will restrict their movements in the castle."

"In exchange, let me look over the contents of those approved documents."

Ernst's expression turns sober. The speed with which Claude responds betrays his brilliance. Claude is saying he won't let that nasty woman do as she pleases with the empire.

Even before the prime minister answers, Claude seats himself at the ebony work desk. Then he bends down. Apparently, he's discovered a wastebasket. He unfolds a wrinkled document, then gives a smile that doesn't go past his lips. He glances at Isaac, and an ugly premonition races down Isaac's spine.

"What do you think of this?"

Ernst makes no move to stop him. There's an appraising look in Claude's eyes. *For crying out loud…* Feeling a little desperate, Isaac looks at the document Claude is holding out to him. Jasper leans in from the side to peek.

"A budget, huh? From the past few years? Tax revenue… I-is it okay for us to look at this?!" Jasper can't believe what he's seeing.

"It's fine; it was just tossed carelessly in the trash. And here we have the document the empress approved." Taking a piece of paper out of the box, Claude sets it on the desk.

The sight of the figures on it makes Isaac feel like tearing out his hair. "Hide it a little better, wouldja?! Increasing the military budget like this is just asking to be investigated! Fudge the numbers a little or, you know, at least try to make it look right…!"

"Ohhh, even your uncle Jasper can tell this is funny… Haven't the demons' attacks settled down?"

"Diana doesn't think she's doing anything bad, so she probably never intended to hide it."

"Where's that increase supposed to come from?! The budget is just going to balloon; the numbers won't match up. Is she planning to increase taxes or issue government bonds or something?"





"…What if I told you the shortfall would be covered by Ellmeyer and Hausel in the form of reparations?"

In response to Ernst's abrupt question, Isaac smacks a hand to his forehead and looks up at the ceiling.

"No, no." Jasper waves his hands in denial. "Hausel doesn't exist anymore. Besides, an amount like this? Ellmeyer couldn't… Could we afford that, Demon King?"

"If we sold off most of the imperial family's assets and doubled taxes, and if the interest rate on the reparations was zero, we could manage it in about a decade. Five years, if we used the demons."

"Don't just calculate it like it makes sense! Paying reparations at all would be insane!"

Claude shrugs at Isaac, but this has made several things clear.

That isn't the part that's giving Isaac a headache, though. "Why is Diana being so sloppy about this?! Both her document management and her procedures… I can't believe she thought of using the demon king as a substitute when she was plotting something like this. She's underestimating us so hard, it's actually scary."

"I couldn't have said it better myself. In fact, though, she and her faction control the military. It probably kept Vica from taking action. His position seems weak," Claude says.

No longer hesitant, Isaac returns the paper to the approved-documents box—then shoves a hand into the box of scrapped proposals. "Is this Emperor Vica's writing?"

"…Yes," Ernst confirms.

"Hmm…"

Most of the documents written in that hand are in the "scrapped" box. After Isaac has skimmed several of them, Claude speaks up, sounding entertained. He's clasped his hands on the desk. "How does my cousin look to you?"

He's having fun. Isaac puts all the documents back. "Do you need my call on this? Why not just give orders?"

"So you'll serve me and not Aileen? That's a shock. However, in order to protect your life, I wouldn't recommend it. Being Aileen's subordinate is what's keeping you alive."

“What kind of threat is that? …Before you answer, let me check on something: How strong is Emperor Vica? In combat.”

“His stores of magical energy are vast, but he doesn’t seem able to use it. He may be under restrictions of some sort.”

“Hmm.” Isaac frowns in response to Claude’s clarification. His hypothesis won’t hold together if that’s true. “Then if the Valkyries attacked him, would he get carried off?”

“I’m not sure about that. He’s about as strong as thirty Elefases.”

“I dunno what that unit of measurement means!”

“You say that, but I can’t grasp the Valkyries’ strength with any accuracy in the first place… Let me rephrase: That boy is me, if I were unable to use magic without limits.”

Jasper cocks his head. “If he can’t use magic much, I get the feeling that already disqualifies him from being the demon king.”

“No, that’s not true. Being the demon king means the demons obey me. Vast magic power is just a bonus,” Claude says cheerfully. “The fact that the demons here don’t respond when I call to them has always concerned me. However, if Vica is the demon king, that makes sense. When I saw him in person, it seemed more than possible.”

The king who rules over demons who aren’t affected by orders from Claude.

That really would be a different demon king.

“I don’t want to make an enemy of him. He’d be more trouble than the Valkyries,” Claude says.

“That’s our bottom line, then,” Isaac agrees. “Okay, no complaints about that. In that case, it would be best if we have Vica take charge of this country.”

“…Why do you say that?” Ernst has been listening to the entire conversation without moving, but at that point, he speaks up. Isaac looks at Claude, but Claude is acting as if he doesn’t know what the man’s talking about. Apparently, he wants Isaac to answer. He’s probably going to take it as Isaac’s assessment of his cousin. Jasper also flashes him a thumbs-up, shoving the question onto him.

With no other options, Isaac faces Ernst. “Because the guy’s brilliant. He’s better suited to running a country than that woman’s

group, at least."

"……!"

Ernst's eyes fly open; he is startled. That's enough to show Isaac what the people around Vica think of him. They've been looking down on him as a puppet emperor and a doll, and the prime minister must have heard it. If he has always believed that's not true and hung in there through all of that, his patience is impressive.

"If nothing changes, though, he'll stay a puppet emperor forever. Up until now, he's been too young to have a foundation to build on. From now on, it will be because his Valkyrie empress controls the military. That said, he couldn't choose not to marry. If a civil war broke out now, he'd lose. Am I wrong?"

Ernst doesn't nod, but he also doesn't take his eyes off Isaac.

"I hear a divine stone from the Valkyries' weapons was found at the scene; that sounds implausibly convenient. Still, since they didn't do it, turning clear suspicion on Cattleya and Diana would do a better job of keeping them pinned down. Wasn't that what you people calculated?"

"…I don't know what you're getting at. As you said, Vica and Diana's marriage was vital for the nation. And now it's come to this…"

"That's the demon king's fault for sauntering over here."

Ernst, who's replying to Isaac in a rather contrived way, looks startled again.

Claude tilts his head. "What do you mean? You make it sound as if I'm to blame."

"I mean this whole 'substitute' business. You people saw the demon king and thought you could use him. That's why you took that gamble. Am I wrong?"

Claude seems confused. "Hmm… Hmm? Wait, you're saying Emperor Kilvas's disappearance was—?"

"Self-orchestrated. By this guy and the emperor himself."

Although the Valkyries were probably the strongest military force in the empire, Vica wasn't so weak that they could carry him off. What's more, Ernst was the one who'd found convenient proof suggesting the Valkyries were behind the kidnapping.

The answer was pretty easy to spot.

"Haaah… What for, though?" Claude asks.

"Who knows. Still, it's clear it was designed to drag Ellmeyer into this mess. When you can't deal with something internally, asking someone tough on the outside for help is a standard move. So is dragging them in if they won't help."

"—I was against it, technically." Ernst sighs, resigned; his voice sounds thin and reluctant. "If we weren't careful, we'd end up with Ellmeyer interfering in our domestic affairs. However, Vica insisted it would be fine; he wouldn't listen to me. It's true that Vica's a good judge of people. If he hadn't been, he'd never have survived. He's good at gambling on risky propositions as well—no, it was our only real option, so he had no choice. But even so… My stomach hurts."

"So you and my cousin decided I measured up?" That's Claude's only question for the man. He apparently doesn't intend to get mad because they tested him or deceived him. Vica must have predicted he wouldn't before acting.

Man, that's scary. A proactive demon king who's good at gambling…

Just imagining it gives Isaac chills. If the retainers back in Ellmeyer heard about this, they'd faint.

"You may think this is presumptuous, after we dragged you into this, but please allow me to apologize. I'm terribly sorry I didn't explain anything. I wasn't certain how much I should tell you."

"Just out of curiosity, what would have happened if I hadn't agreed to this? You were against it in the first place; you must have had a different plan in mind."

"We would have used the emperor's disappearance to reduce the Valkyries' power and influence, of course. If that put the matter to bed, that would suit us just fine. If it didn't, we would have distracted the people by using Ellmeyer as a scapegoat. At present, I believe the latter was more practical," Ernst says nonchalantly. He's either foolishly honest or brilliant, but he's crafty either way. "There is another reason Vica turned to you for help. As a rule, in order to maintain the wall that protects the empire, he isn't able to leave the imperial capital."

“The wall… You mean the one that keeps the demons from invading?”

“That’s right. There is a spell built into the wall itself. It’s made so that demons too strong for even the Valkyries to cope with can never get through.”

He’s talking about the endless thing they’d seen from the train. Isaac had thought it was impressive technology, but hearing this changes things. “…Are you maybe telling us that Hausel built that wall?”

“Yes. The spell that maintains it is in the capital. I’m told the city was built to form an enormous magic circle, with the imperial castle at its center. Vica is the one who supplies it with power. Apparently, it’s made to siphon his magic automatically as long as he’s in the capital.”

“Hmm.” Isaac looks at the ground.

Claude looks down, too, murmuring, “Vica’s not in the capital now… So it’s currently being supplied by…”

“Yes.” Ernst nods solemnly.

After a moment’s hesitation, Isaac asks, “…It’s the demon king?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t give me that! Doesn’t that mean it’s gonna be bad news if he leaves the capital?!”

“Yes, the wall’s magic may vanish, letting in demons too strong for the Valkyries to defeat,” Ernst tells them honestly. Crafty doesn’t even begin to cover his machinations; this man is positively Machiavellian.

Claude blinks at Ernst. “…I really hadn’t anticipated that. No wonder I sensed Vica had vast magic but couldn’t use it. It’s being used to maintain the wall’s spell.”

“Look, this isn’t the time to get all impressed. Doesn’t that mean you can’t teleport or contact the demons right now?”

Claude blinks. He looks at the ground again, then looks up, tilting his head. “You’re right. I can’t. The magic vanishes as soon as I try to use it.”

The demon king is far too strong and unexpectedly dumb. Isaac groans. “Realize this kinda stuff sooner, wouldja?! Don’t tell me

you're weaker than Elefas all of a sudden!"

"Hang on. I can use a sword. I'm better than Elefas…"

"That's peanuts compared to whether you've got magic or not! What are we gonna do? We're not gonna be able to make a break for it in an emergency!"

"I'd like you to steel yourselves for that as well," Ernst says firmly; he seems to have decided he's done apologizing. "No doubt abandoning Kilvas is something you could do. In fact, I was concerned that you would. However, you won't. The demons are on your mind, and most of all, you have a good opinion of Vica. You must know it would be better to cooperate with him."

"Vica pushed everything onto me, and now he's free. You don't think he'll just run?"

"No, I don't," Ernst assures Claude. "I would not serve a master like that."

Claude smiles wryly; he probably finds the obvious loyalty in Ernst's eyes very familiar. "And what is Vica doing now, then?"

"He's gone in search of a way to control the demons. He didn't seem certain, but…"

"He didn't, huh? So it's just a shot in the dark?" Isaac asks.

"I'm also the type who acts on impulse, so I can't blame him too harshly."

"Yikes." Jasper physically recoils.

Isaac sounds fed up with the demon king. "Yeah, and after you do, your adviser and your guards rip you several new ones."

Claude subtly averts his eyes. For the first time, Ernst smiles a little. "I'll do the same. When he gets back, for starters, I'll give him a good kick in the stomach. After all, the only explanation he gave me was 'I'm going to have the demon king substitute for me, and I'll grab the chance to get this and that.'"

"Then planting that divine stone was your call?" Isaac asks.

"Vica left it behind. His intent was quite obvious, so I merely used it. Doing so would turn both Diana and Cattleya toward the substitute plan. If I made them think I was eager to release the information, they were bound to be wary and push back."

"Uh, let me derail the conversation for a sec. Do you and those

two Valkyries not get along?" Jasper asks bluntly.

Ernst looks down. "I'm…not sure. We used to. And yet somewhere along the way…"

"It happens," Claude says, lightly tidying the matter away.

Ernst closes his eyes briefly, discarding sentimentality. "Vica…or rather, His Imperial Majesty has left any decisions that must be made here entirely in my hands."

That's proof of the trust Vica places in him, and at the same time, it's a concession to Ellmeyer. It means Vica doesn't intend to use them and leave them with nothing to show for it.

"I see. Let me ask you one more time, then: What should I do with these approved documents?"

If Claude is going to go along with this farce, how far should he go, and what should he pass along?

Ernst gives him a fearless smile. "By all means, check them over. That is your job, Your Majesty. So is attending the banquet." He's telling Claude that it's fine to act in Vica's place and that he'll cooperate. "However, please abandon the idea of leaving the capital or going to observe the demons… I'd prefer not to imagine it, but depending on the situation, Cattleya and Diana may give permission for that. They would be taking advantage of the fact that you don't know anything."

That could happen, Isaac thinks. This country has no decent military force besides the Valkyries, and it would be the best way to boost their value.

"If that happens, base your decision on what I've just told you."

"The situation seems complicated in several directions… By the way, I consider myself kind, but my subordinates are always telling me I use them too roughly." Claude stares at Ernst, as if he's testing him.

Throwing his shoulders back, Ernst nods. "If you feel Vica is a suitable emperor for this nation, then command me as you like."

No one will be unilaterally used here. They're all in the same boat.

Not bad. It's much better than abandoning Kilvas, then finding the Valkyrie's warships closing in on Ellmeyer's coast.

"I suppose I must. I'll give it my best. After all, I am Vica's big brother."

Isaac doesn't delve into that remark. That isn't his job anyway. "Okay, we'll say we're comrades for as long as our interests line up. How far are we going here?"

Jasper and Ernst blink at him, but the demon king seems to understand what he means.

"Let's see. Maintaining the status quo, deadlocks—that would be boring. I won't do anything as unsightly as make a run for it, of course, but not being able to go home is irritating. Ideally, I'd like to make them beg me to leave."

"Man, you've got a nasty personality."

"Are you against it, Isaac?"

"Nah, it's the best move. Getting this over with fast would be great. Okay, old man Jasper, we're narrowing the scope of information we're gathering."

Jasper is still there to collect information for Aileen. Under the circumstances, he'll have guessed what his role is. "Scandals about the Valkyries, the empress's reputation, and intel about corruption among the aristocrats who'll fight us next. Is that about right?"

"Got it in one. I'll tell you which ones to work up into articles. I doubt it'll be a decisive blow, but it'll annoy them."

Anxious, irritated people make mistakes. That should be particularly true of those women, who aren't used to politics and who probably think being correct will inevitably yield results.

"As you wish, I'll make them beg you to get lost. While I'm at it, I'll make sure they never get the urge to fight us again."

"…If possible, um…go easy on us." Ernst seems to have mixed feelings about this, but that's not Isaac's problem.

Heaving a long sigh, Jasper tugs his beret back onto his head. "Without Miss Aileen and the adviser around, I can't expect this crew to act sensibly, can I…?"

"I'm really glad I sent Aileen home."

Isaac's with the demon king on that. If anything happens to Aileen, Rachel is bound to get pulled into it. *Besides, the demon king's reliable, sensible adviser is with them now*, he thinks

sarcastically, and then gets the feeling something's wrong.

Do Aileen and Keith actually have the sort of common sense that would put his heart at ease?

Well, there can't be too much Aileen can do without the sacred sword… Plus she's pregnant…

If she behaves and leaves the Kilvas Empire, she'll be welcomed back by retainers who are the very definition of *sensible*. *After that, I hope she just leaves everything to us*, Isaac wishes with heartfelt sincerity.

She breathes deeply to calm herself.

Vica Tsar Kilvas. The final boss of *Valkyrie of the Magic Lance* was a child who'd lost his parents young, relied completely on his elder sister, and stayed holed up in the capital. Frightened by the legend that he would become a demon if he left the city, he could neither carry out his role as emperor nor become the demon king. In fact, he was a red-eyed demon. However, he gained courage from the heroine, Diana, and having become aware of his form and his situation, as the emperor and demon king, he ultimately gained the resolve to fall along with his empire and the demons.

Although, in the end, the demons still attack.

He died on every route, and yet the demons attacking the Kilvas Empire didn't disappear. He was attended by the demons of Kilvas, but Hausel and Ellmeyer were the reason for the demons' attack, so they were the ones who had to be defeated to save the empire—or that was the answer in the game anyway.

In short, Vica dies for nothing. The unfairness of it all is what earned the game its reputation as a real downer. For the man in question, it's an intolerable fate. It's as awful as the villainess Aileen's incredibly pointless death. If anything, it's worse. On that point, she can sympathize with him.

That's only in the game, though. This man is just someone she glimpsed in passing when she arrived at the imperial castle. She's heard that people consider him a puppet emperor, but she hasn't

managed to discern if that's true.

"…So you're all right."

She sees Vica's reflection blink, then force a smile. "I apologize for worrying you."

"Did you orchestrate that attack yourself? Or was the attack itself genuine, and some sort of situation has prevented you from returning?"

Vica shifts his grip on his dagger. She's made him wary. "That's a shock. From what my sister and Diana said, it sounded as if you were just an adorable little consort. Was that all an act?"

"I do believe I am adorable, thank you very much. I'm so precious that after you've threatened me like this, I won't know what to do unless you tell me your story."

"That really isn't the attitude of a woman who's worried for her life. Although it's also odd for your assailant to say so."

"You don't appear to be a mere puppet emperor, either."

Aileen glances down and to the side. A shaft of sunlight is coming through the window. She has a shadow.

In order to keep an eye on—or rather, protect—Aileen, Claude cast a spell on her shadow that allows the demons to come and go through it. Vica has been watching her in the mirror, and his gaze follows hers.

In that moment, she wrenches free of his arm and starts for the door. "Almond, come out!"

"—Oh, there's some sort of magic cast on this?"

Vica's foot stomps on Aileen's shadow. At the same time, she touches the unlocked door, but her hand is knocked back. Silence fills through the room.

Claude's spell hasn't activated, and the door's been sealed. Biting her lip, she turns around. "What do you want? Is there any room for negotiation?"

"…I thought just threatening you a bit would be enough… That's a problem. And the attendant who's trying to sneak in through the window there… Is he really human?"

So he noticed that, hmm? Keith must have heard the commotion from the next compartment over. Hooking his leg over the frame of

the open window, he slides into the narrow room. "I'm just a human. One who's able to manage as the demon king's adviser anyway… I've arranged to have the Valkyries summoned if I don't return within one minute. What would you like to do?"

"I can use magic freely now, so it won't be a problem. Maybe I'll jump off the train and run for it."

"It won't work. Although I'm just a human, the demon king places particular trust in me. When he is unable to act, I can use his power. It's what's known as the demon king's proxy authority."

"Proxy… So you can use the demon king's power?"

"Yes, I can issue orders to the demons on his behalf… Milord's spell just failed to activate. Even if that was your plan all along, it isn't such an easy thing to do. Something must have happened to Master Claude, and you're involved. You're going to tell me about it."

Vica doesn't move; he seems to be thinking. "If something's happened to Master Claude, the demons of Ellmeyer won't sit idly by," Aileen adds. "I'll mobilize all the forces at my disposal as well. It wouldn't be wise to make us your enemies."

In response to her warning, Vica raises both hands. "…All right, I'll explain. I see simply asking you to hide me was rude to both of you. Good grief. I only chose this train because it would get me out of the capital unnoticed. What a blunder."

"If you wanted to leave the capital, then that attack was self-orchestrated after all. Did we fall into your trap?"

"I'm not sure. It seems as though Big Brother Claude has seen through it."

Big Brother Claude. The name makes Aileen sigh deeply. "So that's why Master Claude is kind to you… He's a pushover when it comes to little brothers."

"You're the reason I changed my mind, though, Empress Aileen. You're incredibly quick-witted. No wonder my sister and Diana were so wrong when they thought they could get information out of you. You wouldn't sell out Claude."

"A wife who would sell out her husband is outrageous."

"In that case, I may have acquired an outrageous wife. Not that I was at our wedding." Lowering his hands, Vica sits down. They've

only just left the capital. There's probably still time. Aileen touches the door behind her; there's no resistance, so she calls through the door. "Rachel, are you there? Is the tea ready? I'm quite thirsty, so bring more than usual, please."

A voice promptly responds. Rachel must have been standing by on orders from Keith. "I'll bring it right in. May I open the door?"

"I'll open it in a moment. What will you do, Master Keith?"

"This appears to be about milord, so I'll stay here, of course."

He has no intention of leaving, and Aileen sighs. The train car is going to be cramped, but these are extraordinary circumstances.

She opens the door for Rachel. When the other woman gives her a look, silently asking if she's all right, she responds with a nod. "Leave the tray there, if you would. I don't want to disturb the Valkyries. I'll be resting in here for a while. Wake me when it's time for dinner."

"Very well. Don't forget to lock the door."

Don't let the Valkyries notice this. Having picked up on what Aileen really means, Rachel says the exact opposite of what she said earlier. Seeing this, Vica laughs. "You really do betray expectations, don't you? So you understand that I don't want the Valkyries to find me?"

"Aren't you the one who said Lady Diana was an outrageous wife? You may dispense with the flattery. Get on with your story, won't you? Does Lady Diana have designs on your life?"

"She hasn't made an attempt yet. However, she and the Valkyries may attack me someday."

So simply holding the wedding hasn't ensured a happy ending. The vague, bad premonition Aileen sensed after seeing Diana's attitude was apparently right on the mark.

Still smiling, Vica continues, "As I think you've realized, there's a movement to depose me and install Diana in my place—in other words, to give the empire to the Valkyries. This marriage was a preliminary step. She even had my sister's introduction. If I behave and stay a puppet emperor, we can get by without a war."

"But you don't intend to play along. Why not?" Keith asks. Even in the cramped compartment, he's skillfully preparing tea on the tray

Rachel brought in.

"Why not? You ask some funny questions. I am the emperor, you know."

"In order to keep from dividing his nation, milord once voluntarily withdrew from the line of succession."

"Yes, I know. If he'd wanted to, he could have led the demons and subjugated the whole country as the demon king, and yet he acted quite nobly. My sister told me about it often. She said I should become an emperor who puts my people first, as he did. Will you tell me the same thing, adviser to the demon king? You've watched the man himself closely all this time. I'd like to hear your opinion."

Keith dexterously divides the generous serving of tea between the teacup from the tray for Aileen and the compartment's mug for Vica. "Milord withdrew because he thought the empire would be better off that way. The talent needed to run the nation was all there, the house of d'Autriche's chief among them. Prince Cedric was also far from incompetent. You have the same face as milord, so perhaps that's why I see it this way—if you refuse to withdraw, it's because there's a good reason."

Accepting the mug from Keith, Vica hesitates for the space of a breath, then begins his story. "When Hausel fell, the demon attacks on Kilvas abruptly stopped. The reason wasn't clear, but in a way, it reinforced the Valkyries' claim that the Kilvas Empire was used by Hausel. I think there's truth in that claim myself. Whether the imperial family of Kilvas was an active accomplice or whether Hausel just used them, some sort of bargain must have been struck."

