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Illustrator: Nami Hidaka
The 100th Time's the Charm:
She Was Executed 99 Times,
So How Did She Unlock
"SuperLove" Mode?!


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The Broken Prince
Girne
Girne's Servant (Guard Dog)
Cerberum
"Can you step away from my fiancée, brother?"
"What did you do to Lady Alphina?!"
"What do you think you're doing to my master?"
"A human prince isn't the right man for you. Don't you think you belong with a dark prince who's fated to loop through time in the same way you did?"
"Ah...!"


"Prince Lio, you played right into my hands!"
"Your Highness... Please remember."
"You can't cry because you haven't given up."
"Why did you reject our marriage arrangement?"

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Chapter One

"Life is short and yet boredom is eternal."

That was the saying Alphina's grandmother Yulinar left behind before she passed away. The words had been on Alphina's mind as of late. For the past six months, Alphina'd had no choice but to live in the palace, since she was Prince Lionett's fiancée. She had never felt more bored, and life had never felt more suffocating.

Alphina couldn't wear the outfit of "Arle, guardian of the forest" either. Instead, she needed to wear the dresses she once thought she'd never have to put on again. The hems were so long and flouncy that she could barely move around in them. Though she'd defended her right to keep her hair in a ponytail, her etiquette coach forced her to write an essay on why she insisted on having a hairstyle different from what noble daughters were traditionally permitted. It was, again, suffocating.

Even *if* Alphina wanted to stay in her room all the time, her attendants refused to leave her alone. If she wanted to leave, then an entire squadron of guards had to accompany her. Thanks to the ninety-nine lifetimes Alphina had led, she'd accumulated an almost infinite supply of magical power, so she didn't need anyone to protect her. But Alphina's magic was something that only her loyal servant Scarlet knew about. From the emperor's perspective, he absolutely had to protect his "precious daughter Alphie-poo."

Alphie-poo, huh? Well, whatever. At this point, that nickname is the least of my worries.

Alphina knew that escaping this marriage was no longer an option. Soon, she'd have her wedding with Lionett and, in the future, she'd rule over the country as empress. Acceptance was already setting in. Not only had Alphina accepted her fate, but she also decided that she'd become an empress so notorious for saying or doing whatever she wanted that she'd leave her blemish in the history books. That was all Alphina Shinn Sylvana, the Greatest Vermilion, thought about these days.

However, there remained something that nagged at her curiosity. She still couldn't figure out what kind of man Lionett

Lione was. Why did he love her so much? It was strange that she couldn't understand him, considering Alphina could use Telepathy. However, this magic only allowed Alphina to listen to someone's inner voice. It didn't enlighten her on *where* these thoughts stemmed from.

"What about me tickles his fancy so much?" Alphina murmured to a bird perched on her windowsill. Of course, it didn't answer her.

That was when one of Alphina's maids approached her and said in a respectful tone, "Lady Alphina, Prince Lionett has arrived."

Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Alphina stood up and turned to look at the door right as Lionett, arms laden with a bouquet of red roses, walked in. He'd been dropping by every day these past few weeks, flowers in hand. His schedule should be packed, considering the emperor put him in charge of all military affairs, yet he always made time to see his fiancée.

"Alphina, I hope you're doing well as always," he said.

"I am, Your Highness. All thanks to you."

Many of the maids exhaled. Partly this was due to how glorious the roses were, but it was mostly because they were admiring Lionett's beauty. People compared his blond hair to the brightest light and his blue eyes to the coldest ice. This was a backhanded compliment, since it also alluded to how unapproachable Lionett was. Recently, though, many noticed that Lionett had become more friendly and personable. According to the rumors among the citizens, Lionett's strong love for his fiancée, Alphina, inspired the change. Even someone with the nickname "Lord Cold Heart" could change if they wanted to.

"The roses today bear a rather powerful fragrance," Lionett continued.

"Do they?" It didn't bother Alphina. She didn't even notice until Lionett mentioned it.

"Let me know if you're unhappy with them. I'll pick some new ones posthaste."

Alphina stared at her fiancé. "Your Highness, don't tell me that the bouquets of roses you bring every day are ones you pick yourself?"

"They are," Lionett replied, expression serious as he nodded. "These flowers are for my betrothed. I don't want to entrust picking them to anyone else."

Alphina didn't know how to respond. If Avenlock, prince of the neighboring country of Heavenrose, had been the one to say those words, she might've been able to laugh and say, "Oh, you and your jokes." But the man before her wasn't Lord Blackrose, the center of multiple international love affairs and romantic scandals. Instead, he was the Golden Sword, the dictionary definition of a "prude." He wasn't the kind of man who'd joke about this. The maids were so touched that some of them were tearing up. But in Alphina's opinion, this was too much. *Way* too much.

(I adore you, Alphina.) His inner voice was saying. *(I love you. I need you.)*

In the past, his thoughts were akin to a passionate declaration of love. Nowadays, it was more of a soft whisper, though still carrying the same intensity. It felt like his love had changed from a burning crimson to a calm and simmering azure. But apparently, blue flames carried far more heat than red ones. Alphina looked away from the blazing ice of Lionett's eyes. Why she did so, she didn't understand herself.

"My apologies, Your Highness," Alphina said as she handed the bouquet to a maid. "But you mustn't take time out of your day for things like this. You have so many other things to do."

Alphina knew well that she wasn't acting very cute right now. A normal girl might've blushed and thanked Lionett. Maybe they would've even smiled and said something like, "Wow, I'm so happy!" They'd never scold him.

"There's nothing more important in my life than capturing your heart," Lionett replied. When Alphina remained silent, he pressed on, "In the past, I was lying to myself. Even though I'd always loved you, I didn't make my feelings known. The Saint took advantage of that to manipulate me into executing you. I won't make the same mistake twice." He never broke eye contact with his fiancée, and his blue eyes glowed with even more passion. "Please grant me the permission to convey my love for you every day."

As Alphina pondered how she should respond, the window started to shake. "Oh, an earthquake," she observed.

The ground the pair was standing on started shaking as well, causing Alphina to lose her balance.

"Alph!" Lionett reached out and supported her, embracing her body to protect her.

In Alphina's opinion, he was overreacting, but she couldn't shove him away. So she remained in Lionett's arms, pressed against his chest and waiting for the earthquake to subside. Eventually, the clattering of the window stopped and peace returned to the earth. The maids ran about the room, making sure nothing had broken.

"Are you all right, Alphina?" Lionett asked.

"I am."

"That's good," he sighed, obvious relief in his voice.

Alphina pushed away from her fiancé's chest and said, "There's been a lot of earthquakes lately."

"Yes, I hope it's not a bad omen." He looked around and asked, "Is everyone else safe?" Lately, he'd learned to show concern for his subjects. Lionett was maturing into someone worthy of becoming the next emperor.

"Until next time, then, Alph."

"Until next time, Your Highness. Good work today."

Yes, Alphina knew that saying "Good work" when bidding farewell to one's *fiancé* was pretty unthinkable. But she didn't know what else she could say.

The prince turned and left the room. As soon as the door clicked shut, the maids all sighed in unison. Some of them remained rooted to their spots, their gazes fixed on the closed door. Lionett's beauty had such a tremendous effect on women.

Yet, the woman in his *heart is little old me, huh? Just what about me does he like?* That was the part Alphina didn't understand. Was she the strange one for not being able to figure it out?

The more Lionett loved her, the more questions welled up in Alphina's mind.

***

The next day, Alphina was allowed to invite a friend and spend time in the palace's garden.

"Lunea, it's been too long!"

"It has, Alphina! How've you been?"

Lunea Yun Yukon was the daughter of Marquess Yukon. She was a beautiful girl with a slender frame and green hair reminiscent of a deep forest. The pair had been classmates in high

school. Since Lunea had often been absent due to her weak constitution, Alphina—who'd been the president of the student council—helped her out. Over time, the two became close.

Alphina respected how strong-willed Lunea was. She was one of the few female students who'd paid little attention to the flirtations of Lord Blackrose—Prince Avenlock. When he tried to hit on her, she responded, "I only possess a single tongue, so I cannot possibly hold a conversation with a gentleman as double-tongued as you." Her rejection was so powerful she'd become something of a legend.

Granted, Aven's reply had been a casual "Then I shall grow a third tongue and then invite you for tea again." The pair had been extraordinary conversationalists.

"Oh, Alph, you've lost weight," Lunea said.

"Palace life is way too boring," Alphina sighed. "Look at you, though! You're starting to get chubby."

"I am! I've been healthy as of late, and my appetite has been as well. I'm especially fond of Alphina buns."

"Oh, stop it, you!"

Their giggles echoed in the pastoral garden. The pair was sitting on the terrace the gardeners had installed, cups of aromatic tea between them. Alphina couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed such a peaceful time with a friend. She'd never had the opportunity after graduation, and a few years after that, she'd started her time loop. It'd been much too long. Alphina felt like she was a student once again.

"It won't be long before I have to refer to you as Crown Princess Alphina," Luna commented.

"Yeah, I guess." Alphina sighed as the topic shifted to her upcoming wedding to the prince. Once they married, Lionett would officially become the crown prince.

"Alph, I can't believe you're sighing about something as wonderful as this! You're engaged to *the* Lionett, next in line for the throne. Do you know how many women in this empire would kill to be in your position?"

"Ah, yes, you're right. Silly me," Alphina replied, giving Lunea an awkward smile. She heaved another sigh on the inside. Not even Lunea could sympathize with Alphina about this.

Lunea's eyes took on a faraway look. "You know, I didn't want to

admit this, but I worried whether you and the prince would get along. You're such a free spirit and His Highness is so uptight. The pair of you are like oil and water."

"You wouldn't be the first person to worry about us."

"But it seems I was overthinking it all." Lunea's expression became more melancholic as she continued, "The people call Prince Lionett 'Lord Cold Heart,' but his eyes were always so gentle when he looked at you. Everyone thinks that this is nothing more than a political marriage, but I know that the prince's love for you is genuine. I knew that even when we were students."

Alphina was too surprised to reply. She'd never realized that Lunea harbored such thoughts. A maid approached the table to take away the empty cake plates, then she cleared her throat. When Alphina checked the time, she saw that it was already three in the afternoon. Her allotted visiting hours were over.

"Seems like I have to head out," Lunea said.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I wish we had more time to chat," Alphina replied.

Lunea smiled and shook her head before she took out an envelope from her handbag. "Could you hand this letter to Prince Lionett for me?"

"A letter?"

"Yes. The prince was my classmate as well, so I penned him some anecdotes from our school days. I've got to take every opportunity I can get to foster these old friendships, right?"

Lunea was usually very direct with her thoughts, so her evasive attitude seemed odd. Alphina wondered what the reason behind her behavior could be, but she decided against casting Telepathy on a friend. Lunea was the daughter of a reputable noble house, and she knew the prince on a personal level. Surely, this couldn't be some sort of conspiracy. Granted, it *was* curious that Lunea was acting so awkwardly.

"All right, then. It just so happens that I need to meet with him later, so I'll hand him the letter when I do."

"Thank you, Alphina. I'll see you next time!"

Lunea smiled and walked away. Alphina could only watch her go.

***

That night, after Alphina finished eating dinner in the parlor, Lionett came to visit. His expression was tense. When Alphina'd handed him Lunea's letter a few hours ago, he'd seemed the same as always. But judging by how he was currently carrying himself, something had changed since then.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?" Alphina asked.

"I apologize for giving you a fright, Alphina. Could you give us some privacy?" Lionett directed the request at the maids and after waiting for them all to leave, he removed a piece of paper from his pocket. "I'd like to discuss the contents of Lady Lunea's letter with you."

"With me?" Alphina furrowed her brow. "Your Highness, we may be engaged, but that letter was specifically sent to you. I can't possibly meddle in your private affairs, especially if it involves a personal friend of mine."

Lionett shook his head. "I understand what you're saying, but considering the contents of this letter, I can't keep you in the dark about this. I don't want to do anything that could cause you to doubt my feelings for you."

"Doubt?"

Lionett then explained that Lunea had written him a love confession. She'd fallen for him when they'd first met as children. Her feelings had never wavered, not even after the announcement of his and Alphina's engagement. The more Alphina listened to Lunea's love for Lionett, the more bothered she became. She could feel her heart rate pick up and she didn't know how to feel, as either the fiancée to the crown prince or as Lunea's best friend.

"Lady Lunea doesn't wish to enter a relationship with me. She explained in the letter that she'd forget her feelings for me after this confession, and that she genuinely prays for our happiness as a married couple."

"I can't believe it," Alphina murmured. She hadn't noticed a thing. Never in her life did she suspect that her old friend Lunea housed such strong feelings for the prince.

Lunea was familiar with the etiquette of high society, and she valued those rules far more than a tomboyish noblewoman like Alphina. So Lunea should know just how inappropriate it was for her to send a love letter to a betrothed man. That meant her love for Lionett was so strong that she was willing to break those rules

to confess to him, even if she knew that he would never reciprocate.

"I don't plan to give her a response," Lionett said in a serious voice. "I doubt she wants one, anyway. At the very end of the letter, she asked me to forget about it."

"But…" Alphina closed her mouth before she could finish asking Lionett to at least say something to Lunea. What could he say, anyway? In fact, *she* didn't even know how she'd be able to face Lunea next time they met. "Why did you tell me about this?" she asked instead, her voice tight with anger. "Lunea didn't want you to do that. She wanted you to keep this to yourself. So why did you —?"

"I know that I've wronged Lady Lunea by doing this," Lionett interrupted. "But I didn't want to keep anything from you, especially if it has to do with other women. I don't want to bear any guilt towards you. That was the lesson I learned from my past mistakes."

Alphina couldn't immediately tell what Lionett meant by "past mistakes." Lionett wasn't like Lord Blackrose. Even during their student days, Lionett never had any trouble or scandals with the opposite sex. The only thing she could think of was…

"Wait, Your Highness. Don't tell me you're still upset about what happened with Saint Debonaire?"

Though Lionett didn't say anything, the way he looked away from her told Alphina she'd hit the nail on the head.

"You weren't cheating on me!" she exclaimed. "She forced you to act that way with her magic. You weren't the only one under her control either. All of the men in the empire, including the *emperor*, were forced to obey her."

"But the fact remains that I had eyes for another woman." Lionett was so stubborn that Alphina could say nothing in response. "I will never cheat on you again, nor will my eyes ever stray. I don't care if my aloofness causes other women to cry." Before Alphina could even open her mouth, he ended his spiel with, "You're the only person who's ever in my heart."

"Your Highness…" Alphina realized just how much she'd underestimated his sincerity and loyalty. "I'm very happy to hear you say that," she managed to say as she looked away.

"Don't push yourself," Lionett said with a shake of his head. "I

know that you're still unable to accept my feelings. Lady Lunea is your best friend too. I knew that telling you about her feelings would cause you nothing but trouble. But this is the only way I know how to act. I'm sorry."

Any woman in the empire would shed tears of joy if they heard the Golden Sword say that to them. Lunea, for example, would've been so touched that she'd have started sobbing on the spot. Alphina knew all that, and yet her eyes remained dry. She was well aware of how little charm she possessed, and she also knew that compared to her peers, she lacked interest in attracting men's attention.

However, could her lack of emotions indicate that there was something wrong with her as a person? Had she lost something important over the course of ninety-nine time loops?

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A few days later, Alphina spotted Lunea while she was walking down one of the hallways in the palace. Lunea was some distance away, so she didn't notice Alphina watching her. Next to Lunea was her father, a government official in the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Alphina was about to call out to her when she changed her mind and closed her mouth. Even if she caught Lunea's attention, she hadn't the foggiest idea of what to say to her. At that moment, Lunea turned her head. When she saw Alphina standing there, her eyes widened. Alphina, on the other hand, remained expressionless.

Lunea smiled and picked up her skirt to perform a dainty curtsy. The movement was so smooth that, even from a distance, Alphina could tell that it had been a textbook greeting. But what left a bigger impression on Alphina was how graciously Lunea was acting. When Lunea turned around and kept walking, she held her head high with the pride of a noble daughter. No, she carried herself with the pride of a woman who'd lost to a romantic rival.

All Alphina could do in response was stare after her old friend's back.

Chapter Two

The next day, Alphina was granted permission to return home. It'd been a long time since she could do so, and she decided to have lunch with her family. Alphina enjoyed spending time with everyone, but her parents, as usual, kept asking when she and Lionett planned on holding their wedding. She could also kind of tell that they were worried she'd run off again.

"Mother, father, I don't plan on escaping. Please, rest easy on that," Alphina said with an exasperated smile. But, she couldn't give them a straight answer about the wedding date.

Lionett said that he'd wait until Alphina was ready. From her parents' perspective, though, the thought of her keeping the crown prince waiting was inconceivable. They were right; it *was* rude, simple as that. Other nobles of high standing hadn't said anything to Alphina yet, thanks to her reputation as the Greatest Vermilion, but if Alphina continued to reject Lionett, they were sure to start nagging her as well.

Yes, I know, I just need to say yes and everything will turn out hunky-dory. But still...

***

After Alphina's parents left to take care of something, she poured some tea for three boys in the parlor. One of them was Carl Mann Sylvana, Alphina's younger brother with the same red hair as her. The second one was Hipper Wilds, Carl's classmate. He was a transfer student from the neighboring country of Heavenrose, and he had curly black hair. Last but not least was Scarlet, Alphina's loyal butler. He had white hair and crimson eyes.

All three of them were adorable little boys, yet they each possessed wonderful talent. Carl was a magical prodigy, but he had trouble communicating with others due to his reserved nature. Hipper supported him in social matters, and the two of them made for a great team. Scarlet was actually a white cat and a familiar that Alphina's grandmother Yulinar, who'd once served as

the court mage, created. He always stuck by Alphina's side.

Even when they were in the palace, he pretended to be Alphina's pet cat. The maids and guards showered him with affection and, if the situation called for it, he was always willing to act as his mistress's sword or shield. Alphina was certain that in times of trouble, Scarlet was far more reliable than any of the palace's workers. Speaking with these diamonds in the rough while enjoying tea Scarlet brewed for everyone was one of the few times Alphina could truly relax.

"I don't understand Lionett Lione at all," she said. She could also express her honest thoughts when around them. "I'm a tomboy with average looks. My only redeeming feature is my sturdy body. And yet, he likes *me*? Of course, I'm flattered, but I don't understand His Highness. What's going on inside his head? I just can't figure it out."

"Is that so?" Scarlet nodded, though he looked confused.

Alphina could understand why. He must think it odd that she was capable of Telepathy, and yet she was complaining that she didn't know what was in Lionett's head. The problem was that even when she tried to listen to his inner voice, she only ever heard how much he loved her. But where did that affection come from? Alphina couldn't even begin to guess.

"Prince Lionett's a hero," Hipper said. "So the way he thinks and what he values are probably different from ordinary folk, like he can see things the rest of us can't. I guess it makes sense that we can't understand the inner workings of someone who's destined to become an emperor."

Alphina could tell that he was trying to comfort her, and she once again felt grateful that he was her brother's best friend. Next to Hipper, Carl was nodding. He was nodding so fiercely that Alphina swore she could see afterimages of his head. Even though he didn't say anything, she could tell that he didn't want to see his sister hurt.

"A hero, huh? I guess you're right," she said.

Alphina wasn't going to marry an ordinary human. She was going to marry a hero. If she thought of things that way, perhaps she could do it. But every time she remembered that she could only ever react with confusion to said hero's passionate love, she worried about her mental state.

That was when a muscular soldier saluted and entered the parlor. He was one of the Imperial Guards, and he was the one in charge of Alphina's safety this homecoming.

"Lady Alphina, I apologize for interrupting your chat," he said. "The palace just sent a messenger. His Imperial Majesty requests that you return at once."

"His Imperial Majesty did? I thought he knew I'd be visiting family today." Alphina couldn't hide the surprise and criticism in her tone. She was upset that she had to leave home early, especially since it'd been so long since she last visited, and she had no idea why the emperor would summon her out of the blue like this. Were they worried that she'd run away again?

In any case, Alphina couldn't ignore an order from the emperor. "Very well, then. I'll head back now."

"My deepest apologies. I shall prepare the carriage."

After the soldier hurried out of the room, Alphina looked at the three boys and said, "I'm sorry. Come visit me in the palace sometime soon."

Carl and Hipper nodded, looking sad. Alphina surreptitiously glanced at Scarlet, signaling for him to transform into a white cat and follow her back to the palace. Her loyal servant understood her silent order in an instant. With a graceful nod, he stood up and left the room.

Emergency summons from the emperor? That's never good. Something terrible must've happened.

***

Alphina hurried back to the palace, turning down even her parents' gifts and souvenirs. As soon as she arrived, Emperor Taiga IV greeted her. "Oh, Alphie-poo! Welcome back! I'm sorry for summoning you while you were visiting your family. I must apologize to Duke Sylvana at the next opportunity."

"There's no need to apologize; it was an emergency. Your Imperial Majesty, what happened?"

"Hmm, well..." The emperor hesitated, stroking his beard.

Alphina could tell that the atmosphere in the throne room was different from usual. Normally, there would be a score of people, ranging from attendants to guards to pages. Now, though, the

only ones in the throne room were the emperor, the marshal who acted as the emperor's right-hand man, and the captain of the guards. In other words, the emperor wished to discuss something top secret. Something was very wrong indeed.

Yet the words from the emperor's mouth were nothing Alphina ever expected: "There's a favor I'd like to ask of you. Would you be willing to meet with Lionett's older brother?"

Alphina's eyes widened and she looked up to stare at the emperor, though she remained kneeling. "His Highness's brother? What, um, kind of person is he?"

Lionett didn't have any siblings. He was the only child of the emperor's legal wife, the late Empress Nadia. The emperor had four concubines, and they each had their own children, but they had all been born after Lionett. Officially, Lionett didn't have any older siblings.

Is this an illegitimate heir? If this were Empress Nadia's child, there was no reason to hide his existence. That meant that this was the son of another woman—a woman who was neither the legal wife nor a concubine. The emperor was an austere man nowadays, but perhaps in his youth he'd been an irrepressible playboy. Alphina stared at the emperor, trying to imagine that. *But I heard the emperor was deeply in love with his legal wife.*

"This is something only a handful of people know about. Will you promise to keep this to yourself, Alphie-poo?" the emperor asked.

"Of course, Your Imperial Majesty. You have my word."

The emperor nodded and then reluctantly explained, "Lio's brother is three years older than him, and his name is Girne. He is a legitimate son between myself and Nadia."

"This is the first I've heard of him. I didn't even know he existed," Alphina said.

"That's because legally, Girne was never born. We pretended that Nadia suffered a miscarriage."

Now that the emperor mentioned it, Alphina remembered hearing that Empress Nadia had lost her first child before she had Lionett three years later. Her father told her that the citizens were greatly upset and disappointed as well.

"So in reality, Empress Nadia didn't suffer a miscarriage and she succeeded in giving birth. Why did you hide that?" asked Alphina.

“That’s because…” The emperor hesitated and patted his beard a few times before he continued, “That’s because Girne was born with the Evil Eyes of Hados.”

“The Evil Eyes of Hados?!” Alphina exclaimed.

In the Theva, Hados was the god of the underworld, and it was said that he possessed Evil Eyes of differing colors. A thousand years ago, the Lione Empire and the Heavenrose Kingdom didn’t exist on the continent of Eurappa. Instead, Eurappa was ruled over by a giant empire that the Great Emperor Galleon established. According to legend, the Great Emperor Galleon made a pact with Hados in order to gain enough power to rule over the divided lands.

Hados accepted the deal and said, “I shall bestow my great power upon your descendants. However, in return, you must know there is the possibility that one of them will be born with my Evil Eyes. Should such a child appear, I order you to hide them away and lock them underground as an offering to me. Now that the ritual is complete, I promise that your family will see great success for generations to come.”

With Hados’s blessing, the Great Emperor Galleon conquered the entirety of western Eurappa. His descendants eventually became the Lione house, who used their heritage to establish a new empire. This story was something that everyone in the Lione Empire learned in elementary school. Since everything happened a thousand years ago, when people didn’t distinguish between history and mythology, schools today taught it as a fictitious legend. No one in the imperial family had ever been born possessing those Evil Eyes. Or so they said.

“But in truth, Prince Girne was born with the Evil Eyes?” Alphina asked.

“That’s correct. That was why we had no choice but to hide his existence, as well as lock him away underground, beneath the palace.” The emperor sounded dejected.

You actually believed in that old superstition? Alphina wanted to say, but she bit her tongue.

Yes, it was nothing more than a legend, but such superstitions were crucial for a country’s continued existence. “Your brain is like a dishcloth that froze up after being left out for an entire winter night,” Alphina’s mother once lamented, and she was correct.

While Alphina may not worry or care about these stories, the average citizen did. These average citizens were the foundation of a thriving country. Heroes like Lionett and Avenlock weren't enough to maintain a nation. The emperor knew that better than anyone, which was also why he was suffering more than anyone over this.

"Girne's spent his entire twenty-three years of life underground. He's never once left," the emperor said with a sigh.

Alphina was struck speechless. She couldn't even begin to imagine how painful existence must be for Girne. He'd never set eyes on the blue sky or felt the warmth of the sun, nor had he ever enjoyed the breeze on his cheek. Girne would die without ever once running through a field or hearing the babbling of a brook. That sounded worse than getting executed and looping ninety-nine times.

"Girne insisted on meeting you," the emperor said. "Will you grant his wish?"

"He wants to speak with *me*?" Alphina asked. She had no idea what he could want. But maybe it was normal for someone to want to lay eyes on the woman who'd marry into their family. Girne would become Alphina's brother-in-law, so she saw no reason to object. "I understand. Very well, Your Imperial Majesty. I will meet him, if he'll receive me."

"My apologies, Alphie-poo. So sorry." Emperor Taiga IV sounded relieved.

"Lady Alphina, do you know the meaning of Girne's name?" the marshal asked in the emperor's place.

"I do not."

"In ancient Raman, Girne means 'broken.'"

"The broken prince, Girne Lione..." Alphina breathed.

The moment the sinister name passed Alphina's lips, the carpeted stone floor started to shake. Before they could even register it as an earthquake, the rumbling became stronger. The guards raced over to the emperor to secure his safety while Alphina and the marshal lowered their heads to protect themselves from anything that might fall from the ceiling. After a few moments, everything calmed down again.

"Is His Imperial Majesty all right?!" a guard's voice sounded from beyond the door.

“He is!” the captain of the guards replied. He gestured for the emperor to evacuate, but the emperor shook his head.

“Earthquakes have been frequent as of late. I just hope that this isn’t a bad omen,” he said.

Alphina nodded, but doubt clouded her heart. She didn’t believe in myths or superstitions. However, she couldn’t help but feel that something big was on the horizon.

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After Alphina returned to the parlor and made herself more presentable, she said, “I won’t make an escape, so could I have some privacy for a moment?”

The maids didn’t look happy, but they obeyed Alphina’s order and left the room. Once they did, Scarlet, in the form of a white cat, padded up to Alphina and sat near her feet. Using Telepathic Communication, she informed him what the emperor requested of her.

“Unbelievable!” As a cat, Scarlet couldn’t communicate with facial expressions. But his inner voice conveyed his sheer surprise. *“I’d thought the Evil Eyes of Hados were nothing more than a legend, but to think they actually exist!”*

“They might not. His eyes might have some curse on them, but that doesn’t mean the broken prince can’t live on the surface without causing any issues.” Alphina pointed out.

“You have a point. There’s no way to test that theory though.”

“Exactly. That’s why it’s so troublesome.”

Most people believed in superstitions. Even if the emperor didn’t put any stock into them, he had to do what was best for his people. Should the public ever find out about Girne’s existence, they’d surely panic and urge the emperor to lock him away like in the legend. It could cause internal strife in the empire, which anti-imperial factions could take advantage of.

And what effect would this have on Lionett? If people knew about Girne, then Lionett would become the second prince rather than the crown prince. Lionett might not care about his status, but the nobles who supported him wouldn’t take that lying down. Letting Girne out from the underground carried so many political risks that the emperor couldn’t afford to do so.

“I don’t know what’ll happen down there, so I’d like you to come with me.” Alphina said.

“Of course I will accompany you. Lady Alphina, whether it’s the underground or the underworld, I will always be at your side,” Scarlet replied.

Once I finished my preparations, fifteen soldiers in full armor came to pick me up. All of them were wielding swords, as well as wearing robes enchanted with defensive magic. They looked more like they were heading out to the front line of a battlefield than to an underground cell.

“Thanks for the hard work, everyone. But don’t you think you’re being overly cautious?” Alphina asked.

“Please forgive us, Lady Alphina. We can’t take any chances when it comes to your safety,” a soldier replied.

What in the world could go wrong? Alphina wanted to ask, but she held her tongue in the face of the soldiers’ tense expressions. *Better safe than sorry.* The soldiers led her to an underground library on the palace grounds. Apparently, this library was under the Department of Curators’ jurisdiction, and it contained many old history books and magic grimoires.

Scarlet, keeping pace with Alphina, said using telepathy, *“I’ve been here before with Lady Yulinar.”*

“With my grandmother? That puts my mind at ease.”

With magic serving as their lighting, the entourage descended the long staircase until they reached a room that could best be described as a jungle of books. Towering bookshelves stood as tall as trees, and the books lining them were packed so densely together that they resembled flourishing leaves.

“It doesn’t smell moldy here, despite the number of books,” Alphina observed.

“It’s very well maintained,” a soldier replied.

He wasn’t wrong. The floor and walls were clean, but this was still so bizarre. No matter how careful one was when preserving old books, they always gave off the unmistakable scent of mold. Someone must’ve cast a powerful preservation spell over this room. This magic piqued Alphina’s interest, but before she could spend any more time wondering about it, something even more fascinating happened.

Upon reaching the end of a hallway, a soldier slid a brick away

from the wall, revealing a keyhole. He placed a key inside and, with a rumble, the bookshelf slid to the right to reveal a red door. It wasn't any ordinary door either. It had countless jewels embedded in it, and golden ornaments adorned the frame. If a bandit broke into this underground library, they'd try to steal the door before even trying to enter the room.

"What an amazing door! It doesn't look like it leads to a room keeping someone prisoner," Scarlet commented.

"Well, that's because the person inside is the first prince. It's not that *surprising, I think,"* Alphina replied.

She could tell from this door that despite locking him away, the empire still gave Prince Girne the royal treatment. When the door opened, a tall man in a butler's uniform greeted Alphina and the soldiers. He had dark skin and white hair, and though his face resembled that of a gentleman, the look in his eyes was far too sharp to mistake him for one. This man housed some bestial nature behind his handsome looks.

When he saw Alphina, he lowered his head in a respectful bow. "I am Prince Girne's servant. My name is Cerberum."

In the Theva, Cerberum was the guard dog of the underworld.

"Lady Alphina, this man is—" Scarlet began before Alphina interrupted him.

"Yes, I can tell. He's a familiar like yourself."

If Girne had been the one to create him, that would mean he possessed magical power on par with Alphina's grandmother, who'd been the court mage.

Cerberum glared at the soldiers and said, "Good work, guards. I, Cerberum, will keep Lady Alphina safe from here. Please wait outside."

"B-But—" one guard tried to protest.

"This is what Prince Girne commanded," Cerberum cut him off, the look in his eyes promising murder.

The guards stiffened before nodding in silence, a cold sweat pouring down their faces. As soldiers under the emperor's direct command, they weren't weaklings or cowards. All of them had accomplished great merits and received medals for their work on the battlefield. But the guard dog of the underworld was so intimidating that they couldn't do or say anything against him.

Alphina turned to look at the cowed soldiers and said, "I'll be

fine. Wait for me out here."

"Understood," they replied after a moment's hesitation.

Then Alphina smiled at Cerberum and asked, "Would you allow this white cat to accompany me? Don't let his appearance deceive you; he's a very reliable bodyguard."

Cerberum glanced at the white cat on the ground before bowing once again. "As you wish, my princess."

I'm not your princess though, Alphina thought as she followed Cerberum inside. A red carpet lined the hallway, and at the end of it stood a door that Cerberum opened for Alphina and Scarlet. Inside, she could see a chair as glamorous and impressive as the emperor's throne. A man...no, a *boy* was sitting on it. *Wait, this is Prince Lionett's older brother?!*

Alphina couldn't help but gawk at him. He looked every inch like a boy of around fourteen or fifteen. He wasn't that tall either, standing only a hair above Scarlet. The prince looked even smaller when next to Cerberum and his large frame. However, his beautiful looks were more than enough to convince Alphina that this was indeed Lionett's brother by blood. Like Lionett, Girne had golden hair that seemed to shimmer under the light, and he boasted flawless beauty. His lips were as red as rose petals, and they were curled in a soft smile. If he ever left the underground cell, maidens were sure to swoon and blush when laying their eyes upon him.

His eyes were the only thing off about his appearance. Girne's right eye was the same icy blue as Lionett's. However, his left eye was a vibrant crimson that reminded Alphina of a blazing fire. He had heterochromia. Some in the magical community referred to this physical trait as "Evil Eyes."

