
Observation Records of My Fiancée:
The Misadventures of a Self-Proclaimed Villainess
2
Written by Shiki
Illust. Wan Hachipisu
Hanashi MEDIA


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ORIGINAL STORY: **Shiki** | ILLUSTRATION: **Wan Hachipisu**

TRANSLATOR:
ETHAN HOLMS

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR:
ETHAN PARKER

PROOFREADING:
BRUCE LAMB

COVER DESIGN:
SKYLAR RUTAN

LAYOUT INTERIOR:
WERNER JACINTO

QUALITY ASSESMENT:
NAHUEL ROBLEDO

PRODUCTION MGR:
NAHUEL ROBLEDO

PUBLISHING MGR:
ANDRES CABASCANGO/ ANDRES MATA

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Story By **Shiki**
Art By **Wan Hachipisu**

Hanashi
MEDIA


CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS
BARD
One of Cecil's candidate attendants. Skilled in physical activities and excels in combat.
ZENO
A spirit contracted with Cecil. Normally, he stays by Cecil's side, disguised as a retainer.
KURO
A spirit of darkness contracted with Bartia. Can take the form of a black fox or a young girl dressed as a maid.
NERT
One of Cecil's candidate attendants. A research fanatic who gets so absorbed in his work that he forgets to eat and sleep.
CHARLES
One of Cecil's candidate attendants. Though he appears to be a playboy, he is actually deeply devoted to one person.
SHAUN
Cecil's younger brother and the second prince of the Kingdom of Alphasta.
CECIL
The crown prince of the Kingdom of Alphasta. A genius who finds most things too easy and thus dull, but after meeting Bertia, he enjoys watching her silly antics.
BERTIA
Cecil's fiancée. Claims to be the "villainess" of an otome game. Tries to act the part of a classic antagonist but never quite succeeds, making her a rather endearing noble lady.
HERONIA
A baron's daughter who, according to Bartia, is the "heroine" of an otome game. She insists that she is Cecil's "maiden of destiny," but...?
KULGAN
A young man distantly related to Bartia and one of Cecil's candidate attendants.

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Part One

Bang… Bang…!!

Beneath a clear autumn sky, colorful smoke shot skyward as our makeshift “fireworks” exploded with loud booms. This was a collaborative effort by me, Cecil Glo Alphasta, my fiancée Bertia, and Nert, a reclusive research enthusiast.

“Everyone, come together! The Halm Academy Cultural Festival is finally happening!” Bertia, my enthusiastic fiancée, exclaimed from the makeshift stage, surrounded by a group of students. Beside her stood my brother, Shaun.

“As President of the Halm Academy Middle School Student Council, I, Shaun Turquoise Alphasta, declare the opening of the first Halm Academy Middle School Cultural Festival!” Shaun announced, his voice filled with nervous excitement.

“… It’s only been about two months since Miss Eirin’s incident, but it feels so peaceful,” I murmured, unable to stop myself from smiling as I watched Bertia beam with joy.

Her smile appeared calm on the surface.

Yet, deep within Bertia’s heart, a small knot of unresolved issues remained. Nevertheless, life continued to move forward unchanged.

“Since I’ve been invited, I might as well enjoy the cultural festival,” I said with a grin, glancing at Zeno beside me. He was not only my attendant but also a contracted spirit.

“So, you’re excited to enjoy it too because Miss Bertia is, huh?” Zeno teased.

With a smile still in place, I quietly stepped on his foot. Then, after a long time, we walked onto the grounds of the Middle School.

Part Two

Bertia Ibil Noches, Marquise Noches—fifteen years old and about to turn sixteen. At the tender age of only eight years old, she was engaged to me, the Crown Prince of Alphasta.

From our very first meeting, she proclaimed herself to be the "villainess of an otome game." Since then, she has vowed to become "a top-tier villainess," entertaining me with her intriguing actions and words. Initially, I was skeptical about these "future scenarios" she mentioned. However, as I indulged her stories—simply because they were enjoyable—I started to wonder if there might be some truth to her claims.

… Well, what matters most to me is whether or not it's interesting. Honestly, even if it turns out to be different, I don't really mind.

I casually observed the bustling middle school students around the academy. The "Cultural Festival" was Bertia's idea, created "to make lots of memories." She had been energetically preparing for several months, and today, it was finally taking place.

Immediately following the opening declaration, the student council members organizing the festival appeared to be occupied, leaving Bertia with little time to spend with me. Hesitantly, I opted to meander around aimlessly, when Joanna, Shaun's fiancée, came up to me.

"Oh, Prince Cecil. I figured you'd be here too."

Like me, she is a second-year high school student, likely visiting middle school to watch her fiancé Shaun, the student council president, in action.

"We both appear to have some time to kill until our partners are available," she said with a wry smile, possibly because I looked undeniably bored.

Joanna, the daughter of the Celtswarren Duchess, is also Bertia's friend. She admires Bertia, supports her from the shadows, and occasionally offers guidance—a truly helpful woman. Additionally, she leads the informal "Bertia Fan Club," organizing its activities.

"Is it okay if I join you for a bit?" Joanna inquired with a soft smile, stepping closer and quickly surveying the area. Afterward, lowering her voice but keeping her smile intact, she said, "Since we both have some free time, could I provide you with an additional report regarding the incident with Viscountess Eirin Silbertz?"

"Oh, of course, that works. It's best to address the difficult topics first so we can both enjoy our meeting at ease," I replied with a smile. If someone couldn't hear us, it would appear that we were simply engaged in a friendly conversation.

We started walking slowly through the academy.

In the past, Viscountess Eirin had posed as Baroness Heronia Inderon and harassed Bertia. At the same time, the real Baroness Heronia was another girl who often argued with Bertia.

Bertia stated that Baroness Heronia serves as the leading heroine of the "otome game." The Baroness appears to have recognized her role, behaving as though she is following a script from the "otome game," and is attempting to embody the tragic heroine while portraying Bertia, the "villainess," as the antagonist.

Bertia took on the role of a villainess, anticipating a dramatic end to our engagement initiated by me. However, her inherent honesty and kindness caused her to falter in this role nearly every time.

Naturally, neither I nor anyone in our circle has been persuaded by the falsehoods disseminated by Baroness Heronia, and we certainly reject any actions that depict Bertia as the antagonist.

The only real complication is that Baroness Heronia has entered into a contract with a light spirit. She might not even be aware of it herself. Nevertheless, this light spirit has been assisting her by acting in her favor.

I have Zeno, a high-level spirit with the blood of the Spirit King, while Bertia has Kuro.

Kuro, an elite dark spirit specializing in defense, often appears as a black fox or a youthful maid. Alongside Bertia, she crafted earrings that grant dark attribute defensive powers. When worn, these magical earrings protect her from the effects of the light spirit.

Both Bertia and I, along with my future aides and Bertia's friends, wear the earrings for protection. In our everyday school lives, Baroness Heronia Inderon consistently attempts to portray Bertia as a villain in public. Her animosity toward Bertia has become widely recognized, and recently, someone even tried to exploit that to launch an attack on her.

The true culprit, Viscountess Eirin Silbertz, wore a pink-blond wig to match the Baroness's hair color and, after tormenting Bertia, eventually pushed her down the stairs.

"Miss Eirin's actions were rather sinister, prompting the judiciary to intervene. Consequently, she was expelled from the academy. Disowned by her viscount family, she is currently in jail awaiting further investigation into her other crimes," Joanna explained.

I listened closely to Joanna's report and nodded. "Well, that seems about right. Simple pranks are one thing, but pushing someone down the stairs is clearly going too far."

Viscountess Eirin developed a crush on a boy who, after becoming flustered talking to Bertia, stirred her jealousy and anger, prompting her to push Bertia down the stairs.

Saying, "Sorry, I just couldn't stand that he was a fan of yours," was hardly an excuse that could resolve everything. If it hadn't been for Kuro, Bertia could have been seriously injured, or worse, she might have died.

"Is it going to take much longer to investigate her other crimes?" I asked Joanna.

"The more we investigate, the more dirt we uncover," she replied.

"Hmm. It looks like she accomplished quite a bit while I was gone."

In the spring and summer of my second year in high school, I took a study trip to a nearby country. During this period, it appears that Viscountess Eirin engaged in multiple acts of harassment toward Bertia.

As a precaution, I had assigned someone to keep an eye on Bertia while I was away.

The report from the “errand runner” I assigned was also submitted as evidence. Normally, there wouldn’t be much to investigate. However, the discovery of additional crimes suggests that the harassment was more extensive than my capable overseer could fully comprehend.

Joanna said in an exasperated tone, “It seems she spent most of her breaks engaging in harassment. The major offenses are already known, but there appear to be a multitude of smaller, unnoticed harassments. Due to the sheer number, while it’s clear they occurred, verifying each fact is taking time.”

“I understand. Well, as long as she’s in jail, she can’t harm Bertia. For now, it’s enough that she’s out of our sight,” I replied. Viscountess Eirin will certainly face punishment. Now, it’s just a matter of compiling her lesser crimes to determine how much more to add to her sentence.

“What about Baroness Heronia?”

“It seems she’s the same as always.”

Baroness Heronia almost had crimes falsely attributed to her by Viscountess Eirin. As a result, she claimed to be a victim and deserving of sympathy. However, no one consoled the Baroness, and in the end, she irrationally ranted that it was all Bertia’s fault for failing to comfort her.

I frowned naturally as I recalled the face of the woman who had hurt my fiancée.

Joanna continued, “She keeps confronting Miss Bertia, saying disrespectful things—insisting in front of her fiancée that she alone can make you happy, claiming to be your ‘maiden of destiny’ with incomprehensible delusions.”

“What an incredibly annoying situation,” I remarked, feeling a frown forming again. I sighed, relaxing my expression.

Bertia, as always, was still trying to set me up with Baroness Heronia. Without provoking Bertia into overreacting by acting impulsively, I’ve simply been deflecting, but it’s hardly enjoyable.

Furthermore, I have recently noticed that Bertia appears increasingly distressed.

Joanna spoke as if she were echoing the thoughts in my heart. “It’s such a shame. We could have handled it neatly if Miss

Bertia weren't so protective."

I wasn't sure where she had gotten it, but Joanna now held an open fan, covering her mouth with it. Perhaps recalling Baroness Heronia's behavior, she seemed visibly irritated. Yet, she remained passive, likely out of respect for Bertia's wishes.

As we walked in silence, reflecting on unpleasant memories, a vibrant corner bustling with students drew our attention. "What's that?" I asked.

"Oh, that? Why don't we go check it out ourselves?" Joanna's mood brightened instantly as she urged me to come along. She seemed to be aware of what was happening in that crowd. Though I wasn't very interested at first, her changing expression made me reconsider. Given her demeanor, it probably involved Bertia, and I found myself intrigued.

I accepted Joanna's invitation, and we made our way toward the crowd. "Ah, Your Highness!" The students gathered there noticed us. Those at the back of the crowd stepped aside, and those in front followed suit, creating a path for us.

As we walked through the parted crowd, we were met with inexplicable cheers like, "We're supporting you!" At first, I was puzzled, but I soon understood what they meant.

At the front, beyond the crowd, there was a display featuring caricatures of Bertia and me, my close aides, and their fiancées. From left to right, there were Shaun and Joanna, Nert and Silica, Bard and Cynthia—and then Bertia and me. Additionally, several other engaged couples were showcased.

Joanna, glancing at the board that paired her with Shaun, excitedly explained to me what it was all about.

"The event happening tomorrow night, the finale of the cultural festival, features a vote to determine the best couple from a list of pre-selected candidates, either self-nominated or nominated by others. This is the voting station."

I understand. This is going to be a very exciting event.

My gaze shifted to the bulletin board, scanning each pair of couples. Shaun, Nert, and Bard, all middle school student council members, are also my close aide candidates.

Additionally, I have other aide candidates, Charles and Kulgan. Charles and his fiancée, Anne, likely weren't selected

because they are both in high school. Kulgan doesn't have a fiancée.

According to Bertia, these five are potential "capture targets" in the "otome game" who could end up with the heroine. However, Bertia hopes that the heroine and I will end up together. As a result, she has meddled—more like interfered—by arranging relationships between these aide candidates and various young ladies.

Currently, none of them are paying attention to the heroine; instead, they are happily engaging with their fiancées and lovers. Kulgan is the only one without a partner, but it seems he has taken an interest in Bertia. However, since Bertia is engaged to me, Kulgan has chosen to focus on his work without seeking a partner. Even so, there are no signs of him being swayed by the heroine.

Ah, and of course, I have no interest in Baroness Heronia at all.

I turned to Joanna and asked, "By the way, what are the current voting results?"

"It's frustrating to say, but Your Highness and Miss Bertia are overwhelmingly popular. Miss Bertia doesn't even realize she's been chosen—she's not aware that her name was even put forward, let alone by someone else's recommendation," Joanna said, covering her mouth with her fan and narrowing her eyes in amusement.

It seems that not only was Bertia unaware, but the people around her had also deliberately kept it a secret from her to create a surprise.

"Your Highness, you'll be attending the finale tomorrow night, won't you?" Joanna asked with a bright smile, to which I responded with a broad grin of my own.

"I can't let my beloved fiancée stand on stage by herself, especially for such an esteemed award. I'd be thrilled to escort her," I assured her.

"Oh my! It's not confirmed yet, you know? Shaun and I are doing quite well in the polls, too. We'll show you a comeback in the final stretch," Joanna retorted with a challenging look. I responded with a relaxed demeanor.

"Then we'll have to do our best too. I'll ensure everyone sees just how well Bertia and I get along during the festival." Drawing

closer to her for all to see would surely attract more votes. Besides, as usual, Bertia is bound to respond in her amusing… and endearing way.

Shaun and Bertia worked hard to prepare for this festival, and I want to contribute to its success.

“It looks like it’s going to be a fun event, doesn’t it?” I mused, imagining Bertia’s reactions.

Bertia was flustered as I closed the distance more than usual. She blushed and seemed even more flustered when chosen as the best couple at this so-called “finale.”

Yes, both scenarios seem enjoyable. As the future royal couple, it would be fitting for us to become figures of admiration for our people, wouldn’t it? Maybe I should put in a bit more effort.

“Your Highness, your smile looks a bit mischievous,” Joanna observed.

“Come now, you’re wearing a similar smile, aren’t you?”

Joanna and I are cousins. We’re not particularly close, but in that moment, I felt the bond of shared blood anew.

Part Three

The following evening, the middle school auditorium buzzed with the “post-festival” celebrations. As the energy of the students peaked among dance competitions and short plays, Bertia’s voice resonated throughout the hall.

“The announcement of the first Halm Academy Middle School Cultural Festival’s esteemed Best Couple Award is here!” This announcement was the grand finale of the event.

Unbeknownst to Bertia, I had Zeno investigate quietly, and it turned out the Grand Prize for Best Couple had been awarded to Bertia and me. Oblivious to everything, Bertia was on stage receiving a piece of paper from one of the students—likely the tally of votes for the Best Couple Award.

Bertia glanced around teasingly, while her friends, including Joanna, watched her with amusement.

“Maybe it’s time to move closer?” I mused quietly from a discreet spot where I had been leaning against the wall,

observing the situation. I started to shift into a position where I could easily approach Bertia.

As the Crown Prince, I naturally drew some attention even from a discreet location. I approached with a calm smile, keeping my gaze fixed on Bertia. *Why would I want to miss such an interesting scene?*

Zeno, discreetly shadowing me, appeared somewhat exasperated—a feeling I sensed even without seeing him. However, I've grown accustomed to Zeno's demeanor and didn't pay it any mind.

As I navigated through the crowd, the announcements began. They started with fifth place. Fourth place went to Bard and Cynthia. Third place was awarded to Nert and Silica; second place went to Shaun and Joanna. Familiar names of couples were called out, and they too ascended the stage.

Finally, the moment arrived.

"And the Grand Prize goes to… His Highness Cecil Glo Alphasta and Lady Bertia Ibil Noches!!… huh? What?"

With the impact of a dramatic sound effect, Bertia announced my name and hers. After a brief pause, she recognized she was referring to us and let out a flustered exclamation.

"Cecil and I? What? What? Whaaat?! How is this happening?!"

Meanwhile, the gathered students in the auditorium, unfazed by Bertia's confusion, erupted into cheers and applause.

"Wait, please wait! Lord Cecil and I? How can this be happening?!" Her face turned as red as an apple, and she flailed her arms in disbelief. Next to her, Silica stepped in, as if taking over as the host, and took the paper from Bertia, casting her eyes down to read the results.

"Here are some reasons for your votes: 'Prince Cecil watching over the adorable Lady Bertia is so charming!' and 'The way Prince Cecil wiped food from Lady Bertia's mouth with his finger during the festival, creating such a sweet atmosphere, was simply the best! Thank you for the treat!!'"

Bertia stuttered in disbelief, "Wha-wha-wha, sweet? No way…"

… Bertia, you're not making much sense, are you?

Her face grew even redder, and she appeared more unsteady on her feet. Standing beside her, I gently wrapped my hand around her waist for support.

“Prince Cecil makes his entrance!!… Lady Bertia, please, pull yourself together!!” Silica admonished Bertia, who was practically melting in confusion.

“But, but…” Overwhelmed to the core, Bertia could only flutter about, unable to respond properly.

It felt like it was up to me to manage the situation. With a broad smile, I could almost hear Zeno calling from the wings, “Keep it together!!” But surely, that was just my imagination.

Since the incident with Miss Eirin, Bertia has occasionally seemed a bit distant. Also, she has been busy with festival preparations lately, which has limited our opportunities to meet.

Due to this, I felt somewhat deprived of entertainment. A bit of mischief should definitely be excusable.

With my arm around Bertia, I scanned the audience and lifted my hand slightly. The cheering students went quiet.

Breathing in slowly with a smile, I projected my voice across the hall. “I am delighted to be celebrated as the Best Couple by everyone here. We promise to continue respecting and maintaining a good relationship with each other, striving to be the couple everyone admires!!”

I glanced at Bertia, who was still beet-red and looking at me as if dazed.

Yes, it seems improbable that we’ll receive any coherent comments from her under these circumstances.

Having quickly given up on getting her to participate properly, I simply pulled her into a sideways embrace, and then…

I pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“?!” Bertia’s eyes widened as she covered her mouth in a flustered panic, likely stifling a scream. Her face—and indeed her entire body—blushed a deep red; she was amusingly adorable. I was quite pleased with her reaction.

As I turned my gaze back to the students, a wave of applause and cheers erupted from the crowd. It was a peak moment. I did a great job.

“The rest is up to you, Shaun,” I said.

“Yes, big brother!” Shaun, who had been standing beside Joanna on the stage, blushed with excitement and took over the responsibility.

Bertia, overwhelmed, slumped limply in my arms. *Right, I need to take her somewhere she can rest, don’t I?*

Under the watchful eyes of the students, Bertia and I gradually descended from the stage. Acknowledging everyone’s cheers, I lifted her in my arms and waved as we exited the venue.

I took her to the infirmary to wait for her to regain her composure. Eventually, Bertia returned to her senses, held her head in her hands, and began to scream.

“I was planning to make good memories with my friends while I can, since a ‘big disaster’ awaits me next year! But now, the impression from earlier is too strong, and it’s turned into a ‘painful event’ whenever I remember Lord Cecil! This is terrible!!”

… But, what can you do, right? I believe that lifting the spirits at such an event is also a part of royal duties.

While Bertia appeared upset, there was also a trace of happiness in her demeanor. However, I noticed that beneath her expression, shadows of sorrow and anxiety still lingered.

Honestly, I had hoped that showing our closeness in front of everyone would ease her worries a little, so it was somewhat disappointing—but, well, I think it created a good memory for me.



Part One

As I enter my third year of high school, I once again take on the role of student council president, a position I also held during my final year in middle school. Around the same time, Bertia started high school; however, during this period, she began to actively avoid me.

When Viscountess Eirin was condemned, Baroness Heronia said something terribly harsh to Bertia. The small knot that formed then has grown larger over time. Before, she would come to me crying whenever she faced trouble, but now she seemed like she wanted to say something, yet she hardly ever actually consulted me about her concerns. She also often showed a kind of restraint that didn't suit her.

All of this is a result of the words thrown at her by Baroness Heronia.

"You are nothing more than a presence to highlight me. You can't even qualify as a rival, just a third-rate villainess. If you abandon your role, Prince Cecil won't be saved. Are you going to steal the happiness that was meant for him? You could never take my place. Because I am the 'maiden of destiny'!!"

No matter how often I think about it, it always leaves a foul taste in my mouth.

I was contemplating what action to take against Baroness Heronia. However, Bertia's friends and those likely to become my close aides are exceptionally capable. As a result, without my

needing to intervene, they had reduced Bertia's interactions with Baroness Heronia early on.

I also tried to arrange more time with Bertia and indulged her a bit. Although our time together decreased due to the busyness surrounding the "Cultural Festival," at the "Post-Festival" event, we were chosen as the best couple, which allowed us to reaffirm our closeness to everyone.

I had hoped this would reassure Bertia, but her attitude stayed the same. Indeed, once she entered high school, she started to avoid me more noticeably.

Considering the situation, I had only one option remaining. "If she runs, I'll just have to catch her, right?"

—One afternoon, a month after school started, I decided to catch her. The moment Bertia spotted me, she bolted like a startled rabbit. I gave chase… or at least that's how it seemed, while actually guiding her to a secluded area of the back garden.

While pursuing Bertia, her maids and I 'accidentally' got separated. In this back garden were only Bertia and myself, with Zeno and Kuro watching at a distance, so there was no need to worry about prying eyes and ears.

I smiled broadly, cornering Bertia against a wall. I placed my hands on either side of her face and trapped her with my legs.

She muttered something unintelligible, "So this is the famous 'wall slam,' huh?" Upon realizing what she had said, she blushed, and her eyes darted around in panic.

"Isn't there an option for you to let me go?" she asked, tears welling up as she glared at me. My lips naturally curved into a smile.

"Did you know? Predators instinctively seek to catch prey that is directly in front of them."

"I am not prey!" Bertia protested, gazing at me with the frightened eyes of a small animal.

"But you do look very tasty."

"… I may have gained a little weight, but I assure you, I'm not tasty at all! Please don't eat me!" Her response made my gaze wander to her chest, which was filling out nicely, but I held back.

—I truly believed she appeared tempting, yet she might misinterpret the meaning of my words.

“Tia, you really take things quite literally, don’t you? Look, when a predator chases its prey, it isn’t always with the intention to eat. Sometimes, they chase just for fun, right?”

“Please don’t treat me like a toy!! And what you’re saying is devilish!!”

I guess I should reject the label of “devilish,” but isn’t the “toy” aspect a bit ironic now? Bertia is so direct; I can’t help but wonder if she hasn’t yet noticed how much I enjoy observing her reactions. She’s genuinely adorably foolish and endearing.

“Look, Tia, you’re adorable, just like a doll. I can’t help but want to play with you.”

“Goodness! To say I’m as cute as a doll! Flattery won’t get you anywhere! I won’t be fooled!”

Bertia’s cheeks flushed pink despite her words, revealing a rather eager expression. She appeared to be easily swayed.

Based on her behavior, it was clear to me that she had grown quite fond of me. So, why does she try to run away? I suspect it has something to do with the previous mention by Baroness Heronia of the “Maiden of Destiny.” Bertia remains stubbornly silent on this matter.

She always finds an excuse, such as “I don’t want to hurt Lord Cecil,” to flee. This isn’t just avoiding the topic—it’s a literal escape, as she physically runs away.

Catching Bertia, like today, isn’t difficult. However, even when I catch her, she won’t speak up. And as adorable as my fiancée is, it’s not right to force the conversation, so I reluctantly let her be.

I’ve thought about asking others who might know about this, like Baroness Heronia, but that would certainly complicate matters, so I’ve kept that as a last resort. I really don’t want to become too familiar with someone who torments Bertia.

As I pondered, it seemed Bertia continued her rant. Unbeknownst to me, she started to get carried away, tears welling up in her eyes as she furrowed her brows and pleaded.

“At last, Lord Cecil, the coercive force has started to take effect! Fate is already at work! In roughly a year, I’ll dramatically fail and be dismissed from the stage. It will be farewell to you, Lord Cecil. To properly embody this role, it’s only sensible that I maintain my distance from you!”

My eyebrows naturally furrowed deeply.

That's not good. Recently, whenever I think about Bertia, I find it difficult to control my expression. With other matters, regardless of what is said or done, I can easily brush it off with a smile… why is that?

"What do you mean by 'coercive force'?"

I managed to swallow the follow-up question I had about whether Baroness Heronia had done something again. It's not good to suspect someone without evidence, especially for someone like me, whose position lends weight to my words. I must be careful with my speech.

I took a deep breath, striving for composure. I consciously smoothed the wrinkles between my eyebrows and returned to my usual smile, prompting Bertia to timidly glance my way. I deepened my smile further, encouraging her to continue. She pursed her lips tightly and wore a serious expression before beginning to speak in a grave tone.

"I'll tell you because it's you, Lord Cecil. Honestly… I've put on some weight."

"… Hmm?"

"So, I've gained weight!"

"… Um, what do you mean by that?"

As serious as I was about listening to Bertia, her sudden and puzzling claim made me tilt my head in confusion. Then, as if she had made up her mind, Bertia opened her mouth to explain.

"Since last fall, right after the cultural festival ended, I've gradually started to gain weight. At first, I didn't understand why, but then I realized! This must be what they refer to as the coercive force!"

Bertia, with her cheeks cupped in both hands, spoke with a look of shock, but I still couldn't quite understand what she was trying to convey.

"Tia, there are a few points I'd like to address, but for now, could you please explain why you believe gaining weight is related to this 'coercive force'?"

Bertia looked rather displeased by my question, as if to say, "How can you not understand?… I believe my question is perfectly reasonable?"

Bertia took a deep breath before she began to explain. “That’s because, in the original story, Bertia was described as plump. Ever since I first met you, Lord Cecil, I’ve been on a strict diet to break away from the role of a third-rate villainess, overturning the original plump characterization. Yet now, as my downfall approaches, I’m starting to revert to Bertia’s original physique!!”

So, if I’m getting this right… She thinks that the coercive force is causing her looks to involuntarily revert to the way Bertia is shown in the “otome game”?

Hmm, is this a moment to laugh?

No, Bertia appears to be serious, and it wouldn’t be appropriate to laugh. Maybe I should provide her with a proper explanation.

“Look, Bertia. I understand you’re genuinely worried, but I believe your weight gain isn’t likely caused by some ‘coercive force’; it’s probably more about what’s in the pockets of your dress.”

“Something in my pockets?” She looked puzzled, furrowing her brow as she glanced down at her dress. Reaching into a bulging hidden pocket, she retrieved the contents within.

“… Cookies from Lady Yumir and Lady Otomeria? These?” She gazed at the two baked treats, tilting her head in perplexity.

I almost sighed, thinking there was nothing wrong with it.

“Tia, since last fall—specifically after the ‘Cultural Festival’—haven’t you been getting more sweets from the young ladies around you?”

“Ah! Indeed, that’s true! Even people I barely knew before suddenly started giving me sweets. Could it be that the coercive force had already begun working back then…?”

“No, that’s not it. After the ‘Cultural Festival,’ everyone recognized what a wonderful lady you are. That’s why other women who want to befriend you started giving you their favorite treats as a way to get closer to you.” While that was my explanation, the actual situation was a bit different.

At the “Post-Festival” event, the ladies who ranked among the top couples were all closely connected to Bertia. These ladies often brought her sweets.

These incidents may have combined to spark a rumor that “offering sweets to Marquise Bertia Ibil Noches can make long-

standing romantic wishes come true or lead to wonderful new romances." Consequently, many students began to offer Bertia sweets…

Bertia, being conscientious, always ensured that she exchanged proper greetings with those who gave her sweets, thereby becoming acquainted with them. Because they were familiar, she took their romantic problems to heart, offered advice, and helped out, even successfully matchmaking some of the young ladies. As a result, this further fueled the rumors.

As the number of sweets offered to Bertia increased, her weight naturally continued to rise due to her consumption. This indicated a clear cause and effect relationship, not some sort of "coercive force" as Bertia described.

Ah, also, my earlier advice regarding her "diet," which included strength training, may have influenced her. I suggested that she tone down her exercise regimen since a muscular Crown Princess could be somewhat awkward.

Bertia still looked doubtful after my explanation.

"No, that's precisely what the coercive force is…"

"No, you just need to cut back on the sweets you eat. And maybe step up your exercise a bit for now, but keep that moderate too." I interrupted her sharply.

Allowing her to think that a bizarre idea of "coercive force" is causing her to gain weight is harmful to her health. Most importantly, if she fixated on the belief that the "coercive force" was beginning to take effect and she impulsively took drastic measures, that would be concerning.

"But it feels wrong not to eat the things I've received with so much care…"

"Why not share them with the maids and eat a little at a time?"

"My snacks…"

"You're aiming to be a top-tier villainess, right?"

"…"

Bertia's head drooped sadly in my arms. However, the fact that she didn't outright reject the idea indicated she was reluctantly coming to terms with it.

"Ah, that's right. If you want to be the top-tier villainess you mentioned, then you can't be away from me, can you?" I added,

to emphasize my point.

This time, she had tried to distance herself from me with the bizarre excuse that “the coercive force” had begun to take effect, and therefore, she needed to stay away from her “target of conquest,” which was supposedly me.

It appeared that she had accepted this as a misunderstanding. However, as the so-called “doom” she mentioned drew nearer, she was likely to become more unstable and prone to erratic behavior. Pursuing her each time may sound amusing, but it’s incredibly inefficient.

It would be much better to keep her nearby, where she can be easily observed and managed.

With a sad expression, Bertia began to speak. “Why? Lord Cecil, you’re supposed to be entering a lovey-dovey phase with the heroine soon and gradually distancing yourself from me. I’m supposed to get overly enthusiastic about holding you back, racing headlong down the path of a villainess. And then, feeling neglected by you, I would…”

As she spoke, tears began to pool in Bertia’s eyes, threatening to spill over at any moment. She clenched my shirt at the chest, trying to hold back the tears without blinking even once.

Seeing her clenched fists, a wry smile crept up on me. If it’s so painful, she doesn’t have to push herself down the path of a villainess; she could simply stay my fiancée.

I decided not to say that to her.

Bertia appeared to be acting on her own terms, so anything I said now would only result in resistance. Instead, I should take necessary actions without her noticing and simply make it through the graduation ceremony day.

I made sure to impress upon Bertia the importance of her goals. “That’s why, Tia. To become a distinguished villainess, you must strive to monopolize my presence. By doing so, you can truly stand as a barrier before the ‘heroine.’”

“Eh?”

“Aren’t you the one who’s supposed to get jealous when I show interest in the ‘heroine’? If that’s the case, you should stay close and constantly make sure I notice you, right?”

“But being any closer to you is personally challenging for me.”

“What’s so difficult about it?”

“The closer we get, the harder the goodbye and betrayal will be, right? If we grow closer and then you turn cold on me at the end, I don’t think I can bear it.” As she spoke, tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked down, trying to endure her emotions. Seeing her like this, I felt a sharp pain deep in my heart.

Perhaps it would be better for her peace of mind if I let her go now. But…

“Then I won’t be cold toward you in the end, Tia. Would that be okay?”

“Is there truly a kind of ‘doom’ that doesn’t conclude with me being treated coldly?”

“Of course. I’ll make sure that the ‘doom’ doesn’t mean I’ll be cold to ‘Tia.’ Can you trust me on that?”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled gently, stroking her head to reassure her. Slowly, she lifted her face, still looking uncertain.

“Then I’ll try to hold on to these feelings a little longer. I’m a top-tier villainess, after all!”

Seeing the determination in Bertia’s expression, I nodded silently. *I’m sorry, Bertia. I’m unexpectedly enjoying our current life. That’s why I can’t bring myself to let go of you. You’re a vibrant splash of color in my life. A dull life is nothing but suffocating pain.*

I will keep my promise. The ‘doom’ that doesn’t involve being cold to ‘Tia’ essentially means I should find someone else to doom, right?

As Bertia stood before me, holding back tears and clutching her hands, I watched her and contemplated how we should navigate the scenarios ahead.

Part Two

Now that the strategy is set and Bertia has safely returned to my side, the only thing left is to decide how to bring this finale to a close. We already have various pawns and plots ready; it’s just a matter of how to maneuver them.

“Hey, Kulgan. I’ve heard that Baroness Heronia has been visiting you often lately. What’s she like?”

Kulgan, who had also been a member of the student council in high school as he had been in middle school, paused his diligent paperwork and turned to face me. It wasn’t just Kulgan who looked up at my question.

Even though no major events were happening, my close aide candidates, who also assisted with the student council and my personal royal duties, often gathered in the council room. Today, they all reacted to the mention of “Baroness Heronia” and turned their attention to me.

Amidst all of this, Kulgan responded to my question.

“Not great, I’m afraid. She’s always been a bit annoying, but recently, she’s been particularly curious about Lady Bertia and her family.”

“You mean suspecting them of wrongdoing… or something?” I asked with a bright smile.