"In other words, you know nothing?"

"Unfortunately, it's all I can do to survive as a puppet emperor. I did look for information but found nothing. After all, I couldn't even leave the imperial capital."

Does that mean Vica has never become the red-eyed demon?

Or perhaps he simply isn't aware of it…

If that hasn't happened, Aileen is no longer certain how Diana became a Valkyrie.

However, even in the game, Diana discovered the experiment surrounding the demons and Valkyries in the Queendom of Hausel.

It wouldn't be odd if no evidence remained in Kilvas.

"As an aside, I do think Ellmeyer was involved as well. After all, it was Ellmeyer who brought Hausel down. My sister and the other Valkyries had a method of communicating with Hausel. I only heard the gist of it from them, but the situation was highly abnormal to begin with. The Queendom tried to destroy the demon king and ended up being destroyed instead. If this were a story, readers would find that turn of events hard to swallow."

"Yes, on the face of it, that nation was on the side of justice. You must have seen the way they acted, though. Rising into the sky and threatening the entire world to bring it to its knees," Aileen says.

That Ellmeyer has not been the target of international censure even after Hausel's fall is due to the presence of neighboring Ashmael and the fear that the Queendom's attitude had sneaked into other nations. It's also key that Ellmeyer has not attempted to assume Hausel's position of power.

"It's strange, isn't it? The Queendom very nearly controlled the world already. Why would they act that way? Was the demon king so great a threat? I really can't believe it."

Since Vica is brilliant, though, he's the type of person to have doubts. Aileen nods to show her sincerity, telling him his suspicions are entirely appropriate. "The underlying situation is complex. However, it will make for a long conversation, and neither of us has much time. May I ask you to get straight to the heart of the matter? As a fugitive, your choices must be limited."

"You really are skilled at drawing information out of people. Having a wife like you would have made my life a lot easier." He's grumbling, but there's no pessimism in it. "I'll be brief: I want to control the demons."

"…You mean the demons of Kilvas, who won't respond to Master Claude. But what do you mean? Do you wish to become a demon king?"

"As a move that would make me the Valkyries' equal fast, it's not a terrible idea, is it? It's presumptuous of me to say it while my esteemed big brother, Claude, exists, but we also have a legend that black hair and red eyes are the mark of the demon king. As a result,

people have said a whole lot of things about me. I'd like to collect on my due."

Vica smiles. His personality seems to be even more audacious than it was in the game. "First, I'd like to go to the Queendom of Hausel. I think whatever's made the demons quiet down is there. Once I know what it is, I'll be able to control them."

"There's nothing there now. The floating palace has gone missing as well."

The royal castle originally sat at the center of the island, and when it rose into the air, it left a gaping hole where it once stood. The ground itself is gradually crumbling, and there have been reports that the large island, which served as the heart of the Queendom, is actively sinking. Of course, several of its higher points will probably remain, but experts in Ellmeyer predict that the majority will be underwater sooner than later.

"The spells Hausel left in Kilvas are still active, though. The one in the capital that maintains the wall, for example. It's what keeps the demons from getting out. I acted as the source for its magic, but the spell itself was made by Hausel."

In the game, the wall—the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall—had a spell on it that monitored the Valkyries and prevented them from deserting. The magic circle that controlled it was supposed to be in the capital. It was said to block the demons as well, so this is probably the same thing.

True, if Hausel's spell is active, there may be something somewhere… Aileen falls to thinking.

Beside her, Keith turns pale. "Wait a moment. You supplied it with magic? How?"

"I don't know. I only heard that it worked by automatically siphoning the magic of the men of Kilvas's imperial family for generations."

"You set Master Claude up, didn't you?"

Vica only smiles in response. Belatedly, Aileen catches on as well. A moment ago, Vica said, "*I can use magic freely now*." "Wait—is Master Claude the new source of magic?"

"He is my cousin, you see. Apparently, it recognized him as a

member of Kilvas's imperial family. Don't worry; it isn't the sort of thing that can kill him. It only means he won't be able to use his magic properly."

"But that means the wall's maintenance depends on Master Claude. What did you intend to do if he refused? I'm impressed you took such a dangerous gamble."

"Just in case, I waited in the capital until the wedding ended without incident. Besides, my luck with gambling isn't bad, and I'm a good judge of people. I'm sure Claude will accept the responsibility. Ernst is probably explaining the situation to him right about now."

Aileen sets her cup in its saucer. She lets her shoulders slump. "So Ernst was only pretending to be against the substitution; he was actually leading us on. He's quite the crafty old fox."

"From my perspective, you're craftier than he is. Women are scary."

"In that case, do you have a solid reason for thinking that going to Hausel will allow you to control the demons? Or is that another gamble?" she says, getting the conversation back on track.

Vica nods amiably. "I have a reason. It's where the Valkyries' surgeries were performed. It wouldn't be odd for there to be something about the demons there."

The blue country managed everything related to the Valkyries. The game explained as much, and it was where Diana was taken when she was injured, so the guess isn't totally unfounded.

"But…that would have been the floating palace, wouldn't it?"

"No. To Kilvas, the wisdom of Hausel isn't found in the sky. It's underground."

Aileen's eyes widen. In that case, something might very well still be there.

"That said, I can't simply board a ship and go there directly. There won't be signs pointing the way, either. Still, I know there's a facility on the other side of the wall that was used to communicate with and travel to Hausel. I suspect I may be able to teleport from there."

"Is *that* speculation?"

"Well, if I go, I'm sure it'll work out somehow."

What an incredibly vague strategy.

Sounding almost impressed, Keith murmurs, "Even your haphazard methods are identical to milord's."

"Besides, I'd like to see the demons, too. I've never seen one," Vica says with an innocent smile.

Aileen makes eye contact with Keith. She's sure they're remembering the same thing: how Claude looks when he's peacefully spending time with demons.

"And that brings us back to the beginning. My wish is simple, really. This train will travel close enough to the wall to see it. I'd like you to hide me until then. I've never been able to use my magic freely before, and I'd like to keep it in reserve for as long as possible."

"I suppose I have no choice, then. I'll accompany you."

"Excuse me?" Vica's eyes widen. In the seat across from him, Aileen folds her arms and boldly crosses her legs.

Vica looks at Keith, who hides his own gaze behind his glasses and says, "…You would say that, Lady Aileen. I do have one condition, though."

"Take you along as well, you mean? I know. I won't act carelessly, either. I'll have Rachel and the rest return to Ellmeyer, but I'll send word with them and have them make various arrangements. After all, if we vanish, the Valkyries will suspect us. Will that do?"

"If you understand that much, it should be sufficient. I shall accompany you. If this is how things stand, milord won't be able to leave the capital, and there's no telling what he may get up to."

"Huh? No, wait, you aren't going to stop her? She's expecting, isn't she? Not only that, but we'll be going to the wall, very near where the demons dwell. Anything could happen."

Aileen points her index finger right at Vica's flustered face. "That is precisely why. What if I let you go alone, and you fail to gain control of the demons? Or what if they kill you? There's a very good chance Ellmeyer would be blamed. After all, Master Claude is currently impersonating you."

It wouldn't be at all strange if others interpreted this as Claude's plot to get rid of Vica. That would give the Valkyries a perfect

pretext for declaring war on them.

"…But shouldn't you be worried about the child you're carrying?"

"Thank you for your concern, but I am the demon king's wife, and this is his child. Do you understand why those around us have allowed that? Because Master Claude is Ellmeyer's splendid emperor."

He may be the demon king, but he is a fine, human emperor. The fact that he is defending that fragile position is what guarantees Aileen's own position. The same is true of their child. If people begin to see Claude as harmful to humans, they'll promptly be expelled from human society.

"For both my sake and the sake of this child, we must protect Master Claude's reputation. That is the same as protecting our child. That means I can't ignore your plight, either. Don't worry; I assure you I'll back away when I must."

"…But I know Claude wouldn't want you to go with me."

Aileen smiles dauntlessly. "Gracious. What do you think, Master Keith? He claims Master Claude—who sent both of us away and who is conveniently unable to leave the capital—will object."

"He can't seriously think we'd listen. Ha-ha-ha."

The two beam at each other. Vica stares at them, then scratches his cheek. "…I see," he finally says in resignation.

✦ Fourth Act ✦

The Common Sense of the Villainess and the Final Boss

Diana brings her fist down on the end of the conference room's long table with a bang. "Never mind that—just pass this budget."

The people around her exchange looks. Their hesitation makes Diana strike the table again. "Why won't you pass it? State your reasons. Is it because I'm a woman? Because I'm a Valkyrie? Quit mocking me."

One of the officials finally speaks up. "Er, the distinguished guests from other countries are still here. It's a rare opportunity to mingle with those from other nations. As the empress, why don't you attend tea parties instead of council meetings?"

"Huh? I did enough mingling during the soirees. Or is there a reason it's inconvenient to have the empress attend meetings? Are you telling me this is a man's world and I should butt out?"

"N-no, nothing like that… However, groundwork for the second continental conference must be laid, and tea parties are a worthwhile—"

"Enough of that. Answer me. Why will you not pass this budget?"

"Because they can't. The figures are wrong."

Claude's explanation makes Diana grimace.

This girl is always cross; it must make her life incredibly unpleasant.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't make fun of me. Do you think I know nothing? You people do corrupt things like this all the time, but I can't? The double standard is galling."

"If the figures don't match up, the budget won't make it through

the council."

Appearances must be maintained, even if some sort of deal is struck under the table and the reality is different. That rules and regulations seem to be observed at a glance is what makes corruption so troublesome. Not even trying to observe those protocols isn't corruption—it's just a mistake.

Apparently, this empress doesn't know the difference. She snorts contemptuously. "Oh, I see. Then tinker with the numbers so they look right and pass that."

"Who do you mean?" Claude asks.

Diana frowns. "I don't care who does it. The amount of funding the Valkyries receive must match this figure, no matter what."

"Your Majesty, in that case, the rest won't balance out…"

"Don't give me excuses. Just do something about it. All you have to do is fudge some numbers."

"In that case, allow me to tackle this. Will that do, Your Majesty?" Ernst raises his hand as if he's been waiting for this exact moment.

Claude nods. "Please do. Will you be able to make it before the end of the council?"

"Yes, if you'll look it over during the recess and if some time can be reserved during the second session for discussion."

Diana seems unconvinced that any of this is necessary. "…All you need to do is fix some wrong numbers. This seems like overkill."

"If I change some of the figures, the rest of the budget will have to be readjusted. It will be faster if I settle this. Will that do, Diana—I mean, Your Highness?" Correcting himself to use her title is probably either a reproach or his own brand of sarcasm.

Diana responds to the prime minister's mediation with an irritated *tsk*. "It has to be easier than physical combat. Don't talk about the job as if it's rough. You really are a prime minister through and through, aren't you?"

"—I believe I did the same thing on the battlefield. Managing military logistics, keeping track of equipment and supplies. In particular, determining the distribution of war funds is a senior officer's job. If we're negligent here, we'll leave those in the field in dire straits."

“Don’t lecture me when you succeeded on our backs.”

“In order to repay even a small portion of that debt, I must make this empire as prosperous and peaceful as it can be. I consider that my current job and my responsibility.”

Ernst had originally been one of the Valkyries’ senior officers. Vica had wanted him to serve as prime minister because he acknowledged the man’s military achievements. From Claude’s perspective, he still had shortcomings, but that was only in comparison to his own prime minister, a genius who’d been educated by his family as the latest in a long line of prime ministers. Ernst’s sincerity would probably hold him back in certain situations, but it would eventually earn him solid popular support.

“Do your best to repay it, then. After all, you worked us hard enough.”

“Her Highness has granted permission. Let us proceed to the next topic, Your Majesty.” Taking her sarcasm as consent, Ernst quickly changes the topic.

Claude laces his fingers together on the tabletop. “Moving on, then. Briefly, the next matter involves the allotment of defense spending near our border with a neighboring country. Bandits have been appearing in locations on both sides of the border, and our neighbors have proposed a joint effort to combat them. That said, at this point, their queen has only made a gentle suggestion to that effect, and—”

Before he’s finished speaking, Diana rises and turns to leave. Ernst calls to her: “Where are you going? The council is still in progress.”

“Handle the rest by yourselves. I have weapons to inspect. I’m busy.”

“Wait. The current matter involves you as well. The queen of the neighboring country has made a request to have tea with you, the empress. You must understand that this is laying the groundwork.”

“‘Lay groundwork, lay groundwork’; what is it with you people and groundwork? This is infuriating. Couldn’t you just have her attend a council and state her opinion?”

“We can’t treat another country’s queen like that.”

"Even if she's a woman, as long as she has a working brain, she'll be capable of giving her opinion. Or is this queen only able to write invitations and greeting cards? She only has that privilege because the Valkyries are protecting the empire from demons, right? If the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall came down, demons would flood our neighbors as well. I swear, it must be nice to be so carefree. Oh, right, your daughter."

Turning abruptly, Diana points at a middle-aged man who's seated near the middle of the conference table. If Claude recalls, the man's a count from an old family line in Kilvas.

"She's very popular in fashionable society, isn't she? I saw men making a fuss over her at the soiree; she looked very happy about it. She's perfect. Have her entertain the queen. If she's stringing along that many men, she must be good at doing favors that benefit her more than the other person."

The count's face goes blank. As someone whose social standing is high enough to attend the council, he doesn't shoot back, but the new tension in his cheeks shows what he's feeling. Silently grateful for his mature response, Claude speaks to him. "The empress has made her nomination. Can we ask your family to handle it? Your daughter is certain to be a splendid conversation partner, even for a queen. Ernst, take this opportunity to turn down all requests for tea for the empress. I'd hate to cause trouble with each one."

Claude has intentionally refrained from clarifying whose trouble it would be, and the count gives him a questioning look. Claude responds with a small nod, letting him know he understands his grievance.

"…Very well. No doubt my daughter will be delighted to serve as a bridge between two nations."

Only Diana doesn't understand. She sighs, muttering, "Just do that in the first place. All right, I'm keeping Cattleya waiting. Oh, and she'll be attending the next council with me, so don't fail to pass resolutions at that one. Prepare properly in advance."

Having made no apologies from start to finish, Diana leaves. Once she's gone, the mood in the conference room relaxes. Claude doesn't overlook this. He scans the assembly. "Thank you for your

consideration. She isn't yet used to court etiquette. That must be how Valkyries fight."

A sensation like a startled, mocking chortle of laughter fills the air.

"I'm not sure how to put this… You seem quite reliable today, Emperor Vica. Marriage really must foster a strong sense of responsibility."

"She has her achievements as a Valkyrie, so I feel like I can't lose."

Right now, everyone is thinking: *She may control our military, but with that personality, we can't expect much from the empress. We shouldn't give her any more power. And that attitude of hers… We can't have her souring our diplomatic relationships, either.*

Compared to her, the emperor is much more reasonable.

"However, it's true that she and others like her have protected our empire for long years. In light of that, I would like to propose a reorganization of the military. Specifically, a review of the Valkyrie system."

He glances at Ernst. As if he understands completely, the other man begins passing out documents. It's Vica's measure, the one Claude had found in the trash. Vica must have left it there on purpose, trusting that if Claude saw it, he'd handle it cleverly. His cousin is quite cunning.

"The empress has just told us to increase military expenditures. The timing is perfect."

The quicker-witted members of the assembly burst out laughing but try to disguise it as throat-clearing.

In order to make things happen, certain procedures must be followed. It takes effort, money, and connections. Laying the groundwork, coordinating the efforts—if screaming that one's demands should go through without doing any of these things were enough, being a Valkyrie would have to be an extremely easy, magical, all-powerful position… But saying so would be unrefined, so Claude doesn't.

The members of this council are the ones who made Vica a puppet. However, that does prove they're cunning enough to manage that sort of thing. That's probably why Vica has kept them

around. He'd determined that, if he made a common enemy for them, they would become his allies.

That gamble is about to pay off.

"—Moving on, then. Let's hash out the details of what the second continental conference will discuss."

As a first move, it's going well. To ensure the Valkyries will beg him to leave the empire, Claude tries to make his smile as sociable as his cousin's.

The wall that keeps the demons confined in the far north of Kilvas is very thick and so high that the closer visitors get, the less of the top they can see.

"Lady Aileen, we'll need to go on foot from this point on."

"All right."

She's already wearing clothing made from thick fabric, designed specifically for regions that get heavy snow. Over that, she puts on a cold-weather cap and thick-soled boots, and on top of everything else, she's bundled up in a thick fur coat. When she peeks out from under the cart's canopy, her breath mists white. It seems there really is no autumn in Kilvas. Aileen, Keith, and Vica have come a long way north. They'd made preparations for their flight, then leaped from the train in the dead of night. After resting until morning in a nearby village, they borrowed a cart and continued their journey. It's been only half a day since their escape, but this is another world. Could some of that be due to the demons' influence?

The light snow that's begun to fall is making the ground muddy.

"Master Vica is searching for the entrance. You really must not be reckless, Lady Aileen. Even Luc isn't here."

To make it look as though Aileen has returned to Ellmeyer, Rachel and Luc have remained on the train. Rachel is pretending to be Aileen, who is feeling unwell, while Luc is looking after her.

"They should have reached the port by now. I do hope they manage to set sail without incident."

The Valkyries will be guarding Aileen's group only until they board

the ship, but there's no telling what they'll do if they discover that Aileen vanished en route. There's danger there as well.

Keith, the only one who's accompanied Aileen, looks around warily. "Worry about yourself first, please. I feel it's entirely milord's fault that you're in this situation, but we can't have anything happening to you… I wish we could have made contact with the demons, at least. We'll just have to leave that in Rachel's hands."

"It would be a great help if we could communicate with the local demons, but if they won't respond to Master Claude…"

"Then our prospects are slim. If these demons have a king of their own, though, that will change things."

"Lady Aileen, Keith, thank you for your patience." Vica jogs back to them. He changed into shabby clothes on the way, to keep himself from standing out, but Aileen suspects it's making him stand out more. After all, he has the same face as Claude. The sight of his mud-spattered leather boots makes her squirm a bit. Keith's lips are pursed in an odd way, so he probably shares her feelings.

However, they aren't in any position to scold him for getting dirty.

"There's a gate we can use to get through the wall near here. Let's head inside."

"But there must be guards."

"Freezing to death outside is much scarier. I managed to teleport the Valkyrie who was guarding the gate, so I'll deal with them that way. I should be able to put them to sleep, too, if I try. Oh, let me return this cart to the village."

Vica snaps his fingers, and the entire cart vanishes, horse and all.

She's heard that he used hardly any magic in the capital and that this is all new to him, but just as children learn to breathe without being taught, he's using magic quite easily. When they leaped from the train, he used magic like an expert and carried them to safety. The only reasons he can't teleport them to the other side of the wall are his wariness about the spell that's cast on it and the fact that he isn't familiar with the world outside the capital.

If he keeps this up, no doubt they'll return to the capital in a twinkling as well. How reliable.

"Where did you teleport the Valkyrie to? We can't afford to have

her raise the alarm."

"Oh… Come to think of it, where did I send her? I just thought 'somewhere far away,' so… From here, the farthest place I know would be the capital, probably."

Aileen takes her earlier assessment back. He's still quite shaky. He's made her remember how Elefas is always lamenting that the way Claude uses magic is careless.

"…Let's keep our use of magic to a minimum. Even teleportation. It will look suspicious if Valkyries start appearing in the capital one after another. More than anything, you don't yet have a clear picture of how to distribute or use your magic. If you accidentally run through all of it, we'll abruptly find ourselves in dire straits," Keith tells him.

"All right." Vica nods obediently, then sets off, taking the lead. They have to press on before the snow covers the muddy ground.

However, the gate Vica leads them to already has several Valkyries gathered in front of it.

"She vanished when I went to fetch our cold-weather gear. It's past time for the shift change, too."

"It's beginning to snow. She wouldn't have gone on patrol before you came back with the gear."

In the patch of shadow where they've taken cover, Vica folds his arms. "A shift change, hmm? Luck was against us. This is a problem."

Keith sighs. "It isn't 'a problem'; this is why I'm constantly telling you to think a little before you act—no, I'm sorry. I gave you the same scolding as I would to milord on reflex."

"For now, shall I put them all to sleep?"

"I think that would leave us in greater trouble later on."

One might be fine, but there are three of them. It isn't likely to end up as a story where the Valkyries laugh about how they all happened to nod off by accident. They're bound to suspect an enemy attack, and security will get tighter.

However, Vica smiles lightly. "Oh, it'll work out somehow."

"That carelessness of yours really is just like him! We'll think of another way. At the very least, I don't want to be seen before we're

even inside. Our objective isn't breaking through; it's investigating the other side."

"That's easy to say, but I can't make us invisible—or maybe I can?"

Setting a finger to his chin, Vica looks up, then looks at them. Then suddenly, he's gone.

"Can you see me now?"

Aileen can only hear his voice, although it's coming from the same spot.

Keith answers calmly, "We can't see you. We can hear you, though. Is it a spell to trick the eyes, or a barrier that cuts off the outside world?"

"I visualized surrounding myself in a transparent membrane, so probably the latter. I'm impressed you knew."

"Milord used that one quite often when he stole into the castle town to amuse himself behind my back, long ago."

"I see, so that's how it's used. That's informative."

"No, you mustn't learn that."

Keith scolds him sharply, but Vica's probably learned it already. For the sake of their future, Aileen quietly vows not to tell him about any more of the uncalled-for things Claude has done.

"A barrier might be safer than trying to trick the Valkyries' eyes. Keith, Lady Aileen, take my hands. I think that will render you invisible. Since you can still hear me, be careful of the sounds you make."

Aileen takes his right hand, Keith takes his left, and Vica starts forward. As they do, a guard says, "For now, let's search inside the wall. Report this to the captain as well."

One of the Valkyries is facing their way, but as Aileen and the others approach, step by cautious step, she doesn't notice them. Holding their breath, the three of them make for the raised portcullis and the wall's interior, past the guards who are still discussing what to do.

"I'll stand guard here, as scheduled. If you find her safe and sound, let me know."

"Understood. If she comes back on her own, report it to us as

well.”

“The alarm would have sounded if a demon came through, so it should be all right, but we can’t let our guard dow—”

Abruptly, a loud, shrill alarm goes off. Both Aileen’s group and the Valkyries stiffen, but the soldiers promptly start scanning the area, looking grim.

“What is it, a demon?!”

“I see. If I use magic, that’s how the warning system reacts.”

Aileen claps a hand over Vica’s mouth, but it’s too late.

“Who is it?! Who’s there?!”

“It doesn’t matter. Raise the alarm! We’re under attack!”

As one of the Valkyries starts to run for it, Keith leaps out from the barrier and strikes her, knocking her out.

Letting go of Vica’s hand has made Keith appear out of nowhere, and the remaining two Valkyries recoil in shock. Taking advantage of this, Vica knocks them both out.

The alarm is still sounding, though, and footsteps are rapidly approaching from both sides. Keith scoops Aileen into his arms, then shouts to Vica: “Emperor Vica, run before they can trap us between them!”

