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ill. TCB
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This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break!


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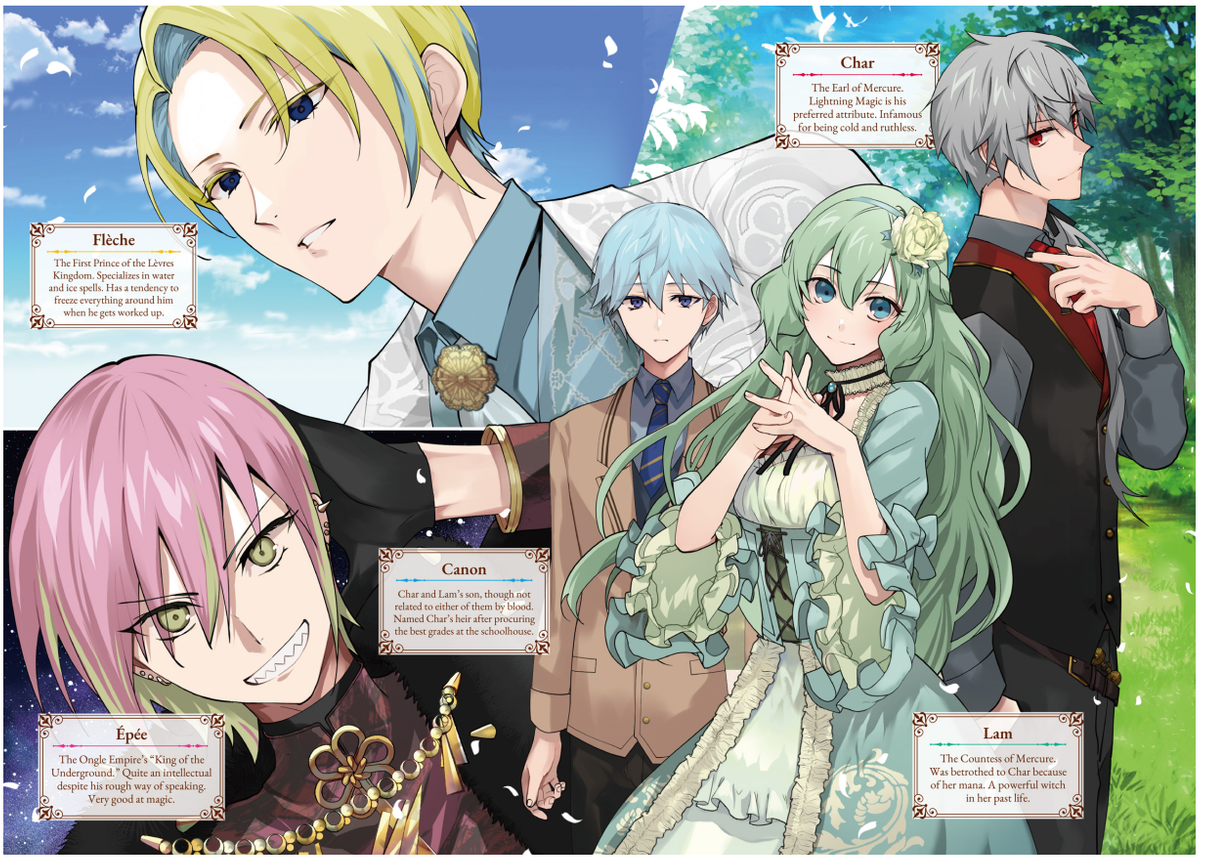


The Countess Is a Coward No More!

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Ageha Sakura
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Char
The Earl of Mercure. Lightning Magic is his preferred attribute. Infamous for being cold and ruthless.
Flèche
The First Prince of the Lèvres Kingdom. Specializes in water and ice spells. Has a tendency to freeze everything around him when he gets worked up.
Canon
Char and Lam's son, though not related to either of them by blood. Named Char's heir after procuring the best grades at the schoolhouse.
Épée
The Ongle Empire's "King of the Underground." Quite an intellectual despite his rough way of speaking. Very good at magic.
Lam
The Countess of Mercure. Was betrothed to Char because of her mana. A powerful witch in her past life.


Char looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn't,
and the two of us resumed walking toward our room.
That was when it hit me.
Oh, my—we're holding hands as if
it's the most natural thing in the world.
Before I'd realized it, my hand had found his,
and I'd grabbed it without a second thought.

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Chapter One: The Countess's Daily Life at the Mercure Estate

One day, a letter arrived at the Mercure estate. My husband, Char, brought it to me in my room, and I opened the beautiful envelope in front of him. "Oh, my. It seems that I've received an invitation to a lady's tea party. How unusual."

In my past life, I'd been invited to many such gatherings, but since Lam didn't have any friends, it was the first time I'd received one since being reincarnated.

Char's eyebrows twitched at my words. "Who's hosting?"

"The wife of the Earl of Jalousie, Lady Landora."

"Oh, that peahen in the flashy dress we met at the first party we attended together," Char said. "I see. I'll send back your declination."

The previous Lam had been treated horribly by the other noble ladies, so Char was likely trying to give me an easy way out. But I actually found myself wanting to attend a tea party at least once in this life. My only image of them was based on five-hundred-year-old memories, and I had no notion of what a modern tea party was like.

I have to say, I am a touch curious.

If I chose not to attend Lady Landora's gathering, I'd probably never have the chance to experience a tea party—especially since I would most likely never host one myself.

In the end, my curiosity got the better of me, and I stopped my husband. "Wait, Char. I want to go."

A frown twisted Char's handsome features, and he eyed me with clear suspicion. "What are you scheming, Lam? I won't judge you, so tell me the truth."

"Oh, come on, you don't have to look at me like *that*," I said.

Ever since I'd confronted Char about the way he had treated the old Lam, he'd started reflecting on his behavior and was now more willing to listen to my thoughts—just as he was now. But, in the same vein, he also seemed worried I was about to do something outrageous.

"I'm not *scheming* anything," I continued. "I'm just curious

about what noble ladies' tea parties are like nowadays."

"Is that all?" A smirk curled his lips. "Don't worry, Lam. I don't intend on making you host any tea parties. It's not like anyone would show up even if we held one anyway. So there's no need for you to force yourself to act like other ladies."

He was right; should we host a tea party at the Mercure estate, there'd be no willing attendees. The other nobles viewed us as nothing more than creepy mages, and they were terrified of what we could do.

"But I still think it'd be nice if we had a bit more interaction with the outside world," I muttered.

I knew I was asking for a lot, hoping those who couldn't wield mana would willingly mingle with us, but I wanted to find a way to bridge that gap—especially for Char and the others.

With my newfound resolution, I stared Char straight in the eye, silently begging his permission. After several seconds, he eventually sighed and said, "I take it there's no convincing you, no matter what I say?"

"Just this once. I want to experience a tea party just *once* in this life. Please, Char!" I begged.

"Just so you know, I won't be able to go with you and protect you if anything were to happen."

His response took me by surprise. "Thank you for worrying about me," I said, moved by his concern.

"You can go, if you insist. But I *really* don't want you to attend that party by yourself. I'll send Mine with you."

Mine was one of the female students enrolled at the Mercures' schoolhouse and a classmate of my and Char's adopted son, Canon. She was a steadfast and dependable girl, and she specialized in Light Magic, just like me. She didn't like fighting, but, as she had been sold to the Mercures by her family, she had nowhere to run away to, even if she wanted. Up until now, she had survived by relying exclusively on a spell that blinded enemies, but ever since I'd taught her my trusty ground-leveling spell, she'd become a true all-rounder, to the point where I'd even call her one of the strongest students of the entire schoolhouse.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," I said. "She's not used to those types of social gatherings. What if the other ladies are cruel to her?"

"The kids are trained in the duties of chamberlains and

attendants. Besides, knowing Mine, she wouldn't just sit back and take it if someone were to insult her—noble lady or not."

He had a point, but I was still worried the others would pick on her for having mana.

"Fine, but I'll tell her she can raze Lord Jalousie's mansion to the ground if they're mean to her," I declared.

"How gruesome," Char said before grabbing my hand, a stern look on his face. "If something happens—*anything*—teleport back here. I'll go and deal with them myself afterward."

And you dare describe my reaction as "gruesome"?

"You're such a worrywart. Still, thank you."

Char was genuinely worried about me. I could sense it in every word he spoke. A strange feeling began to swirl deep in my chest, and I started feeling a little jittery.

What's wrong with me? I've been having this weird feeling in my chest for a while now.

"Lam?" Char said, peering at my face. I hadn't noticed how close he had gotten, and I unconsciously jumped back.

"I'm f— I'm f-f-fine!" I stammered. "Anyway, it's just a tea party. We'll be drinking tea and eating sweets. I'm sure I'll manage."

"I hope so," Char replied. I was surprised by how grave he sounded. "I can chaperone you there and back. It'd be faster for you to teleport, but this country's nobles make a fuss *every* time we use magic, so instead we'll take the carriage."

"I'll take you up on that offer, then," I managed to reply despite the pounding in my chest.

Why is my heart so loud*? Do I have some sort of cardiac issue?!* I wondered in horror.

I didn't understand why my body always seemed to malfunction around my husband. Clearing my throat to hide my unease, I averted my eyes and then quickly slipped out of Char's line of sight.

Seriously, what's happening to me? I've never experienced anything like this in either of my lifetimes! No matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn't come up with a single reason I felt like this when talking to my husband.

Eventually, I decided to put these thoughts on the back burner and made my way to the schoolhouse.

I'm going to pay Mine a little visit before classes start. I need to ask her if she wants to come to the tea party with me.

Despite Char's claims that Mine would be fine, I still wanted to

ask for her opinion on the matter before my husband presented her with a fait accompli. Tea parties came with their own set of risks and hurdles, after all. I knew painfully well that noble ladies hid thorns and poison beneath the smiles blooming on their perfectly beautified faces, having been their victim myself. As such, I didn't want to force Mine to tag along if she objected.

I soon reached the schoolhouse. The once dull and dreary building now sported adorable pink exterior walls adorned with vibrant polka dots that spanned the color of the rainbow.

No matter how many times I look at it, it's still just as lovely! I wonder why Char and the twins don't like it. I suppose they just don't understand my artistic vision... They would always come to pester me when I tried to work on the outside walls.

It hadn't been easy, but I had eventually managed to evade my husband's and the twins' interruptions and had finished my masterpiece. The older students didn't like the new look either, but it was a resounding hit with the little ones, who kept repeating how cute it was. Children appreciate true art when they see it!

Focusing back on the task at hand, I stepped into the schoolhouse. The children would only have classes in the afternoon today, so they were presently all relaxing in their rooms or in the garden.

It's almost time for the oldest students' lesson, so Mine's likely in the girls' dormitory.

There were around ten students enrolled at the schoolhouse, and half of them were female. While the schoolhouse's first floor housed the classrooms, the boys' dormitory was located on the second floor and the girls' on the third. Thus, I mustered every ounce of strength my weak body had to offer and ascended the old staircase to the girls' floor.

The separate dormitories didn't have individual rooms for students, and instead they bunked together. I had offered to have the building remodeled to give them private spaces, but the children had declined, saying they felt safer together. Until I'd stepped in, their life at the schoolhouse could've been summarized in one word—brutal. Because of this, they had learned to rely on and support each other. Things had started changing for the better, but many of them still bore serious trauma from those days, even now.

You can't rush emotional healing. Let's take it one step at a time.

Having reached the girls' dormitory, I knocked at the door and a couple little girls came to answer. "Hi, madam!"

"Come in, come in!" they urged, clinging to me as I stepped into the room.

"Is Mine here?" I asked.

"Yup! She's wight there!" one of the girls exclaimed, pointing to the corner of the room where Mine was fast asleep, an open book resting on her face. Nearby, two little girls were playing tag, their laughter filling the air.

Perhaps I should come back later, I thought. But before I could act, one of the little girls threw herself onto Mine's stomach. "Miiine, wake up!"

The teenage girl let out a strangled "oof" and plucked the book from her face with one hand. She was clearly used to being woken up this roughly by the younger girls, as she launched into a lecture without missing a beat.

"How many times do I have to tell you *not* to wake people up by jumping on—" she started but came to a sudden stop upon noticing me by the door. "M-Madam?!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

"The madam came to see you, Mine!" one of the little girls said.

"C'mon, get weady! Huwwy!" another urged her.

A little cry escaped Mine's lips as she hurriedly fixed her hair and straightened her clothes before making her way to me, an awkward look on her face.

"I'm sorry, Mine. I was about to leave and come back later when..." I trailed off, glancing at the girls.

"It's fine. I had to wake up for class soon anyway," Mine said.

"I'll tell you why I came on the way to the classroom. Go get ready."

Mine quickly changed into her uniform, grabbed her school supplies, and followed me out of the room.

"So, what brings you here? It must be important if you came all the way to our room," she said as soon as we were out the door, impatient as ever.

"I have a job for you," I replied. We began heading down the stairs, and, thankfully, the descent was easier on my body. "But you don't have to accept if you don't want to."

"A job for *me*?" she queried, visibly confused.