Kulgan, appearing slightly surprised, furrowed his brow and nodded.

“There have been several instances in which she asked whether Lady Bertia’s family had heard any bad rumors or if being related to them might have gotten her involved in some kind of trouble.”

“Hmm,” I murmured.

Just as I thought.

According to Bertia, in the “otome game” scenario, Kulgan was meant to be the adopted son of her family, the Noches Marquis household. However, due to a deviation in the scenario, he ended up being adopted by the lower-ranking Uradil Count family instead.

This was primarily a strategic move for infiltration, intended to investigate the suspicious activities of the Uradil family.

Kulgan is supposed to play a vital role in the impending “doom” that is expected to befall Bertia during my graduation ceremony. If Baroness Heronia is frequently approaching Kulgan now, it’s likely to serve as a preparatory step to bring about Bertia’s “doom.”

Kulgan’s recent statements have confirmed this suspicion.

“What’s up? Are you discussing some crafty scheme? I’ve had my share of unpleasant experiences with Baroness Heronia too, concerning Lady Anne. I’d be happy to lend a hand.” Charles chimed in with a smirk, propping his cheek on his hand as he listened to our conversation.

I remembered how Charles had been annoyed by Baroness Heronia constantly telling him to abandon his feelings for Anne. She had even gone so far as to spread rumors that Charles was a playboy and to pressure him into an engagement with someone else, despite his brother’s objections.

Even someone as chivalrous as Charles would be justifiably upset if someone interfered in his blossoming romantic pursuits.

“I feel the same,” Nert added. “I was just reading a book when she started complaining about Silica right next to me, saying things like, ‘That must have been hard for you,’ without really understanding anything. She doesn’t realize that when Silica scolds me, it’s out of love. Despite her complaints, she always takes care of me happily, which is really cute.”

Nert glanced up from his book, his brow furrowed and his expression irritated.

It truly takes a lot to anger Nert, who is typically so calm.

“I feel the same way. I usually don’t like to gang up and speak poorly of someone, but… I truly find her challenging,” Bard remarked, maintained his usual calm demeanor.

“I was looking forward to a long ride just with Cynthia, but then out of the blue, she insisted on joining us. I had no choice but to take her along, yet she couldn’t keep up with our pace and ended up complaining and demanding to turn back halfway, ruining our date several times over.” Ah, Baroness Heronia can ride a horse, but trying to keep up with Bard and Cynthia is reckless.

Their equestrian skills rival those of knights serving in the royal palace, if not surpassing them. While it may be admirable to persistently try to join them on their rides, it becomes inappropriate when it interrupts the outings of a couple who are engaged.

Bard isn’t typically quick-tempered, but he does hold onto his anger. However, repeating the same mistakes could only lessen his favorable impression of her over time.

“I don’t feel very warmly toward her either. After all, she’s said things that could hurt my Joanna,” added Shaun, jumping into the conversation with a scowl.

Well, it’s understandable that the “targets” would become increasingly averse to a “heroine” who disregards their feelings and continues with aggressive approaches. Moreover, the power of the light spirit contracted to Baroness Heronia — as Zeno noted, Little Pi barely qualifies as a high-level spirit.

Thus, she can use “Healing Light,” a power characteristic of high-level light spirits, which grants a sense of well-being to those around her. This ability creates a unique happiness in those near Baroness Heronia, making it difficult for them to separate from her.

The enchantment is also partially blocked by magic-warding earrings that diminish the influence of the light spirit.

Indeed, according to Zeno, the “Healing Light” remains immature. Little Pi has only recently evolved from a mid-level to a high-level spirit and is still seen as an apprentice in that realm. A fully matured high-level spirit can wield their powers over a vast area without causing discomfort to those nearby. However, Little Pi hasn’t mastered this ability yet. Thus, to those of us not under Little Pi’s spell, the followers surrounding Baroness Heronia appear to have the vacant look of “addicts,” clearly under some type of enchantment.

Based on Bertia’s explanation of the “otome game,” we, the “targets” of conquest, are supposedly prone to becoming her followers. Thankfully, we are accompanied by a genuine, experienced high-level spirit.

It’s very unlikely that Baroness Heronia’s spirit can significantly harm us, considering our protections.

I smiled at my close aides. “It sounds bad when you call it a crafty scheme. I’m just considering defensive measures to protect my fiancée. If Baroness Heronia doesn’t intentionally try to harm her, I plan to treat her as just any other stranger.”

“These defensive measures are necessary for us as well, right?” Charles said with his usual grin, pointing out the obvious without hesitation. The other members nodded in agreement.

Indeed, when we are in relationships or engaged, we naturally feel the need to protect our partners from any potential

harm.

“If the enemy is common to all of us, wouldn’t it make sense to cooperate?” he added.

While suggesting collaboration, it was evident that Charles expected me to take the lead.

Well, with this group, it would be safest for me to create the ‘scenario’ and have them follow along.

Charles and Kulgan, with their ability to judge people and act rationally, might be capable of operating independently. In contrast, individuals like Bard, who are straightforward and quick to trust, may act rashly without considering the consequences and should not work alone. The same applies to Shaun, who has been pampered, and Nert, who struggles with interpersonal interactions. It would be problematic if those who find it difficult to read the nuances of others acted inappropriately.

Feigning to contemplate for a moment, I then smiled and offered a suggestion. “Well, ganging up on a seemingly fragile woman would be ungentlemanly, and it’s not something I’d prefer… but if it’s to protect our loved ones, setting up defensive traps that someone might accidentally trigger isn’t too bad, right? If at that point they become ‘the enemy,’ then our actions would be justified as self-defense.”

Everyone seemed to nod in agreement after hearing my plan. It would indeed be unseemly for future leaders of the country to retaliate against a noble lady simply for causing some minor disturbances. However, if clear hostility was shown toward us, then that’d be a different matter.

Setting traps would help clarify any ill intentions she may have and provide a just cause for our response. Of course, I do not intend to misinterpret her actions or fabricate reasons for retaliation unnecessarily. If she does not act with malice, the traps will remain harmless.

Ideally, the best outcome would be that nothing happened at all. However, I’m honestly indifferent about how things turn out. As long as my fiancée doesn’t suffer and continues to keep me entertained as always, that’s all that matters.

“For now, report back as soon as Baroness Heronia does something suspicious… Kulgan, if she asks you anything again,

could you be evasive without confirming or denying? Keep it vague and noncommittal."

Kulgan furrowed his brow in confusion. "Are you suggesting we should neither confirm nor deny her suspicions?"

I nodded, keeping my usual smile. "Yes, exactly. Let's not deny anything. It'll be interesting to see what she will infer from that and how she'll act based on her interpretations… Since neither Bertia nor the Noches family has anything to hide, there shouldn't be any issues, right?" I raised one corner of my mouth, giving Kulgan a meaningful look.

It seemed that the others couldn't fully grasp my intentions from that alone, but Kulgan understood perfectly.

"I see. Just as I expected from Your Highness," he said with a cold smile, though his brows soon furrowed in concern.

"However, doesn't this approach potentially expose my sister, Lady Bertia, to danger?"

That's an interesting slip-up… Or maybe not so much a slip-up. Why did you begin referring to Bertia as 'my sister'? Surely you haven't been thinking of her that way all along, and it just accidentally slipped out?

I might need to have a detailed discussion with him at some point.

"I will not put my fiancée Tia in any danger. That's why I want us to move forward without creating any friction until 'the final moment,' steering clear of anything that might provoke Baroness Heronia. We will simply observe her plans and actions. Until then, we should avoid retaliating against her attacks and focus instead on skillfully dodging them."

I paused for a moment, then flashed a reassuring smile. "I've arranged to spend more time with Bertia. You all should do the same with your significant others. Think about what to do when you can't be together; maybe set up some alerts? They're smart—they'll be able to protect each other."

The group's partners nodded in understanding.

Despite the calm expressions on everyone's faces, one person did not nod in agreement.

"Excuse me, but while that may be true for other ladies, I have a feeling that if we alert Lady Bertia, she might rush in headfirst instead…" Kulgan said, his smiled tinged with affection.

Yes, he understands Bertia well. I believe that too.

Still, I find that attitude troubling. It's as if he's fondly watching over the actions of a much younger girl.

She is neither your sister, nor your girlfriend, nor your fiancée, you know?

"Yes, I agree. That's why I'd appreciate it if we could keep this matter from Bertia," I said, ensuring I caught everyone's eyes around the room, which prompted a series of solemn nods in response. Over the years, they have all been tested by fire regarding Bertia. They understood the dangers of giving her too much information.

She acts purely and simply on her impulses in both good and bad ways.

"So, unless Baroness Heronia takes actions that are considered extremely dangerous, could you all focus on gathering information and observing please? Let's say the final judgment will be made around our graduation ceremony," I suggested.

My graduation ceremony—reportedly the moment when Bertia is doomed. It's likely that Baroness Heronia will make her move then.

Of course, I can't exactly explain the details of this being a scenario from an "otome game" to my close aides. So, I provided a plausible reason: "I want to resolve this while we seniors are still around. The final deadline is our graduation ceremony." They nodded, without asked any questions.

Now, all that remained was to prepare for various contingencies while waiting for the other side to take action. Naturally, I planned to protect Bertia diligently during this time.

Kulgan will probably be extremely busy with preparations. He'll be so occupied that he won't have any time to meet with Bertia.

"I'm excited to see what happens," I said with a truly genuine smile, which brought smiles from everyone present.

Their smiles appeared somewhat sinister... perhaps that was just my imagination at work.



Part Three

As the seasons transitioned from spring to summer, I found myself drawn back to the palace, compelled to gather information about the enigmatic “Maiden of Destiny” that had been nagging at me for some time. When Baroness Heronia brazenly declared to Bertia, “I am the ‘Maiden of Destiny’!” it sounded as if the title itself held significant meaning, as though those words alone could justify why I would choose her.

Furthermore, events related to the “otome game” that Bertia often mentioned typically included explanations of some kind. This led me to wonder whether this “Maiden of Destiny” truly existed in our world and might significantly influence my future. Eager to uncover more, I scoured the royal archives, but to my surprise, I found too many relevant texts, making it impossible to select the most pertinent information. Although there was no document explicitly titled “Maiden of Destiny,” numerous similar stories seemed to abound.

Therefore, I decided to shift my perspective slightly. I began to explore matters related to myself—or rather, more accurately, into the traditions and legends concerning the royal family. If the “Maiden of Destiny” was truly meant to affect me, there must be a reason I was chosen, likely connected to my royal lineage. Traditions regarding the royal family often included stories passed down from one king to the next. To confirm this, I planned to visit my father.

As a gesture, I prepared some of my mother’s favorite pastries from a renowned bakery along with essential documents for my father’s administrative duties. These documents included information he had been eagerly seeking. My father, the king, was extremely busy; however, when I mentioned that I had something to cheer up my mother and important information to aid in his governance, he was pleased and promptly arranged to meet with me.

When I visited my father’s office, I immediately presented the gifts. As he took them, his face lit up with joy, especially

appreciating the treats intended for my mother and quickly passed them to his chief steward.

“Father, do you know anything about something called the Maiden of Destiny?” I brought up the subject directly, prompting him to look at me in surprise.

“The Maiden of Destiny? It’s rare for you to show interest in something so romantic.”

“It’s a term that emerged during a personal research project, but I’m struggling to grasp its true meaning,” I explained.

“You’re having trouble? That’s unusual. Didn’t you check the archives?” he asked with a hint of curiosity.

I smiled. “I did, but I couldn’t find it. To be precise, there were too many texts with similar phrases, and I couldn’t determine which ones matched.”

“Why, then, do you come to me with this?”

“It seems connected to the royal family. If it were important to the royal house, I assumed you would know,” I replied, keeping my smile as my father raised an eyebrow skeptically.

In truth, I was uncertain whether this issue concerned the royal family or me personally. Instead, I wanted to clarify this by talking it over with my father. However, I chose to refer to it as “related to the royal family” intentionally.

If my father knew something that was confidential regarding the royal family, he would determine whether it was better to inform me as a king rather than as a father. Thus, framing it this way was crucial; otherwise, he might cleverly steer the conversation in another direction and end it.

Silently, we exchanged glances, each of us trying to assess the other’s intentions. My father narrowed his eyes slightly, attempting to discern my true purpose.

Meanwhile, I maintained my expression unchanged. It was my father who relented first.

“Although you’re my son, your smile is impenetrable. I considered probing why you asked, but it seems impossible to extract any information from you when you don’t even change your expression,” he remarked.

In response to my father’s comment, I chose to share some background information that led me to this inquiry.

“In fact, I received a somewhat delusional prophecy from an individual who claimed to be the ‘Maiden of Destiny’ and stated that her powers could influence me. That piqued my curiosity, so I decided to look into it.”

“Is that true?”

“It is… So, do you have any idea what it could be about?”

My father then gazed into the distance as if searching through his memories, and let out a contemplative hum.

“I’m sorry, but nothing specific comes to mind. Our country has a rich and important history, and there are many prophecies and legends surrounding the royal family—tales of destined monarchs, legends of saints, and warrior maidens. However, I can’t recall anything that aligns perfectly with this ‘Maiden of Destiny’ you mention.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

This time, it was my turn to narrow my eyes a little, casting a scrutinizing glance at my father.

He met my gaze with a direct expression, as if to imply that there was nothing secretive or urgent.

I kept observing him—every twitch of his cheek muscles, his breathing, the movement of his eyes—ensuring that I didn’t miss even a minute detail… Finally, I eased my gaze a little.

My father probably wasn’t lying.

“I understand. If you don’t know either, it must be some unfounded lie or fabrication.”

“You give up rather easily,” he noted.

“Since I can see that you aren’t lying, Father, if you’re unaware of it, then it must be either trivial or nonexistent… After all, there’s no way something crucial to the royal family would be unknown to you, the King.” *—Or perhaps, it’s a matter unrelated to the royal family entirely.*

As I shrugged my shoulders, Father chuckled wryly, and said, “It seems it was rather overrated.”

Smiling, I added, “Besides, my interest was only as far as it could be useful if known, so there’s no issue with leaving it unknown.”

“Oh, really? It was a ‘prophecy’ that caught your interest enough to ask about, wasn’t it?”

“It felt like a delusional prophecy. Even if such a person were to genuinely appear, they would likely be nothing more than a nuisance. Managing them is troublesome, so it’s better to ignore them. At most, they could be utilized as a pawn.”

“But it’s the ‘Maiden of Destiny,’ isn’t it?” My father grinned playfully.

I smiled in exasperation. “I have a fiancée, Miss Bertia. That was your decision, wasn’t it, Father?”

As I mentioned Bertia a little sharply, my father looked slightly surprised at first, then his expression softened into a relieved, affectionate smile.

“Ah, that’s right. That was the case… Tell me, Cecil,” he asked.

“What is it?”

“Are you enjoying your life now?”

Caught off guard by the sudden question, I tilted my head, uncertain of his intentions. Nonetheless, my response was already decided.

“Yes, I am. My fiancée always makes sure of that.”

“That’s good to hear… It means there was no flaw in my judgment when I chose her as your fiancée,” Father nodded contentedly, his gaze filled with paternal affection, which felt somewhat uncomfortable.

“… Shall I say, ‘As expected of you, Father’ then?”

“You could praise me more, you know?”

“I’ll leave that role to Mother. You’d prefer that, wouldn’t you?” I said with a playful tone. Father looked momentarily puzzled, then burst out laughing.

“Indeed, that’s true. It would be better to share this with Olivia in bed, where she could shower me with praise. She’d undoubtedly cry with joy.”

I couldn’t help but think that Father’s words, mixing crying and rejoicing, might have carried a different implication. A wry smile escaped my lips as he spoke so casually about such matters in front of his son.

“Father, Mother isn’t as young as she once was, so please, do restrain yourself?”

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m not a child anymore, am I? And please refrain from bringing up such delicate topics in front of your

actual son."

"I really don't understand what you mean."

Despite his feigned ignorance, I responded with a full smile. "Then perhaps I should go and do to Bertia what you intend to do with Mother. There shouldn't be any problem, right? Of course, if anyone questions me, I'll proudly say 'the King has permitted it."

"Stop that! At least wait until you're married! Otherwise, between the Prime Minister—who is Bertia's father—and Olivia, who has feelings for Bertia, I'll end up getting murdered!"

The Prime Minister was Bertia's father, and Olivia's my mother's name.

At my father's alarmed tone, I tilted my head, still smiling. "Wouldn't it be okay to just receive praise?"

"… Sorry. Please, just maintain a proper relationship befitting the Crown Prince until you're married."

Father scratched his head roughly, his lips pursed as if annoyed.

I let out a chuckle, "I suppose it can't be helped."

While this man appears as a good and dignified king to his people, in my view… when he steps away from his duties, the persona of a simple father seems rather pitiful.

I do not dislike this side of him.

… Although not to the same degree as Bertia, watching him can also be quite entertaining.

"Well then, I should take my leave now." I hadn't obtained the information I sought, but I had asked all the necessary questions. I bid farewell to Father as I made my exit.

Father repeated his admonition about maintaining a proper relationship, but I merely smiled and let it go… *Naturally, I have no desire to hurt Bertia; I just found it amusing to see Father turn pale, so I poked fun at him a little.*

As I began to walk toward the door after saying my goodbyes, a voice called out from behind me. I turned halfway around, wondering if there was something else he needed, and met Father's unexpectedly serious gaze.

"… Cecil, you are a truly capable son of whom I am proud. However, being capable doesn't mean you are without worries. There may be troubles unique to those who excel. I may not be

the most dependable, but whenever you're troubled, come to me for advice."

I couldn't understand why Father had suddenly said that. However, seeing his expression as a father and hearing his words gave me an unexpected sense of relief. Then, all of a sudden, I realized something.

—Within me resided a quiet sense of unease, a feeling I had never recognized before. My plans for the future, the "scenarios" I had contemplated, did not consider any uncertainties. I was determined to confront whatever arose and was fully equipped.

Dealing with the light spirit could be troublesome, but I doubted it would require the use of flashy powers. Bertia, who viewed this world as an "otome game," was unaware that magic existed here, likely because no such powers appeared in the game.

Even if some form of power were exercised, we were joined by Zeno and Kuro, high-level spirits in their own right.

—Yes, thinking like this, there appears to be no reason to feel anxious.

So, I had thought that I felt no anxiety.

Still, I truly felt relieved by Father's words.

That relief came because I felt a slight, unreasonable anxiety within me.

How pathetic of me.

"Thank you, Father. When the time comes, I will rely on you without hesitation, so be prepared."

"Ah, leave it to me. As your father, I can at least share your burdens."

"Won't you tell me to leave everything to you as if I were boarding a great ship?"

"Having a son too capable makes a parent modest."

"I think that varies from person to person."

"That's how it is for me."

We both grinned slightly and exchanged glances. Then, turning my back to Father, I headed for the door again. Before leaving the office, I bowed and caught a glimpse of him in my peripheral vision.

He had resumed his kingly demeanor, concentrating on the documents I had submitted. In my heart, I silently thanked him

once more.



Part One

Only three months remained until my graduation. One afternoon, with classes ending early, I was enjoying a leisurely tea with Bertia in a special room designed for small gatherings and meetings. As usual, Zeno, Kuro, and Bertia's maids stood by in the background.

"Tia, what color do you think would be nice for the graduation party dress?" I asked.

Upon hearing my question, Bertia's eyes suddenly became clouded. Just moments earlier, she had been happily stuffing her cheeks with bite-sized pastries.

There was a time when Bertia acted distant toward me. Recently, however, she has started spending time with me when she can, but mentioning graduation always seems to cast a shadow over her expression. That's why I have been careful not to bring up anything about Baroness Heronia, graduation, or the "otome game."

Unfortunately, with graduation so near, such omissions were no longer feasible. I had already managed the necessary preparations regarding Baroness Heronia without informing Tia. However, the arrangements for the graduation itself couldn't move forward without her, especially since, as my fiancée, she needed to attend the graduation party as my partner.

"The dress for the graduation party?" Bertia murmured, her cheeks still filled with pastries, and then she froze.

… It's trivial, but you know, the pastries are made bite-sized so you don't end up with bulging cheeks. It defeats the purpose if you stuff several in your mouth at once, doesn't it?

She swallowed with difficulty—or at least, it appeared that way since her mouth was crammed full of pastries, making it look like she was swallowing normally. To ease the tension, I opted to tease her a little.

"Indeed. The graduation party is primarily a couples' gathering. It's an unspoken rule that engaged attendees should bring their partners. You wouldn't want to leave me as the sorrowful bachelor abandoned by his fiancée, would you? Therefore, in response to your generosity, I thought I'd gift you the dress."

Bertia smiled uncomfortably. "But isn't the dress more fitting for the heroine? Shouldn't it be given to her instead of me…"

"Tia, I'm asking you as my partner." Her uncertain gaze met mine. I interrupted her, my voice unexpectedly harsh. She must have detected the irritation in my tone as she flinched and inadvertently crushed the pastry in her hand.

"Ah, look what you've done. Your favorite treat is ruined now." I took a breath to calm myself, then stood up as if nothing had happened. I reached across the table and took her soiled hand.

When I touched her, she shivered with anxiety, but I chose to ignore it. Gently, I uncurled her fingers to collect the crumbled pieces of the pastry.

This isn't good.

Is this typical of adolescence? Recently, my emotions have felt extremely volatile. Even the smallest things Bertia does seem to disturb me, which wasn't the case before. It's honestly bewildering.

If she wasn't involved, my emotions wouldn't be so stirred up, allowing me to function normally. It doesn't interfere with my responsibilities as Crown Prince, and it's not a significant issue.

While Bertia's maids readied a damp cloth, I quickly popped the pastry fragments from her hand into my mouth.

"Mmm, these are quite delicious, aren't they?"

Even if the pastries were oddly shaped, their nostalgic taste lifted my spirits. Looking at Bertia, I noticed her cheeks were

flushed red and her hand remained in mine—a scene more delightful than any dessert.

I gestured to Zeno, who promptly positioned a chair beside her. When a maid came forward with a damp cloth, I reached out to take it. She lingered for a moment, evidently hesitant to allow a crown prince to undertake such a humble chore. However, my encouraging smile helped her feel at ease, and she handed me the cloth. I carefully cleaned Bertia's hands.

"All done! Now, Tia, what color do you want it to be?" I relaxed my grip after wiping and gently placed her hand on mine. Kuro came over, thumping her fluffy tail against the chair as a warning.

… I know. I won't do anything more in such a public setting.

"Color…"

"Absolutely, color! I want the design to complement my outfit, so I'll take care of that. Naturally, I'll pick something that looks great on you too." While I talked, Bertia, still blushing, began to warm up. Watching her, I offered her a gentle smile.

She appeared to want to say something, but upon seeing my smile, she seemed to abandon any objections.

"… A muted shade of yellow," she said after some contemplation, selecting a color she frequently wore. However, her expression shifted abruptly, and she exclaimed, "No, wait! I believe blue would be a better choice!"

I tilted my head in confusion at her sudden shift; she looked troubled, almost on the verge of tears, as she smiled weakly.

"Or… another color might be even better. Like red or black… Yes, that's right! Perhaps something more fitting for a villainess…"

Her hand tightened around mine.

Though her grip seemed unintentional, it felt as if she was holding onto me tightly.

The first color Bertia suggested for her dress matched my hair, while the next resembled my eyes. However, she quickly dismissed both options in favor of something "more befitting of a villainess." She moved from yellow to blue, then from blue to red or black.

Each time she blinked, the sorrow in her eyes appeared to intensify, almost as though she was attempting to pull away from

me. Witnessing this, I felt my brow knit in concern.

“Hey, Tia. Why can’t we go with the usual yellow?… Are you tired of yellow now?” I kept my voice steady, suppressing my smile and narrowing my eyes instead.

Bertia, gazing downward, failed to notice my expression. The phrase “growing tired” was all too familiar to me. Whether regarding objects or people, I became bored easily. Even things I once found somewhat interesting or enjoyable quickly turned dull as they failed to meet my expectations, making them lose their appeal.

Once that occurred, my enthusiasm would fade as quickly as it had appeared, and even things that once felt unique would seem indistinguishable from a stone by the road. I had experienced it many times before. Yet, for the first time, I truly felt the fear of being “used up.”

Due to my deep familiarity with ennui, I could readily sense when others grew “weary” of something. That sharp foresight seized my heart like a claw and sent a shiver through me.

… No, what ridiculous thoughts am I entertaining?

Her eyes mourned the idea of parting from me—of being hurt by me. Her hand, tightly gripping mine as though holding on for dear life, revealed her genuine emotions. Though her words indicated the opposite, her entire presence radiated love for me.

It was impossible to mistake such an overwhelming surge of emotion.

—It seemed impossible, yet my heart was uneasy despite my mind’s reasoning. There was a nearly invisible “possibility,” and the mere fact that it wasn’t zero terrified me.

When I asked if she had grown tired of yellow, Bertia hesitated before responding, “I love yellow… especially a soothing, milky tea-like shade. And I also adore the clear, night-sky blue.”

With one hand, she gently caressed her dress and the necklace hanging around her neck. The dress matched the color of my hair, while the necklace—given to her by me—held a liquid resembling the color of my eyes, encased in a glass vial adorned with an ivy design.

Ah, she still…

As soon as I instinctively let go of the breath I had been holding—

“But that’s exactly why I don’t want to wear them at the event. I don’t want to tarnish those precious colors… Colors filled with cherished memories… I don’t want them to be overshadowed by sadness.”

—A chill ran deep into my stomach.

A question surfaced in my mind.

… Why are you so stubbornly trying to distance yourself from me?

I brought her hand, which was tracing the necklace, nearer and laid it over my other hand. Then, softly enveloping both her hands in mine, I spoke with careful tenderness.

“Hey, Tia. If it makes you so sad, why don’t we just end this ‘defeat’ event?”

She glanced back at me, surprised, her eyes trembling with disturbance. Nevertheless, the determination deep within those eyes showed no signs of wavering.

“I can’t do that because I want you, Lord Cecil, to be content as well. I wish for everyone else to find happiness too.”

“If you think that, why do you believe we can’t find happiness unless we achieve this ‘defeat’? Can you explain?”

Despite Bertia’s strong academic skills, her ability to scheme or devise plans was alarmingly poor. Any strategies she formulates were usually so simplistic that they hardly qualify as strategies. In terms of capability, she could be seen as rather foolish.

Fortunately, she is surrounded by supportive people and enjoys a good reputation. This leads me to believe that with my consistent support, she could effectively navigate her future role as queen. If only she would share the information she’s keeping to herself, I would be able to help her.

Sadly, Bertia remained stubbornly silent. That’s why I decided not to press her. Spending time on unproductive efforts was wasteful, and I thought it best to concentrate on what I could handle.

… But for some reason, I can’t hold back my impulse right now.

“Even if the only solution you have discovered is to confront ‘defeat,’ maybe we can uncover a better option together, right?”

Before I realized it, I had posed this question to her.

The chances of her discussing this issue were very slim. Nevertheless, a strong desire for her to trust me and share her thoughts grew within me. While I can think logically, my emotions disrupted my reasoning.

Ah, how foolish. How completely foolish. Have I unknowingly embraced some of Bertia's silliness?

Bertia reacted promptly to my inquiry, her lips parting. "That's not possible because…"

She started to speak but then suddenly clamped her mouth shut.

"Why?" I asked softly, leaning closer to inspire her to elaborate, clinging to a glimmer of hope.

… But as expected, my wish stayed unfulfilled.

Bertia's voice trembled with genuine emotion. "I care deeply for everyone here. That's why I want to protect them from harm. The only ones who deserve to suffer are my father, who has done wrong, and myself."

Crimes? He hasn't actually committed any, though. I nearly let that slip but held back. Bertia mistakenly believes her father is engaged in corruption, but in truth, he is gathering intelligence on corrupt nobles. He is overseeing Kulgan, who has penetrated the Uradil family.

Disclosing this may put them at risk, particularly because Bertia lacks any skill in deception or subterfuge. This is information I need to keep to myself for the time being.

Still, why does she appear so troubled? After all, she was the one who urged the Marquis of Noches to take this dark path, wasn't she? Asserting it was essential for the "otome game" scenario. If it causes her such distress, she shouldn't have advocated for it.

"Do you feel remorse for encouraging the Marquis of Noches down this ominous path?" I couldn't help but inquire.

Bertia shook her head. "No, I don't. It was essential. Without it, a far worse future awaited. It's an inescapable fate!" Her fists tightened, reinforcing her determination.

I didn't know what to say… I apologize. The reality is, I've already changed that destiny.

“So, please, Lord Cecil, don’t hesitate to seize your ‘victory’ and rush toward a love-filled happy ending with the heroine!”

A “love-filled happy ending,” huh? Bertia’s words suggested I should discover happiness and love with Baroness Heronia. However, previously, I found Baroness Heronia uninteresting and even unpleasant. Now, she is someone who has hurt my fiancée.

The thought of loving and finding happiness with such a person is beyond comprehension.

No, the thought of me, an engaged man, selecting another woman was unimaginable. Although there may be situations where, for the nation’s sake, I might consider ending an engagement if there were serious flaws in the other party, Bertia has none of those. She is charming and delightful—I find no faults in her. My mother adores her, and she is actively preparing to be a future queen.

There are no flaws to mention. Everything falls within my ability to support, so it should be fine.

In comparison, Bertia greatly eclipses Baroness Heronia. A charming fool is far more desirable than an annoying one. After all, even among fools, distinctions matter significantly.

Anyone watching my behavior can quickly see whom I hold in higher regard. For example, I affectionately call Bertia “Tia,” whereas I keep a formal distance from Baroness Heronia, never having used her name in front of her.

The academy has an unspoken custom of calling familiar women by their first names, often added a respectful “lady” or “miss.” Although some may be addressed informally, I have never referred to her simply as “Heronia” in any situation.

People who are fairly insightful notice this uncommon way of speaking and realize that I do not wish to be acquaintances with her at all.

It appears that only Bertia remains oblivious to these facts.

Why doesn’t she recognize my genuine intentions? When I’m with Bertia, I make a conscious effort to show that we are a loving couple. It would be disastrous if rumors circulated about discord between the future king and queen.

Recently, my brother Shaun remarked, “Brother, you’ve been giving Miss Bertia too much attention. It’s somewhat embarrassing for the family.”

—The reality is much different from the “otome game” script she describes. Still, it appears she cannot imagine a happy future walking alongside me.

Do I seem so unworthy in her eyes?

Or maybe… the love I believed I received from her was merely an illusion, and she doesn’t truly want happiness with me? These unfounded questions whirled in my mind, rendering logical thought unattainable, while my fingertips felt icy. I forced a smile, yet my facial muscles appeared frozen, as if a screw or two had come loose and disappeared from my head.

Amid these thoughts, Bertia handed me a book. “Lord Cecil, I present this to you.” The cover was blue, adorned with patterns of ivy and roses in faded gold—a design she particularly liked, reminiscent of a worn and thick diary.

I took the book, but I couldn’t force myself to open it. If it really was a diary, it wouldn’t be right to read it without consent.

“What is this?”

“It’s my diary,” she confirmed. It truly was a diary, written by Bertia herself.

But…

“Tia, why would you share your diary with me?” Her gesture surprised me. Typically, diaries are private and not meant for others’ eyes.

“… It holds all the wrongs I’ve done to different people throughout the years.”

“Is that so? And?”

“You are truly brilliant, Lord Cecil. Surely you don’t require such a thing to overcome me. You have more than enough evidence at your disposal. Nonetheless, here it is, just in case. It’s the diary of a villainess. I’m certain it will come in handy if necessary!”

Bertia swallowed hard before she started to talk about the diary’s contents. As I watched her, my brow furrowed. I recognized the gravity of this moment; it was intended to provide evidence that could be used against her.

Just moments ago, I hesitated to read someone’s diary, thinking it was an invasion of privacy. Yet, those doubts have since vanished.

I let out a cold “Hmm” and started to leisurely flip through the pages.

Monday, Cloudy

Today, I took pleasure in tormenting the new maid during tea time. I had her prepare the tea, only to harshly critique it as undrinkable, smashing the cup on the floor. I chose a teacup that was already slightly cracked, ensuring it would break easily. This way, I didn’t have to ruin a new cup—killing two birds with one stone! The moment the cup shattered, the maid looked at me with teary eyes, which was quite satisfying.

—Ah, that incident.

I received a report from an ‘errand runner’ looking into Bertia’s behavior. One day, she had a new maid bring her a teacup that had been accidentally cracked. Then, in front of everyone, she deliberately broke it. The teacup was already damaged by the novice maid, who, too anxious to confess the mistake with such a costly item, had concealed it.

Although Bertia seemed harsh for shattering the cup, the maids viewed it differently. Aware of the maid’s error, she had the cup brought to her and broke it herself, accepting the blame to safeguard the maid. This became a story of heroism in which Bertia defended the maid. Touched by her gesture, the new maid tearfully confessed her error and pledged her loyalty to Bertia.