“Oh yes. There should be a gate leading out of the wall over there. I remember the layout.”

“Lady Aileen, I beg your pardon, but bear with me for a little while!”

Before she can nod, Keith breaks into a run. Several Valkyries are heading straight toward them from the front. Vica jumps lightly, and Keith rises into the air, still carrying Aileen. Vica leaps over the Valkyries, passing just beneath the ceiling. The group of guards is startled, but they promptly change direction.

However, an invisible wall springs up to block their way.

“Now’s our chance,” Vica says.

“A barrier?! What impudence!”

One of the Valkyries thrusts with her lance. It’s a magic lance, and as it strikes the barrier, the divine stone set in its hilt glows. The barrier bursts with a bang. Still running, Vica glances back and casts the same thing again as more Valkyries cry out.

“Dammit, who is that?!”

“Hey, raise the alarm! It’s an intruder. If it comes down to it, we’ll use the—”

Aileen, who has been watching the Valkyries from Keith’s arms, thinks of the words that might have been drowned out by the noise of the bursting barrier. She frowns.

“This is it; the gate to the other side of the wall, Vica says. “Let’s slip through here and hide for now.”

“Wait. I hear footsteps.”

Just outside the gate, Keith stops suddenly. Vica stops, too, several steps ahead of him. A third figure has just stumbled and fallen.

It’s a human, barefoot in this cold, clothed in threadbare rags. Vica runs up to the unfortunate person before Aileen can stop him. “Are you all right? A human, here? Why…?”

“Y-y-you… What’s a m-man doing here?”

The human who looks up, trembling so hard that his teeth chatter, is also a man. When he sees Aileen in Keith’s arms, he shrieks. “V-Val— Valkyrie…!”

“No, I am not. I’m an ordinary human.”

“Liar! Y-you people won’t fool me again! You tr-tricked me!” the man screams, sending spittle flying. Keith is wary; his arms tighten around Aileen.

Vica offers the man his hand. “We’ll talk later. The Valkyries are pursuing us. For now, you should get away from here, too.”

“…Wh-what are you? If she’s not a Valkyrie, then why is she here…? Don’t tell me—did you volunteer because you wanted to help the Valkyries, too?!”

“No, I’m—”

“There they are!”

A Valkyrie shouts from the gate they’ve just come through. The Valkyries have caught up.

“Hey, there’s a fugitive as well!”

With another shriek, the man scrambles back, scuttling like a crab. Vica catches his hand and pulls him to his feet. “I don’t understand what’s going on, but come with us. I’m pretty strong. I’ll

protect you even if we run into any demons."

"No, it's no good. Get away from me!"

The man shoves Vica hard. In the same moment, one of the Valkyries throws an object of some sort. The sweet, pungent smell makes Aileen's eyes widen. "…Master Keith, Master Vica, don't breathe it! It's demon snuff!" she yells.

The substance makes demons lose their reason, and it's nothing but harmful to humans. Vica, who's picked up the same scent, grimaces. "What's that?"

Has demon snuff never made its way to the Kilvas Empire?

There's no time to explain it now, though. If Vica has as much magic as Claude, he should be fine, but there's no guarantee. Aileen knows a cambion who was forcibly changed into a demon by this substance. She doesn't have the sacred sword, Keith is simply human, and of course the man who's been called a fugitive is in danger as well.

As Aileen looks back, though, a large shadow falls over her.

There's a series of heavy cracking noises. It's the sound of a skeleton changing, of an entire body being broken and regenerated. Vica stands in front of it, stunned. "Y-you…"

"Emperor…Vica…?"

The voice that slips through the man's gritted teeth is still his own. However, his whole body is covered in gray scales, and his face is no longer visible. With tense, crackling sounds, his jaw and neck lengthen and thicken. A tail sprouts from his bent body. Four taloned feet trample the ground, and the demon howls. Just for a moment, his eyes flash, and there's murder in them.

So this is a demon of Kilvas…!

Aileen can see what her brother meant when he said they weren't like Ellmeyer's. This demon's form resembles a wingless dragon.

The demon launches into a sprint. Vica is still standing in his path, and the demon swings his claws at him as if he's in the way. Still holding Aileen, Keith grabs Vica's arm and yanks him out of the way. "Pull yourself together, please! I have Lady Aileen to look out for!"

Vica nods, but he doesn't take his eyes off the demon. "What…is

this? A human just…transformed into a demon…?”

The demon charges straight at the wall, but the Valkyries have already closed the gate. They must have assumed that if they leave Aileen and the others here, the demon will finish them off.

The demon’s attention is focused on the wall, but on this side of it, he’s in his element. The cloying scent of demon snuff still hangs in the air. They need to get away from here fast, before the smell attracts other demons.

“At any rate, we have to find a way back into the wall, or we’ll be in danger—”

Suddenly there’s a shrill howl. It’s the demon’s scream. He keeps ramming the wall with his head, knocking himself back in the process. It’s probably the spell on the wall that’s responsible. Even so, the demon promptly gets up and flings himself against the wall again—shoulder first this time. When he fails again, he screams.

Automatically, Aileen and Keith pause in their flight and look at him. They are the demon king’s wife and his adviser, after all.

“…He just wants to get out.” Vica’s still gazing at the demon. He doesn’t move. “Why are they doing this? It can’t be… My sister and Diana can’t have…”

“Master Vica?” He’s acting strange. Keith grabs his shoulder. “Calm yourself, Master Vica! You mustn’t lose your composure. You are—”

“…Me too?” Beneath his bangs, Vica’s wavering eyes are glowing red. “Will I be like that someday, too?”

Jumping out of Keith’s arms, Aileen steps in front of Vica and raises a hand. “I beg your pardon.” A dry sound echoes as the slap connects with his cheek, and she gives him an elegant smile.

Vica’s unblinking eyes close, then open again. The red light is gone.

“Have you regained your senses?”

“Y…yes.”

“Very good. Now, while we have the chance, let’s search for a different gate. Then we’ll investigate what that was and what on earth is happening here. You can work toward being the demon king and becoming a demon after that, can’t you?”

Aileen's lips are curved in a smile. Vica blinks at her repeatedly, and then his expression turns grave. "You knew about that? About the aberration in Kilvas's imperial bloodline—the fact that some of us become demons?"

"What? …Well, er, yes. After all, I am the demon king's wife."

Without thinking, she blurted out something she knew only from the game. Covering for herself with a cough, Aileen turns on her heel. "Now then, lead us to a different gate. Have you forgotten my condition?"

"No. Oh, I'm sorry. I did, just a little." Vica looks back at the demon one more time. He's still hurling himself against the wall. "Stop that. You'll hurt yourself." His words are as soft as a prayer. The demon can't possibly have heard him. He's too busy growling at the wall.

"…So it's no good. Could Big Brother Claude have done it…?" Shoulders slumping, Vica turns to her again. He bites his lip, then smiles as if he's intentionally shaking it off. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. It's this way. Let's hurry."

Vica sets off without looking back. Taking Keith's hand, Aileen follows him, walking on her own two feet this time. However, she does look back just once.

The demon has stopped flinging himself against the wall and is gazing at them steadily. Then he whirls around, bolting toward the far horizon over ground that's thinly dusted with snow, until he's finally out of sight.

Claude is fairly used to his wife bursting in with the question "What's going on?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said to pass this budget at the council the other day!"

"Diana, calm down."

Diana has stormed into his office, yelling. Behind her, a troubled-looking Cattleya is trying to restrain her. Feigning ignorance, Ernst is making tea, acting like Claude's adviser even though he's the prime

minister. As Claude waits for tea that's delicious in a different way from Keith's, he pauses in his work. "I believe the budget was passed, as you wished."

"Then why haven't the military funds come through? Not only that, but they tell me the budget's all been used on other things, so there isn't any to spare!"

"If you use money, it goes away. That seems logical."

He nods, satisfied, and Ernst clears his throat rather unnaturally. He almost burst out laughing and has to cover for himself.

Veins standing out on her temples, Diana shouts across the desk at him. "Take it back! You can demand it from Ellmeyer, even."

"Your tea, Your Majesty. Also, here is the report regarding the undertaking the other day."

"Thanks. That's a big help."

"Wait just a minute. What is that report? I said to call off that business, didn't I? This guy's subcontracting work illegally."

"Then we should deal with the illegal subcontracting but continue the project," Claude says without missing a beat. "Providing free lunches to schoolchildren isn't something we should stop doing."

"But this criminal's just taking our money! What sort of operation are you running here?!"

"Diana, let's discuss this calmly. Emperor Claude is only a substitute, you know," Cattleya says in an attempt to calm her down.

"That's right, I wanted to hear your opinions as well. It's in regard to retirement for the Valkyries."

"What?" Even as she holds Diana back, Cattleya's eyes widen.

Settling back in his chair, Claude holds out some documents. "I've reviewed all the Valkyries' records. Many have left the front lines, and many more have reached their limit in terms of service age. However, from what I can see, this nation has no system by which Valkyries may retire."

"…That's right. The men of this country just use us up," Diana says cautiously.

"On that point, I thought those who wished to could become instructors for the military, which we are going to organize."

Diana goes very quiet, her face blank. Cattleya's expression is

grave, too.

"The biggest reason is the collapse of Hausel. We won't be able to make any more Valkyries now. From this point on, Kilvas will need an army in which men and women fight the demons. We should act now, while there are still many Valkyries left."

"Men *and* women fighting?" Diana asks incredulously. "You're saying the men should start fighting now, this late in the game?"

"There simply weren't many departments they were eligible to join. Besides, there have been male soldiers before, including Ernst."

"That's…"

He'd expected Diana to snap back with *So what?* but her gaze wanders uncertainly. Is there something about the idea of male soldiers that makes her uncomfortable?

Cattleya promptly steps forward, making Diana retreat slightly. "Emperor Claude, after asking you to be a substitute, I have no right to say this, but interfering with the military is really going too far. We can't have this, especially not while Vica isn't here."

"The proposal is Vica's. It was in the garbage for some reason. I found it in his office. I've checked with Ernst and confirmed that it's definitely Vica's suggestion. Isn't that right?"

"Yes. We'd discussed it just the other day, so I'm certain of it. I believe it was thrown away by mistake."

"…You heard him. In that case, as Vica's substitute, what problem could there be with my advancing the proposal?"

Cattleya frowns, tucking her chin.

Behind her, Diana glares at Ernst. "Ernst, shouldn't this be considered interfering in domestic affairs? You're not going to stop him?"

"We're in no position to argue after our scheme to use him as a substitute. On the contrary, I don't know why you'd be against this. Now that Hausel is gone, the Valkyries will inevitably disappear. Since it's possible that demons will continue to pop up, preparing our military for the future is an issue we need to address."

"We put out a call for recruits, offering salaries similar to what the Valkyries receive. We already have more than five hundred applicants. I don't think the men of this country are completely

without merit.”

Diana, who was about to snap at Ernst, turns to Claude after his comment. “If they’re offered salaries similar to ours without them having to go through surgery like we did, of course they’ll flock to it. I can’t believe this. Did you use up the budget on something that pointless? Just to make worthless soldiers who will only hold us back?”

“True, the surgery allowed the Valkyries to be battle-ready immediately, while the men will need to undergo strict training. However, in order for the Valkyries to feel secure about retiring, I think this treatment is necessary.”

“…Says a mere substitute who knows nothing about reality.” Diana’s tone is contemptuous.

Cattleya thumps her on the shoulder, soothing her. “We were the ones who asked him to act as a substitute, Diana. However, Ernst, this proposal really will offend the Valkyries. Give us time to make adjustments.”

“I appreciate your suggestion, but I will make the adjustments. That is what the prime minister is for.”

“Don’t get full of yourself,” Diana says with an obvious edge in her voice.

“More importantly, how is the search for Vica going? You said to leave it to the Valkyries, but is it really all right to do that?” Smiling as if he knows nothing, Ernst changes the subject.

Diana’s eyebrows come down. “Don’t tell me you still doubt us.”

“I’m simply confirming the facts. Even on the battlefield, I frequently reminded you to stay in close communication.”

“Word has been sent to all the Valkyries, Captain Ernst, and they’re searching diligently. If we consider the timing, it’s conceivable that another nation may have interfered, so we’ve expanded our search to the borders.”

In a tone that could be taken as either sarcasm or moderation, Cattleya makes her report to Ernst. The bottom line is that Vica hasn’t been found yet.

Claude takes a document from the mountain of papers on the desk. “It would be a great help to me if you found him soon. Has my

wife's party left the port already?"

"Yes, we received a report confirming that yesterday. Lady Aileen began to feel unwell during the journey, so their departure was quite rushed, but they were sent off safely."

Feeling unwell. Claude hadn't heard about this, and he frowns.

However, if they've set sail, there are demons in the ocean, and they can use the demons' network to make contact with Ellmeyer. In any case, their outstanding retainers will do something about it. Keith is with her, too. Claude is sure there won't be any blunders. If he acts now, no doubt it will only raise the potential for trouble in Ellmeyer.

Having brilliant followers is important.

He knows he's lucky, and that reminds him of how difficult life must be for Vica. As neighbors with a troublemaking heavyweight like Hausel between them, he'd really like to get along.

"In order to set you free as soon as we possibly can, Emperor Claude, I'll do everything I can to find Vica… It's been more than three days since his disappearance, but he's safe, I'm sure," Cattleya informs him, serious to a fault.

Claude smiles at her as kindly as he can. "I know. I'll do my best as a substitute as well."

"Just behave and stick to passing the proposals we want you to pass."

"Diana, let's leave this to him," Cattleya says firmly. That's unexpected. Diana is clearly unhappy with it, but she quiets down.

Cattleya bows, then starts to leave the room, taking Diana with her. Ernst calls after her: "Cattleya…if anything happens, report it."

"Of course. Where is this coming from, Ernst?" Cattleya looks bewildered. Diana glares at him as if demanding to know what he's implying.

Ernst has been about to say something, but he changes his mind, throwing his shoulders back as if he's shaking it off. "Rescue Vica as soon as possible. He is this nation's emperor."

Cattleya gives a wry smile, then nods firmly. "Of course. He's also my precious little brother and the husband of my best friend."

"I see… Yes, that's true."

After bowing again, Cattleya leaves with Diana, and then the room is quiet.

"What was that about?" Claude asks.

"…Cattleya can look you in the eye and lie." Still watching the door she disappeared through, Ernst breaks into a grin. "Diana's bad at lying, and her gaze wanders. As a result, I don't know whether what she just said was true."

"Are you saying it isn't only Diana? Cattleya is distancing herself from Vica as well?"

"No. But…to Cattleya, Vica is more her little brother than her emperor."

That isn't necessarily a bad thing. On the other hand, Ernst wants to support Vica the emperor, and Claude understands what he's trying to say. There's quite a gulf between the positions of "little brother" and "emperor."

"Just out of curiosity, let me ask: Weren't you close to them?"

"…My mother was Vica's wet nurse, and Cattleya is my childhood friend. When she went to see you, she told me about it. She said you were an intelligent, calm, splendid person. I know you corresponded by letter. You were her ideal in everything, so I hated you with a passion."

Claude blinks; he hadn't been expecting this.

Ernst sets a hand to his chest, looking composed. "After all, I also prided myself on being brilliant. I believe Vica is the same. In the end, it's just a droll story from our childhoods."

"…Well, well. It appears I've unwittingly incurred resentment. I'm devoted to my wife now, though. I hope you'll overlook my transgressions."

When Claude responds with a joke of his own, Ernst laughs. "Overlook what? There's nothing between Cattleya and myself. She was becoming a Valkyrie, and I wanted to help her, that's all. That's why I attended the military academy even though I was a man, then stood on the battlefield as a commanding officer."

"…As answers go, isn't that more than enough?"

Ernst is the third son of a marquis. If these things work the way they do in Ellmeyer, he won't have the right to inherit, but he's

definitely an aristocrat by both birth and upbringing. Not only that, but he has an exceptional record. He won the position of prime minister due to his military achievements. He must be a genius with both sword and pen… And yet he went out of his way to choose the danger of the battlefield. If he'd simply wanted to demonstrate his loyalty to the princess, there must have been other ways.

"She is brilliant, and I wanted to prove to her that I was as well. It was childish pride. If I'd merely sent her and the other Valkyries to the front line and let them protect me, I would have had no right to speak. And so perhaps 'comrades in arms' is the best way to describe my relationship with those two. It is what I wanted us to be… Although after the Queendom's fall, our respective positions have changed substantially."

"Hausel's fall has had a marked effect on everything, hasn't it?"

"You speak as if it were someone else's affair. It was you who defeated them."

"That wasn't due to my power alone."

"Oh, that's very good. I'd like to make this nation the same way." Ernst narrows his eyes as if he's jealous, but promptly looks down. His wits are sharp. He's well aware that the gears have already begun to slip.

"…If anything inconvenient happens later, you and Vica should both come to Ellmeyer. We have quite a lot of territories that are surprisingly difficult to govern, and good help is hard to find."

Claude says this on a whim, but once he's said it, he thinks it's a pretty good idea.

However, Ernst laughs off the suggestion, then fixes Claude with a stare. "Kilvas won't become your client state. Don't underestimate us, Emperor of Ellmeyer."

That wasn't what he meant, but from the way he phrased it, he can't blame Ernst for interpreting it that way. His good friend's advice comes back to him: *"You make conversation like the demon king. Fix that."*

"I misspoke. My apologies."

"No, I've been complaining unnecessarily. Now then, let's start with these jobs—"

Just as it looks as though another heavy armful of documents will join the pile already sitting on the desk, there's a knock at the office door. Ernst responds promptly. He makes sure to drop off those documents first, of course.

"Got a minute? It's urgent."

Without waiting for Ernst to answer, Isaac walks quickly over to Claude. Behind him, Jasper comes in. Looking around warily, Jasper takes off his beret, then immediately shuts the door.

"The emperor might be beyond the wall," Isaac reports quietly.

Ernst turns back sharply. Isaac glances at Jasper, who's leaning against the door to block it. Jasper continues the report for Isaac, keeping his voice low. "We were staking out the Valkyries' station in the castle town when a Valkyrie came along, all confused. She said she'd been on guard duty at the wall, and the next thing she knew, she was standing in the middle of the capital."

"…She was teleported?" Claude asks.

"There aren't too many people who can do that. What do you think?"

Isaac is asking if Vica could do it. Ernst shakes his head slowly. "I don't know. Vica couldn't use his magic properly in the capital."

"In that case, it seems even more likely that it's him. Maybe that's why he ended up teleporting her to the capital. There's a good chance he doesn't really know how to use his powers."

Vica can't be used to casting magic yet. No one who was would have sent a Valkyrie on guard duty to the capital. Clearing his throat, Jasper says, "The Valkyrie didn't seem to know what was going on, either. The outpost managed to check with the wall and confirm that, at the very least, something had happened over there. The Valkyries have a way to communicate with the security detail posted at the wall."

"Was that something invented by Hausel?" This is news to Claude as well.

"Probably. So they found out somebody's gotten past the wall. They haven't identified them yet, though. The Valkyries here should know that much already." Isaac turns to Ernst and asks, "They haven't mentioned it to you?"

"Not a word," Ernst responds briefly. If he's shaken, he doesn't show it. He must have been prepared for this back when he asked Cattleya to report if anything happened.

Claude puts in a tentative word for them. "Maybe it's because the Valkyries don't know the details yet. You two didn't report this to me immediately, either."

"We didn't know how the situation was gonna develop, so I prioritized the stakeout," Isaac replies.

"E-easy, easy. We don't know for sure it's the emperor, but… The thing is, it sounds like the 'somebody' who's invaded the wall is actually several somebodies, and…uh…" Jasper falters, glancing at Isaac.

Isaac gives it to them straight. "There are three of them. It's probably the emperor, Aileen, and your adviser."

Ernst blinks.

There's a pause. Then Claude claps his hands on the desk. His usual adviser isn't here. On top of that, he's acting as Vica's substitute right now. He has to stay calm. He pulls on the sort of smile one would give a child. "You know there's no way something that ridiculous could happen. I've been told they already set sail for home. Aileen wasn't feeling well, so they departed hastily……"

Something abruptly occurs to Claude, and he falls silent. Isaac *tsks* irritably, then says, "Rachel faked it, and Luc stayed with her to make it look right. The emperor must not have left the capital until he was sure you'd be his stand-in. That would match up with the time where you stopped being able to use magic. The train Aileen's group took was kept out of the public eye so people wouldn't see you weren't with them. It had Valkyrie guards, but just the minimum. It would probably have been easier to sneak onto that one than some other train."

"…But Keith wouldn't allow…"

"If they've made contact with the emperor, they'll know you're weaker than Elefas right now."

Claude would really love to refute that claim, but that isn't the most pressing issue right now. The question is what Aileen and Keith would think and do once they made that discovery.

It isn't hard to imagine. "*Gracious, how awful—we simply must save Master Claude.*" "*Yes, after all, milord is surprisingly foolish.*" He can practically hear their voices and the accompanying laughter. Is he hallucinating?

Bracing his elbows on the desk, he laces his fingers together near his lips. "I understand the situation. My wife is as reckless as ever. As befits the adviser of the demon king, my adviser's methods are crafty. Your theory is quite plausible… It's my fault. I should never have trusted them."

"W-we don't know any of this for sure yet, do we? Besides, a personage such as your empress would never—"

"That woman would absolutely do it."

For some reason, Isaac's answer seems to make Ernst anxious. "But surely the people around her wouldn't permit such a thing…!"

"My wife would," Isaac tells him, sounding exasperated. Claude knows exactly how he feels. "I thought the demon king's adviser might hold the line, but I read him wrong. If it's for your sake, that adviser of yours would even use Aileen. Dammit, I'm never trusting any of your people again."

"…Don't say that. You'll make me sad." The smile Claude turns on them this time is natural, and yet Jasper shrinks back against the door. Claude won't let him make a run for it, of course. "I understand the situation now. Oh yes, I understand perfectly. If it's come to this, having them cry and beg me to leave won't be enough. I'll completely incapacitate the Valkyries as soon as possible."

He's kept his focus on buying time as Vica's substitute, but he can't be that laid-back now. If Aileen is taken hostage, war will break out on the spot.

"We can't conduct a review of military personnel immediately, though," Ernst says.

"There's a good method that won't take much time. Isn't there, Isaac?"

"I've already set that up. The Valkyrie-bashing should hit like a ton of bricks tomorrow."

"…Valkyrie-bashing?" Ernst doesn't seem to understand.

Jasper tugs his beret back onto his head. “Well, you know, this and that. Yeah. I may not look it, but I’m a journalist, so…”

“On its own, that won’t be enough. Since we’ve got the chance, why don’t we try using my face?” Claude’s breezy proposal makes Jasper plaster his back against the door. Apparently, Claude has surprised him.

When Claude looks at Isaac, though, the other man’s eyes are gleaming. “That’s okay?”

“Of course it’s not. I’m extremely reluctant, and this is humiliating besides. However, I’m sure you’ll be able to use my face with peerless efficiency. Go ahead and ignore both my honor and my pride.”