"Yes. I'm sure Char will be in touch with you about it soon, but,

considering the nature of the request, I wanted to talk to you first so you don't feel pressured into doing something you're not comfortable with."

We reached the first floor and entered the classroom, which was empty save for Canon and Bombe, who sat quietly beside each other, waiting for the lesson to begin.

"What kind of job is it, madam?" Mine asked.

"I want you to accompany me to some noble lady's tea party," I said. "It's a women-only gathering, and all the adults on the Mercure estate are men, so I can't ask any of them, and it's not as though I could attend with one of the servants."

Mine stared at me, dumbfounded. "A noble lady's tea party?" she echoed.

"Yes. We'll dress you up and pretend that you're either my relative or a lady-in-waiting. Of course, we'll supply you with the clothes and the makeup you'll wear at the party—if you agree to come, that is. There are a lot of rude noblewomen, and I don't want you to force yourself to come. You can say no. No one will hold it against you."

Canon and Bombe had started leaning closer in curiosity, clearly interested in our conversation. As I shifted my focus back to Mine, to my surprise, she was staring at me with flushed cheeks and wide, sparkling eyes. "I-I'll go! To the tea party!"

"Huh? Are you positively sure?! Just so you know, the other ladies will most likely pick on you because you're with me."

"I've always wanted to go to a tea party. There'll be lots of tasty food, right? And you even said you'll provide me with a dress and makeup! I can't *not* go!"

The words "tasty food" had barely left Mine's lips when Bombe had shot up from his chair, its legs scraping loudly against the floor. "Wait, I wanna go too!"

Prior to my intervention, the students of the schoolhouse had only received plain, modest meals. They'd still had it better than the old Lam, though not by much. Their food situation was much better now, but none of them had ever experienced the extravagant dishes served at noble gatherings.

"Sorry, Bombe, but, as I said before, it's a women-only event…though, I suppose we could see to that if you really wanted to come. I actually know a nifty little spell for gender bending, and—"

"Uh, you know what? Never mind!" he hastily interrupted me,

sinking back into his seat, his face white as a sheet.

Canon, who had been listening to our conversation in silence up until now, gazed at us like he wanted to say something. Being the top student of the schoolhouse, he was set to become the next Earl of Mercure and, as such, was officially my and Char's son.



“Are you familiar with noble etiquette?” he asked Mine. “Events like these always have all sorts of complicated rules.”

“Uh, I…” the girl hesitated, throwing uncertain glances at me.

I feel you, Mine. I was never taught noble etiquette either when I still lived at home. Oh, I know! I just had a genius idea.

It was right at this moment that Fouet and Barre joined us in the classroom. *Perfect timing.*

Today I was holding one-on-one practice sessions, hence the presence of the twins. I’d been doing more and more of these types of lessons with the older students recently, where I’d practice with one of the children while the twins handled the other two. With only three of them, it was much more time efficient to teach them spells individually rather than as a group.

“Fouet, Barre, I have a request for you,” I said.

The twins eyed me with suspicion.

“What is it, madam? Have you come up with another strange proposal?” Barre asked.

“Just a reminder, we already declined your suggestion to redecorate the classroom the other day,” Fouet added.

Their rude comments stung a bit, but I cleared my throat and pulled myself together before explaining my idea. “I’d like you to teach the children about etiquette. Remember when you gave me a lesson on the basics of noble behavior? I want you to do the same for them.”

The old Lam had never received a proper education when she had still lived with her parents, and neither had her sisters (which explained why they’d turned out like *that*). The Baron Ivoire and his wife had preferred using their money to fuel their extravagant lifestyle and to invest in dubious business ventures over educating their daughters.

Since regaining my memories, I’d realized I couldn’t continue down that ignorant path if I wanted to act the part of a modern-day countess. I’d set to work filling the gaps in my knowledge, determined to improve.

Thanks to the guidance of Char, Fouet, and Barre, I’d finally managed to grasp the basics of social etiquette. Granted, it would’ve been more efficient to have employed a female tutor well-versed in the ways of nobility, but, due to the nature of the House of Mercure, hiring one was near impossible. Not many private tutors wanted to venture into a den of mana wielders, after all. As always, the other nobles preferred to keep their

distance from us.

That said, there was no shortage of nobles trying to cozy up to Char—some sought to hire his services, while others were simply drawn to his good looks—but none of them treated the Mercures as equals. I imagined that some feared the scrutiny of the Motar Faith and the potential fallout from associating with mages, while others refused to engage with mana wielders altogether.

Besides, Char wasn't particularly skilled in the art of socializing, so I could imagine him antagonizing other nobles by simply being his usual unamiable self. As for the noble ladies enamored with his looks, most had resigned themselves to the fact that becoming his mistress was an unattainable dream after the party at the palace. Apparently, they'd deemed that there was "no opening" for them to insinuate themselves into his life. I didn't think things were as hopeless as they thought, but Char was quite pleased he didn't have to deal with their advances as much.

The twins nodded at my tutoring suggestion.

"Now that I think about it, the kids have never received any etiquette lessons. Back when we were students, we had servant training and classes on the ins and outs of nobility, but I remember Gourdin saying these 'weren't necessary' and cutting them from the curriculum entirely when he was appointed as the schoolhouse's teacher," Barre said.

"It's true that we don't often need to socialize, but the students should definitely know how to conduct themselves in high society for their future," Fouet chimed in. "Well, we're by no means experts on the topic, but we can certainly teach them the basics of etiquette—just like we did for you, madam."

The students' previous teacher, Gourdin, had subjected the children to an inhumane education that was nothing short of abusive. We had dismissed him, but, to my dismay, these types of harsh lessons had always been the norm at the schoolhouse even before his tenure, though perhaps not as extreme. Char and the twins had also been raised at the schoolhouse, and the three of them had long since grown desensitized to such cruelty.

"Yes, that'll be more than enough. Can I leave it to you two, then?" I said.

The twins nodded at my request, as if to say it was no trouble.

"Of course. We'll take care of it," Fouet said.

“But, while we’re at it, how about you practice with us, madam?” Barre offered. “I’ve heard you’ll be attending a tea party soon.”

“R-Right. I shall stay and demonstrate proper tea party etiquette for the students.”

“You sound very confident, but your manners are rather old-school,” Barre commented. “Your teacher at the Baron Ivoire’s estate was a bit behind the times, huh?”

“I-I suppose, yes,” I stammered, avoiding his gaze. I hadn’t told anyone but Char that I had the memories of my past life—and even he didn’t know the full story. While he knew I used to be a mage five hundred years ago, he wasn’t aware that I was Aurora Ibrusus, the witch of legends.

And so, with the twins’ help, today’s magic lesson turned into a lecture on etiquette. The children were quite enthusiastic at the idea, as it meant they could perhaps be invited to parties or banquets in the future.

“Well then, let’s head to the garden and pretend to be at a real tea party, shall we?” I suggested. “It’s sure to be more immersive that way.”

“I’ll go and arrange for some tea and sweets, then. Do you have any requests?” Fouet asked.

“I’m fine with anything as long as the madam hasn’t made it,” Barre replied.

“I’m with you on that one,” Fouet said with a nod.

I pretended not to hear the twins’ rude comments about my cooking and headed to the garden where I began to set the table with my magic.

“Let me help you, mother,” Canon chimed in. “It’ll be good practice for me.”

“Thank you, Canon,” I said, his kindness warming my heart. But his next words doused my enthusiasm.

“You always collapse when you use your magic, so be careful not to overdo it,” he said in a stern tone. “If it’s simple magic, I’ll do it for you. So don’t waste your energy and rely on me.”

“Ugh… I’m sorry,” I said sheepishly.

Lately, I couldn’t help but notice how much Canon was starting to resemble a certain *someone*. I supposed the saying “like father, like son” did hold some credence—though the two of them weren’t related by blood.

Soon, the servants arrived, pushing tea carts laden with an

array of desserts and steaming teapots. Our request for this service had been so sudden that I hadn't expected anything impressive, but I'd been proven wrong.

Cakes, cookies, and even jelly! These must've been prepared in advance, but still—the kitchen staff outdid themselves.

Once everything was set, we all took our seats at the round table. Mine and Bombe looked especially excited, their eyes sparkling as they gazed at the sweets.

"We should have these etiquette lessons every day," Bombe said.

"I agree!" Mine replied. "I feel like I would work even harder if cake was always involved. The little ones would love it too."

I was pleased to see that the students had become more comfortable at expressing their feelings during lessons. It was a nice change, though I couldn't help but be amused at how easily swayed both Mine and Bombe were.

And so, with a smile on my lips, I began the lesson. To my surprise, it didn't take the children long at all to master tea party etiquette. I watched in awe as all three of them—even Bombe—cut their cakes into neat little pieces and carried it to their mouths with remarkable grace.

Aren't they too good at this? It took me much longer to get the hang of it!

"These three are the last survivors of the schoolhouse, so to speak. They're quick learners, especially when the lesson interests them," Fouet remarked, as if he could read my thoughts.

"I suppose they are, yes," I said.

At this rate, Mine would have no issues blending in at the tea party.

But if we're going to continue holding etiquette lessons, I'd like for the children to be able to actually put their skills to use. It'd be great if they had at least some opportunities to socialize with other nobles. All right, I really need to make a good impression at the tea party! I vowed with renewed resolve as I drained the last of my tea.

※

The month passed, and the day of the tea party finally descended upon us. The hostess, Landora, the wife of Earl Jalousie, was rumored to have an extensive network of personal

connections and was renowned for frequently hosting lavish tea parties with many nobles in attendance. This was the perfect opportunity for me to observe the social scene. Earl Jalousie was also famous for being *very* wealthy. Hosting extravagant tea parties and banquets seemed like a way for the couple to flaunt their fortune.

As promised, Char would be escorting me to the party in his carriage and fetching me when it was over. Clad in a day dress, I climbed into the coach and turned to Mine, who was standing outside the vehicle, equally dolled up. “Thank you for accompanying me,” I said cheerfully.

She flashed me a sweet, elegant smile, just as she’d been taught by the twins.

“Thank you for taking me with you, madam. I’ve been looking forward to this day so much! I’ll be up with the coachman until we arrive, so you and Lord Char can enjoy each other’s company inside,” she said with a suggestive gaze before scampering away.

Should she really be saying these kinds of things at her age?!

I was pretty positive Mine had never been in a relationship before, since she’d grown up in the schoolhouse, yet she seemed much more mature than other girls her age on the matter. Lately, she’d taken to asking me about my relationship with Char every time we crossed paths.

There were very few women at the Mercure estate, so I supposed it was only natural she’d bring these topics up around me.

Char and I may be married, but it’s not like we’re in love with each other! This is just a marriage of convenience since he’d needed a new wife. Besides, Char had no interest in Lam until I regained my memories, and, even now, the two of us don’t have that *kind of relationship! But when she asks if we’ve kissed already…*

Char climbed into the carriage, and I found myself glancing nervously his way.

“Something wrong? You’re acting weird,” he said, his ruby-red eyes all but piercing right through me.

For some reason, I started feeling nervous and fidgety. I stammered, “I-I’m not. Everything’s fine.”

“If it’s your appearance you’re worried about, don’t be. That dress looks beautiful on you. You can hold your head up high.”

“Wuh?!” I squawked. I hadn’t actually been worried about my dress, but hearing Char compliment my appearance out of the

blue made my heart skip a beat.

I can't believe Char, of all people, would compliment me! He's always so indifferent to others. My heart started racing in my chest and I gripped the skirt of my dress tightly.

"Lam... Are you blushing?" Char asked teasingly.

"Sh-Shut up! I'm *not*!" I quickly rebutted, unconsciously raising my voice. But my reaction was a dead giveaway—even I realized it.

Char stared at me, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. He was clearly finding this amusing.

"J-Just leave me alone!" I demanded.

"Don't be so mad. If you keep that death grip on your dress, it'll get wrinkled."

I wanted nothing more than to put some distance between the two of us, but Char shifted in the carriage to sit right next to me.

Things never went the way I wanted when he was involved.

"Isn't it a bit cramped for both of us on this seat? Why don't you sit on the opposite side instead?" I suggested.

"Nope, I want to sit here. Are you still blushing?"

"I told you I'm *not* blushing!"

"Oh, really? Then you don't mind if I scoot a little closer, do you?"

And so, I spent the entire ride fighting off Char's attempts to invade my personal space. It was exhausting.

We eventually reached our destination, and the coachman came to open the door. Char climbed down first and held out his hand to help me out of the carriage, still sporting that teasing smirk.

Ugh... He's toying with me again!

Frustrated, I mustered every ounce of composure I could to feign indifference as I took his hand and stepped out of the vehicle.

"Not only are you blushing, but you're also avoiding my eyes now, hmm?" he queried.

"Y-You're imagining things."

I couldn't let each and every single little thing he did get to me. *Stay calm, stay calm*, I repeated to myself as I began walking forward.

"Lam," Char said, bringing me a stop.

"Wh-What *now*?"

Squaring my shoulders to appear more intimidating, I turned back to my husband, only to find that a serious look had replaced his smirk.

"There's no guarantee these women will make their assault head-on. Though I'm sure you'll be fine, don't let your guard down around them," he warned.