August 25, Sunny

In class today, we discovered how to properly enjoy tea. I had eagerly anticipated this lesson, as I planned to teach Lady Heronia —a woman who appears intent on winning over my dearest Prince —a lesson about the harsh truths of our society.

I was already aware of the lesson plan from Lady Joanna. We were to partner up, with one person preparing the tea while the other tasted it, followed by a critique of each other’s efforts. I put in a lot of effort to ensure my critiques carried a tone of refined disdain. I practiced intensively by voicing my complaints about the tea made by the maids. As a result, I was able to deliver many sharp comments! By the end, Lady Heronia was furious, her

complexion flushed and eyes filled with tears. It was quite invigorating!

Reflecting on a discussion with Silica, a childhood friend of Nert and Bertia's peer, I recognized that she had recounted comparable experiences. She participated in the same class and directly observed Bertia's interactions.

Bertia willingly teamed up with Baroness Heronia, the only partner no one else desired for the tea exercise. She carefully instructed Baroness Heronia in choosing tea leaves, when to add them to the pot, the appropriate water temperature, and how long to steep them. Remarkably, every element of Baroness Heronia's tea-making was executed so poorly that even the instructors were astonished by the bitterness of her tea.

When Bertia highlighted her etiquette mistakes, Baroness Heronia's face flushed with rage. Ultimately, she tearfully charged Bertia with harboring dislike for her, prompting disapproving looks from those nearby.

The practice sessions with the maids were quite popular, resembling 'tea brewing tutorials' led by Bertia. Her eagerness to share the tea skills she had honed, along with her effective guidance, greatly enhanced her reputation among the maids, as reported by the errand runner.

Most of the 'misdeeds' I skimmed through in the diary were of this nature. Even when they succeeded, they were only minor mischief at best, and most were failures—in terms of villainy, that is. Ironically, however, these actions often ended up enhancing her reputation, thus 'succeeding' in a different way.

If I were to offer such items as evidence, I would probably be ridiculed. This would scarcely be deemed proof of any significant misconduct.

Well, it was quintessentially Bertia, if such a phrase applies. Usually, I would describe her antics as 'charming', 'fascinating', 'captivating', or 'amusing'.

But now, I couldn't feel the same way.

While her antics consistently entertained me, the realization that Bertia had handed me what she saw as the "trump card" for my "defeat" troubled me.

“Hey, Tia. Are you truly trying to distance yourself from me?” A chilling voice, with dark undertones, unintentionally escaped my lips. Despite knowing it wasn’t the case, I couldn’t resist asking.

Usually, my heart doesn’t show much color, whether for better or worse. But now, it felt as if a black stain had been dropped onto it, gradually spreading.

I could feel my expression turning stern as Bertia stared at me with wide, beautiful eyes that appeared to grow even larger with surprise.

A peaceful part of my mind urged me to settle down, yet another part of me couldn’t stop.

“You claim it would bring you joy to witness my union with the heroine, but is that genuinely the case? I don’t perceive it that way… as I truly appreciate our present life.”

“But… I mean… because…” Bertia found it difficult to express herself, unable to convey her ideas.

The black stain in my heart spread further.

“Is it truly just that you want to separate yourself from me?” I realized these words could sting her, yet my more composed self couldn’t suppress the part of me that was losing control.

“That’s not true at all!” Bertia shook her head vigorously, tears brimming in her eyes.

“Your Highness…” A voice restrained came from Zeno behind me.

Zeno’s words of restraint felt like mere distant sounds to me, not genuinely reaching my consciousness.

“Why are you trying to run away then?” I pressed.

“I’m not running away! It’s just that I care about you, Lord Cecil…”

“Hey, Tia. What do you think makes me happy?”

“Being united with the heroine,” she said firmly.

Bertia’s words, for the first time, filled me with deep resentment.

“Why do you still have faith in such foolishness?”

“Because I know what fate is about to unfold,” she replied.

“Is that truly fate?”

“It is… or at least, it ought to be.”

Tears at last overflowed the bounds of her control, streaming down her cheeks. The gazes from her maids, Kuro, and Zeno pierced me like daggers. However, I couldn't give in—not in this moment. This wasn't a choice reached through calm deliberation—it was simply what I felt I had to accept.

I inhaled deeply and blinked slowly, redirecting my gaze toward Bertia. She glared at me, her eyes glistening with tears.

"Then, I'll simply have to defy that destiny," I asserted.

"No, you absolutely must not! You will surely regret it," she protested.

"Unfortunately, I'm not one to harbor regrets."

"Why can't you simply follow my advice? You'd be happier if you did!"

"Why won't you tell me why you want this so much? Without that, how can I decide?"

"That's because…" She clamped her mouth shut again.

I shot her a glance more chilling than I had ever given her before.

"Let's wrap up this discussion. Tia, I'll pick the dress myself."

"Lord Cecil!" Bertia raised her voice as she stood up.

"You initiated this 'game.' No matter the result, you will see it through to the end, right?"

"…"

"The graduation ceremony is approaching quickly, and whether we laugh or cry, so is the end of this 'game.'"

"Please, I beg you. Be happy…"

"I will try. So don't run away, okay?"

I smiled.

As usual, it was a bright, cheerful smile.

Yet, for some reason, it felt like my heart was bleeding.

Part Two

"Tia, you look absolutely stunning! The dress I gave you looks amazing on you," I complimented her.

"Thank you so much, Lord Cecil," she replied.

Following the graduation ceremony earlier that day, we arrived at the evening party. The venue's entrance hall was buzzing with couples like us, who had planned to meet here. Hand in hand, they formed a line, eagerly waiting for their turn to enter.

Bertia and I stood near the doors of the grand hall where the graduation party would take place. Members of the high school student council were also close by.

Seeing Bertia in the dress brought me immense satisfaction. Her maid mentioned that she had wrestled with the choice of whether to wear the dress I gifted her, but in the end, she chose to wear it for the evening.

The dress I had chosen for her was inspired by the moon floating in the night sky. It was made of dark navy silk, reminiscent of the night, with golden embroidery stitched in various places—similar to the embroidery on the jacket I wore.

The design closely followed her curves, highlighting Bertia's graceful silhouette, while the necklace I gifted her shimmered at her neckline. The skirt featured a layer of gold lace atop the navy fabric, adorned with scattered gems in matching hues.

It was a rather sophisticated dress for the typically lively and exuberant Bertia, yet it was glamorous and perfectly suited her.

… Well, since I designed it for her, it was only natural that it fit her so perfectly.

As I couldn't help but smile, Bertia offered a slightly awkward grin.

"Ah, Lord Cecil, about today…"

Bertia's eyes flickered as she started to speak, but I softly pressed my index finger against her cherry-red lips to silence her.

Surprised by my gesture, her eyes opened wider. I gave her a comforting smile.

"Shh, quiet now. We're about to go in. Once we're inside, the student council members need to be on stage. You might feel a little lonely for a bit, but please wait there with Miss Silica and the others, okay?"

I'm not open to any disagreements or complaints, am I?

I don't want to hear anything from you that might push me away.

It's okay. Everything will definitely turn out fine.

I will eliminate any future tonight that could cause you unhappiness or rob me of my happiness.

So, can you please not stir my emotions anymore?

… I sense that something dark might awaken inside me.

At that moment, as if on cue, music started to play from inside the venue.

—Indeed, I had arrived just in time to avoid hearing any of her objections, just before the party started.

“It’s time to enter,” a student guide announced.

I reached out to Bertia. After a moment of hesitation, she shyly placed her small hand in mine.

I faced forward, attempting to shift my gaze away from Bertia.

“Lord Cecil…” she whispered.

“What’s the matter?” I inquired. She swallowed hard, gripping my hand tighter. After a moment of decision, she started to speak.

“… Lord Cecil, what do you think of me?” Bertia asked, her voice shaking and surprising me completely.

Her intense gaze searched for the truth in my eyes. I had not expected such a question at this moment. “Tia?” I leaned in closer, trying to read her expression to understand her intent. She flinched, her shoulders trembling slightly as if frightened.

Silence hung in the air for a moment, and I noticed faint tears welling up in Bertia’s eyes. Seeing her lips tightly pressed together ignited an urgent need within me to respond.

“Tia, I think you’re absolutely adorable. You’re just so cute and…”

“Graduates, please enter!”

Just as I was about to express how precious and dear she is to me as my fiancée, the call for the graduates interrupted me. At that moment, the grand doors to the hall swung open with a loud thud. My time was up.

I leaned in closer to Bertia’s ear and whispered, “We’ll continue this later,” before turning my gaze forward.

Just before stepping into the venue, I took a final glance at Bertia. She wore a delicate, solitary smile, gazing back at me in a way that truly tugged at my heartstrings. However, time was pressing, and I had to start moving.

As a prince and the president of Halm Academy's student council, it was essential for me to act with dignity in public, serving as a role model for my fellow students. Even though I cared deeply about Bertia, I couldn't let her needs override my responsibilities at this time.

Before we entered, there had been more opportunities to talk with her. I regretted interrupting our conversation, reluctant to hear anything negative—a remorse that lingered slightly as we walked into the hall.

Part Three

The graduation party venue was buzzing with all the students from Halm Academy's high school section, along with the graduates' parents. I could also spot notable guests like my father and the Marquis Noches among the attendees.

As a student council member, I took the stage with my fellow peers to manage the event. Following the opening remarks, my father, the king, delivered a congratulatory speech, and I, representing the graduates, also offered a greeting.

From the corner of my eye, I kept a close watch on Bertia and Baroness Heronia. Bertia was well-protected by her circle of friends and seemed to be in no particular trouble.

My possible aides were also at the venue, and along the walls, discreetly stood Zeno and Kuro among the servants from other houses.

Baroness Heronia, in her yellow gown, was once again surrounded by infatuated male students. To ensure these young men didn't become overly enamored, I instructed Kuro, via Bertia, to address the most intense symptoms of their infatuation. For those exhibiting milder symptoms, I tasked Zeno with their management.

Nevertheless, several male students near Baroness Heronia displayed hedonistic inclinations. Regardless of how much we alleviated their addiction symptoms, they appeared to be irresistibly attracted to the joy her spirit offered. Some were drawn to her regardless of her spirit's effectiveness.

I had Zeno issue multiple warnings to Baroness Heronia's spirit, Little Pi, advising her to restrain her powers. Yet, it appeared she remained unwilling to curtail her abilities, likely realizing that without them, Baroness Heronia would face isolation.

In support of this, Little Pi usually exerts less power on individuals who genuinely approach Baroness Heronia of their own accord. Regardless of the morality of these actions, it is evident that she aimed to protect someone dear to her.

As the graduation party reached its midpoint, the only remaining event was the ceremony for the transition of the student council officers.

After the student council officers' ceremony concluded, I, as the outgoing president, had the responsibility to kick off the first dance. This event would allow everyone to relax and mingle for the rest of the evening. If Baroness Heronia planned to act, this would probably be her opportunity.

Therefore, I intended to share my intentions with everyone ahead of time. If that encouraged her to rethink her actions, then that's great—I'd just think, "That's lucky." And if it didn't, it wouldn't bother us at all.

While it was true that Baroness Heronia may make some offensive remarks toward Bertia, Bertia had prepared herself to face such challenges from the beginning. It was better for her to witness everything and see it resolved rather than me simply telling her, "It's okay," without her knowing the full context… even if it might hurt her.

As I looked toward my father and Marquis Noches, I noticed my father wearing a wry smile laced with exasperation, while the Marquis displayed a grim expression of displeasure. I had recently discussed Baroness Heronia's past actions and my future plans with them. Naturally, I hadn't shared everything.

I needed their approval for what I was about to do. I also asked them to remain quiet about it because I wanted it to be a surprise for Miss Bertia. Although the Marquis was clearly unhappy, I managed to persuade him.

My father didn't complain. He simply nodded at me with a resigned expression in his eyes, accepting the inevitable.

The ceremony went smoothly, and I received a bouquet from Kulgan, the new president for the upcoming academic year. Then, loud enough for all the students to hear, I declared, “With this, I officially transfer the authority of the student council for the new academic year!”

Although I mentioned this, the actual transition took place much earlier, and the new student council officers already managed all the administrative tasks related to the graduation party.

The declaration served as a formality to signify a definitive conclusion. As my voice resonated in the venue, applause erupted. I smiled, taking a moment to appreciate my surroundings before finally locking eyes with Bertia. She was already gazing at me, our eyes connected.

Her lips were tightly pressed together, possibly to keep from crying, and her eyes, slightly narrowed, appeared to be filled with determination. I nearly chuckled at her expression.

Maintaining my usual smile, I held her gaze steadily as the applause slowly faded. One by one, the clapping dwindled until deep silence enveloped the hall.

After noticing Bertia’s strained look, I redirected my focus to the audience as a whole.

“I have one more announcement to make,” I declared, making sure my voice projected across the room with deliberate strength.

The unexpected remark piqued curiosity, tension thickening the atmosphere due to this unforeseen turn of events. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Baroness Heronia’s response. Her lips twisted into a sly smirk, her eyes sparkling with eagerness. Yet, I decided to overlook her artfully manipulative nature.

“Miss Bertia Ibil Noches, would you kindly step forward?”

As I turned my gaze back to Bertia, she swallowed hard.

The students nearby moved aside, clearing a way for her. Bertia pressed a hand to her chest, inhaled deeply, and, wearing a determined look, straightened her back before approaching me. But then…

Ah, it was typical of Bertia to almost trip over the hem of her dress in a classic comedic moment.

I fought to suppress my laughter, placing my hand over my mouth to keep a serious expression.

“Lo-Lord Cecil, Bertia Ibil Noches is here,” Bertia nervously stammered her introduction, clearly overwhelmed by her anxiety.

Bertia, you’re too tense. Even if you muster the courage to act like a top-tier villainess and execute a perfect lady’s curtsy, stuttering and stumbling over your words undermines the whole point.

Her struggle significantly lightened the atmosphere in the room. With her cheeks flushed a deep red and tears welling in her eyes, yet maintaining a determined demeanor, she probably charmed many audience members. Although some disapproved of the unforeseen turn of events, the majority observed with sympathetic and warm expressions.

“Lord Cecil?” Bertia softly called, drawing my focus as I watched her and the crowd’s response.

Her serious expression seemed to convey a message of impatience: “Isn’t it time yet? Isn’t it time?! If you’re going to do it, do it with a bang! Come on, let’s see it!” Her upward gaze, trembling like a small, frightened animal, was incredibly endearing.

I never imagined I’d take pleasure in frightening someone, yet here I am, potentially uncovering a new quirk about myself.

Just then, I felt a piercing gaze from the edge of the room.

… I know, Zeno, you’re giving me that judging look, aren’t you?

I conveyed my thoughts to Zeno through a silent glance.

It’s fine. It won’t reach that point—what? “Are you just now discovering your own quirks?”

It appears you still don’t completely understand your master, do you?

I suppose I’ll need to carve out some time later for a long ‘chat.’ Get ready… and look forward to it.

“Lord Cecil~”

As I shared glances with Zeno, Bertia’s voice rang out, thin and frail.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I wasn’t ignoring you on purpose, okay?

Please, don’t make that about-to-cry face.

… Alright, enough jokes for now. It's time to get serious and face you properly.

This is, after all, one of the pivotal moments in our lives.

I felt an unusual flutter of nerves as I began to speak slowly. "Miss Bertia Ibil Noches, you have committed a serious sin—"

"What do you mean? I haven't sinned at all!" Bertia exclaimed.

Bertia, could you please refrain from speaking over me? Your lines sound a bit too rehearsed because of your nervousness.

Despite the amusement her reaction caused, I knew we needed to proceed. I gently placed a finger on her lips, signaling her to stay silent for a moment. She blinked rapidly, a puzzled look crossing her face, but soon she understood and kept quiet.

"No, you have indeed committed a grave sin… the sin of being born two years after me," I remarked, my lips curling into a smile as I sensed her finger quiver in reaction to my statement.

She tilted her head in confusion, giving me a puzzled look. I smiled meaningfully at her. I could see confusion spreading among the students in the venue, likely including Baroness Heronia.

I then retrieved a small velvet box from my pocket. This prompted a quiet cheer from the perceptive girls in the audience.

Yet, Bertia appeared unaware of the implications, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

I knelt on one knee in front of her and opened the box to show what was inside. "Since you were born two years later, I have to wait an additional two years for your graduation, being apart from you. This is truly a serious sin. Therefore, as reparation, you will end our current engagement right after you graduate and become my wife instead… This serves as proof of that promise."

"What?! Huh?! What is this? Huh?! Ehh?! But, Your Highness, what the—"

"Come on, give me your hand. Don't be shy."

Bertia was taken entirely by surprise, unaware of the situation unfolding around her. While she glanced around in bewilderment, I took her left hand and gently placed the ring on her finger. She appeared oblivious to this gesture, so deeply engrossed in her chaos, but I didn't mind at all.

From the beginning, the plan was to navigate the confusion. If nothing else occurred, that would be acceptable. If there were any disruptions, we would simply have to manage them.

“Oh, defeat… I have to accept my loss…” Bertia said tearfully, her words tumbling out as she kept repeating “fall.” I held her left hand firmly, and together we looked straight ahead.

… She mentioned that she was supposed to be ‘put in her place’ at the end, but since she has already said “defeat” so many times, maybe we can consider it settled?

As I considered this, I proclaimed in a dignified tone, fitting my royal status, “To all who have shared this precious time in our student lives and have watched over us, I announce that in two years, when she graduates, we will marry. As the Crown Prince and Princess, we will strive to make this kingdom a better place!”

The area fell silent.

Then, just as smiles started to emerge on the students’ faces and they were about to applaud…

“Objection!”

At last, Baroness Heronia made her move. Leaving her group of male students behind, she approached us with her hand raised purposefully.

… Oh, she just glanced back, didn’t she?

From her frustrated expression, it seems she didn’t intend to leave her followers behind. They probably felt too intimidated to follow, which left her standing alone.

Baroness Heronia approached the front of the stage where we stood. She didn’t climb up but fixed a worried Bertia with a stern glare.

“… What exactly do you mean by ‘objection’?”

I tilted my head with a wry smile.

“Your Highness, that woman—Miss Bertia—is deceiving you!” Baroness Heronia declared, sharply pointing her index finger at Bertia, who flinched at the accusation.

I frowned inwardly at the scene. Truly, Baroness Heronia displayed a complete lack of decorum. Even if she were to rephrase her statement, referring to a lady of higher status as “that woman” was already a serious misstep. Moreover, her direct gesture toward Bertia and the self-satisfied expression on her face were utterly inappropriate for a noble lady.

Marquis Noches, my father, as well as the graduates' parents and students, all had frowns on their faces. Among them, a woman notably concealed her mouth with a fan, her brows deeply furrowed in a clear display of disdain.

"Your Highness, Miss Bertia is unfit to be your wife, let alone the future queen. She has shown extreme cruelty to many, myself included—participating in harassment characterized by status discrimination, public insults, and just yesterday, she nearly shoved me down the stairs," Baroness Heronia asserted, clasping her hands tight before her chest and gazing up at me as if imploring for my understanding.

I felt a strong urge to sigh.

"I have not received any reports of Miss Bertia participating in such dreadful actions. As my fiancée, she faces constant public scrutiny throughout the day, making it logically impossible for her to operate in secrecy."

The audience of students murmured yet appeared to nod in agreement with this reasonable point.

"In fact, she was with me yesterday evening. After dinner, when she appeared unwell, I personally accompanied her back to her dormitory. Additionally, I sent a servant to deliver flowers as a get-well gesture, and the servant confirmed she was in her room. Out of concern, I requested the dormitory supervisor to monitor her closely, and it appears they checked on her regularly. According to their reports, Miss Bertia remained in her room and rested the entire time."

I looked over at the dormitory supervisor in the audience, and she nodded firmly, confirming my words.

"It must have been someone else you asked to push me down the stairs," Baroness Heronia attempted to deflect the accusation.

"So, the real culprit was someone different? We need to figure out who orchestrated this. Given that it impacts Miss Bertia's honor, I'll ensure a thorough investigation and take the necessary steps once we identify those involved," I replied, seeking more information.

"I… still don't know who it was…"

"That seems illogical. Why did you bring up Miss Bertia's name? Also, could you clarify the other instances of bullying you referred to? Do you have any proof?"

“There are others who have suffered just like I have! Everyone, please!!” Baroness Heronia called out, spreading her arms wide and looking around for support.

…

The hall was quiet; her plea went unanswered by anyone.

“It seems like there’s no one,” I remarked dryly.

“That can’t be true! People always come to me with different matters. Please, don’t hesitate now! Let His Highness know about the frustrations you’ve all experienced. I’m certain he will hear you,” Baroness Heronia pleaded once more.

…

Even with her heartfelt plea, no one came forward. *But why would they?*

Accusing a woman about to marry the Crown Prince in two years may be viewed as an act of lese-majesty, jeopardizing one’s own status and possibly harming their family’s reputation. Absent strong justification, few would wish to engage in such accusations, particularly since Bertia has done nothing to deserve this widespread disdain.

A few ladies—whom Baroness Heronia had likely expected to support her—shifted their gazes uncomfortably when she looked at them, quickly averting their eyes. It must have been disappointing for Baroness Heronia, hoping for solidarity that simply wasn’t there.

Considering their demeanor, it was probable that the young ladies were simply involved in light gossip about Bertia or courteously listened to Baroness Heronia’s grievances during their daily discussions. However, none of them would be unwise enough to risk their futures over such trivial exchanges. Even if Baroness Heronia had solicited their backing, it was evident that none would step up.

“Why not?! Everyone always says they suffer so much…” Baroness Heronia’s voice wavered as her gaze drifted in confusion.

At the same time, I gently drew a distracted Bertia closer by her waist. She murmured softly, “Ah, ah, I must be put in my place…” I lightly kissed her forehead and smiled while tilting my head, encouraged her to let it go.

“Miss, shall we take your ‘objection’ as withdrawn then?” I suggested gently.

“Not yet! I intended to report this privately, but…” Baroness Heronia crouched down, reaching beneath her dress to retrieve a thick envelope.

… Keeping items under one’s skirt is quite improper, Baroness Heronia.

Even if she has no other place to store it, retrieving items from such a location is unbecoming of a lady. Look, others are even doing a double take at the sight.

“Your Highness, please take this…” She held out the envelope to me.

I hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether to accept something that had just been pulled from beneath a skirt.

My hesitation naturally arose from the question, “Should I really handle something that just emerged from beneath someone else’s skirt?” While touching items belonging to a lover or fiancée is one thing, dealing with something from a stranger’s skirt is an entirely different issue.

Nonetheless, I had no intention of stepping down from the stage or beckoning Baroness Heronia closer.

Believing that we had to find a way to overcome this standoff, I quickly looked at Zeno for help.

Having foreseen this situation, Zeno had already shifted closer to the stage, away from the servants who were by the wall. He took the envelope from Baroness Heronia and handed me the stack of papers inside it.

“… I understand,” I said softly while scanning the documents —it was a comprehensive report on Marquis Noches, information I was already familiar with. It didn’t surprise me that Baroness Heronia had commissioned someone to investigate the Marquis.

As Bertia watched the papers in my hands, her curiosity shone through her anxiety. She quickly looked at the pages and gasped softly, her face turning even paler. Noticing her unease, I passed the documents to Zeno to shield them from her view and signaled silently for him to deliver them to my father.

Bertia lowered her head quietly, murmured something regarding “coercive force.” I softly ran my fingers through her hair and whispered, “Everything will be fine.”

She had been hoping for this situation to unfold. However, the anxiety of potentially losing something valuable, even with her readiness, felt overwhelming.

As I held her tightly, she fought to stay brave until the very end, her petite body shaking as she grasped my clothes.

… Poor thing, so frightened.

Simultaneously, I felt a sense of relief in recognizing that she genuinely did not want that kind of future.

When did I become so cruel?

"—And?" I turned to Baroness Heronia, who was ready to share her thoughts.

"The documents I just gave you are the result of my own investigations. As you can see, they serve as evidence of Marquis Noches' crimes! A criminal's daughter cannot be permitted to become your wife, much less the future queen of this country!"

"So, you propose that due to the Marquis's 'crimes,' I ought to punish her and end Miss Bertia's engagement to me?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted my father and Marquis Noches reviewing the stack of papers handed to them by Zeno. My father's eyes sparkled with mockery, while the Marquis's revealed a flicker of anger. Nonetheless, both maintained their composure, a hallmark of seasoned leaders who had long governed the nation.

Meanwhile, the audience—consisting of students, parents, and faculty—seemed disturbed by the accusation made against such a respected figure.

"—Look, Miss. The documents you've provided are certainly well-researched and seem to indicate serious crimes," I said with a smile, gently stroking Bertia's head. Baroness Heronia's face lit up with a triumphant grin upon hearing my words.

In that moment, I felt an internal chill wash over me. Bertia, nearby, must have noticed the shift. She gazed at me with intensity, her expression twisting as she tensed up.

I drew her closer, ensuring she couldn't step back, and whispered, "I'm not angry with you," yet her stiffness did not ease.

I kept conversing with Baroness Heronia.

"… However, these do not serve as proof of Marquis Noches' crimes; instead, they provide evidence against Viscount

Consabtier, Count Connery, and Baron Sagir, correct?”

Upon hearing this, Count Connery and Baron Sagir, who were part of the audience, turned pale. Their children fidgeted anxiously as well.

People in the vicinity started to distance themselves, likely out of fear of being involved. Before long, a noticeable space emerged around them. Observing this, my father discreetly gestured to the knights guarding the venue. In no time, the knights had apprehended the Count and the Baron, preventing their escape.

Baroness Heronia cast a challenging look at Bertia and Marquis Noches.

“Yes, these are proof of their crimes and also evidence linking them to Marquis Noches,” she stated.

Bertia’s face soon filled with tears as she glanced between Marquis Noches and Baroness Heronia. The Marquis smiled, yet his eyes were devoid of joy, fixed on Baroness Heronia with an icy stare. His silence stemmed not from an inability to speak but from a deliberate decision to leave the situation in my hands.

At times, I noticed a glance from him that appeared to communicate, “Your Highness, put an end to this absurdity for my poor daughter’s sake.”

I focused on Baroness Heronia and asked, “Just because someone is linked to a criminal, it doesn’t mean they are automatically guilty, right?”

“That might be the case… However, Lord Kulgan must be aware of Marquis Noches’ misdeeds! He has endured the Marquis’ tyranny, as they are related, for quite some time,” she hesitated briefly before asserting herself once more. Turning to Kulgan, who was beside me, she nodded energetically, motivating him to vent years of pent-up frustration.

Everyone focused on Kulgan as deep lines etched his forehead. “I don’t recall ever discussing these issues with you, and I’ve never entertained such ideas. My rapport with Marquis Noches has consistently been friendly and continues to be so,” he replied calmly.

Baroness Heronia’s eyes widened in disbelief. “That can’t be! You’ve always shared so much with me…”

“You’ve been forming negative assumptions about Marquis Noches by yourself. I remember feeling uneasy and disregarding your speculations, but I’ve never supported them,” Kulgan responded, his stare sharper than normal, even for someone whose demeanor typically appeared frosty.

Baroness Heronia insisted, “You’re lying! You’ve suffered at the hands of Marquis Noches for years!”

“I’m informing you that no such fact exists. Please end this now.”

Kulgan conveyed his dissatisfaction clearly, redirecting his gaze away from Baroness Heronia. It appeared she had genuinely misinterpreted the situation. I observed calmly as everything transpired according to my plan, remaining emotionally detached throughout.

Baroness Heronia was much like Bertia. She believed in a story that supposedly followed the “scenario” of an “otome game.” Because of this belief, she tended to interpret things in a way that suited her, pushing the narrative in her favor based on this assumption. If we had outright denied her premise, she might have realized it wasn’t functioning. However, by not correcting her misunderstanding, there was a greater likelihood that she would continue to hold onto that same mistaken belief. After all, it’s surprisingly difficult for anyone to recognize their own misconceptions.

That’s why I instructed Kulgan: if Baroness Heronia inquired about anything, he should not confirm or deny, but rather respond evasively and remain non-committal. Now, we found ourselves in this predicament.

Dragged along by the clear and simple scenario of the otome game, her perspective had narrowed drastically, which led her to make a critical error. If she had done nothing, we wouldn’t have acted either. The last opportunity given to Baroness Heronia was spectacularly ruined by her own actions. “Pity, isn’t it?” I continued, addressing the stunned expression on Baroness Heronia’s face.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. Count Connery, Baron Sagir, and Viscount Consabtier—though his name wasn’t mentioned, we are also aware of the crimes committed by Count Uradil and his connections with Marquis Noches,” I revealed. “His Majesty and I

know that they have been engaging in suspicious activities. We were collaborating with Marquis Noches and Kulgan on an undercover investigation. In other words, Marquis Noches isn't a criminal; he was posing as an ally to conduct an investigation and catch the real culprits."

I looked to Marquis Noches for confirmation, and he nodded in agreement.

"The investigation is finished, and given the current situation, we will detain Count Connery and Baron Sagir immediately. As for Viscount Consabtier and Count Uradil, knights have already been sent to apprehend them," I announced. However, unknown to those present, their locations had already been secured, even though they were not here. Anticipating that today's graduation party might unfold this way, I had arranged for their capture in advance. It wa crucial to address such matters quickly to prevent any chance of escape.

Baroness Heronia was clearly stunned by my words, collapsing to the floor in disbelief. I pressed on, speaking to her as she sat there, dazed, "It appears all your 'objections' were mere misunderstandings. What should we do now? You've humiliated my fiancée and Marquis Noches in front of everyone, and we can't overlook that. Our families will have to discuss this, but for now, maybe you should take a moment to gather yourself."

A nearby guard knight seized Baroness Heronia's arm, trying to help her stand. While it may seem he was supporting her, he was actually ensuring she couldn't escape. The knight started to pull her arm to lead her away from the scene, but—

"This isn't right," she whispered while remaining seated.

"Why won't anyone understand? I'm supposed to be the heroine…" Heronia looked up defiantly, glaring at me and Bertia. "Why won't you choose me?! I've done everything you wanted! I even wore a yellow dress today because you like it! I chose you! And this is how you repay me? It's too much!"

Baroness Heronia, screaming wildly and exhibiting a demonic expression, lunged at us. The knights quickly restrained her, but she continued to struggle, attracting more guards to her side.

"Your words sound odd. I never requested to be selected by you, nor have I ever felt that way," I replied calmly.

“What? You’re just a prince android! Without being chosen by me, you’re nothing but a clever doll without a heart!” Baroness Heronia lashed out at me, her words growing more severe.

Bertia’s face, on the verge of tears, contorted as she shook her head. “Please stop,” she whispered.

Although several knights held her back, Baroness Heronia’s intense gaze remained locked on me. “I am your ‘Maiden of destiny,’ aren’t I? A kiss would confirm that immediately. After all, I am the heroine. The mark of the ‘maiden of destiny’ is meant to be evident on my body. Don’t you understand, Your Highness? If you do not claim me, you will continue to dwell in a dull, colorless world, overcome by boredom. Eventually, you won’t be able to endure it any longer… and that will lead to your downfall.”

I was completely confused by her assertions. She talked as if I should be aware of this “maiden of destiny.” However, I was entirely in the dark about it. I had never heard of any mark resulting from a kiss.

I turned to my father for guidance; his expression was intricate, yet he shook his head, signaling that he too was puzzled about what she meant.

As I looked at Bertia in my arms, I noticed her trembling and crying, her face nearly white with fear. She weakly shook her head and murmured, “no, no,” as if trying to fend off some terrible threat. Desperately, she reached out to cover my ears.

I held her hand gently and reassured her, “Everything will be fine.”

Throughout this time, Baroness Heronia remained relentless in hurling severe accusations and claims.

Bertia aimed to keep those words from reaching me, fearing they might wound me deeply.

Silly.

Silly and… incredibly sweet.

Amidst this, Baroness Heronia continued her tirade.

“You need me! Only I can help you truly gain a heart. Without me, you remain a heartless shell, unable to see others as people. Only I can help you shine as the greatest Crown Prince! That woman can neither capture your heart nor hold your

interest. She's just a third-rate villainess. So, stop them and take my hand!"

I fixed a cold stare on the screaming woman and ordered those holding her, "What are you doing? Take her away immediately."

I struggled to understand Baroness Heronia's words, yet hearing them was distinctly uncomfortable. It was as though she was recklessly scratching at a sensitive area within me… an area that should remain untouched. Without Bertia's effort to cover my ears, I doubt I would have been able to stay composed.

"No! Stop!! I am the Crown Prince's 'maiden of destiny'! I'm unique and irreplaceable! Do you understand? If you don't take my hand right now, you will definitely regret it. So… no! Stop!! Let go of me!!"

The knights dragged the still-shouting Baroness Heronia away, each gripping one of her arms. Her hair was disheveled, her face a mess of tears, but I observed her coldly.

At that moment…

CRASH!!!

A loud noise erupted as the stained glass skylight above us shattered. I instinctively shielded Bertia, wrapping my arms protectively around her head.

"Your Highness!" she exclaimed.