So, these are the Evil Eyes of Hados? Alphina had been staring into them until she remembered herself and bowed. "It's nice to meet you, Prince Girne. My name is Alphina Shinn Sylvana."

"It's very nice to meet *you*, Lady Alphina. Or should I call you Crown Princess Alphina?" Girne spoke in a kind voice. It sounded as gentle and pleasant as the babbling brooks in the Amazone Forest.



“I haven’t married Prince Lionett yet, so please call me Alphina.”

“All right, Alphina. You don’t need to refer to me as prince, then. I have no right to the throne.”

“Very well, Lord Girne.”

Though their interaction had been short, Alphina could tell how affable he was. Since he’d spent his entire life underground, she’d imagined him unsocialized. It was a little disappointing how normal he was. In comparison, Lionett had been much more disagreeable during his school days.

Alphina looked over the face of this “broken prince” once again. His expression was cherubic, like he was the personification of innocence. If he didn’t possess the Evil Eyes, then it would be easy to describe his kindly beauty as “angelic.” *Is it possible for someone locked away their whole life to make this sort of expression?*

Giving in to her curiosity, Alphina activated Telepathy, but it didn’t work. She only heard silence in response. Those with Evil Eyes possessed powerful magical powers and apparently had an easier time deflecting others’ spells. *I guess he has much more magical power than I do*, Alphina concluded.

“Hmm,” Girne hummed, staring at Alphina as well. The smile on those roselike lips deepened. “You’re the same as me.”

“The same?”

“That’s right. Loop.” Upon hearing the word that came out of Girne’s mouth, Alphina’s eyes widened. “You’ve gone through many loops, haven’t you?”

Alphina could feel sweat bead on her back. “A-And what led you to that conclusion?”

“Because I’ve been looping as well,” he replied in a casual tone. Alphina gasped and upon seeing her shocked expression, Girne laughed. “I’ve looped nine hundred ninety-nine times up to this point. This is my thousandth one.”

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Alphina could only stand there, mouth agape, upon hearing the broken prince’s revelation. She’d gone through ninety-nine time loops, and never once did she encounter another person experiencing one. But, according to the beautiful boy before her, he’d gone through life nine hundred ninety-nine times—far more

than *she'd* ever done.

"In the past, I met with Lady Yulinar," he began.

"With my grandmother?" Alphina asked.

"That's right. She told me that those who use the same magic possess the same aura. And she was right! Your aura is the same as mine. I suppose this is a destined meeting." When Alphina continued to stand there, unsure of what to say, Girne looked over at Scarlet. "Dispel."

As soon as the word left his lips, a blurry light surrounded the white cat's body. Then, a *poof* sounded in the room. The light vanished to reveal Scarlet in his human body, dressed in his butler uniform.

Girne laughed. "So the white cat reveals itself to be a handsome boy." He smiled like a child who'd succeeded in pulling off a prank.

Cerberum, still standing next to his master, said in a firm voice, "It's rude to remain a beast when standing before Prince Girne."

"M-My apologies!" Scarlet replied at Alphina's side. He hunched his shoulders and hung his head. When Alphina glanced at him, she could see anxiety all over his face. It seemed that Scarlet was also having difficulty gauging Girne's personality.

"Is he your familiar?" Girne asked.

"He is. His name is Scarlet," Alphina answered.

"A High Familiar capable of thinking for themselves and acting on their own, is he? I suppose Lady Yulinar was the one to create him. My Cerberum is a High Familiar as well. Lady Yulinar taught me how to make them. Your grandmother was truly something special. Familiars are a lost art that only fictional mages can use." He clapped his hands together before continuing, "I'm guessing your Loop magic is also something Lady Yulinar cast upon you?"

"It is." Alphina was impressed by how much he'd figured out. Considering he went through nine hundred ninety-nine loops, it was of no surprise that his magical power far exceeded hers. Magic accumulated in the user every time loop, but Alphina had only gone through ninety-nine. She was nowhere near nine hundred ninety-nine. "Lord Girne, did you summon me here because you wanted to confirm that with me?"

"Nope, that's not it," Girne replied with a smile. "Did you know Loop requires a trigger to work? Under normal circumstances, that trigger is death. In your case, I'm guessing that being executed for

a crime you didn't commit acted as the trigger."

Alphina stared into his Evil Eyes, unable to blink. This was the biggest surprise of the day. "Y-You even figured that out?"

"Heh, of course I did!" Girne puffed his chest out like a child boasting about an accomplishment. "In the nine hundred ninety-nine time loops I've experienced, Saint Debonaire always blames you for her crimes, leading to your conviction and execution. There are some differences here and there, but your death as a result of the Saint's manipulations was constant across nine hundred ninety-nine lifetimes. I'd thought your fate set in stone, and your destiny cursed. That a troublesome foe had set her eyes on you and you had no hope of escaping. And yet, here you are in this thousandth loop." His eyes, one blue and one red, shone with curiosity.

"You're alive. You should've died on July 5th, 845, yet two years have passed and you're still here! What in the world happened? How did you escape the Loop? How did you defeat the Saint? I couldn't contain my curiosity, which is why I asked my father, the emperor, to bring you before me." Girne leaned forward, and Cerberum reached out to grab his shoulder so he didn't fall out of the chair. "Tell me, Alphina. Explain to me what this is all about."

"Well, that's..." And so, Alphina told Girne all about what happened. She didn't inform him of her Telepathy magic. He might know about it already, but she had no obligation to tell him more than necessary.

As Alphina continued her story, Girne's cheeks became flushed. His little nostrils flared and his eyes sparkled like a child listening to a hero's epic. He was enjoying Alphina's retelling of her adventures and misadventures.

"I see, I see," Girne said, nodding in excitement. "The Saint killed you ninety-nine times, but on your hundredth loop, you launched a counterattack! What a satisfying conclusion to your tale. Amazing, Alphina!"

"R-Really?"

"You really are amazing! I can't believe you could overcome such a difficult fate and break free from the time loop. Oh, Alphina Shinn Sylvana!"

At long last, Girne pushed himself to his feet. He approached Alphina but could only manage a few steps before he started

coughing.

“Lord Girne?!” Alphina rushed over to him as he collapsed.

“Sorry, my body is rather weak,” he rasped. “Not that surprising, considering I spend all of my time here away from the sun.”

“Please, don’t push yourself.”

“It’s not all bad down here, though. My imprisonment kept me safe from the Saint’s Geis. I couldn’t believe how foolish everyone on the surface was when Cerberum told me what was going on. She might have had the great Xenos’s protection on her side, but she was still nothing more than a single villainous woman. My father and brother were so pathetic.”

Girne returned to his chair, and Cerberum handed him a glass of water. After accepting it, Girne drank it in slow sips. Perhaps he wasn’t able to chug down the whole thing.

Once she was sure that he was hydrated enough, Alphina asked, “Lord Girne, you said that you’ve looped nine hundred ninety-nine times, right?”

“I sure did.”

“And you said that something has to trigger the loop. If my trigger was my execution, then what’s yours?”

The smile vanished from Girne’s face. “I presume you know that there’ve been a lot of earthquakes happening in the capital?”

“I do. The imperial academy is investigating the reason behind them all.”

“Those earthquakes are nothing more than an omen,” Girne said in a calm voice. “Three months from now, Mt. Flame Dragon will erupt, killing seventy percent of the population. This will lead to the decline and the eventual destruction of the Lione Empire.”

“D-Destruction?! This empire’s gonna be destroyed?!” Alphina exclaimed in a shrill voice.

Girne nodded. “That Great Calamity is my trigger.”

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The Great Calamity. Alphina and Scarlet were staring at the broken prince in shock, unable to comprehend the foreboding premonition.

“The academy said that Mt. Flame Dragon has a low chance of eruption,” Alphina tried to argue.

“Alphina, that’s nothing more than a wish made by humans lacking any actual knowledge about the world. How can we pitiful humans hope to understand the laws of nature?”

“I suppose you’re right,” sighed Alphina. Volcanoes and earthquakes were all caused by events happening deep underground. Humans might think they understood everything, but they had no way of seeing the true appearance of the earth. “Is there no one who can prevent it?”

“Nope,” Girne replied with a shake of his head. “Who can stop a volcano’s eruption, anyway? I did my best during the first twenty loops, but there’s no spell to counter it, and no miracle ever occurred. I tried calling for a large-scale evacuation, but the emperor didn’t give me the time of day. Besides, I’m trapped underground. The massive earthquake caused by the eruption will destroy this palace, crushing me under it. And then it’s over.”

Girne shrugged and shook his head. Alphina understood exactly how he felt. She’d also tried to avoid her fate during the first fifty loops, only to give up after realizing how futile it was. In Girne’s case, he was going up against a volcano *and* an earthquake. Neither of them were enemies that a human could hope to defeat.

“Destruction, huh?” Alphina sighed. “The empire wasn’t able to rebuild itself after the disasters?”

“As you know, the Saint turned all the men in this empire into utter buffoons. The army and court were both full of corruption, and they weren’t able to deal with the aftermath.”

Alphina made an understanding noise. *So it’s once again the little piggy’s fault?* She felt at a loss. “But the Saint’s not here in this world. Don’t you think it’s a little too early to give up on preventing the empire’s destruction?”

“Not really. It’s not as if there’s much hope,” replied Girne, sounding like he couldn’t care less. Alphina couldn’t blame him, considering he’d seen the empire collapse nine hundred ninety-nine times. But simply waiting around for destruction was not Alphina’s style. This may be the thousandth calamity for Girne, but it was the first time for Alphina.

“I’m going to look into the Great Calamity,” she said. “There might be something in my grandmother’s books and papers. Maybe there’s no way to stop the eruption, but there might be a

spell to calm the earth."

"I already looked into that. You're talking about the books in Lady Yulinar's house in the Amazone Forest, right? I asked the emperor to bring me everything there was inside and read through all of them. But even the great court mage was powerless in the face of the forces of nature."

Girne's face showed nothing, not even resignation, and his voice never carried any emotion. He sounded like he was describing a story he'd read many times over.

As Alphina struggled to come up with something to say to him, the broken prince asked, "Instead of wasting time on worthless pursuits, why not live here with me?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly as it sounds. The Great Calamity will happen in three months' time. Why not witness the Lione Empire's final moments here with me?" A smile played on his lips, and Alphina intuitively recognized it as the smile of one who'd surpassed both life and death.

"My apologies, Lord Girne, but I can't twiddle my thumbs and wait for the empire's destruction. I plan on fighting against this fate as best as I can."

Scarlet nodded in agreement. He looked proud, like he was thinking, "I expected nothing less from my mistress."

In comparison, Girne's reaction remained frigid. "I already told you it's useless, but fine. In case of an emergency, you and your family can always flee to another country. I do feel bad for Lionett, considering his fiancée will be leaving him at the altar."

"No, I don't plan on running away." Alphina gave him a firm nod. "In the past, I've fled the country to run away from the chains of fate and past karma tying me down. However, that was only to attain freedom. In my entire life, I've never once run away from impending danger."

"So, you plan to fight against your fate?" The prince's eyes narrowed with his smile. "Alphina, you're just the same as me. Your mind has already surpassed that of a normal human. Even after hearing of the empire's doom, you choose to stand and fight. To describe you as 'courageous' would sell you far too short. Your heart is no longer that of a human's."

"My heart's…no longer that of a human's?" Though Alphina tried

to maintain her calm, she couldn't stop the tremor in her voice.

"I'm sure you're well aware of it yourself," replied Girne. He must've noticed Alphina's agitation, because there was dark humor in his voice as he continued, "You've lived and died a hundred times. You've lost your understanding of a normal human's emotions. It's like how a god can't understand how humans feel. Hmm, perhaps it's more apt to say it's like how a person can't understand how insects feel."

Alphina realized she had no way of countering this accusation. She wanted to tell Girne he was wrong, and yet the words caught in her throat. The incident with Lunea had cast a shadow over her heart.

"In that case, a human prince isn't the right man for you. Don't you think you belong with a dark prince who's fated to loop through time in the same way you did?" Girne's voice carried a soft temptation. "If you truly cared for my brother, you should have never come here. But it's too late. I've met you, and now know the kind of person you are. I can't go back to the way I was before. I can't even imagine how I'd start my thousand and first loop without you."

Light flashed from his Evil Eyes. Sensing danger, Alphina tried to look away, but it was already too late. Her limbs wouldn't move. He'd cast Bind—and an extremely powerful version at that—on her. Alphina couldn't resist it at all. His Evil Eyes had amplified his magic.

"What did you do to Lady Alphina?!" Scarlet yelled. He tried to jump at Girne, but Cerberum blocked him with his massive frame. When Scarlet tried to attack him, Cerberum easily parried the move, forcing Scarlet to back away.

"I should ask you the same question, kitten. What do you think you're doing to my master?" Cerberum growled. When Scarlet hissed in response, he continued, "Pathetic. How can you call yourself the princess's servant with that level of strength?"

Scarlet looked wounded. Hearing that from a fellow familiar must've been a blow to his pride. But he couldn't deny the vast gap between Cerberum's strength and his own. Though Cerberum only gave a short display of his fighting prowess, Alphina could tell he boasted as much skill as Lionett or Avenlock. He lived up to his title of the "guard dog of the underworld."

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Girne said as he approached Alphina, who remained frozen in place. He rested a hand against her cheek and leaned in close. “This is the first time I’ve felt this way in nine hundred ninety-nine lifetimes. I’ve never once wanted anything. I’d given up, you see. And yet a small hope has bloomed in my heart. Will you fulfill my wish, Alphina Shinn Sylvana?”

Pinned down by those beautiful Evil Eyes, Alphina couldn’t even open her mouth. Bind wasn’t keeping her in place. Rather, empathy was. As someone who’d looped ninety-nine times, Alphina could understand his despair. She hesitated to take his hope away. But then…

“Can you step away from my fiancée, brother?” a cold, yet intense, voice sounded out.

When Alphina turned around, she saw Lionett Lione standing there. He’d already pulled out his sword, ready for combat. Upon seeing the weapon, Cerberum placed a hand on his own sword.

“My dear brother Lio, it’s been far too long,” Girne said, looking up at Lionett and taking his hand away from Alphina’s face. “It’s been two or three years since your last visit. You used to drop by on my birthdays, but you stopped after the Saint cast Geis on you. Did you only remember your poor older brother after Geis wore off and you got reengaged to your precious Alphina?”

“Girne.” Lionett sheathed his sword and knelt before his brother, who was his elder by three years. “A twist of fate is the only reason I’m next in line for the throne. Destiny, rather than my own merits, granted me my status as crown prince, but my future with Alphina was something I chose for myself. It’s something I won after fighting off interference from both the Saint and the prince of Heavenrose.” Though he spoke in a firm voice, he never once looked up at Girne, staring down at the floor the entire time.

“So what, Lionett?” Girne asked, a hint of something dark and terrifying entering his voice. “Our father and the marshal were the ones who arranged your marriage with her. They’d chosen the daughter of the Sylvana family to become the bride of the crown prince—in other words, they chose *her* to become the crown princess. In that case, doesn’t it make more sense for her to marry me, as I’m the first prince?”

“Girne,” Lionett started before his brother cut him off.

“Do you understand, my pathetic little brother? You stole

everything—my throne and my fiancée—from me."

Lionett closed his eyes, and Alphina realized something. Fear wasn't stopping the courageous Golden Sword from meeting his brother's eyes. Guilt was.

Thundering footsteps sounded from the entrance as the soldiers who'd been waiting outside the door stormed in. Girne sighed as he returned to his chair. Cerberum was standing next to it, glaring daggers at the intruders.

"I'm tired of this. Go home."

As soon as he said that, the magic keeping Alphina in place lifted. Freedom came so suddenly that she stumbled, but Scarlet rushed to keep her upright.

"Thank you, my brother," Lionett said, bowing at him. Alphina and Scarlet mimicked the motion. "Let's go, Alph."

"R-Right."

Lionett took her hand and led her away. Girne and the soldiers were watching, so it was a little embarrassing, but Alphina clenched his fingers. His hand was frigid, and Alphina could feel minute tremors running through it. Alphina had never realized how delicate the mighty and powerful Golden Sword's hand was.

"Listen, Lionett. Keep this in mind." Girne's bitter voice sounded behind them. "Never forget what you stole from me. Never forget the fact that you're a thief, Lio."

The words seemed to echo around them as they left the room and ascended the stairs.

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The moment they returned to the surface, they sent away the soldiers. Scarlet worried that Girne and Cerberum might pursue them outside of their cell, so he stood by the door to guard it. That left Alphina and Lionett alone.

"I'm sorry, Alph," Lionett said. "I didn't know things would turn out like this."

"It's fine," Alphina replied.

They were sitting underneath a tree in the garden. Lionett was staring at the sky, a sad look in his eyes. He was probably still hurting from his brother's words.

"Just the other day, I promised I wouldn't hide anything from

you again, and yet I put on this pathetic display. I couldn't tell you about my brother. Please forgive me."

"Don't worry about it. It's a national secret."

Sure, he promised he wouldn't keep any more secrets from Alphina, but she didn't really expect him to tell her *everything*. Alphina's father, George, loved his wife, Mary. That didn't mean he shared confidential information with her, and Mary didn't want to hear it either. However, Lionett was the kind of man who would apologize for something like that.

"Your Highness, why did you come all the way here?" Alphina asked.

"When I heard my brother wished to meet you, I had a feeling this would happen," Lionett replied, looking over at her. "My brother has spent his entire life underground, stripped of his freedom. As you're the personification of freedom, I guessed he would fall for you. We're related by blood, born from the same womb. My sixth sense told me we would love the same woman as well."

Alphina didn't know how to answer that, and she looked away.

"I feel bad for my brother," Lionett continued. "But that doesn't mean I'll let him marry you. If in the future, my brother loses the Evil Eyes, and he becomes next in line to the throne once more, I'll gladly give him the title of crown prince. But, you're special."

(I'm sorry, Girne.) Alphina heard his inner voice say. *(When I die and travel to the underworld, I'll repent for my sins before Hados. But, until that day comes, I'd like to spend my life with my beloved Alph...)*

Alphina's heart pounded faster in her chest. She glared at her future husband, attempting to ignore the thumping. Part of this reaction was because of worry, but perhaps she was also trying to hide her embarrassment as well.

"Your Highness, you mustn't blame yourself!" she cried.

"Alph?"

"I do feel bad for Lord Girne. Fate dealt him a rough hand. But it's not your fault. You should blame his luck or curse Hados! Yes, gods are so powerful that humans are mere insects in their eyes. In that case, we should give them a taste of their own medicine! We should ignore them and live the lives *we* want to lead. You mustn't feel bad! You're too kind for your own good!" she yelled in one breath.

Lionett blinked and stared at her in surprise. “Kind? I’m not sure if that’s an accurate description of me, but that’s the first compliment you’ve ever given me.”

“Huh? Um, I don’t think it was the *first*.”

“It was. I don’t recall hearing any others.”

Is that so? Alphina tilted her head to the side.

“Today’s a special day. I’ll mark it down in my diary so we can celebrate this anniversary in the future,” Lionett said. His expression finally softened, and some color returned to his pale skin.

“Y-Your diary? It’s not that big a deal,” Alphina muttered.

“Should I not?”

“I can’t stop you if you insist.”

Alphina couldn’t help but find this entire exchange hilarious. Lionett was so serious he’d circled back to being funny. Everyone only knew him as Lord Cold Heart, so getting to see this side of him was a privilege reserved for Alphina. *No, perhaps he’s only like this when he’s around me.*

“Your expression is so soft today, Alph,” Lionett observed.

“I always have a soft look on my face,” Alphina replied.

“No. When you’re speaking with me, you usually look like you’re glaring.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is. You always smile when you’re around your brother and his friends, but you don’t make that expression when you’re with me.”

“I already said that’s not true!”

Since both Alphina and Lionett were stubborn, they refused to give the other any quarter. Their argument felt so silly that Alphina couldn’t help but laugh.

“I have something else to record in my diary today,” Lionett said, nodding to himself.

He had such a serious look on his face that Alphina laughed out loud, giving him a third thing to write about.

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In the future, Alphina would often think back to this day. And every time she did, she would have a single regret: “If only I’d

asked for more details and held a proper conversation with him.”

Chapter Three

There was no place in the Lione Empire that had as many books as the academy's library. It contained every single book that had ever been published in the empire, and anyone could use it so long as they were a student or teacher. Every day, the library was full of students who would one day work in the government as officials and administrators.

A well-guarded secret archive existed in the library as well. The books in this vault contained knowledge that would be dangerous if misused. For example, one grimoire taught the reader how to create highly addictive and illegal substances. Another grimoire contained powerful offensive magic that could severely injure or kill whoever the caster used it on. Only the academy's professors, or those with higher authority than a professor, could access this archive. If anyone else wished to enter it, they needed to apply for permission and undergo an extensive examination.

Alphina might have been the daughter of Duke Sylvana, but she wasn't exempt from this rule. Even worse, the application process usually took several weeks. *Who has the time for that?!* Since Alphina'd visited Girne, earthquakes had become a daily occurrence. Now that she knew these earthquakes would eventually lead to Mt. Flame Dragon's eruption and the Great Calamity, she had no time to waste. And so Alphina decided to use her connections. To be honest, she didn't want to use this one, nor did she want to meet this person. But she had no other options. This was to save the empire.

"My, my, Lady Alphina. I don't do this for just anyone, you know?" a pretentious voice sounded out from behind Alphina as she rummaged through the bookshelves, her eyes as wide as saucers.

The speaker was Kithling Ashley. He was a handsome young man with blue hair, and the sophisticated glasses on his face paired well with his features. People in the empire referred to him as Prince Lionett's brains and looked forward to when he would eventually become the brains of the Lione Empire. He was

intelligent enough to deserve that title. However...

"For generations, the Ashley family has produced elite after elite. Please keep in mind that my mother's position as an academy professor is why I could give you access to this vault."

Alphina remained silent. Kithling was like someone took the personification of "snideness" and gave it some clothes and glasses. His inner voice was a whole other beast, though.

(Yahoo! ♪ I'm on a library date with Lady Alphina! Heh heh heh, I guess this is what you'd call a perk of my position! Ah, Lady Alphina, whatever am I going to do with you? If you wanted to spend time with me, then you only need to say so but I suppose you can't considering how it might damage His Highness's reputation but to be honest as long as I can spend time with you I'm happy! Pfft hee hee ah wait I messed up! How can I, the genius and sophisticated Kithling Ashley, have a laugh like "Pfft hee hee"?! It's like proclaiming to the world that I'm a disgusting geek! No no it's been so long since I last got to spend time with her that...ahhh wait I'm drooling I'm drooling oh no where's my handkerchief ahhh I left it in my bag I'll have to go get it but if I go get it then that'll take away from my precious Alphina time but wait if I don't have my handkerchief than I'll have to slurp up my drool while in front of her nooooooooo is this what people call "ambivalence"?!)

"Ambivalence"? I should be the one screaming that. What did Alphina do in her past life that she'd have to conduct her investigation with this closeted pervert? The second she listened in on his inner voice, she regretted using Telepathy.

"Lady Alphina, I didn't expect you to be interested in books," Kithling said out loud. "What are you looking for?"

Still scanning the bookshelves, Alphina replied, "Not to answer a question with one of my own, but Kithling, what are your thoughts on the recent earthquakes?"

"How do you mean?"

"Have you ever wondered if they're omens for an even greater calamity? Like, for example, do you think they're warnings that Mt. Flame Dragon might soon erupt?"

Kithling thought for a moment before saying, "Well, I'm sure there are people who believe that. However, if we nobles express any fear, then we'll spread unnecessary anxiety among the citizens. That could lead to panic. I believe that undergoing proper preparations is what we need to do in case of a future emergency."

“What do you mean by proper preparations?”

“We’ve been stocking up food and drinkable water. Key facilities in the empire have been undergoing renovations to strengthen their foundations, and the military has been preparing sand to put out any fires that may occur in the future.”

Smart people really were a different breed. Kithling and those around him were doing exactly what needed to be done.

“Aha, now I know what you’re looking for, Lady Alphina!” Kithling said.

“Huh?”

“You’re looking for a way to stop the eruption, aren’t you?”

Alphina paused in her search and looked at him.

Kithling puffed out his chest with pride and continued with a chuckle, “Well? I’m right, aren’t I? It’s a bold idea—exactly what I would expect from you—but there’s no way to stop an eruption. I’ve read through almost every single book in this empire. If I don’t know the way to stop an eruption, then it simply doesn’t exist.”

“Kithling.”

“What is it? Would you like to praise me?”

“Hmm, how should I say this? You always mess up at the last step.”

“Excuse me?!”

Kithling scowled. Alphina didn’t mean to annoy him, but that was her honest opinion. She’d thought it ever since Kithling snuck into the Heavenrose palace in order to defeat the Saint. His plans and methods always worked up to a certain point, but since he’d let down his guard at key moments, he had trouble seeing the heart of the matter. With that in mind, Kithling would make a great adviser, though not a good leader. He excelled at offering advice rather than making plans on his own.

“I’m not looking for a way to stop the eruption. I’m looking for a way to cause it,” Alphina said.

“Wait, what?” Kithling’s glasses slipped off the bridge of his nose. “Y-You’re saying you want to *cause* an eruption in an empire that’s already dealing with daily earthquakes?”

“No, *I’m* not the one who’ll cause the eruption.”

Kithling adjusted his glasses and shook his head. “I can’t understand the way you think.”

“Sure, sure, I figured,” Alphina sighed.

She wasn't confident in her idea either. Even if she was right, she didn't know if it was enough to stop the empire's destruction. But Alphina wasn't the type of person who could sit around and wait for the end. She'd already decided that she would fight against fate to the best of her abilities. Though she didn't have anywhere near as much experience as Girne and his nine hundred ninety-nine loops, she'd still gone through ninety-nine lifetimes until she found a way to break free and live.

"Honestly, I believe the chances of that volcano erupting are close to zero," Kithling said.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I've found no historical records mentioning Mt. Flame Dragon's eruption! According to the academy, volcanoes with no risk of erupting are defined as 'extinct.'" Kithling pushed up his glasses with a proud smirk.

Alphina sighed. He was such an honor student. "By historical records, you mean human records, right? The sky and the land were around long before humans ever walked the earth. It's weird to assume we know *everything* there is to know about the world."

"*If* Mt. Flame Dragon ever erupted before humans appeared on this continent, that would be thousands...no, tens of thousands of years ago."

"Yeah. Is that so strange?"

"Pardon me, but it's simply impossible for the volcano to erupt."

Kithling was book smart; he was the kind of person who stuffed his large brain full of information he'd read or heard about. So it made sense that he couldn't fathom the way Alphina viewed things. He could only see and imagine the world through the filter of existing facts and precedents.

Bored with this debate and knowing that it would head nowhere, Alphina changed the subject. "Should Mt. Flame Dragon ever erupt and bring about the Great Calamity, we'll have no choice but to help Prince Lionett and His Imperial Majesty escape the empire."

"Yes, you're right. Of course, this is still nothing more than a hypothetical," Kithling replied.

No matter how much destruction the eruption caused to the capital or the geography of the Lione Empire, they needed to keep the imperial family alive. So long as the empire's figureheads were

safe, they could gather the survivors and work to rebuild the country.

“Speaking of the prince, I hear he’s heading out to Mt. Flame Dragon today,” Kithling said.

“Huh?” Alphina had been reaching out for a new book when she heard Kithling’s words. She paused and turned to gape at him. “Wh-Why is he heading there?”

“The constant earthquakes have caused some important mine tunnels to collapse, and so he headed there to assess the damage. Mt. Flame Dragon is a region so dangerous that even adventurers don’t dare to step foot near there, but the prince once killed the flame dragon there. So he volunteered himself for the task. Prince Lionett is what all leaders should aspire to be like.”

“Wh-Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!”

“Oh, I figured you already knew.”

“I didn’t!” Alphina shoved the book in her hand into Kithling’s arms. “Return this to the shelf for me!”

“W-Wait, Lady Alphina?!”

Ignoring Kithling’s attempts to stop her, Alphina raced out of the vault. It was far too dangerous to be near the volcano right now. They still had time before the eruption, but if anything happened to Lionett, then it would be one step closer to the future of destruction Girne told her about.

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Alphina rushed to the palace’s southern gate on horseback. Ten soldiers, on their own horses, were already standing in line and waiting for orders. Three carts, likely to transport supplies, were on standby as well. A group of muscular men, who looked like laborers, had crammed themselves onto one of the carts. At the front of the group was a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes, riding atop a white horse. He was staring off into the distance, towards Mt. Flame Dragon. His eyelashes were so long that they seemed to flutter in the spring breeze.

“Your Highness! Prince Lionett!” Alphina called out to him.

Lionett turned his horse around when he heard her. His beautiful face was slack with surprise. “Alph, what are you doing here?”

“That’s not important right now! Why are you personally leading the investigation? And why didn’t you tell me about it?!”

The soldiers and laborers looked shocked that the prince’s fiancée had arrived, and without any guards either. They rushed to dismount their horses and jump off the cart so they could kneel before her. It was all way too formal for Alphina’s tastes, but she couldn’t waste any time telling them off.

“My apologies,” Lionett said. “I didn’t want to cause you undue worry.”

“Oh, so you *know* that going to Mt. Flame Dragon will make me worry?”

Lionett pursed his lips at his fiancée’s accusatory tone. “During the expedition to slay the dragon a year ago, I traversed the deepest caverns of Mt. Flame Dragon. No one in the empire is as familiar as I am with that place. That’s why I must go.”

“Yes, but…” Alphina looked around at the soldiers and workers. However, no one met her eyes. They must’ve tried to dissuade the prince, just like Alphina was doing now, but to no avail. *The prince is so stubborn! No, at this point, I should say he just has a one-track mind!* Lionett’s decision to lead the investigation into Mt. Flame Dragon was a manly one, but today, Alphina simply couldn’t find it in herself to praise him for it.

(Nothing I have was earned with my own merit,) his inner voice was saying. *(That’s why I always need to prove to everyone that I’m worthy of becoming the emperor after my father steps down. More importantly, I need to show the citizens and Girne that I’m worthy of being Alphina’s betrothed. A man who cowers in the castle because he’s scared of an earthquake has no place at the Greatest Vermilion’s side.)*

I knew it. That incident with Lord Girne really shook him up. Alphina sighed. “Fine, then. In that case, let me go with you.”

The soldiers murmured among themselves and Lionett shook his head, his mouth a firm line.

“No, Alphina. It’s too dangerous.”

“Remind me again who’s the one heading out to said dangerous place?!” Alphina exclaimed, no longer able to contain her anger. “So you can go investigate the mountain, but I can’t? Where’s the logic in that?! Even if an earthquake happens and we end up buried alive under the rubble, I wouldn’t mind that! We’ll

just cross the River Steex together when the time comes!”

“According to the Theva, the ferryman on the River Steex only takes one person at a time,” Lionett pointed out.

“Then, I’ll swim alongside your boat!” Alphina retorted, waving her arms and showing off her expertise with the butterfly stroke. The soldiers widened their eyes at the display. They were familiar with the Greatest Vermilion, but they did not know what Alphina Shinn Sylvana was like as a person.

“I’m sorry, Alphina,” Lionett said, looking to the side and signaling the leader of the imperial guards, who understood the unspoken order.

“My apologies, Lady Alphina!” the leader said, grabbing Alphina from behind and holding her in place.

“Let me go!” Alphina tried to break free, and she even stomped on his foot with all her strength. However, she couldn’t deal any damage through the thick military boots he was wearing. Nonetheless, Alphina continued to fight. Some other soldiers had to surround her to help the leader of the guards hold down her arms and legs. “Your Highness, don’t run away from me! Your Highness!”

“I’m sorry,” Lionett murmured once again as Alphina continued to yell and curse at him. Without another glance behind him, he and his white horse marched off, followed by the other soldiers on horseback. The horse-drawn carts followed after the entourage.

Alphina would come to regret this moment in the following days. She should’ve broken free, even if it meant using super high-tier magic on the guards, and stopped Lionett. She should’ve chased after him, even if it meant using Swiftness to catch up.

“I’ll be back in five days. I won’t be able to give you any flowers during my absence. Please forgive me, Alphina,” were Lionett’s final words before he left as if the spring breeze had spirited him away.

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Three days had passed since Lionett set off. During those three days, Alphina spent all of her time in the academy’s secret archive, only leaving to take a bath. She even ate her meals while flipping through books in the vault.

Alphina had never been more studious in her life. Kithling even widened his eyes and said, “This is the first time I’ve seen you under a roof for this long,” when he noticed her. From Alphina’s perspective, though, the prince had abandoned her (something she’d sulked about for days) and so she had no choice but to let out her frustrations through research. If she didn’t have these books to take her mind off things, she might’ve joined her mother to practice kara-tay, a type of martial arts.