He really was worried about me, huh?

"Thank you for the advice. Well then, I have a tea party to enjoy!"

Accompanied by Mine, who had climbed down from the coachman's seat, I made my way to the venue, keeping in mind to follow the current etiquette trends the twins had taught me.

Earl Jalousie's estate was located in the middle of the royal capital, and as such, everything at the tea party attested to its proximity; from the utensils arranged on the table to the sweets and the tea itself, it all exuded an air of luxury. Due to the number of guests, a sit-down gathering would've been impractical, so instead, food had been laid out on the many tables, banquet-style.

My sisters would lose their minds if they saw this. Lim and Lem loved anything expensive, after all.

Despite being around the same age as my sisters, Mine didn't seem to care the slightest bit about the fancy decorations, far more interested in stuffing her face with sweets. Making sure that no one was paying attention to her, she expertly sneaked in a few treats.

"Madam, this is delicious," she commented.

"Really? I'll have to try it later."

I was curious about the food, but I knew I had to greet the hostess before I could indulge myself.

Well then, where is Lady Landora? Uh... Now that I think about it, I don't even know what she looks like. Char said we'd met at a party once, but, at that time, it had still been the old Lam. She'd been so nervous that she'd kept her eyes down the entire time, so I'm not sure that she even saw her face.

I looked around the venue, feeling a tad lost. Thankfully, Landora spotted me first, saving me the trouble of searching for her.

"Oh, my, Lady Mercure! Thank you kindly for attending my party. I didn't think you'd come—I am so very happy to see you!"

she cooed, grabbing my hands with a smile. I was about to greet her back when she raised her voice and announced to the other guests, “Ladies, the one and only Lady Mercure has arrived!”

Instantly, all the other ladies around us whipped their heads toward me. Their eyes reflected a mix of curiosity and the sharp glint when predators see prey, which made me feel quite uncomfortable.

“It seems that you’ve become the target of all the idle gossipers, madam,” Mine whispered from where she stood one step behind me.

It sure looks like it, huh?

Though I had publicly driven back a group of rude young ladies at the party I’d attended with Char at the royal palace, most of the guests here either hadn’t been invited to that event or hadn’t witnessed the scene. As such, it seemed that a lot of these ladies still believed me to be the old cowardly Lam.

Right now, all of them were thinking the same thing: How can we torment this lost little lamb who wandered into our den?

“What should we do, madam? Would you like me to level the ground with them?” Mine offered, taking a form as if ready to attack. She was clearly irritated that these ladies were looking down on our house. It made sense; if I let these women insult me unpunished, it’d reflect poorly on the Mercure name. The old Lam used to let others do as they pleased without putting up a fight, but I knew I couldn’t show any sign of weakness at this party.

“Now, now, calm down, Mine. It’s not like they’ve actually done anything yet. Let’s just calmly observe the situation for the time being,” I said.

“Very well,” Mine sighed. “But please don’t dillydally too much, madam. Lord Char and Canon will be a pain to deal with if you let things go too far.”

I didn’t really know what she meant by that last part, but I decided to just nod in agreement. “I’ll be casting a little spell to repel any attack on us, just in case,” I said.

“Your ‘little’ spells are *never* ‘little,’” Mine commented.

The two of us barely had time to finish our exchange before a group of ladies came to surround us. “Good day, Lady Mercure.”

The atmosphere was electric, but Mine didn’t seem too bothered. After all, she’d had to put her life on the line many times fighting tough monsters under the guise of “training”

when Gourdin had still been in charge of the schoolhouse. Noble ladies didn't scare her.

Three women crowded around me, with several others standing farther back, content to watch the coming spectacle.

"Good day to you too," I replied with a smile. I had to be a good example for Mine, after all.

"I did not expect to see you here today," one of the ladies chirped. "What a pleasure."

The other two were quick to chime in after.

"I also hadn't expected your attendance since I have heard that you seldom leave the Mercure estate. Oh, and is that a new dress? To be honest, I thought that the dress you wore at the first party you attended with Lord Char was *much* too humble," one said.

"I thought the same thing." The other nodded, not letting me get a word in. "You're so young, you shouldn't be wearing such plain outfits."

Lam's former handmaidens had been underhandedly selling the dresses the Mercures bought for her, so all that had remained in her closet had been the simple old ones she'd brought from her parents' home. As such, she'd had no choice but to wear one such outfit at the party they spoke of. Well, not that these women had any way of knowing that.

"Oh, by the way, I've heard that you and Lord Char have been getting along better than ever recently. He accompanied you all the way here, did he not?"

These three women were trying to extract every bit of information they could from me without telling me a single thing about them in return. Even when I had been Aurora, I'd always hated the habit nobles had of sizing each other up like this. We were basically going in circles.

It seems that noble ladies haven't changed all that much in the past five hundred years, huh?

"I used to be in poor health, but now that I am feeling better, I'm able to leave the mansion from time to time. As for my relationship with Char, we are doing fine. Actually, the dress I'm wearing is a present from him," I said, answering their assault without hesitation. The previous Lam would've just hung her head and trembled in fear, but all that would've accomplished would have been to paint an even bigger target on my back.

It was evident that the other ladies were taken aback by my

newfound confidence. However, curiosity ended up winning over confusion, and they continued to bombard me with questions.

"Are the rumors about the party at the royal palace true?" one asked. "They say that you caused a nobleman's wig to start flying."

"Yes, indeed," I replied. "I sent it soaring right out the window."

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the crowd of onlookers.

"How barbaric!" I heard someone whisper.

"Mana wielders truly are dangerous! I can't believe she sent that poor man's wig flying!" someone else said.

Well, if you're so scared of me, how about you don't bother me? I won't do anything unless provoked first.

The women clinging to us began retreating like a receding tide. It seemed that having gotten confirmation that I had indeed used my magic at the king's party had stripped them of their bravado. None of them were as bold as Lilyrossa, who had insisted on confronting me even after witnessing my magic. Not that I was complaining—I could finally do what I'd come here for and observe the party.

For now, I decided to head to a nearby buffet table with Mine and finally try out some of the sweets. I didn't know if they thought Mine was a relative of mine or whatnot, but none of the other ladies dared approach her either. As she had to be related to the Mercures in one way or another, they kept their distance from her.

"This is delicious," I commented, munching on a pastry.

"I don't usually trust your judgment on what's 'delicious,' but I have to admit, this is very good," Mine said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Your taste buds are kind of... You know what? Forget it. I wish we could take some of these sweets home," she said, changing the topic, before reaching out for another pastry.

For a moment, we were able to enjoy some peace and quiet as most of the other ladies simply observed us from afar. But then, a brave lady stepped forward and timidly called out to me, "E-Excuse me, Lady Mercure..."

Turning on my heel, I saw a familiar young woman standing in front of me. "You're..."

"Jaune, the daughter of the Viscount of Lucie. I wanted to thank you again for rescuing me from those ruffians."

She was one of the girls who had been captured by the thugs Lilyrossa and the bishop's aide had hired to abduct me. Char and I saved her, along with their other victims, and she'd been able to return home safely.

"Are you feeling well enough to attend parties already?" I asked.

"Yes. I sustained very little injury, thanks to you. Well, other than the fact that my fiancé called off our betrothal. Not many men want to wed a woman who was abducted, after all. As most of the ladies here are already married, I was hoping one of them could introduce me to an eligible bachelor."

"I see."

"Things have been rather tense at home since I returned, so I want to marry as soon as possible," she continued, a grave look on her face.

The criminals hadn't actually done anything *physical* to her, but people had apparently started speculating and spreading rumors about her virtue.

"If you ever find yourself in need of a place to stay, please don't hesitate to come to us," I said. "We have plenty of unused rooms. I know it might be unnerving to come to a place full of mana wielders, but I promise no one will harm you. Besides, most of the servants don't have mana either."

"Thank you. I used to be afraid of the Mercures, but I realize now that you're not as scary as I thought. I'd love to see what a mages' estate looks like."

"Oh, my, is that so? Then I shall send you an invitation in the near future. Oh, and I'll introduce you to the children—they're darling," I said. "I'll even make us some sweets. I am quite the avid baker, you see."

"You'd even go as far as to make sweets for *me*? How kind of you! I would be delighted to come visit you," Jaune replied.

Mine's face paled when I mentioned baking. Now that I thought about it, despite me repeating that they were more than welcome to eat my sweets, all the children, including Mine, tended to hesitate to indulge. They'd pass the treats around and encourage the others to eat them instead. How well-mannered of them!

"Don't worry, Mine. I'll bake sweets for you and the others too. There'll be more than enough for everyone to get their fill!"

At my words, Mine jumped with a little "Eek!" She tugged at

Jaune's sleeve and whispered something in the other young woman's ear.

Is it just me, or did Jaune's lips twitch a bit in response? Hmm… It must be my imagination.

"Ahem," Jaune cleared her throat before shifting her gaze back to me. "That reminds me, there are many popular baked goods in the capital. Have you had the opportunity to try them, Lady Mercure?"

"Never, no. I'm not very knowledgeable about what's popular or not…"

Jaune leaned forward excitedly. "You *ought* to try them!" she said. "It might give you some inspiration for your own creations!"

Overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, I could only nod. "Why not? It might be a good idea to incorporate some of the newest trends into my baking."

"I shall bring a ton of them when you invite me over, then!" Jaune offered.

Behind her, Mine nodded, a self-satisfied smile on her lips.

We merrily chatted with Jaune, but after a few minutes, she glanced around, and her smile dropped. "Lady Mercure, be careful around Lady Landora," she warned me in a hushed voice. "I saw her whispering to some of the other ladies earlier. She may not look like it at first glance, but she is quite the ill-tempered woman. She might be scheming something…"

"Is that so? And here I thought that she'd invited me to her tea party out of the kindness of her heart."

I wasn't certain yet that I was Landora's intended target, but considering that Jaune had gone out of her way to warn me, it was highly likely that I was. I supposed it made sense; most people didn't like the Mercures, and I made for an easy mark. If anything, it would be surprising if she *wasn't* planning on causing some sort of trouble at my expense. Even the ladies who bore no ill will toward me would likely join her plot. By rallying everyone around a single target, they could foster a sense of unity and camaraderie—and, as a bonus, easily win Landora's favor.

And what better victim than the timid, cowardly Lam?

I hadn't reached Char's level of exasperation yet, but I could feel myself becoming increasingly fed up with the tiresome games of nobility.

No, Lam, get yourself together! Remember? You have to make

connections with other families, so the children can have more interactions with the outside world!

"No matter what you do, try to stay away from Lady Landora," Jaune insisted, unaware of my inner turmoil.

"Thank you for the advice. I suppose I'll just stay here."

Unfortunately, Jaune's warning proved to be futile. A woman's piercing scream echoed from beyond the trees in the garden.

"What's happening?" I said. "That was quite the loud scream."

"That was Lady Landora's voice," Jaune told me, her face going pale. "She might make her move soon."

Sure enough, Landora soon emerged from the direction of the cry, supporting a young lady who was positively drenched. The party's hostess had a ghastly expression on her face as she made our way toward us.

Huh? She's coming here now*? Shouldn't she find that girl a change of clothes first?*

But no; Landora simply kept marching toward us. When she was close enough, she pointed at me, a triumphant look on her face. "Lady Mercure, how utterly despicable! I cannot believe what you did to poor Lady Peona!" she exclaimed in a high-pitched voice.

"Huh? Who's that?" I asked, confused. I had never heard of a "Lady Peona" before, but I assumed it was the drenched girl next to Landora. But why were they acting like it was my fault she'd gotten wet?

As I stood there, baffled, Landora pressed on with her accusations. "Stop playing coy! You've used your magic to put a water curse on her! If not, how do you explain that she got all wet even though there is no water here? You tried to drown her!"

I was finally starting to understand what was going on.

I see. So that's the story she's come up with.

Jaune's warning echoed in the back of my mind. Landora was going to pretend I was the one who drenched Peona and disgrace me in front of everyone.

"Well, Lady Mercure? How are you going to repay Lady Peona for this heinous crime?!" Landora pushed, a smug smile on her lips. If this were happening to the previous Lam, she'd most likely have fallen to her knees and cowered in fear. In fact, I was positive this was what the other ladies were expecting me to do.

Bullying others for their own amusement... How vile.

To Peona and the other ladies near the bottom of the food

chain, Lam was the perfect scapegoat. Not only was some good old bullying the perfect way to liven up an otherwise boring tea party, but having me as their shared target ensured some level of equilibrium among the ladies.

That's why they're trying to knock me down before I can climb the social ladder. Well, I'm sorry to say that was a bad move.

Beside me, it was obvious Mine was itching to use her magic.

"Watch this, Mine. I'm going to teach you the perfect spell to use in this situation," I said before snapping my fingers.

The next instant, Landora let out another much louder shriek than earlier. My little spell had turned her hair into a frizzy mess that would best be described as a bird's nest, which was getting larger with every passing second.

"Nooo! My silky smooth and shiny hair!" she yelled. Her hair had become so large it had started entangling the ladies beside her, including Peona, but it was still showing no signs of stopping. The ladies' cries of horror echoed in the garden as they started being swallowed up.