“Leave it to me.”

Claude wishes Isaac hadn’t accepted so enthusiastically.

“What exactly do you intend to do? I’ll do all I can as well, but…” Ernst still doesn’t seem to get it; he’s the only one in the room who’s bewildered.

Isaac glances at him. “The demon king yanked up the standard, but you’ll work, too.”

“Uh, I hear you had a fan club in the Valkyries before you became prime minister. Until Diana came along, it sounds like you and Princess Cattleya split the popularity pretty evenly between you.”

As Jasper says that while flipping through a notebook, Ernst frowns. “A f-fan club? What is that?”

“So becoming prime minister made him less popular, huh? That actually works better.”

“We’ve got a good excuse as well. An imperial visit regarding the Valkyries’ retirement system. We’ll start with the capital. We won’t even need to leave the city. And for some reason, Her Highness’s faction is opposed to the retirement system,” Claude puts in.

Isaac smirks. “Oh yeah? This’ll really be worth doing.”

“Won’t it?”

“U-um, if you don’t tell me what you intend to do, you’ll make me uneasy.”

Ernst seems worried, so Isaac says, “Don’t worry about it; it’s just a job. We’ll set it all up for you. Plus, if we’ve got the demon king’s

face, we've basically won already."

"No, um, that's why I'm asking… Why his face?"

Ignoring Ernst, Claude comes to a decision. "All right. It's a race: We'll see who can bring down the Valkyries first, us or Aileen. Don't worry; no matter what happens, it isn't our fault."

"Right," Isaac agrees. He also finds Aileen is impressive, but at the same time, her methods have never really sat right with him. For the time being, that makes him and Claude allies.

"Everything that's about to happen is my wife's fault, for leaving my face all by its lonesome," Claude says firmly.

Jasper claps his hands together as if he's praying.

Ernst is still perplexed, but they'll just have to make him grow up a bit more.

Military power isn't the only weapon in the world.

It's quite a long way from the district Aileen and the others have infiltrated to the district that's related to Hausel. That means it's safer to travel on the outside, away from the wall, where security will definitely have been tightened. Whether they run into demons is a matter of luck—encountering demons will give them more chances to gather information.

With that in mind, Aileen's group presses on until just before sunset, keeping an eye on the wall in the distance. In the end, though, that first demon is the only one they encounter. There's no sign of pursuit by the Valkyries, either. It's probably because, while Aileen's group is on this side of the wall, they might as well be locked in. The Valkyries may also be planning to weaken them before they get rid of them.

However, with Vica's magic, it's easy for them to rest in the hut they find under the wintry sky. They quickly start a fire and camouflage the entire hut with a barrier. Not only that, but the hut has clearly been used by others. They find water and preserved food inside. Keith uses these to make dinner, and Vica magically removes the dirt from their clothes in the blink of an eye.

At this point in time, the only problem is that there's only one bed.

"We'll sleep on the benches. You take the bed, Lady Aileen," Keith tells her. He's spreading out their coats and cloaks and hanging them in front of the bed to form a makeshift privacy screen. "How are you feeling? Any strain or discomfort?"

"No, none… I'm more concerned about that." She glances past a hanging fur coat at Vica. Illuminated by the red glow of the fireplace, Vica is gazing absently out the window. It's true that Aileen and Keith are conversing in low voices, but he doesn't even seem to have registered that they're talking.

"I don't think we need to worry about him using too much magic, but… Watching him makes me rather nervous."

"He's more levelheaded than Master Claude was during his rebellious phase, though." When she looks up, Keith smiles at her. "Milord had those things as well: adolescence and a rebellious phase."

"…I can't even imagine it."

"No doubt. However, even I can only speculate about Master Vica's relationship with the demons. Not everything about him will be the same as milord… And after what happened earlier, well…"

Keith also thinks that Vica's preoccupied because of the demon they saw that afternoon.

A human transformed into a demon. The demon snuff was probably nothing more than a trigger. Demon snuff can grant humans demon-like powers, but they remain human; they won't physically turn into a demon. The only ones who do that are those with special constitutions, like Claude and James.

However, it happened to that human.

"That's probably the primary reason they won't respond to milord. It isn't about who's demon king."

Since they were originally human, they won't obey the demon king. That does make sense.

"Either way, we still know practically nothing. Not even whether we should consider the man who became a demon the rule or an exception."

"…True. We mustn't jump to conclusions."

"I'll go get more kindling. I leave Master Vica to you." Aileen frowns, and Keith winks at her. "You're the one who's best suited to it. You're particularly good at taking those who are at risk of losing their humanity and drawing them back to the human side of things."

"You mean you are. You're the one who kept Master Claude human."

"You overestimate me. I'm a human who falls in with his own kind at the very end."

Before she can think up an argument against that, Keith puts his cold-weather clothes back on and leaves the hut.

Left behind and with no other options, Aileen steps out from behind the screen of fur coats and approaches the table where Vica is sitting. The cup of plain, once-hot water he's holding has gone completely cold.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"…No. That's not it. Just… I thought I might be able to hear the demons' voices."

So that's why he's been gazing out the window all this time? Aileen seats herself in the chair across from Vica.

"It hasn't worked. I'd hoped leaving the capital would do it, or meeting even one demon, but… Apparently Master Claude really is the only reincarnation of the demon king."

"You seem disappointed… Do you mean resisting the Valkyries wasn't your reason for wanting to control the demons? Did you genuinely want to be the demon king?"

"I…really don't know. I've never had many allies, and to put it bluntly, the Valkyries are my enemies. As a result, I may have gotten the feeling that the demons were my companions."

The eyes of one who's searching for companions. If she thinks of it that way, the loneliness in Vica's expression makes sense. She can't have him going to that side, though.

"Aren't you concerned about your sister or Ernst, or the empire?"

"Ernst is brilliant, so I'm not worried about him. My sister… I think she'd prefer to have Claude at her side than me."

"Goodness, dropping hints like that right in front of me? How bold

of you."

"You must have noticed."

"I really don't know what you're talking about. I'm delighted that Lady Cattleya and Master Claude are such great friends. After all, Master Claude has also had some rotten luck when it comes to his relationships with humans. If he can connect with his relatives, I welcome it."

Vica glances at her, moving only his eyes, as if she's caught his interest. However, he promptly looks out the window again. "…At this point, I think I've done my sister a disservice. I did think she'd win against you by a mile, though. Even for Ernst, I may only have reopened an old wound…"

"You keep speaking of others. What about you? Wasn't there a woman you were fond of?"

Vica turns toward her. His reaction is far better than Aileen anticipated, and she blinks. "Gracious. There is, isn't there."

"I'm…not certain. I'm still not very conscious of… I'm not confident in my own feelings."

There's something strangely innocent about the way he broods; it makes him look like a normal young man. This may be the real thing. Intensely curious, Aileen leans forward. "We're alone here. I won't give you any boorish lectures about how you've just married. Go on."

Besides, at this rate, his relationship with Diana is very likely to fail. Vica doesn't mention this, either. Instead, he laughs as if he's genuinely entertained. "She doesn't like me, though."

His face is nice, and he's obviously a man of means. He's clever, dynamic, and decisive. He's friendlier and better with people than Claude is. If she were to sum him up carelessly, he'd be "a younger, mischievous Claude who seems kind." Was there anyone who wouldn't fall for such an agreeable young man if he put his mind to it? That doesn't seem possible.

"That's quite hard to believe. You're certain you simply haven't told her how you feel?"

"Well, perhaps I haven't…"

"There, you see? It's that indecisive attitude." If he isn't clearly

aware of his feelings, he can't pursue her properly. "It isn't confidence you lack—it's courage. Why not make full use of that precious face of yours?"

"You say that so easily, but there are some things even this face can't do."

"So you *do* know about your good looks. Listen to me—life isn't so convenient that she'll notice you if you only gaze at her… Well, no, it could happen with that face, but relying on that is arrogance, plain and simple. You're counting on her to do the work for you. If you make a properly sincere appeal to the object of your affections —"





“Like this?” Resting his chin in his hand, Vica tilts his head, peering into Aileen’s eyes.

They gaze at each other like that for a little while, faces incredibly close, and then Aileen nods silently.

“That’s right. See? You can do it if you try.”

“But you won’t think of me that way, will you?”

“Whose wife do you think I am?”

Aileen has to admit the action did make her heart race, but she’s accustomed enough to this sort of thing that she can hide it.

It isn’t clear whether Vica can tell what she’s really feeling. He chuckles to himself. “Well, that’s all I have. It isn’t as if I’ve used it much, either.”

“O-of course. That’s for the best.”

“That’s the opposite of what you said a moment ago. Don’t tell me—are you flustered?”

“No! I simply remembered that substance is more important than style!” she says emphatically, clenching her hands into fists, and Vica laughs out loud. What an innocent laugh.

It’s bad enough that he’s physically identical to Claude. These childlike ways of his, which Claude doesn’t possess, are dangerous in the extreme.

Aileen clears her throat. “And? Who is the object of your affections? Is she someone I know?”

“I’m not confident yet, so I’ll keep it to myself. I don’t know what these feelings of mine are, you see… They really don’t seem to be kind ones.”

“My. Does seeing her make you feel irritable, perhaps? That’s a classic manifestation of the fact that she’s constantly occupying your thoughts to the point that—”

“No, if I had to say, I’d like to make her cry.”

Aileen breaks off, studying Vica closely. He’s serious.

“If possible, I’d like to see her face twisted in humiliation.”

Aileen thumps the table hard with both fists and groans. “Why must it turn out this way? Is it fate…?!”

“Exactly. I knew it wasn’t love. If I didn’t know better, I might even say I hate her.”

"No, that's love! I've heard all this before!" Aileen laments, covering her face with her hands. Then she takes Vica's hand. He looks mystified. "Listen—come to me for advice whenever you wish. If you don't, I'll feel far too sorry for this woman!"

"Th-thank you very much. Unfortunately, though, I make a point of hunting my own prey."

"I—I see…"

Vica's wearing a bashful smile. Feeling hopeless, Aileen puts some distance between them.

Claude is an adult. The fact that he consciously uses his charms makes them harder to deal with, but he's capable of moderation. If Vica puts his mind to it, though, he may attack with everything he has, regardless of the woman's situation. The thought terrifies Aileen.

"…That's a relief. As long as that woman is here, you'll choose humans, won't you?"

Vica tilts his head, giving her a smile with no feeling behind it. "Even though she hates me? My love is unrequited, you know."

"Take a look at your face."

There's no mirror, so she points at the surface of the water in his cup. Vica looks down.

The reflection doesn't show a melancholy young man unable to choose between demons and humans. His eyes shine vividly, and he wears an irrepressible grin, as if his prey is right in front of him. It's the face of someone hungry for the future—of a human who's living in love. To Aileen, he looks exactly like Claude when he's plotting to punish Aileen, but she decides to write that off as a hallucination.

"I pity any woman who falls prey to that face," she mutters, turning away.

Vica laughs, finally taking a sip of his water.

A chill shoots through Claude from his feet to his head. Beside him, Ernst considerately offers hot tea from a travel flask. The flask's lid can be used as a cup, and the tea he pours into it steams gently. It's

a metal thermos with demon stones worked into it. Technology in Kilvas really is more advanced.

If we go to war, I get the feeling we'll have a hard time winning. If I mobilize all the demons, we may manage a draw…

If he drags Ashmael into it, they might win, but the holy king is sure to be furious. *I know what to do. Next time we meet, I'll propose a military alliance. It'll be easier to get Ashmael involved that way.*

He drinks the hot tea, then sighs in relief. The chill recedes.

"Thank you. Don't worry; I only shivered just now because someone is speaking ill of me."

"Don't be modest. You mean 'everybody.' There's no way it's just one person," Isaac says, mouthing off.

"……"

"The Valkyries' outpost is over there." Not the least bit flustered by Claude's withering gaze, Isaac checks the map, then points ahead.

The building stands on the outskirts of the capital, in a district that's nearly been deserted. It's one of the four Valkyrie outposts that are located on the capital's four sides. Of those four, this is the most desolate location. It's notorious as a place Valkyries get demoted to.

A guard is properly stationed at the gate, though. Ernst frowns. "That article was just published. They're bound to be wary. I don't have any acquaintances in that unit… As a rule, Valkyrie outposts are off-limits to everyone who doesn't have permission to enter, and the Valkyries are particularly wary of men. I suspect they'll turn us away at the gate."

"I showed you how to keep that from happening. Just follow the process," Isaac says reassuringly.

"You say 'process,' but I don't think much of strategies that take advantage of others' goodwill. We really should follow proper protocol and visit as the emperor and the prime minister."

"Like I said, that would take time, and they'd suspect you even more. This works because we'll catch them off guard. Quit griping and go. Come on, Demon King, you too."

"Wait, please. I need to steel myself for this. I'm not magically immune to the nerve-racking idea of dealing with multiple women at once."

"No one needs to hear any of your false modesty. You're at the top of your game, and you're obviously not really nervous. Go on. Just get over there ASAP." Isaac gives Claude a good, solid kick in the rear.

It's so unexpected that Claude can't even brace for it. He tumbles out of the building's shadow and sprawls on the flagstones. He manages to avoid landing on his face, but that isn't his most immediate concern.

The demon king has been bowled over by a mere *human*. Inconceivable. This can't be real.

Am I really weaker than Elefas right now?!

That can't be. That was— Yes, he'd only gotten careless. However, it's undeniably true that he fell. He planted his hands on the flagstones to catch himself, and he squeezes them into fists. As he's trembling from shock and humiliation, Ernst hastily runs up to him, asking, "A-are you all right?!"

"What's the matter? Are you hurt? Or are you feeling unwell?"

The Valkyrie guard seems concerned about Claude, who hasn't yet managed to get up. She comes over to them. This is exactly what Isaac was aiming for.

When the Valkyrie's hand is right in front of him, Claude raises his head. "I'm sorry… It's really nothing…"

The kind Valkyrie freezes. As does Ernst, for some reason.

Slowly getting to his knees, Claude gives her a fragile smile. "It was just a little vertigo. I'm sorry, I must seem pathetic."

"I—I see… C-can you stand? Are you hurt?"

"Thank you, you're very kind. I mustn't cause you trouble, though."

"I am a Valkyrie. Protecting others is my job. You're— Oh!"

She finally seems to have matched Claude's face with her memories of the emperor. Gently, Claude puts a finger to her lips. "I'm sorry. I don't want people to make a fuss."

"—O-of…course you don't!" Her voice cracks.

She's shaken; now's their chance. Claude darts a glance at Ernst, and the man gasps, straightening. "I…I'm sorry to ask, but do you suppose he could rest at the outpost?"

"Th-that's, um…not really… We can't admit members of the public without permission."

"He isn't a member of the public. I'm sorry, I realize it's a difficult request, but… Please. You're the only one we can ask."

"When you want to get your way, look straight into the other person's eyes, act earnest and anguished, and keep telling yourself they're the only one you can turn to."

Ernst has followed Isaac's instructions faithfully. He probably doesn't understand why, but the red in the Valkyrie's cheeks deepens. The combination of a handsome young man in distress and being relied on is thrilling.

In other words, this is a fiendish method that takes advantage of others' goodwill, and it only works for people with pretty faces.

"I-if you're going to go that far, then…!"

"I see. That's incredibly helpful. Come, Master Vica."

As Ernst turns to him, Claude deducts a few points. The man's relief has made him break into a natural, brilliant smile. What's the point of turning it on Claude? He should show it to the Valkyrie and make her like him more.

That said, they're off to a good start.

As the Valkyrie leads the way, Claude stealthily looks back. In the shadow of the building, he sees Isaac scowl and make a shooing motion with his hand. The man has no intention of recognizing Claude's efforts. His wife's lackeys really are careless about their personal safety.

However, Isaac is scheduled to make contact with Jasper and start working on another angle next. Claude can't dispose of him yet. Channeling his disappointment to make his acting even more convincing, he walks into the outpost.

The emperor and the prime minister's sudden visit sends confusion racing through the personnel. Half the looks they get are suspicious and critical, but no one is bold enough to be openly hostile toward Claude when he seems so weak and vulnerable. The

Valkyrie at the gate let her sense of justice win out; that was lucky, too. Most of all, Claude is confident that he could get enough gold, silver, and valuables to build a castle just by acting vulnerable.

At first, the Valkyries stealthily slip more wood onto the fire, and when he thanks them, they bring him a blanket. Then comes hot herbal tea, a cushion, cookies and fruit-infused water, and white bread soaked in stew, all in the blink of an eye.

"So this…is the power of a beautiful face…"

"What are you saying? The Valkyries are being kind, that's all."

"Yes… True… Very educational."

Ernst averts his eyes, completely at a loss. This gesture elicits a fresh wave of sympathy from their hosts, and it isn't long before they offer him sweets as well. Ordinarily, he would have stubbornly refused them, but Isaac has given him strict orders to graciously accept, say thank you, and invite them to spoil him even more if possible.

After stiffly sharing his painfully serious thoughts, Ernst clumsily asks for tea. Once the Valkyries recover from their surprise, they burst into laughter. The man has plenty of his own assets to work with, and Claude wishes he'd learn to weaponize them already.

However, the Valkyries aren't the sort of women who'd let a pretty face fool them completely.

"I'm impressed that the emperor fell ill with such impeccable timing… While accompanied by the prime minister to boot."

A tall woman emerges from the depths of the outpost; the Valkyries must have summoned her. Startled, Ernst gets to his feet. "Irena! What are you doing in the capital, way out here?"

"Personnel shuffle. The demons are behaving themselves right now, and they don't need me at the wall."

"…Friend of yours?" Claude asks.

Ernst nods. "She looked after me when I was just starting out. I outrank her, but… People call her a hero. She's one of the top five Valkyries."

"I've just been in the service a long time. Take yourselves elsewhere as soon as he's feeling better, all right? We're busy." She's smiling, but she clearly finds their visit suspicious.

Ernst lowers his voice. “Is it because of that article this morning?”

There’s a sharp intake of breath from the Valkyries around them. Hearing this, Irena plops down on a stool in front of Claude. “Yes. That article was a nasty piece of work. Some girls had rocks thrown at them while they were patrolling the capital.”

The article that set the capital abuzz this morning expressed doubts about the nature of the new empress. It exposed Diana’s autocratic behavior toward guests of state from other nations, the arrogant way she speaks, the fact that she’s neglecting the work of her station—including producing an heir—and the suspicion that she’s been misappropriating military funds.

In addition, her preferential treatment of some of the Valkyries was also criticized. Many citizens of the empire endure austerity and even poverty for the sake of the fight against the demons, yet there are some Valkyries who live in the lap of luxury.

“That sort of thing will settle down if we just leave it be for a while.” Irena doesn’t seem too concerned.

“I see…,” Claude says quietly, adding, “The empress is hastily taking steps to address it as well.”

“…Well, well. That’s good to hear.” Irena massages her forehead, just above her nose. She clearly doesn’t think it’s good at all.

As expected, Diana is furious, and she promptly started visiting all the papers to protest. Cattleya has been accompanying her, leaving Claude and the others free to move as they wish. Given Diana’s personality, Claude has little doubt she’ll probably go on a rampage and give the evening papers plenty to write about. And there’s a good chance Irena is imagining the same thing.

The woman seems like a reasonable type, and Claude sits up. “If you don’t mind, we’d like to hear your side of this.”

“Ernst, we don’t want trouble. Just take that boy and go home already.”

“We’d particularly like to hear how you are being treated, and the realities of your rank.”

This time, clear agitation runs through the listening Valkyries. Irena shifts her gaze from Ernst to Claude. “Those who are competent are promoted. That’s all.”

“In other words, you were all sent here because of your incompetence?” Claude scans the group around them. One of them starts to loom threateningly, only for Irena to throw out an arm to stop her.

Diana claims that the Valkyries have been sacrificed for the sake of the nation, so they should be rewarded. However, there are a great many Valkyries, and the group’s interpersonal relationships are every bit as complicated as they are anywhere else in human society. What’s more, rank is ostensibly tied to achievements in battle, which also determine treatment and pay. Inevitably, there are always winners and losers in such a system. This is what Isaac and Jasper have chosen to focus on and exploit.

Leaning back in his chair, Claude holds up two fingers. “By and large, those who become Valkyries come from one of two situations. Some are sold to the Valkyries by their parents and are drafted into the service against their will. Others volunteer. The empress is the former, and my sister is the latter.”

“…That’s right. What about it?”

“The empress feels that Valkyries are victims. From her perspective, the volunteers who chose to protect the empire are inconvenient. She needs them to claim they never volunteered, that they were forced to become Valkyries. Those who refuse to comply are labeled incompetent. Isn’t that how you’re currently being treated?”

Diana has been favoring Valkyries who agree with her assertion and show her complete loyalty.

The Valkyries stationed at this lonely outpost are those who failed to side with the winner. These are the ones Diana has deemed unusable.

“…If she wants to change the Valkyries’ treatment, that type of posturing is probably necessary. Besides, we fight to defend the empire. We’re proud of that.” Irena is calm. She doesn’t take the bait.

That’s not true of everyone else present, though.

Personal pride and dignity are important, but the exposé in the paper had revealed quite a lot of details, including salaries. What do

the Valkyries think now that they've seen that difference spelled out in such concrete terms?

Numbers are violence. I swear, Aileen's subordinates fight dirty.

"I understand. But that article made me think. There will be fewer and fewer Valkyries from this point on, and I'd like to make another path for them. I want to set up a retirement system."

Claude seems to have caught Irena by surprise. She blinks in confusion. A stir runs through the group around them.

"Because the majority of Valkyries die in battle, there has never been a formal path to retirement. Things will be different now, though. First, we'll recruit more male soldiers. Since there will inevitably be fewer Valkyries, that isn't something we can avoid. Like you, the men will have to become soldiers in order to protect their country. However, training them will take time."

"…Sure. They won't be like us. We're able to wield magic lances the moment we undergo that surgery."

"That's where the Valkyries' retirement system will come in. Some of you can no longer fight on the front lines due to age, while others cannot because of wounds they've suffered. I'd like to let those individuals retire from front-line duties and devote themselves to training those who will follow in their footsteps."

"So you're saying to side with you and not Diana, boy?" Irena cuts right to the chase. "Just so you know, we understand Diana better than the imperial family. We just don't hold a grudge against the imperial family and the nation and men as much as she and her faction do, that's all. We were also a bit disappointed in Ernst when he became prime minister. We thought, 'So in the end, even he thinks like an aristocrat. Like a man.'"

"No need to say it twice. Ernst, let's move on to the next place." Uncrossing his legs, Claude stands up.

Ernst rises as well. "Y-Your Majesty, are you sure?"

"You give up real easy… Wait, the next place? Are you planning to bring this up with the other groups, too?"

"It wouldn't be fair if I didn't. Besides, the empress is undoubtedly busy." Irena's eyes widen, and Claude burns his smile onto her retinas. "If you don't need the lifeline I've thrown you,

that's your business. I offered it to you, and that's all that matters."