Scarlet was helping Alphina as well. In fact, he seemed even more passionate than she did about finding a solution here. He was practically sprinting between the shelves, looking over every single book. He was working like a man possessed. Alphina wondered if losing to Cerberum weighed on his mind. That wasn’t due to Scarlet’s own weakness, though. A familiar’s strength came from their master’s magical power. Girne was stronger than Alphina, so it tracked that his familiar would be stronger than hers too.

However, Alphina knew that telling Scarlet this wouldn’t bring him any comfort. Like how Lionett had his pride as a prince, Scarlet had pride in his position as Alphina’s familiar. Out of respect for that, she remained silent.

On Sunday—the fourth day since Alphina and Scarlet buried themselves in the piles of books—Carl and Hipper came to help them since they had the day off. It was during the afternoon when Hipper spoke up.

“Look here. This passage kinda feels like what you’re looking for,” he said, handing a book with a red cover over to Alphina.

She flipped through the pages. Until this point, there’d been countless books with passages that “kinda” felt like they contained the answers Alphina sought, but none of them did. So when she started looking through the book Hipper passed her, she wasn’t expecting much. However, the more she read, the more her eyes sparkled with curiosity and excitement.

“You did it, Hipper! This is it! You found it!”

Scarlet and Carl gathered around the pair, and the four of them leaned down to read the book. The pages contained instructions for the ancient spell, Hados’s Awakening.

“I see,” Scarlet, who’d finished reading before anyone else did, said. “There’s a possibility of causing an eruption if we cast this

spell where the tectonic plates are unstable from all the earthquakes. However, I don't believe we can put that plan into action."

"Why not?" Alphina asked.

"The ritual necessary to cast the spell is incredibly difficult. Please look over here."

He pointed at a passage in the book and Alphina read through it, humming to herself as she did so. "When the earth's anger reaches a peak, only the souls of those who descend from a noble conqueror may soothe it. They shall present and offer themselves before Hados, lord of the underworld. Only then shall crimson fire spill from the great mountain," was written upon the pages in ancient script.

"'The earth's anger' must mean the earthquakes," Alphina said. It wasn't difficult to connect the dots, and it made sense to take advantage of an earthquake to cause an eruption. "Are 'those who descend from a noble conqueror' the imperial family, then?"

"Most likely," Scarlet replied. "And the souls are their lives."

"They have to offer themselves, according to the book. Does that mean they need to commit suicide?" To summarize, someone from the imperial family needed to kill themself during the earthquake or else they wouldn't be able to activate the spell. It was a vulgar ritual, but more importantly... "It sounds impossible to pull off, doesn't it?"

"It does. I have no idea how anyone could perform this."

Scarlet was right. It wouldn't be so bad if the ritual wanted them to kill someone from the imperial family. They only needed to kidnap them and then knock them out with magic or drugs. Then, while they were unconscious, they'd kill them for the ritual. It was easy to come up with a murder plot, but making them commit suicide? That was more difficult.

"There's no way to pull this off without something like the Saint's Geis," Alphina mused.

"That's correct. However, the Saint is no longer around. Lord Girne's claim is that the earthquake will occur even without her," Scarlet said.

Hipper tilted his head to the side. "I don't know who this Lord Girne is. But doesn't he mean the eruption is a natural disaster rather than caused by anyone's magic?"

Carl nodded, agreeing with his best friend.

"I guess," Alphina said after a moment. Hipper and Carl were right; there was a higher chance that the coming eruption was a natural calamity.

Alphina knew that she'd been hoping for another answer, though. If the coming eruption wasn't a natural one, and was instead the result of some conspiracy, then she simply needed to find the ringleader and stop their plot. Doing so would prevent the Great Calamity. That was why she'd been looking around for a spell that could cause an eruption. *Now that I think about it, hoping that the eruption is someone's evil plot was a strange thing to wish for.*

"Let's say that someone *does* know this ritual... Who are they, and why would they want to perform it?" Hipper had been the one to pose the simple question.

"Remnants of the Church of Xenos? They seem like they're crazy enough to try it," Alphina guessed.

Carl's and Hipper's expressions tensed. In the past, their homeroom teacher, Bayard (or Mister Honey Bear, as Alphina referred to him) tricked them and tried to offer them as human sacrifices to revive the Saint. Bayard had been a zealot of Xenos.

"Kithling gave me an update on the Xenites," Alphina continued. "He said that it's impossible to completely annihilate them all. Many of them fled underground, so there's a chance that they're scheming something in secret."

Hipper nodded, his face still twisted in a grimace.

Carl slowly opened his mouth and said, "It's weird."

"What's weird, Carl?" Alphina asked.

"I've...always thought it weird. The Theva said...Xenos is a good god. But the Saint...his messenger...she wasn't a good person. She was always doing bad things...like controlling us with magic. The Saint accused Alphina of a crime she didn't commit...and had her executed."

"Wow, I didn't know you could say so many things at once," Hipper said, eyes wide.

In any case, Carl was right, and his musings were something Alphina had pondered on many times herself. The great god Xenos was the chief of the other gods in the Theva. He was the most powerful of them, as well as the most holy. On occasion, he'd test humans with difficult trials, but he always had a reason for

doing so. The Theva described him as a fair and just god. Yet, the messenger that Xenos chose for his apostle and bestowed with his blessing—the Saint—had been such an evil person. Why was that? After going through so many time loops, Alphina had started accepting this contradiction with “this is just the way things are.” But now that Carl mentioned it, it really was strange.

“Lady Alphina!”

They turned around at the shout to see Kithling bursting through the door and racing into the vault. He was panting from sprinting all the way here.

Alphina opened her mouth to jokingly ask if he was giving his shoulders a workout when she noticed something: she’d never seen Kithling look so serious before.

“L-Lady Alphina, I have terrible news! His Highness…” Kithling swallowed and, without wiping the sweat off his face, yelled, “While investigating Mt. Flame Dragon, a rock fell and struck Prince Lionett. He’s in a coma!”

Interlude: Lionett (1)

Mt. Flame Dragon was about thirty kilimeters away from the palace. As the name suggested, a Flame Dragon had lived in the mountain for over a hundred years, which made the fire spirits in the area even more active. Despite the altitude, the temperature here was about five degrees hotter than on flat ground.

However, things changed after the Flame Dragon's death. In the year since the Golden Sword Lionett killed the dragon, the fire spirits grew weak and the temperature here was the same on as any other mountain. Thanks to the nice weather, it was so comfortable that many of the soldiers were wearing short sleeves. Some of the laborers had even stripped off their shirts. This was an investigation, not a life-or-death battle. It made sense that the soldiers were a lot more casual about this job.

The entourage was investigating an area halfway up the mountain. According to reports, a landslide had occurred here a few days ago. Lionett dismounted as well. He would guard the group from any monsters and beasts that might attack them while the investigation was underway. Though he'd warned them to keep their guards up, the monsters here weren't too strong and so the soldiers' expressions were bright with confidence.

"I suppose it's understandable," Lionett muttered to himself.

For several years now, an oppressive atmosphere had dominated the empire. The Saint had had an authoritarian rule over the government. Meanwhile, Alphina's death had lowered the soldiers' morale and left the citizens with a crushing sense of guilt. Heavenrose had been applying political pressure as well. Lord Blackrose, or Avenlock, was said to be a prodigy when it came to combat, and the Lione Empire had feared the prospect of him launching an attack.

However, Heavenrose and Lione had managed to sign a treaty with each other. Not only that, but after the emperor revealed Alphina had survived, the citizens' happiness at the announcement exploded after all the prior grief, filling the empire with joy and freedom. It felt like Duke Sylvana's strong and optimistic

personality had infected everyone. *It's thanks to Alphina…thanks to my wife that this country has changed for the better.*

Referring to Alphina as his "wife" was a tad hasty. But Lionett was already calling her that in his mind. A single noble daughter had not only changed this empire, but she'd saved it as well. *And I'll be the one to marry her. I'm the luckiest man in this country. No, in the entire world.* Though Lionett didn't doubt that for a second, there was a blot on his conscience when he thought about his impending marriage.

Girne Lione was the reason behind this hesitation. A cruel fate had caused his older brother to spend his entire life underground, and Lionett's guilt towards him weighed upon his shoulders. To make matters worse, Girne had fallen for Alphina after meeting with her. Lionett might have been a hero worthy of the title "Golden Sword," but that didn't mean he could remain unfazed by this turn of events. *But…in that case, what should I…?*

"Pardon me, Your Highness," someone called out to Lionett, who was leaning against a tree and lost in his own thoughts. When he looked up, he saw two young men who'd only joined the imperial guard last month standing still, nervous looks on their faces. "Please forgive my impudence for speaking to you, Golden Sword. We were wondering if you could enlighten us with a story of how you defeated the Flame Dragon here?"

Their eyes were sparkling with respect and excitement as they gazed upon their hero. Lionett sighed, though he made sure it wasn't so obvious they'd notice it. Nobles at parties often asked him to regale them with this same tale, but Lionett wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed bragging about his accomplishments.

The leader of the imperial guards glared at the young soldiers. "We aren't on a picnic, you two. I already warned you to keep your guards up and—"

At that second, with a deafening rumble, the ground began shaking. It didn't feel like the usual earthquake. Normally, the ground shook left and right, but this time, it was shaking up and down. The vibrations felt like someone was poking up at the ground from underneath it.

"Everyone, mount your horses! Get away from the cliff as quickly as you can!" Lionett immediately shouted, sensing something was amiss.

The soldiers jumped to follow his command, but the horses were panicking at the earthquake, making it difficult for the soldiers to climb onto them. Right next to them was a cliff. There was a high chance someone might fall off in this commotion.

“If you can’t get on your horse, then leave it here! We must prioritize evacuation!” Lionett yelled. With masterful command over his own steed, he raced to the front of the group in order to lead them to safety.

“Your Highness, please stand down! I’ll ride at the front!” the leader of the guards cried.

“No, leave it to me!” Lionett retorted. He charged, swinging his sword. The vanguard was in a dangerous position, and Lionett didn’t hesitate to volunteer himself for the task. Due to his powerful swordsmanship, he was able to slice through the falling rocks with his sword as if they were butter, opening up a path for the soldiers. As soon as they put the cliff behind them, Lionett went to the back of the group to bring up the rear. “We’re almost there! Run, everyone!”

That was when an explosion sounded from the distance, as if someone had set off a large amount of gunpowder or cast an explosive spell.

“An explosion? Here?!” a soldier cried.

“That’s impossible! Who could’ve done that?” another one exclaimed.

More rumbling shook the ground, this time so strong that the soldiers lost their balance.

“Don’t stop! Run!” Lionett bellowed, protecting some soldiers from the falling rocks. A massive boulder landed right in front of him, blocking his path.

“Your Highness! Prince Lionett!”

He could hear the leader of the imperial guards yelling for him. However, Lionett couldn’t answer, so focused on avoiding the falling rocks while pushing ahead. More landed in his path, though, blocking off any escape. He raised his sword to cut his way through when the cord on the pendant around his neck snapped off. The pendant was a piece of wood carved into the shape of a bear, and Lionett always had it with him.

“Alphina!” he cried, leaping off his horse without hesitation and picking it up.

He tried to mount his horse again, but it was too late. A massive rock fell and landed straight on the horse's head. The beautiful white horse gave a shrill whinny before falling over, where it lay still. Lionett fell with it and when he tried to get back on his feet, several rocks fell right onto him.

"Gah!" Blood sprayed from his mouth, flecking his lips. *I broke my ribs!* Then another rock hit him on the back of his head. His vision shook and he fell to his knees. Yet another rock fell... "I'm sorry, Alph."

As soon as he said the name of the woman he loved the most in the world, Lionett lost consciousness. The Golden Sword collapsed onto the ground as rocks continued to fall on and around him, burying him underneath. Covered in stones and sand, the prince's beautiful body seemed to become part of the mountain itself.

Chapter Four

Lionett was discovered an entire day after the rockslide. In a twist of fortune, he'd fallen in between two boulders and miraculously, none of the rocks had crushed his limbs. However, he'd lost a lot of blood from the wound on the back of his head; something must have struck him hard and put him into a coma. When the rescuers discovered him, he'd been severely weakened from his injuries. Both his pulse and breathing were faint, and his pale skin had turned translucent from all the blood loss. They'd even been able to see his veins and arteries underneath.

The prince had been on the brink of death. He only survived because three healers from one of the empire's magic guilds spent three days using white magic on him around the clock. However, he still hadn't regained consciousness. He remained lying on the bed, his blue eyes hidden beneath his eyelids.

According to the doctors, this was because of the damage his head took. Most of the brain's functions were still a mystery, which was why healing spells didn't account for it. In other words, under the empire's current understanding of medicine, the doctors had no idea what to do for the prince.

Alphina was no exception. Her grandmother Yulinar had been a skilled healer, and she'd left behind a number of potions that could heal any physical wound in seconds. However, Yulinar didn't have any spell or potion that could wake someone from a coma. All Alphina could do was wait for Lionett to recover.

The citizens were aware of his condition as well. In the beginning, the government considered hiding it from them, but they'd hired so many people to search for him that rumors spread about his safety. Since things would only get complicated if the population began concocting conspiracy theories about Lionett's whereabouts, the government had no choice but to announce what happened to him. As a result, the citizens were in a state of fear and sadness.

From dawn till dusk, a long line constantly formed at the government's special civilian registry office in front of the palace

gates. Everyone looked gloomy, and most of the women had tears in their eyes. The nobles were as upset about Lionett's coma as the common folk. In fact, many of them were even sadder about it than the citizens. Some of the noble daughters at the registry office within the palace would wail and sob, not caring at all that they were in public.

"Oh, Your Highness, my heart aches when I think of the state you're in!"

"I pray every day that you'll wake up and make a full recovery!"

"If, Xenos forbid, anything happens to His Highness, then I'll kill myself to keep him company in the afterlife!"

They would say things like that while crying, swearing their fealty and love to Lionett. However, many people complained about them as well:

"Prayers won't wake him up."

"Isn't it more disrespectful to talk about him like he'll die?"

"They're so freaking noisy."

"Fill out the registry form and leave any donations in silence," the emperor had to go out of his way to proclaim a mere three days after the registry offices opened. That was how loud the women were.

Of course, not all the visitors were so irritating. After signing her name in the registry form, Lady Lunea Yun Yukon held up an ascrite hand mirror. Ascrite was a kind of gemstone said to possess healing powers, and many people throughout history offered it to the god of medicine when praying for someone's recovery.

"My grandmother, may she rest in peace, gave me this mirror as a trousseau," she said. "However, I don't mind parting with it if it can help His Highness recover as quickly as possible. Even if it means I've lost my chance at marriage in this lifetime, I won't regret giving it away."

A single tear made its way down Lunea's cheek, and the nobles who'd been wailing about how sad they were fell silent, awkwardly looking away.

Meanwhile, Alphina, who had to deal with the guests as Lionett's fiancée, sat with her back straight and proud. Her eyes were dry and her mouth remained shut. Under normal circumstances, Alphina was a cheery and chatty woman. But now,

she simply lowered her head in silence at the constant stream of guests. The solemn way she carried herself was a point of admiration among the nobles.

“Lady Alphina is so strong.”

“I’ve not seen her shed a single tear. She’s doing her best to hide how sad she must be.”

“She’s truly worthy of becoming the crown princess.”

Though strangers might have praised her for the way she was acting, those who were familiar with Alphina interpreted her behavior in a different way.

Kithling Ashley, who was supervising the registry today, testified: “It’s an almost imperceptible change, but she looks paler than normal. Her expression is usually so bright and sunny, and now it looks like a shadow has fallen over it. She must be worried about the prince.”

Young Hipper, who was once Alphina’s student, saw things in a different light: “Miss Alphina isn’t acting like herself. Of course, she’s worried about Prince Lionett. But that’s not all. She looks like she’s in pain. I’ve never seen her like that before.”

Carl Mann Sylvana, Alphina’s younger brother, only had one thing to say: “Don’t blame yourself.”



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No one knew whether the rockslide on Mt. Flame Dragon that Lionett and his expedition survived resulted from a conspiracy, or if it was nothing more than a natural disaster. Some testified they'd heard sounds consistent with an explosive spell. However, the scene of the disaster was a mess, and it made investigating next to impossible. Aside from that, the frequent earthquakes meant no one could get close to Mt. Flame Dragon in the first place. The truth of the rockslide would remain buried for a while longer.

More importantly, Lionett hadn't recovered from the incident. The priority had been to make sure he survived, and everyone in the country was more focused on that instead. Alphina had placed a chair at Lionett's bedside. Only the doctors and nurses could do anything about his condition. All Alphina could do was stay at his side until he woke up.

She stayed with him all hours of the day, only leaving to eat or take a bath. Once, while she was bathing, someone reported that the prince's eyelashes moved. Upon hearing that, she rushed out in nothing but a towel. In the end, the report turned out to be a mistake, as someone had left the window open to let in some fresh air and a breeze made it seem like Lionett was waking up. Alphina had slumped her shoulders in disappointment before sneezing. This action was so "Alphina" that it brought some measure of peace to the solemn air in the palace.

Alphina herself, however, was serious about wishing for Lionett's recovery. Scarlet was painfully aware of his mistress's feelings. He hesitated to even call out to her when he saw her sitting next to Lionett's prone body. Sympathizing with her or saying he understood her pain wouldn't give his mistress any comfort. Scarlet knew that better than anyone.

"Hey, Scarlet," Alphina said, her voice devoid of emotion. "The tears won't come out. Everyone's crying for Lionett, and even Lunea couldn't hold back her tears. I'm the only one whose eyes are dry. Even though *I'm* his fiancée and the one who's closest to him, I can't cry." She held Scarlet's hand in a pale grip. "Before he left, I read his mind. He said, 'A man who cowers in the castle because he's scared of an earthquake has no place at the Greatest

Vermilion's side.' The prince risked going to the dangerous Mt. Flame Dragon for *me*." And yet Alphina couldn't shed a single tear for him. She wasn't sure if she was even sad or not. All she knew was that she felt empty, as if someone had carved a hole in her chest. "Maybe Prince Girne was right, and I've lost the heart of a human. Aw man, after fighting that monster of a Saint for so long, did I become an abomination myself?"

Scarlet rushed to shake his head. "It's not like you to blame yourself, Lady Alphina! It's like a shade of sadness has possessed you. You never give up and always act in the face of danger. That's the kind of person you are!"

The door opened and several young guards walked in, all sporting injuries. Some had bandages around their arms, and others were on crutches. They were all people who'd survived the rockslide thanks to Lionett.

"There's something we'd like to give you, Lady Alphina." A soldier with bandages around his forehead handed her a bear-shaped pendant. Alphina had given it to him in the past, right before he'd set off to exterminate a tribe of barbarians in the north. "When His Imperial Highness was trying to escape the earthquake, this pendant snapped off, and he tried to retrieve it. It must be important to him."

Alphina accepted it from him with trembling fingers.

"I wasn't sure who to leave it with. But I thought, as his fiancée, you would be the best person to have it," the soldier continued, before apologizing for how late it took him to see Alphina.

By the time Alphina managed a "Thank you," the group had already left the room. Alphina didn't even notice, too busy staring down at the pendant.

"Lady Alphina?" Scarlet asked in a hesitant voice.

"Sorry, Scarlet, but could you leave me and the prince alone for a moment?"

Scarlet looked like he wanted to say something, but he decided to respect his mistress's wishes instead. As he closed the door behind him, he turned around to look at Alphina one last time. Her ponytail, which usually danced about in tune with Alphina's lively movements, was hanging low behind her, like it had lost all its strength. He'd never seen her look so sad before. Scarlet bowed to Alphina before leaving.

“Hey, Prince Lio,” Alphina said. Silence met her words as her fiancé remained fast asleep. *Lio. Wasn’t I the one who offered to call him that so we could get to know each other better?*

“I was the one who suggested that. Yet, I never tried to understand or know you any better. All I did was run away.” She’d gone through ninety-nine lifetimes, and in all ninety-nine of them, she’d never had a proper conversation with Lionett. Not even once. “The tears really aren’t coming.”

Alphina’s voice broke. She clutched the bear-shaped pendant so hard her knuckles turned as white as snow.

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A week passed, and Lionett still hadn’t woken up. Since he’d recovered from his injuries, the healers removed his bandages. The color had returned to his skin as well. But he never opened his blue eyes. The Golden Sword remained sheathed in bed—a most uncharacteristic place for him to be.

As for Alphina, she was sitting at his bedside, as per usual. She’d not had a proper night’s rest in two weeks now. Even with her sturdy physique and strong force of will, the exhaustion was taking its toll on her. Her eyelids grew heavy and before she could remind herself to stay awake, she drifted off.

Alphina was dreaming of a time back in school, soon after her parents had arranged her marriage to the prince. One afternoon, she invited him on a walk. The weather had been sunny, with a comfortable breeze to cool everyone off. They strolled at a hill near the school, which was covered with red alphina blossoms, and had a proper conversation for the first time.

The prince never spoke back then. Since he always looked miffed, I thought he didn’t want to be my betrothed.

However, when she looked back at those days through the lens of this dream, she realized that wasn’t the case at all. A light flush had graced Lionett’s pale cheeks. His lovely mouth had always been trembling. Now that she thought about it, the evidence of his love for her had been there this whole time. Back then, she hadn’t been able to hear his inner voice. But if she’d only paid attention with her eyes and ears, she would’ve noticed how Lionett’s affections had been reserved for her. She felt awful and guilty.

If the prince doesn't wake up, then I'll never get the chance to make it up to him.

A sound came from outside the room, startling Alphina awake from her catnap. She looked over at the window. It sounded noisy out there, and she could hear voices raised in argument.

Oh no, did someone break in?!

Alphina leapt to her feet and looked around the room for something she could use as a weapon. After confirming there wasn't anything, she picked up the chair she'd been sitting on and, without a moment's hesitation, threw it onto the ground and smashed it. She grabbed a leg, holding it like a makeshift sword, and rushed towards the door.

The moment the intruder comes in, I'm going to break their head open!

The door opened and Alphina swung the chair leg down on the shadow that walked in. However, the intruder blocked it with a sword. The thin blade of the sword had a unique curve to it. Before she could get a closer look at it, the sword knocked the leg out of her hand. It flew through the air and landed on the ground.

Regaining her balance, Alphina put some distance between herself and the intruder. They were an expert swordsman—between the quick lunge and powerful slash, it was clear this was no ordinary assassin. Ignoring the cold sweat dripping down her face, Alphina glared at the enemy before she noticed how familiar their dark skin and black hair were.

"P-Prince Avenlock?!" she blurted, shocked at the intruder's identity. "What are you doing here?"

The prince of the neighboring nation of Heavenrose still had a dangerous look in his eye. He patted the dirt off his clothing as he replied, "To see you, of course! I trekked all the way here just to see your lovely face."

"Uh-huh..."

"And since I'm here, I figured I'd pay that weakling snoring on the bed a visit, but..." Avenlock pushed his hair out of his face and furrowed his brow. "It seems like *you're* the one in more need of a visit than Lionett, Alphina."

***

Alphina and Avenlock decided to chat in a garden close to the room Lionett was sleeping in. A group of soldiers from both Lione and Heavenrose were watching over them, though far enough that they couldn't hear what they were saying. The Lione soldiers were wary of Lord Blackrose, since they didn't know what he might do. Meanwhile, the Heavenrose soldiers were standing guard in case the Lione soldiers tried to harm their prince. They were glaring at each other, with the Heavenrose soldiers looking fired up in particular.

(If anything should happen, I'm willing to put my life on the line for Prince Avenlock!) Alphina could hear their inner voices saying.

He's unconventional as far as princes go, but his soldiers really respect him, Alphina thought. She adjusted the way she sat and turned her attention back to Avenlock. "The crown prince of Heavenrose, barging into the Lione Empire's palace without making an appointment first? You're as reckless as I remember."

"What's the point of power if I can't even see the woman I love when I want to? I'm just following my heart," Avenlock replied breezily. He really was the polar opposite of Lionett. "Damned Lio. I can't believe that pathetic idiot hasn't woken up yet. It was nothing more than a rockslide."

"Nothing more? Most people die in rockslides, you know?"

"They won't if they're determined to live."

"Uh-huh..."

According to the soldiers who'd been at Mt. Flame Dragon, it'd been more akin to a rock avalanche. That Lionett was alive was a miracle in and of itself. Though Lionett was a swordsman so skilled he could even slay a dragon, that didn't mean he could fend off a boulder landing on his head. But apparently, the prince of Heavenrose didn't agree with that. His argument that Lionett lacked the guts to recover from his coma was a ridiculous one. But if Lionett was awake, he would probably agree with him.

"He's right. I lacked determination!" he would have lamented.

These two are always fighting with each other, even though they're similar in such strange ways.

Avenlock took a sip of the tea Alphina poured for him, smiling like it was the most delectable brew. "Even disregarding his lack of determination, don't you think this incident was just deserts for him?"

“You’re saying he deserved it?”

“I am. He went and meddled with the investigation instead of leaving it to the soldiers. That’s not what the prince of a country should do.”

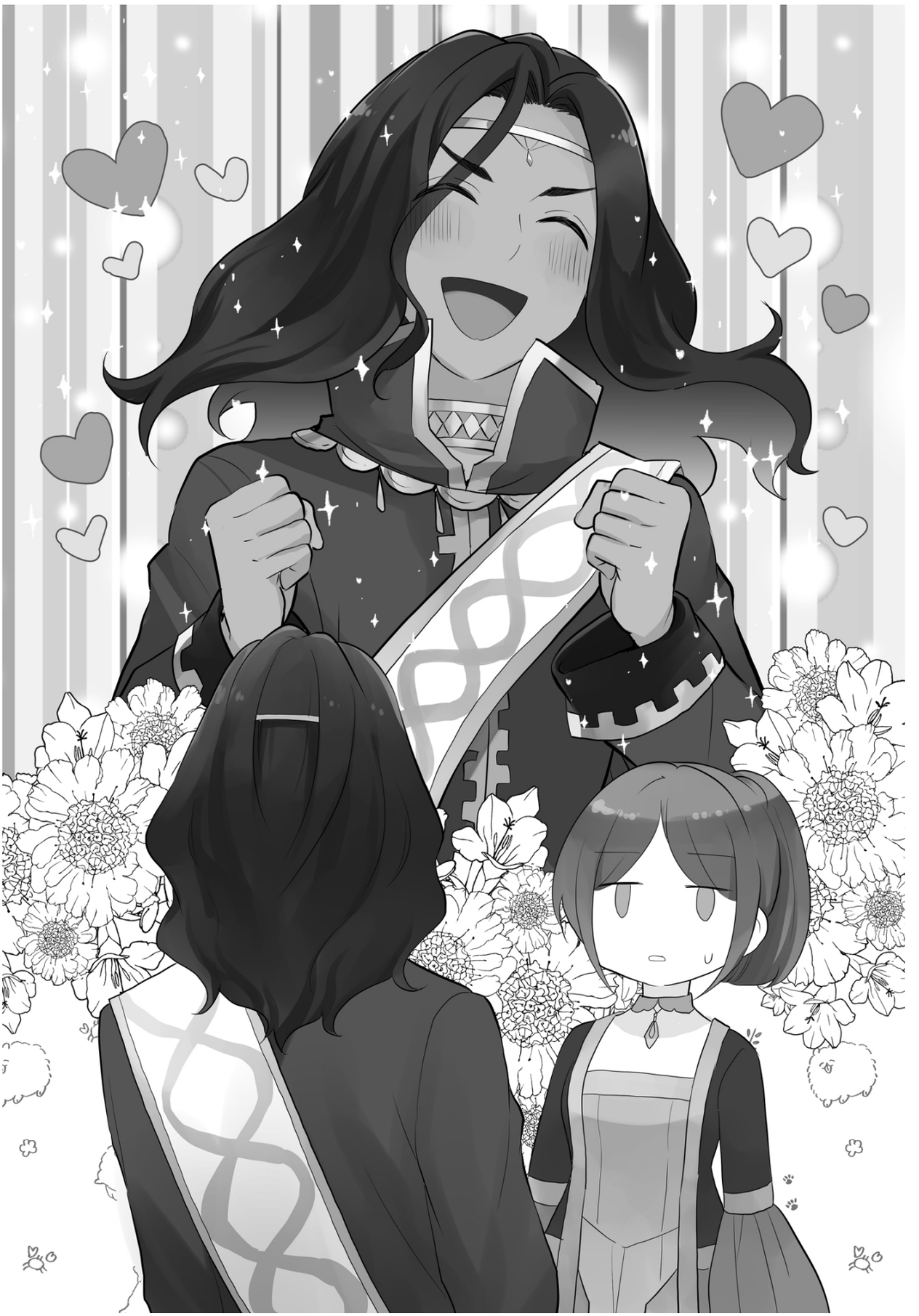
If Alphina was being honest, she’d have to acknowledge he had a point. But she argued, “His Imperial Highness said that he’d been there before to slay the Flame Dragon, so he was the most familiar with the mountain’s layout.”

“Why is the country’s superior putting in so much work? He’s taking jobs away from the people who serve him. All a prince needs to do is sit back and relax in the back. In fact, I’d go as far as to say he shouldn’t do anything else! Stop sticking your nose into places it doesn’t belong in, Meddlenett!”

Avenlock was probably the only person who could call the Golden Sword, famed for his incredible combat prowess, such a mocking nickname. But it was strange. Despite Avenlock’s criticisms and insults, Alphina couldn’t sense any malice from him. As for his inner voice…

(Yahooey! ♪ Yahooey! ♪ I get to chat one-on-one with my precious Alphie! I’m gonna steal her away while that idiot Lio is fast asleep! ♪)

He’s the same as always; it’s like he’s cursed to have a musical in his head. Singing about something as sordid as stealing another person’s fiancée in such a cheerful voice is a little hard to react to. But I’m sure he won’t try anything here.



“Prince Aven, could you advise me on something I’m worried about?” asked Alphina.

“My ears are biologically incapable of ignoring a beautiful woman’s troubled sighs. But hmm, *you* have something you’re worried about?” It was clear from the way Avenlock was looking at Alphina that he found the situation rather amusing.

“I have worries too, you know?” Alphina huffed.

Before she’d realized it, Alphina had reverted to the casual way of speaking she’d had back in school. She felt like she was back in school—back to when her only stressors had been her recent engagement to the prince and her position as student council president. She hadn’t been used to her responsibilities yet and, since Avenlock had been such a troublemaker, she’d often summoned him to the student council room. They were always arguing with each other, so she’d been under the impression that Avenlock disliked her. But after she heard his inner voice, she’d realized how wrong she’d been. Alphina’s eyes had never once reflected Lionett’s or Avenlock’s genuine selves.

“I might not be human anymore,” Alphina said, coming clean to Avenlock about her recent worries.

“Oh? What are you, then?” Avenlock asked.

“I don’t know. But humans shed tears when they’re sad, don’t they? And yet, I can’t cry. The prince I’m engaged to is in a coma, and the tears just won’t come. Other women have waterfalls coming out of their eyes, and yet mine remain dry. ‘Cold-blooded’ isn’t even enough to describe me. I’m worried I’ve lost what it means to be human.”

Alphina hadn’t been able to tell Carl or Scarlet these honest thoughts. She didn’t know why she could confide in Avenlock. Maybe it was because he was a foreigner rather than someone in the Lione Empire, or maybe it was because they used to be classmates. Or maybe it was because he was the only person Lionett acknowledged as a rival. Alphina didn’t know; all she knew was that he was the only person she could confess this to.

By the time she finished speaking, Avenlock had a grave expression on his face. He didn’t look worried about Alphina. Rather, he looked like someone who was seriously contemplating how they might help a lost traveler.

“You can’t cry because you haven’t given up,” Avenlock said.

“You know that tears aren’t enough to bring Lio back.”

His words were like a bullet, piercing straight through the depression in Alphina’s heart.

“I…haven’t given up?” Alphina felt her body grow warm despite the pain in her chest.

“That’s right,” replied Avenlock. “Even in difficult situations and against adversities that would make a normal person give up, you always stand up and face your problems without fear. You may fail. But you don’t let that stop you. Instead, you try and try again. So, why aren’t you doing that now?”

Alphina’s eyes widened. Avenlock’s words sparked something hot and passionate in her heart. To be more precise, it reminded her of that burning passion inside her. Avenlock was right. How many times had she repeated the time loop? How many trials had she overcome? She’d escaped from an inescapable fate, and conquered an unavoidable death. *That* was the reason she was sitting here alive right now.

“Experiencing a hundred deaths would have driven most people insane,” Scarlet had once said.

But surprise, surprise! I’m still alive. Yes, I’m still here. In that case, I can just try again!

“That’s right. I can just try again.” Alphina’s eyes widened, and she gripped her hand in a fist. Her breathing was coming in shallow pants. Her excitement was akin to that of someone who’d finally stumbled upon the exit to a large labyrinth.