"I felt so bad for using a hair-growth spell on Lilyrossa and the others last time. They're ladies, after all—making hair grow all over their body was much too cruel," I told Mine.

"I don't think that was the issue... Either way, this spell does seem rather useful, indeed. I can't believe these ladies' gall. I'm *this* close to using my magic myself!" she said, visibly angry.

"I'm sure a little spell won't hurt anyone. Don't you think this garden would be prettier if it was a little flatter?" A cunning smile tugged at my lips, and I flashed the girl a wink. Mine immediately understood what I was hinting at, and an equally menacing expression appeared on her face.

If I let Landora and the others walk all over me like this, the Mercure name would be tarnished even further. Besides, these ladies were willing to go as far as to lie to see me use my magic. Who was I to betray their expectations? I'd give them the show they so clearly wanted.

"What a coincidence, madam! I was just thinking the same thing," Mine said playfully before raising her hand. "Taaake this!" she exclaimed, using her trusty ground-leveling spell on an empty corner of the garden.

A roaring sound echoed in the air, and beams of light rained upon the garden, flattening the terrain out, sending the trees and decorations flying.

“Phew, I’m done leveling that insignificant patch of grass,” Mine said, with a self-satisfied chuckle.

“We can see much better without all these trees standing in the way,” I remarked.

Between what I’d done to Landora’s hair and Mine’s impromptu landscaping session, the party had quickly descended into chaos.

“Aaah!”

“Nooo!”

Ladies in beautiful dresses were scurrying around the garden, yelling and shrieking like beasts. It was most amusing.

I turned to Landora and Peona. The latter was shaking like a leaf, completely entangled in the former’s hair which was still growing at alarming speed.

“As you can see, we are quite adept with large-scale spells,” I said cheerfully. “If I really wanted to harm someone, I wouldn’t just splash some water on them. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The two women nodded stiffly in response, too stunned to speak. As for the other ladies, they weren’t doing any better, pale and trembling as they watched us from afar.

I’d gone out of my way to attend this party, only to once again fail miserably at socializing with my fellow noblewomen… I still had a long way to go if I wanted to become the perfect countess.

“Well, it looks like this tea party is pretty much over,” I said, turning to Mine. “Let’s head on home, shall we? Char said he’d come fetch us.”

“I’ve had my fill of sweets and delicious dishes, so I’m perfectly content,” Mine replied. “I’ll send a message to Lord Char.” With those words, she took a piece of paper out of her pocket, scribbled down a quick note and held it up. She used the communication spell I’d just taught her a few lessons ago, and the letter turned into a ball of light before shooting off in the direction of the Mercure estate.

“My, you’ve become good at that spell,” I praised her.

“Well, Light Magic *is* my specialty,” she replied, puffing her chest out in pride.

After a short time, Char and Canon came rushing through the front gate of the Jalousie mansion, looking flustered.

“Well, that was fast. How did you get here so quickly?” I asked.

“We teleported here as soon as we received Mine’s message,”

Char said. “Are you all right, Lam? Mine said the hostess tried to play a trick on you.”

It seemed that Mine may have overexaggerated the situation a bit in her message. “I’m fine,” I replied.

I glanced at Mine behind me, and she was sporting an unconcerned expression, as if to say she had simply told Char the truth.

Canon took a quick look around the garden before turning back to us. “I assume mother put the spell on that woman’s hair, and Mine’s the one who leveled the ground over there,” he said.

“Yup, that’s right. It was just a little payback for what they did to the madam,” Mine replied, sticking out her tongue mischievously before hiding behind me. *Cheeky girl.*

“Weren’t you supposed to take the carriage?” I asked my husband and son.

“I was worried something had happened to you after seeing Mine’s message, so I teleported over,” Canon replied. “Father did the same.”

Char came to stand in front of me, as if to shield me from any potential attack, and glared at Landora and Peona, who were pretty much drowning in hair at that point. “What’s going on here? What did you do to Lam?” he asked coldly.

Landora froze in fear, and Peona shook even more intensely than before. They were so scared of what he might do to them that they couldn’t muster the courage to respond to his question.

Mine poked her head from behind me and gave Char a quick summary of everything that had happened. “That woman poured water on her friend and pretended the madam did it with her magic. So, naturally, I had no choice but to flatten the garden.” As soon as she was done with her explanation, she ducked back behind me.

“I see,” Char said. “You did the right thing, Mine. These women *did* try to insult my wife, after all.”

“I think you could’ve done a bit more landscaping,” Canon chimed in. “Look, there’s a pond on that side of the garden. You should get rid of it before these ladies try to accuse mother of using Water Magic on them again.”

“Um, I’m fine, everyone,” I said, but no one paid me any mind. Char picked me up without a word and headed toward the door. “Huh? Wait, Char, what are you doing?”

“You’ve used your magic *again*. You’re about to collapse, aren’t you? We’re going home.” He turned his head to look at the other two. “Canon, I’m leaving the rest to you.”

“Yes, father. Please take good care of mother.”

“Wait, Char, I told you I’m fine! Let me go!” I protested.

But Char wouldn’t relent. “No,” was all he said as he kept marching away from the tea party.

Seconds later, I heard two—no, three, more explosions as Mine and Canon wreaked havoc on the rest of the garden. No one at that party would be able to stop them now.

When we reached a spot away from prying eyes, Char used a teleportation spell to take the two of us back to the mansion. Then, he led me to his study and started lecturing me, even though I’d done nothing wrong.

“I *told* you not to attend that tea party. I can’t believe they’d try to humiliate you like that!” he said, fuming.

“I’m fine,” I repeated for the third time. “I had Mine with me, and Jaune—one of the ladies I saved last time—took my side as well.”

“I’ll keep an eye on that young lady—just to be safe.”

“Thank you, Char. By the way, she’s looking for a fiancé and—” I started, but he interrupted me.

“Don’t try to change the topic, Lam. At any rate, I think it’d be best if you refrained from attending tea parties in the future.”

To think my husband would ban me from going to tea parties after my very first one… Surely, he could’ve given me a couple more chances!

“We’re not like the other nobles. There’s a world separating us,” he continued.

“But don’t you think we’d have an easier time with certain things if we closed that gap?” I asked.

“These people aren’t that open-minded. Just give up, Lam. It’s useless to even try approaching them.”

This whole “mages are creepy” shtick was really starting to get on my nerves.

It was at this moment that the twins stepped into the room, sporting identical gloating smiles. They must’ve guessed what Char and I had been talking about, as Fouet said, “Lord Char was *so* worried about you, he was completely restless while you were at the tea party, madam.”

“Yup. He couldn’t even focus on his work,” Barre added. “It’s

the first time I've seen him like that. I wish you could've seen it."

Char's eyes were shooting daggers at them, but the twins didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

Meanwhile, I was quite conflicted. While I was happy Char was so worried about me, I couldn't help but be a tad embarrassed… It was a weird feeling.

"Is something wrong, Lam? Your face is all red," Char asked, his voice tinged with concern.

"N-No, it's nothing. Nothing at all!" I said, quickly averting my gaze from him. My face felt like it was burning, and I had no idea why.

The twins exchanged knowing glances. It seemed that they had an idea about the condition I was suffering from.

"Oh? Well, I didn't see *that* coming," Fouet said.

"Do you think the madam… No, there's no way. Or is there?" Barre mused, and the two of them did this thing only twins seemed to be able to do, where they silently communicated just by looking at each other.

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In the blink of an eye, tales of Landora's tea party spread among high society, and people became even more scared of the Mercures. However, it seemed that—other than the guests—everyone thought that Mine and Canon were the only ones responsible for the chaos.

People still think I'm just a cowardly countess and refuse to take me seriously, huh? Despite my best efforts, I was still regarded as an easy target.

As evidence of this, half a month after the tea party, I received a letter from one of the other ladies at the party, urging me to go pay a visit to my family, as their situation was "dire." She explained that my father, the Baron Ivoire, was struggling greatly and that his house was on the brink of collapse, so I should go talk to them.

Why should I go? They'd just tell me to ask Char to resume sending them money.

I crumpled the letter in a ball and threw it in the dustbin. *Good grief. Just how self-serving can one be, really?* The Baron Ivoire had brought this situation upon himself. It had nothing to do with me.

But, even though I ignored their pleas, the letters kept coming. At this point, I was pretty much receiving one every single day, which was awkward, to say the least. The servants never commented on it, but I could tell they were starting to find it suspicious.

I can't blame them—it does *look like I'm up to no good. What am I to do?*

I decided to continue ignoring the letters, but, to my dismay, they didn't stop coming—in fact, they increased. I went from receiving one letter a day to *three*. Anyone would find it questionable.

I'm at a bit of a loss here.

With how frequent the letters were, Char was bound to have noticed. He already had to deal with my family after the whole debacle with my sisters, so I didn't want to cause him more trouble on that front. But, as it turned out, not only *did* Char know about the letters, the other members of the household did as well.

"Hey, what's going on?" Char asked one day, barging into my room with a letter in hand. "You've been receiving so many of these lately, I almost started suspecting you of having a secret lover."

Apparently, his curiosity—or perhaps his paranoia—had gotten the best of him, and he'd opened one of the letters without asking.

"Don't be absurd," I replied. "You know how limited my social circle is."

He'd asked me what was going on, but he'd already read the letter, so he knew Lam's family had been pestering me to pay them a visit. The twins stood behind him, silently observing the situation. It seemed that they knew the contents of the letter as well.

"So? What's happening, Lam?" Char insisted.

"Basically... Um..." I resigned myself to my fate and told Char and the twins about the letters I'd been receiving incessantly since the tea party. By the time I finished, the three of them looked completely disgruntled.

"They don't seem to have learned their lesson at all, Lord Char," Barre said. "I can't believe they're pulling this stunt after the thrashing we gave them last time."

"Perhaps they *want* us to teach them a lesson again," Fouet

mused. “Or maybe they just haven’t learned from their mistakes.”

Char nodded in agreement. “It’ll be a pain if they keep bombarding Lam with letters. I’ll go put a stop to it.”

“Wait,” I called out to the trio. “I’ll come with you.”

The Baron Ivoire was my father. I couldn’t let Char and the twins face him alone while I sat back and did nothing. That would be beyond irresponsible.

“No, Lam. You’re staying here,” Char said sullenly.

“Listen to Lord Char, madam,” Fouet chimed in. “It’d be a most unpleasant experience for you. How about you stay here and eat some sweets instead?”

“Don’t worry; we’ll deal with the Baron Ivoire and his family in your stead,” Barre added. Both twins had menacing smiles on their lips. They must’ve had new spells they wanted to test out.

But I wasn’t about to back down. “I refuse. These letters were addressed to me. I have to go and set things straight myself.”

Char let out a sigh. “You fixate over the strangest things.”

“How rude. As the Baron Ivoire’s daughter, I just want to settle this situation once and for all.”

Char sank his forehead into his open hand in exasperation. “I assume that, even if I told you not to come, you’ll teleport there anyway.”

“My, you know me well, husband. So, let’s skip the back-and-forth and just let me come with you.” I said, punctuating my sentence with a big innocent grin.

Char set both elbows on the table and buried his head in his hands with a defeated sigh.

I promptly sent a reply to the lady who’d been sending me the letter, and we headed to the Baron Ivoire’s estate together. Of course, Char and the twins had tagged along as well. When the lady arrived to accompany me, she looked like she wanted to protest, but one sharp glare from my husband was enough to silence her.

I wish I could look as intimidating as him... I thought sullenly. But there was no point in dwelling on the impossible, so I quietly climbed into the carriage.

Under normal circumstances, we’d have teleported to our destination, but we decided against it since we wouldn’t be alone. Most spells had been lost to the vestiges of time, so I’d told Char and the others to refrain from using the ones I’d taught

them in front of others as much as possible, just to be safe.

Even though I keep using them without thinking… To be fair, up until now, I'd only used my magic in front of people who were completely ignorant about the topic, so none of them even suspected these spells were technically extinct.

The carriage rattled slowly along the cobblestone road. The Baron Ivoire's estate was located in the royal capital as well, so it didn't take long for us to reach our destination. I hadn't seen the house in quite some time, but it had definitely seen better days. There were no guards at the gate, the garden was overgrown, very few servants appeared to remain, and the entry hall was unkempt.

They're completely out of money, aren't they?

We were ushered to the drawing room by a tired chamberlain and the lady who'd accompanied us, where my father was awaiting us. The hallway and the reception room both looked like they hadn't been cleaned in quite some time, with dust collecting in the corners.

"Lord Ivoire, I've brought Lady Lam with me. Please do not forget our agreement," the lady said before leaving the room.

She must've asked for something in exchange for her cooperation, huh? I suppose it makes sense; she has no reason for helping out my father unless he gave her some sort of incentive. I didn't know what kind of agreement she had with my family, but, either way, it seemed that her role here was done.

We stepped into the room, and Lam's entire family—who were sitting on the sofas—turned their attention toward us at once.

If I'd come alone, I'm sure they'd have started ganging up on me right away. I could have handled their criticisms on my own, but having Char and the twins by my side was reassuring. If anything, the odds felt stacked entirely in our favor.