"Fsshaaa!!!" Screams erupted around us, but Zeno and Kuro were the fastest to react.

Kuro quickly created a barrier around us, and Zeno conjured wind magic to sweep away the falling shards of glass. As I momentarily relaxed my grip to survey our surroundings, I spotted a bright ball of light hurtling toward us from above—a projectile approaching with immense speed.

Squinting against the bright light, I identified it as Little Pi, the light spirit with Baroness Heronia. Noticing her evident malicious intent, Kuro inched closer to us, exposing his fangs and amplifying the barrier with fearsome growls.

"Shaaa!!" The barrier, once as thin as a film, grew thicker and crackled with dark lightning.

Still, the light spirit quickened its pace toward us, causing Kuro’s fur to bristle.

Zeno concentrated on preventing the energy emitted by Kuro from impacting the surrounding area, keeping a defensive posture.

I noticed the knights’ caution toward the mysterious glowing object as they rushed to shield me, yet I swiftly signaled them to halt. Not everyone perceives spirits or barriers; it’s likely that neither Kuro’s barrier nor the spirit was visible to the knights. Acting recklessly might place them in even greater peril.

The atmosphere crackled intensely with tension as the spirit continued its relentless approach.



A harsh sound echoed in that instant as Kuro's barrier met the orb of light. The light spirit, unable to move forward yet persistently trying to breach the barrier, sustained numerous injuries to its tiny form.

"… Little Pi?" Baroness Heronia recognized her companion, silencing her cries and staring in shock.

"Pii… Pii…" The light spirit, clearly struggling for breath, chirped in reply. Summoning its final reserves of strength, it shifted from the form of a bird into a simple clump of light, intensifying its energy.

Snap!

"Yelp!" A jolt like static electricity shot through Kuro's paw.

Although Kuro instinctively pulled back her paw, the mass of light seized the opportunity. It transformed into a thin, thread-like shape, relentlessly boring into the barrier even as it was gradually worn down by it.

"Tia!" I called as the spirit, almost extinguished, made its final effort toward us.

I wrapped my arms around Bertia, positioning my body as a shield to protect her.

"Lord Cecil!" Bertia's voice, nearly a scream, reverberated throughout the venue.

A small pop echoed near my ear—probably the chain of her earring snapped.

Crack.

A pain as faint as static electricity coursed through my back. The last flicker of the light spirit's life.

Although it reached me, it seemed the spirit no longer had enough strength to cause me significant harm. The moment I experienced that slight pain, my vision was enveloped in white.

"Lord Ceciiiiiiiil!" Bertia's anguished scream echoed beside me, yet I was powerless as I descended into unconsciousness.

Part Four

"Where am I…?"

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in an entirely white space.

“Could this be a kind of consciousness space influenced by the light spirit?”

I swiftly examined my body but noticed nothing unusual. Still, this might not be my true physical form. Without the ability to inspect my real body, I can’t definitively say it’s “all right.”

“So, what should I do now?”

It appeared that the light spirit had used its powers to confine me here. However, it had depleted much of its energy by breaking through Kuro’s barrier. It is likely that maintaining this space indefinitely and keeping me trapped would be unfeasible.

It might have about ten to twenty minutes at most?

“I could probably force my way out, but instead of taking a drastic approach that might lead to trouble, wouldn’t it be wiser to wait until the light spirit exhausts its energy?”

Kuro and Zeno’s powers protect me.

Even though the chain of my necklace was broken, the power of Kuro remained. The light spirit shouldn’t be capable of launching an attack that impacted my mind directly. Thus, I must avoid any extreme actions that could jeopardize my own psyche.

“I hope it depletes its energy before Bertia begins to go wild again.”

I let out a wry chuckle, recalling Bertia’s scream right before I blacked out. As I started to consider how to fill the time until the timeout, the blank space in front of me began to glow.

“It’s dazzling…”

I raised my hand to shield my face and shut my eyes. However, the light quickly faded away.

Feeling the light fade through my eyelids, I gradually opened my eyes. Before me lay a familiar scene, a striking contrast to the once monochrome world.

“The audience chamber…?”

Inside a room of the royal palace, which I often visited while accompanying my father on his duties, I found myself beside the throne where the king sat. Yet, as I examined my surroundings more closely, I noticed that the decorations and the curtains by the windows were subtly different than how I remembered them. They weren’t “unfamiliar” but evoked a sense of “nostalgia.”

This is…

“This is my first time meeting you. I’m Bertia Ibil Noches, the eldest daughter of Marquis Noches, Douglas Ibil Noches.”

While I scanned the area and reflected on my memories, a sweet, youthful voice suddenly emerged. Drawn by that sound, I turned my attention. A few steps below the throne, beside Marquis Noches, the Prime Minister, knelt a girl—Bertia—performing a subject’s bow. She looked to be around eight years old. Her appearance hadn’t changed since our first meeting; she still resembled a plump, snowman-like figure, her face tense as she focused intently on the floor.

This scene was from when I was first introduced to Bertia.

… Yet, for some reason, Bertia’s demeanor and expression felt different from how I remembered. Back then, she had looked up at me from beside her father, her eyes sparkling and a broad smile on her face as she introduced herself. I can still recall how I chuckled involuntarily at her cheerful friendliness.

The girl in front of me now was behaving like a proper noble young lady should—”as expected.” By this age, most noble children start to become adept at reading the room and adhering to etiquette. Consequently, in a high-pressure situation such as meeting the king and the crown prince in the audience chamber—where even adults might feel anxious—it was common for them to become tense, feeling the weight of the atmosphere, and awkwardly trying to conform to the expected protocols of greeting.

Unlike the Bertia from my memories, who expressed her straightforward, genuine affection, being “normal” was actually the “strange” aspect.

Yet somehow, the Bertia in front of me felt strange. As I frowned at this unusual version of Bertia, an unsettling feeling washed over me, and my fingertips turned a bit cold. “What could this be…?” I wondered, placing a hand on my heart, confused by the odd sensation. Suddenly, I was enveloped in a flash of light. I squeezed my eyes shut, and when I opened them again, I found myself in the royal palace garden—the very place where Bertia had shared her thoughts about the “otome game.”

As I looked around, just as I thought, a younger version of myself and Bertia were seated at a table, enjoying tea. Witnessing

this moment brought back Bertia's words— *Prince Cecil! I am the villainess!!! My purpose is to ruin your relationship with the heroine you encounter after joining Halm Academy and ultimately be left in disgrace with a grand "defeat!"*

The younger versions of us standing before me were involved in a different conversation:

"I am delighted to have someone like Miss Bertia as my fiancée."

"Ah, thank you. I will do my best to become a woman worthy of you, Your Highness."

I smiled warmly at her, and Bertia blushed, returned a shy smile.

Yes, it felt normal. A completely usual interaction, with nothing out of the ordinary. But perhaps that's precisely the issue? It was painfully dull. This wasn't the Bertia I remembered. She appeared to be simply a slightly plump, 'ordinary' noble girl, indistinguishable from many others. True, my younger self facing Bertia wore a smile, yet that smile lacked any real happiness.

It felt like my face was hidden behind a mask. I know myself, and I could see that the person I was in that moment had zero interest in her. There was a complete absence of emotions—no interest, affection, joy in meeting, or enjoyment of being together. Not even negative feelings like disgust, anger, or sadness were present. It was pure emptiness.

Sigh…

The seemingly harmless conversation happening in front of me was observed with a chilling distance, and once again, I experienced an 'unnatural sense'. This sensation was clearer than ever. From my chest… from my fingertips… the 'heat' that should have undeniably been present was slipping away.

Alongside this sensation came a slow fading of expression from my face, an unsettling feeling—as if something dear was being ripped away. I tried to clench my fist, only to realize another peculiarity.

Creak, creak, creak…

My fingers hardly moved when I attempted to bend them. As I looked at my hand to identify the cause, I involuntarily furrowed my brow.

… My hand had somehow changed into that of a flawless bisque doll.

"Unless I select you, you are just a clever doll lacking a heart!" The Baroness Heronia's earlier words echoed in my mind.

I gazed at the younger version of myself standing before me. My eyes were icy as I smiled and conversed with Miss Bertia.

… The same.

That thought struck me suddenly.

The younger me appeared like a doll, limited to just smiling. I lacked the warm, human emotions that I now possess.

That was "me."

That's why I understood.

In those days, I embodied Baroness Heronia's description, "a clever doll without a heart." Unable to engage with anything, I mechanically performed the roles expected of me, showcasing emotions in line with what others anticipated in various situations. I had no preferences, no sense of good or bad, no happiness or sorrow, no anger—none of those feelings. I was a lifeless doll devoid of everything. Yet, this very emptiness fueled a strong desire within me: to meet someone who could ignite my interest, a person whose significance would resonate deeply with me.

"That's not 'my' Bertia…"

Ever since I met Bertia, the 'heat' known as 'emotion' has been building up inside me. A chill raced down my spine when this 'heat' was suddenly taken away, reverting me to my original doll-like form.

"No, I don't want this. It's scary…"

These emotions welled up inside me, causing me to shudder.

—At the moment, there are three versions of me present. The first was the fake me, crafted by the light spirit. The second was the vessel me, which is made to experience this situation. Lastly, there's the real me, existing within that vessel. It seems that the light spirit can influence only the fake me and the vessel me, while my true consciousness remains linked to the real world.

This has to be a dream-like illusion created by the light spirit, clearly not reality.

… I get that. I really do. However, the vessel's transformation makes me feel like my emotions are shifting as well. It's a strange,

unsettling, and perilous feeling.

“Maybe I should push my way out of here, even if it’s a little reckless? No, I don’t want to do anything hasty that could impact my true consciousness with these feelings”

As I observed my arm slowly changing into a doll’s, I considered my choices. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind swept toward me. I instinctively shut my eyes, and when I gently opened them again, I was faced with an entirely different scene.

Bertia wept for her mother who had passed away from illness. My younger self stood before her, wearing a sorrowful expression and offering comforting words but keeping a respectful distance. Next to her was Marquis Noches, his eyes revealing despair and a sense of helpless anger, remaining expressionless.

—A future that was meant to occur.

The future I envisioned with Bertia was now revealing itself before my eyes. The Bertia standing here was on a different journey. As a result, her personality, actions, and even her appearance felt unfamiliar compared to my memories.

Although I might typically think, “that’s pitiful” when I saw her, my heart stayed unaffected. However, witnessing a reality that starkly contrasted mine, I intensely felt, “The Bertia in front of me will never align with ‘my’ Bertia,” and this understanding sparked a sense of urgency akin to panic.

At that moment, more warmth escaped from my chest, and my arms up to my shoulders and legs turned into doll parts.

The scene before me continued to shift rapidly.

Marquis Noches, appearing as a changed man, became emotionally distant from those around him. He channeled all his affection into his daughter, a constant reminder of his late wife, and slowly, Bertia developed into a stubborn and defiant young woman. When her demands weren’t met, she would throw fits and destroy items within her reach. She would also lash out at servants over insignificant issues.

In my presence, she would coo softly, pressing her curvy figure against me, fiercely protecting me from any woman who came near.

Such scenes, one after another, unfolded before my eyes.

With each scene's transition, the warmth within me faded away, and I increasingly resembled a doll. As these scenes unfolded, Bertia matured and eventually entered Halm Academy. By this point, my form had nearly fully transformed into a doll. Regardless of what I witnessed, I felt numb… or so I was led to believe, experiencing profound feelings of loss, pain, and sorrow. I resented this. This wasn't who I was. Please don't strip away my warmth… the 'emotions' I had finally begun to feel…

Within the doll-like vessel, my true self quietly screamed. The outer shell insisted that feeling such emotions was inappropriate and dismissed the true intentions—the feelings—of my authentic self. It felt suffocating, making me nauseous. Yet, trapped in this doll's body, I was unable to cry or even vomit.

I considered that destroying everything might be the best course of action. I felt an urgent need to shatter this vessel and flee from this unsettling world. Yet, a more composed voice within me cautioned, *"What if you abandon this tumultuous situation and it impacts your true mental state?"*

"In the worst-case scenario, you could genuinely lose the 'emotions'… the 'Bertia' you worked so hard to feel."

In that instant, I experienced a fear that surpassed any dread felt in this environment. It was something I desperately wanted to avoid.

"Prince Cecil!!"

When the scene shifted again, wrapped in light, a woman's overly sweet voice reached my ears. She had a bright, flawless smile. Her mere presence seemed to illuminate everything around her, almost as if light itself was cascading over her surroundings.

My eyes were drawn in. Warmth started to flood my chest. Without realizing it, my fingers, once doll-like, began to transform back to human. But…

"This is wrong,"

"It's fake,"

I, my true self within this vessel, voiced my frustration angrily. The figure just out of reach was Baroness Heronia, not my beloved fiancée.

If not my fiancée…

"So, why not switch out the fiancée?"

A whisper uttered in my own voice seemed to come from somewhere far away.

No.

That's not it.

I knew the correct answer, but part of me still wanted to agree.

This was a nightmare.

When the light spirit depleted its energy and I emerged from the dream, my rational mind came back. However, this nightmare was so dreadful that I felt inclined to grasp any quick solace.

And yet, this "relief" was precisely the power of the being subjecting me to this ordeal.

I clenched my teeth tightly and stared at the scene before me.

Baroness Heronia smiled at the fake me, who could initially muster only a forced smile, but gradually, that version of me began to show genuine human expressions.

A body that had once been transformed into a doll was returning to its human form. Instead of feeling grateful for this transformation, which would usually be a relief, I felt annoyed.

Contradiction. Contradiction. Contradiction.

I struggled to understand my conflicting emotions.

—Upon waking from this dream, it will seem as if it never happened. So why not stop fighting and embrace the deceptive sensations offered by the light spirit?

That would be much easier.

Once more, those thoughts crossed my mind. If everything would be back to normal in just a few minutes, then there was no reason to resist vigorously. Doing so would only squander my energy.

—The desire to resist this artificial world conflicted with the urge to surrender to the struggle. In time, a scene resembling the night before the graduation party at Halm Academy unfolded.

"I… I love Prince Cecil. Even if it means going against Lady Bertia, I can't change these feelings."

The false persona I had created chose to sever connections with Bertia because of her heinous behavior, prompting Baroness Heronia to speak softly. Until that moment, my feelings for her were merely a faint 'interest' and 'affection', but suddenly, I felt a rush of warmth rising in my chest… or so I was led to believe.

“Is this what they refer to as love? I can’t let her go now that she has stirred these emotions within me.” I wrapped my arms around Baroness Heronia, a cold, sinister smile creeping onto my face. The person standing there was no longer the doll-like version of myself.

A familiar warmth enveloped me, and with joy, I softly closed my eyes. Just a little longer, and I could give in to this delightful sensation.

That was when it happened…

“Prince Cecil!! Why?! Why is that woman by your side?!”

Bertia’s tormented scream resonated. I quickly opened my eyes, finding myself at the graduation party scene. After observing Bertia’s shocking actions in this realm crafted by the light spirit for a while, I realized that her public condemnation before a crowd of students and parents provided a fulfilling narrative climax.

But…

Although there were some differences in her looks, a girl resembling my Bertia cried out in despair. Her pain made my heart ache. When a tear fell from her amber eyes, it reminded me of the real Bertia’s tears I had seen before.

The fleeting thought of surrendering to the false solace offered by Baroness Heronia disappeared in an instant. Even if it wasn’t real, even if it was just for a brief moment…

The idea of relying on the woman who had harmed my Bertia, or of acting based on the whims of the light spirit, was unbearable. Regardless of the pain it might cause, I simply could not accept it.

At that moment, a different kind of warmth surged within me, distinct from the heat that had been forcibly imposed earlier. It was unmistakably my own ‘emotion.’

Crack…

It sounded as if a thin shell were breaking. As I looked around, I noticed cracks forming in various areas of the space I occupied.

“Has it finally reached its limit…?”

Before I realized it, the scenery around me began to flatten, peeling away like deteriorating walls. The world was disintegrating. Yet, one spot—where Baroness Heronia was

located—appeared to hold strong, gently glowing, as the cracks there began to mend.

“Why not just give up? No illusion you present can sway my heart… I will never consider your master,” I proclaimed into the emptiness.

Even if I couldn’t see it, I felt its presence; it must be there.

As anticipated, the light spirit attentively listened to my words. Seemingly relinquishing its attempts to show me illusions, it gracefully erased the surrounding scenery, bringing me back to a blank white world. However, this time, standing before me was a boy who appeared to be around five years old.

Even in this artificial world, it seemed hard for him to keep his shape. His form was translucent, as if he could disappear at any moment.

“Why can’t it be Heronia? You could have had a future like that too, right?” he begged, tears flowing down his cheeks as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. All I could provide in reply was a bittersweet smile.

“How can I explain? We’ve just moved on to a different future; that’s all I can say.”

Indeed, the future he envisioned was a possibility. The world I just experienced closely mirrored the “otome game” world Bertia had depicted. This made me believe that such a future seemed very likely. However, I had already begun moving toward a different future.

Even if I were told to return to the original path, I would have to say it was impossible. I felt no need to go back, and if asked, I would resist with all my strength. Moreover, being shown the possibilities of a different future had reaffirmed my conviction. I much preferred the alternative future I was creating with my Bertia—she made my life incredibly enjoyable right now.

“You can still make a difference… if anyone can, it’s you, right? Please, select Heronia! If things don’t change, she’ll only feel sad and suffer.” His youthful looks and tearful request didn’t genuinely touch me. I felt not pain, but an awareness that he was my enemy, attempting to hurt my Bertia and pull her away from me. I found it hard to feel sympathy for him.

Some might consider me cold, but this was my true emotion. I have always been someone with dulled emotions. Although I’ve

started to grasp “feelings” gradually, and exceptions did arise occasionally, my essence remained unchanged.

The illusions created by the light spirit led me to this realization.

I’ve also come to appreciate the importance and preciousness of that one unique existence that can evoke these ‘exceptions’ in me…

I responded to the light spirit, who wanted me to select Baroness Heronia, said, “I’m sorry, but that’s just not possible. I genuinely dislike her. Initially, she was merely ‘someone who didn’t matter to me,’ but you both have continuously made foolish moves to attempt to take Bertia from me, haven’t you? You’ve created this situation for yourselves.”

I responded with a smile. The light spirit’s eyes grew wide in surprise.

“Why? Why?! But Heronia claimed you are her destined partner. That’s why it’s natural for her to fall in love with you. The scene I showed you earlier was slightly adjusted, but it was based on Heronia’s memories, a predicted future! Heronia was simply trying her best to lead you to the right path!!”

The light spirit wailed like it was throwing a tantrum, its behavior both foolish and pitiful.

“When we met, I already had a liking for Bertia. So, no matter how hard you tried, the chances of the future changing were slim. Besides… I believe you’re misdirected in your efforts.”

The light spirit looked perplexed, not understanding.

I kept my tone gentle, much like when speaking to a child. “If you hurt others to satisfy your desires, you will likely face someone’s anger or hatred. Who could genuinely love someone who consistently behaves selfishly when their wishes go unfulfilled? I’m not suggesting you shouldn’t strive to surpass someone to claim the only available spot; that might be essential. However, if you aim to outdo someone, it shouldn’t be at their expense; you should focus on performing better than they do. Agreed?”

Bertia also made repeated and earnest attempts to realize her wish, even though it was unnecessary.

In that regard, she and Baroness Heronia shared some similarities. Yet, a notable distinction existed between them.

Bertia, despite stating her desire to be “a top-tier villainess,” never genuinely inflicted harm on anyone.

Although Bertia attempted to hurt others, each effort ultimately failed. While some may see it as mere luck, I think it was due to her innate ability to restrain herself from crossing unacceptable boundaries. Even though she aspired to be perceived as a “villainess,” Bertia lacked the experience to genuinely inflict harm on others. Whenever she made an attempt, she ended up hurting herself instead. She’s not skilled at concealing her inherent “kindness,” which effortlessly shines through and draws people in.

Bertia has another notable strength: her ability to enhance herself and pursue her goals. Occasionally, this talent reveals itself in amusing ways that I find entertaining, yet I consider it an invaluable asset. These traits are absent in both Baroness Heronia and me. Indeed, I also lack these strengths.

The light spirit, wearing a sorrowful expression, remarked, “But she had to do that, right? Otherwise, Heronia wouldn’t have been happy.”

“That’s incorrect,” I replied. “It’s precisely because of that decision that she struggled to find happiness. If she had embraced the destiny she wrongly believed was meant for her and tried to win others’ affection, she wouldn’t have faced that defeat in solitude. At that moment, you were her only supporter.”

“What was she supposed to do then?!” shouted the light spirit.

While he spoke, his figure gradually diminished—suggested that his end, or what humans refer to as ‘death,’ was approaching.

I answered his question, stating, “In attempting to shield her from pain, you only fueled her naivety. If you really cared for her, you ought to have revealed the truth and occasionally guided her with gentle corrections. As a result, she may not have attained the happiness she dreamed of, but she could have discovered a more realistic form of it.”

I paused, letting my words sink in. Then I conveyed the harsh reality.

“Well, it’s all over now. Even though I might suspect as much, I can’t confirm what will actually happen.”

“At that… because… because…” The light spirit sat down suddenly, a look of surprise crossing its face.

He was soaked in profound regret, and there was no time remaining for him to begin anew.

“If you exhaust your energy and vanish, she’ll genuinely be alone. With the situation having escalated this far, Baron Inderon will undoubtedly forsake his daughter; a baron’s influence can’t shield her. Should he foolishly attempt to protect her, it could result in his family’s ruin. After you’re gone, the friends who rallied around her due to your strength will depart as well. Most importantly, you won’t be by her side. Utter isolation.”

“Heronia… Heronia…”

“This is the end of the path you both chose.”

The light spirit, now barely visible, lay prostrate on the floor, deeply lamenting his master’s fate.

All I could do was silently witness this scene.

He was about to disappear.

Eventually, he stopped lamenting and looked up. His face, drenched in tears, was roughly wiped with his arm as he stared at me with intense eyes.

“I realize that Heronia and I have been a burden to all of you. I understand it’s inappropriate to ask this, but… would you be able to pass a message to Heronia?”

“That’s fine. I don’t like either of you, but I’ve come to understand some things because you were here. As a gesture of thanks, I’ll fulfill your last wish.”

“… Tell Heronia, ‘Even if you can’t see me, I’m always with you.’ That’s all I can do for now.” His smile, an effort to lighten his sadness, was twisted.

Facing such a situation, he must have many regrets.

I believe he genuinely wanted to leave Baroness Heronia a future with me in exchange for his own life. But his last hope was lost.

“So, even if you can’t be seen, you still want to stay by Baroness Heronia’s side?”

“Even if a spirit loses its power and disappears, it simply becomes part of the world again. I won’t have personal consciousness anymore, but I will become one of the particles of light that illuminate the world, remaining by her side. I hope she

can think that way too. I want you to tell her she's not alone, that she has allies."

As I looked into his determined eyes, I couldn't help but think, "If only he had shown that expression a bit earlier, could something have been changed?"

"Understood," I responded, nodding back at him.

He appeared slightly relieved, then gradually closed his eyes. I sensed the world that had confined me starting to fade away. Simultaneously, the life of the light spirit was dimming. What was once a human-like form reverted to pure light. Surely his consciousness had become so faint that he found it hard to even think.

"This ending seems like it will leave a bad taste," I muttered to myself, feeling a slight ache in my heart for the first time.

I may not have come to like them, but I had certainly learned a lot from them. Just repaying that in a small way, by lending a hand, wouldn't be so bad. What I offered was merely a small glimmer of hope. I wouldn't protect Baroness Heronia myself; she must atone for her own sins. The rest was up to them.

"Zeno, lend me your strength," I called out, placing my hand on my chest.

Zeno, a high-level spirit with powerful abilities, should be able to send power through the gaps given the extent of this destruction.

His response came quickly. I smiled faintly, and gently extended my hand.

"Well then, let's get back quickly."

Part Five

"…?"

I heard a distant voice. It felt like my consciousness, was being pulled up from the depths of the sea, and I was relieved to be escaping such an unpleasant world. My mind remained foggy, but I anticipated it would clear once I was fully awake. There was a hint of lethargy, yet it felt like a typical morning awakening.

My vision slowly brightened, and the sounds around me grew clearer.

“… !… ck!!”

I must have worried everyone.

After waking up, I’d need to apologize and rest a bit before trying to sort out the situation…

“Your Highness! Hurry! Wake up!”

“There’s no time to rest!! Lady Bertia is—!”

“Quickly wake up and deal with this situation!! Otherwise…”

“Wake up!! Stop Bertia!!”

… Quite lively, isn’t it?

Do you all realize that I’ve been unconscious here? Maybe a little concern or comfort would be nice…

“Hurry up, or Lady Bertia… your fiancée will end up bald!”

… Wait a minute.

Bertia becoming bald? What’s that supposed to mean?!

“Your Highness!!”

Stunned by the surprising remark, I instinctively opened my eyes. Those nearby, attempting to rouse me, cheered enthusiastically.

Their relief seemed not just because I had woken up, but as if they were welcoming a savior.

“… What about Bertia?”

After the attack by the light spirit, I would have preferred a more gradual re-awakening. However, I couldn’t afford to rest because of the alarming words I thought I’d heard. Wincing from the throbbing pain in my head, I glanced around to assess the situation.

Joanna knelt beside my bed, clutching my collar as if attempting to rouse me. Silica, her face pale, appeared to be softly slapping my cheeks. Zeno sat on the bed, propping up my upper body from behind while firmly patting my back. Marquis Noches was preparing to splash water on me from a finger bowl… Seriously, Marquis? Such behavior isn’t fitting for the Crown Prince, is it?

Well, the actions of the other members are on the edge of out of line too, especially Zeno. You knew I was about to wake up, didn’t you? And were you hitting me on purpose? I heard you mutter, “payback for the usual grievances,” you know. Are you still holding

a grudge because I gave your snack to Bertia the other day? Next time I feel like it, I'll buy some treats for Bertia and get something for you too, so let's stop with the sighing. Oh, and of course, it will be during a lecture. Looking forward to it, aren't you?

With a silent smile directed at Zeno, Marquis Noches, having returned the finger bowl to the table, said urgently, "Your Highness! You must stop Bertia at once!"

He gestured toward Bertia, who stood a short distance away. In tears, she was rampaging uncontrollably. Guards and my personal aide candidates were desperately attempting to soothe her.

"Please release me! I need to join a convent! Otherwise, Lord Cecil!! Scissors! If not those, lend me your dagger! If that won't do, then please allow me to use the sword at your side!!"

The scene was alarming, but her words were even more concerning. What in the world had occurred? And what does she mean by "join a convent… maybe became a nun"?

Joanna shared her explanation, and then Silica added, "She has been shouting things that don't make sense, like 'I will become a nun to save His Highness!' and 'I will shave my head right here!' while attempting to cut her own hair."

"Until we moved here to the anteroom, she begged Lady Heronia, pleading with tears." She said, "If it would save Lord Cecil, she would go to a convent or anywhere else. Please, save Lord Cecil" Silica continued, "But after we separated her from that girl and brought her here with you, Your Highness, and seeing you wouldn't wake up, she started panicking, asking, 'What should I do?! Should I not go to the convent? Should I shave my head and become a nun?!"

Joanna and Silica swiftly moved away from me, pretending as though nothing had occurred. Both wore expressions of bewilderment fitting for noble young ladies.

While I had my opinions on their behavior, I didn't think now was the right moment to share them.

"Whoa! Hold on!! Lady Bertia, please don't unsheathe that sword yourself!! It's dangerous!!" Charles shouted, but Bertia ignored him.

"Please hand it over quickly! I'm planning to shave my head! I promise not to use it for anything too risky!"

“Swords are not intended for shaving your head! And please, don’t shave it at all!” Nert attempted to intervene with Bertia, but…

“I have to shave it!! If I don’t, Lord Cecil will definitely not awaken!! Destiny, the heroine, will prevent that!!”

“It’s okay! His Highness is such that even if you killed him, it wouldn’t matter! So please, calm down!”

“Your Highness! Please hurry and take action! If not, Lady Bertia’s wedding hairstyle will be ruined!”

Nert and Charles, noticing that I had awakened, urgently pleaded with me.

… I feel like the way everyone is treating me is getting worse, but maybe it’s just my imagination?

I feel that everyone is putting too much work on me, don’t you think?

After all, I’m only human—not immortal, right? It’s perfectly fine for you to treat me with kindness, isn’t it?

Meanwhile, Bard stepped in between the guards and Bertia, stopping her from grabbing a sword from one of the knights.



Kulgan and Shaun, who weren't present, were likely managing the party venue. Maybe even Father was helping out. Everyone seemed to be struggling, but now it appeared to be my turn to take charge. Still, I wouldn't mind just watching a bit longer as a break…

"Your Highness!" everyone except Bertia shouted at me.

Certainly, the emotions reflected in their eyes weren't concern or relief, but rather a frantic request for me to take charge. A few even cast a reproachful glance, as if to say, "Now that you're awake, quickly step in."

I understand their desperation, but… wouldn't it be nice if they showed a little concern for me? Well, it's fine since Bertia seems worried enough for everyone.

"Alright, alright, I understand," I said with a wry smile, gradually rising from the bed.

Considering her condition, Bertia probably wouldn't hear me even if I shouted from here. I'd have to approach her and speak face to face. I must have fallen to the ground when I lost consciousness. I'm experiencing some pain, but it won't impede my movement.

I quietly approached Bertia.

"Tia, relax. I'm okay now," I said.

"Lord Cecil! You need to be rescued at once!" she exclaimed.

"No, it's honestly too late for that now," I replied.

"God, Buddha, Heroine-sama!! I don't care what happens to me, just please save Cecil-sama and this country!"

… What does she mean by "Buddha"?

"Look, asking Baroness Heronia won't change anything, okay? Besides, I don't need saving anymore," I explained.

"Ah, Lord Cecil's voice… Am I imagining this? Could this be the legendary dream pillow?!" she wondered aloud.

"This doesn't make sense, and it's not a hallucination, alright? Can we just take a moment to calm down?"

"Lord Cecil, what should I do?"

"Just try to calm down for now."

Bertia wouldn't listen to reason, so I gently took both of her hands and gazed into her tear-soaked face. Her unfocused eyes gradually shifted toward me and locked onto mine.

"Ah… Lord Cecil?"

“Good morning, dear Tia. I’m awake now, so everything is fine.” I intentionally adopted a gentle tone and smiled warmly at her, which made Bertia’s expression crumple further as tears fell down her cheeks.

“Lord Cecil! I’m so glad. Truly glad.” She hugged me tightly, nearly crashing into me. I held her close and softly stroked her back, comforting her.

“It seems I’ve caused quite a bit of worry. I was just taking a short nap, so I’m okay.”

“Ah, God, Buddha, Heroine-sama, thank you!! I haven’t shaved my head yet… oh, it must be a delayed payment! Got it!! I will officially become a nun and serve the Buddha…”

“Could you refrain from serving that, whatever this Buddha represents? I’ll permit you to pray at the chapel in the palace every morning. However, you have a role as the Crown Prince’s consort, so entering a convent is not an option, alright?”

“What?! I’m a villainess! If I’m not ‘defeated,’ how can Lord Cecil and this country be happy…”

“That ‘defeat’ you’re referring to is over, right? It’s all finished. The future where I’m tied to your so-called ‘heroine’ isn’t happening. I’ve come to realize that I can’t do this with anyone but you.”

“Huh? Huh? But… um, me? What about what comes next…?”

“Do you still have any worries?”

“?! Uh… well…”

Bertia’s eyes grew wide, and she fidgeted anxiously, her cheeks a bit rosy. Clearly, she had more to say, yet she was reluctant to proceed. It likely related to the “otome game” she brought up earlier, and talking about it here might not be appropriate.

I surveyed my surroundings with a somewhat imposing glance.

“Could you please give us some privacy? I need to have a serious conversation with her; just the two of us,” I said, indicating that this was not a mere request but a directive.

My aide candidates and Bertia’s friends nodded reluctantly with wry smiles, recognizing the situation. However, Marquis Noches, her father, was even more reluctant.

“But my daughter isn’t married yet. Even though you are her fiancé, I can’t allow you to be alone with her in a room that has a bed…”

I could appreciate his concern.

“In that case, let Zeno and Kuro stay too. Would that work for you, Marquis Noches?” I inquired, suggested that no additional compromises were possible.

He nodded begrudgingly.

Bertia, still holding my hand as if captured, murmured to her father, “Father…” but I pretended not to notice.

Now that it had come to this, I had no intention of letting her slip away.

“Thank you. Oh, one more thing, if I may?”

As everyone started to shuffle out of the room, I remembered something I needed to verify.

“What did the graduation party look like to all of you before I collapsed?”

While I tilted my head in curiosity, Joanna blinked several times, then softly said, “Ah,” and gradually started to speak.

“That bird which accompanied the student named Heronia suddenly broke through the venue’s glass and flew in… Lady Bertia’s maid started running as if to shield you two, but just before she collided with her, the bird glowed brightly… and seemed to vanish. I couldn’t see very well in the end because it was too dazzling.”