“Right now, you seem to me like someone who voluntarily locked herself in a jail cell,” Avenlock continued. “I doubt you’re meaning to act like that. Jeez, this isn’t like your usual self. Did you recently acquaint yourself with a prisoner?”

Surprise rendered Alphina speechless at first. *This foreign prince is really amazing. He can’t use magic to read my mind, but everything he says is hitting its mark!*

“Acquaint myself with a prisoner? Of course not,” she said. She could sympathize with Girne’s past, and she could understand why Lionett felt guilty towards him. But that didn’t mean she’d enter his underground cell as a fellow prisoner.

“Listen, Alphina. You’re different from the other ladies in this empire. Unlike the average woman, you’re not the type to sit around moping and crying just because the love of your life fell

into a coma. The way you live—no, the very shape of your soul separates you from the others. Isn't that right, Lady Monkeyna?"

Alphina giggled at the nostalgic nickname. It felt like it'd been far too long since she last laughed, and she continued to do so for a while longer. "You're right. If tears could wake up His Imperial Highness, then I'll cry until I run dry. But that's not how reality works. So I'm going to stand up and do something about it. I'll loop and overwrite my past actions. Once I do, I'll solve all the problems plaguing us now. That's the way Alphina Shinn Sylvana has always lived her life."

She'd found an exit. Ever since her meeting with Girne—no, ever since her conversation with Lunea, she'd been acting strange. She'd noticed that as well, but didn't know what she could do about it. Her confusion over the type of person Lionett was, as well as uncertainty over how she should act in the face of his love for her, had been the reason behind that. In that case…

If I don't understand something, then I just need to find an answer. If I have time to spend moping around, then I should figure out a solution instead. That was, according to the prince of Heavenrose, what Lady Alphina, daughter of Duke Sylvana, would do.

"You look like a weight's been lifted from your shoulders," Avenlock said with a gentle smile. "Goodness gracious. I came to visit my beloved, yet ended up helping my rival instead. It's all right, though. I can wait until Lio wakes up to win you over with my sword."

"I'm looking forward to it. When the time comes, Lord Lio and I will face you together," Alphina teased.

Avenlock shrugged in a theatrical motion. "Honestly! You're not cute at all, Alphina."

Chapter Five

At midnight, after all the guards and maids fell asleep, Alphina snuck out of her window and climbed onto the roof. With the moon as their only witness, she and Scarlet sat down to discuss something.

When Avenlock asked why Alphina never thought to try again, he hadn't been referring to the time loops, of course. He'd meant those words of encouragement in a more general way. However, Alphina *could* try again. At least, she thought so, anyway. Instead of waiting for Lionett to wake up from his coma, she could jump to the past, before the rockslide, and save him. Maybe.

"I understand," Scarlet, in human form, nodded after hearing Alphina's explanation. "To be more precise, this would be a time leap rather than a time loop. But it's possible in theory. Up until now, you've been traveling back months in time, so going back a mere week might not be a big deal at all."

"Right?" Alphina replied.

"I wonder if it'll be that easy, though? When Lady Yulinar cast Loop on you, I doubt she expected you would want to leap back to a particular date. You could never do such a thing in the past either, could you?"

"Well, that's true."

All the time loops Alphina had experienced had placed her at different points in time. There was always a chance she'd mess up and send herself back several years, or even back to when the Saint accused her of a crime she didn't commit. Honestly, Alphina didn't mind either scenario. If she traveled back to when the Saint was exerting control over the empire, then she'd only need to defeat her and carve open a path to the future.

"In any case, activating Loop is the most important part," Alphina said. "I'll think about what I'll do after I reach the past."

Scarlet thought for a moment, looking uncertain. "How will you trigger the loop this time? For ninety-nine loops, your trigger was your execution. Your hundredth loop started because of your wedding. We'll need to endanger you in some other way."

“I’ll ask Carl and Hipper to hurl a super high-tier spell at me.”

“You’re using such a violent method?!”

“Loop activates when I’m in danger. That’s the only way, isn’t it?”

Alphina only wanted to go back a week, so she didn’t need to put herself through some despair-inducing threat. That was her hypothesis anyway, so this was nothing more than a guess. Nothing about this plan was certain, and she was flying by the seat of her pants. No wonder Scarlet was worried.

“What do you plan on doing if this fails?” asked Scarlet.

“I’ll use Crest, just like in the hundred first loop,” she replied.

When Alphina fled to the hundred first world in order to elude her wedding with Lionett, Alphina made a huge mistake and ended up returning to her original timeline. Back then, she’d used the magic carved into the back of her hand as a lifeline and had Carl, who’d been in the original world, pull her back. She could just do that again if she wasn’t able to fix anything. At least, that was what she’d thought.

Scarlet’s expression turned dark. “Lady Alphina, this is difficult to say, but…”

“Hmm?”

“To tell you the truth, you don’t have the same amount of magical energy as before,” he said.

“What?”

“I became sure of this when I saw how you couldn’t resist Lord Girne’s Bind. He may possess Evil Eyes, but the Lady Alphina of the past wouldn’t have fallen under his thrall so easily.”

“You’re right,” Alphina murmured. She’d actually had her suspicions as well. Even if the prince possessed Evil Eyes, she’d found it odd that her Telepathy hadn’t activated against him at all. “Do you think this is because of the previous loop?”

“Most likely. Last time, you used Loop of your own accord to travel to a parallel world, and then return to your original timeline. That wasn’t an easy feat.”

When Alphina’s grandmother cast Loop on her, she probably never expected her granddaughter to use it in such a way. And now Alphina was trying to do the exact same thing again. It wouldn’t be strange if this attempt used up all the magical power she’d accumulated over her lifetimes.

“I’m guessing that after this loop, you’ll lose your ability to hear

others' inner voices," Scarlet continued.

"Well, that's no skin off my back." Hearing inner voices had been too much for her anyway. She *did* wish she could learn Girne's true thoughts, though. "This'll probably be the last time I can loop too."

"And you still wish to go through with it?"

"Of course," Alphina replied without any hesitation as she nodded at her familiar. "My grandmother cast Loop on me so that I could escape my difficult fate. I'm grateful for that."

She looked up at the night sky. The bright yet gentle light of the full moon shone down upon the earth. It reminded her of when she was a child and her grandmother would smile at her. Yulinar's kindness and warm gaze had been just like this soft moonlight.

"Now that I think about it, isn't it strange?" Alphina murmured, talking more to herself than to Scarlet. "I wanted to escape my wedding with the prince so badly that I activated a time loop. Yet now, I'm going to use Loop to save him."

"Oh, yes. If you don't want to marry him, then leaving him the way he is might be more convenient for you, Lady Alphina."

Alphina shook her head. "If I'm going to run away from my wedding, then I'm going to do so when my fiancé is awake. It's a blemish on my reputation otherwise. I'll escape from him fair and square."

"Yes, you're absolutely right," Scarlet replied with a bittersweet smile. "If I may be honest, I've been conflicted as of late. I don't know if I'm powerful enough to serve as your familiar, Lady Alphina. Compared to Cerberum, I'm so weak and—"

"That's not true," Alphina interrupted, giving Scarlet her honest opinion. "You're the only familiar for me. No one else can replace you."

"Lady Alphina..." Scarlet looked like he was about to cry. "Very well. I may not be about to offer you much help, but I will do my best to be a worthy familiar to you."

"You offer me lots of help, though," Alphina said. She wasn't trying to comfort him; she truly thought that. If this young butler hadn't been around, then she wouldn't have survived to this point. She wouldn't be able to pull off the magic she planned on doing later either. No one cared more for her than Scarlet did, and he was an irreplaceable person in Alphina's life. "Thank you, Scarlet. I hope you'll follow and watch over me for as long as we live."

“Of course, my mistress!”

And that was how Alphina set off on her final loop.

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The next morning, Alphina summoned Carl and Hipper to the palace under the guise of needing their help with the garden. She explained the situation to them while wrists-deep in the dirt.

“Loops? Jeez,” Hipper sighed. He didn’t seem surprised. Rather, he sounded more exasperated than anything. “At this point, it feels ridiculous to question what you do, Miss Alphina. Nevertheless, I gotta ask: Is that really possible?”

“Yeah, just leave it all to me.” Alphina wondered what expression he’d make if she told him she’d already looped through a hundred lifetimes. “Carl, I’m counting on you as well.”

Carl usually listened to his sister. This time, he didn’t give her an immediate answer.

Not that I can blame him. I’d react the same way if my sister was like, “Heeeey, blast me away with a super high-tier spell, ’kayz? ☆”

In the beginning, Alphina had considered lying to Carl and telling him she wanted to test out a new defensive spell. However, after pondering on it for a night, she decided to tell him the truth. Alphina wanted to avoid lying to her brother as much as possible.

Carl’s innocent eyes were filled with worry as he said, “There’s…a deep darkness around you.”

“Darkness?”

“Things might not work…like they usually do.”

Carl reached out and grabbed Alphina’s skirt. Her beloved brother was a magical prodigy, so maybe he saw something she couldn’t. Girne Lione was the only thing that came to mind when she thought of “darkness.” Maybe he cursed her somehow when she went to visit him. Perhaps he cast a spell preventing her from looping? It wasn’t out of the question; he possessed the Evil Eyes of Hados, after all. Alphina wouldn’t be surprised if he knew curses like that.

“It’s fine, Carl. Trust your sister.” She placed her hands around her brother’s, who refused to let go of her skirt.

“No! I don’t…want you to leave.” Tears were welling up in his eyes.

I can't believe Carl is this frightened. The darkness possessing me must be a really dangerous one. She'd grown used to fighting the saint of light, but this would be her first time going up against the prince of darkness. If Alphina was honest, she wasn't confident she'd succeed. This plan was a huge gamble. However, she'd already decided she would go for it. She wasn't thinking of it in terms of "I think this plan will work, so I'll do it" or "I think it'll fail, so I won't." Instead, her thought process was "I've decided I'll do it. So I will."

In the future, historians would say that this way of thinking was the most reckless, or perhaps the most admirable, trait the Greatest Vermilion possessed.

"Carl," Hipper said, placing a hand on his friend's trembling shoulders. "Have some faith in your sister. Hasn't she always returned to your side?"

Carl stared down at the ground for a short while before he released Alphina's skirt.

"Thank you, Carl," Alphina said.

Even as she petted her brother's head, she couldn't help but think that this upcoming journey would be more difficult than any other one in the past.

***

It was the morning that Alphina would attempt the hundred first loop—her final loop. She'd finished all her preparations the previous day. Before the first rays of the dawn even appeared in the sky, she snuck out of the palace and made her way to the nearby woods, where she'd set up a magic circle on the ground. Carl was capable of using super high-tier magic without it, but they'd drawn it as a precaution; failure was *not* an option.

Alphina had left Scarlet on the bed in her room with the blanket pulled over his head. She'd told him to answer any question with "My head hurts" to buy them as much time as possible. Since Scarlet wasn't able to fully replicate Alphina's voice, it wouldn't take the people in the palace long to figure out the deception. She stood in the middle of the magic circle while Carl stood before her. Hipper was standing under a nearby tree to serve as a lookout.

Their plan was simple: First, Alphina would completely lower

her defenses and Carl would hit her with the full brunt of his super high-tier spell. Loop should activate right before the impact. It would send her to precisely a week ago, before Lionett headed out to Mt. Flame Dragon. Alphina planned on preventing the investigation team's departure, even if it meant resorting to violence. Of course, she didn't need Loop to place her at exactly a week ago. So long as she could make it to before they left, she wouldn't sweat the details.

She had something more important to worry about. As she stood in the magic circle and focused on the magical energy inside of her, she could tell that she had far less of it compared to before. It was possible that the spell her grandmother Yulinar cast upon her was losing its effectiveness. *This really will be my final loop.* After this one final loop, she'd return to being "Alphina, the girl who's terrible at magic."

"All right, Carl. I'm counting on you," she said.

Carl nodded and, in a low voice, began reciting the chant for Thundershock, the super high-tier spell he was most adept with. In the past, witnessing Alphina's execution had broken Carl out from the Saint's Geis, and he'd tried to cast this very spell at her. This time, he was going to use it on his sister. Alphina had worried that Carl wouldn't be able to use his full magical potential against his own family, but she'd underestimated her brother. He'd decided he would help her and, judging by the amount of magic gathering around him, he didn't plan on holding anything back.

A spell this powerful will throw me back in time. After experiencing so many loops, this was something Alphina knew by instinct. The magic circle glowed. The spell was almost ready. Alphina closed her eyes, focusing on the image in her head. She envisioned the world she wanted to loop to and imagined the scene she wanted to reach.

The image of Lionett leaving, a group of soldiers behind him, appeared before her mind's eye. He must have ridden at the front, his white horse galloping across the land. "A true king must always show his back to his soldiers" was an old idiom, and one that Lionett faithfully abided by.

In other countries, members of the royal or imperial family used their soldiers' lives as shields. Some of them would even throw their citizens to the wolves if it meant they could survive.

However, Lionett made sure he was always standing in front of them. People could insult his rudeness and recklessness, but no one could ever call him a coward.

Alphina could perfectly recreate the sight of his back in her mind's eye. But right as the image became clear, the faint sound of someone groaning in pain reached her ears. It sounded like Hipper! From her periphery, she saw him collapse to the ground. The person behind him was…

"L-Lunea?! Why are you here?!" Alphina cried.

Lunea Yun Yukon stood before Hipper's prone body. Alphina's old friend was clutching a bloody knife in her right hand. Alphina could tell that Lunea had stabbed Hipper from behind. *But why? Why would she do something like this?!*

"Where do you think you're going, Alphina?" she asked in a voice reminiscent of a damned spirit from the depths of the underworld. Her face was deathly pale, the only color coming from her ominously crimson lips. "Hey, where are you going? You're abandoning Prince Lionett while he's in this condition and running away all by yourself? Where to?"

Alphina swallowed. Lunea was clearly not in her right mind. She was acting like she was under someone's mind control. Was it Prince Girne? His hatred for Lionett ran deep, so was he trying to prevent Alphina from going back in time?

"I'm not running away, Lunea," Alphina said. "I'm going to save His Imperial Highness."

"No. You're fleeing from the prince's love, and from the version of you who can't accept his affections. Isn't that right?"

Carl had stopped chanting. He'd closed his eyes to concentrate on the spell, but after sensing something was amiss, he'd opened them. Now he was looking between Alphina and Lunea, unsure of what to do. But then, right as Lunea stumbled towards the pair, she stopped and fell to the ground. Hipper had crawled up to her and grabbed her ankle.

"Carl, keep chanting!" he yelled. Blood was pouring from the wound in his side, and pain twisted his expression. But he never released his hold on Lunea's leg. "I'm fine! Keep going! You gotta get Miss Alphina out of here!"

Carl looked into Hipper's eyes, nodded, and then closed them again to continue the chant. This was something that couldn't

happen if a strong bond of trust and friendship didn't exist between the pair.

I'm sorry, you two! I'm going to figure this out, I swear! Alphina thought. She had a feeling that saving Lionett would no longer be enough to solve everything. Someone's grudge permeated every single incident that had happened to the empire thus far. This vague feeling of unease became more concrete after seeing the ghastly state Lunea was in. Alphina was sure that the broken prince was involved in some shape or form.

In that case, all she had to do was keep moving forward. She'd leap into his trap and expose him from within. She would save Lionett, reveal Girne's conspiracy, and give everyone a happy ending. The moment the resolve steeled in her mind, Carl finished his spell.

"Thundershock."

A powerful bolt of lightning shot down from the sky, enveloping Alphina in light. The next second, it felt like her spirit had left her body and floated through the air. She'd felt this sensation many times in the past—it was Loop activating from within her. So she relaxed and allowed the magic to sweep her away.

Chapter Six

When Alphina next awoke, she found herself on the sofa of a parlor. She felt groggy, like she'd woken up from a long slumber—a sure sign that she'd just looped back in time—but then she hissed with pain from the splitting headache assaulting her skull. It felt like someone had hit her on the back of her head *hard*. This had never happened before.

Her mother, Mary, was sitting on the couch next to hers. Normally, Mary always had three attendants with her. But right now, she and Alphina were the only ones here. This seldom happened.

"Mother, what's today's date, month, and year?" Alphina asked.

Mary Nan Sylvana looked up at Alphina, her face thin and pale.

My mother looks exhausted. In Alphina's original timeline, her mother had become a very healthy person. Here, however, she seemed to have regained her sickly constitution. In fact, she looked even worse off than before.

"What's the matter, Alph?" Mary asked. "Are you so hungry that it's affected your memories?"

"Um, no, I'm not that hungry right now," Alphina replied, finding it odd that her mother would say such a thing. However, her mother's answer would shock her even further.

"It's May 1st, 839."

"Huh?!"

That meant Alphina was fourteen years old, and today was the date right before she transferred to a new middle school during her second year! She'd gone back further in time than any of her previous loops. Now that she was paying attention to herself, her palm seemed smaller than usual. This was the first time Alphina had ever experienced such a large discrepancy in time. Perhaps Lunea's interference had affected the ritual. Alphina's exclamation must've shocked Mary, because she clutched at her chest and started to cough.

"I-I'm sorry, mother. Are you all right?" Alphina looked around for a bell to summon an attendant so she could have them bring

some water. But she couldn't find one on any table. "Excuse me! Is anyone here?!" she called. No matter how long she waited, no one came over.

"Did you already forget, Alph? We had to let go of all our attendants last month."

"Ah... Is our family that poor right now?"

"It's not just our family," Mary sighed, slumping her shoulders. "All the families in the empire, both common and noble, are in dire financial straits these days. Yes, it pains me to admit that. I suppose this is what it's like to live in a country on the verge of destruction."

"The country's on the verge of destruction?" Alphina echoed. She took another look around the room. Most of the furniture she was used to seeing was gone. Normally, a red carpet covered the parlor's floor, but someone had torn it away to reveal the brown flooring underneath. The biggest change was... "Mother, where's grandmother's portrait? It was supposed to be hanging on that wall there."

Mary sighed again and shook her head. "Don't you remember? We sold that ages ago."

"Y-You sold it?! But it was such an important heirloom!"

"I'm sure your father was reluctant to sell it too. But it was the only way to keep the house."

"And where is father, anyway?"

"He's staying in the duchy by himself. There's no telling when the people will rebel, so he can't leave."

"Things are that serious?"

The empire's social situation was a lot more dangerous than Alphina had presumed. Though she wanted to ask some more questions, Mary began coughing again, and so she had to wait until her next opportunity. She helped her mother up and carried her to her bedroom. In the entrance hall, which was devoid of furniture and covered with dust, she ran into her younger brother, Carl. Carl was only four years old in 839. Despite his status as Duke Sylvana's eldest son, the clothing he wore was ragged and torn. Alphina's heart ached when she looked at him.

"Oh, Carl," Alphina called.

Carl said nothing as he brushed past her. At this age, Carl had rarely shown any emotions. Alphina was well aware of that. But

after watching Carl break out of his shell in her previous life, seeing his brusque demeanor now was like a stab to the chest. In fact, Carl seemed even more emotionless than before. It might have had something to do with the dark and dreary air filling this house.

Alphina decided to check out the situation outside. She needed to gather as much information as possible, so she wanted to go out to the city and find an acquaintance to speak with.

"Oh? What's with this weather?" she murmured to herself as soon as she left the house. Thick, gray clouds covered every inch of the sky. She couldn't see any blue at all.

Cloudy skies were rare in the Lione Empire. It was usually sunny, and it seldom saw rain, no matter the month or season. Feeling like this was an ill omen, Alphina made her way to the city on her own two feet.

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The capital of Lione was one of the biggest cities in the world. The marketplace was always bustling, and the streets were always full of people. Spring was a particularly lively season. Merchants from foreign countries would open up stalls along the streets. The crowds would be so large that even walking ten meters down the road proved an arduous task.

However, that wasn't the sight that greeted Alphina when she made it to the capital. She didn't see a single stray cat, let alone any merchants. The few people walking around all had dark expressions on their faces as they stared down at the ground.

Is this really the main street of the capital of Lione? It looks like I wandered into the slums!

In various corners of the city, Alphina could see people dressed in rags—children, in particular, caught her eye—sitting on the ground and pressing up against one another for warmth. When they saw Alphina, they glared at her as if she were their enemy. She understood that for the starving citizens, nobles *were* the enemies.

This had never happened before. As nobility existed within the Lione Empire, class difference was an existing issue. However, at least in the capital, very few commoners displayed such obvious

dislike towards those in the noble class. Taiga IV was a good ruler. Other than in times of poor harvest, the citizens rarely starved. In this version of the empire, though, famine was apparently the default.

How did things turn out like this?

In order to find the answer to that question, Alphina headed to the working-class district in the capital's west. For years, tradesmen had made their homes here. Most of the construction workers who'd helped build the palace and church, as well as blacksmiths who smelted and repaired weapons, lived in this neighborhood. When Alphina was younger, she'd often visited them to spend the day observing their refined and practiced techniques.

She was worried about the state of the working-class district, considering how many happy memories she'd made here. But it was as lively as in her original timeline. Alphina breathed a sigh of relief before telling herself that this wasn't *that* good of a thing. If blacksmiths were busy, that meant people in this world often needed to purchase weapons and armor.

Alphina went to the back alley of a store that handled copper weapons. Her favorite cheese pie stall usually appeared here. As soon as she stepped inside, the rich and nostalgic aroma of cheese filled her nostrils.

"Hello there, little Alph!" a man in a short-sleeved shirt and with a towel around his neck greeted her with a wide smile. He had gray hair and a five o'clock shadow, but his expression made him look younger than his actual age. He always smiled at her like this in her original timeline.

"Hello, Mister Gen! It's been far too long!" she said.

"Huh? Didn't you come here the day before yesterday?" Gen asked.

"O-Oh, did I?"

Though Alphina enjoyed spending time with the man she called "Mister Gen," she didn't know his real name. She only called him that because everyone else did. Judging by how muscular he was for a cheese pie merchant, she guessed he might've been a retired soldier. Alphina had visited his stall ever since she was in middle school, and he'd never once asked about her social class. He treated her like the other kids in the working-class district, which

was something that Alphina appreciated.

She ordered a cheese pie and bit into it, enjoying the light and crispy texture, before saying, “To tell the truth, Mister Gen, I hit my head yesterday.”

“Huh? Did you pick a fight with some punk again?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Because of that, I have something like temporary amnesia. I’ve forgotten a lot of things, so I might ask you some weird questions. Will you still answer them for me?” Alphina asked. She knew it wasn’t the best cover story in the world, but Mister Gen nodded.

“That’s rough. Ask away; I’ll answer you the best I can.” It really was comfortable spending time with him. Alphina’s grandfather died before she was born, but she hoped he had been someone like Mister Gen.

“The city seems like such a dangerous and unruly place right now. In the past, the capital of Lione was so rich that people called it the center of the world. What transformed it this much?”

“Well, the biggest reason is the war,” Mister Gen replied.

“The war? You mean with Heavenrose?”

“Nah.” Mister Gen grimaced. “With the rebels. There was a civil war against Lord Girne Lione and his rebel army.”

“A rebel army?! Led by Lord Girne?!” Alphina exclaimed, her voice so loud that it echoed throughout the alleyway. “What do you mean?! I thought the emperor sealed Lord Girne underground because he possessed the Evil Eyes.”

“He escaped. It happened about three years ago now. He escaped the underground cell with that tall servant of his and founded a terrorist organization. Then, he invited disgruntled nobles and foreign forces to create a powerful rebel army. They’ve taken over Mt. Flame Dragon and its surrounding area, and they’ve launched multiple attacks on the empire.”

“S-So that’s what happened.”

Mister Gen smiled, though it seemed more like a grimace. “Sheesh, that’s one hell of a prince, all right. He’s such an effective leader that under his command, even a colony of rabbits can transform into a pack of wolves. He’s invincible with a sword, and more powerful than the greatest sage when it comes to magic. Lord Girne is our enemy, but I gotta give it to him; the word ‘hero’ was invented for people like him.”

“You sure aren’t holding back with the compliments.”

“People in neighborhoods like ours are honest when praising those with talent.”

The people in the working-class district had to learn a trade and use it to both feed and house themselves. So it made sense they would respect people who could get things done. They probably preferred following those with actual power over nobles, who could only act tough because of their pedigree or their family’s social standing.

“It’s amazing that he could break out of jail and gather an army,” Alphina said. “His cell was so deep underground, and there were so many guards watching over it.”

“Huh. You sound like you’ve actually seen the cell Lord Girne was in, little Alph.”

“Oh, no, no. I was just imagining it!”

Mister Gen didn’t seem too concerned with Alphina’s slip since he continued, “Apparently, the Church of Xenos helped him out.”

“The Church of Xenos did?” Alphina didn’t expect them to enter this story. “Why would people who worship Xenos help Lord Girne escape? He possesses the Evil Eyes of Hados.”

“Who knows? According to the Xenites, it’s because Xenos and Hados were brothers, and family should help family.”

In Alphina’s opinion, that was just a convenient excuse. Lionett and Girne were brothers too. “Mister Gen, has a Saint of Xenos already appeared?” she asked.

“A saint? No, not to my knowledge. It’s been decades since the previous one passed, but I’ve not heard anything about a new one. Not even rumors.”

In that case, Alphina’s theory that the Saint was manipulating the church behind the scenes was incorrect. If the church had discovered a new saint, then it had no reason to keep it a secret. Making her their figurehead rather than Girne, and then taking over the empire like they did in the previous loops was far more profitable, after all. If the Saint didn’t exist in this world, then that meant Girne was behind everything that was wrong with it.

“So, it’s Lord Girne’s fault that the empire is in such a state of disorder,” Alphina said.

“Pretty much. I can sympathize with Lord Girne, though,” Mister Gen replied as he rubbed at his stubble. “Sure, the Evil Eyes are

pretty ominous. But if you think the stories about them are nothing more than ridiculous superstitions, then they're nothing more than a pair of freaky-looking eyes. Locking away someone that heroic because of them was such a waste. The empire is getting what it deserves for that."

Alphina could agree with that sentiment. "Mister Gen, you're really supportive of Lord Girne, aren't you?"

"I'm not the only one. He's a charismatic fellow. Lots of people are suggesting we make peace with the rebel army and give Lord Girne the title of crown prince. Everyone wants this war to end as quickly as possible."

"It seems like Lord Girne's really popular."

"Yeah, especially compared to a certain useless *someone*."

"Useless?"

Before Mister Gen could answer Alphina, she heard a loud noise from the street outside the alley. It was the sound of multiple footsteps and hooves, as well as the metallic scraping of armor and weapons. The army had arrived.

"I-Is it the rebel army?!" Alphina asked.

"Nah, it's not," Mister Gen said in a bitter voice. "The false prince, Lord Lionett, has graced us with his presence."

Alphina gaped at Mister Gen, shocked at his sarcastic tone. "P-Prince Lionett is here?"

"Yeah. He comes here sometimes and patrols the streets. It's probably his way of trying to secure some popularity for himself, but it just brings trouble to the people here."

Mister Gen's words were harsh—*way* too harsh. In Alphina's original timeline, as well as in her previous loops, the citizens had called Lionett the "Golden Sword" out of respect. Those who feared him referred to him as Lord Cold Heart. But no one had ever called him "the false prince."

No longer able to contain herself, Alphina rushed out of the alley. As soon as she reached the street, she saw Lionett on a white horse, his attendants and soldiers behind him. Like Alphina right now, he should be around fourteen years old. Despite the more innocent expression on his porcelain face, he still boasted incredible beauty. However, Alphina saw a giant cross-shaped scar on his left cheek. Someone must've slashed at his face with a sword. It didn't look new either; Lionett must've received the injury

over a year ago.

As Lionett proceeded down the road, the citizens all glared at him. The sight of their angry expressions shocked Alphina. Lionett Lione, a hero who had accomplished so many admirable deeds, was being regarded with contempt by the populace. What in the world changed their impression of him this much?

“It’s the false prince,” someone said before the others started murmuring as well.

“Your loss to Lord Girne caused the empire to collapse.”

“Who in their right mind would want someone as weak as *you* to be our next emperor?”

“You should give Lord Girne the right to the throne.”

They hurled their cold insults like stones. Lionett must have been able to hear everyone, but he endured their criticism in silence.

“Prince Lionett’s popularity just keeps plummeting,” Mister Gen said. At some point, he’d walked up to stand at Alphina’s side.

“Hey, Mister Gen. What do they mean by Lord Lionett losing to Lord Girne?”

“Well, they mean exactly that. About a year ago, Lord Girne challenged Lord Lionett to a duel to see who was more worthy of the throne. Lord Lionett accepted it. He’d overestimated his own strength.”

A blend of disappointment and disgust permeated Mister Gen’s tone. Considering how even the friendly Mister Gen was speaking about him in this way, it was clear that no one liked or respected Lionett in this world.

“So, Prince Lionett lost to him?” Alphina asked.

Mister Gen nodded and then pointed to the prince’s cheek. “That hideous scar is proof of that. Lord Girne didn’t kill his brother. Instead, he left a mark on that beautiful face to humiliate him.”

His answer struck Alphina speechless. She couldn’t believe that Lionett would lose a duel to anyone; she’d thought that Lord Blackrose was the only one capable of defeating him. However, it wasn’t *that* unbelievable that Lionett would lose if his opponent was Lord Girne.

Alphina was still silent in disbelief, so Mister Gen continued, “But the emperor voided the duel. I can understand His Imperial

Majesty's perspective; he'd rather protect the son who doesn't bear a curse. Thanks to that decision, though, things got complicated. I'm sure you noticed that Lord Lionett has lost the people's love and trust, and most people support Lord Girne now. The situation's a headache for the emperor too. Sheesh." He spat on the ground before he sighed, "If only Lord Lionett, rather than Lord Girne, had been born with the Evil Eyes."

His voice echoed in Alphina's head for a long time after that.

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After Lionett and his soldiers finished patrolling the city, they took a break near the well. The prince dismounted his horse and sat down on the grass underneath a tree. Alphina, who'd been following them, saw her chance and approached them.

"It's nice to meet you, Your Imperial Highness," she said. "My name is Alphina Shinn Sylvana."

Lionett looked up at her. He looked tired. "Duke Sylvana's daughter, yes? Is there something you want?"

"There is. I'll be transferring to the same middle school as you soon, so I wished to greet you." She gave him a bright smile, and he shook his head in response.

"No wonder..."

"Hmm?"

"You haven't heard anything about me yet."

His words were unfriendly. It sounded different from the brusque manner he spoke with in Alphina's previous timeline. There was something dark in Lionett's tone and expression, and Alphina guessed it was his guilt towards Girne. As someone who knew the true Lionett, she wanted to clear the negativity away from him.

"Th-That's not true!" she exclaimed. "I know you very well! You're an amazing swordsman and, um..."

"And? And what?"

"Uh..." *I can't think of a single compliment!* Alphina had wanted to cheer him up with some praise, but nothing came to mind. She knew he wasn't the type who liked compliments about his appearance, so she chose honesty instead. "I hear that you're a very stubborn and humorless person."

Lionett stared at her and said nothing.

Ahh, stupid me! How come I can only say things in such a weird way?! She'd already known that she wasn't the most articulate person in the world, but she'd never felt this frustrated about it before. Lionett didn't get angry at her, though. He merely looked surprised.

"You shouldn't talk to me at school," he said, his voice softer than earlier. "It might put you in danger."

He stood up and called to the soldiers, telling them it was time to get back to work. Then, without a look back at Alphina, he walked off.

Chapter Seven

There were many bizarre things about this hundred second world, but the strangest thing was the gray and cloudy sky hanging over the empire. A week had passed since Alphina arrived at this timeline, and the weather hadn't cleared up even once. When she asked her mother about it, her mother said that this was normal and didn't seem concerned. The thick clouds covered up the sun, which had a negative effect on both the crop quality and how quickly laundry dried. So Alphina couldn't understand why her mother didn't care.

However, she couldn't spend all her time worrying about the weather. The Lione Empire was in the midst of a civil war, but the capital wasn't seeing any direct conflict. People in the city could still lead their everyday lives without issue. That meant Alphina had to go to school. School wouldn't give students a day off just because the weather was cloudy.

Ugh, I don't mean to complain, but I really don't wanna go. In terms of knowledge and life experience, Alphina was already an adult, so taking a class for middle schoolers sounded like absolute boredom. That being said, she couldn't skip school either. Her mother was so much frailer than before that Alphina didn't want to add onto her stress.

More importantly, this was her chance to approach Lionett. In this hundred second world, she could redo her meeting with him. She didn't understand Lionett Lione as a person in her previous timeline, so she could use this opportunity to know him better. At least, that was the optimistic way she chose to think about this.

Of course, she'd considered using her Crest to return to her original timeline. This world was so different from her original one that her plan had failed from the beginning. She was worried about Hipper and Carl as well. She also wanted to know what happened to Lunea after she attacked them. There were so many questions she wanted answers for, but she didn't have a lot of magical energy left. Even speaking to Scarlet through the Crest might deplete her remaining reserves. In order to save her magic

for an emergency, she couldn't waste it on unnecessary tasks now.