It's not only the mansion that's changed since my last visit, but my family too, huh? My parents and sisters used to wear the latest fashions, but now their clothes had the faded and worn look that was produced through countless washings. Lim and Lem were glaring at me, clearly envious of the new dress Char had bought me only a few days ago, but they didn't dare to say anything in front of our father.

"Lam, sit next to me," Char said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Char… All right."

I let him guide me by the arm and took a seat beside him. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, like a husband protecting his wife. *Which we are, but still...* I felt oddly restless, just as I often did recently. It was starting to wear on my nerves.

Once we were all settled, the Baron Ivoire breathed in, acting as the family's spokesperson. He was reclining comfortably on the sofa, his hair combed backward, and his legs spread wide. His frayed purple suit barely hinted at its once flamboyant nature, only further highlighting how rough things had become for them. This slovenly appearance wasn't a deliberate show of disrespect toward Char; the Baron Ivoire was simply a sloppy man and had always been.

"It's been a while, Lam," he said.

"It has, indeed, Baron Ivoire," I replied politely. I had cut all ties with the Ivoire family since the incident with my sisters, so I refused to call him "father." He clearly did not appreciate that fact—and neither did my mother and sisters, if the way they were glaring at me was any indication.

"Who do you think you are? Acting all high and mighty just because you married an earl," my father said, his tone dripping with disdain.

"I couldn't have worded it any better, father!" Lim chimed in. "How impudent! You're just Lam—remember your place!"

"Exactly!" Lem added.

Char had given them a stern warning the last time they'd tried to bully me, so they didn't dare to act as brazen as they'd used to, but their attitude toward me hadn't changed.

Spurred by his daughters' comments, my father snorted before immediately launching into another tirade. "Because of you, the earl has stopped sending us money, you good-for-nothing girl! Don't you feel bad about what you've done?" he admonished me.

All I did was tilt my head to the side in puzzlement. "I beg your pardon?"

For some reason, they seemed to believe it was my fault that Char had cut off his financial assistance to them. Just how in the world had they even reached *that* conclusion?

"Why do you think I sold you to the Mercures? You'd better take responsibility and convince the earl to resume his support!" my father barked. "If you can't do that, I'll make you divorce him. Good thing you're still young. Sure, you may be plain and just a

mana wielder, but there are still a few men who'd be willing to buy you."

"*Excuse* me?" I demanded. For him to bring up marrying me to another man so suddenly, he must've found a potential "buyer" already. This also explained why he'd wanted me to come alone and vulnerable.

Now that Char refuses to give him money anymore, he's desperate for another person to leech onto. As always, this man was an absolute reprobate.

"It won't be much, but we'll at least be getting *something*," my father continued. "I'm magnanimous enough to forgive you for causing the earl to stop his financial support if you agree to come back without putting up a fight."

"You'll 'forgive me,' hmm?" I asked. Of course, I had absolutely no intention of accepting his conditions. These people had long since lost any authority over me—they couldn't force me to divorce nor could they sell me to anyone.

Still... A divorce, huh?

I thought back on the past few months. All this time, my goal had been to divorce Char and get out of the Mercure estate. *But now...* I realized that I couldn't picture myself leaving. Despite how insistent I'd been on getting a divorce at first, I found myself becoming more and more reluctant to leave the Mercures. Much to my own puzzlement, part of me had even started thinking, "Staying wouldn't be so bad now, would it?"

What do I really *want to do?*

Either way, now wasn't the time to get lost in these thoughts. First, I needed to deal with the Ivoires. Char wasn't even trying to hide his disgust at my father, and the twins were staring at my family with matching looks of horror, as if they couldn't believe what my father had just said.

"Fouet? What is that old fart talking about?" Barre pointed at my father, his eyes narrowing in disdain.

A similar expression crossed Fouet's face. "How troublesome. Lord Char explained to him quite incredibly thoroughly why he decided to stop his financial assistance, but it would seem that Lord Ivoire is prone to forgetfulness and delusions, and he doesn't remember."

My mother and sisters continued to watch me in silence, trying to gauge my next move. I stood up, took a step forward and looked my father straight in the eye. "That would be very

convenient for you, wouldn't it? Well, I refuse to do anything you say. Lord Ivoire, you're not my father anymore. I have no obligation to listen to you."

"Wha—?!" he exclaimed, his face turning red with anger. If it'd been Char or one of the twins who'd said this to him, he would've had a much different reaction. All his life, he'd looked down on his daughter, so seeing me rebel against him only fueled his fury. "Lam, y-you— What did you just say?!"

Soon, the rest of the family joined in, and they all started yelling at me. They must've thought they could intimidate me into accepting their demands, even with Char and the twins by my side. The old Lam would've immediately wilted under the pressure, but I was different.

"I said, I refuse to do anything you say," I repeated. "Char has already given you more than enough money. He even agreed to raise his financial support multiple times, per your demand. I was curious, so I checked, but he ended up giving you an astronomical sum. I cannot even fathom how you managed to get yourselves in such a tight spot with how much money you received."

If they hadn't wasted their money on buying useless luxuries and investing in dubious business ventures without thinking, they would've still had more than enough money left to live comfortably. *You reap what you sow.* Besides, it was their fault Char had cut his financial support in the first place. I had absolutely no sympathy for them.

If my sisters hadn't caused such a scene at the mansion, perhaps Char would have kept sending them money.

Either way, no matter how much they liked to pretend they'd done nothing wrong, it was too late. Unfortunately, my father refused to accept this fact and was getting increasingly agitated, his face now a stunning crimson.

"How impudent! Who do you think you are?!" he roared before standing up and marching toward me with long strides. Anticipating that he was going to attempt to strike me, I used my magic to put up a barrier, but Char intercepted. He'd planted himself between my father and me before the Baron Ivoire could even attempt to lay a finger on me.

"I won't allow anyone to touch my wife without her permission—even if that someone is her own father," he said.

"Move out of the way, Lord Mercure! This is a family matter! I'd

appreciate it if you refrained from getting in the way of me disciplining my daughter!"

"I've been sitting back and letting you blabber on since earlier, and you keep spouting the most ridiculous nonsense," Char said coolly. "A 'family matter'? Lam is part of *my* family. She's already cut ties with you lot. But if you insist on making a scene, I'll gladly use you as a test subject for my magic, just like last time."

Char's words seemed to finally snap my father back to his senses, and he let out a panicked "Eek!" It wasn't just him—my sisters' faces visibly paled, and they started shaking. All three of them had witnessed firsthand just how powerful Char was.

"Wh-Why would you even bother?! Your and Lam's marriage is one of convenience. Everyone in high society says that you have no interest in my daughter!"

"Those are false rumors. Lam is immeasurably dear to me."

Wait, what? I glanced at Char, puzzled, and he flashed me a mischievous smile and a wink. *That's his "I'm having fun" face!*

Char liked to say these very over-the-top things to tease me. *Ugh, because of him, my heart is acting weird again!*

"Let me put it plainly: Do *not* contact my wife ever again," Char said. "I believe I told you the exact same thing the last time I visited you, yet you still attempted to communicate with her through another noble. I despise underhanded tactics."

Knowing only the old Lam, my father must've believed his plan was foolproof. Upon receiving that first letter, she would've undoubtedly sneaked out of the Mercure estate without letting anyone know to go see how her family was doing, only to be captured, forced to have a divorce, and sold to the wealthiest man who'd take her.

However, as I'd ignored the first few letters, Char had started growing suspicious and had ended up reading one to see what was going on. Seeing that this harassment had been orchestrated by my father, he'd wasted no time in fetching the twins and getting ready to go settle the matter himself.

The previous Lam would have obviously refused Char's help, and—no, scratch that. If I'd still been the old Lam, Char might not even have looked into the matter at all, convinced that his wife wanted nothing to do with him. Under those circumstances, my father's plan would have worked perfectly. But, unfortunately for my father, Char now considered me a member of the Mercure family and was willing to go out of his way to help me.

And, of course, I wasn't the Lam he remembered either.

My sisters had witnessed that I was different from the old cowardly Lam, but they hadn't told my father, perhaps because they refused to accept the truth. And, well, this was the outcome.

"Please wait a minute, Lord Mercure! At this rate, our family will fall into ruin, and we'll lose our home!" my father pleaded.

"That's got nothing to do with me. You shouldn't have spent all the money I sent you on useless luxuries. Perhaps it's time you learned to contribute something to society," Char said, and I nodded inwardly. He was absolutely right.

"Let's go, Lam," he finished, offering me his hand.

I took it and stood from the sofa.

"W-Wait!" my father yelled. He reached a hand forward and, perhaps out of panic, grabbed me by the hair.

A pained cry escaped me, and I instinctively flung a hand up to the back of my head.

"You useless girl! Acting all high and mighty and thinking you can get away with it because your husband is an earl..." my father seethed.

Char immediately stepped forward, ready to deal with my father, but I stopped him. "Wait, Char. Let me handle this—it's my mess to clean up. The reason the Baron Ivoire thinks he can act this way is because he sees me as nothing more than a weak, helpless countess. I ought to make him realize this couldn't be further away from the truth."

Enduring the pain as best I could, I began to gather mana into my body. The hair in my father's grasp writhed and twisted like a serpent before winding up his arm. If I wanted them to leave me alone, I had to give them a good lesson once and for all.

"Wha— Your hair! It's... Eek!" My father gasped as my hair grew longer and coiled around his entire body. He began screaming, but it was too late—my hair had already reached his mouth and sealed it off completely. Once I'd ensured he couldn't move anymore, I used a Wood Magic spell to turn my hair into vines and cut off the excess.

"Phew, I've captured that insignificant louse," I said.



My mother and sisters were visibly terrified. They clearly had no idea I was able to use magic. *Looks like my little stunt made quite the impact.* Of course, Lam's family knew she had mana, but they thought she couldn't wield it. That was why they'd been treating her with such disdain her entire life.

"Eeek! Y-You're a monster! Get out! And don't step foot in our house ever again!" my mother shrieked as she huddled with my sisters, the three of them quivering uncontrollably. *First you tell me to come, now to leave… You ought to make up your mind. How self-centered.*

While they had no qualms about Char and the other Mercures using magic, they clearly drew the line at a member of their own family doing so.

"I hope you've learned your lesson and won't try to contact me anymore. Char was right; stop spending other people's money to fund your lavish lifestyle, and try to be helpful to others for a change," I said.

My sisters were crying at this point, calling me a "monster," a "mana wielder" (which I was), and yelling at me to leave.

"You ungrateful brat! I should never have given birth to you!" my mother spat, resentment hot in her voice.

Char stepped in before I could react. "If you keep spewing this nonsense, I'll hurl all three of you into the Ouragan Mountains," he said. "The only good thing you did in your life was give birth to Lam and grant me her hand in marriage. I *am* grateful for that, so I will spare your lives… But you'd better not appear in front of us ever again."

He told the twins to handle the rest, scooped me in his arms, and carried me back to the carriage. At his signal, the driver cracked the reins, and the carriage lurched forward.

"What about Barre and Fouet?" I asked.

When he'd set me down, I'd ended up awkwardly between his legs, so I hurried over to the opposite seat.

"They'll teleport back once they're done dealing with your parents. Don't worry about them," he replied. For some reason, he seemed more concerned about my well-being than the twins'.

"Are you still thinking about what Lady Ivoire said to me?" I asked. That he'd immediately jumped in as soon as she made that nasty comment had felt a bit out of character for Char. "If you are; don't. I've heard it countless times in my childhood. It doesn't bother me anymore."

“Really? Then that’s fine, I suppose,” he muttered, his gaze shifting away from me. “Most parents who send their kids to us say the same thing. I have to hear this sort of thing every time I go pick a new student up,” he added, not concealing his disgust. I couldn’t help but wonder if his own parents had told him the same thing as well.

Is that why he stepped in to defend me then?

I couldn’t believe that Char, of all people, would worry about me like that. It made me feel both embarrassed and touched at the same time, and I discreetly squeezed my fists, which were resting on my lap.

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The Tête Kingdom was a small, inconspicuous nation located on the western edge of the continent. It was surrounded by mountains and forests, and, while it had several rivers and direct access to the sea, its territory wasn’t particularly vast. The Lèvres Kingdom bordered it on the east and the Ongle Empire on the southwest.

Despite being surrounded by two powerhouses, the little nation managed to eke out an existence by staying mindful of the whims of its neighbors. Another reason the Tête Kingdom had managed to survive for so long in such a prime location was that the two larger nations kept each other at bay. Both Lèvres and Ongle were equally matched in terms of strength, and neither wanted the other to gain control of Tête.

It was said that if one were to try to take Tête over, the other would immediately come to the smaller nation’s aid and help them fend off the invaders. Should such a war break out, the casualties would be catastrophic for all sides. As a result, despite the constant tension, no conflict had yet erupted, and the equilibrium remained intact.

A man restlessly paced the royal palace of the Tête Kingdom. That man was none other than King Soupir II, its current ruler.

“Why?! How did we end up in this situation?!” he exclaimed. “Why is the first prince of Lèvres butting into our business all of a sudden? What are they scheming?!”