“Your Highness, was that, perhaps, a spirit?” Charles began to ask but paused halfway, his eyes widening as he realized something.

Only a select few can perceive spirits, and knowledge about them typically rests with the nobility. Yet, everyone present, including the guards, hails from relatively high-ranking noble families. Even if they haven’t encountered a spirit, they likely possess some awareness of them due to their education.

“Yes, that bird was a manifestation of a light spirit,” I affirmed with a warm smile, prompting everyone to gasped in astonishment.

While they were taken aback, everyone seemed acquainted with the term “light spirit.”

“Considering your reaction, you understand why it would be an issue if others discovered this, correct?... I apologize for asking, but could you handle a cover-up?”

My father was likely already handling the situation. However, the commotion took place within the school, and most of those present were students. Any visible intervention by adults could draw attention and raise suspicions.

Upon discovering that Baroness Heronia’s bird was a light spirit, the aide candidates and the young ladies were visibly shocked.

“Huh? Was that a spirit? Huh?” Silica blinked several times, tilting her head in bewilderment.

“I’ve never seen one until now,” Joanna confessed, her face reflecting both surprise and acceptance. Charles nodded in agreement as well.

“Me neither.”

“Hmm, I think that wasn’t my first time seeing a spirit,” I pondered aloud.

“Eh?” Their simultaneous exclamation echoed through the room.

When I casually mentioned it, Joanna and Charles looked at me with curiosity. *I mean, aren’t there two spirits standing right in front of you all? Perhaps I’ll keep it to myself that they’re spirits for now, waiting until they decide to reveal themselves for some fun.*

“Then, I’ll let you take it from here. I’ll catch up with you after my chat with Tia. How about we kick off the party again in about an hour?”

“Are we really going to restart?” Charles grimaced a bit at my suggestion.

Well, it was a grand spectacle, and there I was, the Crown Prince, collapsing. The students must be quite unsettled. Ideally, we should just call it a day now and later send an apology letter along with gifts, or perhaps plan a new party...

“It’s a graduation party, and I don’t think it’s good to end it on a sour note. If possible, I’d like to overwrite the unpleasant part with fun memories. Plus, showing them that I’m healthy and Tia has calmed down will reassure everyone,” I reasoned.

I smiled widely and said again, “Please take care of it.” Charles appeared somewhat resigned as he exited the room,

followed by the others, whose faces showed a blend of fatigue and relief.

It may be somewhat of a hassle, but we were intending to address several matters regardless, including the issue of Baroness Heronia — the ‘defeat’ that Bertia often mentioned. Preparations for the follow-up are already underway, so it should be fine.

The only unexpected occurrences were the spirit of Baroness Heronia depleting its energy to safeguard her, and my brief fainting spell caused by its strength. These were minor surprises, and I trust my competent friends can deal with them.

Now, the issue I need to address…

“So, Tia. It’s just us now. You’re going to tell me everything you’ve been holding back, all right?”

After making sure that Kuro and Zeno stayed while the other members left the room, I turned back to Bertia.

Noticing her tear-stained face, I couldn’t resist a wry smile. I softly wiped her cheeks with a handkerchief before guiding her to the bed where we both settled. The bed creaked beneath us. The two spirits in the room sensed the moment’s seriousness and quietly retreated to a corner, observing us.

“Lord Cecil, I… um…” Bertia’s demeanor shifted from frantic to subdued as she looked up at me anxiously. Her makeup, smeared by tears, made her face appear more innocent than usual, evoking a protective instinct in me. I suppressed the urge to merely reassure her and encouraged her to keep speaking. I knew that if I didn’t listen now, she might spiral into distress and act impulsively again.

“Tia, we’ll be getting married soon after your graduation, so no secrets between us, okay?”

“Is… is that already decided?”

“Of course it is.”

I took her hand and kissed the ring that fit perfectly on her finger, smiled. My gaze firmly conveyed that there was no turning back, and her small hand trembled slightly in response.

“But, but, but…”

“No matter how much you struggle, the situation won’t change. But we can change the future…”

“Don’t lie to me! A Lord Cecil who forsakes the heroine shows no concern for our country’s future or our own!” Bertia interjected forcefully, her eyes reflecting a mix of sorrow and helpless rage.

“Tia?”

Perplexed about the cause of her anger and her belief that I was being dishonest, I felt bewildered.

“Uuuu… I just want everyone to be happy, especially the one I love. Why can’t things go right? Why can’t I play my role as a villainess properly?”

As she began to cry again, I gently stroked her back.

“Tia, I may not understand why you are so upset, but I’m not lying. I genuinely want to improve the future of this country, especially since you are a part of it.”

“But… how can…”

“It’s alright. Just trust me and talk to me?”

Her eyes, a blend of hope and doubt, expressing a desire to believe yet tinged with uncertainty, met mine. I smiled warmly and nodded slowly at her.

After a brief pause, Bertia appeared to reach a decision and gave a slight nod.

“Alright, I’ll share it. Just please don’t take it personally. If what you’re saying is accurate, this isn’t about you, Lord Cecil, but rather ‘Lord Cecil Glo Alphasta’ from the otome game.”

She held my hand tightly and began to speak slowly, sharing her burdens.

Part Six

“—So, the graduation party acts as both a condemnation event and a turning point for the ‘Heroine’ to choose her romantic target, with the resulting ‘individual route’ or ‘harem route’ providing a unique story for each character, right?”

As I sorted through her somewhat convoluted explanation in my mind, I felt a significant headache brewing.

“Yes, that’s correct. By the time of the graduation party, the characters available for the ‘Heroine’ to choose from will vary

based on how much she has conquered each ‘target’ and the level of affection she has attained. The eligible ‘targets’ will send her accessories or dresses that match their hair color by the day of the party, making it clear who can be pursued. Additionally, the route will change based on which accessory she wears to the party.”

“She wore a yellow dress today… Even though I didn’t send one.”

It should have been obvious that I wasn’t among the options. Nevertheless, undeterred, she secured a yellow dress for herself, opting for me of her own volition. Even though it was understood that no gifts would be given if I wasn’t favored enough, she thought it would be fine to make the choice herself.

… How foolish.

“If your affection rating with Lord Cecil is high, you will receive the yellow dress. In a harem route scenario, she would wear the necklaces, earrings, and bracelets gifted by others. However, today, with only the yellow dress at hand, Lady Heronia seemed focused on pursuing Lord Cecil’s individual route… I think.”

Bertia’s brows briefly furrowed, revealing a pained expression. Witnessing this, I experienced a small sense of satisfaction.

It’s interesting that she’s now discussing the meaning of gifts in the ‘otome game’ quite casually—but how does she interpret the fact that I once offered to send her a dress myself and told her she could pick any color she liked?

Furthermore, I selected a dress embellished with gold lace for her. The lace matches the color of my hair, symbolizing deep affection. Surely, she must recognize its significance?

… Maybe when things calm down, I should clearly point it out and have her think about what it means.

“The route with Lord Cecil and the harem route transforms into a romantic internal politics route with Lord Cecil, enhanced by thirty percent more sweetness. The harem route also features interactions and jealousy events with others, but… as someone who advocates for fidelity, I’m not particularly fond of it.”

“That’s good to hear… If you ever created a harem, I might end up scheming in various ways to ensure you couldn’t look for

someone else."

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"No, nothing at all." I smiled and shook my head.

Bertia appeared puzzled, but being essentially simple, she didn't seem to dwell on it for long.

Self-awareness can be a truly frightening experience.

If I hadn't acknowledged my feelings for Bertia, I wouldn't have understood my own "obsession" with her. I would have only perceived my emotions for her as a "peculiar sensation."

"The Cecil route and the harem route have their challenges, but ultimately, we overcome them together, leading to a happy ending for everyone—except for the villainous characters, of course. However, the routes involving others are…" I remembered the story Bertia had shared with me earlier.

"I'm assassinated, disappear, embark on a journey across countries, become obsessed with my research, and isolate myself… or turn into a battle maniac and dive into a world of war, right?" As soon as I heard this, my headache reached its peak.

Yet, recalling the false-self presented to me by the light spirit, I couldn't confidently declare, "That can't be possible!"

Right now, I have Bertia, a significant person in my life. Thanks to her, I can enjoy life to a certain degree, but without such a focus… I would surely have despaired of life—of the world itself. For example, if an assassin targeted me, I might typically handle it casually but could think, "Well, I'm tired of life anyway," and allow myself to be easily killed.

Tired of a life and future lacking in interest, I might begin to meddle in dangerous affairs. In search of fun and engaging pursuits, I could leave the country to my brother Shaun and embark on travels, or immerse myself deeply in research or warfare… I can't entirely dismiss these possibilities.

Bertia elaborated on each storyline, said, "In Prince Shaun's path, he writes a letter stating, 'I'm tired of royalty. I relinquish my claim to the throne. It's all yours, Shaun.' Later, when the king is poisoned and a neighboring nation takes advantage to invade, a frightened Prince Shaun finds encouragement and support from the heroine, who fights beside him and fosters their love."

She paused, her expression darkening.

Personally, I find it hard to believe that love alone could lead to victory in a battle. In the game, you might miraculously win the initial fight, resulting in a romantic happy ending filled with phrases like “I couldn’t have accomplished this without you.” Still, I’m apprehensive about what happens next,” Bertia shared her worries.

“… Well, that makes sense. Shaun really isn’t cut out to be a king, nor is he suited for battle.”

“In the otome game, Lord Cecil might say, ‘If I can accomplish this, then Prince Shaun surely can as well. Managing internal affairs and handling diplomacy isn’t too difficult.’”

“… Is that true?” I pondered, thinking about my former self. Naturally, as a crown prince destined to govern, my abilities felt entirely normal. The individuals around me were skilled, and I had never really grasped the meaning of “inability.”

Watching Bertia struggle and persevere despite all her setbacks, I realized that there were indeed people who “couldn’t.” I was also aware of my own superiority over others.

“Next is Lord Kulgan’s journey. As I mentioned earlier, Lord Cecil, you face assassination in this scenario. When Lord Kulgan finds out that the assassin hails from a neighboring country, he makes the bold decision to travel there, disregarding his own safety. The heroine, realizing his resolve as she tries to stop him, says, ‘I’ll accompany you,’ and together they infiltrate the neighboring country. They encounter various challenges that deepen their love, ultimately revealing that a member of the neighboring royal family orchestrated your assassination…”

“… Well, that would lead to war,” I interjected.

“Yes, that’s right. The two manage to obtain some evidence and escape home safely together. They report the circumstances to the king, and it’s a happy ending… but in the end, they fought a war to avenge you, Lord Cecil.”

“… Is that really a happy ending?”

“They overcame the dangers and were in love, so romantically, it was a happy ending. But I can’t see it that way.”

“I agree,” I responded, unable to suppress a wry smile.

When I think about how many lives are lost in war, it doesn’t seem like a happy ending. If I were there, I could probably find a better solution… but I’m destined to be the first one killed.

“So, in Charles’s route, I disappear, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Once the diplomatic negotiations conclude, Lord Cecil, you disappear in the neighboring country. You notice a suspicious person, follow them alone, and then… just vanish,” Bertia nodded, beginning to outline the Charles route.

“During that time, our relationship with the neighboring country became strained. If we tried to deploy troops for a search, they would likely see it as a pretext for invasion, resulting in unfavorable outcomes. In this situation, Lord Charles takes on the role of negotiator and travels to the neighboring country, accompanied by the heroine.”

“Delays in the initial investigation are costly. I think the current version of myself wouldn’t be so easily defeated… But then again, I probably wouldn’t have taken this on alone in the first place,” I mused, reflecting on what I would do differently now.

Now that I had reliable aides and confidence with Bertia by my side, I would prioritize my safety and avoid unnecessary risks. Unlike my character in the game, who acted recklessly on their own, I recognize that I lacked the instinct to depend on others. This was true for me during my childhood.

I could handle most things by myself and often found it quicker and more reliable than asking for help. As a result, relying on others felt more like a burden than a benefit.

“Lord Cecil, you astutely infiltrated the enemy’s hideout, which was situated within the royal palace of the neighboring country. It appears there was a traitor in our nation who had been collaborating with that country. They were preparing to invade us and viewed your disappearance as an opportunity to launch their attack,” Bertia explained.

I understand. Acting as if you are vanishing in order to blend in.

That might truly be a smart strategy to take advantage of an opponent’s weakness.

“Lord Cecil, you were able to reach out to Lord Charles, who was visiting the neighboring country, and you provided him with various pieces of evidence along with a letter for our king. When Lord Charles encouraged you to come home, you reassured him

by saying, ‘Even if something happens to me, Shaun is still there, so it’ll be fine.’ In the end you decided not to leave with him.”

Well, once you’ve infiltrated deep into enemy territory, it’s understandable you’d want to see everything you could.

“With some hesitation, Lord Charles gave up his attempts to persuade you. However, considering his role in organizing your search and rescue, he understood that returning home too early could raise suspicions. Thus, he pretended to negotiate for a while before eventually returning, where he presented his findings and the letter to His Majesty. Meanwhile, as you stayed undercover, a coordinated attack was launched from both within and outside against the neighboring country. Concurrently, an agent who looked like Lady Anne tried to charm Lord Charles to gather intelligence, adding a romantic element to the situation. Despite these obstacles, their love flourished, leading them to a happy conclusion,” Bertia explained.

“… But a war was still ongoing.”

“… Yes, that’s true,” she acknowledged, her eyes glistening as she looked down, feeling disheartened.

Seeing her sorrowful demeanor, I gently ran my fingertips along her hand, offering reassurance with the words, “It’s going to be okay.”

“So then… in Nert’s route, he becomes reclusive, right?”

“Yes. In Lord Nert’s route, Lord Cecil, with too much free time on his hands, swiftly finished the research that Lord Nert had been pursuing, while the heroine worked to uplift a downcast Lord Nert.”

I think I just became intrigued and couldn’t resist. In the past, I would have reacted without thinking about Nert’s feelings.

“Then, Lord Cecil becomes absorbed in creating gunpowder and studying new minerals, ultimately isolating himself in his own laboratory,” Bertia continued.

Indeed, it was fun creating the “fireworks.” For the “Cultural Festival,” based on Bertia’s knowledge, Nert and I collaborated on the gunpowder mixture. However, since Bertia was frantically shouted next to me, “You mustn’t get hooked on gunpowder!” and “Long live peace!” I chose not to explore this further.

Bertia, in her own way, was probably worried that I might isolate myself too much.

“Once Lord Cecil isolated himself, the neighboring country saw it as an opportunity to launch an attack. During this time, Lord Nert used the gunpowder you created to craft powerful weapons, leading our country to victory. Lord Nert, celebrated as a hero, and the heroine who supported him, shared a deep love and achieved their happy ending.”

“It seems our country has developed significant military capabilities, but the consequences of the war may escalate,” I remarked.

“I’m really worried about that too,” Bertia said, her eyes growing even darker.

To be honest, I believed the “scenarios” of the “otome game” weren’t worth worrying about. However, these discussions clearly distressed Bertia and weighed heavily on her.

Considering her kind nature, I think she was worried about my possible disappointment in my future or in myself after hearing these stories.

I apologize, Bertia. I was so focused on your innocent perspective that I overlooked your concerns.

“Ultimately, I become a war maniac.”

“Yes, that’s Lord Bard’s route. When Lord Cecil became weary of his peaceful reign, the neighboring country launched attacks… prompting him to enter the battlefield,” Bertia continued, her expression darkening further.

“With the noble goal of serving his homeland and seeking adventure, Lord Cecil embarked on a quest to conquer neighboring nations one after another. Lord Bard, who stood beside Lord Cecil, exhausted himself on the battlefield, while the heroine provided him unwavering support. In the end, Lord Cecil united the surrounding countries, creating a peaceful world where they both could live happily,” she explained.

“That means significant harm happened while pursuing happiness, and once peace was reached, I’m likely to find it dull and create something new.”

Indeed, that is an accurate depiction of a “war maniac.” While I don’t wish to go on such a rampage, I can’t entirely dismiss the possibility.

If my heart stays unfulfilled and grows parched, and there is something that can satisfy that thirst, what would I do? Perhaps I

would seek it out.

"… I am, perhaps, a worse person than I thought."

As I let out a wry smile accompanied by a chuckle, Bertia vigorously shook her head, not caring that her hair was becoming disheveled.

"No, that's absolutely not the case! The Lord Cecil I know is completely unlike the Lord Cecil from the otome game! Whenever I find myself in trouble, you're always there to help me, and you're a person everyone counts on! There's no way such a kind individual could merely be a doll!" Bertia exclaimed, clearly upset, referencing the term "doll" that Baroness Heronia had used.

The "doll" that the light spirit had shown me in an illusion was unlike the Cecil in the otome game because Bertia is in my life. She's the one significant difference.

Witnessing Bertia's urgent expression, a fresh sense of warmth welled up inside me.

"Cecil isn't a doll! Not a doll… not at all a doll… absolutely not!" Bertia raised her voice, fervently denying it.

"My beloved Lord Cecil is a warm person. He can truly be happy. He doesn't smile with cold, emotionless eyes like the Cecil in the game. He doesn't have eyes that have grown tired or disillusioned with everything! He's someone with a kind heart who cares for others. He could never become like that…" Her voice trailed off as she began shedding big tears.

I embraced her gently, as if she were something fragile.

It made me happy that Bertia thought of me like that—no one else but her.

I'm happy, yet I'm also aware of the "doll-like" aspects within me, which makes her high regard for me feel slightly uncomfortable.

Bertia, I regret to say that I may not be as much of a "human" as you think. The only loss that truly frightens me is yours; everything else, I could easily dismiss.

Even though you say I'm depended on, it's primarily in regards to issues concerning you. Even as the Crown Prince, I am necessary, but am I truly sought after as an individual?

… Then again, yes.

If you want me to be that way, trying to meet that expectation could actually be enjoyable.

It may be a hassle, but if it makes you smile, it's not so bad. You're the only one who can make me truly 'human,' so I'm sticking with you until the end, okay?

As Bertia clung tightly to me, I instinctively smiled while stroking her back.

"Lord Cecil, I'm sorry. I failed to fulfill my role as a villainess properly, which resulted in the absence of a 'maiden of destiny' to heal you. But please, don't abandon us! Don't revert to being a doll, don't disappear, don't go on a rampage, or seclude yourself!" she pleaded.

She loves the person I am now and wants me to remain here. And I want her, the one who brings warmth and joy into my life, to stay too.

Honestly, I have no interest in war right now. Instead, I would much rather not cut down the time I spend observing her. Considering there are more enjoyable things, why should I give them up for something else?

This is clearly a case of mutual interest. If that's true, there's no issue with me binding her to me, right?

Just then, I unexpectedly remembered something—what Baroness Heronia had mentioned about the "proof" of the "maiden of destiny."

… I see. So that's what it was.

As I comforted Bertia, I looked at Zeno and silently mouthed, "The proof."

Zeno's eyes widened, and he shook his head vigorously several times. Kuro, standing next to him, appeared to sense something. While he was concerned about me, he also looked visibly worried about the sobbing Bertia.

Without taking my eyes off Zeno, I smiled widely and said with confidence, "It's going to be okay."

Reacting to my words, Bertia stirred in my arms and looked up. I shifted my gaze to her and deepened my smile. Then, a voice, carried by wind magic and audible only to me, echoed from Zeno.

"I don't want to hear it anymore, you know? You'll have to follow up on this yourself," Zeno said, his voice carrying a hint of

exasperation.

I nodded firmly, keeping my gaze fixed on Bertia, who continued to shout in confusion.

“How can everything be fine? The situation is turning completely bitter, like the worst kind of tea! We’re headed straight for a bad outcome!”

I didn’t directly respond to her question; instead, I asked a different one.

“Do you like me, Tia?”

“W-what are you saying?! I’m just a…,” she stammered, taken by surprise.

“You mentioned ‘my beloved Lord Cecil’ earlier, didn’t you?”

“Th-that’s… but I’m a villainess,” she insisted, her face turning bright red. Her expression made it clear that her feelings were unmistakable.

“Then, it’ll be okay.”

“But what do you mean by ‘okay’?”

“I like you too, Tia.”

Bertia’s face flushed a deeper red, her eyes widening as if they might pop out of her head!

As she stood there, mouth open in amazement, I offered her the sweetest smile I had ever mustered. Then, gently lifting her chin, I ensured our gazes met.

“I may be hopeless, but if you’re the one to conquer me, I feel like I could be a pretty good Crown Prince or ‘target of conquest.’ So… you’re my ‘maiden of destiny.”

I spoke those words slowly, and as she was too bewildered to react, I leaned in and gently pressed my lips against hers, the lips of the person I loved.

“!!!!!!!!!!”

“FFSSHAAA!!!”

As our lips parted after a brief moment, Bertia’s inarticulate scream and Kuro’s menacing growl resonated around us.

As the scream echoed, Bertia’s left hand was wrapped in light. Yet, with her face turning a deep shade of red and on the verge of exploding, Bertia didn’t notice it. Covering her mouth with both hands and her eyes darting back and forth, my adorable fiancée appeared utterly bewildered.

I tried to get a clearer view of her face, but my sight was blocked by something black and fluffy—Kuro's tail. Her glossy fur puffed up to about three times its usual size as she wedged herself between us. Kuro, acting protectively, hugged Bertia's body and glared menacingly at me.

I had expected this ending, but having the warmth stripped from my arms was somewhat frustrating. Well, I couldn't provoke any further since Kuro's tail was enveloped in black lightning.

"Cecil! What on earth are you doing?! I'm a villainess, not the heroine!" Bertia exclaimed.

"In my eyes, you're the heroine. Just look."

Bertia, nestled in Kuro's embrace, suddenly regained her composure and shot me a glare through watery eyes. Yet, her flushed cheeks diminished the intended impact. Instead, it stirred a different warmth within me.

I pointed firmly at the back of Bertia's left hand to dispel these feelings.

With a puzzled expression, she raised her hand and looked down at it.

"?!" At that moment, her spine stiffened. Following that reaction, Kuro's puffy tail also lifted upward.

"Why, why, why do I have this mark?! Eh?! I thought I was always the villainess; could it be that I was the heroine all along?! No, that can't be right!! I am definitely a villainess!! A third-rate villainess, at that!" Bertia cried out in confusion.

On the back of her hand, a mark shimmered with colors that blended together like an aurora. About the size of a coin, it resembled an emblem of some sort.

"Tia, the mark on your hand is proof that I have chosen you as my partner. Spirits grant their protection to the chosen companion of their master, if the master desires it. That mark is indeed proof. Baroness Heronia referred to it as the 'proof of the maiden of destiny,' and she was right. It signifies that you are the 'fate-chosen' partner I have selected."

Bertia tilted her head, puzzled. "Eh? Eh? Is that what it means?" She stared intently at the mark on her hand. Simple-minded Bertia was nearly ready to accept this explanation. However, that's not quite what it meant.

If I had given the spirit's protection to the "heroine" of the "otome game," I would have daringly called it the "proof of the maiden of destiny." Saying it was a mark "given to one's companion" sounds less special than claiming it appears because "you are the fated one." It helped make the other person believe they are 'the only and irreplaceable one,' an excellent tool for binding them to me.

"With this mark, if danger approaches, it will alert both me and Zeno. Even if you find yourself in jeopardy, Zeno's powers will keep you safe. If you're far away, or if you get kidnapped or lost, we can pinpoint your location immediately… You can't escape me now, so get used to it, okay?"

I had no intention of letting her go; thus, I confidently made that declaration.

I may have scared her a little with my statement, but in return, I intend to cherish her so much more…

"Ah, I understand now! That's what it is!" Inside, I held a sinister smirk, but before I could ponder it any longer, Bertia cut in with a shout.

… Hey, did you catch that last part? I mean, a bit more of a reaction would be nice, don't you think?

"With the spirit's mark, I can protect Lord Cecil even if he encounters danger, and if he goes missing, his location will be completely transparent! I can find him! To prevent the paths of recluses and war maniacs from unfolding, I will do my utmost to entertain Lord Cecil! For Lord Cecil's sake, I will even learn magic tricks, belly dancing, or dojo scooping!"

Magic tricks? Belly dancing? Dojo scooping?

I couldn't fully understand her intentions, yet it appeared she was once again veering off onto a strange path. Perhaps she needed a bit more apprehension regarding my possessiveness…

"Come on, Kuro, please help Lord Cecil too! I'll treat you to some inari sushi! With this, we could erase half of the routes! Lord Cecil is really clever!" Bertia exclaimed.

… Hey, Bertia. It seems you aren't really hearing me, are you? Well, if Bertia is fine with it, I would certainly accept the mark, but are you absolutely certain? You seem to misunderstand its significance… no, you're not grasping it. You're seeing it differently and are stuck on that.

Kuro is… oh, she seems quite reluctant. So, she can't refuse Bertia's request? I get it. It's not because she was tempted by the "inari sushi," right? I didn't see her wagging her tail when Bertia mentioned "inari sushi." I didn't see it, okay?

"Go on, Kuro, finish it up! Oh, don't I sound just like a villainess? I'm rather something, aren't I?" Bertia cheered for herself.

Things had become quite confusing, but if the prey willingly jumps into the nest, the appropriate response is to gladly accept it.

"So, Kuro, can you do it?"

I smiled broadly and extended my left hand to Kuro. With her lips pursed as if to say, "I guess there's no helping it!" Kuro forcefully slapped the back of my hand with her fluffy tail.

The force was stronger than expected, but I chose to interpret it not as an expression of her dissatisfaction but as a stern encouragement, a "do your best."

As soon as her tail moved away, a black emblem mark appeared on the back of my hand.

"Yeah, it turned out great. Kuro's mark is really cool."

"Now everything will be fine! Next, we'll work together, Lord Cecil, to prevent war… Ahhhh!! That's right! A traitor was supposed to be caught through my father's connections after my 'gaffe event,' but since there was no gaffe, everything got mixed up!"

"Ah, that must refer to Count Uradil. Don't worry, it's already taken care of."

"Huh? Huh?! What a… situation!!"

"Are you still going on about that? The 'scenario' has completely fallen apart by now, especially since you've become my destined partner."

"Eh? Partner?"

"I said this is the proof, right? By the way, this mark can be made invisible but can never be erased, and it can only be given to one person for life, okay?"

"Eh? Um… that… eh? I'm the partner?"

Seeing Bertia finally starting to understand, I whispered with a broad smile.

"I'm looking forward to our wedding, my beloved wife."

Then, I lightly kissed her cheek—

“?! ?! Meeeeow!!” Bertia blushed deeply, emitting a cat-like scream.

Watching her, I was certain that our life together would be filled with joy.



Part One

"Now, let us hear your thoughts on this matter, Baron Inderon."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

We found ourselves in the royal palace's audience chamber. I was next to my father, who sat on the throne, while the Marquis Noches stood a few steps below us.

Few guards were present, even fewer than when 'proper' guests like foreign emissaries came — only the bare minimum were there. Among them, a man lowered his head shyly. He had a gentle face, yet appeared somewhat weary.

Baron Inderon governed a region located far from the capital and was the father of Baroness Heronia.

Several days had elapsed since the graduation party.

After that day, when I had talked privately with Bertia, the graduation party was rescheduled.

Bertia blushed beautifully, indicating that something significant had happened. She appeared somewhat dazed as I escorted her into the venue. Upon our entrance, everyone breathed a sigh of relief and cheered.

Seizing a moment of showmanship, I apologized for the disruption caused at the party. Then—

"She is the best partner anyone could ask for. No woman loves me as much as she does. This event has helped me understand her love even more deeply." As I spoke these words and kissed her on the forehead, the hall erupted in an

extraordinary uproar, and it was called the most moving graduation party in history.

As a result, my class's graduation party was a great success, and the foolish actions of Baroness Heronia, along with the light spirit, faded into a forgotten corner of people's memories.

Unfortunately, not all issues had been resolved.

As expected, Baroness Heronia was expelled from Halm Academy.

As it became impractical to keep her indefinitely in the academy's dormitory under surveillance—she was, after all, no longer a student—the decision to expel her was made. Before her father, Baron Inderon, could arrive in the capital, it was impossible to finalize everything. Consequently, until the Baron's arrival, her custody was assumed by the royal palace.

Of course, she could not be treated like a normal guest and was placed in a room usually reserved for high-ranking nobles suspected of crimes. This arrangement was intended for reflection on her past actions and contemplation of her future. However, according to the knight assigned to monitor her, she still appeared to be under some misapprehensions.

For her, a lower noble, the 'cage' meant for upper nobility felt more like a no-exit guest room. It seemed she viewed herself as a guest of the royal palace. Perhaps it would have been better to confine her in an actual cell.

Considering the events at the graduation party, that was also an issue. Most importantly, she was still a minor.

Even if her actions weren't a clear 'crime,' social sanctions were inevitable. Her deeds had become widely known among many nobles.

—Yet, Baroness Heronia seemed utterly unable to grasp this.

It was truly unfortunate, mainly because of what was in her head.

Nevertheless, a decision had to be made regarding her future handling.

Defaming the Crown Prince and his future princess, the Marquis Noches' daughter, along with attempting to falsely incriminate the Marquis Noches—these were serious accusations.

A discussion involving the parents was inevitable.

Therefore, a judicial assembly with all relevant parties was convened.

Notably, Bertia, one of the concerned parties, was absent. Her involvement could further complicate matters. Furthermore, there was a risk that Baroness Heronia, who was to be brought in later, might try to harm her again.

After discussing with my father and Marquis Noches, we decided to keep Bertia in the dark and handle the punishment privately.

—Baron Inderon bowed so deeply that his forehead almost touched the floor.

With a quivering voice, he started to speak.

“This time, our daughter has caused considerable inconvenience…” Baron Inderon began.

“Let’s skip the preamble. Could you share your thoughts on what should happen next?” Marquis Noches interjected sharply, interrupting the Baron’s attempted apology.

An icy glare, one that would never be aimed at Bertia, pierced through Baron Inderon, causing him to emit a small, involuntary squeak. Typically regarded as good-natured and affable, Baron Inderon now revealed a vulnerability that almost inspired sympathy… Yet, as the parent who raised her, he couldn’t be excused. To do so might lessen the consequences for Baroness Heronia, a risk too significant to take. A hardened heart was necessary.

“I will cut all ties with my daughter… with Heronia,” he declared, his face twisting in agony before settling into a determined expression.

He then received a stack of papers from a servant he had brought along and handed them over. These documents were intended to formally disown Heronia Inderon from the baronial family records.

If accepted, these documents would make Heronia Inderon a commoner, severing her connection to the baronial family. Baron Inderon had made the heartbreaking choice to disown his foolish daughter to safeguard the livelihood of many connected to his estate.

It was certainly a painful decision for any parent to even contemplate, but it was one he felt he had to make.

Marquis Noches, his stern expression unwavering, pressed on. “Very well. What about the subsequent handling of your daughter?”

Although his words seemed harsh, the Marquis also needed to maintain the dignity of his title. While Bertia might have her naive moments, she was dear to him, and he could not allow her to be harmed again by any leniency shown to her accuser. Nor could he risk further damage to the Noches family’s reputation.

The royal family felt the same way. As the Crown Prince, I had been publicly insulted, a slight that could not go unaddressed.

In the room, no one was there to advocate for Baroness Heronia, the daughter of Baron Inderon.

Baron Inderon replied to Marquis Noches’s inquiry, saying, “I intend to send Heronia to a convent where she will live without the protection of the Inderon family. There, she can reflect on her actions for the rest of her life…”

This punishment may seem harsh at first, but it also offered a glimpse of a parent’s compassion by ensuring that her basic needs—food, clothing, and shelter—were met. Once disowned by the Inderon family, Baroness Heronia would have no means of survival; being disowned meant the family could no longer provide financial support or fulfill any of her basic needs.

Sending her to a convent appeared to be a thoughtful choice, ensuring she remained under watchful supervision as well.

“Hmm, that seems like a reasonable arrangement,” Marquis Noches nodded, as expected.

Of course, just because the daughter was disowned, it didn’t mean the baronial family was relieved of all responsibility. Once the family member was removed, any lingering issues could likely be resolved with a simple exchange of money.

The key point is to demonstrate to society the implications of insulting the royal family and the house of Marquis Noches.

Father appeared pleased with the plan and was ready to move on to discuss the details when I interrupted.

“Father, Marquis Noches, Baron Inderon, I have a request.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at me.

I spoke clearly, saying, “Please allow me to choose the convent that will be Baroness Heronia Inderon’s new home.”

In that instant, Baron Inderon stiffened, his face reflecting fear. Marquis Noches cast me a slightly amused look, while Father… *why do you seem so worried?*

What? Don't you trust me?

Please don't look at me like I'm about to cause trouble. Remember, I am still royalty, after all.

"I will not act unreasonably, nor do I possess sufficient interest in the former Baroness Heronia to put forth unnecessary effort. As long as she is out of sight for both me and Bertia, I will be content."

"And so, Your Highness, at your… discretion," Baron Inderon replied, his voice strained, as he bowed deeply.