After this, Diana will be even more suspicious of Valkyries who won't pledge their loyalty to her. It won't be long before deep doubts divide the group. Simply by visiting this place, Claude has already achieved his objective.

"I see. So you didn't come to make us your allies, hmm?"

"You're wrong, Irena. I want to cooperate with you." Clenching his fists, Ernst sits back down. Claude gives him a reproachful look, but Ernst keeps his eyes fixed on Irena. "I don't expect you to pretend like nothing ever happened, but I'd like you to think of the future as well. Someday, the Valkyries will be gone… I don't want you and yours to meet your end as traitors."

"You say that, but if the Valkyries rise up, your side won't stand a chance. I wager it will be remembered as a revolution, not treason. And it'll serve you people right."

"Then let's say your revolution succeeds. What will you do about other nations? This matter won't end at our borders. Diana views Hausel and Ellmeyer as enemies."

"…If she plans to invade Ellmeyer and spread devastation, then obviously we'll stop her."

"So the Valkyries will eventually fight among themselves? In that case, you'll end up as traitors either way."

Irena falls silent. Ernst goes on without giving her any time to think. "Even if you manage to stop her, what if Ellmeyer invades us? Vica's already on friendly terms with Ellmeyer's emperor. That was what the marriage was for."

"You can't mean… Did he invite him to the wedding so he'd come to view Diana's faction—or even all the Valkyries—as threats? …Did the emperor really think it through that far?"

"I was ordered to drag Ellmeyer into this," Ernst declares, before Irena can turn suspicious eyes on Claude.

Claude is impressed that he has the nerve to lie about something so dramatic, after coming all this way on thin ice. The man is surprisingly bold.

"Vica—His Majesty isn't the sort of ruler who only exists to be protected, as Cattleya says he is."

Grimacing, Irena rakes her fingers through her hair and sinks into thought. This seems like a good time to back Ernst up. "Ernst, that's enough. I respect the Valkyries who protect this nation, but I have no respect for those who would mock you."

Irena's head comes up. Once Claude is sure she's registered his cold smile, he turns on his heel. It's like watching a wave recede.

"Wait, boy—I mean, Your Majesty." His hand is on the door when she calls to him. "All right. I understand… You're right. You had us in checkmate the moment you came here. Neither Diana nor Cattleya will overlook this. They'll suspect us. On top of that, if you end up planning to crush the Valkyries instead of winning us over, we'll really have nowhere to run."

When he turns back, Irena is on her feet, watching him.

"Having that article published was part of your plot all along, wasn't it?"

"Perish the thought. I'd never do such a thing," he tells her, straight-faced, and she bursts out laughing.

"Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, you've got me beat. I thought I'd catch you off guard, and you didn't even blink. You're quite the actor. I must be losing my touch… I underestimated you. Sorry about that. You've chosen a good master, Ernst. Let me apologize."

Ernst's eyes light up.

Irena nods. "I'm very much in favor of that retirement system. Would a handshake be disrespectful, Your Majesty?"

Vica would surely take the hand Irena offers, so Claude squeezes her calloused hand in return. "…This is the hand of someone who's fought for a long time."

"It takes a good man to understand that. If we learn anything, I'll let you know. Oh, and if you need someone to be your shield, make it me. That burden's too heavy for the other girls to bear. It's a common story, you know? Middle-aged women getting jealous of younger girls and becoming jaded and conservative."

This heroic woman speaks resolutely, with perfect nonchalance, and Claude shifts his grip on her hand. "I'm honored to have earned the support of such a woman." With gratitude and respect, he lightly kisses the back of her hand. An excited murmur goes up.

Irena blinks. Then she sighs deeply. “Handsome men have it good, eh? I might end up placing my trust in you. That’s nasty stuff.”

“I intended it as a demonstration of my sincerity. Didn’t I, Ernst?”

“No, that was simply the power of good looks,” Ernst says seriously. Stabbed in the back by his ally, Claude grimaces. Planting her hands on her hips, Irena bursts out laughing again, and so do the rest of the Valkyries.

Well, never mind. Things should go as planned now. This provocation is bound to make the backlash worse, but it will draw attention away from his wife’s group. Catching himself, Claude blinks. As things stand, it would appear he’s volunteered to be a decoy. He can’t tell if he wants to get the better of his wife or rescue her.

Good grief. What could my wife be up to, and who is she attempting to get the better of?

Irena responds to Claude’s quiet smile with a wry one. “I was joking. Don’t make that diabolical expression.”

“—Diabolical?”

“Yes. You’re the spitting image of the demon king, plotting evil.”

It must be because I’m trying to pass myself off as Vica, Claude concludes privately. Smiling, he promises to do his best.

✦ Fifth Act ✦

The Villainess's Magnificent Clandestine Maneuver

Exercise is a must for pregnant women…but only in moderation.

"Why did you set off the alarm after you said it would be fine, Master Vica?!" Aileen yells.

"I'm sorry, I'm still not used to my magic. I thought it would go better."

"You're planning to use that excuse for everything, aren't you?" Keith asks as they run. "Wait, isn't that it? That dead end! That's the elevator you mentioned, isn't it, Lady Aileen?!"

"Yes, hurry and get inside!"

The elevator's door is already open. That's immensely helpful. Aileen runs in first and immediately hits the button to close the door. Keith dives in right behind her, followed by Vica.

One of their Valkyrie pursuers shouts, "Stop! That's… Wait, Emperor Vica?! What's he doing here?!"

The pure-white elevator door shuts. Apparently, the elevator has a fixed destination, because it begins to move without any action on their part. From the way gravity noticeably pulls on her shoulders, Aileen thinks they're probably descending.

For the moment, they've managed to elude the Valkyries, but Vica *tsk*s irritably. "This elevator neutralizes magic."

Aileen gently touches the pure-white wall. The elevator is spacious, but its blank whiteness makes it feel oddly oppressive. It gives off the same impression as the floating palace.

"It must be made of divine stones. It's being propelled by sacred power… Also, they may have finally realized who we really are."

Having learned from their experiences the day before, Vica cast a spell on the Valkyries so that even if he, Keith, and Aileen triggered alarms and could no longer hide, the Valkyries wouldn't be able to see them properly. However, during their escape into the elevator, Vica's face had been spotted. Aileen bitterly regrets their slipup.

Keith speaks up cheerfully. "Assuming we have been found out, what should we do, Lady Aileen? That's the important part."

Drawing a deep breath, Aileen quickly switches gears. "That's obvious: We claim dastardly Master Vica threatened us and forced us to accompany him. If they catch us, we'll testify that we know nothing."

"What…? I mean, it's fine, but that's not the least bit persuasive."

"Gracious, it should do quite well. Master Claude spoils me, and I'm a useless girl who knows nothing of the world. That's the image they have of me, at any rate." Aileen gives a charming smile.

Keith returns her nod, beaming. "That's the demon king's wife, all right. You have no qualms about deceiving others or tossing them aside like yesterday's garbage."

"I shall take that as a compliment."

"Are you sure that's what it was…? It seems to me as i-if…"

Vica's voice wavers unnaturally. The elevator is slowing down. They're nearing their destination.

Keith pushes up his glasses, then glances her way. "Come to think of it, Lady Aileen. Why did you suggest making for this elevator?"

"What? …W-well, Kilvas doesn't have the technology it would take to descend underground, and of course Ellmeyer doesn't, either. That means both this elevator and wherever it leads must have been made by Hausel."

She remembered that in the game, you always used an elevator whenever traveling to a place connected to Hausel for the Valkyrie surgery or for medical treatment. Despite needing to come up with an alternate reason on the spot, she's made a rather persuasive case. Vica nods. "The elevator wasn't included in the building's plans. I also think something must be hidden here. Your eyes are as sharp as a vulture's, Lady Aileen."

"Y-yes, I— Wait, was that really a compliment?"

“I also consider your keen vision worthy of constant admiration, Lady Aileen,” Keith agrees.

She gets the feeling they’ve said something rude to her, but arguing would just come back to bite her, so she holds her tongue. What’s more important is the destination of this elevator; it doesn’t even have a display that shows floor numbers.

A sound signals that they’ve arrived, and the door opens.

A black floor and ceiling stretch away from the door in a straight line. Lights gleam at regular intervals in both surfaces, seemingly showing the way. This is most definitely a corridor that goes somewhere important. Steeling herself, Aileen steps out of the white box—and when she sees what opens up around her, her next words slip out involuntarily. “The queen’s blue country…”

“Is this…? Are we at the bottom of the ocean?” Cautiously, Keith touches the transparent wall. It seems to be made of very thick glass. On the other side, the world is a deep blue. Higher up, small schools of fish swim past, and white diaphanous jellyfish drift by.

Vica follows them with his eyes, then comes to his senses with a jolt. “Wait. As far as I know, there is no ocean near the wall.”

“That elevator may be a transfer device,” Aileen says. “We might be on the outskirts of Hausel.”

Hausel is an island nation. In those lands, the ocean is never far. Vica exhales in what could be either wonder or fear. “So this…is the Queendom of Hausel…”

“Don’t be scared. It’s time to get moving. We aren’t here on a pleasure trip.”

With those words of reassurance, Aileen sets off. Vica and Keith quickly follow after her.

Without warning, the lights in the ceiling wink out. The underwater corridor is ending. As she takes a careful step into the space beyond it, bright light glares down from an even higher ceiling.

The room is large and circular. An ornamented pillar stands in the center, encircled by a round table and haphazardly placed chairs. The walls are still glass, but the view beyond them is no longer the ocean. It’s a spacious room with gray walls.

Several people come into view.

They're all dressed in simple clothing, and they all seem dazed. They're standing up or hugging their knees, and their eyes are hollow and unfocused. They don't seem to have noticed Aileen's group. Even when she calls to them, there's no response. Perhaps they can't see through the glass.

Vica murmurs quietly, "It doesn't appear to be a jail for prisoners. The location's too inconvenient."

"I'd imagine not… I think those are all men," Keith says.

At that, the same thought occurs to all of them.

The man who became a demon before their eyes. The really concerning thing is the surgical table in the inner room.

If I recall, the room used for the Valkyries' treatment and surgeries looked like this in the game art…

However, there are no women in that vast room. The abrupt crash of something breaking yanks Aileen back to the present. "Wh-what was that?! Have they caught up to us?!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I broke this, and— Whoa! Aggghhh!"

Vica tried to pull out something that had been stored beneath the round table in the center, and it's spilled everywhere. There's shelving under the table, and what Aileen thought were ornaments on the pillar are demon stones.

"Warn us before you act, please. You startled me," she says. Then she notices something. "Master Vica?"

Vica has been flipping through the booklet he pulled off the shelf, and he stiffens. When Aileen approaches, wondering what's happened, the sight of the book he's holding makes her freeze as well.

"The Demon King Creation Project…?!" Aileen can't believe her eyes.

"Huh? What did you just say?"

"Look at this, Master Keith. This is a *backup* project; its objective is to artificially create a demon king by performing the Valkyrie surgery on men—"

As is common with the Queendom's documents, it's written in the old tongue.

Vica seems able to read it. He turns the pages rapidly, his eyes hungrily drinking in the words. Aileen explains to Keith the parts she's managed to make out. "It says that incompatible subjects become demons—they transform."

Keith takes another look around, his eyebrows drawing together. "Then are these men test subjects? It's likely they've been operated on alread— Master Vica?"

"I'll save them."

Suddenly flinging the book aside, Vica starts toward the glass, behind which the men are trapped.

"W-wait, Master Vica. I understand how you feel, but if we do that—"

"It's all right. It looks as though I can use magic here. I'll be able to teleport them all out." As Vica reaches for the glass, there's a crackling noise, and his hand is repelled. Some sort of spell has been cast on the glass. It's magic, not sacred power. Sacred power isn't suited to imprisoning people.

Vica reaches out again, and there's a series of audible cracks as his magic and the spell repel each other. Wind rages around them.

Aileen raises her voice. "Even so! We don't know what sort of state those men are in. It isn't safe!"

"Then are you saying we should just leave them like this? When it's my fault—" Vica's turned around, but then he covers his mouth with a hand and staggers.

"Master Vica?"

"Stay away!" he yells sharply. Leaning against the glass, he raises his hands to his face.

Those hands are covered in black scales, and they've begun to sprout sharp claws.

His red eyes waver—a premonition of mounting resignation and despair. An omen that he is becoming a demon.

Why now?!

Is it because he's been using magic when he wasn't used to it? At any rate, Aileen moves closer. "Master Vica, calm yourself. If you lose yourself in a place like this—"

"Be…quiet. Someone's coming…!"

As she tries to look back, she feels herself rise off the ground. She and Keith are shoved into a corridor that's different from the one they used to enter, and she falls on her rump. When she tries to get up, her head bangs into something. It's a barrier. A thin, dome-shaped membrane covers their immediate surroundings. It's clear whose work it is.

"Master Vica! What's—?"

"You don't seem to be feeling well. It's because you got carried away and used magic." A mocking voice echoes from the corridor on the opposite side. They've been found. Not only that, but the woman at the head of the group isn't just a Valkyrie.

What is she *doing here?* —No, thinking like that isn't productive. The wall that was linked to this facility was built by Hausel. It wouldn't be odd if there was a device or two that could transport her here from the capital in a flash.

Raising his glaring red eyes, Vica sighs. "…Hi there…Di…ana."

"I never thought I'd find you here. Where are the other intruders?" Diana scans the room. She has to have seen Aileen and Keith, but her eyes move on as if she hadn't.

A cloaking barrier…

Vica's hiding them. If they stay quiet and still, they're very unlikely to be discovered.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Not compared to the fact that you faked the attack on yourself."

Diana lifts a hand, and the Valkyries raise their weapons. The tips of their lances are all pointed at the emperor of their own country.

"I thought it was odd, but it all makes sense now. So Ernst was in on it, too. Was this a plot to gain power over the Valkyries? How unfortunate for you. Oh, I won't kill you. You're still useful."

"…That's an awful…thing to say to…your brand-new…husband…"

"I wouldn't have needed you once the wedding was over anyway. If you'd behaved yourself, though, you could have lived a little longer. By making a break for it, you've shortened your own life. You've really done something nobody needed. Thanks to you, we've been saddled with a substitute emperor, and on top of that, Cattleya… Whatever, it's fine. She's probably given up on the

substitute emperor by now."

"…Did Emperor Claude…do something?"

"He's done plenty. That womanizer."

The word doesn't fit the tense atmosphere. Aileen frowns. What has that husband of hers been doing?

"Still, it's about time for Cattleya to make her move. The narrative's changed, but now we have a reason to invade Ellmeyer. We'll make this empire understand it needs the Valkyries. I won't let anyone treat us as useless."

Diana spins the magic lance in her hands, then raises it high.

"You're going to transform. Then you'll lead the demons and destroy Kilvas. That is *the destiny of the red-eyed demon*."

Aileen catches Keith's arm to stop herself from leaping out at them. Keith hugs her shoulders, as if he's holding himself back as well.

"If you have any last words, I'll hear them."

"I have scores of them, but…I wonder if my sister will be sad."

"Cattleya is kind. There's no other option, though. She's steeled herself for this. No doubt she doesn't want her life to be this constrained."

"…And you? Won't you be sad?" Vica looks up at Diana. He's wearing his usual gentle smile.

Diana's eyebrows twitch as if Vica has offended her. "Die, monster. It's your fault. This damnable life… Don't even joke about that."

Accepting those words, Vica looks Aileen and Keith's way. The emotion in those lovely, soft, red eyes is resignation.

This is how it was meant to be. And that's fine.

Aileen bites her lower lip. She can't go out there now. She'll ruin everything.

The dull thud of a magic lance piercing a shoulder rings out. There's a spray of blood. At the same time, the Valkyries unfurl a net of glittering crystal and cast it. Aileen knows what it is. It's the magic item Hausel used to capture demons.

The net swallows Vica like it's catching a fish, transforming him into a small crystal. It falls to the floor with a light *clink*, and Diana

picks it up, looking as if she's lost interest in him already. At the same time, Aileen vaguely senses that the membrane surrounding them has vanished.

Diana's group hasn't noticed them yet. Gently, Aileen sets a hand against the glass wall. She can see the ocean through it.

These are probably the waters near Hausel. Demons who adore Claude are quite close. Demolishing a building in a ruined country won't cause an international incident.

When she catches Keith's hand, he squeezes hers back. That's enough for her to know that they're thinking the same thing.

In the next moment, the building rocks as if the earth has moved beneath it.

"…What was that? We're underwater. It can't be an earthquake…"

"Lady Diana, it's a demon! A demon is attacking us!"

"But demons never come near Hausel."

Diana's correct. However, they will if the demon king orders them to.

The ceiling and floor begin to creak. An enormous squid demon has wrapped its arms around the corridor. Cracks race through the glass walls, and seawater floods in. Apparently, the demon means to break the entire structure. Diana and the others hastily retreat into the corridor where they emerged.

With a terrific *crack*, the thick glass walls shatter. Keith pulls Aileen into his arms. They're flung out into the ocean with tremendous force and are welcomed by the wide, gaping mouth of a whale demon.

After that, they simply have their new friend carry them to the surface.

Even if she weren't pregnant, this mode of transport is far too grueling for comfort.

After Keith hoists her up onto the top of the whale's head, Aileen sighs. "I do believe this child will be quite sturdy…"

"How about that." Keith is completely soaked as well. Once he's set her down, Aileen wrings out her hair and her skirts. The sunlight is warm, but the end of summer is near. Both for herself and the sake of the child she's carrying, she needs to warm up quickly.

"What would you like to do now?" Keith asks her, as they stand side by side in the sea wind. "It looks as if things are about to get rough in Kilvas… Should we return to Ellmeyer? I ordered the demons to rescue us, so they'll take us back. To either country."

Aileen laughs a little. "'To either,' hmm? …Master Vica's face really is against the rules."

"It is, isn't it? It reminded me of something. When he was about that age, milord often used to gaze out the windows of the old castle, and his expression looked just like that."

This is how it was meant to be. And that's fine. If I can protect something by giving up, then…

"Yes… Master Claude did wear that expression, didn't he?"

"Master Vica isn't Master Claude, of course. I don't want you to misread this. With that in mind, let me ask you: Which country shall we head toward?"

"Hausel."

"Pardon?" Keith blinks.

Aileen giggles. "As I've told you time and time again, I'm well aware that I am about to be a mother. I'll stick to behind-the-scenes work this time. Perhaps I'll be the shadow commander in chief."

"*…Sigh.* I really can't bring myself to believe you."

"Don't be rude. We mustn't underestimate the Valkyries. Not only that, but this is about Kilvas. If Ellmeyer gets too involved, we'll be accused of interfering in domestic affairs. Master Claude is trapped there already. If he can't use magic, he's weaker than Elefas… Ah, my poor Master Claude. To save that face of his, we must rescue him without wounding his pride. Being a wife is very trying."

Keith bursts out laughing.

Aileen continues primly, "Rachel and the others will have called Ellmeyer at Hausel's port by now. Besides, we should have a little time before the Valkyries make Master Vica attack the capital. Wouldn't it be dashing to strike just as that woman's feeling triumphant and has lowered her guard?"

"I see. That's very like a shadow commander in chief, yes. I imagine Bel and Almond will be delighted."

That should do nicely.

The red-eyed demon. If things are progressing according to the game, Diana shouldn't know that bit of information yet, so why did she say it? Until they've clarified that, Aileen will keep all her cards hidden.

And while she is extremely reluctant to do so, there's someone she would like to contact. Aileen certainly isn't relying on her, and this doesn't mean she believes her. Still, to save Vica, that woman's advice is necessary.

Particularly if the enemy is *just like them*.

"For the sake of winning, I'll use everything at my disposal. That's quite fitting for the demon king's wife, isn't it?"

When she sweeps her wet hair aside, the scattering water droplets glimmer in the light. Laying a hand over his heart, Keith bows respectfully.

Taking a defiant tone, issuing gag orders, instigating a cover-up—they really aren't pulling their punches. Ernst sighs; he's seen the headlines of the newspaper Claude is skimming. "…It isn't settling down at all, is it?"

"The empress must have gone on a serious rampage. As you'd expect, Cattleya seems to be reining her in now, and she's calmed down somewhat. Still, the Valkyries are no longer a united front."

The article also clearly states that Diana is opposed to the retirement system. Meanwhile, Irena has declared that she is in favor. The Valkyries have a growing schism in their ranks.

"Public opinion is leaning toward the emperor… I'm not sure how to put this. I can't believe it. Hardly two weeks have passed since the wedding. Everything is going so smoothly…"

"It's just a facade, Ernst. Nothing's actually changed."

All they've really done is generate backlash against the Valkyries among the general public. It hasn't solved the most fundamental problem: the difference in military strength.

"If we had time, we'd be able to capitalize on the criticism and gradually chip away at their power…but I doubt we'll manage that."

Now then, how will this go? From this point, Isaac has predicted three possible paths.

First, the opposition will continue, and they'll resort to drastic measures. In that case, the country will inevitably be forced to endure some turmoil. Their top priority is to prevent that turmoil from reaching Ellmeyer. If that's what comes to pass, it won't be long before Claude gets an invitation to leave the imperial capital as soon as possible, and it will be vital to time his departure carefully.

The second possibility is, no matter what Diana and Cattleya actually think, they'll back down for now. This is the alternative that's easiest on Claude. He can just have Vica take over and deal with the rest.

The last option is also the most troublesome one.

They'll ask for my cooperation. The situation will be complicated whether I refuse or accept… The worst-case scenario will be if Aileen and the others have been captured.

However, on beautifully clear, peaceful days like this, bad premonitions always prove to be correct.

"Ernst, I'm sorry. I'd like to speak with His Majesty alone."

Claude has been holed up in his office since morning, approving documents, when Cattleya comes to see him. Ernst gives him a questioning look, and Claude nods. It would be stranger to refuse her. Ernst appears uneasy, but that's probably inevitable.

They've already done everything they can.

"Master Claude," Cattleya says, once they're alone. She must intend for this to be a personal conversation. Claude clasps his hands on the desk and waits for her to continue.

"I'm told you sent an official notice to the newspapers telling them to refrain from printing articles about the empress. Thank you very much."

"It was the natural thing to do. Business like that will impact the authority of the imperial family. Even as a substitute, I can't overlook it."

"It was done too skillfully, so we investigated as well. It appears that a journalist from Ellmeyer was behind it. I'm told he's a friend of Lady Aileen's. A disaster for you, too, isn't it?"

Even though Claude braced himself, he looks stunned. Cattleya smiles wryly. "I've heard that life was hard for Lady Aileen in Ellmeyer, since others constantly compared her to the Maid of the Sacred Sword. Diana's position is similar, and seeing her must have made Lady Aileen uneasy. Articles the journalist prepared to curry favor with Lady Aileen have been circulating."

"I don't think my wife is like that…" Claude accidentally lets slip what he actually believes. As a result, his words come across as quite genuine.

Cattleya gives him a sympathetic look. "We aren't sure yet whether Lady Aileen actively issued instructions…but it appears you really didn't know."

"Yes, this is the first I've heard of it… I never even dreamed a thing like this could happen."