Scarlet will take care of things in the original timeline. So I have to do what I can in this world! With that decision, Alphina went to school. In her previous lifetimes, Alphina was late to her first day of class, so she climbed a tree and snuck in through the window. Lionett discovered her while she was in the middle of doing this. That had been their first meeting.

Maybe I shouldn't have spoken to him when we were in the working-class district. She might've changed the course of history for no reason. In order to prevent any accidents, she would have to trace her previous actions as best as she could. That was why she decided to take her time and arrive late. After sneaking in from the school's back entrance, she went to the back of the grounds to engage in the simple task of climbing the tree when…

"H-Huh? Where's that tree?!"

The tree that had grown near the windows, so tall that it reached the third floor of the building, was no longer there. Since a groundskeeper passed by, Alphina stopped him to ask about it.

"Oh, that tree? We cut it down last month. There aren't enough resources in the empire because of the battle with the rebel army, right? So they wanted the lumber to make temporary shelters for refugees," he replied.

"Th-The war has affected even something like this?!" Alphina clutched her head. She didn't expect this, but she couldn't back down now. At this point, she might as well walk into the classroom from the door like a normal person, but Alphina didn't want to do something so lame. Her values and priorities had always differed from a normal noble lady. "Aren't there any other trees? Ones as tall as the one that was here?!"

"Huh? If you're looking for a tree…" He pointed at a giant tree that was about ten meters away from the building. It was tall enough to reach the roof of the building, yet too far from the classroom on the third floor. Alphina was athletic, but not so athletic she could cross such a distance.

"Mister Groundskeeper, do you have a long, thick rope or anything?" Alphina asked.

"Yeah, there's one we use for the Cow Lassoing Festival in spring. It ought to be in the shed."

"That's perfect!"

Alphina dragged the rope from the shed the groundskeeper pointed out. Once she scaled the tree, she, with his help, tied the rope around one of the branches. She would use centrifugal force, like a pendulum inside a clock, except in this case, Alphina would act as the pendulum. She hung from the rope, took a running start, and then jumped!

"AH AHH AHHHH! ♪" she yelled.

The spring air felt so good against her face that she couldn't stop herself from giving a victory cry like a bull ape. She'd already forgotten that she was trying to sneak in and pretend she hadn't been late. The only thing in her head was how she could maximize this thrill. As she approached the window, she let go of the rope. She'd intended to press herself against the window and stand on the ledge, but there was so much momentum behind the impact that she broke straight through the glass. Alphina rolled, her skirt swirling around her, before she finally ended up atop a cushion on the ground. The students screamed as glass shards flew through the room.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?!" the teacher exclaimed, shocked that someone had interrupted her history lesson in such a way.

The duke's daughter, who'd arrived at school in the most dynamic way possible, remained seated on the floor as she introduced herself. "My name is Alphina Shinn Sylvana, and I'm a new transfer student at this school!"

She looked around and noticed something strange. *Hmm? I don't see the prince.* No matter where she looked, she only saw her teacher and classmates gaping at her. *Wait, don't tell me…don't tell me that my meeting with him in the working-class district changed our fate?! Did Prince Lionett pull some strings so we didn't end up in the same class? If he did, then my plan to redo my meeting with him is over before it can even start!*

"The prince! Where's the prince?!" Alphina asked.

"If you're looking for Prince Lionett, you're sitting on him," the teacher replied.

"Huh?"

Now that the teacher mentioned it, Alphina had been thinking something like, *There's a weirdly soft cushion in this classroom, but thanks to that, I didn't receive any injuries! ♪* But this *wasn't* a

cushion? She was too scared to look down at it. She didn't want to see what she was sitting on. Sweat poured down Alphina's face like a waterfall.

Ahhhh! She could feel the prince's fury through her butt. He was so angry that his entire body was shaking. Her plan to redo her meeting with Lionett worked, sure. But now, his impression of her had started in the negatives.

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Lionett passed out soon afterwards. Apparently, he'd been twitching from pain, rather than trembling in anger like she'd thought. Thinking she'd killed him, Alphina panicked and heaved the prince onto her shoulders, only to look around in place, unsure of where to go. If the teacher hadn't instructed her to take Lionett to the nurse's office, she would've gone all the way to the palace to find a doctor. The nurse looked annoyed even after Alphina explained the situation to her. But she allowed Alphina to lay Lionett down on the bed, anyway.

Um, this totally isn't funny! Alphina was looping to prevent Lionett from falling into a coma after the rockslide. What was she doing, knocking him out herself?! This was probably the first time a rescue attempt ever went this sideways. Alphina couldn't help but think that this was another piece of evidence indicating that she would make a horrible empress.

Now that she had time to think about it, she wondered about the nurse's cold attitude towards them. After doing the bare minimum for Lionett, the nurse left, citing an errand she needed to run. The teacher and the classmates barely reacted to Lionett's danger too. No one seemed to have any genuine concern for Lionett's condition, even though he was the prince of the empire. In Alphina's original timeline, everyone would've been beside themselves with worry if Lionett passed out at school.

That goes to prove just how popular Lord Girne is. When Mister Gen from the cheese pie stall mentioned how the people wanted Girne as the crown prince, was this what he meant? Alphina was happy that people weren't persecuting Girne for his Evil Eyes. But it wasn't fair that this acceptance meant they turned on Lionett instead.

Or maybe this is Girne's punishment towards Lionett? Girne suffered over nine hundred ninety-nine lifetimes. So is he getting back at Lionett in this thousandth one?

Alphina was familiar with that sentiment; she'd done the same thing to Saint Debonaire. If their relationship was similar to hers with the Saint, then perhaps their only choice was to despise and fight each other. That they were brothers related by blood had little bearing on this grudge. But was there truly no way for them to get along?

"Ngh…"

"Your Imperial Highness! You're awake!"

Lionett's long eyelashes fluttered, and he slowly opened his eyes. "Where am I?"

"The nurse's office. Does your body hurt at all? How clear is your consciousness? Do you feel nauseous?"

Lionett thought for a moment before he replied, "No, I'm fine."

Phew! The answer brought Alphina such relief she felt like she would melt away. "I would like to apologize, Your Highness. I can't believe how discourteous I was to you."

"There's no need for that. It was my fault for not dodging something so avoidable," he replied in a serious tone as he pushed himself into a sitting position. "I can't blame the people for losing their faith in such a weak prince. Once again, I proved to everyone how inferior I am compared to my brother. How pathetic."

"Actually, you're right. It's weird that you couldn't dodge that." Alphina felt like if this was the Lionett in the previous timeline, he wouldn't have had any issue stepping out of the way. That was when she noticed the unnatural way he was hiding his hands under the blanket. "Excuse me, Your Imperial Highness."

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

Alphina pulled the blanket away to reveal his hands, which were covered in gauze and bandages. Though he was a prince, he must've wrapped up his wounds himself, considering the amateurish work. The bandages were coming loose and stained with blood.

"Now I get it," Alphina said. "All that sword training you do must've exhausted you. Your hands are proof of your efforts."

"D-Don't look at them!" Lionett hid his hands under the blanket

again. Ignoring him, Alphina went to the shelf to grab some bandages and rubbing alcohol. Then, with practiced ease, she dragged his hands out and started treating them. “S-Stop! I can do this myself.”

“It’s because you *can’t* that these bandages are in such a horrid state, right?”

Ever since she was a child, Alphina’d always had scrapes and bruises from playing outside. So patching up others had become second nature. She was so fast and efficient with wrapping up Lionett’s hands that he couldn’t help but stare at her work.

“My apologies,” he murmured, his eyes still averted from her. This social awkwardness was the same as in the previous timeline.

“Your Highness, make sure you pace yourself properly while training. There’s no point in becoming stronger if you end up sick or injured as a result.”

“This is the bare minimum of effort I need to put in if I wish to defeat my brother.”

Alphina thought it strange how upset Lionett sounded at that. The prince in the previous timelines had never sounded this unsure of himself. His current situation, where the people constantly compared him to Lord Girne, must’ve shattered his confidence and pride.

“But you’re Prince Lionett, not Prince Girne!” Alphina exclaimed. “No matter the circumstances, His Imperial Majesty decided that you’re the most suitable candidate for inheriting the throne. Why not take pride in that fact? There’s no need to compare yourself with your brother and look down on your own merits.”

Lionett looked down at the sheets. “It’s easy for you to say, Lady Sylvana.”

“Did I offend you?”

“I seem to recall telling you to leave me alone.”

“It’s not like I came up to you on purpose. My butt was the one that decided your back was the safest place to land on.”

“Without my consent?! Are you really a duke’s daughter?!” After his outburst, Lionett widened his eyes like he realized how he was acting, and then he cleared his throat. “In any case, I’m fine. Return to the classroom and make sure you never speak to me again.”

“I can’t promise that, Your Highness,” Alphina replied.

“What?” Lionett glared at Alphina, but she merely shrugged in response.

“My butt embraced this chair the moment I sat down in it. It must’ve decided that if it can’t sit on your back, then this chair is the second-safest option.”

“A butt isn’t capable of such thoughts!”

“Oh? And how do you know that? Did my butt tell you that?”

“Your butt—!” Lionett stared at her, speechless. After a few moments of frustrated glaring, he turned over in his bed, aiming his back at her.

“I’ll stay here until you fall asleep,” Alphina said. Even though she couldn’t see his expression, she could see his anger from the tension in his back. She couldn’t suppress a small huff of laughter. *He’s such a stubborn man*, she thought, ignoring her own personality.

Everything in his body language rejected Alphina’s presence. He was pigheaded and obstinate, and once he decided on something, he refused to listen to any counterarguments. The Lionett from Alphina’s previous timeline had been exactly the same. However, she found this part of him endearing.

From the citizens’ perspective, Lionett’s stubbornness might have appeared childish and strict. It might reinforce their belief that Lord Girne was a better candidate for the throne than Lionett was. However, at least for Alphina, Lionett’s strong will was no reason to hate him.

Chapter Eight

Alphina's life as a middle schooler had started. In her previous timeline, she'd attended the same middle school as Lionett as well, but he didn't make an impression on her. She'd been so preoccupied with herself and her own problems that she didn't have time to focus on her fellow schoolmates. During middle school, the two of them hadn't been engaged yet. So since she'd regarded Lionett as "a prince who practically lives in another world," she'd never paid him any mind.

In this life, though, she would get to know him better. To do so, she took every opportunity she could find to speak with him.

"Good morning, Your Highness!" she greeted him. "It may be cloudy, but what a nice and refreshing morning we have today!"

Even when Alphina chatted and smiled at him in the classroom, he remained distant. He never once gave her a reply, and would always look away from her instead. Seeing them, the classmates would always gossip among themselves:

"Why's Lady Alphina speaking to His Highness?"

"She's a transfer student, so maybe she doesn't know much about him?"

"Really? So she doesn't know about the rumors of how Lord Girne plans on executing all the nobles close to Prince Lionett after he wins the civil war?"

"Ignorance really *is* bliss."

And so on and so forth. No one could understand Alphina's motives. But Alphina wasn't the type to care about how others thought of her. She ignored them and continued to demand Lionett's attention. Lionett kept others at bay and was always alone. It didn't matter if he was in the classroom, the hallway, or the cafeteria. Even when they had to sort into groups for class projects, Lionett never had a partner. But every time, without fail, Alphina would approach him with, "Oh, Your Highness, what a coincidence! I'm alone as well, so let's spend some time together, oh ho ho!" This behavior would then lead to more rumors from their classmates.

Lionett never reacted to her, outside of a slight furrowing of his handsome brow. A normal noble lady would have realized she wasn't welcome and backed away. But such a thought never occurred to Alphina. Instead, she interpreted his lack of a reaction with, "If he really didn't want me to spend time with him, he'd react with a lot more disgust! So since he isn't saying or doing anything, that must mean he doesn't mind!" It was like she was jumping back and forth on the subtle line between "optimism" and "impudence."

A week passed, then a month, then a year. Every day, she tried to approach the disgraced prince. The idea of giving up never occurred to her.

One cold winter day, cold enough that snowflakes were fluttering through the air, Lionett was eating lunch alone. Though the cafeteria was rowdy and full of kids, no one ever wanted to sit around him. The space around Lionett was akin to a hole in the crowd of people.

"Good afternoon, Your Highness! What are you eating today?" Alphina—the only person who would ever approach Lionett—asked. On the tray in her hands was such a large bowl of rice that it looked like a blizzard had hit the bowl. Without waiting for Lionett's reply, she sat down across from him.

"Fried mockerel," Lionett muttered.

The next second, his eyes widened, and he snapped his mouth shut. Alphina was just as surprised at the response; he always ignored her when she spoke to him. Eating must've lowered his guard. *This is my chance!*

"Oh, what a coincidence," she said. "I ordered fried mockerel as well. The hamburg steak in combo B was alluring, but I felt like eating fish rather than meat today."

Lionett didn't respond. The mockerel fillet had been fried to golden perfection, with tomatoes and sliced cabbage next to it as a garnish. Lionett's plate looked the same as Alphina's. She didn't know if it was because of a lack of appetite, but Lionett had barely touched his main dish.

"You should eat," Alphina said. "Otherwise, your stomach will start growling during afternoon classes." She grabbed a bottle of shoy sauce and tipped it over the fried mockerel a few times. The fragrant skin soaked up the shoy sauce, becoming softer and less

crispy. Lionett, who'd set his mouth in an annoyed line, looked surprised. "Hmm? What's the matter, Your Highness?"

The prince once again looked taken aback at his own reaction before he cleared his throat hesitantly. "What did you pour over the fish?" he muttered.

"It's shoy sauce. Don't you know what this is? It's a sauce made by fermenting beans imported from a country in the far east."

"I know what shoy sauce is. I'm asking why you poured it over the fried mockerel."

This time, Alphina was the one to widen her eyes.

"What do you mean? This is normal."

"No. Pouring Worcestershire sauce over fried food is normal."

"I use Worcestershire sauce on fried chicken and pork. But fried mockerel is special."

"How is it special? It's a fried dish, just like the other ones you listed."

"Well, the empire *is* a large place. I suppose there are people who use Worcestershire sauce on fried mockerel."

"Why are you talking like *I'm* the weirdo here when *you* are?!" Lionett yelled. Realizing he'd raised his voice, he cleared his throat once again and stopped speaking.

Upon hearing him, the surrounding students noticed their conversation and observed them from a distance. Lionett rarely spoke to anyone at school, so they were probably curious about what they were chatting about.

Sensing her opportunity, Alphina called out to the female student closest to her, "You over there!"

"Y-Yes?!" the female student squeaked.

"Do you put Worcestershire sauce or shoy sauce on your fried mockerel?"

The female student shot Lionett a nervous glance before she looked back at Alphina. Then, she stammered, "M-My family always uses salt on fried food."

"Salt?!" Lionett and Alphina blurted.

"Um, my father's really picky about food, and he says that salt is the best way to enhance the ingredients' natural flavors."

Alphina thought for a moment and then smiled at Lionett. "What do you think about this new faction, Your Highness?"

"It's got nothing... I mean, it has nothing to do with me," he

replied, standing up and preparing to make his escape.

However, Alphina wasn't the type to back down from that. Her grandmother Yulinar once said that food was the way to know a person better, and that food helped create bonds between others. In deft movements with her knife and fork, she cut off a bite-sized piece of fish before holding out the fork, the morsel of fish on the tines, to the prince.

"Stop giving excuses and try it. You'll know from one bite whether fried mockerel is more delicious with shoy sauce or not."

Lionett turned his face away, looking unsure of what to do. Everyone in the cafeteria was staring at him now, silently mocking him for his childish pickiness. At least, that was how it looked to Lionett.

"Don't tell me you're running away?" Alphina goaded. "The great Prince Lionett Lione, fleeing from mere fried mockerel?!"

The uncertainty on Lionett's face made way for irritation. "A member of the Lione family would never run away from battle!"

He snatched the fork out of Alphina's hand and ate the fried mockerel with shoy sauce in one bite.

"What do you think?" Alphina asked.

Lionett was chewing in silence, but after hearing Alphina's question, his expression softened, just a little. Alphina guessed this was the face he made after eating something delicious. The other students must've come to the same conclusion, because they all made a wordless exclamation of excitement.

"I'm guessing you liked it," Alphina said.

"H-Humph!" Lionett wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up. "It wasn't bad, but that's it. I knew that shoy sauce wasn't a good match for fried mockerel."



With that rather impolite parting statement, Lionett picked up his tray and walked away. *Why didn't he just eat here?* Alphina wondered. *I would've poured so much shoy sauce on his fish.*

At least she understood him a little better now. He was stubborn, hated to lose, and had a bizarre sense of taste if he liked to pour Worcestershire sauce on his fried mockerel. It sounded like she was insulting him, but Alphina felt like she'd touched the "person" underneath the prince. Since she could hear his inner voice, she knew he had this side to his personality. But she had never seen him put it on display until now.

Around her, she could hear the students arguing over fried mockerel:

"I agree with His Highness. Worcestershire sauce is the best match for it."

"No, I'm on Lady Alphina's side. My mother also says that shoy sauce pairs best with seafood."

"It's seafood, but it's still *fried*. And since it's a fried food, you have to put Worcestershire sauce on it. Anything else is just blasphemy!"

"Um...what about salt?"

This is a school for the upper echelons of society, but they're all surprisingly mundane in their tastes and conversations, Alphina thought. She only hoped that this fried mockerel incident would change how they viewed Lionett.

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Two years had passed since she looped into this timeline, and Alphina was now a high schooler. That meant this was the third spring since she entered this hundred second world. Avenlock was supposed to come to Lione as a transfer student at this point in time, but he never did.

Alphina was curious about the political situation with Heavenrose. However, it seemed that the kingdom decided to simply observe its neighboring empire's civil war from the sidelines. Since Avenlock was a cautious man, he probably decided to stay in Heavenrose to avoid getting dragged into another nation's war. Though it felt like yet another change to the history Alphina was familiar with, Lord Blackrose entering the picture

would only make things more complicated, so she viewed this as a good thing.

The event after Prince Avenlock's arrival to Lione was Alphina's engagement to Lionett. It was about time for their families to make this decision. However...

"The engagement event just isn't happening," Alphina muttered to herself.

She knew perfectly well why too. In her previous timelines, the person who decided that Alphina would be Lionett's betrothed was Emperor Taiga IV. And right now, that same Emperor Taiga IV was bedridden from an illness. The stress from the long years of civil war had been too much for him. The servants of the Sylvana family were all terrified upon hearing this news, often lamenting in the hallways:

"It'll be terrible if His Imperial Majesty needs to step down from his duties."

"As the crown prince, Lord Lionett is next in line. So he'll immediately ascend the throne."

"The citizens would never accept him as the emperor."

"The insurgents might take up arms and make Lord Girne the next emperor by force."

"If that happens, then the rebel army will emerge the victors in this civil war."

Alphina didn't understand politics, so she had her father break it down for her: "Most of the civilians support Lord Girne as the next emperor. Though the conservative nobles were on Lord Lionett's side, the rebels are gaining so much strength that the nobles can't afford to ignore them any longer. Soon, the highest members of the nobility will approach the rebel army to negotiate peace with them. They won't have an emperor to support either way if Lord Girne kills them. Things are so unstable right now that the rebel army could attack the palace at any time."

Hmm. This world is such a dangerous place! The hundred-second world was so different from the previous ones, and set at such a high difficulty level that even Alphina was giving up. She couldn't believe that things could change so much just because the broken prince was around in this timeline. It felt like everything was moving in a way that only suited his agenda. *That's right. In fact, maybe this is all part of his plan. Maybe he controlled Lunea and*

disrupted the ritual in order to bring me to this world. In that case, my remaining here is playing right into his hands.

But that didn't mean Alphina could do anything about her current situation. So she switched gears. Everything in this world was progressing according to Girne's plan, but the Alphina thinking and moving right now wasn't under his control. In that case, Alphina needed to press on with what she came here to do. That was why Alphina decided to stubbornly recreate the events that happened in her previous timelines.

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"Your Highness, would you like to go on a hike with me?" Alphina asked when she saw Lionett in the hallway during their lunch break.

He shot her a dark glare. After the fried mockerel incident and her previous attempts at conversation with him, he always had his guard up around her. However, Alphina never stopped calling out to him, so he began viewing her daily visits as part of his everyday life.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Leave me alone," he said.

"You've said that to me countless times," Alphina replied.

The other students in the hallway watched from a distance. In middle school, the fried mockerel incident warmed their classmates up to Lionett, but things went back to the way they were once they entered high school. The rebel army was gaining power by the day, which meant even fewer students felt inclined to speak to him. Alphina's actions were unthinkable to them.

In a voice loud enough to reach them, Alphina continued, "I decided I'd do whatever I want. That I would live freely. Freedom isn't always good, and it comes with its fair share of troubles. But that's why I want to enjoy the troubles in life too."

Lionett stared at her before he huffed. *Ah, it feels like it's been forever since I heard him say "Humph."* She couldn't suppress a small giggle at how nostalgic the sound was.

"What's so funny?" Lionett asked.

"Nothing! My apologies. Anyway, let's go!" Alphina grabbed the reluctant prince by his hand and dragged him to the hill behind

the school.

Alphina and Lionett were the only two people on the hill. As she expected, heavy gray clouds were blocking out the sun today as well. Alphina hadn't seen clear skies since she arrived in this timeline, but she still enjoyed the spring warmth. A gentle breeze blew between them, ruffling Lionett's blond hair. So many noble ladies had breathed sighs of appreciation upon laying eyes on the golden strands.

Though Alphina never reacted in that way, she agreed Lionett had a fine head of hair. The gold was a perfect encapsulation of his pride, as well as the strength to remain true to himself despite his solitude. However, the gold wasn't as infallible as she'd imagined.

"Your Highness, do you know what these red flowers are?" Alphina asked, pointing out the crimson flowers blooming in the grass. "They're called alphina. They're a tough flower that grows all year round. People use them as medicinal herbs, or even as mediums for healing magic. Not only that, but they can grow in any kind of soil, and they're as hardy as shepherd's purse! My grandmother named me after them!"

"Humph. I see," Lionett replied.

"Humph" again? Though Lionett's words were as unfriendly as ever, his blue eyes were soft as he stared down at the ground.

"I don't understand," he continued.

"Don't understand what?"

"As the daughter of a duke, I'm sure plenty of noble sons want your hand in marriage. You don't have to spend time with a disgraced prince."

"I don't think that many people are interested in marrying a tomboy like myself."

This wasn't modesty, but the truth. Before her engagement with Lionett, Alphina had met with prospective husbands for an arranged marriage. But most of them decided against her. One said that she was more difficult to handle than an ornery horse, and Alphina had responded with "Then you wouldn't mind me doing this ♥" and kicked him out. The only person who never complained when meeting with Alphina was the Golden Sword before her.

"My father...His Imperial Majesty is sick right now," he said, his

voice betraying nothing. “The people are worried, and they want the civil war to end as quickly as possible. However, my brother has no intention of stopping his rebellion. In fact, he plans to take advantage of our father’s absence and increase the ferocity of his attacks.”

“Yes, my father told me as much. We must negotiate peace with the rebels as quickly as possible.”

Lionett nodded, a pained expression on his face. “My brother will want the title of crown prince in exchange for peace. Even the nobles who were adamant that a bearer of the Evil Eyes cannot possibly become emperor will agree to this. After seeing my brother’s strength with their own eyes, they have no choice but to agree.”

“And are you all right with that, Your Highness?”

“If giving up the throne is what I need to do to save my people, then I don’t need it,” he replied with no hesitation. “After my brother becomes the rightful heir to the throne, I’ll surely be assassinated or executed.” Alphina stared at him, unable to voice a response as Lionett went on, “My continued existence will only incite more conflict in the future. My brother is smart; he’ll get rid of me for sure.” Lionett turned to glare at her. “Do you understand what it means to approach me now? You may be the daughter of Duke Sylvana, but that won’t protect you against my brother or the Church of Xenos backing him. Defending me will only earn you his ire. He won’t hesitate to destroy you or your family.”

“I know that! But—”

“No, you know nothing!” Lionett snapped, interrupting Alphina before she could finish. “Listen. Never talk to me again. This is the last time I’ll entertain you.”

Lionett turned away, forcibly ending the conversation. He only had time to take a step forward when Alphina called out to him.

“I finally understand you as a person, Your Highness.”

“What?” Lionett looked over his shoulder at Alphina, who gave him a smile when their eyes met.

“To tell the truth, I couldn’t understand you when we first met. I kept wondering what you were thinking and whether or not you disliked me. Your hair is such a blinding blond and your eyes are such a clear sapphire. But it’s like there’s a darkness around your heart. Even if I could listen to your inner voice with Telepathy, I

doubt I'd be able to interpret it."

"Telepathy?"

"It's just a what-if," Alphina said, playing it off as a joke. "But after speaking with you today, I think I finally understand you a little better."

"What do you mean?"

"Your Highness, you're such a kind person. So unbelievably kind."

Lionett's porcelain cheeks—even his scar—flushed a deep crimson. "Wha— Y-You… What are you say—?!"

"I'm right, aren't I? There's a high chance that someone might kill you soon, yet you still bothered to show concern for me and my family. If you're not kind, then you're an idiot."

In Alphina's opinion, both were apt descriptors for the prince. If Lionett had been nothing more than a kind man, then Alphina wouldn't have liked him. She wouldn't have cared for him if he was a simpleton either. However, a sweet fool was, at the very least, someone she couldn't dislike. Yes, Alphina Shinn Sylvana couldn't bring herself to hate Lionett Lione. Even such a minor revelation made this final loop worth it.

"Your Highness, since I'm already being rude, may I ask you one more question?"

"What?" Lionett's face was still red.

"I've been curious about something for a while now. Were you truly giving your all in the duel where you received that scar? If you were fighting at your full strength, then I doubt you would've lost even to Lord Girne. A certain prince once boasted to me that only 'Lame-o-nett' was his equal in swordplay."

"What are you implying?! You think I would go easy on my opponent in a serious battle?"

"Of course not; I'm sure you intended to fight with your full strength. But what about your subconscious self? I don't believe you're the kind of person who can swing a sword at his brother."

Lionett opened his mouth, but then closed it without saying anything. His face was an expressionless mask. The man before Alphina was no longer Prince Lionett, but Lord Cold Heart.

"Ridiculous. This conversation isn't worth my time. Pardon me," he said, turning away from Alphina and walking off.

"Please call me Alph next time we meet, Lord Lio," Alphina

called to his retreating back.

He didn’t reply, and Alphina knew perfectly well why—there was no “next time” for Lionett.

Interlude: Lionett (2)

I should've died back then. Lionett had lost count of how many times the thought passed through his head. Though it was past midnight, Lionett couldn't fall asleep. He slipped out of bed and walked out onto the balcony, bathing himself in the moonlight.

Looking at the full moon, which shone overhead like a hand mirror, he said, "You should've been the one who died back then."

He brushed his hand against his left cheek, over the cross-shaped scar. This was proof of his dishonor. When he lost his duel against his brother Girne, he should've killed himself on the spot. Warriors hailing from a country to the far east performed a ritual called "harakiri" to cleanse themselves of their crimes. After suffering a devastating blow to their reputation or committing an unforgivable crime, they would slice open their stomach with their own sword and end themselves.

Lionett should've done the same thing. He should've cut open his stomach. He should've condemned himself with his own hand. So why didn't he die? He didn't fear death. Back then, Lionett still had hope and determination that if he trained for a few more years, he'd be able to surpass his brother's skill with the sword.

True to his resolve, he'd trained until his palms bled after his loss against Girne. He pushed himself so hard that he could pass out at any time. Duke Sylvana's daughter was the only person who ever saw through his front. However...

"I was simply too naive," Lionett sighed to himself.

"If I train for a few more years, I'll be able to defeat Girne one day"? What a ridiculous notion. Back then, Lionett didn't realize that the empire didn't have the luxury of time to wait for him. The country had grown weak and unstable from the long years of civil unrest. Because the army had conscripted so many young men, farms and factories lacked manpower to keep up with supplying the empire's demand. The government had thought they could quell the rebels in only six months' time, but this spring would mark the fourth year since the conflict started. Lionett could no longer ignore his people's suffering. He couldn't ask them to wait

years for him to improve his swordplay.

That was why his last duel with his brother Girne would come now. Lionett was sure to lose. Like last time, Lionett doubted Girne would kill him. Perhaps he'd receive a second cross-shaped scar on his other cheek. Lionett planned to kill himself via harakiri when he lost. With his death, the conservative nobles who wanted to cling to the old power structure would give up. Girne could become the crown prince with no opposition, and under his rule, the empire would continue to survive. The civil war would end, ushering in an era of peace once again.

This was the only path left for Lionett to take. He didn't have any regrets. His mother was dead, his father was sick, and he didn't have any other loved ones in his life. He only had his responsibility towards his people and his empire. If tossing away his life could save his country, then he would do so without hesitation.

Oh, right. A thought hit Lionett, and he returned to his room. After taking out some stationery from his desk drawer, he began penning a letter. To be more precise, he was penning his will. First, he apologized to his father, the emperor, for being such an undutiful son and dying first. He also announced his abdication of his position as crown prince.

He finished the letter in no time. Lionett had no one other than his father to leave a will to, nor was there anything so important he had to write them down before his death. But then, for some inexplicable reason, a noble lady's face appeared in his mind's eye before he could set down his brush.

Alphina Shinn Sylvana.

Just who was she? Why did she approach him? Was she an idiot? Surely, she must be, between her barbaric act of pouring shoy sauce over fried mockerel and her reckless courage in inviting him to an untamed mountain. In the past, many noble daughters had tried to curry favor with him so that they could become the next empress. However, after his loss to Girne, they all disappeared from his side. They only ever approached him for his status as the crown prince, and not because they actually had an interest in Lionett himself.

But that girl... Why did she smile at me? Why was she always so cheery around me? Lionett's heart beat faster. He couldn't

understand the emotions welling up inside him.

“Alph…”

Lionett blinked, surprised at himself. *What am I doing? Why did I say her name just now? How can I be thinking about women before such an important decision, anyway? What do you mean by “Alph,” Licentious Lio?!*

In the end, Lionett left behind another will and he addressed it towards a certain duke’s daughter. The only word on the page was “Humph.”

Chapter Nine

During her youth, Alphina constructed a secret base in the back garden of the Sylvana family's manor. "Secret base" made it sound a lot fancier than what it actually was: a dilapidated hut. She'd picked out branches in the woods and borrowed straw from the farmers in Sylvana territory before taking them all to the back garden. Though Alphina had been a child, she'd fixed up the hut with her own hands and the materials she gathered.

This was back when she was seven or eight, so she had just entered elementary school. While all the other noble daughters were busying themselves with memorizing the names of different precious stones, Alphina's focus was on making her own secret home away from home.

No one knew about her secret base except her grandmother, Yulinar Finn Sylvana. Yulinar had caught her in the middle of sneaking cheese pies and tea to her secret base. Her granddaughter had frozen at the sight of her grandmother, but Yulinar had only given her an impressed look before pressing a finger against her upturned lips in a shushing gesture. Alphina could still perfectly remember the smile Yulinar gave her that day. She'd even practiced it in the mirror. Though Alphina herself no longer remembered this, the smile she gave Lionett the first day she transferred into middle school had been a replica of Yulinar's.

And now Alphina was standing alone in that hut. She'd renovated the interior and had drawn magic circles all around the walls and floor. Smoke from the namomile and saliander herbs she was burning filled the room. Dark curtains covered the windows, and candles burning in the candelabras set up in the four corners of the room served as the only source of illumination.

All this was just so she could speak with Scarlet through Telepathic Communication. It'd taken her around two years to finish all her preparations, since this ritual required a lot of different mediums and spells. Alphina had taken many trips to Yulinar's house in the Amazone Forest, enduring occasional monster attacks in order to bring magical tools from her

grandmother's to her base. Despite all the trouble she went through to prepare this spell, the Telepathic Communication would only last about ten minutes. She'd have to ask all of her questions and listen to all of Scarlet's answers in that brief window of time.

"Scarlet, can you hear me? It's me! Scarlet!"

The Crest on the back of her hand emanated a soft glow. Reacting to the energy from Alphina's Crest, a pale light emerged from the magic circle. Enveloped within it was a young boy with white hair and red eyes in a butler's uniform.

"Lady Alphina?! Oh, I'm so glad to see you're all right!" Scarlet exclaimed.

"I'm getting by somehow. What's the date over there?"

"It's May 6th, 847."

Judging by the date Scarlet gave her, only a week had passed since Alphina had cast Loop. As she'd expected, the flow of time between the two worlds was out of whack.

"The Loop flew me back to 839," Alphina reported.

"What?! You went that far back in time?" Scarlet asked.

"That's right. Two years have passed since then and it's now 841. I just entered high school."

"The spell isn't working at all like it did in the past."

"Yes, it's quite terrible here. On top of the ongoing civil war, it's always cloudy."