"I have no objections," Marquis Noches responded promptly in a calm voice.

The only one left was…

Father looked at me with a grim expression. To reassure him of my innocence, I flashed him a bright smile. However, this only seemed to deepen the furrows between his brows. After a deep sigh, he finally gave his permission, saying, "Do as you wish."

"Thank you. Don't worry; I won't do anything harmful," I said, trying to reassure everyone. *Yet, why did no one seem relieved by my words?*

Following a pause, Father exaggeratedly cleared his throat and redirected the conversation.

Part Two

"Apologies for the delay. Heronia Inderon is here!"

—After wrapping up the finer details of the discussion, it was decided to inform the person herself of the decisions that had been made.

Her hands bound and surrounded by knights, she appeared strangely exhilarated. Baron Inderon's gaunt face, Marquis Noches's smile filled with anger, and the icy stares from those around her seemed entirely lost on her. *Perhaps her time with the light spirit had tainted her mind? The magic she wielded on the*

male students might be influencing her… but her focus appears sharp, and she doesn't quite look like an addict, does she?

"Prince Cecil, I have always trusted you. I knew you wouldn't succumb to Bertia Ibil Noches's evil influence and that you would see my righteousness."

Hmm. I'm not entirely certain what she means by that, but I doubt Bertia could wield anything as significant as "wicked influence"—she simply lacks it. Even if she did, someone like Silica would likely say, "Please get rid of such unclean items! It will tarnish Lady Bertia!" and promptly take it away to dispose of it.

With a tone laced with disbelief, I asked her, "Hey, do you grasp your situation? Generally, you shouldn't start speaking before His Majesty has addressed you. You should have learned this at the academy, right?"

"Yes, of course, I understand. I have always worked hard on my studies at the academy. I've thoroughly acquired that level of education, so please rest assured, I can stand by Prince Cecil's side anytime!"

… Right, she doesn't seem to understand at all. It seems she didn't pay much attention to her studies at the academy.

Additionally, the spot next to me is already reserved, so there's no need for you to stand next to me.

Could you please stop thinking you can stand there?

I managed to suppress a rising wave of irritation swelling within me.

It appears Marquis Noches felt the same way; his previously cool smile fell a good ten degrees.

Amidst this, Baron Inderon's complexion grew even paler. It appeared that he too, was harboring a quiet anger toward his daughter… or rather, his former daughter.

"Miss Heronia, do you understand why you've been summoned here?" Father—the King himself—asked Heronia, perhaps sensing the dangerous aura radiating from both Marquis Noches and me.

As if she had been waiting for this moment, she suddenly looked up, beaming a wide smile, and then put on a deliberately puzzled expression.

“Yes, of course. It’s about the ‘holy light’ that surrounded Prince Cecil at that time, isn’t it?” Baroness Heronia asked, her eyes filled with tears as she looked up at my father.

Certainly, such overt acting wouldn’t fool my father, who often interacted with individuals of unusual habits. He was obviously recoiling.

“It was my first time seeing a light like that… But surely, the one who emitted that sacred light was…”

“That matter has already been investigated, and the reason you’re here is different. It relates to the crimes you’ve committed and the punishment that will be administered,” I sharply interrupted Heronia.

She began to speak as if the actions of the light spirit were extraordinary, almost as if they embodied “justice.”

By using terms like “holy” and “sacred,” she appeared to be under the misunderstanding that what occurred was a miracle or something she created, even perceiving it as her accomplishment.

Listening to such claims would be a waste of time and generally unpleasant.

What transpired was a rampage by a light spirit. However, in the company of lower nobility such as Baron Inderon, it was impossible to discuss this since they are unaware of the existence of spirits and magic.

Given that a detailed explanation was off the table, if we were to continue this conversation, it would have to be approached as an “attack aimed at the Crown Prince.” She would be treated as a felon who made an attempt on the life of a royal.

That would certainly leave a bad taste, and Bertia would definitely be concerned.

Above all, the efforts of those who tried to conceal the spirit’s rampage would be futile if her narrative prevailed.

Interrupted, the former Baroness Heronia appeared confused, tilting her head as if she didn’t comprehend what was happening.

“Wait? My crimes? Punishment?”

Observing his daughter’s bewildered state, Baron Inderon finally held his head in despair.

Others around showed expressions of disdain and confusion.

“Yes, but why, Prince Cecil? I believed I was a saint acknowledged by a holy being…”

“You have demeaned Bertia, a noble of higher status, and me, the Crown Prince, in public. Furthermore, you attempted to pin false crimes on us. These actions constitute crimes of lese-majesty and various other offenses, for which you would typically face legal repercussions. However, considering that you are still a student and the incidents occurred within the academy, it has been decided to address this through a private discussion among the involved parties rather than through legal means.”

Upon hearing my explanation, the former Baroness Heronia’s eyes grew wide with disbelief.

“Lese-magesty? Other crimes? What are you talking about…” she stammered, clearly struggling to understand the reality of her situation.

“As a result, Baron Inderon has decided to cut ties with you and send you to a convent, a choice we have all agreed upon,” I continued firmly. “Therefore, you will spend the remainder of your life as a commoner, known simply as Heronia, with no connections to the Inderon family, residing in a convent. Naturally, escape is not allowed. That is all.”

Heronia attempted to interrupt several times during my speech, but I firmly ignored her interruptions. As I spoke, her face twisted with confusion and anger.

“Father! What is this all about?” Heronia exclaimed, turning to her father in desperation. “I’ve always told you I was special; why is this happening…”

Baron Inderon began to respond, his anger evident, but he hesitated as he met the king’s gaze, seeking permission to speak.

Father nodded slowly, giving him permission. “Baron Inderon, you may speak.”

“Heronia, are you still saying things like that right now?” Baron Inderon admonished, his voice heavy with fatigue and disappointment. “It’s time you faced reality.”

“You’ve caused quite a significant incident,” he continued, his tone heavy with regret. “Under normal circumstances, you could have faced much harsher punishment under the law. But since this occurred within the academy, you’re getting off relatively lightly. Be thankful… I’ve always feared this day might come and

regret not being able to correct you sooner. I, too, will carry this guilt, so you must spend your life in the convent reflecting on your actions and praying daily for the well-being of others. This is my final word to you, my daughter."

The former Baroness Heronia was stunned by the slowly spoken words. As Baron Inderon finished speaking, he bowed his head and averted his gaze from her.

"This's all wrong. It just isn't right! Everything was going well until I joined Halm Academy. How did it turn out like this? I thought my happy harem life was finally starting at the academy. Why?! This ending isn't in the game at all! I'm supposed to be the heroine!" Her voice grew harsh, and as she attempted to step forward, the knights held her back. Her anger was laid bare.

… Did Baron Inderon's final semblance of parental affection touch her in any way? No, she definitely did not comprehend.

"What about Little Pi? Where did Little Pi go? Everyone would understand I'm special if that creature were here. After all, it's a holy…"

"If you're referring to your pet bird, it's no longer in this world," I interjected calmly.

"… What?" Her eyes searched desperately, hoping for her avian companion—a tiny bird that had always stayed by her side, shielding her. Now frozen, she looked around frantically, but the bird was nowhere to be found; it couldn't be.

Those unaware of the bird's significance furrowed their brows in confusion.

I couldn't say whether she recognized that bird as a light spirit. However, keeping that possibility in mind, we stayed vigilant about her statements.

"That creature tried to protect you, its master, and sacrificed its life in the process," I explained gently.

"No, that can't be…" Her voice faltered.

"This is the consequence of your actions, and this is the future you chose," I continued.

"No, that's… no… It's a lie. Little Pi?!" she shouted.

Until now, the former Baroness Heronia had been driven by anger, quick to blame others. For the first time, her face showed signs of regret and sorrow.

Even if it took a twisted form, there appeared to be a genuine bond between her and the spirit. I felt a slight sense of relief knowing this.

“Little Pi! Little Pi! Little Pi!” Heronia’s voice resonated in the hushed audience chamber.

She kept calling out for her lost friend, shedding tears without pause. However, the eyes of those around her remained indifferent. It wasn’t that the hearts of the people present were unfeeling; rather, it was her actions that had distanced them.

… Now that the punishment has largely been decided, let’s fulfill one last promise.

“Changing the subject, I was asked to pass on a message to you,” I said in a clear tone to her, who kept brokenly calling ‘Little Pi.’

In response to what I said, she shot me a glare, and I replied with my typical smile.

“Even if you can’t see me, I’m always with you’—that’s what ‘he’ wanted me to tell you.”

Heronia’s tearful eyes widened significantly. Even without specifying who, she seemed to understand.

“Uh… ah… ahh…” she uttered indistinct sounds, crying without wiping her tears. The reality of her friend’s death was likely a harsher trial than facing the consequences of her own actions.

If only she had made different choices for the future before things had reached this point. She could have chosen a peaceful life to share with her friend. But now, it was too late to change the past.

He helped me realize something important.

I shared his final words to express my gratitude—but perhaps there’s one more thing I can do to thank him.

I decided to give Heronia one more choice.

As she crouched like a puppet with its strings cut, crying continuously, I walked toward her slowly. Ignoring the concerned looks from those around me who tried to stop me, I knelt beside her and leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

If this had happened earlier, she might have cried out loudly, but now she seemed too exhausted even for that.

“This is a fragment of his consciousness… a piece of his soul,” I whispered to her, ensuring no one else could hear. From my pocket, I pulled out a small white stone strung on a leather cord.

I placed it around her neck and stepped back gently. “This is a keepsake from him,” I explained. The simple white stone was a shard of the core of the light spirit. Just before his power was exhausted and his core shattered, Zeno helped me preserve this piece. It contains a bit of his will.

In a land that worships the “light,” if she continued praying and channeling energy, it might revive and become a spirit again. Of course, there’s also a chance it might not work. And since what remained was only a “fragment,” it wouldn’t completely transform back into “Little Pi.”

“Now, I’ll give you a choice,” I said, as a flicker of hope ignited in Heronia’s vacant eyes. After glancing at the white stone dangling from her neck, she slowly lifted her gaze to meet mine.

“You may choose between a strict convent at the northernmost tip of the country or a relatively mild one that’s a three-day carriage ride from the capital. Which do you prefer?”

“Ah… I…” Ordinarily, she would definitely choose the convent closer to the capital. Living in a milder climate would make life significantly easier. However, that place had a weak connection to the “light,” so no matter how much she prayed, the shard wouldn’t gather much power.

Is she prioritizing her own comfort, or is it her friend she chooses? The light spirit gave up its life for her. How far will she go for him?

“I… I…” I presented her with just these two options.

“I’m not as kind-hearted as Bertia,” I said with a broad smile, watching her swallow nervously.

“I… I will…”

After a moment, Heronia pressed her lips together firmly. Once more, she gazed at the white stone, her eyes burning with a fierce light as she glared back at me.

“I will head north,” she declared with a voice full of resolve.



She was no longer the “heroine.”

She had transformed into a woman with a strong will, driven by her desire to save her friend.

… Probably.

Part Three

“… And so, she set off for the monastery at the northern edge,” I concluded, having swiftly handled the aftermath of that recent uproar and finally gotten a chance to explain everything to Bertia. We were currently enjoying our spring break.

By the time the break ended, news of the former baroness Heronia Inderon leaving the academy would surely reach Bertia. I could have waited for that moment to explain everything to her, but regrettably… and truly regrettably, since I had graduated, I wouldn’t be there when she learned the truth.

Her friends, along with Kulgan and Shaun, would likely explain it well, but there was always a chance that third parties might embellish the story. I thought it better to tell her the facts myself first.

“So be it. Truly fitting for a heroine! To go and pray at the sacred temple in the north, all to heal a wounded spirit that had tried to protect her!” Bertia exclaimed with admiration.

“Yes, I’m sure she will continue to do her best there,” I replied, smiling warmly and patting Bertia on the head as she laughed with a relieved expression.

… I hadn’t exactly lied, had I?

After all, it was Heronia who had decided to go to the northern monastery—though, admittedly, I hadn’t given her many options. Well, yes, I did intentionally omit some less palatable details and used phrases that would appeal to Bertia’s sensibilities. But that should be within forgivable limits, right?

Incidentally, I had already communicated the version of events that I shared with Bertia to her friends and my own junior attendants.

They would likely manage to keep the story properly adjusted.

“So, when will the heroine return? By then, I should be ready to step down from this position…”

“She’s not coming back, and since you’ve become my one and only partner, there’s no way you can step down,” I interjected, cutting off Bertia as she started to take the conversation in a completely unexpected direction.

I quickly blocked any chance of escape, not after I had gone to the trouble of removing any interference. The thought of letting go of my dear Bertia was unimaginable.

“Eh? She’s not coming back?” Bertia asked, her confusion evident.

“No, she’s not. The spirit’s injuries are severe and will take time to heal, so it’s better for him that she stays at the monastery. She’s now required to live there permanently. And…” I tightened my arms around Bertia, who was sitting on my lap.

“Wha-?!” She jumped, startled, her face flushing red.

“With you captured like this, you still think of leaving me, Tia? If that’s the case… maybe I need to get serious about keeping you here,” I teased.

We were in my room in the royal palace. Bertia had come to visit and was about to sit across from me to drink tea when I lifted her into my arms and set her on my lap.

Initially, Bertia was flustered and blushing, which was incredibly adorable. However, as soon as the conversation shifted to the former Baroness Heronia, she became engrossed in the story, quickly forgetting that she was sitting on my lap. A bit irritated by her distraction, I reminded her of her current predicament, which somewhat eased my frustration.

“C-capture? What are you planning to do?!”

“Well, this is my private room, and I’ve ensured we won’t be disturbed, so perhaps a fait accompli…” I mused playfully.

“Fushaaaaaa!!”

“Your Highness, what are you saying?!” My words were interrupted by Kuro, who bristled and hissed defensively, and by Zeno, who appeared equally shocked and exasperated.

“Eh?! Wh-What…?!” Bertia stammered.

Bertia blushed even more intensely and appeared quite flustered. On her lap, Kuro again hissed menacingly in my direction. Yes, Kuro was on Bertia’s lap.

And, dressed like a little maid, Kuro was stuffing her cheeks with sweets.

Meanwhile, Zeno was standing behind me.

Yes, as usual, while I could clear out the people, I couldn't do the same with the spirits.

I had hoped to create a sweet atmosphere suitable for engaged couples, with Bertia on my lap, but Kuro, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, settled onto her lap as well.

… Truly unfortunate.

"It's just a joke, a joke. I'll save my dear Tia's first time for the fun after we're married," I assured her.

"And how did you think you could charm me… pfft… charm me in this 'turtles all the way down' situation?!" Bertia chuckled, laughing heartily.

Zeno, you laughed right in the middle of that, didn't you?

Surely, the sight of Bertia on my lap and Kuro, dressed as a maid, on hers might remind one of a stack of turtles. However, to laugh at your master? That hardly seems appropriate for an attendant.

"… Zeno, could you become a horse for us?"

"Eh?"

"A 'horse', Zeno. You can do that, right?"

"Your Highness! Wh-What are you planning?!"

"Well, it wouldn't be fair to leave you out. I thought it would be perfect if you joined our little 'turtle stack' as a horse. If you turned into a horse, I could sit on you, right?"

"I'm so sorry!!" Zeno quickly bowed his head, apologized without hesitation.

I glanced at him briefly and said, "Maybe we should discuss this later?" before turning my attention back to Bertia.

Starting a lecture with Zeno now would eat into my time to talk with Bertia. Whenever we're together, her overprotective father-in-law imposes time limits, so managing our time well is really important.

"Well, that's the situation, so you don't need to worry about the heroine anymore, okay? If any issues come up, we'll take care of them here. So, come and be my wife without any worries?"

"Wi-wi-wi-wife?!" Bertia stammered in shock.

“… Why are you surprised now? It’s been decided since we were children, hasn’t it?”

“But, still, I mean…”

“Our fates are intertwined by the marks engraved upon us, aren’t they? Isn’t it time you accepted that?” I said, gently taking Bertia’s hand in mine and tracing the spirit’s mark with my thumb.

While Kuro looked displeased, Bertia’s ears turned red.

“But, I have always aimed to be a top-tier villainess. So, I’m not confident about becoming your consort, Lord Cecil…”

“It’s alright. You’ve worked hard in the training to become the crown prince’s consort. If any issues arise, I’ll be here to support you. If needed, I’ll take down anyone who stands in our way.”

“Crush? You mean, crush…?”

“No, no. I meant to say that I’ll work hard to persuade them and help them understand,” I reassured her, though my earlier comment may have seemed a bit strong.

“Eh? Eh?” Bertia looked puzzled, tilting her head as if wondering if she had misunderstood.

I sensed Zeno and Kuro’s gazes becoming colder out of the corner of my eye, but I chose to believe it was merely my imagination.

“Besides, we have strong allies and spirits with us, right? Just settle comfortably into the role of my wife,” I smiled reassuringly at her, then glanced toward Zeno and Kuro, signaling for Bertia to look at them too.

Though Zeno and Kuro seemed exasperated, they nodded firmly, reassuring Bertia.

“Lord Cecil, I…” Bertia’s expression softened for a moment before becoming serious as she gazed at me intently.

“Now that it’s come to this, I will do my utmost to ensure you become a wonderful king, Lord Cecil! And I will make you incredibly happy! I’ll make sure you never even think about starting a war just because you’re bored!” Bertia declared, her determination evident as she clenched her fists tightly.

My lips naturally curved into a smile. Having her by my side has allowed me to truly laugh from the heart. Somehow, I’ve even come to understand the meaning of ‘happiness.’ I want to make

this country—a country we'll live in together—a better one. Until now, my thoughts were shaped by the duty ingrained in me as a crown prince from a young age, but now, I think this way of my own accord. There's no time to be idle, and no interest in war, because I have Bertia, a source of joy in my life.

"Is that true? Then promise you'll always stay by my side?"

"Of course, I will! I'll support you unwaveringly, Cecil-sama!"

"I've heard your words clearly, remember? It's a promise, right?"

"I promise! It's exactly because I, an irregular, am here that the situation has changed. I'll take full responsibility and serve diligently!"

"I'm glad to hear that… Regardless of how the situation shifts, the key takeaway stays the same."

"…?" Bertia tilted her head, puzzled by my cryptic comment.

I smiled widely and took her left hand. "What matters most is that my 'maiden of destiny' is here with me, and that we will keep leading a life that is mostly fun (for me)."

As I kissed the mark of the spirit on her hand, our bond appeared to respond, glowing softly. Yes, the most important thing is that the girl I have chosen is here with me. That keeps me true to myself and allows me to stand firm as the crown prince.

Without letting Bertia see, I permitted myself a different, slightly twisted smile.

—Just then, I recalled a story my father had shared with me recently.

Part Four

—On the night the fate of the former Baroness Heronia was determined, I asked my father to spare some time to confirm facts that remained unclear, despite my best assumptions.

In his private study, I sat across from my father. He reached for a bottle of Kiwis, a golden-hued liquor. This was something he had instructed the butler to prepare before we were alone.

"Shall we grab a drink?" he suggested, raising a glass toward me.

I hadn’t been of drinking age for long and, having spent most of my time in the alcohol-free environment of the academy, had little experience with drinking. However, I had enjoyed the taste of Kiwis from a previous experience, so I gladly accepted his offer. It was Charles who introduced me to Kiwis for the first time.

The night following my birthday last year, Charles decided to stay another night at the palace after joining my birthday party. He expressed a desire to see me drunk and continuously poured me tasty Kiwis. Given that we were in my private room without the concern of being observed, we drank quite a bit, yet I never reached complete inebriation. Although we finished several bottles of this relatively potent liquor, I only felt a mild warmth in my ears and fingertips, suggesting I might have a high alcohol tolerance. I had been eager to discover what it feels like to be tipsy, which disappointed me.

I guess it’s a good thing in a way, since I’ll probably need to drink often at diplomatic events in the future.

“Didn’t we still owe you a celebratory drink for your graduation? I had something special prepared for the occasion.”

Although it felt slightly improper to serve a drink to the king, even if he was my father, I reached for the bottle. Yet, with a playful grin, he offered the glass to me instead. This drink, he claimed, was a toast in my honor.

Realizing it was best not to dwell on formalities, I accepted the glass from him. He joyfully filled my glass with the amber liquid, quickly pouring one for himself as well.

As he waved his hand dismissively, indicating I shouldn’t worry about it, I responded with a wry smile. He raised his glass silently, and when I clinked mine against his, a soft sound echoed between us.

“Congratulations on your graduation! You did great,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied. Although I hadn’t really done anything particularly noteworthy to deserve such praise, I accepted his words graciously. The old me might have corrected him, but now I appreciated the comfort of this moment and felt no need to dampen it with unnecessary corrections.

We quietly sipped our drinks for a while. As the atmosphere relaxed, my father was the first to speak again.

“The situation with Miss Heronia was quite troublesome. It’s finally resolved now, a true relief.”

“I’m glad that one more complication is out of the way,” I replied.

“Well, you’ll soon be busy again with the wedding preparations,” he said with a hint of mischief in his grin, alluding to the challenges of planning a wedding.

I replied with a smile, “That’s not a ‘complication’ but a ‘pleasure’ for me.”

My father appeared somewhat surprised by my response, then he relaxed and muttered, “Is that so?”

Watching his reactions, I felt my guess inching closer to truth.

“Maybe it’s too late to ask, but Cecil, do you find joy in being with Miss Bertia? Do you think you can be happy together?” His tone was light, but the question held significant weight.

As he sipped his drink, his gaze was focused and probing, laced with concern.

“Yes, of course. There’s no woman who entertains me and makes me as happy as she does… If anything were to take her away from me, I might just accidentally destroy an entire country, that’s how much I cherish her,” I said with a broad smile, sharing my true feelings. Father was momentarily taken aback, then burst out laughing and said, “Is that so?”

“Father, may I ask a question of my own?” I waited for his laughter to die down before continuing to the main topic.

Wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes after laughing too much, he looked at me attentively. “Isn’t that why you’re here? What is it?”

Taking a sip of the Kiwis, which had a unique blend of sweetness and bitterness, I paused before asking my father, “Father, have you noticed anything about the ‘maiden of destiny’ I once asked about?”

Father’s hand, clutching the glass, twitched slightly, causing the amber liquid to ripple. “No, I know nothing about the ‘maiden of destiny,’” he replied, raising an eyebrow and feigning ignorance.

“What about people like me then? Do you know anything about that?”

“People ‘like you…?” he echoed.

“Yes, exactly. About people like me. Is there something you’re keeping secret?”

We exchanged probing looks.

A tense silence enveloped the room, but it did not last long.

“—Where did you learn about this?” he finally asked.

“I haven’t learned it; I deduced it. Remember when I asked you about the ‘maiden of destiny’? You said you didn’t know about her. But I suspect you knew about ‘people like me.’ Your reaction back then struck me as odd, and combining that with the information I have, I made some guesses… And your response just now has confirmed them.”

“… I see,” he murmured, his voice a blend of resignation and curiosity.

In response, my father’s cheeks twitched slightly, and he let out a deep, profound sigh, muttering with a mix of exasperation and resignation, “You really are something, aren’t you?”

“Father, will you talk to me?”

“I guess I don’t have a choice. I would have rather not discussed such matters with my own child, but…”

“Either way, this is information that must be passed on to future generations of the royal family, right? It’s just a question of whether it’s sooner or later.”

Faced with my reasoning, my father grimaced. “Knowing this at a young age versus learning it when one is older could lead to different ways of handling it, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. There might be some truth to that. Now, please go ahead and tell me.”

“Are you trying to lightly dismiss my parental concerns?”

“I appreciate your feelings, Father. Now that I’ve come to understand these things, it’s better to hear them from you here and now.”

“That might be true… Alright, let’s just get this done.”

“Thank you.”

“Is this what they call a rebellious phase? No, rather, is this just how you normally operate?” He muttered to himself, seemingly bewildered, before slowly beginning his explanation.

“Your guess is likely correct. In our royal line, children with exceptional abilities across the board, like you, are sometimes

born. It is said to be the influence of the bloodline of King Torjin, the founder of this nation."

"The Hero King?"

I remembered the stories of our country's origins that I had read as a child to pass the time. It was a time when many tribes dotted the landscape, each continually warring to expand their territories.

To bring peace to the land, the son of a tribe's chief rose up. Excelling in both martial prowess and strategic intelligence, this man quickly united the surrounding tribes and laid the foundation for what would become the modern Alphasta Kingdom.

Eventually, he married the daughter of a chieftain with whom his tribe had established an alliance.

With her, who was also his childhood friend, he governed the nation and is said to have brought peace to this land. Essentially, it's the typical story of a nation's founding.

"The Hero King, huh? Yes, King Torjin is indeed referred to as that, but it's just a postscript," my father explained.

"A postscript…?" I repeated, somewhat puzzled.

Father nodded. "Children born into the royal family with extraordinary abilities often lack basic human emotions in exchange for those abilities. Simple feelings like love or dislike are foreign to them, and they find little to no joy or interest in most things."

His description aptly fit my own childhood.

"Because of this, they are constantly seeking something that can spark their interest, something that can evoke their emotions. Once they find it, they become fixated, and it's hard to divert their attention from it. King Torjin was exactly like that. Although he is now celebrated for unifying the tribes to bring peace, in reality, he simply loved to fight."

"I see. A 'war fanatic,' then," I reflected, recalling a story Bertia had once shared about someone named Baldroot.

It seemed I might have ended up similarly, if circumstances had been different.

"Yes, 'war fanatic'—that is an accurate description. However, Torjin was never called that; he became known as the 'Hero King.' His wife played a significant role in this transformation."

Father then began to recount the story of King Torjin and his wife, Queen Arnei. It was the untold truth, a narrative that had been conveniently altered in existing documents and submerged in the depths of history.

—King Torjin and Queen Arnei were both children of tribal chiefs who had fostered good relations and likely aimed to strengthen that bond through their marriage. Since childhood, they were frequently brought together and played alongside one another.

From childhood, King Torjin was a child who showed little interest in anything. No matter what he did, he executed it perfectly but always seemed somewhat disinterested and bored. To him, Queen Arnei, who was always smiling and laughing, appeared to be a mysterious being.

They frequently played competitive games together. However, the outcome was always the same: Torjin won effortlessly every time. Each time they gathered, Queen Arnei suggested new games.

One day, he became completely absorbed in a new game she had brought, a war game that was popular among the youth at the time. It involved moving set pieces with specific roles and capturing the opponent's pieces. Delighted by this game, King Torjin began to play it more frequently, even involving adults from his tribe.

… Eventually, when the board game no longer fulfilled him, whether by fate or bad luck, a war erupted between neighboring tribes and his own. As a boy maturing into a young man, King Torjin urged his father, the tribal chief, to allow him to lead a small troop into battle himself.

Exceptionally intelligent from a young age and possessing high combat skills, King Torjin impressively met the expectations placed upon him. He quickly became engrossed in warfare, fully utilizing his abilities. Given the era of frequent conflicts, there were ample opportunities to achieve accomplishments. His prowess on the battlefield swiftly elevated his status.

Eventually, his father acknowledged his accomplishments and ultimately gave him full authority. By that time, King Torjin had emerged as a leader who had unified many tribes, possessing more power than anyone else.

“Like indulging in the sole pastime he cherished, King Torjin pursued the battlefield relentlessly. No one should have been able to stop him. As he grew increasingly uncontrollable, raising concern among those around him, a woman stood in his path.”

“… Queen Arnei?” I asked.

“Yes. Queen Arnei was a gentle-spirited woman who detested the loss of life in war. However, given the era, there were many times when fighting was unavoidable. During such times, when King Torjin sought to pursue even more battles, she stood before him, tears streaming down her face, and scolded him.”

—The gentle Queen Arnei couldn’t bear to watch King Torjin lose himself to war. “If you continue to needlessly take lives, I will come to despise you,” she finally declared. Those words profoundly confused Torjin, and subsequently, he abruptly ceased his participation in battles, dedicating himself instead to building a peaceful nation.

“She truly was a ‘maiden of destiny,’” I remarked. Although I find King Torjin’s simplicity astonishing, I can see parallels between his experiences and emotions and my own, and I can’t feel negatively about it. If Bertia ever told me she would come to dislike me, I might just inadvertently comply with whatever she asked, as long as it was a serious declaration and not just a moment of pique.

‘Maiden of destiny,’ indeed. While she wasn’t officially given such a title, it wouldn’t be wrong to say so. Fortunately, there was another being who could captivate his interest—the existence of Queen Arnei. She became his restraint, allowing him to avoid becoming a tyrant or a fool and instead to be remembered as the ‘Hero King.’”

Regardless of the true details of the story, King Torjin unified the nation and brought peace to this land. As they say, the end justifies the means.

Father continued, “Every few decades, a member of the royal family with extraordinary abilities, like King Torjin, is born. However, they invariably carry some emotional impairments. While they possess great capabilities, they often lack emotions and interest in most things. Once they discover something that captivates them, they become excessively fixated. They are a double-edged sword.”

His intense, serious gaze remained locked on me. “Depending on what piques their interest, they might become wise rulers or foolish ones—or fade away before achieving either.”

“The author of the book I found in the hidden library was one of those royal members, wasn’t he?” I recalled. As a child, when Bertia predicted an epidemic based on her knowledge from an “otome game,” I searched the archives to create a cure and accidentally discovered a hidden library.

This revelation deepened my understanding of my lineage, as well as the burdens and blessings of our extraordinary abilities, shaping how I viewed our duty and destiny.

The hidden library was filled with books containing knowledge that should not have been known yet—perhaps not for decades, or even centuries. The authors of these books all bore the surname “Alphasta.”

Father nodded thoughtfully at my question. “Yes, that’s right. Many geniuses within the royal family, who were considered prodigies, documented their knowledge, which now remains dormant in that library. Several of them gave up their claims to the throne to immerse themselves in their research and stepped away from the public eye.”

“What about those who didn’t become engrossed in research? What happened to them?” I asked, eager to understand more about the varied fates of those like me.

“I don’t know everything, but there were those who never found anything that truly captured their interest. Among them, some lived their lives as if they were mere dolls, and others, unable to endure the tedium, took their own lives,” he answered.

“That’s chilling,” I commented, shuddering at the thought that I, too, could have ended up like that.

The atmosphere hinted that the successful cases were few. It was a dark aspect of our royal lineage—one that should never be revealed to the outside world.

“When you were born, it wasn’t long before you began to understand and speak words far earlier than other children. I was shocked. Even knowing that such children could be born, I had never imagined my own child would be one of them.”

“You must have been disappointed,” I remarked, recalling my emotionless childhood self—intelligent but devoid of the charm

that draws parental affection.

Instead of agreeing, Father slowly shook his head. “It was more worry than disappointment. Having a wise child is preferable for the royal family. But as a parent, I hoped you would experience a range of emotions and find happiness.” His voice carried a melancholic tone.

“From the time you were born, even though you lacked emotions, it was possible for you to learn happiness and other emotions as you grew. I knew this because of King Torjin and several other successful cases. These individuals, more often than not, had interests not just in ‘things’ but also in ‘people.’ It seems that having someone important in their lives made it easier for emotions to develop. That’s why I took a gamble.”

“Was that gamble Bertia?”

Confirming, Father nodded firmly, “yes.”

As I reflected on his response, it seemed as if the pieces of a puzzle were falling into place. Bertia was hardworking, her family background flawless for a crown princess. She was surrounded by capable, compassionate people eager to assist her, which made her well-liked. Even though she sometimes showed naivety, I wondered if she was genuinely the best choice for a crown princess, particularly given her overly lively and occasionally reckless behavior as a child.

Joanna could have been a more suitable option, but the choice of Bertia was evident. It wasn’t just her impressive skills that captivated me; it was the distinct manner in which she engaged my interest.

“Bertia might seem a little absent-minded, yet she is captivating and delightful. Isn’t she the kind of lady who effortlessly attracts others? She is expressive and emotional, displaying a profound compassion. In many ways, she contrasts sharply with you. Above all, she openly shows her affection for you. I believed that being around her could spark something within you.”

“And it seems your judgment was correct.”

Bertia, as I see her, was nearly identical to Father’s description. The only change I would suggest is that Bertia doesn’t merely fail to hide her affection; she appears unable to conceal it, even if she might want to.

Father, satisfied with the result, sipped his Kiwi drink contentedly.

“Your confidence has really grown. I’m pleased my prediction came true. You’ve appeared much happier since you met her, and that’s been a relief for me. I recall when you first took the initiative to ask for a birthday gift—I toasted to that with the queen. I wanted to steer clear of discussing a potential negative outcome… yet since you’ve come to understand it yourself, now is certainly the right moment to have this conversation.”

“Unknowingly, I must have caused you quite a bit of trouble,” I admitted.

“What purpose do parents serve if not to endure some hardship for their children’s future? In return, I expect a great deal of filial piety from you moving forward,” he said with a bright, carefree smile.

“Does that mean you’re saying you’ll assign more official duties to me?”

“It’s a privilege to have a capable son.”

“For now, as long as Bertia is with me, I suppose I can manage to maintain the effort.”