"Women are frightening, Master Claude. Especially when they fear their husband or lover may be taken from them, many women will go completely out of control. Lady Aileen must be that type. I'm not saying there was any malice behind it. However, in terms of how she behaved toward the empress of another country, it was very poorly thought out. I managed to calm Diana down, but…"

"I'm sorry for the trouble we've caused you. Once I'm home, I'll lecture her thoroughly."

His wife does let things get out of hand quite often. Cattleya isn't technically wrong about that, so his apology is also very sincere.

This development is concerning, though. Something Claude did has been blamed on "Aileen going out of control." Isaac and Jasper would never make a mistake like that. If it came down to it, they would cheerfully have sold Claude out to Cattleya's faction instead.

That means this information was intentionally leaked, and he doesn't know why.

"We were the ones who asked you to act as a substitute. I can't speak too harshly. No doubt Lady Aileen was privately unhappy with the idea. Master Claude, is life difficult for you in Ellmeyer?"

He'd been confident he could calmly handle anything she said to him, and yet his expression tenses.

"I'm told the power of Lady Aileen's family was a large factor

behind your installation as emperor. However, the house of d'Autriche was also a driving force behind your disinheritance. Was your marriage and ascension to the throne truly what you wanted? Is it painful for you? You're in Kilvas now; no one is listening. Please tell me what you really— Master Claude?"

"Uh…… No, I…"

The act he'd planned to put on has been completely blown away. At his wits' end, Claude covers his mouth and averts his eyes. To Cattleya, it may look as if he's suffering.

So that's what they were after!

Jasper and Isaac falsified foolish behavior on Aileen's part in order to provoke Cattleya into inviting Claude to join the other side. His wife's right-hand man may genuinely have sold him out. He might even be thinking of having him disposed of, along with these people. Claude's starting feel that, if he makes a single wrong move here, it will be fatal to his dignity as a husband.

"Actually, Master Claude, just between you and me…," Cattleya begins. Claude looks up. She's calm, and he can't tell how far she's managed to read his mind. After all, she's no fool. "…the demons are growing more active. I think it's because Vica is near them."

"You've found Vica? Where…?"

"Beyond the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall—the wall meant to keep the demons at bay. Vica seems to have gone there to meet them. We believe he orchestrated the attack on himself. Ernst was probably his accomplice. I've asked my subordinates to restrain him so he can be questioned."

Claude's eyes go to the door Ernst left through, then return to Cattleya. She's impossibly calm. "I apologize for dragging you into this."

"…Then am I being dismissed?"

"That is what I would like to discuss with you. Vica is on the verge of transforming into a demon. Just as you did, Master Claude."

"I'm the demon king. Vica is human. He isn't even a cambion. I doubt there's any reason for him to turn into a demon." Claude has a bad feeling about this, so he tries to take the conversation as far off-topic as possible.

However, Cattleya continues impassively, "In order for Hausel to maintain its authority and remain a global power, they needed the demon king. There was too much uncertainty in simply waiting for Ellmeyer's legend to come to pass. A century or two would be one thing, but if it took longer… And so Hausel attempted to artificially create a demon king by performing the Valkyrie surgery on men. Or perhaps a surgery meant to create the demon king was repurposed for the Valkyries. Either way, the first emperor of Kilvas was their only success."

Claude's eyes widen. Cattleya flashes a troubled smile. "Now you understand why the imperial family of Kilvas received support from Hausel. Vica, a son of the imperial family, was your spare. He's an artificial demon king created by Hausel, and he is capable of controlling the demons on the other side of the wall.

"…Is this true? Is there a way to return him to his human form?"

The question seems to startle Cattleya a little. "It's too late. He used a lot of his magic after leaving the capital, and it's beginning to weigh on him physically. We're holding him here and suppressing the transformation, but it's only a matter of time. Master Claude, please."

Cattleya leans over the desk, fixing her tranquil gaze on him. "Fight alongside the Valkyries as the emperor of Kilvas."

"That's…"

"Long ago, I was young, and I couldn't rescue you from Ellmeyer. But things are different now. We can say the demons Vica leads are an attack from Ellmeyer."

Cattleya doesn't look away.

Her eyes look the same as when she asked if he was happy, but this time, she's asking something quite different. "Or will you remain bound to the empire that used you however it pleased? If demons invade us, Ellmeyer will surely become the focus of all the anger and resentment. If you are its emperor, you'll be blamed again. Not just by your own country, but by the entire world."

Probably so. That's precisely why Claude is here to stop that from happening.

"We've run off everyone who came from Ellmeyer with that

journalist. There's nothing left to tie you to it now. All you need to do is refrain from leaving the capital."

"…Are you proposing that because you know I can't use my magic here?"

"Ernst must have said something. I'm not doubting you, though." Even when Claude frowns at this, Cattleya's expression doesn't change. "You tried to make Irena and the other Valkyries your allies due to your strong sense of responsibility as Ellmeyer's emperor. You knew nothing. Let's *say that's how it was*, shall we?"

She puts him in check, neatly cutting off his escape route. She has no illusions that she'd be able to deceive him with flowery words.

Sensing a hint of salvation in that, Claude responds with another wry smile. "I don't seem to have many options."

"You are my one regret. Please let me make up for it."

Valkyries flood into the office. They don't actively restrain him, but with no magic or allies, Claude has no way to resist.

"I assume Ernst and Irena are safe? This country needs both of them."

For a moment, Cattleya's expression turns bitter, but her tranquil smile doesn't take long to reappear. It finally occurs to Claude that smiling that way is a habit for her. "I'll persuade them… I really doubt Ernst will understand, though."

"That just means you're using the wrong methods of persuasion." Claude rises to his feet. Cattleya doesn't respond.

They leave the office. When Claude peers through the large window in the corridor, he can see the Valkyries' barracks. Part of the "preferable treatment" that has been lambasted in the newspapers lately is that they are being fully renovated; construction has already begun. "Over here, right?" An energetic boy smiles over an unfurled blueprint. A young man with an eye patch is silently relocating flowers from the flower beds. Claude recognizes both of them, and he sighs.

"The work begins today, as scheduled."

Cattleya is probably trying to say that fluctuations in public opinion don't bother them one bit. He nods quietly, then follows her.

The uproar starts before they reach the emperor's private chambers. One Valkyrie seems to be in a great hurry; she runs up the stairs toward them, shouting as soon as she sees Cattleya. "Lady Cattleya, Ernst has disappeared from jail!"

"Disappeared?" Cattleya turns to her, but her gaze promptly returns to Claude.

Claude shrugs. "As you can see, I can't use magic. Perhaps Irena saved him?"

"She's in the dungeon… You wouldn't think it now, but the man was a commissioned officer. There may have been a rat we didn't know about. Hurry and track him down. This way, Master Claude."

Cattleya opens the door to the emperor's chambers. The moment Claude steps inside, an unpleasant feeling wells inside him. Some sort of spell has been cast on the whole space.

"This room was made by Hausel so that we could confine the demon king in an emergency."

"…Well, well, well. To think you'd protect me so graciously when I have no magic."

"If you behave yourself, you won't be harmed… Maybe we can even share a meal together."

Cattleya gently closes the door. They've left him alone, but he's probably being watched. It's likely that the room itself has an access-restricting barrier cast on it. Anyone who wants to enter will have to be an accomplished mage.

For the moment, Claude seats himself in a chair, looks up at the ceiling, and sighs. "'Save my sister,' hmm?"

What a troublesome request. He understands the role he's been given, but this situation irritates him to no end. Fortunately, it looks as if he'll have time to think.

Still, they rescued Ernst before me? Who gave that *order?*

Looks like I'll be disposing of my wife's subordinates after all, he vows, closing his eyes.

Ernst was sure he was in the dungeon, but what he's seeing now

clearly isn't the imperial castle's interior.

What makes it more confusing is that he recognizes this place. It's Irena's outpost, the one he visited just the other day. He rubs his eyes hard with his arm, but the outpost doesn't disappear. Not only that, the one who's raised a hand and called to him from the back of the room isn't Irena or another Valkyrie—it's Isaac.

"Glad to see you're safe. Man, your reactions are slow. Hey, sneaky mage, you'd better not have done anything weird."

"I didn't. He's been abruptly teleported without his consent, so I imagine he's just wildly disoriented."

"Teleported," Ernst murmurs quietly to himself.

The man who abruptly appeared behind him in the dungeon and grabbed his arm comes to stand in front of him, pushing back his hood. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Elefas. I'm told Master Claude is deeply in your debt."

Ernst has heard that name before, and he blinks. "Elefas… You're the one who…"

"I categorically refuse to hear the rest of that. I apologize for the lack of explanation earlier. Our top priority was getting you to safety."

"Then… This really is Irena's outpost? Why isn't anyone here?" Ernst scans the room.

Isaac answers nonchalantly, "The Valkyries hauled them in last night. They're all in the dungeon right now. It sounds as if Diana's people are planning to take them somewhere, but we dunno where yet. Jasper's been held responsible for those articles and expelled from the capital. It sounds like the mage here protected him, so he should be fine. As an aside, I made it seem like I had Jasper take the heat and I scuttled back home ahead of him. From the looks of things, nobody's caught on yet."

"No, wait! What's the meaning of this? They arrested Irena's unit? No one mentioned anything to me. There's no way that would be allowed without consent from either myself or the emperor, and neither of us ordered—"

"The empress has control over the Valkyries' personnel decisions. Besides, did you forget where they stuck you? Things have gone

waaay past that level."

Realizing that Cattleya and the others have finally made their move, Ernst clenches his hands into fists.

"Well, Isaac? What do we do next?" Elefas asks.

"It's just a question of whether we'll make it in time. Seriously, my guy, why can't you teleport a bunch of people all at once like the demon king can? We can't use those human weapons this time around, and the only ones with a shot at making it in time are flying demons."

"As I've said many times before, please don't group Master Claude and me together! I can teleport despite being neither the demon king nor the holy king, yet everyone treats me with so little respect. The only one who thanked me was Jasper, you know!! He said he'd run an advertisement for my wife's new product… He's so kind!"

"You're boasting about teleporting, but it took you two full days to get here, with breaks… You had the demons carry you quite a ways from Hausel, didn't you?"

"Er, don't the demons listen only to Emperor Claude?" Ernst still hasn't caught up with the situation, but he asks that question anyway.

Sitting down in a chair by the wall, Isaac scratches his cheek. "As a rule, yeah, but there are ways to work around that."

"Specifically, tricking them by saying it's for the demon king's sake, telling them sob stories, and bribing them with sweets, you mean. And having the demon king's wife threaten to stand on the front line works pretty well, too," Elefas adds.

"…W-wait a moment. Do you mean Empress Aileen?! Th-the front line…? I-i-is that all right? Having the empress do a thing like—"

"It totally isn't, so everybody's hell-bent on stopping her. That adviser's a real tyrant."

Does that mean they're acting on the adviser's instructions right now? Ernst is having trouble understanding this situation.

"We'll chat later. Listen up, Emperor Kilvas has been captured by the Valkyries," Isaac informs them.

"Master Vica?! They've found him…?! That must be why they

arrested me." All of Ernst's other questions fly right out of his mind. With a gasp, he looks up. "Then what about Emperor Claude?! Don't tell me the Valkyries also have him!"

"Probably."

"No! It's our fault… We must rescue him at once—and who knows what will happen to Vica…" Ernst is tormented by regret.

Elefas speaks seriously. "This person is a good man. He's been serving as Master Claude's attendant, hasn't he?"

"It's probably because the demon king stayed real focused on his work," Isaac explains.

"Huh? Wait just a minute. What's this? Master Claude didn't run or make impossible demands? He just diligently went to work? You must be joking. Then why does he make us do all of that back home…?"

"Let's talk that over with the rest of our group later. You don't have to worry about the demon king. We've already taken the appropriate steps. Those Valkyries are probably chatting him up right now."

Another question occurs to Ernst, and he thinks hard. "Is this the third potential path you mentioned? But you said the chances of it happening were low…"

"I made it more likely. I bet they'll pick that path. After all, making an ally of the demon king is better than making an enemy of him." Isaac sounds fairly certain now.

"Did you do that at your own discretion?" Ernst can't imagine Claude giving that instruction. Was this a violation of orders? He knows this is trivial, but he can't have them taking the ladder away and leaving him stranded on it later.

Isaac's expression is sour. "…Nah. It was my decision, but the order came from the shadow commander in chief."

"……I'm sorry, is that an Ellmeyer-style joke?"

"Look, please don't draw attention to it. Just let it go." Isaac is in agony.

Beside him, Elefas laughs. "Oh, what's wrong with it, the shadow commander in chief's right-hand man?" I think that title's perfect for you. After all, you're about to do something foul enough to be

worthy of the name."

"You're the last person I want to hear that from, you sneaky mage. Actually, you people should be grateful to me: I pinned down the demon king for you. He can just use that face of his to string the Valkyries along, and we'll have more freedom to move."

"This has nothing to do with me. As Master Claude's faithful subordinate, I could never say something so dreadful. I intend to draw up an official record stating I was against it."

So who's actually giving the orders here? Ernst is confused.

Isaac's gaze returns to him. "Never mind that. What comes next is more important. Timewise, I think finding your emperor is pretty close to impossible, so we're discarding that plan. You've led Valkyries before, right?"

Ernst nods, and Isaac opens a map. "If a huge army of demons gets past the wall and makes for the capital, and the Valkyries counterattack, point out the easiest battlefield that gives them the biggest advantage. The route, too. We'll collect Emperor Kilvas there."

"Are you saying Vica's going to appear there? Why would he be with the demons—?" Before Isaac answers, a certain premonition makes Ernst choke slightly. "Don't tell me… Has Vica become a demon? Just as the legend says?"

Tradition has it that a man with black hair and red eyes will be the reincarnation of the demon king, and that men of the imperial family of Kilvas turn into demons. Taken in combination with the warning that this man must never leave the capital, it's a cleverly designed legend. Ernst never seriously believed it. Even Vica laughed and said life would be easier if he could become the demon king.

However, Cattleya—and after a certain point, Diana—certainly believed it. As a result, both Vica and Ernst always felt that something wasn't quite right. That was why Vica was determined to leave the capital.

Ernst never imagined it could be real, though.

Isaac, on the other hand, harbors no such preconceptions. "If nothing changes, I hear that's what's going to happen to him. Turns out your emperor really is a demon king."

"Even if that's true, why would he become a demon?! Emperor Claude is properly human…" While Ernst is still speaking, it hits him: The Valkyries have captured Vica, and they've done something to him. Realizing what Diana and Cattleya are plotting, Ernst gasps. The thought, *It can't be true*, runs around and around in his mind, but Isaac's unflinching gaze instantly dispels that naive wish.

Although he doesn't want to believe it, those two have changed. It began the day Hausel fell.

Elefas is watching Ernst and Isaac steadily. His eyes are soft, but he doesn't look away. "This is the first question you should ask, Isaac: 'If Emperor Kilvas becomes a demon king, can you still serve him?'"

Ernst smacks his own cheeks sharply. Elefas and Isaac both blink.

"I'm sorry. All sorts of things have happened at once, and I'm afraid it made me panic."

"…Well, yeah, panicking is a perfectly normal reaction. It's just that we're short on time, so…" Isaac isn't unsympathetic, but the clock is ticking.

"Yes, there's no problem. Even if he is the demon king, Vica is the emperor of Kilvas. More importantly, he needs me. What could be better than being wanted by the demon king emperor and being able to serve him? I can't wait. It sounds like fun." Ernst laughs.

Isaac looks turned off. "Do the demon king's people all think about serving him like that?"

"I'm under no obligation to tell you," Elefas says brusquely.

Ernst pauses for the space of a breath. "After I dragged you into our affairs this much, apologizing would probably be rude, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, perhaps. We're doing what's convenient for us anyway," Elefas says.

Clapping both hands onto his knees, Ernst sits down emphatically. Facing Isaac across the table, he looks him straight in the eye. "I am grateful to Ellmeyer. I vow we'll repay this favor someday."

Both Isaac and Elefas seem startled. However, they quickly break into smiles.

"Don't worry about it too much. We fully plan to collect. Besides,

the reason's probably his face anyway," Isaac explains.

"His face… Emperor Claude's? …No, Vica's?"

"That's right. The face that has dazzled even our shadow commander in chief is what will save you and your people in the end."

"Who on earth is this shadow commander in chief? It can't possibly be your wife, can it, Isaac?!"

After a brief pause, Elefas bursts out laughing, and Isaac massages the spot on his forehead right above his nose. "Never mind that," he says, shoving the map at Ernst, and in the end, Isaac and Elefas refuse to tell Ernst who it is.



The world is filled with inconsiderate people. Crumpling the newspaper, Diana tosses it away. She's in a spire of the imperial castle, below the bell tower, and the wind catches the paper, sweeping it into the streets of the capital. She sighs. "…That was a waste of my time."

The newspapers are still filled with hilarious stuff about the empress.

Diana simply made a justifiable complaint. She explained in scrupulous detail, and yet nobody in this empire was even trying to understand—although she'd known they wouldn't.

Staring at the newspaper Diana discarded, Cattleya speaks mildly. "It will all change drastically tomorrow."

"What about that woman? Has she repented in the dungeon?"

"No. She insists she believes the emperor. She always was a conservative."

"Ha! Without even knowing the emperor's a substitute? Well, why not? An incompetent middle-aged lady who's getting on in years and

beginning to feel uneasy about her future kissed up to a man, that's all. She wouldn't be much in a fight, and I wasn't counting on her anyway."

"However, since we're against the retirement system, the wind has begun to turn against us. People are wondering if we intend to use the Valkyries until they're dead."

Those are words people have thrown at the empire, at the world.

It doesn't matter. It's a trivial thing. Diana has no need to even object to it.

"They still haven't found Ernst, but I doubt he can do anything. Do you have any other concerns about proceeding?"

"None. You're too cautious, Cattleya. No matter whose side Kilvas takes, it's just part of the process. And yet you keep saying things that demand patience, like 'Until we find the sacred sword.'"

"I do regret that. I misjudged Emperor Claude's brilliance. I never dreamed he'd drive a wedge between the Valkyries. I bet both sides have been influencing each other, making it more likely for irregularities to occur. He can't do anything now, though, and Ellmeyer has no Maid of the Sacred Sword. There is no way to stop us."

"What about Ashmael? Things have gone strange over there as well, haven't they? The holy king is still alive."

"They have no reason to meddle with us this time."

That kingdom must still see everything happening as a distant event in a land across the sea.

"Most of all, Ashmael hasn't so much as hinted that they'll do anything. There's very little possibility that they'll interfere."

"I suppose not. All right, let's get started." Diana stretches. It's partly due to the cold, but her movements are dull. "What will it be, twenty-four hours from now? Or do we have a bit longer? I may be a little rusty."

"It's been a while since I was on a battlefield myself."

The demons will soon break through the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall, and the first reports will reach the imperial capital. Irena's Valkyrie unit has been stationed partway down the route. The demon horde will naturally overwhelm them and wipe out the unit.

They should be grateful. They'll have the privilege of laying their lives down in honorable combat.

Once the demons reach the capital and cause some mayhem, the Valkyries will kill them and the demon king.

The end result will be a tale of heroism even a child can understand.

Will this card be playable in a world where Hausel has fallen? It's worth a try.

Diana's magic lance is lying on the floor haphazardly. She reaches down for it. When her hand closes around the haft, the center of her chest glows. It's responding to the divine stone that's set in the lance.

Pointing the tip of the lance at the flagstone floor, she raises it high.

"…Vica, I'm sorry."

She doesn't reproach Cattleya for her soft murmur. Instead, she brings the lance down. There is no way to save that man. That character was doomed from the start. She pitied him for that, if nothing else.

Pierced by the lance, the magic array that runs all through the castle develops a crack. Now the massive wall that imprisoned the demons for so long will lose its magic. In the space of a few hours, it will become mere stone. When it does, the communication lines to the capital will stop functioning as well, but the Valkyries have made their preparations already.

A bell begins to toll with almost perfect timing.

Three hours later, the first reports of a vast horde of demons breaching the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall spreads through the capital.



"In honor of our bond as former comrades."

That's what the Valkyries said as they gave Irena's group pitying looks and magic lances that had their divine stones removed before they left.

About thirty of her subordinates were captured and brought here along with her. For a moment, Irena looks around, lance in hand.

"Lady Irena, where…?"

"All I know is that we're near the wall."

She can see the fortifications in the distance. It's a familiar sight, though currently the wall is only as tall as her thumb. Unfortunately, there's no way they'll be welcomed with open arms even if they can reach it. They'd simply be thrown on the other side. She has nothing but questions about why Diana's followers haven't done that already.

Survival comes first, though.

"If I recall, we'll reach a village if we backtrack a bit. Let's go impose on them."

Irene's Valkyries were given lances, but they have no money to pay their way or for equipment to make camp. In this season, even with the Valkyries' advanced physical abilities, spending the night with nothing but the clothes on their backs would be hard. *If we can borrow a barn, at least, we'll be set*, Irena thinks. She checks the direction, and then she and her several dozen subordinates start back the way they came. If they leave now, even if they're walking, they should make it there by nightfall somehow.

However, as they march, they can't keep their feet from dragging a bit.

"Diana's group may have authority over personnel affairs, but treating Lady Irena like this… Is Diana planning to set the Valkyries against one another?"

"If she were, she'd have had us killed already. I heard from a guard that they caught Captain Ernst as well."

"Then they've probably got His Majesty, too." Irena's remark makes the others fall silent. "I wonder if I misjudged him… I may not look it, but my instincts have never been wrong in a pinch before."

That's how Irena managed to survive this long. However,

surviving in the political arena probably requires different instincts compared to surviving on the battlefield. If it were just her own life at stake, Irena could be more cavalier about it and leave it at, *These things happen*. She can't help but feel bad for the subordinates who've followed her and share her fate. Some of them are still very young.

"…Why do you suppose they released us, though? Especially in a weird, in-between place like this."

"They even gave us weapons. Even if the divine stones are gone, we'll be able to fight… Although I imagine fighting demons will be a lot harder."

"They can't be trying to make us attack the village up ahead, can they?"

Irena turns back to her indignant comrades. "There really wouldn't be any point in doing something that convolu—"

Then she sees it. The long, long wall that seems to crawl along the entire horizon shines with a light as red as the evening sun.

"Wha—? Lady Irena, what's that?!"

She doesn't have an answer. It's the first time she's ever seen this. The red light shoots high into the sky, then silently fades away.

As they watch, holding their breath, they begin to hear a low, distant rumble. It's easy to guess that it's the work of the demons on the other side. Before long, with an enormous crash, a section of the wall collapses.

The magically reinforced wall has always repelled demons and attacks from magic lances without any trouble. Now it's been obliterated by the demons as if it were just a regular wall of rock and stone.

It can't be—did they break the spell?!

The spell that maintains the Warrior Maidens' Great Wall is in the imperial capital. Every Valkyrie knows that. There's no need to hide it. After all, no Valkyrie would attempt to break it.

At this point, too late, Irena understands just how naive that assumption was.