Scarlet nodded, looking like he realized something. "In that case, this is most definitely Girne Lione's doing."

"I figured. He's looped nine hundred ninety-nine times. I'm sure he's accumulated enough magic to interfere with my Loop if he wanted to." Alphina paused before she asked what she'd been worried about this whole time. "What happened with Lunea after I left? Everyone's fine, right?"

"They are; you have nothing to worry about. After a night's rest, Lady Lunea was back to normal. However, she doesn't remember her attack on you, Lady Alphina."

"She doesn't? Does that mean someone was controlling her mind?"

"According to one of the Yukon family's servants, a tall man appeared at the manor and took Lady Lunea away."

"It must be Cerberum, Lord Girne's familiar. That means they

were the ones who made Lunea attack us. Then, could the rockslide that hurt Lord Lio also have been…?"

"In our world, Prince Lionett is still asleep," Scarlet confirmed with a nod. "Every day, we receive reports of earthquakes and rumbling, as well as odd behavior from animals. The citizens are in a panic. Some people even proclaim that the apocalypse is nigh."

"So the Great Calamity—the eruption of Mt. Flame Dragon—is close at hand, huh? The timeline here is in just as much danger."

Was Girne right all along? Was the world *really* about to end? However, there was a sense of wrongness permeating the whole situation that Alphina couldn't shake off. If the Great Calamity was from a natural disaster, rather than the result of some dark conspiracy, why was she feeling that someone had masterminded all these events?

"If Lord Girne was the one causing the Great Calamity, then it'd all make sense," Alphina said.

"It didn't sound that way when we spoke to him in that underground prison," Scarlet pointed out. "The spell to cause the earthquake was a complicated one. Could Lord Girne meet all its requirements while incarcerated?"

"Maybe…" Alphina didn't think she could write it off as an impossibility. That a rebellion was occurring in this world could be a representation of Lord Girne's desire to destroy the empire. But even with that hypothesis in mind, the sense of wrongness still stuck to Alphina. Girne just didn't seem like such an evil person to her. "By the way, Scarlet, how are the two requests I made of you in case of an emergency?"

"Not so good. But at the very least, I can report that Prince Avenlock promised to help us."

"Good. And how's the Carl from this world doing?"

Scarlet shook his head weakly. "My apologies. We've not seen any success thus far."

"I'm not surprised. We're trying to transplant a Crest across different worlds."

"But, I'm sure that familiar Cerberum would've been able to do this." Scarlet's voice and expression were stiff.

"Don't blame yourself," Alphina said gently. "Remember what I said? Even if you aren't as powerful a familiar as Cerberum, you're still the only one I'd trust, Scarlet."

“Lady Alphina!”

Right when Scarlet’s expression brightened, the flames on the four candles around the room flickered as if the wind had blown through them. Although she’d closed all the windows, her red hair whipped around her face from the gust, and Scarlet’s image in the magic circle disappeared like someone blowing out a light. In his place was a young man with blond hair, as well as a pair of mismatched eyes. It was Girne Lione, his familiar Cerberum behind him.

“Hi, Alphina. I apologize for interrupting your conversation,” he said, confidence dripping from his every word. His physical body was elsewhere in the empire, and he was using magic to send Alphina his appearance and voice.

To think that he could interfere in my Telepathic Communication! Alphina shuddered at the casual display of Girne’s magical power, but she put on an unaffected air as she replied, “Hello, Lord Girne. I figured I’d meet with you in this timeline eventually.”

He laughed. “Judging by those words, you seem to have noticed what I did.”

“Of course. So you were the one who called me into this dreary world full of cloudy skies and twisted people.”

“Yup. That’s right!”

“Since you could answer my question, you must have memories of both the previous timeline and this one. You might well be the same Girne I met in that underground cell.”

“Two for two! Wow, you’re smart on top of everything else? I’m impressed.” Girne clapped his hands like he was enjoying a show. “I was the one behind the rockslide that assaulted Lio and the others too. I ordered Cerberum to use explosive magic on some loose rocks along the mountain face. Of course, I didn’t think Lio would actually *die* from something as lame as a rockslide, but I wanted to see the imperial family and nobles panic. They got what was coming to them, all right!”

Girne laughed like a child while Alphina heaved a mental sigh. The broken prince was obsessed with his own victim mentality. To put it short, everything he was doing was to take revenge against the empire he hated so much. Yet Alphina still couldn’t wave off the sense that something was wrong. Girne’s cruelty came from his innocence and unfamiliarity with the world. But was his hatred

for his brother and the empire genuine? Alphina still couldn't believe he was the kind of person to bear such resentment.

Next to Girne, his servant Cerberum stood with his back straight and eyes lowered to the ground. He didn't look Alphina in the eye, nor did he open his mouth.

"This world is amazing compared to our previous one, isn't it?" Girne was saying. "A useless younger brother, in contrast to his popular and talented older brother. What a fantastic feeling! I've finally reclaimed the privileges of my birth. Everyone wants me and not Lio as the next emperor too. The Great Calamity will wipe this timeline from existence, just like it did the others, but I don't care. I'm just glad I got to experience such a lovely world."

Alphina's eyes widened. "So the Great Calamity will take place in this timeline as well?"

"Yeah, probably. Hmm? Did you think *I* was the one causing it? Of course not! The Lione Empire's my homeland too; I'd never destroy it. I can't believe you think so little of me." Girne looked hurt. Seeing his expression made Alphina feel like she insulted a sensitive little boy, and so she didn't think Girne was lying about this.

Yes, that was the true root of the feeling of wrongness. She couldn't understand how someone who could make this kind of expression could possibly...

"So, was there something you wanted?" Alphina asked.

"Didn't I already tell you? I want you to be my wife," Girne replied. When Alphina said nothing in return, he continued with a smile, "There's no merit in becoming Lio's betrothed in this world."

Alphina shook her head. "How can you be so sure? Perhaps Lord Lio will put in enough training that he'll be able to defeat you one day. He's a muscle-head, after all!" After she said it, she started wondering if this really counted as a legitimate defense for Lio.

"You're right," Girne said, his smile looking more bitter now. "My brother is a genius with a sword, but his true talent lies in how much work he puts into bettering himself. But does my brother really have the luxury of time to focus on training?"

Alphina gasped as the truth of Girne's words hit her. He smirked and snapped his fingers. Cerberum, who'd been silent and still at his side the whole time, nodded and removed a hand mirror from his pocket. Judging by the glyph carved into the metal at the back,

it was a magical tool.

Light reflected off the mirror's surface and hit the wall. Then, the image of a devastating battlefield appeared from the light. Words escaped Alphina at the shocking sight. Dead soldiers, arrows riddling their bodies, littered the ground. They were still holding on to their swords. Merchants had collapsed in the mud, painful-looking hoofprints still visible on their backs. Farmers were breaking down in tears at the sight of their destroyed crops. Starving children lined the streets, begging passersby for food and coin. Alphina's chest ached at the sights Girne showed her.

"Understand now? This empire doesn't have time to wait for my brother to improve himself," Girne said. "I'm sure he's aware of that as well. Judging by his personality, he'll likely challenge me to a second duel soon."

"And you plan on accepting it?" Alphina asked.

"Don't worry, Alphina. I don't want to see my brother go through any more torment. I'll kill him in one strike. Well, considering what I know about him, he'll likely kill himself before I have the chance to do the deed myself."

Kill himself? Lionett plans on committing suicide? The idea left Alphina in a daze. Despair akin to the sensation of falling into an abyss seized her.

"Alphina." The broken prince's voice was gentler than before. "If you promise to become mine, then I'll make it so that this horrible world never happens. I'll return you to your former timeline. After I escape my cell, let's abandon this dying empire and live somewhere else, just the two of us. I never once thought of leaving that underground prison. But it's a whole different matter if I can have you with me. Don't you think it'd be so fun to go on the run together? The two of us can evade any pursuit. It's not such a bad deal, is it? I'll give you whatever your heart desires, so let's go live however we want together."

Girne reached out with his slender fingers to brush Alphina's jawline. Since this was an illusion, he shouldn't be able to touch her. However, Alphina felt a physical sensation against her chin. She shook her head, knocking away Girne's hand.

"Sorry, but I refuse," she proclaimed.

Surprise and anger twisted Girne's expression. "I can kill you if you don't obey me."

“Go ahead, then. I’d bite off my own tongue before you can do so.”

“Try me.” Girne’s red eye flashed with light, and crimson flames enveloped Alphina’s body.

It burns! She grunted in pain as the fires licked her skin. Girne and Cerberum were nothing more than magical projections, so they shouldn’t have been able to do actual physical harm to Alphina. And yet, her body could *feel* the fire like it was real. It was so hot and agonizing that she felt like her entire body would suffer third-degree burns. Like she wanted to beg for forgiveness and ask Girne to release her from the inferno. However, she refused to take a knee.

Still staring into the Evil Eyes before her, she said, “Freedom—the freedom I earned for myself after experiencing a hundred time loops—is what I want above all else.”

“Didn’t you hear me?! I told you I’d give you that!”

“And I’m saying that’s wrong!” Alphina yelled, ignoring the flames. The passion emanating from her was akin to its own fire. “How is admitting I’ve lost and sucking up to those in power ‘freedom’?! Freedom isn’t something others can grant you! It’s something you have to win with your own hands! Girne Lione, you’ve lived through nine hundred ninety-nine lifetimes and you still don’t understand such a basic concept?!”

The moment she finished talking, a dull light surrounded Alphina’s body, and the heat from the fire grew weaker. She looked down at herself in confused surprise. *What’s this light?* It didn’t feel like defensive magic. Alphina barely had any magical energy left, and the remaining dregs were nowhere enough to counter Girne’s spells. So what was up with this light? It was warm and, more importantly, it felt familiar. Where did this sense of nostalgia come from? Scarlet wasn’t present in this timeline, but did Alphina know any other magic users who might protect her?

As Alphina’s mind continued to whir with questions, Girne suddenly groaned in pain. He curled up, clutching his chest. “Alphina, you…you…”

“L-Lord Girne?!” Alphina cried.

Something strange was happening with his Evil Eyes. Light was flickering in them, alternating between the red and blue eyes. Alphina wondered what was happening to him. Had he lost control

of the Evil Eyes' power?

"Your Highness! Get a hold of yourself! Your Highness!" Cerberum helped him up and shook his shoulders.

The light blinking from the Evil Eyes grew weaker and weaker before finally, with a last sparkle, it faded. The pain disappeared from Girne's face as if it had never been there.

"And here I thought you were a smart one," Girne said calmly. "How boring."

"Lord Girne, are you…?" Alphina stared at him, wide-eyed. She didn't have any solid proof, but it felt like all the pieces to the puzzle known as Girne Lione were clicking into place. It was nothing more than a hypothesis, made from the warm light that had been surrounding her and Girne's odd behavior. But if she was right, then it would explain everything. After taking a quick breath to calm herself, she asked, "Cerberum, what are your thoughts on all this? Do you really think this is for the best?"

Girne's servant didn't answer for a moment, and when he finally did, he did so in a quiet voice. "I will follow my master's will."

"Humph. His will, huh?" Alphina nodded. "I'll place my trust in your words, as well as in your pride as a familiar."

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After Girne's and Cerberum's images disappeared, the magic circle glowed again to reveal Scarlet.

"What happened?" he asked. "The Telepathic Communication cut off."

"Well, Lord Girne decided to drop by," Alphina replied.

"He did?! The broken prince approached you of his own accord?"

"Yeah. It looks like I'm gonna have to prepare myself mentally." At Alphina's words, Scarlet sucked in a sharp breath. He'd never seen such worry and determination on his beloved mistress's face before. "This world might end up being my grave."

"What do you—?!"

"But I'm not going down without a fight. Even if future generations will remember me as the worst villainess in this empire's history, I won't stop struggling until my last breath."

"A villainess, you say?" Scarlet blinked.

Ignoring his confusion, Alphina continued, “In order for my plan to succeed, there’s something I’d like you to do for me. It’s something I can only entrust you with, Scarlet.”

Once she told him the plan she’d been working on in her head, Scarlet’s eyes slowly widened and he said, “That’s a lot of responsibility. Will I be able to handle it?”

“You’re the only person in the world who can. I’m sorry that I keep saddling you with such difficult tasks.”

Just how many times has Scarlet helped me since our first meeting? If Alphina had never come across Scarlet, then she wouldn’t have been able to fight against her destiny like this. She could accumulate all the magical energy she wanted from constant loops, but Alphina knew that if she’d remained alone, she wouldn’t have been able to do anything meaningful with it. Now that magic was no longer an avenue for her, she was realizing anew how irreplaceable this loyal butler was for her.

“This reminds me of back when we were sneaking into Saint Debonaire’s headquarters in the Heavenrose Kingdom,” Scarlet said with a soft smile. “Back then, you entrusted me with your hope, Lady Alphina. Even if it costs me my life, I’ll grant your wish.”

“Thank you. But I don’t know if ‘even if it costs me my life’ was what you meant to say,” Alphina replied with a slow shake of her head.

Scarlet understood the implication in her words and nodded. “You’re right. I’ll grant your wish, so we can go back to our lives together!”

Alphina smiled; that was the sentiment she wanted to hear from him. Scarlet wasn’t a mere servant for her. She could no longer imagine life without him. They were partners, in both body and spirit.

Chapter Ten

About a week later, something happened at school. Alphina had gotten there bright and early, and was carving away at a piece of wood with a sculpting knife. Since she wasn't the most dexterous person in the world, she had difficulty with arts like sculpting. But this was the second time she was making this, so she was managing.

"Hmm, this looks about right," she said as she observed her work.

A piece of the ear had fallen off, but it didn't look so bad, if she said so herself. She was in the middle of gathering up the wood chips with her hands when someone entered the room.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Lady Alphina Shinn Sylvana?"

The visitor was a young man with blue hair and a pair of glasses, which he kept pushing up with his fingers. He was blocking the door with his body, which Alphina found terribly annoying.

"You came at the right time. Can you toss these for me?" she asked.

"Humph. Of course." The four-eyes accepted the wood chips from Alphina, walked over to the bin, tossed them, and clapped his hands to wipe off the remaining sawdust. He sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow like he'd just done something impressive. "WAIT A SECOND! I didn't come here to toss your garbage for you!"

"Then what are you here for, Kithling Ashley?"

Like in their previous timeline, Alphina's first meeting with this four-eyes had been at the school's entrance ceremony. Considering the rebellion, the entrance ceremony had been rather gloomy. To change the atmosphere into something more exciting so the students could enjoy themselves, Alphina had fired off a joke. Since then, though, Kithling had chosen to make Alphina's business his, which was overbearing in an irritating way.

In this world, Kithling wasn't Lionett's right-hand man. The Ashley family must've changed their loyalties, as most of the

empire supported Girne instead.

“All right, well, I’m busy, so…” Not giving Kithling time to reply, Alphina tried to push her way out of the classroom, only for Kithling to grab her wrist.

“We haven’t finished our conversation. Why did you reject our marriage arrangement?”

“Huh?” *A marriage arrangement? With this annoying four-eyes who can’t ever shut up?*

“For generations, the Ashley family has been one of scholars,” Kithling said. “Under normal circumstances, we’d never marry a barbaric monkey. However, it’s also the truth that decline awaits families that won’t let in the occasional drop of foreign blood. That’s why my father decided that you, with your sturdy body, are the right woman to let into our line.”

Alphina hummed in response. *So if my engagement isn’t to the prince, it would be to the Ashley family, huh?* She wasn’t too concerned with this. It had only taken a hundred two lifetimes for her to stumble upon this fact, but she couldn’t care less.

“What’s with that reaction?” Kithling asked. “Didn’t your father tell you anything?”

“Oh, is that what he was going on about last night?”

Alphina had been so busy going over her coming plans that her father’s words had gone in one ear and out the other. She knew that ignoring her father like this made her a pretty bad daughter, but she’d make up for it if she could survive this timeline.

“Anyway, Lady Alphina, would you like to take lunch with me in the library? We can think of this as practice for our arranged dates.”

“Nah, I think I’ll eat somewhere else.”

Kithling chuckled. “Yes, I expected that. No noble daughter would ever turn down an invitation from Kithling Ashley, the smartest person in the entire empire. Since our tests are coming up soon, I don’t mind tutoring you in subjects—” Alphina made for the doorway while the four-eyes was still blabbering on, and he grabbed her blouse. “Hey, wait, wait, wait!”

“What do you want?!” Alphina yelled. “You’re going to ruin my shirt!”

“Wh-Where are you going?! First period will start any moment!”

“I plan on skipping it.”

“Oh, I see! Ha ha, so you’re embarrassed, Lady Alphina. Heh heh, I can’t blame you. I, Kithling Ashley, am the third-handsomest man in this empire, right behind Prince Girne and Prince Lionett. Even a shy noble lady would accept an invitation from a man as wonderful as—”

“OH MY GOODNESS, SHUT UP!” *His personality is all over the place!* Up to Alphina’s ninety-ninth loop, Kithling had been like if someone dressed up a rulebook in clothes and glasses. But in loops past the hundredth one, she couldn’t understand him as a person at all. Maybe he’d always been like this, and she simply never noticed until she could hear his inner voice. “Let me GO!”

Alphina drove her fist into Kithling’s belly. The hit landed so cleanly that the classmates who’d been watching in silence all winced in sympathy. Kithling fell to the ground, squeaking like a small forest animal.

Oops, was that too much? Then again, Alphina knew perfectly well that Kithling wasn’t the type to stay down from this kind of minor physical violence. She was just about to head out of the classroom again when a male student running down the hallway caught her attention.

“B-Big news, everyone! Prince Lionett—” Alphina’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the name. “Prince Lionett headed off to the Amazone Forest on his own! I heard the teachers discussing it in the faculty lounge!”

The students in the classroom began murmuring among themselves.

“Didn’t the rebel army set up their headquarters in the Amazone Forest? What does the prince think he can accomplish on his own?”

“Do you think he wants to challenge Lord Girne to another duel?”

“No way! He’d never win against him!”

“Doesn’t he know his place?”

Alphina’s brow furrowed, and she felt a vein pop in her head at the last comment. None of them understood what Lionett’s intentions were. If they did, they wouldn’t speak of him in such an insensitive manner.

“He went alone, right? No one accompanied him?”

“Isn’t it normal for a prince to have bodyguards with him?”

“They probably figured they could take this opportunity to wash their hands of him.”

Alphina’s entire body was shaking as she listened to her classmates’ thoughtless words. She wanted to yell at them and demand why they couldn’t see through Lionett’s intentions. Lionett’s plan was to lose and die to his brother in a final duel. In doing so, the nobles and people would accept Girne’s claim to the throne. The emperor would give up as well, and barter peace with the rebel army. Lionett wanted to sacrifice himself so that he could end this civil conflict. Yet everyone here only thought to insult the prince without even taking the time to understand his tragic resolve.

BANG!

Everyone in the room jumped at the sudden noise. Alphina had slammed her fist onto her desk. The loud sound, as well as the anger coming off the duke’s daughter in waves, silenced the irresponsible gossip in the classroom.

“Can’t any of you empathize with the prince?” she asked, glaring at her classmates. The memory of that blond prince’s awkwardness and almost impolite brusqueness, as well as his straightforward honesty, propelled her to raise her voice. “His Highness plans to sacrifice his own life and reputation for his empire and people. Why can’t any of you understand that?!”

As she spoke, she mused on how odd this whole situation was. *Why am I speaking on the prince’s behalf? I can’t blame anyone here. No matter how many times I looped, I could never figure Prince Lionett out. I even ran away from him. But now I’m standing up for him.*

“Prince Lionett might emerge the winner in his duel,” Alphina continued. “And then what? Are you all going to butter him up instead?” It was only when the words were out of Alphina’s mouth that she finally realized something: she was voicing her own wish. *Oh, I understand now. I don’t want the prince to die.* She took several deep breaths to calm herself down before looking around the classroom once again. “No one can predict the outcome of a duel, just like how no one knows what’ll happen in life. That’s why they’re so enjoyable.”

With that as her parting words, Alphina jumped over Kithling’s unconscious body on the ground and ran off like the wind.

Chapter Eleven

“A noble lady walks a narrow path.”

That was a phrase in *The Way of the Noblewoman*, a book that Empress Nadia, Lionett’s mother, had left behind. The book was a compilation of core values and lessons for any noble daughter in the Lione Empire. It contained all the unspoken rules of proper etiquette for Lione noblewomen, born from hundreds of years of tradition.

In exchange for riches and status, countless noble daughters had to walk on this narrow path. It didn’t matter if they were happy with their lot in life or not. They simply had to walk along the rails their parents and society had set out for them.

The Saint was the person who embodied the most extreme of the empire’s views on proper noblewomen. She was beautiful, pure, and righteous. Yet she also needed to be delicate and passive. Her actions and words were to benefit the men around her, as well as their reputations. She had to sit in silence and smile, never once voicing her own thoughts. All the noble daughters in the world should aim to act like the Saint. In the empire’s high society, this was common sense if you wanted to become a noble daughter everyone liked.

But who decided this? The country’s hundreds of years of history had. Those who dared step off this narrow path would meet mockery and criticism. According to Nadia, people would fling insults like “impolite,” “tomboy,” “inconsiderate,” and “unpleasant” at these women.

What did people in the empire call noble daughters who rejected the way of the noblewoman? They called them “villainesses” to signify they were the opposite of the Saint. But what was so villainous about them? It was the fact they broke the rules their family set for them, as well as the rules of society the empire set for its people.

After reading all of that in the empress’s book when she was a child, Alphina wondered, *If what’s in this book is true, then it’s as if having freedom is a bad thing. Are women who want to live their lives*

as they want 'villainesses'?

Then, that means I'm a…

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By the time Alphina borrowed the fastest horse that the school owned and raced to the barracks, Lionett was already on his own mount. But she'd made it before he could leave for his duel with Girne. A crowd of nobles and soldiers had gathered to bid him farewell. Everyone looked sad, and some were even sobbing. A few of the noble daughters were clutching handkerchiefs as well. Many of them were cheering for the prince and the Lione Empire, though their voices were thick with tears. None of them were stopping the prince.

I wonder if the so-called "kamikaze unit" saw something like this before they set off? Alphina wondered. The kamikaze unit was something her grandmother Yulinar told her about. Apparently, a country in the far east had a special kamikaze unit, and the soldiers in it would carry gems that contained explosive magic. Gems in hand, they'd charge into the heart of the enemy formation and detonate them to take as many soldiers as they could with them in a suicide attack.

"What brave soldiers! They're the portrait of how a genuine patriot should act," Alphina's father had said after hearing Yulinar's explanation. However, Alphina came away from the story with a different opinion.

When her father wasn't around, she'd approached Yulinar and said, "Grandma, that story you told us the other day was so odd. Yeah, I think the people in the kamikaze unit were really brave, but the people who ordered them to do that weren't brave at all. I mean, they had to resort to suicide attacks because they were losing the war, right? In that case, shouldn't *they* be the ones to blow themselves up?"

Yulinar's only response had been to smile. Right now, though, there were more pressing matters than some country in the far east.

"Please hold on a moment, Prince Lionett!" Alphina yelled, jumping off her horse and standing in his path.

Lionett's white horse whinnied in protest while he looked down

at her in surprise. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“This isn’t the time for such silly questions! I can’t believe you!”

Lionett looked down as if he was too ashamed to meet Alphina’s eyes. “I’m… Ahem, this is the only method I can think of to save this country. Please let me through.”

Alphina clenched her fist and bit her lip. But his words steeled her resolve, and she glared up at him. “No, Prince Lionett. There’s a much better way we can solve this.”

“What did you say?”

“I’ll tell you all about it if you lend me your ear.”

The crowd that had gathered to see Lionett off was starting to look confused at the hold-up. Lionett dismounted and approached her.

“What is it? What can I do aside from fighting my brother?”

“Well, it’s THIS!”

It happened in the blink of an eye. A sharp sound, as if a balloon had popped, rang out as Alphina slapped Lionett’s cheek. A soldier, who’d been standing nearby and witnessed the whole thing, later described the scene as, “It was such an impressive punch that even *hearing* it made me snap to attention. She’d put her entire weight behind that attack. I couldn’t believe a nobleman’s daughter was capable of such ferocity.” Another commented that Alphina threw a punch better than his kara-tay teacher. The testimonies weren’t the complete truth, as Alphina had hit Lionett with her palm, not her fist. However, she’d moved so fast and the impact was so loud that most people described it as a punch.

“Wh-What are you—?!” Lionett’s eyes widened as he stared down at Alphina, gobsmacked at the violence.

She shot him a confident grin and giggled. “Prince Lio, you played right into my hands! To tell you the truth, I’m a spy from the rebel army.” Murmurs broke out among the spectators, so Alphina raised her voice as she continued. “My mission was to seduce you so that you’d be too distracted to duel Lord Girne. Though I successfully transferred into the same school as you, you’re so stubborn that you still chose to fight until the bitter end and challenge Lord Girne to a duel. Aw, shucks, that means my mission is a big fat failure. How can I ever show my face around Lord Girne again? I guess I have no choice but to kill you right here!” She

pulled out a knife, the polished blade flickering in the sunlight despite the thick clouds overhead. “Prepare for death, Your Highness!”

Lionett gasped, though he remained frozen. Alphina swung down with the knife, but before she could sink it into his chest, soldiers grabbed her from behind and wrestled her to the ground.

“You vile wench!” one yelled.

“Scoundrel!” another spat.

Jeers and screams rose from the crowd as the soldiers kicked Alphina. They didn’t hold back just because she was the daughter of Duke Sylvana. The punishment for regicide, even if the assassin didn’t succeed, was death. That was the law in the empire.

“Who are you calling a scoundrel?!” Alphina yelled as boots continued to rain down on her, covering her in dirt and bruises. “Everyone who’s willing to sacrifice the prince for their own survival is far worse than I am! You can dress it up as much as you like and tell yourself it’s for the empire’s good as much as you please. It still doesn’t change the fact that you’re all just scared of losing your precious authority! Why must Prince Lionett die for something as ridiculous as that?!”

“Shut up! You have no right to speak, you villainess!” a soldier snapped.

The two soldiers behind Alphina wrenched her arms behind her back and snapped shackles around her wrists. The sight of a noble daughter being arrested was a painful one, but Alphina had gone through this a hundred times already, so she personally didn’t care.

“Take her away!” someone yelled. “We’ll interrogate her at headquarters.”

The soldiers began dragging her away, practically lifting Alphina off the ground, but Lionett calling out to her stopped them.

“W-Wait, Alphina!” he said, his left cheek swollen. “Are you… Did my brother really send you?”

“Yes, he did,” Alphina replied, looking over her shoulder at him. She curled her lips into the nastiest grin she could muster, drawing on the memory of none other than her archnemesis, Saint Debonaire. That woman was capable of the most despicable expressions, and Alphina could only hope that she captured even a

hundredth of that infuriating essence as she spat, “I knocked out the Ashley family’s heir on my way here too. Lord Girne entrusted me with this mission because of my aggressive nature, yet I failed him. Oh, Prince Lio, it’s really too bad that I wasn’t able to kill you!”

Alphina’s acting wasn’t the best in the world, as she’d never been a skilled liar. Anyone paying attention could see how much she was pushing herself to act as the villain. If Lord Blackrose of Heavenrose were here, he’d quip, “I wouldn’t pay a single coin for such a dreadful performance.”

Alphina was truly a villainess at this moment—a villainous actress, to be more precise. No one noticed anything off about her performance, though. Eyes clouded by hatred and rage could not see through to the truth.

“Ugh, can someone shut that woman up? Take her away!” the captain ordered his men.

The soldiers, still sandwiching Alphina, marched her away.

“Alphina, why?” Lionett asked as he watched them depart. His entire body felt weak and cold. Only his cheek, still smarting from her slap, felt warm.

“Your Imperial Highness, we should return to the palace for today,” his bodyguard, personally assigned to him by the emperor, said. He was also supposed to serve as the witness for Lionett’s duel with Girne. “Considering that spy’s attempt on your life, we should postpone the duel. She might not be the only assassin Lord Girne sent after you.”

The bodyguard was right. In their heart of hearts, the servants of the imperial family all surely wished for Lionett’s death, but he had to be killed fair and square during the duel, or else the citizens wouldn’t accept it. If an assassin killed Lionett on his way to his duel with Girne, then that could lead to further discord and yet another civil war in the future.

Lionett knew all of that, but he still couldn’t understand. Nothing Alphina said made any sense. Would his brother really try to assassinate him now, especially when Lionett was so much weaker than him? And even if he did, would he truly go through the effort of training a nobleman’s daughter to become a spy? These seemed like basic questions, but Lionett could tell from a glance around that no one thought the situation strange. Alphina’s performance had convinced everyone she was a villainess.

“Alphina…” Lionett looked down at the ground and noticed something. Alphina must’ve dropped it during the scuffle. “What’s this?”

He stooped to pick it up. It was a hand-carved wooden pendant that resembled a bear’s face.

Interlude: Girne

The rebel army's base was located in the Amazone Forest, but rumors of Duke Sylvana's "barbaric attack" on Prince Lionett still reached their ears in no time at all. When Girne Lione, sitting in a large tent that looked like something inhabitants of a desert nation might shelter in, heard about it, he couldn't help but blink his Evil Eyes in surprise.

"Alphina, a rebel spy?"

"Yes, milord. She apparently testified to the military police that you ordered her to assassinate Lord Lionett."

After hearing the reply from his loyal servant Cerberum, Girne furrowed his brow and murmured, "Just what is she thinking?"

"This must be a ploy of some kind. I suggest we make a move of our own."

"Like what?"

"Why don't we tell the imperial army that she isn't our spy? Then, we can set up a duel with Lord Lionett a—"

Girne shook his head, interrupting Cerberum. "I doubt the empire will listen to us. I don't know why Alphina would lie about being our spy, and if I can't explain her motives, I can't make them agree to a duel." *If this is indeed Alphina's plan, then it's a clever one indeed*, Girne mused. He couldn't think of any way out of the current situation. "Alphina's really something, isn't she? Throughout history, heroes and their ilk were mere fabrications of the populace's delusions. But Alphina's the real deal."

"I agree," Cerberum said. "It wasn't a coincidence that she survived a hundred time loops."

If Alphina's plan had been to stop Lionett's duel with Girne, then it didn't actually change the fact that the rebel army held the advantage. All she did was buy them time. But the price she paid for that time was far too great. She couldn't pretend she was joking; the punishment for regicide—even a failed attempt—was death. Her status as Duke Sylvana's daughter wouldn't offer her any protection. Even worse, since she claimed herself as a spy, the government would execute her in public to make an example out

of her. Surely, Alphina was aware of the risk…

After thinking for a moment, Girne smiled. “I don’t know what her end goal is, but it wouldn’t hurt to play along with my beloved Alphina’s plan.”

“But that would deviate from our original strategy.”

“That’s fine. I’m more interested in knowing what she’s plotting.” Girne smirked, the expression resembling that of a mischievous child’s. As Alphina noticed in a previous conversation with Girne, a part of him was akin to an innocent boy. He was pure, yet cruel, much like how a child might rip off the wings of an insect to sate their own curiosity. “Oh, I know! How about making Lionett carry out Alphina’s execution?” he asked in an excited tone. “We should appoint Lio as her executioner, just like he was in all the previous timelines. This is the best way to hurt him, isn’t it? The Saint isn’t even compelling him this time; he’ll have to do the deed of his own free will. And Lio has no choice *but* to kill her. This is the only way to save his country from civil conflict, after all. Ha ha, doesn’t that sound so wonderful? This is what he gets for taking everything from me!”

His Evil Eyes sparkled with insane joy.

“Lord Girne,” Cerberum said as he looked into his master’s eyes. “Is this really what you want?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Lord Lionett is your younger brother, and Lady Alphina is the woman you wanted to meet more than anything—the woman you’re interested in. Is plunging them into misery truly what your heart desires?”

“Lio… Alphina…” Girne’s expression became blank. His Evil Eyes began flickering, but the light in them wavered as if they were shining through a fog. “B-But, she turned me down. She rejected me and said she would choose my brother. She didn’t want me or my Evil Eyes. Lionett already took all the happiness I should’ve experienced. He’s the one who…” His sorrowful moans filled the tent. As if light and darkness were waging a war inside him, his red eye and blue eye flickered one after the other. “Yes, that’s right. How can I ever forgive that thief, Lionett?! If Alphina wants to protect him, then she’s just as guilty. I can never forgive them. I’ll kill them in the most painful ways known to man. Alphina will die at the hands of her beloved Lionett!”

Cerberum watched his master cackle. Sadness veiled his gaze, as if he pitied what he saw. Several times, he wanted to raise his hand and reach out to his suffering master. However, in the end, his arm remained still at his side.

“What’s wrong, Cerberum?” Girne asked. “Do you take issue with my decision?”

“No. I am your loyal servant. If this is what you truly wish, then I have no reason to disobey,” Cerberum replied.