“So, the future of the kingdom is in her hands?”

From that perspective, it certainly appears that way.

“With her by my side, even the most mundane official duties feel enjoyable.”

“For now, I’ll ensure that more guards are assigned to Lady Bertia.”

“Since my hobby appears to be observing her free-spirited and energetic nature, please ensure it is done subtly from the shadows, without being overly restrictive.”

“I will think about it.”

Father and I raised our glasses again and continued drinking deep into the night.

—It went without saying that Father was the first to give in to the wine’s effects and fall asleep, eventually being carried away by Mother.

Part Five

Lost momentarily in thoughts about my recent conversation with Father, I was pulled back to reality by Bertia's curious voice. "Lord Cecil?"

I softly smiled and lightly shook my head, saying, "It's nothing."

Though sharing our royal lineage with Bertia would be simple—considering her fate to join the royal family and access its secrets—I decided against it.

Sharing with her the heavy legacy we Alphastas bear could tighten our bond if I conveyed that my unpredictable nature might worsen if she were to leave. This awareness could serve as a chain, yet the idea of using my inherited blood—an aspect of me determined not by choice but by birth—as a shackle repulsed me.

I wanted to keep her by my side through choices made freely, through mutual understanding and decision-making, not through the chains of destiny or genetic fate. *After all, isn't it much more romantic to speak of destiny than to give in to genetic doom?*

If she ever genuinely planned to leave, I could be inclined to embellish the story of our "cursed bloodline" to hold her back. However, no such actions were required now, nor did I find them necessary.

Burdening her with the shackles of my lineage, stifling her vibrant expressions and clipping her wings, would only lessen the very charm that attracted me to her. It was better to grant her some freedom, to let her remain unaware of being trapped in any way, thereby enhancing her allure.

I didn't want a puppet who simply went along with my desires. What fascinated me about Bertia was her unpredictable nature, much like a jack-in-the-box that surprises and delights simultaneously. I appreciated every aspect of her personality, including the spontaneous outbursts that often caught me off guard.

Bertia was my primary interest, my "special someone," and also my anchor. Since she had completely captured my attention, it was only fitting that she remained by my side until my heart stopped beating.

Having her by my side filled me with true happiness and contentment. In this joy, I felt more motivated to strive for the

welfare of our subjects, confident that our happiness would radiate to Bertia and, through her, to our entire community.

The cycle that started appeared flawless, creating a scenario where no one would suffer loss.

Don't you agree?

Bertia's expression became more and more confused.

With a reassuring smile, I shattered the silence. "Excited for the wedding, aren't you? I can't wait to begin our life together." I knew that with her by my side, each day would be vibrant and full of joy.

"W-w-what? The wedding?! Yes, I can't wait for it either!" Bertia stuttered, her cheeks turning red as her gaze shifted anxiously. Her behavior resembled that of a cute, timid creature.

"The wait until graduation feels long."

"No, not at all! Time will fly by as we prepare for the ceremony! I… I will miss seeing you every day, though…" Her voice trailed off.

Although we weren't in the same school year and didn't see each other daily, I decided it was better not to mention that right now.

"I will dedicate myself to being a wife just as fiercely as I did while training to be a villainess!" she proclaimed with enthusiasm and resolve.

"I'll also train to be a good husband," I replied, half-jokingly contemplating where to begin—maybe by quieting the noisy neighbors to our kingdom, much like buzzing insects around our ears.

Based on insights from the Marquis of Noches and Kulgan regarding their domestic issues, along with my own intelligence about the neighboring country's questionable activities, it shouldn't be too difficult to silence them.

Perhaps I should initiate a business venture or two to increase the budget for Bertia's bridal gown and other expenses. I want to protect my lovely bride from any difficulties.

When I brought up the idea of training to become a better husband, Bertia shook her head vigorously. "Cecil-sama doesn't need any training to be wonderful! You're already the best groom there could be!"

How should I reply to this charming being, so earnestly squeezing my hands and championing my virtues?

… Really, Kuro? Are you still questioning my abilities? I guess I have my moments of effectiveness too.

Then there's Zeno, always cautious. "Don't overdo it, please?" though his tone unmistakably suggested more lethal undertones. *Are you implying I'm some kind of tyrant?*

A terrifying Demon Lord, you think… Already planning a "tutorial" session for him in my office later.

Refocusing on Bertia, I smiled warmly. "I'm genuinely moved by your words, Tia, but I can't allow you to be the only one making an effort. As promised, I'll work hard to become a king deserving of you."

"Lord Cecil…" Bertia's eyes filled with tears, overtaken by emotion.

I leaned in to kiss her forehead, a simple and tender gesture. Just as my lips neared her skin, Kuro's tail swooped in to block me. Seriously? With little other option, I took hold of the pesky tail, set it aside gently, and swiftly gave Bertia a peck on the lips instead.

"?!" Bertia gasped, and "Fushaaa!" came the indignant hiss from Kuro, whose tail puffed up in my hand. I chose to ignore it.

Bertia, caught between shock and joy, embraced Kuro tightly, her cheeks turning a deep red. "My sweet Tia, you always manage to amuse me. I wish to watch over you for eternity."

"Fumyaaaa!!" she squealed, her voice oozing with such sweetness that I almost felt overwhelmed myself.

Bertia, in her panic, attempted to escape from my lap, but I held her firmly, preventing her from getting away. She muttered something about this being a "smothering love route" and how terrifyingly intense the situation felt, yet her amusing reactions were too entertaining for me to ignore.

It struck me then, as it has on numerous occasions, that my records of observing Bertia—this intriguing and unpredictable being—would undoubtedly persist for my entire life.



Part One

Ding-dong… Ding-dong…

Under a bright blue sky, the cathedral bells chimed. The capital was alive with cheerful faces, and vendors set up stalls along the streets. The stretches of road leading from the royal palace to the cathedral were filled with people excited to see today's stars, while knights were positioned at regular intervals to ensure safety.

"Congratulations, Crown Prince Cecil and Princess Consort Bertia!"

"Long live Crown Prince Cecil and Princess Consort Bertia!"

Today's stars were myself—Cecil Glo Alphasta—and my fiancée, Bertia Ibil Noches. Our carriage, flanked by numerous mounted knights, slowly progressed forward. The day had finally come. Today was our wedding day.

Part Two

About two years had passed since the "defeat" incident. Finally, Bertia had graduated from Halm Academy. Her graduation naturally signified that our marriage was imminent. With her student life, preparations for our marriage, and training as the future Crown Princess, Bertia claimed these two years flew by in a flash.

For me, however, unable to see Bertia as often as before, these were two long and exceedingly dull years. So dull, in fact, that I engaged in various activities to keep myself entertained—from forming an aggressively advantageous alliance with a neighboring nation, to purging corruption within our own borders, to teasing Zeno.

I even briefly considered the idea of invading a politically unstable country, but I quickly dismissed that thought, knowing it would bring Bertia to tears. Instead, I secretly supported the fifth prince of a friendly nation, born to a concubine, assisting him in gaining an advantage in his country's affairs.

That nation is likely to remain unstable for some time, but in my view, the fifth prince is a capable individual who should be able to manage. Amid these distractions, I quietly created an environment where Bertia could enter our marriage with peace of mind. And now, those days are finally coming to an end.

Right now, we were being taken to the grand cathedral in a carriage. From this point on, I anticipated that we would share a peaceful, enjoyable, and happy life together. Just the thought of it lifted my spirits, and the smiles I gave to the citizens who have gathered to see us became more sincere.

This growing feeling of elation must surely be what happiness felt like. Next to me, Bertia was…

"I feel really anxious. In situations like this, aren't you supposed to write the kanji for 'person' on your palm and swallow it? Or maybe I should go with the local script—what should I do? I'm so nervous, it feels like my heart might just jump out of my chest!"

Clad in a pristine white gown, Bertia appeared far more refined than usual. In this lovely moment, she mumbled something unintelligible and traced shapes on her palm with her finger.

I wasn't entirely sure what she was doing, but from her murmured words, it seemed to be some kind of charm she thought should be performed before appearing in public.

"My dear, sweet Tia, I hate to interrupt whatever captivating thing you're doing, but could you wave to the people? They're certainly looking forward to it."

“Ah! Yes, that’s right! As someone aspiring to be a top-tier Crown Princess—not just a top-tier villainess—I must strive to become a figure beloved by the people!” At my reminder, Bertia quickly raised her head in a fluster. After scanning her surroundings, she began waving energetically.

Although it might be a bit too lively for a Crown Princess, it appeared to please the citizens, so I deemed it acceptable. Plus, it was enjoyable to watch her.

As the carriage arrived at the cathedral, Bertia and I were about to go our separate ways. Usually, we would disembark together and enter the cathedral, but—

Bertia wanted to walk down the “virgin road” with her father, so I was instructed to enter the cathedral and wait for her. Initially, the more traditional clergy were hesitant to break away from this custom.

Fortunately, there was no rule stating we had to enter together, nor did I see any reason to adhere strictly to such a custom, so I dismissed their concerns. I managed to quiet a particularly vocal priest by whispering in his ear, “Who is your favorite nun these days? The redhead? I hear she’s three months pregnant?” After that, no more objections were raised.

As I observed Bertia walking toward the cathedral, I got ready to take my position when Kuro came up to me. Typically clad in a maid’s outfit or attire that complemented her dark fur, today she donned a distinctive light blue dress embellished with sheer, multicolored layers on the skirt, bold and eye-catching.

Kuro handed me a booklet that looked handmade.

‘A List of 100 Things I Desire for Our Wedding—By Bertia’

A hundred felt like an overly big number. Throughout our wedding planning, she had sometimes modestly hinted at her wishes for certain things, yet it appeared there was a lot more she wanted. Had she been holding back, perhaps?

I wanted to grant every wish of my lovely bride; I only wish she had shared them with me sooner.

As I leafed through the booklet given to me, I swiftly reviewed its contents. Some items were already past their deadlines, while others needed preparations that seemed unrealistic at this point. Yet, many tasks still seemed achievable.

“Thanks, Kuro. I’ll have Tia prepare some ‘inari sushi’ for you later as a treat,” I said with a smile, extending my hand to pat her head, but she swatted it away. It’s expected since she usually only allows Bertia to do that. However, her typically emotionless face showed a solid thumbs up, indicating she appreciated my offer.

“Zeno,” I called as I looked down at the booklet, and he immediately responded from nearby.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“For the time being, please organize these, these, and these. We’ll require a short conversation with the Marquis Noches and my father regarding some of these, so kindly coordinate with them. I’d also like to oversee these… Do you believe we can get everything ready in time?”

“Certainly. With assistance from some spirited friends, we should handle the preparations; the challenge is whether we can gather sufficient staff in time.”

“Do your best.”

“Your Highness?”

“You can do it, Zeno. Go for it!”

“What! You’re dropping this on me? That’s really unreasonable, isn’t it?!”

“Don’t fret. Charles and the others, familiar with my whims, probably have extra servants ready for today’s needs. If it comes to that, we can seek their assistance.”

“I can’t just borrow servants from another house without permission!”

“Don’t you think you should get that permission before Tia and I enter the venue? Isn’t this urgent?”

“So, this is a done deal now, right?! Right?!”

“I’ll take my time getting to my spot. Once I’m inside the cathedral, it’ll be the bride’s entrance next. If I’m not in position, Tia won’t come in either. If you hurry, you should make it. Good luck!”

“You idiot, Your Highness!” Zeno shouted back at me as I gave him a thumbs up with a big smile, mimicking Kuro’s gesture. He then dashed off. Despite his protests, I knew he could handle it; he was quite capable when he put his mind to something. This time, I had indulged my whims, so I’d choose to ignore the “idiot” comment.

“I must also do my part.” Most of Bertia’s top 100 wishes revolved around tasks she wanted me, the groom, to fulfill. Therefore, I needed to firmly imprint the details into my mind to ensure I caught the right moments and integrated them effectively into the schedule.

“Still, Kuro, it would have been nicer if you had given this to me a bit earlier,” I muttered to Kuro, who had been silently observing the exchange between Zeno and me. As usual, she kept her expressionless demeanor but gave a large swish of her tail. Then, looking satisfied, turned her back on me and started walking away. It seemed her timing in delivering this message was her own little prank or perhaps a sort of retaliation for having accepted her master.

“I suppose it’s time for me to leave. Kuro has assigned me considerable homework, and above all, I want Tia to be the happiest bride imaginable.” As I walked at a relaxed pace, I flipped through the booklet once more.

As I made my way to my designated spot in the cathedral, I got ready to wait for my adorable fiancée.

Part Three

The sounds of music filled the cathedral, welcoming the bride. This was her wish, and she had personally selected the music. Typically, wedding ceremonies in our country took place in a quiet setting, marked only by the applause of the guests, but this musical addition created a surprisingly pleasant atmosphere. Initially taken aback, the guests now appeared to share my feelings, their faces lighting up with smiles as they adjusted to the unexpected.

Soon, the cathedral doors opened, and Bertia, accompanied by Marquis Noches, made her entrance. Dressed in a stunning gown, she captivated everyone. A moment later, applause erupted, celebrating our soon-to-be union.

As my bride came closer, she clasped hands with the Marquis Noches, whose eyes shimmered with unshed tears. When he passed Bertia’s hand to me, his expression grave, he urged,

“Please, please, please take good care of my daughter.” I nodded with sincerity and assured him, “You can trust me.”

As I grasped Bertia’s hand, I genuinely felt like she was becoming my wife. A warm rush surged through me, a feeling so deep that not even the frown of the tearful Marquis Noches could lessen my joyful expression.

“Shall we, Tia?”

We were set to walk to the altar together. When I gently called to her, a hesitant and trembling “Y-yes!” emerged from under her veil, and she almost tripped. I had a sense this might happen and calmly wrapped my free arm around her waist to support her.

“I-I-I’m so sorry, Lord Cecil.”

“As your husband, it’s my duty to support my wife. I’m simply fulfilling my role.” I whispered softly in her ear, kissing her head through the veil, which prompted a sudden intake of breath from her.

I regretted not being able to see her face beneath the veil, but I was convinced she was blushing. The hand I was holding became warmer, and the visible skin showed a subtle flush.

“No need to hurry. Let’s proceed at your pace, Tia. And remember, whatever occurs, I’m here to handle it, okay?”

“Lord Ceciiiiiil…” Bertia’s voice quivered with unshed tears—was it merely my imagination? I briefly pondered how she would look when I lifted her veil. *What if her face was stained with tears and a runny nose? She would still be charming, certainly, but I feared Bertia might fret over her appearance.*

To lift the veil, I would need to angle it to prevent the attendees from seeing her face directly. If it appeared untidy, I would promptly use a handkerchief to dab away any mess.

“It’s okay, really,” I said with a reassuring smile. As Bertia began to regain her composure, she stepped forward. I matched her gentle pace, one arm wrapped securely around her waist while the other held her hand to prevent any falls. *Just to clarify, my hand is strictly for her safety; there’s no hidden agenda, understood?*

As I approached the high priest at the altar, I hesitantly let go of her waist. Dressed in his grand ceremonial robes, the high priest announced in a voice that echoed through the cathedral,

“We now begin the marriage ceremony of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Cecil Glo Alphasta and Crown Princess Consort Bertia.”

In keeping with tradition, the high priest addressed our fathers—the King and Marquis Noches—to verify that everything was in order for the marriage ceremony. Once they provided their approval, he gestured for the guests to take their seats, and the ceremony commenced.

… Now we approach the extended segment. Quite extensive indeed. Ceremonies like this typically do not get shortened when higher ranks are present. In fact, a royal ceremony such as this, involving the kingdom’s elite, can be so lengthy and monotonous that one might find themselves dozing off.

Bertia, tense with anxiety, was unlikely to doze off, and if she happened to get sleepy, her veil would conceal it. On the other hand, if I closed my eyes even for a brief moment, it could spell trouble. I needed to remain alert.

With nothing else occupying my mind, I found myself daydreaming about our soon-to-be honeymoon, picturing the fun and joyful experiences that awaited us. *Just to be clear, I genuinely appreciate the divine forces that brought Bertia into my life, and I have a profound respect for them, alright?*

During the church’s discussions of its accomplishments, I believed it was okay to let my thoughts wander. That portion of the ceremony often seemed more focused on personal interests, fundraising, and boosting the church’s image than on spiritual intentions.

“His Majesty the King will now present the royal seals for the Crown Prince and Crown Princess. Your Majesty, you may proceed,” the high priest announced.

“Indeed.”

As the ceremony approached its end, my father carried out the ritual of bestowing the seals. These ring-shaped seals held great significance as they represented our royal status. In the Kingdom of Alphasta, royals received new seals at birth, upon attaining adulthood, and during marriage.

The seal, from birth to adulthood, simply indicated status and held little value on documents. Although it should not be

disregarded, it did not imply significant responsibilities until one reached adulthood.

Once an adult seal is attained at legal maturity, it carried greater authority and necessitated careful management, symbolizing the owner's ability to manage national responsibilities.

Lastly, the marriage seal came into play. Royal men engraved a symbol that represented their wife onto their seal, resulting in a new seal they would use throughout their lives. The wife, now a royal, was also given a new seal that featured both her personal symbol and her husband's. This tradition recognized and affirmed their status as a married couple.

As a result, the ring ceremony in marriage rites held particular importance.

As the high priest solemnly proclaimed, "These rings are bestowed upon Crown Prince Cecil Glo Alphasta and Crown Princess Consort Bertia," he marked a key moment in our lives together."

My father stood in front of us, presenting a red velvet cushion given to him by the archbishop, showcasing it to our guests. Resting on it were two rings: one adorned with motifs of all the magical elements, its dark element modified to showcase a black fox motif in honor of Bertia. The other ring, intended for Bertia, illustrated a black fox holding a crown, symbolizing the merger of my seal with hers.

The ring ceremony usually ended with each of us putting our rings on our fingers and displaying them to those present. However, I decided to take an unconventional approach—I picked up Bertia's ring instead.

"… Huh?" A soft voice of surprise came from next to me, but I ignored it and continued speaking.

"Tia, would you mind extending your hand?"

"L-Lord C-Cecil?"

I grasped her left hand and slipped the ring onto her finger. To make it special, I kissed the ring gently. The cathedral responded with soft murmurs, but I decided to overlook them. The whispers felt more like admiration from the women present rather than any criticism, so I saw no problem.

While preparing for our wedding, Bertia appeared overjoyed when the ring ceremony was discussed. Yet, after hearing the specifics, a trace of disappointment crossed her face. Although I had considered addressing it, she had quickly bounced back and expressed delight about our union, so I refrained from probing. Today, after reviewing the list Kuro provided, I finally grasped her concern.

Bertia had wished for a ceremony where we could exchange rings—a tradition absent in our country.

Having grasped her desire, I was eager to make it come true. In doing so, the experience felt like a binding ritual—surprisingly appropriate and quite enjoyable.

Since Bertia's face was hidden by the veil, I couldn't see her expression, but the warmth of her fingers conveyed that she was pleased, which filled me with joy as well.

"Tia, could you put mine on as well?" I said with a smile, reaching out my left hand. She nodded gently, taking my ring in her shaking hands. Carefully, she slid the ring onto my finger, and warmth surged in my chest—definitely a feeling generated by the fact that it was her doing this.

Once she was done, Bertia glanced at my face through the veil. It was clear she was contemplating whether to kiss the ring too, given that I had kissed hers. This created an ideal opportunity to transition.

The moment arrived for the vow kiss. Instead of having her kiss the ring, I intended for us to share a kiss on the lips to finalize our vows. I looked at the archbishop to signal him to proceed, surprising him momentarily before he quickly regained his composure and carried on with the ceremony.

"Now, the kiss of vows."

I gently lifted her veil, and our gazes connected—her eyes glistening with tears. It was a relief to realize that, despite her flushed cheeks and teary eyes, the situation was not as dire as I had dreaded.

Whether she was still taken aback by my previous actions or simply anxious, Bertia remained motionless, shaking like a small animal. I clasped her hands in mine, surrounding them with warmth.

“Bertia Ibil Noches—no, Bertia Ibil Alphasta. I, Cecil Glo Alphasta, pledge to love and honor you in health and illness, in joy and sadness, in prosperity and need, and through every challenge we encounter, to support and comfort you, and to cherish you for all our days together.”

At my words, her eyes widened in surprise.

Pleased with her reaction, I leaned forward and softly pressed my lips against hers.

She let out a silent scream, her face turning an even deeper shade of red as she opened and closed her mouth wordlessly, overwhelmed by the moment.

Bertia’s rosy cheeks stood out against the white of her gown, enhancing her charm. Murmurs of admiration flowed from different parts of the venue. Concealed by her gently flowing veil, the guests might not have noticed her flushed face, or they may have been captivated by her expressions of surprise and confusion, which added to the beauty of the event.

From Marquis Noches’ seat, I heard the gritting of teeth and felt a palpable murderous intent directed at me, yet I decided not to dwell on it. This was simply how a father of the bride behaved.

If I were to watch my daughter, who looks like Bertia, get married someday, I might find myself watching with a fierce gaze, possibly even stirring up some trouble unintentionally.

Having won such a heartfelt affection as Bertia’s, I can partially understand the Marquis Noches’ emotions.

“Tia?” I tilted my head, prompting her with both the questions, “Is this the vow you wanted?” and “Won’t you vow in return?”

“Uh, well, that… um… yes, that…” Bertia, clearly distressed, grasped my intention. She hesitated, her mouth opening and closing, her eyes flicking around as if searching for the right words.

Bertia looked to the archbishop for help. However, since the ring ceremony, I had strayed from the agreed course, leaving the archbishop uncertain about the next steps. Indeed, he wore a calm smile, yet his skin was slightly damp with sweat, and he could only offer Bertia an encouraging nod.

At last, Bertia appeared to summon her courage. “Um… um… I, Bertia Ibil Alphasta, promise to love you, Lord Cecil, at all times,

and support you even unto death!” Her voice resonated with an unusual strength for a vow, reverberating through the hall.

She appeared overwhelmed by unexpected events and unsure of her next steps, yet her statement was confident and assertive.

Bertia, did you forget the vows and get nervous? You certainly shortened them quite a bit. This behavior is typical of you. Apparently relieved to have completed her shortened vows, Bertia’s face lit up with a contented smile, and a small chuckle slipped from her lips. She really is a charming person, regardless of the circumstances.

“Hey, Tia. What do you think about the ‘kiss of the vow’?” I said with a teasing smile, encouraging her to kiss me. In our culture, the vow kiss is typically a singular act, and it seems to be the case in her past life too. However, considering the circumstances, it wouldn’t be strange to ask for a kiss from her this time, would it?

“The vow kiss has already happened…,” she stammered, trying to say that the kiss had already taken place.

I leaned in closer, narrowing the distance between us. “I want your ‘vow’ too, right?” Naturally, feeling the urge to kiss her, I lingered just a breath away from her lips.

She gasped, her cheeks flushing a deep red, as if she might lose consciousness. I gently steadied her at the waist. Typically, this would be when Kuro’s tail might intervene, but thankfully, that wasn’t the case today. In fact, Zeno had returned at some point and was keeping Kuro at bay, ensuring the ceremony remained uninterrupted.

“Tia?” I whispered her name softly, so only she could hear it.

She swallowed with nervousness.

Finally gathering her courage, she shut her eyes tightly and gently pressed her soft lips to the corner of mine.

What is this unusual feeling, the warmth flooding my cheeks, my heart racing more than normal?

Experiencing a post-workout feeling, I had a peculiar, slightly itchy sensation that compelled me to yell, yet it strangely brought comfort.

“… Lord Cecil?” Bertia, confused by my silence following the kiss, slowly opened her eyes.

“?!… Lord Cecil, your face is quite flushed. Are you feeling embarrassed, perhaps?”

Embarrassed…

Her words prompted me to realize my own reaction, and I instinctively covered my mouth. Overcome by embarrassment, I found myself turning away from Bertia without thinking.

Bertia laughed joyfully at my reaction, her smile momentarily catching my attention, but I was too flustered to truly appreciate it.

“Archbishop, please go on…” I muttered, still avoiding eye contact, eager to push the ceremony past my unexpected display of shyness.

Bertia’s sparkling gaze overwhelmed me, making it difficult to meet her eyes directly, which prompted the archbishop to continue with the proceedings.



Following my prompt, the archbishop also composed himself. With a wide, joyful smile, he announced us as husband and wife and presented the marriage covenant for our signatures. All that was left to do was sign the document and listen to the final remarks to officially wrap up the ceremony.

With the archbishop's support, I regained my composure and returned to my usual self before signing the covenant. I encouraged Bertia to follow suit. Once we affixed our signatures, we were officially married. I exhaled in relief as the ceremony concluded, despite having to sit through the archbishop's drawn-out closing remarks. I longed for a swift ending, but some things cannot be avoided.

"… This wraps up the marriage ceremony!" The archbishop's traditional announcement was met with a wave of applause echoing through the cathedral. We surveyed the congregation, standing closely together, and greeted the guests with wide smiles.

Part Four

Returning to Bertia's "List of 100 Things I Desire at Our Wedding." One particular item stood out to me: "Carrying the bride after the wedding!" This was a task I felt quite capable of, provided my physical fitness held up. My only worry was that my recent desk work might have caused a little loss of muscle tone, though I did squeeze in some exercise during breaks.

The ceremonial garments, while lovely and glimmering, featured intricate decorations and were quite heavy. Generally, bridal attire is designed to be just light enough for the bride to move comfortably. I figured that with Bertia's weight factored in, it ought to be manageable. However, Bertia was no ordinary woman.

She frequently called her training "dieting," yet her physical strength greatly surpassed that of a typical young woman, setting her capacity to move in heavy dresses at a significantly higher level.

When I lifted Bertia in a bridal carry, her astonished gasp elicited smiles from everyone in the room. Despite the dress's intricate design and considerable weight, Bertia gracefully twirled in front of the mirror, showcasing elegance that masked its bulk.

"Let's go, Tia," I said after waving goodbye to the guests. At my suggestion, she nodded with a rosy smile—not only relieved to escape the archbishop's long speech but genuinely thrilled by the successful end of our wedding ceremony.

As I held her close, I felt my own happiness swell, my usually stoic heart unmistakably stirred by her presence. "Hold on tight," I said softly.

"Eh? Eh? Wha—?!" Bertia's charming, startled gasp resonated softly as she instinctively wrapped her arms around my neck. Although her weight was notable, it felt unexpectedly delightful. This closeness made even the heaviest burden seem like a weight of joy.

"Lord Cecil?!" she exclaimed, her entire body blushing deeply within my arms.

I smiled at her and kissed her forehead before making my way down the central aisle of the cathedral. Our relatives, friends, domestic nobles, and foreign dignitaries applauded us, celebrating our union. Typically, newlyweds strolled hand in hand down the aisle, but my choice to carry Bertia seemed to evoke an even more enthusiastic reaction than I anticipated.

Numerous women in the congregation cast envious looks at Bertia in my arms. Those with husbands or fiancés drew nearer to their partners, perhaps motivated by our affectionate display. Even the men seemed unfazed by the romantic gesture, with some mirroring the act by pulling their own spouses or fiancées closer.

Among those observing were not just the regular attendees but also the king and queen, along with Marquis and Marquise Noches. Despite the initial surprise, their faces softened into expressions of approval and joy.

As we passed Bertia's group of friends, she seemed puzzled by my behavior at first, but she soon relaxed and started to wave shyly yet authentically at them. Her friends responded with glistening eyes full of emotion, while my friends…

“It seems like a good workout. Perhaps I should try doing squats while carrying Cynthia.”

“Hey, Your Highness! Don’t raise expectations too high for us! We have our own weddings to plan… but I will certainly do my best if I get to marry Anne.”

“Can I really lift Silica? Should I begin working out now?”

“My little sister finally…”

Bard, Charles, Nert, and Kulgan—aren’t you forgetting to congratulate me in particular? Meanwhile, Shaun sat among the royals, muttering, “I wonder if Joanna would like something like this? I may not be as cool as my brother, but if I start practicing now…”

As we neared the exit, knights clad in ceremonial attire gracefully opened the doors for us. Surrounded by honor guards in formal dress, their ceremonial swords held high in salute, we moved through the serene yet dignified atmosphere they established. Their faces, though serious, exuded warmth and congratulations.

We strode directly down the hallway flanked by guards until we arrived at the exit door. Faint whispers from the crowd assembled to honor us drifted in. The knight stationed by the door looked to me for a nod of approval to proceed, which I granted with a slight gesture. Gradually, the grand doors opened, allowing bright streams of light to pour in.

As the doors opened wider, the crowd’s cheers intensified, creating a vibrant atmosphere. We were greeted by smiling faces, a joyful sea celebrating our arrival.

In this moment of bliss, I stepped out of the cathedral with Bertia snuggled into me. Amidst the rising applause, we exchanged glances and burst into laughter.

Nobles of considerable rank surrounded the cathedral grounds, though they were not quite high enough to enter the cathedral itself. They waited to extend their congratulations, representing those in our closer social circles. Commoners, who were not permitted on the grounds, celebrated from beyond its borders.

“Come on, Tia. Wave to them,” I softly urged Bertia, who was cozily nestled in my arms. I emphasized my request with a tender kiss on her cheek.

“!” Even though I had repeated similar affectionate actions throughout the day, Bertia’s reaction remained endearingly novel each time. She blushed deeply, lightly brushing her cheek where I had kissed her.

Our loving display elicited even louder cheers from the audience. Bertia, clearly relishing the attention, appeared to radiate joy, despite her shy nature.

“Please, let me down now!” she requested after a moment, possibly feeling a touch embarrassed by the extended show.

“Just a bit longer,” I comforted her, still reluctant to let her down. Soon, we would take part in the “bouquet toss,” a tradition Bertia eagerly anticipated and had insisted on adding to our wedding. At that moment, I would finally set her down, but her friends, who intended to catch the bouquet, hadn’t arrived yet.

I had become familiar with her weight in my arms, establishing a comfortable balance that enabled me to keep holding her without discomfort. I wished to savor the sensation of declaring she was mine a little longer.

“Look, everyone is eager for you to wave. Since I’m preoccupied with holding this precious treasure,” I said, gesturing toward Bertia with a playful smile, “I can’t wave myself. Would you wave for both of us, my dear wife?”

“~~~~~~~~!!” Bertia emitted another indescribable squeal, her face a blend of embarrassment and joy. Still, she enthusiastically waved to the crowd, fully embracing her role in my arms.

Part Five

Following our ceremony in the grand cathedral, the wedding turned into a delightful whirlwind of events. The “bouquet toss” that followed was a tradition unfamiliar to many, leaving us unsure of its reception. Initially intended solely for unmarried women close to Bertia, we soon found that unmarried women among the foreign dignitaries were also eager to join in. Even a meticulously selective princess from a neighboring country implored us to allow her participation, her earnest eyes filled

with determination. Consequently, we established clear rules: “This is a no-holds-barred event. No complaints afterward. Should any issues arise, the Alphasta royal family will take charge, and personal grievances are not permitted.” With this assurance, we welcomed their involvement.

To ensure safety, we agreed, “This is just a part of the event. Since only one bouquet will be thrown, we will prepare a separate bouquet for each participant.” We quickly arranged additional bouquets as gifts. Each bouquet, potentially enhancing marital fortune, was made for everyone, so that no one would get overly competitive about the one being tossed. In a gathering of influential figures, we wanted to avoid any flare-ups or disruptions to our wedding ceremony.

Bertia came up with this idea after seeing the bouquets she created for her close friends. Desiring for her friends “to find happiness with the ones they love,” she secretly prepared matching bouquets distinct from the one meant for the toss. However, believing it was unjust to compare her friends’ heartfelt bouquets with the “courtesy bouquets,” we chose to give her friends the matching ones, while the others received different arrangements made by me.

Ultimately, the “bouquet toss” ended up being incredibly vibrant, despite a few surprises. The intense rivalry among the women when the bouquet slipped from Bertia’s grasp was somewhat intimidating. Nevertheless, the mood became friendly afterward, and I think everyone had a great time.

Interestingly, it was Kuro who caught the bouquet. After the toss, Kuro leapt elegantly into the air to catch it and then bounded toward Bertia with sparkling eyes, eager to return the bouquet. The sight of Bertia exclaiming, “Kuro, this isn’t a ‘fetch’ game!!” was quite entertaining. Once Bertia described the bouquet’s significance, Kuro seemed to grasp that it was for her to keep. However, something else drew my attention. When told that “the one who catches the bouquet will be the next happy bride,” Kuro gazed intently at Zeno, who stood quietly at the edge of the gathering for quite a while.

I deemed it wise to caution Zeno, saying, “You know it’s inappropriate to pursue young girls,” yet his response surprised me. “Age doesn’t matter for spirits!”

What did he mean by that? Though I recognize that their appearances are just façades, I definitely want to avoid rumors suggesting that my attendant is inclined to chase after young girls.

After exiting the cathedral, we made our way to the royal palace. As we walked, the crowd welcomed us with words of celebration, applause, cheers, and a cascade of petals. To clarify, I orchestrated the petal shower. Kuro had provided me with a "List of 100 Things I Desire at Our Wedding," which featured a "flower shower' noted as "beautiful when petals fall as we leave." Consequently, I assigned Zeno the task of executing it.