So far, the empire has been protected by exploiting the Valkyries' goodwill, their sense of duty, and their lives.

Diana's criticisms were about to confront the nation in a visceral, violent way.

"L-Lady Irena! The demons are going to get out!"

"…I guess we know why they dumped us here, then." Irena smiles wryly.

Gripping her lance, one of her subordinates speaks up. "There's no telling how long we'll last with magic lances that don't have divine stones."

"You're not wrong, but the village, lots of towns, and the capital are behind us."

Everyone gasps and pales. Irena feels bad for them. However, she's proud of each and every one of them as well.

So the exploitation never ends, hmm?

She's sure Diana's faction is right. More and more places along the wall are beginning to break. The demons had been pretty well behaved lately, but Diana's people must have done something to them, because they're all trying to break through.

If she and her Valkyries fight here, they'll be lucky if they manage to hold the demons back for an hour. They'll die for nothing. Or rather, they'll die honorably in battle, as Valkyries.

They can't flee from it, though. This is how they've always lived.

"Anyone who wants to run, go warn the village. Everyone else, stay with me. Will you follow me?"

When Irena raises her head, the entire group nods.

"Looks like we're destined to always get the short end of the stick, huh? Thanks to that, we'll be able to die thinking this was a good life."

That probably counts as being lucky.

A horde of demons is already hurtling straight at them, kicking up a cloud of dust.

They don't stand their ground and wait for them. Irena gives the order, and they charge, refusing to give up a single inch of ground to the demons—and that's when it happens.

"Irena!"

A horse gallops toward them from the village. On its back is the undependable commanding officer she'd once taught the ways of

the battlefield.

"Ernst! What, they didn't catch you after all?"

"Your whole unit's still safe. Thank goodness we made it in time… It's all right. Reinforcements are on the way!"

All the Valkyries stare at him in confusion.

"So please lend me your strength! Help me find Vica."

"His Majesty? What do you mean?"

"He's become a demon. According to a certain individual, as long as we can rescue Vica and restore his humanity, it will stop the rampaging demons."

"No, wait, what do you mean by 'reinforcements'? And who do you mean by 'a certain individual'? Don't tell me they've got you on the ropes so badly you've gone delusional. Listen— there's no one in this country besides the Valkyries who can fight a horde of demons. And—"

"All personnel, condition one battle stations!" calls a loud voice above Irena's group, and a large shadow falls over them. Wondering if it's an enormous bird, they look up, and immediately realize their mistake. It's a massive flock of crows, flying in a bow-shaped formation.

"Search party, move out! Objective: Find the demon king's little brother. Looks exactly like him! Poor thing!"

"Rescue mission, rescue mission! Reward is fruit tarts!"

There are some rather dim-sounding yells now and then, but that isn't the problem. The birds are clearly rousing one another with words.

"Th-those crows are…talking?!"

"I hear they're Ellmeyer's demons."

"Demons talk?! That's ridiculous."

"Hey, you over there! Humans! Do you want to die? Get out of the way now, or you'll get dragged into this."

This time, there's a human in the sky—no, he only looks human at first glance. Horns protrude from his head, and wings sprout from his back. He's something inhuman that wears a human form. Is this also one of Ellmeyer's demons?

"Beelzebuth!" Ernst shouts, "They're allies. Valkyries from my

country.”

Beelzebuth looks Irena’s group over from the sky. He seems unimpressed. “Fine. Just don’t hold us back.”

“We’re grateful for your aid. Even though we were the ones who dragged Emperor Claude into this…”

“I’ll overlook it. After all, I’m currently the shadow chief of staff! I must fulfill my contract… More than anything, I’ll prove I’m not like the nobodies who can’t do a thing unless the king orders them!”

His tone is far too boastful for what he’s actually saying. He spreads his arms wide, nostrils flaring. “That said, those numbers are impressive. We won’t lose. But, humans, if you want to run, go now while you still can.”





He turns away, but before he can fly off, Irena shouts after him. "Wait! Why would demons help humans?"

Demons are the enemy. That's how it has always been in Kilvas, at least. She can't believe that they're genuinely trying to help them, so she asks something she probably shouldn't. But she's sure the other Valkyries feel the same way. That's how much pain demons have caused them. At the same time, they've hunted demons as well.

"Irena, they're—" But Ernst doesn't get to finish what he's saying.

"Demons are going to take on other demons? Are you telling me they fight turf wars with one another? If the demon king's setting his sights on our empire next, I'm really not on board with that."

"I don't know what you're trying to say. We've only come to rescue the king's little brother. He'll be sad if we don't," Beelzebuth explains matter-of-factly.

"He'll be sad." That isn't a phrase Irena was expecting, and she falls silent.

"Demons this, nations that… As always, you humans are tiresome," the demon says, sounding utterly disinterested. Then he flies away with no hesitation, even though he's headed for a battlefield that would make even the Valkyries falter.

"…Irena, I understand your confusion, but you're misunderstanding," Ernst says, and Irena turns to look at him. "The demons sympathize with Vica, since he has the same face as the demon king. We decided to use that sympathy. By gaining the cooperation of Ellmeyer's demons, we'll save this nation and its emperor."

Ernst is apparently leading demons by the nose. It's far too bold and brazen. It's the sort of decision an ordinary person wouldn't be allowed to make.

"In Ellmeyer, the demons will benefit from visibly protecting humans. Kilvas will gain a new system of government. No favors are being done here. This is an equal exchange."

Ernst proudly holds his head high as he says this. He's undoubtedly the empire's prime minister.

"Granted, I've just been told as much by the shadow commander

in chief myself, and I've only just managed to absorb the knowledge. Neither I nor Vica have trained enough yet. Not if we want to challenge the world."

The world is vast. Ernst looks as if a weight has rolled off his shoulders. Following his gaze, Irena looks at the wall again. The barrier that has imprisoned both the demons and her group has been broken.

Will it end up being the harbinger of total collapse or the turning of the tide? They're standing at the fork in the road where they'll have to make that choice.

"…This is our empire. And we've put our lives on the line to become masters at fighting demons."

There may come a time when Irena and the rest of the Valkyries aren't needed. A dreadful era when all their efforts and achievements become completely irrelevant. That's what new eras are like.

"There's no way we're losing to demons now, after all this time! Come on, let's go! We'll make this our final battle! That's our pride as Valkyries!"

However, because it will be proof that they've changed the world, they'll stand tall and accept whatever comes.

In response to Irena's order, her subordinates roar. Even the thundering footsteps of the approaching demon horde can't drown them out.

Registering the shadow stretching from the window, Claude opens his eyes.

With the light behind him, the mage gives a deep, deferential bow. "I'm terribly sorry for the delay, Emperor Claude. Elefas Levi has arrived."

Leaning against the armrest, Claude props his chin on his hand and glares at him. The demon king's mage doesn't flinch as he launches into his explanation. "Regarding the fact that I did not come to greet you first, direct your complaints to Isaac, if you

would. I was abruptly summoned by Rachel and the others, who stopped at a port of call in Hausel. When I hastily came to confirm the situation, Master Keith—whom the demons had rescued—told me to report to Isaac. I'm merely a mage who's worked to the bone without understanding a thing. A useless mage who can't simply teleport everyone unless he has your power, Emperor Claude."

The stream of excuses and self-deprecation take the edge off Claude's hostility, and he sighs. "…I know. It's not your fault. Everyone treats you with far too much contempt. During this incident, I felt that very keenly. Using 'weaker than Elefas' as a standard is just wrong."

"So they did that, did they? Blast them. I'm delighted that you understand. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Explain the circumstances briefly. As my brilliant mage, no doubt you have a handle on the situation."

Maybe Elefas is relieved that he hasn't been blamed. He stands up straighter as he launches into his briefing. "The demons of Kilvas have broken part of the northern wall. The cause was the breaking of the spell in the capital that was reinforcing the wall. The reason only one portion of it collapsed was, um… Explaining it to you seems rather odd, but a certain demon king is using his vast magic to halt the spell's collapse."

The mage knows exactly what Claude has been doing here all along.

"The demons who've emerged from behind the wall are heading straight for the capital. They're expected to reach it in approximately twenty hours, and the Valkyries… Or is it the empress? At any rate, they're constructing a line of defense within the capital. The empire's citizens have not been evacuated. I imagine the Valkyries want them to witness their glory firsthand."

"In other words, as things stand, the situation is going just as the Valkyries planned. You've taken steps, of course?"

"At the moment, Almond, Sugar, and Beelzebuth are leading all the flying demons to deal with the situation. There's a good chance that this incident involves the use of demon snuff, so in the first stage, the plan is to scatter a large amount of Luc and Quartz's

demon-snuff antidote. If the demons stop because of that, things will wrap up quite neatly. In addition, Denis is working out a way to render the magic lances of the Valkyries in the capital ineffective. I do believe he may build a flying palace one of these days… It frightens me."

Claude isn't worried. All of Aileen's underlings are already on his watch list. That said, Denis is close to the demons, and he and Claude hit it off as well, so Claude would like to let him keep his freedom if possible.

"That alone won't be a fundamental solution, though. We have to do something about Vica."

"I'm told the maneuver's objective is to secure Master Vica and restore either his humanity or his senses, since doing so will calm the demons. Even if he can't be made human again on the spot, if they shoot him with a tranquilizer gun or something and take him back to Ellmeyer for a while, she'll fix it somehow…says, um, the shadow commander in chief." Elefas quietly averts his eyes.

Claude blinks in an exaggerated way. "I'd heard there was no way to return him to normal. Does she have something in mind?"

"That's what concerns you? Or, no, that's important as well, but… You're not going to ask about the shadow commander in chief?"

"Aileen is good at making the demons happy. Including me, of course."

"Huh? Master Claude, you're happy about the shadow commander in chief, too?"

"The mere fact that she's not standing on the front line this time means she passes. Or did she use that as a bargaining chip? Ah yes, and that's why you've been forced to run around."

Even the demon king's wife and his adviser can't bypass Claude and use Elefas and the demons as they wish. They would have needed to negotiate somehow.

"That's a problem. Has my wife finally become able to use the demons without me?"

"……Um, so… Everybody's doing their best. If you move, we'll have to distract the Valkyries again, and we can't have the whole wall coming down at once, so I think you should stay as still as a

mountain and maintain the status quo, Master Claude.”





This mage's bad habit is getting sloppy the moment the end is in sight.

"Don't be so modest. Couldn't you fill in for me?"

"Aaaaaaah, I can't heeeaaaar yoooouuu. No, no, I could never. Anyway, I'm going back to the battlefield, okay, Master Claude?"

Elefas seems to be implying that being on the battlefield is preferable to obeying Claude's orders. The man starts to turn on his heel, so Claude swiftly gets up, trips him, then plants a foot on his cloak. "As my brilliant mage, not only can you stand in for me, you can also recast the wall's spell, can't you?"

"I don't want to. I've only made it this far by drinking tonics. I can't do any more! Even repairing spells takes time!"

"No matter what Kilvas does with it from this point on, fixing it is probably the safest option. How long will it take?"

The enormous spell has been cast over the entire capital. Not only that, but it was designed by Hausel. Even if it takes days to fix it, simply holding back its collapse is not an option they can entertain.

"Three hours, no matter how desperately I work at it." Elefas is still sitting on his rear on the floor. Claude gazes at him steadily. "What is that look for? Yes, it's only piecing a broken spell back together, but it's not the sort of thing one can do in ten or twenty minutes. Even if I borrow your magic, that is the very fastest I can manage."

"No… I was just thinking my mage was brilliant. If you use my magic, I think you might be stronger than me."

"If I can't win without borrowing it, there's not much point, and you know it."

It's hard to tell whether that response is him being servile or supremely confident. With a wry smile, Claude lifts his foot off the mage's cloak. Looking cross, Elefas gets to his feet.

"I'll leave rebuilding the spell to you. Teleport me outside the capital."

"Wait, Master Claude! I can't borrow your magic right now. I can't be your substitute."

"It's fine—I'll be right back. All you have to do is buy time."

"There's no way you'll be 'right back.' The last time you said that, you were gone for half a day!"

"I mean it… I have to be the one to settle things this time. Please."

Elefas shuts up. He exhales, shoulders slumping. Then he looks at Claude with eyes the same color as Claude's. "I wish you good fortune in battle."

"I really have been blessed with good retainers."

Rudely, Elefas shrugs, but he promptly vanishes and is replaced by a stretch of sky. In the distance, Claude can see the ramparts of the imperial capital. He hasn't been outside it in a long time. *Now, then…* He looks around.

Still, they really underestimated me. Didn't they realize breaking that wall would set me free? Or did they assume I'd try to fix it somehow?

They might have. As a matter of fact, if Elefas hadn't appeared, Claude probably would have chosen to maintain the wall. After all, keeping the number of demons who enter the capital low enough that Diana and Cattleya's group are certain to be able to drive them off is the best way to keep the damage to a minimum.

Cattleya probably thought that was the choice Claude would make. It was a type of trust.

However, there's one other woman who accurately guessed what he would do: his wife, who will hold her head high and claim, *That is why I am here*.

In the dry wind of an unfamiliar land, Claude closes his eyes, then opens them. Calling to the demons is enough to tell him what the war situation is.

All right, I'll go along with the shadow commander in chief's plan. If I'm going to be manipulated, I'd prefer it that way.

On the battlefield, the advantage keeps shifting from one side to the other.

First, the antidote Almond and Sugar's group scattered was fairly

effective, so they gained the initiative. However, although they tried to push the demons back behind the wall, they weren't able to communicate with them. They knew this would be an issue, since the demons had failed to respond to Claude—or rather, since they'd heard about the demons of Kilvas in the first place—but it was still discouraging. After all, being able to persuade them to stop would have been the fastest solution.

In the end, the Valkyries and Almond's group worked together to drive the demons back inside the wall, as if they were herding animals. Then they were spotted by the Valkyries who'd stayed at the wall. They hadn't taken the fact that some might still be there into account. Humans joined the demons, and the battle devolved into a chaotic melee where friend and foe were jumbled together.

Irena's unit is strong, but their magic lances have no divine stones. Beelzebuth is protecting them, but his force's strength is halved since he has to fight without killing. In the meantime, the enemy continues scattering more demon snuff. The demons of Kilvas, who have been milling about in confusion, rampage again. Starting about then, the front line begins to buckle.

The demons of Kilvas are screaming. The Valkyries have grown impatient and started attacking both Irena's group and the demons. They just need to use demon snuff to lure the demons to the capital. As long as the enemy in front of them vanishes, it's fine. That's the only way they see the situation, and that's why they're able to do something so thoughtless.

If they'd looked closer, they would have noticed that Irena's group was avoiding attacking the demons of Kilvas. They can't have thought Irena's Valkyries were doing it out of the goodness of their hearts, can they?

"Those idiots," Isaac mutters. He's peering through a pair of binoculars from a tent pitched on high ground a little distance away.

"You're quite harsh. I'm sure they can't help it. This country has far too little information regarding the demon king. How is Master Ernst's command?" Keith asks.

"Even better than I'd hoped. I shouldn't have expected less from a guy who has experience in the field. He's made the right choice

and is beginning to pull back."

"If possible, I would have liked to find him. With the situation as it is, though…do you think he'll come?"

"As the demon king's adviser, do you think he wouldn't?"

"He'll come. If demons are being hurt, the demon king will appear."

Just then, a demon so large they don't need binoculars to spot it punches a new breach in the wall. For a brief moment, the wall flares with light as if it's resisting, but the newcomer stomps through the spell as well.

Any demon who can do a thing like that is obviously the demon king.

The demon is covered in shining black scales, and he plants four feet on the ground, crouching low. The flames that jet from between his sharp fangs rise into the wintry sky like steam. The demon's red eyes seem to glare at everything. And when the demon hears the screams of the other demons who are being attacked, his whole body trembles.

This is the red-eyed demon—a dragon. He isn't shaped quite like Claude, though. His form isn't much different from those of the demons of Kilvas. That gives Keith and Isaac some faint hope.

However, the large wings that sprout from his back aren't just for decoration.

"So he *can* fly, huh?!"

The red-eyed demon soars high into the sky and sucks in a deep breath. His mouth is turned toward them. Apparently, he is intelligent enough to locate their position. He may be inhaling the magic around them; the tent flaps and sways.

Naturally, Isaac and Keith have no way to block the attack.

"Hey, adviser. Do you have any last words?"

"'This, when you can't even make tea.'"

"Okay, mine are 'Now I can't keep her from standing on the front line, got it?'"

The blast of gathered magic is unleashed at them. Its light bleaches out the world.

The attack is blocked by a human figure.

"That would be a very big problem."

Isaac realizes he had the wrong idea. That demon—Vica—hadn't been aiming for their position.

He'd instinctively sensed a strong foe and aimed for him.

The area around their position has been singed a little, but he and Keith are alive. Letting out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, Isaac rakes his fingers through his hair and smiles. "Haaah, we won…"

"It seems a bit early to make that call… So that's Vica?" Having descended to their position, the demon king of Isaac's country looks behind him, black hair streaming in the wind.

The demon king's adviser smoothly steps forward and says, "Milord, I have a message from the shadow commander in chief: 'Take him alive.' She also wants you to give him hope. There's still a good possibility that he'll come back."

Claude blinks.

Isaac repeats the words. "Did you get that? Take him alive. *Alive.* Even if worse comes to worst and we can't turn him human again here, we can ask Ashmael for help."

"…Oh, I see. Ailee— The shadow commander in chief doesn't think Vica's become a demon completely, only that his magic's destabilized and gone out of control. If so, we can pull him back. Still, there must have been some sort of trigger that made him lose his inhibitions."

The sort of sadness or anger or despair or resignation that would make him want to give up on being human.

Keith gazes into the distance, looking melancholy. "…In all probability, the woman he loved said something horrible to him. 'You monster,' or something to that effect."

"Oh yes, that's brutal. The poor boy," Claude says sympathetically.

"Huh? I didn't hear anything about that… Oh, wait, did you get that by working backward from this? C'mon, don't destroy the world over that! Demon kings do this every time. Do you lot have romance on the brain or something?!" Isaac is more irritated than anything else.

Claude wishes Isaac would direct his complaints at the world that

made its demon kings that way.

He laughs a little, then takes to the sky. The demons understand his orders even if he doesn't say them out loud; they begin evacuating the humans and clearing the area.

Conversely, the demons who have taken Vica's orders all begin attacking at once, trying to bring Claude down. Vica is the king they serve.

I'll have to show respect for that.

To celebrate the birth of the new demon king. To teach this king, who is still immature, how to live.

And so that those young, red, glaring eyes, identical to his own, will see him properly. As an older brother and someone who's already walked this path.

Even in the south of Kilvas, it's quite cold out on the ocean. However, in addition to hot tea, her outstanding ladies-in-waiting have provided a magic heating item manufactured in Ellmeyer and cold-weather gear made with down feathers. Thanks to these, she doesn't feel the chill while out on deck.

On the other side of the long wall that runs all the way to the horizon, there's a flash of light as if the sun has set.

Slowly, Aileen steps away from the telescope and returns to the small, round table that's been set out on deck. When she settles back into her chair, her brilliant lady-in-waiting promptly gives her a lap blanket.

"Master Claude has made it in time. We've won."

"Congratulations." Rachel pours her more hot tea.

"Being a disinterested spectator requires serious mental fortitude, doesn't it?"

"As you are the shadow commander in chief, you mustn't act recklessly."

"I know… If only I still had the sacred sword, I wouldn't have asked for Lady Lilia's advice."

"There, you see? It's just as I said. Aren't you glad you went?

"Oh, come on. Don't be angry, Lady Aileen. I'll answer properly. Now tell me what happened!

"Huh? I don't even know why you think you've got trouble. I mean, the red-eyed demon can go back to being human. He just has to regain his sanity. He didn't go back that time because he steeled himself to be killed as a demon.

"Honestly, you really should check the game's rules properly before going into a fight."

Lilia was right, of course. The game never mentioned that the demons of Kilvas were former humans. That meant it also never said they can't change back.

On top of that, Vica had become the red-eyed demon and returned to being human several times before.

As one would imagine, the great former player who'd weaponized her knowledge of the game to toy with reality noticed many things. Frankly, Aileen is vexed. Here she's been thinking timid things about how she'd need the sacred sword to solve this.

"However, Lady Aileen, everyone is glad you do not have the sacred sword. Things would be much more complicated if you did. Besides, it's nice for a change to take over after everyone else has worked hard, isn't it?"

"True. I can't fight the same way forever."

The sacred sword may be gone, but that doesn't mean the responsibility she's accumulated has vanished.

"Are we all ready to welcome Master Vica?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. Lady Serena has made a private arrangement with the principal consort of Ashmael, and Grand Duchess Levi is working to provide both sacred and magic items. Depending on the situation, we may have them dispatch the Daughter of God as well. If Master Vica's form makes it difficult to keep him in Ellmeyer's capital, we plan to prepare residences in the grand duchy of Levi and the Revanche County. Ashmael says they will also cooperate by increasing production of the demon-snuff antidote. There's a demon-snuff expert over there who rivals Luc."

"Thank you. I really can't do a thing. I'm completely reliant on others." Aileen gives a deliberate sigh.

Rachel responds primly, "Quite true. I pity Empress Diana and Princess Cattleya."

My wife probably thinks we've already won. Claude sighs.

I'm the one who's about to head over there and win, you know?

Granted, he doesn't intend to lose.

Claude has transformed into a dragon. Even when the demon king gazes at Vica with his deep-purple eyes, Vica doesn't flinch. He overtakes the other frightened demons and lunges at Claude. He's instinctively protecting the other demons.

Ah yes, he really is the demon king. The thoughts and actions that bleed over from his instincts are exactly like Claude's.

The demons adore him, and he loves them. However, he can't completely hate humans, either, and is unable to become fully human or demon. Most demon kings probably know that agony.

That said, Claude can't have him ending that way.

All right. If it were me, what would I have to remember in order to go back? What if Aileen called me a monster and rejected me? What then?

Vica sinks his teeth into Claude's neck, and Claude bats him off with his tail. Claude is larger, but his opponent is more agile. Vica flips, righting himself, then begins to circle Claude.

"Are…you sure…about this?"

Maybe because he's in his right mind, Claude finds he's able to speak. *I suppose I would be*, Claude thinks after he's spoken. Almond and the others talk, so why wouldn't the demon king be able to?

Yes, Claude is sure hearing this would have snapped his old self out of it.

"I'm going…to save…your wife."

Vica's red eyes waver unsteadily. He howls, firing another blast of magic at Claude. He's flustered and hasn't taken aim, though. There's no way an attack like that would hit Claude.

Claude soars high into the sky. He punches through the clouds,

then flips and plunges back down, making gravity his ally.

He said, "Save my sister."

Claude thought it was odd that Vica hadn't said *wife*. It was possible that Vica had no feelings for her, and his sister was the one who mattered. Even so, something seemed off.

Claude wouldn't have left the woman who was most precious to him to another man.

Why are you giving up?