“Is that so? Then do as I tell you.”

“Understood. Even if it costs me my life, I will carry out the task.”

“Mm.”

With a final bow, Cerberum turned and left the tent.

Chapter Twelve

After the soldiers forcibly escorted her to the palace, they dragged her to a dilapidated tower in the garden's corner and locked her away in its tallest room. Few rooms could compare to this one's poor quality. It didn't even have a window! That the soldiers didn't toss her into an underground cell was because of their lingering respect for her title as a duke's daughter. Alphina was very familiar with this place, as it was the same room she was tossed into during her time loops.

"I never thought I'd come back here again," she sighed to herself as she sat in the same rickety chair she'd sat in during every time loop.

A large piece of gauze covered her cheek, right where a soldier had punched her, and bandages were wrapped all over her body. It looked painful, but she'd already suffered through similar injuries in the past. Considering she'd died ninety-nine times—a hundred times if she counted a mental one—such minor wounds no longer bothered her.

It felt like she hadn't been here in a hundred years, and an odd sense of nostalgia welled up in her. Last time, Scarlet, as a white cat, came to visit her, but she couldn't count on him this time. He had his own job to take care of in her original timeline. All Alphina could do now was put her trust in him and wait. Frankly, she didn't think the odds were in their favor.

Saint Debonaire was another person who'd visited Alphina here before. Alphina had spent ninety-nine lives thinking that the Saint's sickly sweet demeanor was a case of some seriously cheesy acting, but when she gained the ability to hear other's inner voices in her hundredth loop, the Saint's true personality had left Alphina too shocked to speak. To think that Xenos's saint was actually a human hog! And an annoying squealer, at that.

"It's so boring in here that I even welcomed Little Miss Piggy's visits," Alphina reminisced. "At least our conversation killed some time."

The Saint had not yet appeared in this world. In her previous

timeline, Saint Debonaire revealed herself when Alphina was nineteen, and since she was sixteen right now, she'd have to wait three more years. If Lionett died, and Girne became the ruler of the Lione Empire, would Saint Debonaire still announce herself? Perhaps it wouldn't change anything; she'd still control Girne with her Geis and puppet the empire to her liking while shopping for hot guys. But would her Geis work on someone with the Evil Eyes of Hados? Xenos and Hados were brothers, so it was hard to say.

"*Little Miss Piggy Versus the Broken Prince*, huh? I'd pay to watch that."

Imagining it put Alphina in a better mood. Who would she root for? But before she could start pondering that, a knock sounded on the door.

Huh?! Is it really Little Miss Piggy?! Alphina was so surprised that she almost stood up out of reflex, but the person who walked in through the door was a smarmy-looking man with blue hair and glasses.

"Kithling?!" she exclaimed. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Kithling made a shushing gesture with his finger. "Please, keep your voice down. The guards will hear you! Ugh, you've really done it this time. Hitting me is one thing, but His Highness as well?" He rubbed at his stomach, right where Alphina had punched him.

"I'm sorry for punching you when I didn't need to. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing," Alphina said.

"That makes it worse, you realize? Judging by the way you phrased that, I assume you punched His Highness for a reason, then?"

Alphina frowned. "You're so persnickety. More importantly, how did you get in here?"

"What family do you think I hail from? The Ashley family has connections all over the palace. So long as I have coin, I can go anywhere I please."

Coin? So Kithling bribed his way in here. "I'm a spy," Alphina pointed out. "Did you come here to interrogate me? To have your dirty way with me?"

"Wha—?! Wh-Wh-Who do you think I am? How dare you imply such a thing about me?!" Kithling's frantic denial of Alphina's joke made him seem even more suspicious, and the blush on his cheeks didn't help his case. After clearing his throat a few times,

Kithling straightened his back and said, “I don’t believe you’re a spy. Spies have to be careful of how they tread, lest they attract unwanted suspicion. You, on the other hand, seemed to go out of your way to stand out at school. I doubt Prince Girne would pick such an idiot as an assassin.”

“I don’t have any rebuttal to that,” Alphina laughed weakly. Kithling was the prince’s brains for a reason in their past life. Once, he’d even been the leader of his own terrorist group. “So now what? Are you volunteering as my attorney?”

“Of course not. I came here at his request.” Kithling stepped aside to reveal a young boy with red hair.

“C-Carl?! What are you doing here?!” Alphina cried.

Carl, who, at six, was younger than in her previous timeline, looked up at her. *Hmm?* Alphina noticed something strange. Instead of his usual blank expression, she could make out a hint of emotion in his adorable, round eyes. He seemed a little overwhelmed by the unprecedented turn of events, but he still mustered up as much courage as he could.

“Carl, what’s the matter?” Alphina asked. “Is there something you want to say to me?”

Carl stood on his tippy-toes and signaled for Alphina to lean down. She rushed to obey his request and listened to what he was whispering, his sweet breath fanning over the shell of her ear.

When he finished, she widened her eyes and exclaimed, “Really?!”

Her entire body was shaking from excitement. She had difficulty wrapping her mind around the information, but if she thought about things as Carl described them to her, then it all made sense.

“What did he say? What’s the matter with you?” Kithling asked, but Alphina couldn’t give him an answer just yet.

“I just learned something that overturned a truth I’d believed for a hundred lifetimes,” she replied. “Carl, thank you for telling me what you did. You were very brave.”

Carl shook his head and then clutched at his sister’s skirt. “Alphina, come back safe.”

“Of course I will,” Alphina said as she placed her hand over her brother’s.

It would be a difficult battle. If Carl’s intel was correct, then things had gone from bad to worse. Considering how powerful

her enemy was, Alphina doubted she would return alive. Would Scarlet, still in their original timeline, make it in time? And even if he did, was that enough to defeat their enemy? *No, this is no time for doubt. All I can do is keep moving forward.*

"Kithling," Alphina said. "Don't go anywhere near the execution site on the day of my execution. Take Carl and go far, far away from here."

"But, then you'll—" Kithling tried to protest, but Alphina interrupted him.

"Enough! Just do as I say!"

Kithling frowned, looking annoyed. But he must've sensed from Alphina's expression that something serious was going down, because he fell silent without further argument. Taking that as acquiescence, Alphina began plotting her next move.

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Like in all her previous lifetimes, Alphina received her sentence in an imperial trial. However, her trial this time felt different from all the other ones she'd experienced. Since Emperor Taiga IV was sick, they held the hearing in his bedroom rather than in the palace's reception hall. To reduce the amount of stress the emperor had to go through, they limited the number of spectators as well.

Alphina's parents were absent. She'd left them a letter, apologizing for her role as Girne's spy and how she'd deceived them over the years. The military police had discovered the letter, and then ordered her parents under house arrest and to avoid contact with their daughter. Lionett was present, but the emperor forbade him from speaking. He merely stayed at his sickly father's bedside, levelling Alphina with a sad look.

"Lady Alphina," the emperor called in a raspy voice.

"I'm here, Your Imperial Majesty," she said, raising her head to look at him.

Compared to how he was in the original timeline, the emperor seemed far older than his actual age. His cheeks were sunken, and his trademark beard looked wispy and scraggly. Alphina had never wanted to see the man with the most authority in the empire in such a sorry state.

“They say you are a spy sent by Girne. Is that true?” he asked.

“It is, Your Imperial Majesty. I have no excuses for my allegiance.”

“However, I also hear that the soldiers couldn’t find evidence of you communicating with the rebel army.”

Alphina scoffed. “That’s because the military police in this empire are useless. Considering they couldn’t even see through my schemes when I’m nothing more than a young noblewoman, I can tell that your army is barely holding itself together. It makes sense why the rebel army is trouncing them.”

The gathered nobles protested in fury:

“Hold your tongue, you wench!”

“How dare you say that when *you’re* part of the rebel army yourself?!”

The long years of civil conflict had eroded their pride, and the last thing they wanted was to hear a little girl insulting them. Everything was going according to plan.

“Rumors about you have reached even my ears,” the emperor said. “They say you’re quite the tomboy.”

“My, my. I don’t deserve such high praise.”

“I hear you punched Earl Ashley’s son the other day.”

“You heard correctly. I was feeling irritable the other day and a very punchable stomach just happened to appear before my eyes.” Alphina smiled as she scratched the back of her head. Most people would forgive a more charming noblewoman’s transgressions if she performed such an endearing action. Unfortunately, Alphina wasn’t charming. So…

“What is with that smile of yours?!” a noble cried.

“Don’t you feel any shame?!” another yelled.

“You *punched* him?! That’s not how a lady should carry herself!” yet another snapped.

So if I slapped him instead, that would’ve been fine? Alphina wanted to ask, but the fine gentlemen of high society didn’t notice the absurdity. They continued to murmur among themselves, but fell silent the second the emperor started coughing.

After taking the cough medicine his physician handed him, he looked over at Alphina and said, “Very well, then. I take it you don’t plan to beg for your life?”

“I’ve already prepared myself for the worst. Do whatever you

like.”

The emperor nodded reluctantly before announcing in a reedy voice, “Alphina Shinn Sylvana, I, Emperor Taiga IV, sentence you to death.”

No one in the room spoke up. Everyone had expected this; there was no point in reacting to a foregone conclusion. Alphina offered the emperor a bow, accepting the sentence without complaint. When she raised her head, she met Lionett’s eyes. He was looking at Alphina like he was enduring deep agony.

Don’t look at me like that, Your Highness, she thought as she looked away. She couldn’t bear to gaze upon Lionett’s distress any longer. He wasn’t the one who’d received capital punishment, yet he looked even more miserable than Alphina did. Though Alphina could shrug off the nobles’ accusations and contempt, Lionett’s sadness did a number on her emotions.

As the soldiers dragged her out of the room, the emperor said, “If only a few more people in the empire had hearts as strong as yours, we wouldn’t have suffered such devastating losses against the rebel army.”

Alphina didn’t turn around to look at him. The emperor’s raspy voice was still echoing in her ears as the door closed behind her.

Interlude: Lionett (3)

“Hyah! Rah!”

In the palace of the Lione Empire, Lionett Lione, the crown prince, spent his sleepless nights swinging his sword. He did so on the balcony of his room while still wearing his nightclothes. Tomorrow was Alphina’s execution, and Lionett was to be her executioner. For generations, the Lione Empire had a tradition dictating that if an assassin attempted to kill a member of the imperial family, the targeted family member had to execute the assassin with their own hand. As the prince, Lionett couldn’t back down from this obligation.

“Hah! Hah! Hah!”

Lionett continued to swing his sword, slicing the blade through the night air. It felt oddly familiar, as if mindlessly swinging his sword had been the only way to let out the raging emotions inside him on sleepless nights in the past. The sensation was akin to déjà vu, yet he had never experienced it this way before. He almost felt like he had lived through this routine multiple times in the past.

“Why am I wasting my time with such ridiculous thoughts?” Lionett muttered to himself as he paused in his training.

Alphina’s true identity as a spy had shaken him up. Did he feel guilt or regret about having to execute a classmate? *No*, he reminded himself. *I can’t let her trick me again. She’s my brother’s subordinate, and she approached me so she could kill me. All those times she acted like she wanted to get to know me better, she was just pretending. It was all an act—a trap to lower my guard. Her voice, as warm as a spring breeze, and her smile, which resembled the crimson petals of her namesake, were all…*

“Your Highness, you’re such a kind person. So unbelievably kind.”

BA-DUMP! The sudden skip of his heartbeat and the ensuing ache made Lionett grasp at his chest. A pulsing and bittersweet pain emanated from his heart, hurting even more than when the dragon’s fangs pierced his flesh or when his brother’s sword stabbed into his body. He wanted to rip into his chest and tear out his heart if that would stop the pain. As he continued to dig his

nails into his nightclothes, he noticed a pendant pressing against his skin. He recognized it as the bear-shaped one Alphina had dropped. Why was he wearing a pendant that belonged to his assassin?

"No, she's not…"

In truth, Lionett was well aware of the fact that Lady Alphina, daughter of Duke Sylvana, had no talent as an actress. She was awkward and crude, but she wasn't a liar. Lionett was absolutely sure of it. But how? Why did he know that? Alphina was nothing more than a classmate, and he'd only known her for a few years. So how could he determine with such confidence that she was acting?

No answer came to mind, no matter how hard Lionett racked his brain. *I'll go to sleep. Hopefully, I'll forget everything that happened when I wake up*, he thought. After he returned to his room and patted the sweat off himself with a towel, he heard a light rapping against the door. *Who in the world is bothering me at this hour?* He wondered, feeling a twinge of irritation at his guards for letting this person through.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"I apologize for disturbing your rest, Your Highness. It's Kithling Ashley."

"Kithling?"

Lionett had met Kithling several times in the past. He was the heir of the scholarly Ashley family, and Kithling himself was rather intelligent as well. Many in the empire expected him to become the new imperial adviser in the future.

"What do you want at this hour?" Lionett asked.

"There's something I desperately need to tell you before Lady Alphina's execution tomorrow," Kithling replied.

"Something about Alphina?" Lionett opened the door to reveal Kithling, standing with his back straight, next to a young boy. "I recognize you. You're Alphina's younger…"

"Yes, this is Carl Mann Sylvana," Kithling replied. Carl didn't say anything or change his expression. He simply stared up at Lionett's face.

"What do you two want from me?" Lionett asked. When Carl remained silent, he continued, "If you want to beg for your sister's life, then you're wasting your time. His Imperial Majesty has

already passed the sentence, and there's nothing I can do about it." Lionett himself wasn't sure why he was making up excuses like this.

Carl reached out and held Lionett's hand in his. He was so small that Lionett feared breaking him if he put any strength into his fingers, so he relaxed as much as he could. That was when he noticed a strange pattern on the back of Carl's hand.

Is that a magical crest? Though Lionett could recognize what it was, he couldn't decipher the crest's effect. He didn't have the power of clairvoyance, nor did he have memories of a previous timeline like his brother did. So he had no way of knowing that the crest on the back of this timeline's Carl's hand was something Scarlet and an alternate version of Carl had transplanted in him. A soft glow emanated from the crest before the light transferred over to Lionett's hand. *What's this magic?* Lionett thought. *Is he trying to kill me to save his sister? No, that's not it. The light doesn't mean me any harm, and it even feels warm to the touch.*

"What is this?" Lionett asked before images began appearing in his mind's eye, one after another. Alphina starred in all of them. He saw them hiking in a mountain one spring; her gifting him the bear-shaped pendant as he was departing to rout the northern barbarians; him arresting her after she plotted with the prince of Heavenrose to kill Saint Debonaire; him executing her with his own hand; and finally, him breaking down into tears as he hugged her cooling corpse to his body. These were all memories he shared with Alphina, but these memories didn't exist in his past. "What's going on?"

Tears rolled down Lionett's cheeks and fell onto the pendant. *Am I crying? But why? Why do I feel so sad?*

"Your Highness," Carl called as Lionett stared into space and wept. "Please remember."

Chapter Thirteen

It was the day of Alphina's hundred-first execution. All her previous executions had taken place on sunny days, but the weather in this world remained as grim as ever. Dark gray clouds covered the sky, giving off the impression that it would rain at any minute. Though Alphina wasn't religious enough to think "Xenos feels bad for me, and the rain is his tears," she still felt like this was some sort of omen.

The execution site was outside of the capital city of Lione, as per usual. She was wearing a simple white dress that would double as her burial clothes, and she walked up to the guillotine with her arms shackled together—the same as her previous loops. All the citizens who'd gathered to witness the execution were yelling insults at her, their faces twisted with rage:

"Spy!"

"Rebel army scum!"

"You're the one who caused this war!"

"Villainess! Villainess! Villainess!"

They seemed to take this chance to let out their frustration at the long years of civil conflict. No one threw any rocks, as the soldiers had stopped them from doing so, but that didn't mean they couldn't throw other objects. Sticks and garbage hit Alphina from every direction before falling to the ground. They held nothing back.

Not even Alphina could hold back her irritation when a wad of mud hit her cheek and clung to it. But she chose to think of it as karma for how she'd spent her childhood bragging about her perfect accuracy with dirt balls. As a young girl, she'd referred to herself as "Alphie the Mudslinger" and spent her days tossing mud at the neighborhood kids until they cried.

This is the first time in a hundred lifetimes that I have to suffer through such a horrible execution. Was this *truly* the end for her? She hardly had any magical energy left, and Loop would no longer activate to save her. She didn't know where her spirit would go after the execution, or if it would return to simply nothingness. But

she knew with absolute certainty that she would die here. After all the fighting and rebelling to avoid this fate, she was doomed to execution in the end, just like at the very beginning.

In a few years' time, this empire would cease to exist thanks to the Great Calamity. Decades or centuries after the end of the Lione Empire, other nations would invade this land and establish a new country that would rule over this territory. Perhaps in the future, a curious historian would look into the history of the ancient empire that once flourished here and stumble upon evidence of a tomboyish noble lady. Surely, they would publish their findings as a ridiculous comedy. If her story could entertain those readers, then Alphina could want for nothing more.

Appearing like dew and vanishing like dew. Such is my life. This world was a dream within a dream. "What a good day to die," Alphina said.

By the time she reached the bottom of the guillotine, the citizens had stopped throwing things at her, lest they hit her executioner, Lionett Lione. He would, like in all her previous lifetimes, be the one to carry out the sentence. His expression was as lifeless as a doll's, showing none of the uncertainty he'd displayed at the imperial trial the other day. Lionett simply regarded Alphina with a cold look in his glass-like blue eyes.

"He's executing a classmate, and a lady on top of that?" one of the watching citizens murmured, starting a flow of conversation.

"Prince Lionett's a lot more coldhearted than I thought he was."

"He must be desperate to stand as Lord Girne's equal."

"Well, such cruelty is necessary for the imperial family ruling this country."

As she listened to comments from people who'd changed their stance on Lionett, Alphina bowed to him and said, "Thank you for making time for me today, Your Highness."

Lionett didn't reply, his frosty gaze still fixed upon her. He embodied his nickname of Lord Cold Heart when he looked like this, and it was the first time since Alphina had come to this hundred second world that he showed this side of him. This version of Lionett could stand up to Girne. With the empire's army rallying around him, they could reorganize themselves and fight back against Girne's rebel army. At the very least, Alphina's death would help the country get back on the right track.

“Take Alphina to the guillotine,” Lionett ordered.

The muscular guards dragged her to her feet and up to the steps, not caring if they hurt her as they did. She wondered if she should wink at the spectators, who were watching this happen with hatred in their eyes. Until now, she’d thought that a head with one eye closed would look rather creepy. But if these were truly her final moments, then she wanted to go out with a bang.

After securing her in the guillotine, the guards backed away. The spectators had stopped jeering and talking, and were watching in hushed silence as Lionett raised his hand to give the signal. The moment he lowered it, Alphina’s head would forever part from her shoulders.

I guess Scarlet didn’t make it in time. Oh well, them’s the breaks. Within seconds, that indescribable thump would sound out, and the guillotine’s blade would descend upon her neck. Alphina was used to it, but that didn’t mean she *enjoyed* it. In the end, she closed both eyes as she waited for her life to end.

Ten seconds passed. Then ten seconds more. No matter how long she waited, the blade never came. Hearing the spectators murmur among one another again, Alphina slowly opened her eyes to see Lionett standing there, hand still in the air, staring down at Alphina in the guillotine.

“When I was a boy, the empress…no, my late mother once told me that fear of a ruler would lead to stability in a country. That an emperor needed to endure that solitude alone. However…”

Lionett’s hand moved to the sword on his belt. Did he plan on beheading Alphina with his own hand? The thought passed through everyone’s mind, including Alphina’s. He brought down the sword like lightning, cutting through the air with a sharp *schwing*.

Alphina closed her eyes in reflex as a gasp escaped her. However, she didn’t feel the bite of cold steel or the warmth of dripping blood on her neck. Instead, she felt her arms spring free from the sturdy chains connecting the rings of the manacle.

When she opened her eyes and looked up at him again, she saw determination on Lionett’s face. He didn’t look like a pathetic man who couldn’t get over his guilt towards his brother, nor did he look like Lord Cold Heart. The expression on Lionett’s face was that of his third, hidden side—that of an idiot who wanted nothing

more than to be with the woman he loved.

"For the first time in my life, I will go against her words," Lionett continued. Alphina blinked up at him in confusion. "I refuse to become the emperor in a world without you! I love you, Alphina!"

Alphina gaped up at him, her cheeks burning. She felt like she was on fire as sweat poured from every pore on her heated body. It would've been better if he'd simply cut her head off.

"Wh-Where did *that* come from, Your Highness?!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?"

"You don't have to say anything, Alph," Lionett said as he removed his white gloves to reveal the back of his right hand. No one could mistake the magical Crest glowing softly upon his skin. It bore the same design as the one on Alphina's own hand.

"Ah," was all Alphina could say as she finally realized what was going on. *Scarlet, Carl, you two made it on time!*

"Come, Alph!"

"Of course, Lord Lio!"

The Golden Sword sliced through the manacles around her wrists and the fetters around her ankles. She stood up and stood next to him, staring down at the soldiers who were surrounding them.

"You're really Lord Lio, right?" Alphina asked. "Are you back to yourself?"

"Yes, thanks to your younger brother. I finally remember everything."

That had been the request Alphina had made. If she and Girne could exist in this hundred second world while possessing their past memories, then it should be possible for Carl and Lionett to remember things as well. It would be a miracle if they could regain the memories of their past lives, but if they did, then they could destroy this world, which Girne had created to serve his own purposes.

"There's something I still don't understand, though. Just what is this place?" Lionett asked.

"Well, just look around you and you'll understand."

At Alphina's prompting, Lionett took another look at the people surrounding them. The soldiers' expressions were blank, as were the citizens'. Despite the hatred that had been burning in their eyes mere seconds ago, they all looked like lifeless dolls as they

stood there, bodies limp. They looked more akin to ghosts or marionettes in a puppet show.

"What's all this?" Lionett murmured as the color began draining from the world around them. Everything—the sky, the ground, the buildings, and even the people—began turning gray, leaving Alphina and Lionett as the only ones standing out. Everything changed, as if stagehands had replaced the backdrop of a play. "Just what in the world is happening?"

"It was all an illusion," Alphina explained. "This world was a trap to torture and humiliate you, as well as drive us apart. It's nothing more than a prop in his revenge scheme."

"Revenge? A prop? Then, you're telling me my brother—"

That was when a voice sounded from the gray skies, interrupting Lionett. "You're absolutely correct, Lionett."

A bolt of lightning crashed down from the cluster of clouds overhead, so bright that Alphina and Lionett instinctively squeezed their eyes shut. The entire ground shook from the impact. When they opened their eyes, they saw Girne Lione, standing there with an arrogant tilt to his head, and his familiar Cerberum next to him.

Alphina took a step forward and glared at Girne without fear. "So since you couldn't get your way, you finally destroyed this farce of a world? *You* were the one who created this stage."

"Humph!" Girne stared right back into Alphina's challenging eyes. "Alphina, you think too highly of yourself. So what if you awakened Lionett's memories? It doesn't change the fact that *I'm* the one in charge of this world. I can kill you two with a snap of my finger, you know!"

Lionett stood in front of Alphina as if to protect her. "Brother, so it's true that you created this world solely to torment me?"

"That's right, Lio. I was the one who caused the rockslide and put you into a coma, all to bring your soul here. I was also the one who interrupted Alphina's Loop when she tried to save you. It was all to drag the two of you into this illusion of a world."

"So you were manipulating everything this whole time?!" Lionett demanded.

"I was," Girne replied.

"No, it wasn't you," Alphina said with a firm shake of her head. "Lord Girne, you're a pawn. Something took advantage of the jealousy you'd been nursing in your heart and turned you into a

tool for vengeance."

Girne blinked, looking like a confused child. "Me? A pawn and a tool? What are you talking about, Alphina?"

"I doubt you noticed anything, Lord Girne. But Cerberum, I'm sure *you* did," Alphina said, looking over at Cerberum. The black-pantheresque man didn't move a muscle or change his expression as he continued to stand next to his master.

"What does she mean by that, Cerberum?" Girne asked, and it was only after his master asked him a question that Cerberum reacted.

"Lord Girne, you're possessed," he said.

"What?"

"My apologies. There was nothing I could do," Cerberum said. "If I tried to exorcise the ghost from you by force, I would cause damage to your mind and body. The thing inside you had taken you hostage. I cannot apologize enough."

"There's no need to apologize, Cerberum," Alphina said. "I only realized this because you left so many hints for me. You could've chosen anyone to attack me, but you controlled Lunea on purpose so that I could notice something was off, didn't you? The same goes for the rockslide. A familiar of your strength could've caused it with no one noticing, but you used explosive magic so that we could uncover the evidence of foul play. We reached the truth with your help. You really are an amazing familiar."

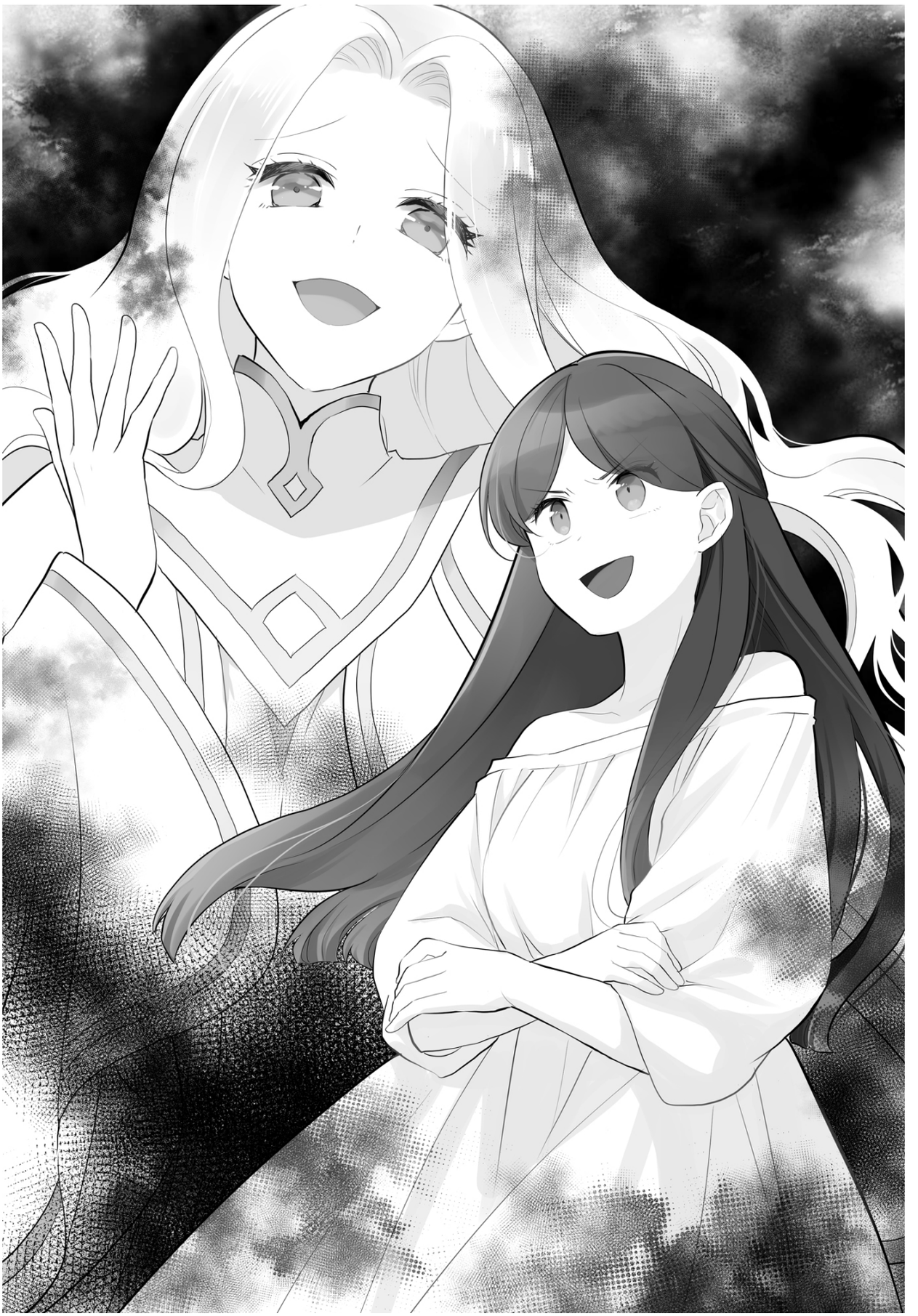
"Enough!" Girne yelled impatiently. "What are you all talking about? Explain it so I can understand!"

"Fine. I'll tell you everything, then," Alphina said, glaring at Girne. Or, more specifically, glaring at his Evil Eyes and the woman hiding behind them. "After Prince Lio killed you in the Heavenrose palace, you possessed Lord Girne as a ghost and took advantage of his desire for vengeance to come up with this convoluted plot. I have to give it to you; you really put in the work, didn't you, Saint?"

In the next moment, a cloud of smoke rose from behind Girne to form the silhouette of a person that both Alphina and Lionett recognized. Her golden hair was as pale as the mist, and she boasted both delicate beauty and a voluptuous physique. And that laugh! "Squee hee hee!" she cackled, the sound reverberating through the air.

"Long time no see, Saint Debonaire!" Alphina said.

“Long time no see, Assphina! I wouldn’t have minded never seeing you again, though!” The all-too-familiar voice of that disgusting sow echoed through the gray world they were in.



As soon as Debonaire appeared, Girne was reduced to a doll that had its strings cut. Without Girne's magic to fuel him, Cerberum froze as well.

"Impossible," Lionett breathed, flabbergasted at the turn of events. "I'm positive that I beheaded her."

"It's her spirit," Alphina said. "This place is a sector of the underworld—the Ghostly Realm. It's a false world that she created."

Alphina should have realized it a lot sooner. How could Loop have activated if Lunea interrupted the ritual? There was only one answer to that question: It hadn't. Alphina had only *thought* the Loop brought her here, when in reality, she'd been taken to the false world that Saint Debonaire's ghost created.

Alphina turned away from Lionett to face down Debonaire once more. "You know what, Saint Debonaire? I've been pondering your existence for a long, long time now. Just who *are* you? Why did you come to the empire and why did you use your Geis to put everyone under your control? At first, I thought you simply wanted hot guys to wait on you hand and foot. Well, I'm sure that was part of your motivation, but I doubt that's the *only* goal you have."

A cruel smile twisted Debonaire's lips. "Why don't you take a guess, ace detective?"

"Fine, I will. Your goal is to destroy the Lione Empire with the eruption of Mt. Flame Dragon and the Great Calamity, isn't it?"

Lionett sucked in a breath. "Is that true, Alph?"

"It is. The spell to cause Mt. Flame Dragon's eruption, Hados's Awakening, involves a member of the imperial family offering their own life to the god of the underworld. In other words, she needed you to commit suicide, Lord Lio."

"My suicide, you say?"

"In previous timelines, she could've caused the eruption by placing you under her Geis's control and forcing you to kill yourself. However, since I destroyed her circlet, she couldn't use Geis anymore and had to employ a different tactic. As a ghost, she could possess Lord Girne and push you into such dire straits that you'd have no choice but to commit suicide. If I can borrow the terminology used in a country to the far east, she wanted you to kill yourself either via a kamikaze attack, or through the ritual suicide of seppuku. In any case, you would be offering your life to

the god of the underworld. Well, Saint Debonaire? Was my deduction correct?"

Debonaire chuckled in a deep voice. "I award you about fifty points out of a hundred, Assphina. If I only needed a member of the imperial family to commit suicide, wouldn't it have been easier to control Girne and have him off himself?"

"No, Lord Girne had already been locked underground as an offering to Hados. You needed a new sacrifice to activate Hados's Awakening, didn't you?"

Though she didn't say anything, Debonaire's eye twitched, and she made a soft, aggravated noise. Alphina had hit the nail on the head.

"Wait a second, Alph," Lionett said, sounding perplexed. "But why? Why would the Saint do something like that? She's the Saint of Xenos, so why would she kill members of the imperial family to cause the Great Calamity and destroy the Lione Empire? What is her end goal?"

"It's simple, Your Highness."

Yes, it was all simple, really. Once one figured out Debonaire's plan, then it was obvious what her true identity was. Yet no one ever reached this revelation. Everyone, Alphina included, had been tricked. From the very beginning, Debonaire had them all fooled.

"Debonaire Lua Lightmist is a Saint," Alphina continued. "However, she isn't a Saint of God Xenos. She's a Saint of Hados, the god of the underworld."

The next moment, Debonaire twisted her expression into one of cruel and ugly glee. "Squee hee hee! I guess there's no point in pretending any longer if you've figured it out, Assphina!"

Her long blonde hair turned pitch-black, the strands twisting around her until they formed into countless snakes. Even her white dress turned black. It was hard to believe the monstrous medusa before them once posed as the beautiful and delicate Saint Debonaire.

"So that's your true form, Saint of the Underworld?" Alphina asked.