Initially, I asked Zeno to summon the flower-related spirits for a bountiful supply of petals. With the assistance of servants from Charles and other households, we spread these petals to the crowd lining the road, creating a beautiful "flower shower" leading to the palace. Although it was a spontaneous decision and quite a distance, it proved to be worthwhile.

The gathered crowd appeared to revel in the moment, and most importantly, the joy in Bertia's eyes made it all the more meaningful. I intend to offer an appropriate reward from my personal funds to the aides and candidates who supported us, as a sign of my appreciation.

When we arrived at the royal palace, the wedding reception kicked off. Essential traditions were observed, including greetings from dignitaries and our first dance as the stars of the event. With my father's support, I aimed to include as many activities as possible.

After completing the traditional ceremonies, our first event was the "cake cutting," something Bertia had eagerly anticipated. Initially, I thought her interest stemmed from her fondness for sweets. However, when she referred to it as "our first collaborative task," it began to sound like it would be enjoyable.

At first, I contemplated whether our initial collaboration would involve welcoming the guests or performing the first dance, yet I held back from sharing this rather uninspired idea. The cake cutting was already on the agenda since it had been requested beforehand. Nonetheless, an item from the "List of 100 Things I Desire at Our Wedding" caught my attention; it referenced something called the "first bite."

The “first bite” refers to a moment when the bride and groom feed each other the cake they have just cut. The groom’s first bite to the bride symbolizes a vow to always provide for her, while the bride’s bite back promises a lifetime of savory meals. Even though we have many chefs in the palace and I doubt Bertia will need to cook, I’ve never shared these thoughts out loud. Ultimately, it’s not about the actions taken, but the emotions behind them, which I recognize as what truly counts.

Bertia had witnessed this “first bite” at a wedding in her past and had always wished to experience it. The version she remembered featured the bride’s and groom’s parents showcasing it initially. Her notes say, “It was amazing! I would love to participate, but… doing it at a royal wedding seems impossible. Asking His Majesty the King and the Queen to demonstrate would be far too much.”

Surely, she must have been holding back on expressing this desire, keeping it to herself. Reflecting on this, I felt a strong urge to fulfill her wishes. After all, it wasn’t a difficult request. So, before the cake cutting began, I secretly approached both my parents and the Marquis and Marquise Noches with the idea.

I was concerned they would feel embarrassed and hold back, but my father and the Marquis eagerly consented. They appeared to enjoy the chance to express their love for their wives openly, framed by the noble intention of “for our children’s happiness.”

Initially, the wives felt shy and hesitated, but after learning that this was a wish Bertia had held back from voicing, they consented to participate. Consequently, we successfully included both the “cake cutting” and the parents’ “first bite” demonstration.

I genuinely worried that some of the more traditional ladies might consider it inappropriate. Yet, maybe due to the immense joy radiating from our families and us, all the guests responded with warm smiles. Additionally, the support from our friends in the higher nobility and their families, who discreetly engaged in their own affectionate interactions, contributed greatly to the atmosphere.

At first, those without partners seemed a little bored. However, as they gathered with others in similar situations, a

unique camaraderie began to form, and by the end, they appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Most importantly, Bertia's face lit up with surprise and immense joy, which filled me with satisfaction. Even if any complaints arose later, I was prepared to tackle—or rather, crush them with full force.

As the party wound down, Bertia must have realized I held her list of wishes. I expected her to mention it, but instead, she leaned in closer and whispered to me with a conspiratorial tone, "Lord Cecil, you comprehend exactly what I desire without me expressing it! It's remarkable!!"

Confronted by her gleaming eyes, I too was rendered speechless. After all, I knew nothing of the customs from her former life, much less how to implement them. As she gazed at me expectantly, I couldn't bear to disclose the secret behind my preparations and instead offered a vague smile to mask the truth.

As the feast reached its climax, it was time for us, the protagonists, to depart. We would leave the rest to our parents and start preparations for our first night together. But before that, I wanted to organize one last event.

"Tia, here you go," I said, giving Bertia a piece of paper.

"What's this?" she inquired.

"I thought you'd like to read a letter to your parents. That's what you wanted to do, isn't it? A letter of thanks from the bride. Then, you can present bouquets to them."

"Could you hold on for a moment? But I haven't written any letter!" Bertia exclaimed, panic evident in her wide eyes.

"Yes, I prepared a draft for you. It's based on some notes Kuro had made," I said, softly brushing her hair aside as I took the opportunity to show her the "List of 100 Things I Desire at Our Wedding."

"What?! Huh?! Why do you have that list?!" she gasped, surprised.

"Let's put that aside for now. Look, it's about to begin."

"Please hold on a moment! I'm not quite prepared! A bride's letter isn't just a formality—it must express my sincere gratitude!"

"Ah, here's Zeno arriving with the bouquets for the parents. To ease your nerves, I prepared this letter as a template. You can

customize it by adding your own sentiments, alright?”

“What?! You expect me to improvise this?” Bertia was completely taken aback by the sudden demand to think on her feet.

“Ad-lib…? I’m not entirely sure what that means, but it does sound fitting, doesn’t it? Ah, as requested, the music has changed. Now, let’s get started. Can you do it?”

“Wait!! Ugh… so this is yet another trial as the Crown Princess, isn’t it? Very well!! I will express all my feelings for my mother and father!! I’ll use this script as a guide then!”

I thought Bertia would easily show her gratitude toward her parents without needing a script since she loved them so deeply, but perhaps this was a bit too abrupt?

Her flustered and bewildered expression was somehow endearing, like that of a small animal, so it was fine. I gently guided her, holding the letter I had given her tightly in her hand.

According to Bertia’s list, “It’s wonderful to do this as a surprise,” so I had intentionally not informed her parents.

When the servant acting as the master of ceremonies announced the “bride’s letter,” the Marquis and Marquise Noches looked bewildered. Even my usually unflappable father and mother were taken aback.

I had previously coordinated with the venue staff to deliver them at the perfect time, ensuring a seamless experience. As the atmosphere inside the venue grew thick with anticipation, guests wondered, “What will happen next?” Having witnessed a series of extraordinary displays during the event, the attendees appeared to relish this unexpected twist as well.

Being careful not to be disrespectful, I made sure to approach everything with consideration.

As we stood before the Marquis and Marquise Noches with Tia, we began our conversation after receiving approval from our fathers, who were used to being flexible. Although they were taken aback at first, they soon collected themselves and kept up with us.

Then, Bertia started to read the thank-you letter…

“Father, Mother, thank you for nurturing me all these years… Ahhh… Uhh…!!”

With that opening line, her tears began to flow.

Tears flowed down her cheeks as she tried to share her past, passionately declaring her love for her parents. The Marquis Noches, touched by her words, twisted his face in an effort to suppress his own tears, almost appearing to glare.

The Marquise and I each wiped our partner's eyes. The Marquis's wife, a gentle-looking woman, observed him with a concerned expression, softly patting his back to provide comfort. She, too, was fighting back tears.

The mood in the venue quickly shifted to a somber tone, with several ladies in tears. "Father, Mother, while I have wed Prince Cecil, I will always cherish the love you've given me! From this moment, I aim to build a beautiful home with Prince Cecil, just as you both did. Naturally, as Crown Princess, I will also work hard to support our country, focusing on excelling in domestic matters."

Hmm? Did I just hear something odd? I'll just chalk it up to my imagination.

The venue, filled with a heartfelt ambiance, appeared oblivious to the charming little remarks Bertia skillfully incorporated into her speech, so I guess that's acceptable.

"Your Majesty the King, Your Majesty the Queen. No, I prefer to address you as Father and Mother. While I may fall short, I promise to do my best to support Prince Cecil! As family from this point on, I kindly ask for your ongoing guidance." Bertia finished with an elegant bow toward my parents.

I followed her lead and bowed my head.

The room burst into applause.

In that welcoming atmosphere, Bertia and I presented bouquets to our parents.

Bertia noted, "I want to present them with a bouquet and a remarkable, unforgettable gift." Yet, due to the rushed preparations, we were unable to fully accomplish the "remarkable, unforgettable gift" aspect.

That was somewhat regrettable.

… And thus, our wedding ceremony ended on a tranquil note.

While we couldn't check off every item on the list, the day remained unforgettable thanks to Bertia's joyful tears, her astonished expressions, and, most significantly, her numerous smiles.

Part Six

Now, let's discuss what occurred next.

"Lo-Lord Ce-Ce-Cecil!! This is awful!"

When I returned to our shared chambers after completing my tasks, Bertia hurried toward me. Noticing her agitated demeanor, I tilted my head in curiosity.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

Then, assuming it was the same as usual, I settled onto the sofa. Eager to discover today's topic, I readied myself to listen. Bertia attempted to sit in the chair opposite me, but I took her hand and guided her to sit beside me.

"Now that I'm the Crown Princess, I intend to leverage my past life's memories to enhance the kingdom's prosperity through what I call 'domestic affairs cheats,'" she explained.

Ah, the usual puzzling statements. "Tia, could you clarify what you mean by 'domestic affairs cheats' first?"

"In my past life, the world possessed a considerably advanced cultural level. In many ways, it was more developed than this one. I believe I can leverage that knowledge to enhance this kingdom. But… but!!" Tears filled her eyes as she appeared heartbroken.

To soothe her, I tenderly stroked her back and urged her to go on.

"I know of many useful things that could benefit this kingdom. However, because I didn't study well in my previous life, I'm aware of these things, but I don't fully understand how they operate!"

With that, Bertia buried her face in my chest and began to cry. She threw herself into my arms with such sincerity, a hallmark of our marital bond.

While I was incredibly happy about this, her tight embrace nearly made me choke. It was somewhat painful as well.

"I believed that by pulling you away from the heroine, I needed to strive to be a valuable Crown Princess for the kingdom. But I just can't do it!"

"Tia, please calm down. You're already doing more than sufficient."

The core reason is that your presence inspires me to manage my responsibilities efficiently. Your profound care for the citizens of this country motivates me to emulate that same dedication. You are taking on a tremendously vital role as Crown Princess.

However, there's more to consider…

"Tia, you've been getting letters from princesses and prominent noblewomen from everywhere lately, haven't you?"

"Yes. They're all very kind to me," she replied, tears still flowing but clearly delighted by the messages.

"I heard you're receiving letters requesting guidance on wedding plans?"

"Yes! They complimented our wedding arrangements and are seeking tips for their own ceremonies!"

"I've heard that some are even willing to pay for your suggestions?"

"Indeed, a few individuals have made such proposals. Just recently, Princess Lysonna of the Umyuve Kingdom asked for my help."

"Ah, the princess who was so intent on the bouquet toss. I heard she found her perfect match and got engaged afterward. Tia, a wedding is a monumental occasion for royalty, isn't it?"

As I talked to Bertia, I remembered Princess Lysonna's intense gaze fixed on the bouquet. "Yes, I've heard some people dedicate years to planning it."

"Exactly. Due to its significance and visibility, they spare no expense to ensure everything is perfect. It's that crucial."

"You also indulged many of my whims for our wedding, Lord Cecil."

"Your whims were charming and not too expensive… But aside from that, do you grasp the significance of being invited to assist with such an important event, Tia?"

Bertia blinked, absorbing the significance of my words, "Yes. I assume it indicates that they trust and appreciate my taste and opinion?"

"Precisely. They view you as someone capable of enhancing their most significant day. That's quite meaningful."

Bertia's tears started to dry as she took in the compliment, a gentle smile appearing on her lips. "You see, Tia? You're already

having a big impact. Your thoughts and your kindness—they truly matter."

"Thank you, Lord Cecil. I will strive to be a good Crown Princess and support you and the kingdom." With this, Bertia appeared to regain her composure, and the sparkle returned to her eyes.

"…?" Bertia tilted her head, clearly confused, which made me chuckle. As always, she seemed entirely unaware of such matters.

When foreign royalty participates in significant events, it serves to 'sell a favor.' This showcases our strong ties with those nations, positioning us well for future requests. Moreover, both royals and nobility invest heavily in weddings. By managing these requests, considerable income can be generated, potentially laying a solid foundation for starting a business.

"It's a cheat in domestic affairs!" Bertia exclaimed, her face glowing with excitement.

"I'm not entirely convinced about that… however, it would be advantageous to foster a strong relationship with both Princess Lysonna's homeland and her fiancé's nation, as both are important for enhancing our maritime routes."

As a royal family member, these connections are truly priceless. However, the more excited Bertia became, the more anxious I felt. Why was that?

"You can count on me! Princess Lysonna and I have a lot in common—we enjoy similar things, making our talks about the wedding quite engaging. I'm thrilled to help her out as a friend!" she exclaimed enthusiastically.

"For financial decisions, please consult with either Lady Joanna or me. Do you understand?"

I'm concerned that relying solely on Bertia could result in excessively lenient choices.

"Lord Cecil, I'm capable of simple calculations!"

"The sums at stake will be significant, so this is just for verification. Even those overseeing the kingdom's finances continuously check one another to prevent errors. It's slightly different, but think of it in that way."

"Oh, so it's a form of double-checking."

"Double? Yes, somewhat like that. In any case, let's ensure someone is there to help you avoid any mistakes."

“Understood! I will ensure everything is double-checked to avoid any mistakes!”

“Good, thank you.”

“Leave it to me!”

Several months later, Bertia’s wedding magazine, “Berti,” was set to launch. At that moment, I had no inkling of how incredibly popular it would eventually be among women envisioning their weddings.

“Bertia, you truly amuse me,” I remarked, a hint of a smile on my face.

“I want nothing more than for you to be as happy as can be, Cecil!”

Simply having you near fills me with immense joy, yet your desire to elevate my happiness even further surprises me?

I couldn’t stop admiring my self-proclaimed villainess wife. Not that I planned to. “Tia, let’s create a lot of happiness together from now on.”

“Yes, definitely!”



Part One

“Waaah… Waaah…”

Two years into my marriage with Bertia, I finally heard the lively cries of my newborn son in the early hours of dawn. It had been a long labor, and we had nearly been awake all night. During that time, I stayed in the adjacent room, listening to my wife’s agonized groans… or rather, her exuberant exclamations like, “No way!! This pain is unbelievable!!” “It hurts, it really hurts!!” “Baby, hurry up and come out, please!!” “You are Cecil’s child, so you can do it!! Mommy is trying her best too, so let’s work together… it still hurts!!”

It was perhaps too much to expect that Bertia, anticipating the baby would hear her pleas and hasten to ease her discomfort, would get the desired response, even from my child. Yet, despite the circumstances, I couldn’t help but find her determination amusing.

Beside me, my father-in-law, who had gone pale at Bertia’s voice, whispered, “Bertia, sadly, that child shares half of your blood! Regardless of how much they get from His Highness, expecting them to comply so swiftly is unrealistic!”

Near the Marquis Noches stood Kuro, her tail puffed up. She appeared uncertain about childbirth and responded to Bertia’s distressed voice with a growl, prepared to confront whatever was causing her pain. However, in this situation, it was our child causing the discomfort, so I had Zeno restrain her with all his strength.

After a grueling night, I felt an overwhelming surge of tension when I finally met my child for the first time.

“Cecil, we did it!! It’s a cute, adorable baby boy!!” Bertia welcomed me with a face marked by joyful tears and the sweat of labor.

In her arms lay a tiny infant, snugly wrapped in swaddling clothes. As soon as I saw his face, tears filled my eyes. In that instant, I had a strong intuition… This child is “like me.”

“Look at him! His hair is a lovely blend of both of our colors, but his face is just like yours, Cecil!” Bertia exclaimed with excitement.

Our baby’s face was still scrunched from being born, yet there was a clear resemblance. As he grew and his features sharpened, he would likely look even more like me.

“This child is bound to be as intelligent as you, Cecil! And even if he isn’t, he’s so charming that he’s destined to be a beloved and kind king!”

“… Yes, I’m sure he will be,” I replied.

Seeing Bertia happily poking our son’s cheeks, I decided to postpone addressing any potential issues. Our son, as if sensing the atmosphere, laughed while Bertia fussed over him. Although I had some concerns about his future, I was confident everything would turn out well. After all, his mother was Bertia. Unlike my own childhood, he wouldn’t have a dull day in his life.

All that was left was to ensure our son didn’t vie for Bertia’s attention. I needed to find his “maiden of destiny” early on. No matter how adorable my child was, I had no intention of giving up my beloved Bertia.

I would also encourage him to explore anything that seemed fun or interesting. Having a diverse range of interests would be advantageous. By engaging in various activities he enjoyed, he wouldn’t become fixated on just one thing, which would make his life more vibrant.

No extraordinary child had ever been born to the royal family for two generations in a row. Nevertheless, connecting my experiences to my child could truly be a blessing.

“Cecil! Let’s envelop this child in love, cherish him, and bring him joy! As a mother, I will give it my all!”

“Absolutely. Let’s ensure he feels… loved.”

Gently, I brushed the sweat-soaked hair from Bertia's face and caressed her cheek.

"Tia, thank you for presenting me with another treasure. I promise to do my utmost to bring more treasures into your and our child's lives."

With my left hand resting on Bertia and my right hand on our son's cheek, I made my promise. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she responded with a beaming smile.

Part Two

"Mother! Look at this flower!"

While Bertia and I took a tea break from our responsibilities, our five-year-old son, Anzart Glo Alphasta, raced over, clutching a potted plant in both hands. He proudly displayed a vibrant blue lily in full bloom. To any onlooker, it might appear that a small child was struggling with a heavy pot, but Zeno followed closely behind, using wind magic to lighten the load. Anzart felt virtually no weight as he put on his best effort for all to see.

Anzart's fundamental personality resembled mine closely. Observing his mother, Bertia—who, although sometimes clumsy, earned everyone's affection through her genuine effort—taught him that demonstrating hard work and commitment usually elicited more favorable responses than just being competent. Consequently, he became skilled at seeming innocently diligent, surpassing even my own childhood in calculated charm.

Naturally, Bertia was completely oblivious to the sly side lurking beneath her charming son. As she rushed to grab the potted plant from him, I quickly stepped in to lift both Anzart and the pot.

"… Tch." My son softly clicked his tongue, just loud enough for me to catch, while maintaining an innocent smile.

I decided to overlook it, keeping my own smile intact. Bertia was now five months pregnant with our second child, and I wouldn't allow her to manage such a large pot. Anzart understood this perfectly well.

As expected, Anzart had developed a strong attachment to his mother, displaying nearly obsessive affection. He appeared unhappy with the prospect of having siblings who might share his place. Although he would never harm the child she is expecting, Anzart sometimes attempted to exploit Bertia's nurturing demeanor, pushing her limits. He was probing the depths of her care for him.

Unaware of her son's true intentions, Bertia doted on Anzart and unwittingly provided him with the gratifying reactions he craved. This only served to inflate Anzart's perception of maternal love, which was quite troublesome.

"Oh, Anzart, what a beautiful flower you have," Bertia said softly. "Is this a bellflower?"

"No, Mother, this isn't a bellflower," Anzart replied, having given up on trying to physically tackle Bertia and now presenting her with the potted plant instead.

The guards, oblivious to the fact that Zeno had magically lightened the pot, stared in astonishment at what seemed to be an impressive display of strength from the toddler.

"Oh my, what flower is it?" Bertia inquired, her smile unwavering as she leaned closer to examine the plant, unaware that a toddler was effortlessly lifting a heavy potted plant.

Why did Bertia believe this flower was a bellflower to begin with? It was clearly a lily. True, it had an unusual hue, but still.

"It's a lily, Mother!" Anzart proclaimed with pride. "I created this blue lily because I know how much you love that color."

Bertia's eyes widened in amazement. "A blue lily?! Did you really make this, Anzart?!" Bertia was astonished by Anzart's proud grin.

"Yes!! Since Mother adores blue, I attempted to craft a blue lily, just like Father created the blue rose!" Anzart replied with pride, snuggled in my arms, which made me chuckle.

He didn't merely create the blue lily to delight his mother; he aimed to compete with the blue rose I had made for Bertia. In this realm, neither blue lilies nor blue roses existed. My initial creation of the blue rose as a gift for Bertia generated significant interest among botanists, who then endeavored to produce a blue lily. Apparently, my son had resolved some of the challenges they encountered.

I felt somewhat guilty for depriving the botanists of their enjoyment, particularly since I had motivated Anzart to engage in such activities. Maybe I should suggest another captivating challenge for them next time.

“Cecil, what should we do?! Our child is a prodigy!” Bertia said, clearly overwhelmed.

“Yes, he’s fantastic. However, keep in mind that boasting about it in public might make you appear overly indulgent, so tread lightly,” I replied with a smile.

As I lifted the lily from Anzart and set it on the table, Zeno’s enchanted support ended, causing it to drop with a surprising thud. The noise startled Kuro, our black fox, who then scurried out from under the table and leaped onto Bertia’s lap.

“Kuro! I’ve told you time and again not to lie on the cold floor!” Zeno quickly lifted Kuro from Bertia’s lap and reprimanded her. Kuro flicked her tail in annoyance, clearly irritated by Zeno’s concern.

Similar to Bertia, Kuro’s rounded belly suggested that she was expecting a baby.

“Why can’t you stay put in our room?!” Zeno admonished Kuro with a seriousness akin to a worried pet owner reprimanding their cherished pet. While it was a heartwarming scene, for Zeno, observing his pregnant wife sprawled on the cold floor surely caused him anxiety. He constantly worried about the possibility of someone inadvertently kicking her.

I would feel confident delivering a full hour-long lecture to Bertia if she were doing the same thing.

Indeed, Kuro was expecting Zeno’s child.

The idea of “marriage” among spirits was somewhat unclear compared to that of humans. However, Zeno and Kuro became a couple in the year Anzart was born. To clarify, Zeno did not engage with a young girl. I was unaware of this before marrying Bertia, but Kuro, being a darkness spirit, experienced a slight power reduction during the day when the light was strong. As a result, she takes on the form of a child to save her energy. At night, her power grows, enabling her to appear as an adult, though Bertia, an early riser, remained oblivious to this fact.

Zeno was well aware that adult Kuro frequently came to see him at night. Their bond flourished, leading to their marriage.

However, it was impractical to acknowledge their union publicly during the day when Kuro appeared as a child. Only a handful of individuals informed of their circumstances understood the reality.

Kuro became pregnant around the same time as Bertia, making it difficult for her to walk around in her child form with a large belly. Moreover, pregnancy increased her energy consumption, so she preferred to spend her time in her fox form, which required less energy and was less strenuous on her body.

Nonetheless, Kuro, who cared deeply for Bertia, found it hard to stay away from her. Despite Zeno's pleas for her to stay put, she would often slip away to share tranquil moments by Bertia's side. Lately, I've noticed Zeno anxiously running around the palace, searching for the missing Kuro.

From my perspective, there's no need to be so overprotective of Kuro, who has strong defensive abilities due to her dark attributes.

Kuro might actually find enjoyment in watching Zeno anxiously trying to locate her. If he weren't searching so desperately, she could quickly lose interest and head back to their room by herself.

When I settled down with Anzart still cradled in my arms, my son looked up at me with watery eyes.

"Father, I want to sit on Mother's lap."

While his features were similar to mine, his expressions strongly reflected Bertia's, likely due to his frequent observations of her. As his father, I found his intelligence both remarkable and somewhat concerning. "Mommy has a baby in her belly, so you can't."

"I'll be careful not to bump the baby! I want to hear the baby's heartbeat too!" He stared at me intently, but I understood his real intention. He was trying to appeal to Bertia, demonstrating his desire to be spoiled by her. And it was working. Bertia's eyes began to shine with emotion at her son's seemingly genuine request.

"Well, fine. I guess there's no changing it."

"Father!!" Anzart's eyes sparkled with joy, reminiscent of Bertia's delight when presented with sweets.

With a sigh, I released Anzart from my lap. Just as he was about to embrace his mother, I scooped Bertia up and set her on my knee.

“Wait! Lord Cecil!! Why am I sitting on your lap?!”

“Father!!” Both a blushing Bertia, and a disgruntled looking Anzart, protested.

Feigning a bit of sadness, I sighed and nestled my cheek against Bertia’s hair.

“I was feeling lonely because Anzart rejected my lap. Tia, will you comfort me?”

“Oh my! Is that so?” she replied.

Bertia’s gaze, previously on Anzart, turned toward me, the seemingly forlorn father unnoticed by his child.

“It’s okay! Anzart cares for you deeply as well, Lord Cecil! Don’t you both always study and play together?”

Indeed, we get along well because we share many similarities. Like me, Anzart may also find the typical tutor lacking in challenge. But do you realize why we spend so much time together? We’re both competing for your attention, Bertia, striving to impress you.

By the look on your face, it seems you might not have noticed at all. I often ponder how you see the interactions between Anzart and me.

“Father, that’s not fair!” Anzart puffed out his cheeks dramatically, clearly seeking attention.

As Bertia focused on me, Anzart’s frustration became evident; he was likely angrier than his adorable sulking suggested.

“Oh, Anzart, are you feeling jealous of your father?” Bertia laughed, playfully poking Anzart’s cheek while he attempted to hug her from the side.

It might seem like a peaceful and harmonious scene, but the only one feeling that peace was Bertia.

“Anzart, please don’t hug Mother too tightly; it could make the baby uncomfortable.”

“… I understand. Father, could you please release Mother now?”

Unlike me, who held Bertia gently from behind, Anzart found it difficult to get close to her, which clearly frustrated him. His

adorable face scrunched up in annoyance as he gripped Bertia's dress tightly.

"Sorry, but I can't allow that. One day, Anzart, you will find your own 'maiden of destiny' and be able to hold her close." I flashed him a confident smile.

Though I spoke in a light tone, this was an urgent matter for me. Lately, Anzart had honed his cunning ways and tried to take Bertia away from me. As my child, of course he was adorable, and I wanted to spoil him. But given that he shared my obsessive nature, I couldn't ignore his determination. It wouldn't be a joke if we ended up competing for Bertia's affection and causing chaos in the kingdom. Besides, I couldn't tolerate losing Bertia.

"Mother is my 'maiden of destiny'!"

"Oh, Anzart! You're just too adorable!" Bertia exclaimed, hugging him while completely missing the concerning weight of his words. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and gently patted Anzart's head.

"I want Mother all to myself!" Tears filled Anzart's eyes as he begged like a determined child.

"That can't happen, Anzart. Mother is for Father," I replied, kissing Bertia's cheek to underscore my statement.

I felt a pang of sympathy for Anzart, who had yet to find someone special to call his own. From my own experience, I understood how significant that connection was.

"Father…" Anzart said, his voice filled with resentment. I responded with a firm, intimidating smile, holding his gaze. He pouted and sulked but refrained from any extreme actions, knowing deep down that I was his father and that he respected me.

Regardless of our rivalry, these interactions with Bertia served as a means of communication for us, a way to strengthen our bond.

"I hope you meet your 'special someone' soon, Anzart," I said.

"So I can have Mother…"

"No, that's not going to happen." I chuckled.

"Oh, I feel so blessed to be loved by both my husband and my son!" Bertia blushed and smiled brightly, seated between us.

Seeing her in this moment, I shared a knowing smile with Anzart. We then enjoyed a tranquil time together, appreciating

the blue lily that Anzart had crafted. Meanwhile, Kuro, weary of Zeno's constant protectiveness, scratched his cheek. This simple scene was also a snapshot of our joyful and vibrant family life.

Part Three

"Father, this child is my 'maiden of destiny'!"

The conflict between father and son regarding Bertia paused about nine months into her pregnancy—specifically, around the time our second child was born.

With a strong wail, our second child—a girl who bore a striking resemblance to Bertia—came into the world, her cries far more robust than Anzart's had been.

She sported slightly lighter, reddish hair compared to Bertia's and possessed heterochromatic eyes, one amber and one blue. Her slightly upturned, cat-like eyes mirrored Bertia's. If not for that one blue eye, I would question where my genes had gone.

The incident took place right after our delightful daughter was born, during Anzart's first introduction to her.

"Anzart, meet your little sister!" Bertia, still beaming with joy despite her exhaustion from childbirth, leaned against a cushion, presenting our crying newborn to Anzart.

Anzart appeared quite unhappy. As if competing for our attention wasn't challenging enough, now there was a new competitor. Being a newborn meant that Bertia would naturally need to focus more on her.

My son, perhaps sensing the competition ahead, couldn't freely show his annoyance due to his intelligence. Instead, he managed a conflicted smile, torn between his emotions and his understanding.

Seeing Anzart's strained smile made me finally grasp my father's feelings. Before I met Bertia, I likely caused my father similar worry. At that time, I believed I was doing what was expected of me, thinking it was the right thing to do. Now, as a parent myself, watching my son reflect my past actions, I felt a pang of regret helplessness.

“My sister… She’s cute,” Anzart said, smiled at the crying baby with a forced expression.

Bertia seemed to notice something was off about Anzart’s demeanor. She tilted her head for a moment but then concluded, “Anzart, are you nervous?”

She misinterpreted his unease as nerves from seeing a baby for the first time. Meanwhile, the baby in Bertia’s arms showed no sign of stopping her wailing. While it was natural for a newborn to cry, the intensity of her crying at the sight of Anzart made me wonder if she had inherited her mother’s lack of awareness.

“Now, Anzart, gently pat your sister!” Bertia, unaware of the room’s tension, encouraged our son, Anzart, who appeared confused and nearly lost his forced smile.

Still, Bertia pressed on, saying, “Don’t be shy, Anzart!” as she took his hand and guided it to the baby’s cheek. As soon as Anzart’s hand made contact, our daughter ceased crying. To our amazement, she grabbed his hand, beaming, and started playfully chewing on it, drooling all over.

“Oh dear, that’s not a snack, you know? That’s your brother’s hand,” Bertia said with a laugh, gently trying to pull Anzart’s hand away.

As soon as she did, the baby began crying loudly again. Startled, Anzart quickly moved his hand back toward her. Our daughter immediately latched onto it again, chewing contentedly with an expression that looked like a drunk person gnawing on dried meat.

Curiosity sparked, and a smile slowly appeared on Anzart’s face. If he could describe his mother’s current expression, it would surely be, “This is intriguing.”

From that point, events unfolded quickly. After calling to Zeno and asking him to use his wind magic to ease the burden, Anzart took his sister from Bertia and held her close. His face radiated pure joy and delight as he proclaimed, “Father, this girl is my ‘maiden of destiny’!!”

“… So, you’ve taken a liking to your sister, have you?”

“Of course! There’s no one else as interesting… I mean, cute and unique as her. This time, I will be the one to monopolize her!! I’ll shower her with all my love!!”

As Anzart embraced his sister firmly, as though promising never to let her go, I began to contemplate the implications of this change. I was pleased that Anzart was focusing on someone other than Bertia, yet the fact that it was his sister raised red flags for me regarding her future.

Clearly, her marriage prospects would be impacted, and it's possible she might be unable to marry at all… As I envisioned this possible outcome, a notion struck me. Perhaps… there's no need to fret about that particular issue.

Even though Anzart held her closely and kissed her cheeks and forehead, the girl remained unfazed, eventually dozing off in a state of calm.



Our brave daughter, when she finds someone she truly loves, will undoubtedly figure out how to manage her brother. Additionally, I wished to keep this charming daughter, who bore such a strong resemblance to Bertia, by my side for as long as I could. If she happened to meet someone who couldn't hold their own against Anzart, I wouldn't feel comfortable entrusting my beloved daughter to them anyway.

In that case…

"Anzart, always remember to cherish and safeguard her."

"Absolutely!"

"Oh my! It's so heartwarming to witness such strong sibling bonds!" Bertia beamed once more as she observed our interaction… *Will she ever come to understand her son's true character? I suspect she may never find out.*

—Our daughter, named Anikis, quickly became adored by her brother and was seen as a possible target for a sister complex, growing up cherished by all in the kingdom.

"Brother! You've meddled with my engagement once more!"

"Anikis, just stay with me and keep me entertained. You don't need to rush into marriage."

"I dream of marrying! I long for a man's love!"

"Isn't my love sufficient?"

"I want romantic love, not sibling affection!"

"Anyone wishing to marry you must possess the strength to overcome me…"

"No one else is like Father!!"

"Anzart and Anikis are as close as ever today, aren't they?"

"That's typical of Tia to perceive it like that." Such discussions would become commonplace in the palace a decade later.

Back Matter

Author: Shiki

Made their publishing debut in 2016 with "It's Too Late Now!!" (Ichijinsha). Received a special award at the 9th Alphapolis Fantasy Novel Awards for "The Observations of My Self-Proclaimed Villainess Fiancée." Enjoys reading and writing novels, though both at a leisurely pace.

Illustrator: Hachipisu☆Wan

This book has been revised and published from the version that was originally posted on "Shōsetsuka ni Narō" (Let's Become a Novelist).

Thank you all

Thank you for finishing Observation Records of My Fiancée: The Misadventures of a Self-Proclaimed Villainess Volume 2! We hope you've enjoyed following Bertia's amusing journey.

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