Monster. What's wrong with that? All he has to do is convince the woman he loves that it doesn't matter…

As Claude falls, Vica looks up at him, and their eyes meet. Then Claude's forehead collides with Vica's face. In an additional blow, Claude spits a magic light ray from his mouth. At point-blank range, Vica can't dodge.





Light falls from the sky to the ground.

The two have torn up the earth in their fall, and their huge bodies send up a great cloud of dust. The figure who rises to his feet in the center of that cloud is human.

"You'd hate that, wouldn't you? If some other man saved her. If she were happy."

If Vica doesn't go back to being human, it won't just mean letting her go. He'll end up giving her to someone else. It's a perfectly natural fact, and it must have occurred to him.

Vica has regained his human shape.

You tried to end things cleanly, and that's exactly how they ended up so messy and half-finished. If the other option is allowing her to find happiness with someone else, then you don't mind if you're a monster. You know that's where it really starts.

"Hurry and grow up."

As he tries to help Vica up, Claude notices a major problem.

This happens every time. Claude is stark naked.

Almond and the others are used to it, though, and they promptly bring blankets and clothing.



Something's not right.

Diana looks at the clock. The appointed time is long past, and yet not a glimpse of the demon horde is visible from the capital's ramparts.

Has something gone awry?

The first report reached the capital without issue. The Valkyries who abandoned Irena's unit have also returned safely. Demon snuff has been stocked at all strategic points. She's checked multiple times.

And yet the demons haven't appeared.

Even if Irena's unit fought desperately and valiantly, there's no chance they could have held out for this long.

Gradually, bewilderment spreads among the Valkyries up on the ramparts. It isn't possible to stay tense forever. They're beginning to suspect that, if the demons aren't coming, the report that they broke through the wall may be wrong.

That's not possible.

Diana broke the wall's spell in the capital. She left Vica beyond that wall. He still had his human form, barely, but it would have been only a matter of time. The demons who began to gather as if they were trying to protect him confirmed it. They saved her the trouble of figuring out where to sow demon snuff on that side of the wall.

"…Diana, let's send out another scouting party," Cattleya suggests.

Diana nods. At first, Cattleya calmly suggested waiting a while, but even her expression has turned grim.

"Lady Diana, look! Aren't those Valkyries…?" One of the Valkyries who's been keeping watch nearby points out the dim shapes of horses and riders. Cattleya leans over the rampart slightly to look, and then the color drains from her face. Diana goes to stand beside her.

The Valkyries' physical abilities have been enhanced, and when she strains her eyes, she can make out the mounted figure at the head of the group… She can't believe what she's seeing, though. Stunned, Diana murmurs, "…Irena."

Confusion races through the Valkyries who know what's really going on. Diana and Cattleya are no exception. *They didn't even have magic lances, so how…? What about the demons?! They can't have stopped them, can they?!*

"We've returned victorious! Open the gates!"

While Diana and her Valkyries stand there petrified, Irena's unit comes close enough that their shouts are audible. In response to the bold demand, Diana steps forward. "Don't be ridiculous. The demons are coming!"

"Oh, are they? From where, hmm? We came all the way back here from the wall, but we saw nothing of the sort. Are you sure the report wasn't wrong? Still, looks like you're heavily geared up there. Have you been armed to the teeth all this time, waiting for imaginary demons? That seems like a lot of trouble."

She's laughed at them, and the Valkyries exchange glances. If they've mobilized their forces and stood guard on top of the ramparts, declaring loudly that they're going to defend the imperial capital, and then the demons never show up, they'll look completely ridiculous.

But that can't possibly happen.

"…Irena, I'm glad you're safe," Cattleya begins. Her tone is calm, but her expression isn't as tranquil as usual. "The wall has been breached by rampaging demons. We've confirmed as much."

"Yes, that's right. And as I said, we've returned victorious."

Cattleya falls silent. Irena is alive, and she's talking about having "returned victorious." Putting those two facts together, Diana screams, "That's nonsense. It can't possibly be true!"

"It's true."

Another unexpected figure appears. Ernst. Before she can shout, *Why?!*, his loud, carrying voice echoes over the ramparts. "Valkyries! Through the efforts of His Majesty, with the aid of the emperor of Ellmeyer, the demons have been driven back! Have no fear: The demons of Kilvas are now under His Majesty's command!"

"Huh—excuse me?! He turned into a demon—," Diana tries to retort, but Ernst raises his voice, drowning her out.

"Citizens of the empire, listen to me! Within our borders, Hausel abused the Valkyrie surgery. In their foolishness, they were researching how to change humans into demons! Some who would continue that practice for their own ends still lurk among us!"

The citizens of the capital, who have been hiding in fear of the approaching demons, begin coming out to see what's going on. Diana had them gather near the wall in the first place so they'd be sure to witness the Valkyries' valor in combat, and it's backfired on her.

"We must not allow the Valkyries' inhumane surgery, or the

technology that would make humans and demons fight each other, to exist in this world!”

Inhumane surgery. Those words make Diana want to shout another retort at him, but before she can, Cattleya turns on her heel.

“In the name of Vica Tsar Kilvas, I, Prime Minister Ernst Helken Dolf, hereby make a declaration. From this day on, Kilvas has no ties to the Queendom of Hausel. We will not let this tragedy be repeated. We will bring true independence and peace to our empire!”

Diana and her Valkyries were supposed to be the ones to say those words. At this point, though, it doesn’t matter.

Cattleya.

Turning her back on the citizens’ cheers, Diana sets off running in pursuit of her one supporter and friend.

Is it a farewell, or is this their true reunion? There are some things even the demon king doesn’t know.

It’s evening. In a situation that’s the inverse of their first meeting, intense, bloodred light from the setting sun streams into the emperor’s private chambers when Cattleya enters by herself.

“…Splendid work, Master Claude. That was your doing, wasn’t it?”

“You give me too much credit. I only stood in for Vica.”

Claude seats himself in a chair, receiving Cattleya as if he’s granting an audience.

Perhaps she ran here. Her hair is uncharacteristically disheveled, and it gleams in the evening light. “Vica is alive?”

“I hear he was discovered in Hausel. He doesn’t seem to be quite himself yet, so I recommended he convalesce in Ellmeyer. As it happens, my wife had just reached Hausel by ship. We considered having him return in triumph with us, but I had qualms about dropping my battered, bruised cousin into a political situation like this one. In another month or two, he’ll be fully healed and able to switch with me. Why don’t we *say that’s how we intended it all along*?”

Cattleya has listened to Claude’s made-up story in silence, but

when he issues a very familiar-sounding invitation, she frowns. "You can't mean… You're going to show us mercy?"

"Not me. Vica asked me to save his sister."

She just needs to take the hand her brother has extended to her. Claude hopes she will.

"…What will you do about the fact that we broke the wall?"

"Hausel fell only recently. It's only natural various problems will crop up. Besides, if Vica is here, the demons of Kilvas won't rampage anymore. They'll obey him. From now on, the wall will probably mark the boundary between the areas where demons and humans live."

"Many Valkyries were involved in this, and yet you won't conduct a purge or silence them?"

"If you and the empress help us, it won't be impossible. Vica should agree to it as well."

"But the empire will consider the Valkyries useless now." On the other hand, she's resigned herself to it. Cattleya gazes quietly back at Claude. "Has something you believed was right ever been abruptly turned upside down? Have you ever felt the futility and anger of realizing all your efforts and your choices up to that point were mistaken? If, on top of that, you managed to discern the correct answer, the one you must choose, what would you do?"

"…Is having the Valkyries continue on as they've always done your 'right answer'?"

Cattleya's only response is a smile.

Claude no longer knows whether that smile is real or fake.

"Master Claude, I never underestimated you. The fact that this is the result anyway is probably because I am soft. I can no longer laugh at Vica and Ernst for being naive and knowing nothing. However, please remember this will not happen again."

"I would like you to be happy." The words slip out unintentionally. It's what he genuinely thinks. She just lets them lie there, though. The woman's cold eyes drill into Claude, memories and all.

"…You were the last person I wanted to hear that from. That irresponsible male excuse. 'I want you to be happy.'"

If it isn't *Let's* both *be happy* or *I'll* make *you happy*, it's better

not to say anything at all. He should just let it stay a lovely memory. After all, Claude hasn't chosen her.

He's spoken carelessly. Her criticism is entirely correct.

"I'm sorry I couldn't join your side."

Cattleya smiles gently, then bows and turns to go. She doesn't look back.

Feeling that he's become a terribly pathetic man, Claude heaves a long, deep sigh.

"My, are you depressed?"

With a start, he jumps to his feet and turns around. His wife is standing there, beaming. Elefas is behind her. They clearly teleported.

"Um… I thought we should wait until things had settled down a bit more, but Lady Aileen said it had to be now and wouldn't back down, so yes. She is the shadow commander in chief, after all, as you yourself acknowledged…" Eyes averted, his mage immediately makes excuses. He falls silent when Claude glares at him, though.

"She probably told you you'd be able to learn my weakness."

"I'm impressed you knew. That's just like you, Master Claude."

"Look forward to a salary revision when I return to Ellmeyer."

"No, please wait. It's all a misunderstanding!"

"That's right, Master Claude. What weakness are you referring to? I'd assumed you were viciously using that face of yours to deceive women, and yet… What a pity."

As one would expect, it takes Claude a little courage to look his wife in the eye. He mustn't run, though.

His wife giggles triumphantly, her fingertips pressed to her lips. It's a first-rate villainous smile, the sort that makes even the demon king feel like fleeing.

"You overlooked her misdeeds, didn't you? You're so kind to your cousin."

She absolutely knows. The sarcasm is horrendous, almost like she's been waiting for this exact moment.

He doesn't ask foolish questions like *Why?* or *Where?* or *How long?* Women are frightening.

The only thing he needs to understand is that he can no longer

criticize his wife's way of doing things with regard to Cattleya.

"Poor Master Claude. I'll avenge you next time."

"…In moderation, please."

He never dreamed he would end up granting Vica's wish here.

"Goodness, I really don't know… It all depends on your attitude, Master Claude." She chuckles, staring at her husband in a way that makes her eyes narrow. She's absolutely enjoying herself. This is bad.

His wife manipulated everything from behind the scenes. In order to make sure she doesn't manipulate him, he reaches out to touch her cheek. "Please forgive me, Aileen. You're the only one who does."

Then he flashes a smile that would make the entire world swoon. His face is power.

However, abruptly, his wife looks as if she's awakened from a dream. *Inconceivable*, Claude thinks, stunned.

Ignoring him, Aileen looks down. "I think…I felt the baby kick just now."

Feeling as if he's been slapped across the face, Claude follows Aileen's gaze.

After that, the two of them get very excited, and he doesn't remember much about it.

That's a good way for a first love to end, though.

"Cattleya."

As she steps out into the hall, someone calls to her. Cattleya forces a smile. "Your face is a picture, Diana."

"Well, I mean…"

"It's fine… Kilvas was never more than a stop on the way. Isn't that right?"

When they launched their operation, they didn't mind if the empire fell.

Outside, energized by Ernst's speech, the citizens of the empire are welcoming Irena and the rest of her unit. There's no longer any

place for the two of them here. There never was, really.

"All right: Next is Hausel, our main objective. No doubt Emperor Claude will refuse to acknowledge us, though. He'll be a formidable foe."

"…Yes, it looks as if we should find the sacred sword. We'll work cautiously next time."

"Right."

"But…you loved him?"

Diana's gaze and the things she says are always straightforward. She's sure to see through any lie Cattleya tells.

"…It's just a memory. Even now that I know everything, it's still a lovely memory when I look back. That dream is over now, though."

She thumps her friend on the shoulder, and they leave the country together.

And so, as the ending of her first love goes, it isn't a bad one.

On the day when the wall in the Kilvas Empire fell, Empress Diana and Princess Cattleya vanished, taking the majority of the Valkyries with them. Emperor Vica launched a search and even called on other countries for help. However, the group's ties to Hausel ran deep, and their whereabouts remained unknown.

A year had already passed since the fall of the Holy Queendom of Hausel.

Even ruined, the Queendom continued to influence the world, and the young emperor of Kilvas suggested convening the second continental conference to discuss what should be done about the country and its relics.

The conference would be held in autumn of the following year. It was the first great achievement of Vica Tsar Kilvas, long belittled as a puppet emperor.

✦ Final Act ✦

The Final Boss's Family

The Ellmeyer Empire has four clear seasons.

Winter, which arrived soon after Claude returned from Kilvas, has passed in a flash, and spring is drawing near. The strong wind that marks the transition between the two seasons; the soft, pale, hazy sky; the madder-red sunset that shyly steals in; and the arrival of night, like a lamp being gently turned down—everything about the day is a sign of spring's coming.

However, Claude doesn't spare a glance for the fine weather. He doesn't have the presence of mind for that sort of thing.

His wife's labor began that morning.

"Master Claude, please calm down." In his office, Walt speaks up as if he can't take it anymore.

"I am calm."

"No, seriously, the room is shaking. Also, your hands are trembling a little."

"I could not possibly be calmer. It's because I'm staying calm with all my might that this room is the only thing I shake."

"…Just be grateful for that small mercy, Walt. Also, you haven't been blinking for a while now, Master Claude."

"Oh, right…," Walt says, trailing off as he and Kyle go back to work. Their main role is guarding Claude, but they can at least sort the documents and materials that have piled up. Having Keith constantly coming and going would make it hard for Claude to settle down, so right now, making tea is their job as well.

Claude can't tell how anything tastes today.

Once the last month of Aileen's pregnancy came and went, they started to worry. Aileen insisted everything was fine, but she had

probably been just as uneasy. Then, finally, her birth pangs started in the morning. The imperial castle was already fully equipped and waiting to spring into action. Preparations for the birth began right away.

Claude came running the moment he received the report, but in accordance with Aileen's long-standing wish, he wasn't allowed to even see her face, let alone hold her hand. In fact, he was banned from entering the room entirely and forced to return to his office. His prime minister, Cyril, was lying in wait for him there and had brought him a mountain of work. He said it was at his little sister's request.

For the finishing blow, Rachel gave Claude a message from his wife: "Everyone around us will be concerned. Prioritize your work." In addition, she naturally refused the demons' dance of support; apparently, they're performing it in the forest instead. Claude would really have preferred to start dancing as well. It wasn't as if he was going to get any work done.

Adding to the general confusion, Crown Princess Lilia also went into labor a short time after Aileen. Her child was arriving significantly before its due date.

Between the empress and the crown princess both giving birth, the imperial castle is in an uproar. Fortunately, they prepared so thoroughly that they had no problems summoning doctors, midwives, and even calling the Daughter of God over from the neighboring kingdom.

About the only thing they didn't plan for was dealing with Cedric, who is just as distracted as Claude, and they ended up being tossed into the same office. They've been lumped together because nobody wants to deal with either of them right now.

Claude calls to his half brother, who's sitting on a sofa in the corner by himself. "Cedric, are you calm? Calm down. I'm here. It's all right."

"Be quiet, Brother. Don't get in my way, please."

Lilia also chased Cedric out, saying, "You're in the way ☆," and told him to finish making the clothes for the newborn that she had started. He's been wielding knitting needles like a professional artisan for some time now. The fact that he's staying this focused on

his knitting when the room is rocking is actually terrifying. Claude is concerned that if he keeps knitting with such dull and lifeless eyes, he'll end up making cursed baby clothes.

He understands how his brother feels, though. It's easier to endure the wait if his mind is occupied.

No matter how much Claude struggles, there's no place for him here. However, the short hand on the clock has already made a full circle since he was first informed that Aileen's labor had begun. He heard these things took time, but it can't possibly continue until dawn…can it? The idea makes his hands shake.

"…It's no good. My signature is illegible, and so is the writing."

"V-very well, Master Claude. Use the state seal to… W-wait, that's also shaking too much, isn't it…?"

"For the first time ever, I'm keenly aware of my own powerlessness…!"

"H-haaah, so you're confessing you've never felt powerless before. That's sort of irritating."

"Master Claude, are you still sane? I've brought a letter from Emperor Vica."

Elefas, who Claude sent to Kilvas with a letter that morning, has returned. He enters through the door and sets the letter on the desk. However, seeing that Claude's hands are shaking terribly, he breaks the seal and hands him the contents of the envelope.

Walt calls to Elefas across the sofa. "Has Kilvas settled down? I'd like to make a trip over there myself."

"Yes, the cold has finally eased a bit. The demons also seem to have calmed down. They've decided to leave the wall to mark the boundary of the demons' residential district… Oh, that's right: They don't call them demons anymore."

"Apparently, they're called demonborn now."

The demons in Kilvas were human originally, after all. Lumping them in with the other demons didn't seem very sensible, and after some discussion, they finally decided on a name. Names define beings and are of great import.

"Those who can return to their human forms are building a village on the other side of the wall. The letter also says Vica and his people

are going to go interview their community to learn more. It's possible that they'll all be able to regain their human forms someday."

Vica managed to switch back with Claude without incident, and it sounds as if he's running the country well. Fewer people seem to be calling him a puppet these days.

The whereabouts of Diana, Cattleya, and the missing Valkyries are unknown, but at present, there are no signs of ominous activity anywhere. The only concerning thing is that the voices calling for the revival of the Queendom of Hausel grow louder by the day. However, Kilvas has scheduled an international conference. If the countries of the world can reach a consensus there, the problem of Hausel may be settled once and for all.

That means the important thing will be international cooperation.

"Send word of this to Ashmael. The sacred accessory the holy king gave me may prove useful here."

"All right. By the way, Master Claude, could you do something about the way the room is shaking?"

"I'm so *powerless*…!"

"Come on, Elefas," Walt says, "Don't make him remember. He almost calmed down for a second there."

"It's only this room. Think of it as a core-strengthening exercise. Just for today, and possibly tomorrow," Kyle admonishes.

Elefas nods. "I see."

Claude scowls in agony. "If only it was already born, there would be things I could do as well…! Like give it a name!"

"I dunno how useful that would be, really."

"No, it's crucial. I have several ready, so I'll be able to rise to the occasion whether it's a girl or a boy."

The door flies open, and Keith enters calmly, stopping after few paces.

He seems to have something to announce.

Claude stands up, turning pale. Cedric rises just as quickly.

"The delivery is complete."

""Which one?!"" the half brothers ask in unison.

Keith beams.

"They're both girls."

Aileen has seen and heard various expressions to describe the pain of childbirth, and going through it herself has reminded her of every single one of them.

Even with all the technological advances in my previous world, giving birth is still dangerous…

Even so, Aileen is empress, and she's one of the fortunate ones. The moment she hears the baby cry and sees its face, the relief and fatigue she feels are so great that she immediately passes out. When she comes to, she's already been cleaned up and tucked into her own soft bed.

There's also a bonus: Her husband is holding her hand.

"…Master Claude…I…"

Aileen's mind is still hazy. Claude looks down at her kindly, then signals at a spot beside her pillow with a glance.

A tiny baby wrapped in white swaddling clothes is lying there in a little woven basket. She's sleeping peacefully. Timidly, Aileen reaches out—then tilts her head, puzzled. "She's not…crying?"

"She was crying fit to rock the castle until a minute ago. She's probably worn-out."

Really? Will she wake the baby if she touches her? Aileen still doesn't understand anything, and Claude gently takes her hand. "They say she's a girl."

"I…see. I see…"

"You worked very hard. Thank you."

Oh, she's been born. I gave birth to her.

The realization suddenly hits Aileen, and she holds her head high. "It's nothing to thank me for. As the demon king's wife and the empress, it's only natural."

She's bluffing, and her voice wavers just a little. From now on, she'll have to go through life nurturing this small life as well. She can't afford to be fainthearted.

Gently, holding his breath, Claude touches the infant's cheek with

a fingertip. The baby immediately starts crying as if she's caught fire, and Claude panics. Seemingly waiting for this moment, Aileen's seasoned ladies-in-waiting open the door and appear in a neat row. There's no telling what's going through Claude's mind as he starts trying to make excuses. The sight makes Aileen laugh.

All right. I'll begin by learning how to properly hold this little one.

They've already decided on her name as well.

Alucato, the imperial capital, is jubilant over the birth of Claire Jean Ellmeyer, Imperial Ellmeyer's first princess. On that day, even as the night grows late, the lights don't go out.

Parenthetically…

"What? Lady Lilia gave birth as well?"

"Yes, about ten minutes after you. They're practically twins."

Her name is Aria. Just as Aileen and Claude gave their daughter a name that references Grace Dark, Lilia has based hers on Amelia's name. She was born prematurely, but she has a firm, energetic cry.

Just as twin princesses were once born in the Queendom of Hausel, two girls named after the first Maids of the Sacred Sword have been born on the same day. Or is it more that Lilia somehow managed to give birth on the same day as Aileen?

Lilia's sheer tenacity makes Aileen break out in goose bumps, and her eyes turn distant as she sinks into thought.

In this era, when the power vacuum left by the Queendom of Hausel is rapidly becoming a problem, neither their daughters' births nor their names will allow the women to distance themselves from the approaching storm. How well will they be able to protect their daughters?





Still, when Aileen thinks of this as proof that life goes on even after the end of the game, it isn't a bad feeling.

Afterword

Hello, this is Sarasa Nagase.

Thank you very much for picking up Volume 10.

This time, I wrote a new story specifically for publication. I hadn't written about Aileen and the others in a long time, and it was a lot of fun.

The story will continue in the next volume. Aileen has been held in contempt as a little princess who can't do anything, and there's no way she's going to let that go unchallenged, so I hope you'll look forward to it.

Volume 5 of *The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor* is being released at the same time as this volume. I'll be thrilled if you enjoy them both.

In addition, the *I'm the Villainess, So I'm Taming the Final Boss* anime begins airing in October 2022. Considering I started this series online without knowing a thing about writing, it feels like a dream.

I've been blessed by the efforts of those around me, of course, and the fact that the series is being turned into an anime is also thanks to your support. I'm already looking forward to seeing Aileen and company move and talk!

With regard to the manga version, Anko Yuzu has drawn Aileen and the rest of the cast for me again, this time in a volume of side stories. This one is even more dynamic and splendid than the others, and I really hope you'll enjoy it to the fullest.

Thank you for supporting Aileen and company in the anime, the manga, and the original novels.

And now for the thank-yous.

Mai Murasaki, I cloned Claude's face before I noticed I'd done it, and I'm sorry…! Thank you for always creating such magnificent covers and illustrations for me, and thank you in advance for your help on the next volume as well.

Anko Yuzu, thank you so much for drawing manga serials for both series at the same time! Please make sure to take care of your health.

The anime production staff, thank you for all the consideration you've shown to me, the completely clueless author of the original series. Please take good care of Aileen and the rest of the characters.

My supervising editors, thank you both for adjusting schedules and helping me out on various fronts.

I'd also like to thank the members of each editorial department (of course), the designers, the proofreaders, and the many other people who've helped me. I'm very grateful to you.

Most of all, everyone who picked up this book: Thank you so much for your unwavering support for Aileen and company. I'll continue to do my very best so you'll be able to enjoy this series along with my other one, *The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor*.

Now then, I hope we'll meet again.

Sarasa Nagase

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