It had all started when the first prince of the Lèvres Kingdom had visited the Tête Kingdom a few days ago. The king had barely received the letter informing him of the prince’s intentions

before he'd appeared in the royal capital to expose the Cerveau Cathedral's wrongdoings despite having no connection to it whatsoever.

"You should send the bishop's aide to the Faith's main church to punish him for his crimes," he'd declared, though it was unclear if that was supposed to be a request or an order. And that wasn't all! He'd then proceeded to make an absolutely unreasonable demand, claiming that, if the king didn't want him to make an even bigger fuss, then he should send a certain individual to his country. Soupir had no idea what was going through the prince's mind.

And so, after wreaking havoc in the cathedral and having made his demands, the prince teleported right back to his own country. *That prince is nothing but trouble!* Soupir thought.

He had no choice but to obey the prince given the threat posed by the bigger nation. Soupir refused to be blamed for his kingdom getting attacked.

"What I don't understand is why he wants us to send him the *Countess of Mercure,* of all people. What is he after?!"

Soupir could barely remember what that woman in question even looked like. He knew that she was a quiet and inconspicuous girl, but that was about it. She had been born into a noble family, so she must have had an audience with him when she'd made her society debut, but Soupir had little recollection of it.

According to the rumors, she was a cowardly girl who rarely left the Mercure estate. In fact, she was so reclusive that there were barely any whispers about her circulating in high society. Her father—a social climber of a baron—had brought their house to the brink of collapse. Soupir had looked into the Baron Ivoire, and the more he learned about the man, the more he realized that he was an absolute good-for-nothing. *Why would the prince go as far as to threaten us just to meet with his daughter?*

The Lèvres Kingdom almost never attempted to push its demands on the Tête Kingdom, aware that the Ongle Empire would get involved if tensions escalated. Yet, this time, the first prince had decided to act alone and make a bold request of Soupir II—all to meet with a mediocre countess who possessed no particular charm, insofar as Soupir II could ascertain.

Sending her to him likely won't cause any issues, but what does he plan to do with her? He's never even met her before. If he'd asked

to see her husband, I would've understood, since he's a mage, but that timid girl has no power or authority to speak of.

No matter how long Soupir pondered on it, it just didn't make sense. At his wit's end, he decided to do what he did best—offload the problem onto the Earl of Mercure himself.

Chapter Two: The Countess Is Invited to Another Country

In a corner of the expansive gardens of the Mercure estate, rainbow-patterned objets d'art were displayed beside a fountain that emitted water glimmering in similar iridescent hues. Nearby, a long table in the same vibrant color scheme was piled high with an array of dishes. The Mercures were currently celebrating an important event that only happened every few years.

This decor is much lovelier than at that tea party I went to. I really have a knack for decorating! I—Lam, the Countess of Mercure—thought with satisfaction as I admired my work. Today was a momentous day for the future of our house, and it certainly deserved to be celebrated.

"Canon, Mine, Bombe. Congratulations on finishing your studies! Cheers, everyone!" I exclaimed, raising my glass in celebration, and everyone else followed suit.

The children—dressed to the nines—had vastly different reactions. Canon remained seated, quietly staring at his glass, while Mine jumped to her feet, a proud expression on her face. As for Bombe, he seemed far more interested in the dishes laid out on the table than his own graduation toast.

I used my magic to scatter a flurry of cherry blossoms through the air. The petals fluttered in the wind, spreading to float gently away into the clear sky. "What a beautiful day!" I declared. The sky was just the same as it had been five hundred years ago, a vast expanse of blue stretching as far as the eye could see.

"It really is," Char commented, looking up at the sky beside me.

"If only the decorations weren't such an eyesore," Barre remarked rudely as he passed by. *He always has something to say about my sense of decoration!*

While he was quite skilled at exterminating monsters, Barre had no aesthetic sensibilities whatsoever, and he always found fault with my designs. *Oh well, no matter. For now, celebrating the*

children's graduation is the priority.

Canon, Mine, and Bombe would be turning sixteen this year, which meant they would officially begin working as mages for the House of Mercure. The family was perpetually understaffed, so the trio's graduation came as a welcome relief. It would certainly lighten the load for Char and the others.

I'd actually come up with a proposition for Char following the children's graduation. "How about we assign the new graduates a mentor? It'd help them learn their new roles and expand their magic repertoires."

During my lessons, I'd found that teaching the children one-on-one allowed them to pick up new spells much faster, so there was no reason this approach wouldn't work just as well in their incoming positions as mages. Besides, I wanted to make sure they had enough opportunities to learn new spells, even now that they were done with school.

"Lam? What in the world are you talking about? The kids have already graduated, remember?" Char said.

He looked genuinely perplexed, so I explained, "Five hundred years ago, most mages traditionally learned their craft by working as apprentices for other mages. What would you think of adopting a similar approach?"

"Apprentices?" Char repeated, blinking confusedly.

"Yes. The mentor would pass down their knowledge and skills to their apprentices and train them to become fully-fledged mages. Back in the day, I used to have three disciples of my own. They were just *darling*."

"Is that so?" Char commented. Lately, he seemed to have developed a tolerance for my rather unconventional ideas, and while he didn't agree with *all* of them, he still took the time to listen. "But who'd take on the apprentices? I can't imagine myself doing my work while babysitting three kids at the same time."

It just so happened that I had the *perfect* solution. "How about you and the twins take one disciple each? That way, the kids will be able to learn your jobs and improve their magic at the same time. I think it's pretty ingenious."

"Just what would that entail?" Char asked.

"You'd teach Canon, while Fouet teaches Mine, and Barre will take Bombe. Canon's your heir, so it makes sense that you'd take him under your wing. As for Mine, she's clever and has good observation skills, so having her learn Fouet's job would be most

appropriate. And Bombe tends to have a lot of excess energy, so I think it'd suit him to accompany Barre on his missions."

As for me, I intended on overseeing Char and the others as they mentored the children.

"I see your point... But I'm rather busy," Char said.

"Well, won't you need to train Canon for his future role as the head of the house either way?" I asked. I wanted them to use this opportunity to bond some more. They might not be related by blood, but they were still father and son. However, as it was, they acted more like superior and subordinate. I strongly believed that reinforcing the bond between the members of the house was necessary for the future of the family.

Char paused and gave my idea some thought. "I'll think about it," he muttered, taking my hand. "What about you? You won't take a disciple?"

"I'll be supervising you and the twins. I'm already teaching you magic, so you three are a bit like my disciples, in a way. Don't worry—I've already raised three disciples into outstanding mages. I'm an old hand at this," I bragged.

Char nodded, but his expression was unreadable. I had no idea if I'd managed to convince him or if he still held reservations.

"I suppose we can give it a try, and if it goes well, we'll continue," he said.

"Thank you," I replied with a chuckle.

Soon, the three new graduates would be able to start working for the Mercures under the guidance of their mentors.

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The day following the children's graduation party, something quite shocking happened—a letter from the royal palace arrived at the Mercure estate. Not only that, but it was addressed to *me* directly.

First, Lady Landora, then my parents, and now this... I sure am popular lately, I mused.

Taking a good look at the letter, I saw that the seal was broken. That could only mean one thing.

"Char? Did you read this already?" I asked my husband, who was sitting opposite me at the dinner table. He'd only just handed me the letter.

Since he hadn't been sent on any long-term missions recently, he'd started spending more time at home and the two of us had more opportunities to eat together. It seemed that the Cerveau Cathedral—the main culprit behind Char's regular absences—had finally learned the concept of reserve.

"I did," he replied. "I was still a little worried because of the situation with your parents, and when I saw that the sender was the king, it made me even more suspicious. How could we know it was *truly* from him? No one could know what might be hidden in the envelope, so I thought it best to check it before presenting it to you."

"I see. That makes sense. I did cause quite a scene at the royal palace last time, after all," I replied.

"Someone could've sent it under a false name, hiding poison or a sharp blade inside. As you know, the royal court is far from unified, and plenty of nobles harbor mixed feelings toward our family," Char said, as if it were no big deal.

There sure is a lot going on with the Mercures, huh?

I took the letter out of the envelope and skimmed it. "Let's see... The king wants me to...go on a diplomatic mission?!" I exclaimed. I thought the king had written to me to complain about the fuss I'd caused at his last party, but it seemed I was wrong. He wanted me to perform as an international diplomat.

"What's going on? It says here that the Lèvres Kingdom has invited me over to their country but...*why*? I don't know anyone there!"

They must've gotten the wrong person. I was nothing more than a controversial countess who'd been shunned by high society. The Lèvres Kingdom would have nothing to gain by getting involved with someone like me.

Unless they have an ulterior motive, like creating a connection with the Mercure family through me, for instance. But... If they wanted to task Char with a magic job, it'd be much easier to contact him directly. There was no advantage in going through me.

What is their objective?

The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. And to add to that, my presence had apparently been a direct request from the first prince of the Lèvres Kingdom. Needless to say, the king had ordered me to accept this summons.

"I can't exactly go against the king's wishes, so I have to follow

his demands, but I don't understand. Why did the prince of Lèvres ask for me and not you? You're the head of the house, and I'm just a weak, delicate countess," I said.

"The only 'delicate' thing about you is your body," Char replied in a not-so-kind manner, but he was smiling. "But you're right. Why would they want to invite a countess they've never met before? Even if it's the royal family we're talking about, it still shows a lack of common sense."

I nodded. "Even *I* understand it's unreasonable, and I'm completely clueless about the social norms of this era."

However, a simple countess couldn't reject the king's orders without a very good reason. Besides, according to the letter, I was to leave relatively soon, so I clearly had more important things to do than argue with the king.

"Well, I suppose I'll just go and come back as soon as I get the chance," I said, resigning myself to my fate.

"Why? I don't want you to travel to another nation on your own, even if that's the prince's demand. It's utterly absurd. What will you do if something happens to you over there?" Char asked.

"You have a point, but... Oh, well. I'll be fine. I'll just teleport back here if I get in trouble."

"What do you mean, you'll be 'fine'? You weren't 'fine' last time. What if you exhaust yourself again? There won't be anyone to come get you."

Char's words hit a nerve. It *was* true that I kept having to rely on him every time things took a turn for the worst.

"Besides, it's way too suspicious that the *prince* asked for you directly in the first place," he added. "You've never even met! You don't know what he'll try to do to you."

"You're such a worrywart," I replied, brushing off his concerns. I genuinely didn't think it was *that* big of a deal. By now, we'd finished eating, so I rose from my seat and made for the door, but Char caught me before I could leave.

He spun me about to face him, and then, raising both his arms up to either side of my head, pinned me against the door, trapping me between him and the solid wood, unable to move.

"Uh, Char? What's the matter?" I asked.

He's so close!

"Is something the matter?" he echoed. "Do you really think I'm going to let my wife go visit another man alone?"

"Wh-Why are you mad all of a sudden?"

My heart rate accelerated once again. Seriously, what was going wrong with my body recently?

"No matter," Char said after a pause as he stepped back. "Take me with you to Lèvres. I won't take no for an answer."

"While I'm grateful for your concern, are you sure? Will the others be all right without you?" I asked.

"They'll be fine. We haven't had much work recently, and there haven't been any big monster outbreaks either. Besides, our most annoying client has been redirected to another nation." I assumed he was talking about the bishop's aide. According to the rumors, he'd been sent back to the main church of the Motar Faith.

"Then I'd love it if you could come with me. I've only started getting used to this country's social norms, so being invited to a meeting with the royal family of a neighboring kingdom out of the blue is a tad overwhelming. I don't want to commit a faux pas and for it to reflect badly on the House of Mercure," I said. "Oh, by the way, what kind of country is the Lèvres Kingdom?"

Char kindly took the time to tell me about our neighbor.

"It's a large nation with a dry climate. They have some very fertile land in the north where they cultivate wheat, and they raise cattle in the south, since it doesn't rain much there. The capital is located near the center of the country, slightly to the northwest, and it's much cooler there than in Cerveau, the Tête Kingdom's capital. Just like us, they're a monarchy and their state religion is the Motar Faith. They have a much bigger population, so there might be more mages living there, but there's no noble magic house like ours."

"I see," I said. Then I had an idea. "Well, since we're going all the way there, how about we take Canon with us?"

After a slight pause, Char said, "Can I ask why?"

"Well, not only would it allow us to have some family bonding time, but it'll also give him some life experience for when he inherits your title!"

"As part of that mentor-disciple system you were telling me about yesterday?"

"Yes, exactly."

Char pondered the question for a bit, but he eventually agreed.

Having gotten his blessing, I left the dining room and headed to Canon's room on the second floor of the mansion. When the

children graduated from the schoolhouse, they were assigned individual rooms in the estate.

Canon's was in the main mansion with Char's and mine, while Bombe's and Mine's rooms were located in the attendants' quarters, where the twins lived. Despite the name, the attendants' quarters were actually a lavish mansion with numerous free rooms, as almost no one lived there. Along with their new rooms, the children would also be receiving a salary now, which Mine and Bombe had seemed very excited to hear.

I padded down the corridor, headed up the stairs, and went to gently knock on Canon's door. It swung open almost immediately, and Canon peeked his head out. "Mother? Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Sorry for coming to bother you so late, Canon, but there's something I'd like to discuss with you," I said, before proceeding to tell him about my upcoming trip to the Lèvres Kingdom and asking if he wanted to tag along. I didn't want to force him to come, after all.