"Yup, it is!" Debonaire gloated. "You were all sooo stupid. I've always had a knack for light magic, and showing it off a little was enough to convince everyone I was Xenos's Saint."

"That's because the church confirmed your identity," Alphina

pointed out.

“Duh. I controlled them all with the Geis that Lord Hados bestowed upon me! Humans are sooo lame; they eat up everything that an authority tells them. They’d believe that white is black and darkness is light if someone with power said it, so of course I became a saint of light in the people’s eyes! Squee hee hee!”

The black snakes that served as her hair attacked Alphina, but Lionett blocked them before their venomous fangs could reach her. He sliced through their disgusting scales with his sword. However, their wounds healed in an instant and they continued their assault.

“My goal is to kill as many stupid humans as I can and offer their lives to Lord Hados,” Debonaire giggled. “Once the underworld gains enough power, we’ll attack and defeat Xenos up in the heavens! You vermin should be thanking me, really. Your pathetic lives will finally have meaning when offered to the great Lord Hados!”

“Oh, shut up, you lecherous saint. You can spout all the nonsense you want about how this was all for Lord Hados, when really, you just wanted to use your power and status to make a harem of hot guys.”

Alphina grabbed a sword from one of the marionette soldiers around her and then ran to stand next to Lionett, cutting down snake after snake. However, even when she sliced one in half, more appeared to take its place.

“How can you blame me for having some fuuun? Little Debbie would’ve been bored out of her skull without an incentive or two! ♥” Debonaire replied in a revolting, whiny tone as more snakes emerged from her head.

Still swinging his sword, Lionett yelled, “They’ll wear us down and overpower us if we don’t do something!”

“There’s no point in killing the snakes. We have to defeat Debonaire herself!” Alphina replied.

“But we can’t approach her with all these serpents in the way!”

“Don’t worry. Our reinforcements should arrive anytime now.”

“Reinforcements?”

The Crest appeared on the back of Alphina’s hand and glowed, forming a pillar of light that extended into the sky and pierced

through the thick layer of gray clouds. It only managed to make a small hole. However, through that hole, a slim sunbeam made its way through and illuminated the ground Alphina and the others stood on. The light wavered like an aurora, and it shook and shook until it twisted the very air itself. From the space popped out three people: Scarlet, Carl, and Hipper.

“Lady Alphina, I apologize for my tardiness!” Scarlet exclaimed.

“No, you’re right on time!” Alphina said.

Though the snakes lunged at the three newcomers, Carl’s lightning spell turned them to dust. Before they could regroup and regenerate, Hipper blew them away with his explosive magic, delaying the process. They worked in perfect sync.

“H-How did you get in here?!” Debonaire screeched. “We’re in Lord Hados’s realm!”

“It’s because the barrier you put around this world grew weaker,” Alphina retorted. “You may be Hados’s Saint, but you can’t maintain that powerful barrier if you’re expending magic in battle. I asked Scarlet and Carl to keep an eye out for an opening and use it to break in.”

“Ugh, you just won’t quit!”

Debonaire raised her hand and pointed at the sky, creating a bolt of black lightning that she cast down upon Alphina and Scarlet, who’d leapt to her side to protect her. However, before it could pierce through the two, a blue bolt of lightning struck it, dispersing the energy into the air.

“Don’t forget about us, ya boob!” a bespectacled man, his blue hair slicked back, yelled. It was Kithling Ashley, though Alphina didn’t know why he’d reverted to his persona as a terrorist. Maybe this was part of his fighting style. In any case, Alphina could tell from his hairstyle that this was the Kithling from the original timeline.

“Kithling!” she exclaimed. “I can’t believe you came!”

“And I ain’t the only one! I rounded up the old gang!”

Debonaire created more snakes to attack them, but five muscular men stood in their path, beating them away with knives and chains. Every time they defeated a serpent, they paused to strike a pose. Their fighting style was unbelievably inefficient.

“Green Gale! Yellow Flash! Purple Gaze! And um…Shadow of Red!” Alphina exclaimed.

“It’s Shadow of Pink! Don’t you dare get it wrong again!” Shadow of Pink bellowed.

“Uh, sorry.” Alphina wanted to retort, “Do you really think I can keep track of all your names?” but since they came to rescue them, she held her tongue.

“I’m here too!” Mulberry Mood and his large frame barged in. He stepped on a snake that had tried to attack Alphina from behind and continued, “Miss Arle, I’m terribly sorry for all the inconvenience I caused you.” Even if Alphina wanted to blame him, she couldn’t upon seeing him hunch his broad shoulders and bow at her.

“It’s fine; there’s no point rehashing old grudges right now. But I thought you were an apostle of Xenos?” she asked.

“That’s exactly why I can’t forgive her!” Mulberry Mood flexed his muscles and threw a pose with a furious expression on his face. His shirt ripped and fell apart in tatters, unable to contain his beefy brawn. “I helped her out because I thought she was a Saint of Lord Xenos, only to find out she’s an underling of that vile underworld god? Unforgivable! Unforgivable!” A waterfall of tears streaming down his face, Mulberry Mood stomped his feet in a dance of madness. The more he displayed his artistic talent, the more the snakes turned to flattened pancakes of scales and meat beneath his shoes.

Alphina’s companions were strong, with Carl and Hipper standing out in particular. Carl’s super high-tier magic could destroy entire swathes of serpents and when they tried to regenerate, Hipper’s precise magical missiles would stop them before they could. Their teamwork rivaled that of an A-rank adventurer’s party.

“Sheesh. Hey, Carl,” Hipper complained, throwing out expert-level spells like it was nothing. “Ever since I started hanging out with you, my life’s been adventure after adventure. Nine lives wouldn’t be enough to keep up with everything.”

“Unhappy?” Carl asked.

“Nope. I ain’t complaining!”

The speed at which they defeated the snakes was finally beating the speed at which the snakes regenerated. With her companions defending her from the serpents, Alphina slowly but surely closed the distance between her and the Saint.

“Give up, Debonaire!” she yelled.

“Humph, resistance is futile. Did you really think creating stupid snakes was the only thing I could do?” Debonaire tittered as she approached Girne, who was still lying on the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Bastard! What are you doing to my brother?!” Lionett roared.

Debonaire ignored him and stooped to place her hand over Girne’s closed eyes. With the same hand, she covered her face. When she pulled it away, she revealed that her eyes had changed colors—one red and one blue.

“The Evil Eyes are Lord Hados’s,” she said with a wicked chuckle. “That means I have the right to possess them!” She released the power of the Evil Eyes, sending out a gust of magical energy. Unable to withstand the force of her magic, Alphina, Lio, and everyone who’d been fighting the snakes flew backwards. “Now then, I believe this little one is a more suitable opponent for you all.”

A dark light gathered in the palm of Debonaire’s hand. Accompanied by a deep and rumbling scraping sound, a monstrous creature appeared from the ground, dragged to the surface by Debonaire’s magic.

“Is that summoning magic?!” Lio exclaimed.

He was right; Debonaire had used a forbidden curse to summon monsters from the underworld. She’d dragged forth a chimarra—a dangerous and misshapen beast with the heads of a lion, goat, and dragon.

“Go, chimarra!” Debonaire laughed. “Use your three pairs of fangs and TEAR THEM TO PIECES!”

All three heads growled as the beast attacked them. The dragon head tried to rip Alphina apart with its fangs, but Lionett used his sword to block the attack. He couldn’t stand his ground against the chimarra’s weight and power, though, and flew backwards into the guillotine that had killed Alphina ninety-nine times, smashing it into pieces. Lionett didn’t emerge unscathed either.

“A-Are you all right, Lord Lio?!” Alphina cried.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Lionett replied, blood dripping from his forehead. “This is nothing compared to the pain you went through in your ninety-nine executions.”

“Lord Lio, you remember all the loops?”

“I learned everything when I received the Crest, including everything you went through,” Lionett replied. Though he was swaying on his feet, he held up his sword and pointed its tip at the chimarra. “What’s one or two monsters compared to the trials and tribulations you had to overcome?! This is nothing!”

The chimarra leapt into the air, so high and fast that it reminded Alphina of a predatory beast. *No, we can’t dodge this!* Lionett was a dragonslayer, but he only had a single sword. He couldn’t possibly defend himself against three pairs of fangs, especially when there was hardly any distance between them. Alphina thrust out with her sword. However, she could only stop the lion. Lionett prevented the goat’s teeth from sinking into him, but the final head—the dragon—lunged at him. He fell to the ground, unable to dodge the attack.

Right when those bloody black teeth were about to pierce Lio’s body, though, a long and thin sword with a unique curve to the blade struck the fangs and pushed the dragon’s head back. A toned body stood between Lio and the chimarra. The newcomer had dark skin, slightly wavy black hair, and a dangerous look in his eyes. He was…

“Unbelievable. You’re pathetic, Lionett,” Lord Blackrose, Avenlock Heavenrose, said, looking down at Lionett with his usual confident smile. “Come on, stand up. Or would you like me to lend you a hand?”

Lionett had been staring up at him in shock, but the mocking question shook him out of his reverie. “You’re the last person I’d want help from,” he retorted as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Lord Aven!” Alphina ran over to them. “You came too?!”

“Your servant made a convincing argument,” he replied.

The Avenlock of the original timeline had been about to return to Heavenrose when Scarlet stopped him and asked for his aid. Alphina had asked Scarlet to do so, but truthfully, she hadn’t expected much. She doubted Avenlock would do anything that could help Lionett. But here Avenlock was at Alphina’s eleventh hour, a smile on his face and a sword in his hand.

“The last thing I wanted to do was help Lio clean up his mess, but I was the one who convinced you to help him. So I’m here to take responsibility,” Avenlock said.

Five snakes lunged at him from behind but, without even

turning around, Aven swung his sword and sliced them into bits. He moved so fast that it happened in the blink of an eye. Avenlock's swordplay was breathtaking, and the realization that Alphina had once been his enemy caused cold sweat to break out on her forehead ages after the fact. She reminded herself that he was an ally now.

"Lionett, I never thought I would one day fight at your side like this," Avenlock mused.

"That should be my line, Avenlock," Lionett replied. They shot each other matching glares before stepping forward to protect Alphina. "I'll settle things with you in time. For now..."

"We raise our swords for Alphina's sake!" Avenlock finished.

The chimarra attacked once again, its three heads snarling.

"Just aim for the heads, Aven!" Lionett ordered.

"Don't boss me around!" Avenlock snapped.

Despite their arguing, they worked well together. Lionett's sword cleaved off the goat's head at the same moment that Avenlock's sliced through the lion's neck.

"Go, Alphina!" Lionett yelled as he stabbed his sword in the remaining dragon's forehead.

"Go, Alphina!" Avenlock agreed. "Bring some closure to your destiny!"

Alphina ran forward, the two princes' encouragement giving new strength to her legs. Cutting away the snakes that tried to get in her way, she eventually made it to Debonaire, who was still standing next to Girne.

"All right, Debonaire," she said. "Let's finish this, one-on-one."

"Hah! You're nothing but the daughter of a duke. Fine, Assphina. I'll show you your place."

The two of them held up their hands, gathering magic in their palms.

"Ah ha ha ha!" Debonaire suddenly cackled as if to disrupt Alphina's concentration. "You can't fool me, Alphina. I know you're running on empty. You used all your magical energy to come to this world, and you barely have any left. Do you really think you can defeat me and my ultimate dark magic?"

Despite all the yapping she was doing, Debonaire was accumulating an insane amount of magical energy inside her body, so much that a storm was forming above her. It seemed

that, while she was in this world, she didn't need to concentrate or say anything to cast magic. The Saint had the total advantage, but Alphina still didn't give up. She clasped her hands together and murmured a spell—no, a prayer—as if the Saint wasn't taunting her with an annoying grin.

If a ghost created this world, that means it's near the afterlife and to you, Alphina thought, directing it towards the person in her memories. *That warm and familiar light that saved me during my conversation with Lord Girne was you, wasn't it? Please answer me. Please, help me!*

Debonaire completed her spell, creating a tornado of dark magic that bore down upon Alphina, destroying everything—buildings, snakes, and guillotine—in its path and rendering it to dust. "The moment that tornado touches you, you'll be taking a one-way trip to the underworld! ♡ Make sure you don't piss yourself in front of Lord Hados! Squee hee hee hee hee!" Debonaire threw her head back and laughed, confident in her victory. But the next second, her smile froze and her eyes widened when she saw a light appear in front of Alphina. "Wait, what's that?! A ghost? No, an apparition?!"

The ghostly figure in front of Alphina was an old woman with white hair and a warm expression on her face. She gave off a gentle air, but she held her head high and proud. The identity of this woman, standing there with a soft glow surrounding her, was—

"Oh, Alph. Despite all the hardships you went through in the time loops, you never gave up. I'm so proud of you."

Tears welled up in Alphina's eyes when she heard the voice of Yulinar Finn Sylvana. It had been much too long. She gritted her teeth to bite back her sobs as Yulinar continued to look at her with a kind smile. "Grandmother, you were watching over me this whole time?"

"Of course I was. But you got this far with your own strength, not mine." Yulinar's apparition stood behind her granddaughter and placed her hands on her shoulders. "Now, it's time for the finale. Let me grant you my magical energy."

"Thank you, grandmother!"

The dark whirlwind was fast approaching. It looked like Debonaire had taken the ominous clouds that had hung in the sky

ever since Alphina came to this world and transformed them into a storm of chaos that wouldn't stop until it swallowed Alphina whole. Her crimson hair blew around her face, the force of the wind almost ripping the strands out of her scalp. The pressure was so tremendous that it was a miracle she could keep her eyes open. The gust battering her body was so powerful that if she relaxed her muscles even a little, she would fly off the ground, never to touch it again.

"I'm gonna send you to hell with that tornado, Assphina!" Debonaire screeched.

Alphina held out her clasped hands, aiming it at the eye of the storm. They were the hands of a mere human who didn't have a single drop of magical energy left. However, Alphina wasn't alone. She had friends and loved ones supporting her.

Alph, my granddaughter, I give you my blessing. Her grandmother's hands enveloped hers, and light as warm as the sun's poured into her. Yulinar wasn't the only one.

"I'll lend you my strength, Alph."

"As will I."

Lionett and Avenlock reached out as well, placing their hands over Alphina's. Despite all the injuries they suffered in their battle with the chimarra, they were still willing to lend her their remaining strength. Their light was brave and bright, like the heroes that they were.

"Lady Alphina, take my strength as well!"

"Sister!"

"Miss Alphina!"

Scarlet, Carl, and Hipper all held Alphina's hands, adding their lights of loyalty, familial love, and friendship.

"Lady Alphina! Take my magic!" Kithling screamed.

"We are Lady Alphina's Scythe! We will always be with you!" his terrorists yelled.

Thanks, but no thanks…is what I want to say. But sure, I'll accept your help, even if your light is kind of overbearing. It's because of everyone's help that I'm standing here, after all. This world, which Alphina finally arrived at after so many time loops, was such a warm and lovely place. The light created from their bonds pushed back the dark storm.

"H-How is this happening?" Debonaire stammered frantically.

“My ultimate darkness is being overpowered!”

“Goodbye, Debonaire Lua Lightmist,” Alphina said.

“How could this be?! How is this POSSIBLE?!”

“Thanks to you, I never got bored over my hundred two lifetimes,” continued Alphina. “But I’m pretty tired of seeing your little piggy face.”

“Impossible! Impossible! IMPOSSIBLE!”

“Goodbye. Say hi to that Hados guy for me. ♥”

Alphina blew Debonaire a kiss right as the light transformed into a searing nova, pushing back the darkness and consuming Debonaire’s body.

“SQUEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!”

The sow’s final cry echoed through the sky, doubling as a victory gong for the duke’s daughter.

Chapter Fourteen

Now that the battle had ended, Alphina collapsed onto the floor, splaying out her arms and legs. “Ahh, I’m exhausted! I’m starving!”

The gray clouds that had perpetually blotted out the sun were fading away in increments, revealing the bright azure of the empire’s true sky in slivers. With the demise of Debonaire’s ghost, the illusionary world she’d created was breaking down.

“Lady Alphina, are you all right?!” Scarlet asked, running up and kneeling next to her.

Alphina reached out and rested a hand against her loyal butler’s cheek. “Thank you, Scarlet. I’m fine, but only because you came to my rescue.”

“A-All I did was bring everyone here,” Scarlet replied, flushing a deep crimson.

Alphina stroked his cheek again. “You’re always doing your best for me, and I couldn’t ask for a better familiar. I’m counting on you to stay with me through thick and thin, Scarlet.”

“Of course, my mistress!”

Lionett was the next to approach her. No, Avenlock was. The two of them pushed and shoved each other to reach Alphina first, and they both held out a hand at the same time.

“Are you all right, Alph? Here, let me help you,” Lionett said as Avenlock asked, “Can you stand, Alphina? Here, let me help you.”

The two princes glared at each other, arms still extended, before yelling in unison, “I was here first!”

“I can stand on my own!” Alphina butt in, jumping to her feet before they could get into a childish argument. She blinked when she noticed something off with one of them. “Lord Lio, the scar on your face is gone.”

“Really?” Lionett blinked.

The cross-shaped scar on his cheek had disappeared without a trace. It must have also been a mirage of Debonaire’s creation.

“Alphina!”

“Miss Alphina, you okay?”

Carl and Hipper rushed up next, their little bodies covered with

bites that Debonaire's snakes had inflicted on them during the battle. Scarlet cast healing magic on them as Alphina wiped away the dirt from their cheeks with her handkerchief.

"Thanks, you two," she said. "You really saved my hide."

"It ain't a big deal," Hipper replied. Since he was putting on a brave front, Alphina ignored his wince and hiss of pain when her handkerchief brushed over a wound.

Carl didn't want Alphina to clean his face. Instead, he pressed his face against her shoulder, wordlessly asked for a head pat instead. His crimson hair, the hue of which he shared with his sister, tickled her neck. Carl almost never displayed such open affection, and Alphina found him so adorable that before she knew it, she was giving him three rough pats.

"Lady Alphina, I see you're all right." Kithling and his terrorist buddies drew up to them.

Now that the battle was over, he'd reverted to his original hairstyle. Alphina had no idea how it worked. Did his hair become spiky to signal that he'd entered a combat stance? Could it turn blond if he needed to use even more power?

"Well, I have to admit you were useful. Thanks," she said.

"Oh, you," Kithling replied. "Are you embarrassed?"

Ugh, he's so annoying. I'll just ignore him.

For some reason, the terrorists behind Kithling were all posing and showing off their muscles. Interpreting it as their way of expressing friendship, Alphina flexed her biceps in a show of gratitude.

After she confirmed everyone's safety, she looked around again and asked, "By the way, where did Lord Girne and Cerberum go?"

"Didn't you notice?" answered Avenlock. "The Saint's spell sent them flying."

"O-Of course I didn't notice! I was busy with the battle!" Alphina had been so focused on her fight with the Saint that she hadn't paid attention to anything else around her. If her grandmother's apparition hadn't offered Alphina her strength, she'd be on a ship to Hados's underworld by this point.

"Girne! Where are you, Girne?!" Lionett yelled.

"Over there!" Carl, who rarely raised his voice, exclaimed as he pointed to a mountain of rubble.

Alphina could see the bloodied form of the guard dog of the

underworld on the remnants of a house. Underneath him, she spotted blond hair the same shade as Lionett's. When she ran over, she realized just what had happened—Cerberum had covered Girne with his body and protected him from the falling debris.

"Hurry," Cerberum rasped in a weak voice. "Save my master." Without another word, he passed out.

Lionett and Avenlock worked together to lift the rubble. As soon as they created a small gap, Carl and Hipper reached in to drag out Cerberum and Girne. Both of them had sustained serious injuries. Girne, in particular, had lost a lot of blood. His face was pale, and he was panting, eyes still closed. Alphina didn't need to have medical knowledge to know he was in critical condition.

"Hurry and heal my brother!" Lionett begged the group. Scarlet cast his healing magic, enveloping the broken prince's body with a warm light. The blood pouring from his wounds stopped, and his breathing steadied. "Girne, hold on for a little longer! You'll be all right!"

But then, Girne reached up with a shaking hand and said, "No, it's fine, little brother."

"What do you mean by that, Girne?!"

"Let me die," the cursed prince whispered. "In the end, I was nothing more than a puppet under Debonaire's...no, under destiny's control. Thanks to Alphina, I can finally see how foolish I was..." He trailed off and coughed, blood splattering all over his shirt. "If I had the mental fortitude to grasp my own future like Alphina did, I could've had a different life than the one I'd led all these years. I gave up because I figured I couldn't change fate, only to give up on myself and direct my hatred against you, my precious younger brother. The Saint took advantage of my weakness. I was such a fool, thinking that I could ever marry Alphina."

Eyes still closed, Girne pointed upwards with a frail and shaking finger. The heavens above them were reverting to the usual blue. "That sky is too bright for someone like myself. *All* of you are too bright for me after my years in that underground cell."

"Girne..." Lionett choked.

"I'm sorry, Lio. I wasn't a very kind brother to you, was I? You earned your position as the crown prince and the next emperor of the Lione Empire. You should be proud of yourself. Become a ruler

worthy of our country."

"No, Girne!" Lionett cried, his voice thick with tears. "Why must we say goodbye when we finally have the chance to start over in the original timeline?! We might have made mistakes, but we can always restart from the beginning! If ninety-nine times aren't enough, then we can try again a hundred times. If nine hundred ninety-nine times aren't enough, then maybe the thousandth time will work out! Let's start over again, Girne!"

Girne didn't respond. Though Scarlet never stopped casting his healing magic, it wasn't very effective. The prince's disinterest in his own survival impeded Scarlet's spell, preventing the grievous injuries on his body from closing. Gods and magic didn't keep people alive—human will did. To be more precise, without the will to go on, they couldn't live.

"I understand, Lord Girne," Alphina said. "In that case, I hope you have a safe journey to the underworld."

"How can you say that, Alph?!" Lionett yelled, furious.

Alphina ignored him as she continued to speak to Girne. "Since this is your first time seeing the great blue sky in person, why don't you look up at it one last time so you don't have any last regrets? Please burn the sight into your Evil Eyes."

Indecision appeared on Girne's pale face as he struggled with this choice. He wanted to see a real sky—something he had never seen before—but he also wanted to die in peace. Alphina couldn't read his thoughts, but she guessed he was weighing those options in his mind. But Alphina believed Girne would open his eyes. She trusted not only in his courage, but in him as a person.

For millennia, people had dreamed of the sky, imagining themselves flying through the open air. When Alphina was locked away in a tower for a crime she didn't commit, she, too, yearned for freedom when she saw the birds flying in that bright blue canopy outside her window.

"The sky..." Girne murmured, expression hardening with resolve. His long eyelashes fluttered as he slowly opened his eyes and gazed upwards. After a moment, he murmured, "Ah, so *this* is what the sky is like. The color's deeper than I imagined; I always thought it a lighter shade of blue. The real thing's so bright and vibrant that it's hurting my eyes." He paused, dry lips trembling as tears streamed down his cheeks, with no sign of stopping.

Lionett, who'd been staring in shock at Girne's face, murmured, "Girne, your Evil Eyes are gone."

"What?" Girne said.

"Your left eye used to be a deep crimson, but now it's the same blue as the sky! The same blue as *my* eyes!"

I knew it. Alphina's hypothesis had been correct. "The Saint took your Evil Eyes from you," she explained.

"Sh-She did?!" Girne gasped.

"Of course, she took it to fulfill her own greed, but we can think of it as the one good thing the Saint did in this world. You're no longer the broken prince, Lord Girne. I'm sure that the version of you in the original timeline lost his Evil Eyes as well."

Girne reached up and touched his face, the color returning to his cheeks. Even his lips looked less dry than earlier.

"Girne! Girne!" Lionett burst into tears.

Alphina watched her fiancé cry before she looked heavenward. *Thank you, grandmother.* She imagined Yulinar gazing down from beyond the clouds with her usual gentle expression and smiled.

Some day in the distant future, when I'm an old woman myself, I'll go see you. So until then, please watch over me.

Epilogue

And with that, the ordeal was over. Now that Alphina destroyed the world that Girne created with his Evil Eyes—to be more precise, the illusionary world Debonaire created using his Evil Eyes—she could go back to her original timeline. Lionett's soul, which had been trapped in that fake world, returned to his body as well. After seeing him wake from his coma and recover from his injuries, the citizens of the Lione Empire breathed a collective sigh of relief. The reinforcements they'd called from a world over—Aven, Carl, Hipper, Kithling, and Kithling's terrorist friends—all returned without issue as well. Everyone could finally go back to their daily lives.

The first thing Alphina and Lionett did was free Girne, who had lost the Evil Eyes, from his underground cell and take him to meet with Emperor Taiga IV. Though the emperor seemed surprised and confused, he caved to the pair's convincing arguments and agreed to a reunion in the audience chamber. Since they'd locked Girne away when he was still a baby, this was the first meeting between father and son.

Alphina worried Girne might refuse to forgive the emperor, despite the emperor's willingness to meet Girne, but her anxiety was for naught. As soon as he saw Girne, the emperor broke down in tears.

"You're the spitting image of Nadia," Emperor Taiga IV sniffed. "I'm so sorry for sacrificing you, my son, to the god of the underworld. I should've never put stock in those old superstitions."

Upon seeing his father cry, Girne sobbed as well. Though Girne had suffered, the decision to lock him away had hurt Emperor Taiga IV as well. They reached this mutual understanding after seeing each other's tears.

Avenlock, who'd been watching as a guest of the empire, joked in a cynical tone, "If the emperor was a fool who refused to let go of the past, Heavenrose could've leveraged this into a political opportunity. Unfortunately, things don't always work out in reality."

A week later, Emperor Taiga IV officially announced the existence of Girne Lione, the first prince of the Lione Empire. His sudden appearance bewildered the citizens, and they worried that conflict would rise between Girne and Lionett over the throne. However, during Girne's first public appearance, he abdicated his right to the throne, stating that he accepted Lionett's position as the crown prince. As soon as he did so, the confusion transformed into passion.

"Prince Girne is such a fair and elegant beauty!"

"He's as handsome as his brother."

"With those brothers leading our country, the Lione Empire will see even greater glory in the coming days!"

The earthquakes that had everyone worried decreased in frequency, and hardly ever happened anymore. Some nobles still believed the Evil Eyes as a harbinger of calamity. However, since the earthquakes had stopped after the emperor publicized Girne, no one paid them any attention.

Despite all the good news, the citizens were still disappointed about something: Lady Alphina and Prince Lionett hadn't announced a date for their wedding yet.

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The next day, the group—excluding Avenlock, who'd returned to Heavenrose—visited Yulinar's house in the Amazone Forest to have a picnic and recuperate.

"So this is the Amazone Forest!" Girne exclaimed, eyes sparkling at all the unfamiliar sights. His exuberance at seeing and touching the natural world for the first time in his life radiated from his entire body, and Alphina monitored him to make sure he didn't run off. "Lio! What's that insect hopping around in the grass?"

"It's a grasshopper, Girne."

"What's that bug? Its shell looks like the pattern on a lady's dress."

"It's a ladybug, Girne."

Girne, the embodiment of curiosity, ran through the field.

Hipper, chasing after him, panted, "Lord Girne, don't run around like that! What if you trip and fall?!"

"Ha ha ha! Hipper, you're such a worrywart!" As soon as the

words left Girne's mouth, he slipped on a leaf and fell over, sliding right into a puddle of mud. He never once stopped laughing. "So this is what it's like to play in the mud!"

"Jeez, is this what all princes act like?" Hipper sighed before he noticed something. "Wait, Carl? What are you doing?"

"Mimicking a grasshopper," Carl replied as he jumped around, eyes fixed on the insect. His ankles tangled with each other and he fell into the mud, splashing it all over himself.

"Agh, why are you making more trouble for me?!" Hipper yelled, his lament echoing through the air.

The entire time, Cerberum had been watching his master play with the two boys, a sentimental look on his face. For years, he'd not only been Girne's friend, but a surrogate father and brother as well. Tears were welling in his eyes at the sight of Girne frolicking under the sun, enjoying the freedom he'd attained after so many long years.

"Looks like all your hard work paid off," Alphina said to him.

Cerberum shook his head. "I did nothing except stay at my master's side."

"That's important work too! I don't think he would've been able to endure living a life of solitude in that underground cell." Much like how no one could ever replace Scarlet for her, Alphina knew how important Cerberum must be to Girne.

Cerberum knelt before her, bowing his head in an elegant motion. "Lady Alphina, please forgive me for all the harm I caused you. Under normal circumstances, I would repent with my life, but —"

"Oh, stop that. You need to stay at Girne's side; you can't do that if you're dead."

"Of course. I promise to protect Lord Girne even if it costs me my—" Cerberum shook his head, cutting himself off. "No, I promise to stay with Lord Girne for as long as we live."

"Good!" Alphina smiled.

"Sorry for what I did to you in the underground cell," Cerberum said, directing the apology to Scarlet this time. "You were amazing, breaking into an alternate world to save your mistress. Seeing you do so taught me a lot about what it means to serve as a familiar."

"N-No, I simply fulfilled my duty," Scarlet replied.

"I look forward to learning more from you, my master."

Scarlet flushed as Alphina burst out laughing. “Master Scarlet, huh? Has a nice ring to it.”

“P-Please stop teasing me, Lady Alphina!”

Carl, his entire body covered in mud, poked his head out from the puddle. “Master Scarlet?”

“Lord Carl, not you too!”

The group’s laughter rang through the verdant forest.

Lionett walked up to Alphina as she was looking around and smiling, and said, “I never dreamed such a day would come.”

“Really? I did. I always hoped that one day, we could all laugh together like this.”

“You’re a strong woman, Alph.”

“I guess I am.” Alphina’s smile deepened. “I’m not always so tough, though. Some days, I feel down and defeated.”

“I can’t imagine,” Lionett replied in a serious tone. “If you ever need to rest your wings, I shall act as the tree for you to perch on. I should say, I hope you will choose me as your tree.”

Alphina took a moment to ruminate on her answer before she looked at her fiancé. “I promise I won’t run away again, so let’s take our time getting to know each other a little better. His Imperial Majesty is still in good health, and Lord Girne is out of his cell too. There’s no need to rush into marriage and ascend the throne.”

“No matter what happens, my feelings towards you will never change.”

Alphina flushed. “Oh, you! Don’t say things like that!”

Lionett’s expression softened at the sight of Alphina’s embarrassment. *Oh*, she thought as she gazed upon his face. *When did his smile become so warm?* The expression on the prince once known as Lord Cold Heart was akin to a gentle spring breeze. In a hundred one lifetimes, Alphina never once saw Lionett like this. But finally, after experiencing a hundred two worlds, she’d reached one where Lionett would show her his genuine smile.

Grandmother, are you watching over us? She shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up at the bright sky. *I’m still alive, as happy and healthy as an alphina flower.* A warm wind blew through the forest, making the grass, Alphina’s crimson hair, and Lionett’s blond hair sway in the breeze.

Red and gold—for many long years, these colors could never

coexist. Yet now, they fluttered in the wind together, as if promising to support each other for years to come.



Afterword

Hello, it's Yuji Yuji. The last time we met was in the second volume. How did you like the third volume of *100th Time's the Charm*, which focused on the Girne Lione arc? This volume was a lot more serious than the previous ones, but we got to see the usual powerful Alphina and Lionett. Actually, they were even more powerful in this one. I hope you enjoyed seeing them in action.

Nami Hidaka's illustrations were as amazing as ever! I kept saying, "I'd like to see how Hidaka would illustrate this scene," and "Wait, no, I'd like to see a picture of this scene too," and "Wait, no, *this* scene..." My editor and I took such a long time to decide which scenes we'd want to see on the cover or in illustrations. However, we were unanimous about the last scene. Yes, the illustration you saw right before the afterword was one where we both said, "We *need* Hidaka to draw this one!" I hope you'll flip back to that page and really take in all the details.

Now, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me on this journey. Nami Hidaka, thank you for all your wonderful illustrations. My favorites are the last scene I mentioned earlier, as well as the adorable one of Aven greeting Alphina. Seeing you use all these different scenes and angles to express my characters' charm made me happy as an author.

To Warafuji, who became my official editor from this volume: Considering the series already had ninety-nine time loops, it must have been hard to keep track of the timeline. Your work organizing and checking over everything made it easy for me, the author, to keep track of events as well. Thank you for all your hard work.

And finally, I would like to thank my editor-in-chief Kohara (who kept a close eye on me from the back), Ruharu Kai (who turned my story into such an amazing and funny comic), and Mori (the editor for the manga). The manga version of *100th Time's the Charm* is on various online manga platforms right now, so I hope you'll give it a try. At least one chapter! It's really funny, I swear!

That's it from me for this volume. Thank you so much for reading all the way here.









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The 100th Time's the Charm: She Was Executed 99 Times, So How Did She Unlock "Super Love" Mode?! Volume 3
by Yuji Yuji

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