But my worries were unfounded. "Can I really accompany you?" he asked, his face lighting up. For once, he looked like a child his age.

"Of course. It'll be great for your studies too. You've never been abroad, have you?"

"No, I haven't. I'm excited! I've always wanted to see the outside world."

Before I took over the schoolhouse, Canon and the other students weren't allowed to leave the building much. He seemed very interested in what lay beyond the walls of the Mercure estate.

"Don't hesitate to ask Char to teach you all sorts of things while we're out there," I added cheerfully.

However, the second Canon heard me mention his father, his eyes darkened. It seemed that he was still afraid of him.

Well, I can't blame him. Char isn't exactly easy to approach.

The Earl of Mercure wasn't a *bad* person, but he didn't mince his words, so it was easy to feel intimidated by him. The old Lam had been absolutely terrified of him, even though he hadn't done anything to her. *As Canon's mother, I need to help him and Char get along better!*

With my newfound determination, I began preparing for our journey to the Lèvres Kingdom.

A few changes of clothes, my daily necessities… My new maid was the one in charge of picking my outfits. I'd hired her when I'd replaced all the estate's former servants. Apparently, she used to work for another noble family and had been expelled from her job without so much as a letter of recommendation after resisting her former master's untoward advances.

Most servants I'd hired actually had similar backstories. None of them particularly *wanted* to work for a family of mages, but they'd had nowhere else to go. I felt bad for them, but I was glad we managed to secure such competent staff. All of them were highly capable, so they'd been a great help.

Speaking of outfits, Char refuses to let me pick my own dresses or buy anything new on my own. He says that it's because I'll end up buying something "horrendous." How rude!

The few times I'd bought clothes for myself, he'd criticized them. I'd recently procured a lovely dress adorned with all sorts of different patterns: purple medicinal herbs, red rocks, and yellow chili peppers. But Char had confiscated it and told me to "never wear it outside the mansion." What a shame! I'd even designed it myself!

For those reasons, I was forced to only take my cute-but-kind-of-boring dresses with me to Lèvres. I thought it was too much of a shame, so I sneakily slipped my favorite dress into my travel bag. I knew Char would confiscate it the moment he saw it, so I'd kept it hidden up until now. It was my most prized possession. And so, without anyone noticing, my beautiful dress sat in my travel bag until the day of the departure.

Two weeks passed, and it was finally time for us to leave for the Lèvres Kingdom. It was my first time traveling to the country, but Char had already been for work, so that was reassuring. As for our means of transportation, we'd decided to travel directly to Lèvres using the rough teleportation spell. It was much quicker and easier than taking a carriage all the way.

Normally, to enter the Lèvres Kingdom, we'd have to go through some complicated procedures, but, for some reason, the first prince of Lèvres had sent us authorizations to bypass most of the formalities. As such, we were allowed in without having to do anything. I did think it was a little careless on the prince's part to give such permission to strangers without much scrutiny, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The prince sent me quite a number of authorizations… I suppose he meant for me to bring a lady attendant and a maid along, but, with Char and Canon accompanying me, I can't actually bring any servants.

As for where exactly we'd teleport to, I'd decided to ask Char for his opinion, as he'd already been to the Lèvres Kingdom's capital, and I trusted his judgment. Yes, his tendency to buy any piece of Aurora merch he stumbled upon was a little unnerving, but he was an excellent head of the household.

"This is everything, right?" Char asked.

"Yes. The prince said he'd get us anything we need in Lèvres, so we should be fine with just this," I replied. We had quite a few bags, but with a quick shrinkage spell, they'd end up around the size of a fingertip.

Let me shrink this one, this one, and that one, and voilà. I can just carry them around in another, smaller bag now.

Checking to make sure that Canon was present, I then activated my teleportation spell. I was feeling particularly good today, and my mana reserves were still full. Canon and Char both knew this spell as well, but it was much more stable when I used it. Speaking of Canon, he kept fidgeting around, visibly excited to use a long-distance teleportation spell for the first time in his life. How adorable. Mine and Bombe had been a little disappointed they'd had to stay home, but I definitely wanted to bring them along on my next trip.

"I'm activating the spell! Here we go!" I announced. The next instant, we disappeared from the Mercure estate and the *next* next instant, we arrived in Coude, the capital of the Lèvres Kingdom.

We landed in an empty alley near the royal palace. The warm, dry wind, the dust dancing above the road, and the townsfolk clad in light clothing and turbans made it clear we were in a different country. From around the corner—where laundry hanging on a clothing line overhead fluttered in the wind—the fragrant smell of spiced, roasted meat and freshly baked herb bread wafted through the air.

I used a little illusion spell to hide us while taking the family carriage out of the bag I had shoved it into before undoing the shrinkage spell.

"Lam, your magic truly is incredible. I've never seen anyone shrink a carriage and shove it in a bag," Char commented.

“The small horse was adorable, right?” I said.

The three of us climbed into the carriage, which started moving as soon as we were seated. I’d just used a spell that allowed one to communicate with animals. Using another illusion spell, I’d made it look like we had a coachman, so we could move about the city without arousing anyone’s suspicion. To them, it looked like we were riding in a regular carriage.

As the vehicle rolled along, I gazed at the streets of Coude through the window. Shops of all different sizes lined the path we followed, each of them selling rare and curious items. It seemed that trade was thriving here, as there were even stalls selling fried rice dishes, something I’d never seen in the Tête Kingdom.

The Ventre Kingdom—the country I’d lived in five hundred years ago—once encompassed the territories of what were now the Tête and Lèvres Kingdoms, as well as the Ongle Empire. According to the historical records, the empire had fallen and had been repeatedly divided over the course of five hundred years, until it eventually reached its current form.

This place had changed quite a lot since my past life. The simple stone houses had been replaced with white plaster buildings, and almost all windows were decorated with colorful potted flowers. However, it was much less lively now, and, unlike before, I couldn’t seem to spot a single mage wandering the streets.

“Oh, that antique lantern hanging over there looks a lot like the handheld lanterns you saw everywhere five hundred years ago,” I marveled. “And that wall ornament—”

“Calm down.” Char stopped me before I got too excited. “You’ll have more than enough time to look around while we’re he—Oh?” Confused as to why he suddenly paused midsentence, I followed his gaze and saw several stalls selling very familiar-looking portraits and all sorts of weird magic items.

No way… They’re selling Aurora merch here too?!

And it wasn’t just a couple of stalls, no—there was an entire row of them lining up the street all the way to the royal palace! All of them had their own unique displays, with a selection of goods far surpassing anything I saw in the Tête Kingdom.

Nooo! I shouted inwardly.

Char poked his head out of the window, and, using the same spell to talk to animals I’d used earlier, he ordered the horse to

stop the carriage. *So* I *have to "calm down" but* he *can do his shopping now, huh?*

"Mr. Horsey, you don't have to stop," I quickly said. "Please keep going until we reach the palace."

Canon was with us, after all. I couldn't let him see his father making a fool of himself.

The horse seemed to hesitate for a moment, but it eventually listened to me and slowly resumed walking toward the palace.

Heh, what a smart horse! Still, the Aurora merch here looks much more historically accurate than what I saw in the Tête Kingdom, even though they had a lot over there too.

The stalls in the Tête Kingdom mostly offered portraits and dolls that didn't even look like Aurora, along with random mundane objects that had allegedly been possessions of hers, even though I'd never used them in my previous life. They also sold "magic items" that they claimed were from five hundred years ago but were really nothing more than some scraps of junk cobbled together. Essentially, the products were the very definition of a scam.

But as for the shops here in the Lèvres Kingdom, well, all of their portraits depicted me exactly as I'd used to look, and, while their possessions of Aurora were just replicas, they at least fit my tastes. Even the magic tools had been crafted meticulously—though they were also just replicas. It was almost as if someone familiar with Aurora's life was overseeing the production of these items.

Perhaps they have more accurate historical records here? I wondered, puzzled.

As Char and I observed the shops selling Aurora merch through the window, Canon—who must've been curious about what had caught our attention—poked his head out as well. "I was wondering what had you both so interested, but I see it's merch of Aurora Ibrusus, hmm?" he commented. "She's not an extremely well-known historical figure, but she is popular among a certain crowd."

I decided to spare Char's honor and not tell Canon that his father was part of that "certain crowd."

"You know about Aurora, Canon?" I asked.

"Yes. We learned about her at the schoolhouse. Our teacher said we should aim to be like her. There was even a portrait of her in the textbook." It seemed that seeing the paintings of

Aurora displayed on the stalls had reminded Canon of his lessons at the schoolhouse. He turned toward me and, with an innocent smile on his face, said, “She looks a bit like you, mother.”

“Huh?! R-R-Really?” I stammered, my face twitching.

“Yes. You have the same hair color and you both give off a similar ambience.”

First Char, now Canon... I really wished everyone would stop saying I looked like Aurora! It felt a bit too close for comfort. However, I couldn’t really fault Canon; the portraits of Aurora sold in the Lèvres Kingdom were so accurate that they really did look like me.

“Oh, look! There’s a giant statue of Aurora there!” Canon exclaimed.

I followed his gaze and let out a horrified squeak. It really was a statue of Aurora!

“Why in the world is there something like this here?” I muttered. To make matters worse, the statue was so intricately carved that it looked even more like the real deal, and, with it being three-dimensional, the resemblance to me was uncanny.

“She really does look like you, mother. It’s even more striking because the statue is so large,” Canon said.

“D-Do you really think so? Perhaps it’s a more common face than you think,” I replied with a stiff smile, trying to brush off Canon’s comment. Right as I said that, the carriage began to angle up a gentle slope. As we ascended, we were treated to a much better view of the royal palace of the Lèvres Kingdom.

“What a big castle,” I commented.

The palace was the same white as the houses in the city but had onion-shaped domes. You had to climb the hill to get to it, and the farther we traveled, the bigger and more opulent the houses on the sides of the road became. I assumed a lot of nobles must live at its peak.

After some time, our carriage reached the palace, and we passed through a large gate. Right after, an escorting party appeared within, not particularly numerous but properly arranged. They took us to the western wing of the palace, where the first prince was supposedly awaiting us. The man in charge was the prince’s chamberlain, and he was polite to us the entire time, a far cry from how our mage family was usually treated in our motherland.

“Welcome to the Lèvres Kingdom, and thank you very much for coming such a long way. His Highness the First Prince is right this way. Please follow me,” he said, addressing me directly instead of Char. So, as it turned out, they hadn’t made a mistake, and the prince’s invitation really had been for me.

“Thank you,” I replied and started following him, though I was still a little puzzled as to what I was doing here in the first place.

The palace was filled with rare treasures, and I couldn’t help but look around as we walked. I’d been to the royal palace of the Tête Kingdom before, on the day of the party the king had organized for Char, but, at the time, I had been so focused on simply making it through the evening that I hadn’t had the chance to appreciate my surroundings. I almost deviated from the path several times, distracted by all the nice decor, but Char, who was walking next to me, pulled me back before I could wander off. “Stop goggling at everything. We’re in a palace.”

“Oh dear, sorry about that. There are so many rare items here, I keep getting distracted. Like that creative painting, for example…” I was barely done apologizing before my attention was once again caught by a piece of art, and I found myself drifting off the path again.

These colors, this luster, and those beautiful, whimsical geese!

Just as you’d expect from the royal family of a large kingdom, their aesthetic sense was impeccable.

“I just told you to stop wandering off,” Char sighed. “Lam, don’t get too close to those creepy things.” He wrapped his arm around me to pull me back, but this time he didn’t remove it. Instead, he kept it around my waist as we continued following the chamberlain. My heart started racing from the proximity, and my ears felt like they were on fire.

“Char, could you move back a little? It’s hard to walk like this,” I said, flustered.

The royal palace of another nation was not the right time and place to be acting like a married couple. I tried to put some distance between the two of us, but Char simply tightened his hold on my waist and kept walking, looking completely unfazed. It seemed that I was the only one feeling awkward about how close we were standing.

Canon glanced at us as he walked with perfect decorum on the marble floor, just as you’d expect from the schoolhouse’s honor student.

“Your rooms will be at the end of this large corridor. This area is usually closed to the public, so we have installed a door here,” the chamberlain explained as he pushed the large door open. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw what lay on the other side.

“Th-These are…”

Portraits of Aurora lined the walls of the corridor. Coupled together with the ornate ceiling and gorgeous wallpaper, it made for a breathtaking sight. Just like the ones we’d seen in the streets, these portraits were incredibly well-made and looked exactly like me in my past life.

What in the world is this?! Don’t royals usually exhibit portraits of their ancestors or something? Why are all of these Aurora?!

“His Highness the First Prince has commissioned these portraits himself. This is his private collection,” the chamberlain explained, much like a tour guide, when he saw that Char was completely enraptured by the paintings.

“The prince did?” I said.

“Yes, indeed. His Highness is a rather devoted fan of the witch of legends. He even supervises the production of all items related to Lady Aurora sold in the city. The shops selling this merch have become quite the popular sightseeing spots.”

Well, it seemed that the first prince and Char were birds of a feather.

“Lady Aurora is a peculiar figure. In a world where mana wielders are shunned and ostracized, she is revered and respected,” he continued. “His Highness actually owns even more portraits and artifacts of her in his treasure room.” With those words, he resumed walking, but, to my dismay, Char wouldn’t budge, too captivated by the paintings to move.

“Char, we have to go,” I urged him. He’d told me not to “goggle” earlier, but now he was the one getting distracted! “Chaaar, let’s go.” This time, I was the one who grabbed him by the hand and pulled him forward, urging him to move on. My ears and face didn’t feel as hot anymore, and my heart rate seemed to have settled for the time being.

Canon didn’t know about his father’s interest in Aurora yet, so he was staring at us, a tad perplexed as to why Char had stopped in the middle of the hallway for seemingly no reason.

Oh dear, first the incident in the carriage, now this… Char, if you’re not careful, your son will soon know how much of a die-hard Aurora fan you are.

As we progressed a bit farther down the hallway, a man dressed in ornate clothing appeared from around the corner. Judging by his attire and the myriad of people accompanying him, it was clear he was someone of high rank.

Could he be the prince who invited me here? I wondered, staring at him.

“Your Highness,” the chamberlain said, stopping in his tracks and bowing deeply. *So, it really is the prince.*

The regal young man opposite us had soft golden hair and an aura that commanded attention. His deep blue eyes, reminding me of icy waters, were looking straight at me.



Huh? H-Hold on a minute… I had never met that man before, yet his bearing looked awfully familiar. *How peculiar.* As I stared back at him, a strange feeling started welling up inside me. *There's something…nostalgic about him.*

The weird sensation bubbled up, and I let out a gasp. All of a sudden, memories from five hundred years ago resurfaced in my mind—my old home, my peaceful life, and my three adorable (albeit rather quirky) disciples.

Their faces danced through my mind, but, for some reason, one of them in particular stood out. *Now that I think about it, the prince looks a lot like* him*, doesn't he? He's not the same age as the boy in my memories, and their overall demeanors are a little different, but other than that they're quite similar.*

The prince looked so much like one of my former disciples that it brought back memories I'd forgotten. *Perhaps he's a descendant of his? Considering* his *lineage, it wouldn't be impossible.*

Flashes of the past kept dancing through my mind—warm, soft, and hazy memories, and a sense of loss that made me feel like my heart was getting ripped apart. *He must be long dead. Still, I'm happy to see that his descendants are doing well.*

I noticed that the prince was peering at me quite intensely—just like that boy used to. *Is something the matter?*

We stared at each other in silence for a while. But then, the prince's composed expression crumbled, and he started running toward us, his face flushed with emotion. I glanced around in a panic.

Huh? What's going on?! Is there something beside me? Another person, perhaps? However, it quickly became evident that it was me he was running up to.

"I-I've missed you so much!" he exclaimed.

"Huh? What?" Seeing the prince with his long lashes lowered, trembling as if he were about to burst into tears, I found myself at a complete loss, unsure of what to do.

"I couldn't have mistaken you for anyone else. I was right—it really *is* you! Your aura and hair color haven't changed in the slightest!" the prince continued.

What is happening?! The prince's entourage seemed as confused as I was, some wondering loudly if the young man had lost his mind. However, the prince paid them no mind. Without warning, he spread both arms and wrapped them around me. I

couldn't help but let out a startled cry, my mind going blank. *I'm not used to physical contact with the opposite gender!!!*

Alerted by my cry, Char and Canon rushed over to help me but not before the prince could speak. "Master!"

A warm feeling spread in my chest at the moniker. Meanwhile, the prince's retinue became even more confused, wondering at the reason behind his words.

"I've been looking for you for so, so, so, *so* long," the prince continued. "I can't believe I finally found you… This feels like a dream! Thank goodness you were successfully reincarna— Whoa!" he stopped midsentence as Char abruptly yanked me back, a sullen look on his face. He hadn't said a word, but his displeasure was so palpable, his objections might as well have been written across his face.

Right. It may just be a marriage of convenience, but the two of us are officially husband and wife. It's not appropriate for a different man to be touching me in public like this. Besides, I'm grateful he came to my rescue.

Now free from the prince's arms (a *man's* arms!) I took another good look at his expression. *What was his goal, jumping on me all of a sudden like that?* His sparkling eyes were still fixed on my face, eyeing me with intensity, as if waiting for something. It felt oddly nostalgic.

His eyes, his expression, his voice… They're all the same as his*.* I was sure of it now; this prince *must* have been a descendant of my former disciple.

But right as I reached that conclusion, the prince tilted his head to one side in confusion. "Master, it's me. You don't remember me?" he asked, flashing me a bright smile.

"Master"? Why would my former disciple's descendant be calling me that? I wondered.

Over the course of my past and current life, I'd had several disciples and pupils, but only one of them had ever called me "master." Another possibility crossed my mind. *Could the young man in front of me actually be…*him*? No, that's impossible. He lived five hundred years ago. I can't let myself get my hopes up. I'll only end up disappointed again.*

But then again, *I* had reincarnated. That was a fact. If such a thing was possible for me… *Could it be that there are other people from five hundred years ago who have returned as well?*

I met the prince's gaze. "Have we met before? Like, um, a long

time ago," I asked.

"How cold of you, master. We haven't just 'met'—we used to live under the same roof. We were *family*."

I was once again hit with déjà vu. He remembered the time we'd spent together. This could only mean one thing.

A gasp escaped me. I knew this young man—to be exact, I knew him in his *past* life.

Five hundred years ago, I'd received a request to teach magic control to a certain boy, who went on to become my second apprentice. And that boy was none other than the current first prince of the Lèvres Kingdom who stood before me. Back then, he had been a prince too, just like now. However, having been the child of an affair, he had been oppressed by the other members of the royal family, leaving him with a heart as cold and impenetrable as ice.

As Aurora, I'd stayed by his side, patiently teaching him magic, until he eventually opened up to me and the two of us had become fast friends. He did, however, have a tendency to slip away, driven by the bitterness of his past, to try and freeze the kingdom he had been born in. It'd been a struggle to stop him every time. But, no matter what, he was still my precious disciple.

"Are you...Glacial?" I whispered.

Upon hearing me call him by his old name, the prince smiled a bittersweet smile, as if he might start crying at any moment, and nodded. *He seems to have a much bigger range of facial expressions than he did back then. That's good,* I thought warmly.

In this life, he and I looked around the same age, but that didn't stop me from reaching a hand forward and gently stroking the top of his hair. Needless to say, everyone was looking at us in shock. It *was* supposed to be our first meeting, after all.

What should I do? Well, I'll for sure have to tell Char that Glacial used to be one of my former disciples. He knows about my past life, but he too must be wondering why I'm acting so familiar with the prince of another nation.

After a moment, said prince seemed to come to his senses, and a soft, airy smile curled his lips. Another wave of nostalgia hit me upon seeing that familiar expression, and I almost started crying.

"Master, my name in this life is Flèche Laîné Lèvres. I'm the first prince of this kingdom," he said, his tone much gentler than

it'd been on our first meeting five hundred years ago.

Seeing as he'd introduced himself to me, I decided to do the same. "You're already aware, I'm sure, but I'm Lam Mercure from the Tête Kingdom. You said you're the first prince of the Lèvres Kingdom, yes? Does that mean you're the one who invited me here?"

"Yeah. It was a bit of a high-handed request, I admit, but when I sensed your mana from the next kingdom over, I couldn't simply let the opportunity slip by, so I used my influence to bring you here," he explained.

"I see. So that's why you invited me over. I was shocked by the sudden request, but I'm glad I got to see you again. You've grown up well. You're even taller than you used to be back then, huh?"

He *had* brought me to his kingdom rather forcefully, but I was so happy to see him again that I couldn't bring myself to be upset. After all, if I'd known one of my disciples was alive in this era, I would've wanted to check on them too.

I was so overcome with emotion that it took me some time to realize that Flèche's gaze had shifted to Char and Canon beside me. "Oops, I got carried away before finishing the introductions. This is my husband, Char, and my son, Canon," I said.

Was it just me, or did Flèche's expression seem a bit tense after I'd introduced them?

"R-Right. Your family basically sold you to the Mercure family to become the earl's second wife, right? And that boy isn't your biological son but adopted."

"Yes, but..."

Why did he feel the need to bring that up all of a sudden? While this couldn't have been said for the previous Lam, Char, Canon, and I got along well. Flèche's words had a subtle undertone which made me feel as though he refused to accept them.

I said, "Glacial—I mean, Prince Flèche, I'm glad to see you well. It looks like you've been fulfilling your role as prince splendidly." I stroked his hair again after he shyly pushed his head toward me. He'd always been the most affectionate of my disciples, and he'd always liked me patting him on the head.

"Master! I have a request for you. Something very important," he said abruptly, a serious look on his face.

"What is it?" I asked, looking back at him. Was he in trouble?

Did he need my help? As I waited for him to speak, he suddenly knelt on the ground, grabbed my hand and dropped a kiss on the back of it.

"Please marry me and become my queen!"

"Wha—?!" Had Flèche really just proposed to me?

At first, I'd thought he must've been joking to lighten the tense atmosphere of our reunion, but his eyes were serious. Did he actually *mean* it?

Any regular young lady would be delighted at the prospect of marrying into royalty but not me. Not only had I been Flèche's teacher in my past life, but I'd practically *raised* him! Plus, I was already married. I couldn't possibly accept his proposal.

"U-Um..." I stammered, too flabbergasted to speak. Instinctively, I took a step back, but Flèche's grip on my hand tightened. He'd always had a habit of blurting out the most outrageous things, yet, out of my three disciples, he was usually the one with the most common sense. He'd often admonish the other two when they got carried away, with a smile on his face. *So why would he propose to me out of the blue, knowing I have a husband and a son?*

As I stood there, confused, I suddenly felt someone pull me back. I saw it was Char when I turned, his expression blank as he studied Flèche warily, his arm wrapped protectively around my waist. Canon stood beside him, the icy look in his eyes so unlike anything I'd ever seen before on the boy that it left me momentarily stunned.

"That won't do. Lam is my wife, as acknowledged by the King of the Tête Kingdom. Please do not propose to her out of nowhere," Char said coldly.

The prince seemed completely unfazed by his harsh tone. "I know," he replied lightly, his smile not reaching his eyes. "That's why I'm asking you to give her to me. Rumors say you two don't get along. You probably don't even want her, do you? If you need a replacement, I can provide you with a noble lady to wed from my kingdom."

"I refuse. I won't give you Lam," Char immediately replied, his voice firm and unwavering. "Besides, she's not an object I can just hand over to you."

"Whyever not? Why would you keep her around if you're just going to be cold to her? If you give her to me, I promise to offer support to the House of Mercure in any way I can."

Surprisingly, the one who answered him was Canon. “Your Highness, it seems your information is a little outdated. While such rumors may have circulated for a time, the situation has since changed. Nowadays, my parents get along perfectly well.” His expression was colder even than on the day I first met him.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Flèche’s clear blue eyes widened, and the temperature in the room plummeted. *O-Oh no!* Char and Canon glanced around, grim looks appearing on their faces. Crackling sounds filled the air as ice began spreading through the corridor, coating every surface. I knew only too well what this signified—my second disciple was on the cusp of throwing a temper tantrum.

Despite being calm and collected most of the time, Flèche had always struggled with controlling his emotions in the heat of the moment and suffered from a troublesome condition that caused his feelings to manifest as magic. Back when I’d been Aurora, I’d seen him trying to freeze people to death with his rampaging ice magic more times than I could count.

I quickly used some Fire Magic to protect Flèche’s entourage, Char, and Canon. “Gla—I mean, Prince Flèche! Compose yourself! I’ve always told you to pay attention to your surroundings, haven’t I?!”

My words didn’t seem to reach the prince’s ears.

“What are you talking about?” he said, calmly. His lips were still curled into that same gentle smile, but his eyes looked hollow. “Master is *mine*. She has to marry *me*. I won’t let you snatch away the woman I’ve loved since my previous life. I won’t allow it.”

As if responding to Flèche’s words, the ice crept up the windows and expanded across the ceiling. A blizzard began to swirl around us, spawning icicles throughout the corridor. Soon, the floor was buried in snow, and I noticed Flèche’s magic had started spilling outside the castle as well. This was no good. *Even the trees in the garden are frozen solid.*

Yet, Flèche kept muttering who-knew-what under his breath, making no effort to stop his magic from spiraling out of control.

At this rate, the entire palace will soon turn to ice. I suppose I have no choice but to resort to force here.

Flèche’s magic was showing no sign of stopping. Left with no choice, I ran up to him, focused my mana into my right arm, and held it high. “Enough is enough, Prince Flèche! How many times

do I have to tell you to not drag innocent bystanders into your outbursts?!"

Before I'd realized it, I found myself striking my second disciple across the face to force him to stop his magic, just like I'd used to in the past. The force of the impact sent Flèche flying across the corridor and crashing into the wall.

"Phew, I ended up sending that insignificant— *Oh*. Oh, dear. Glacial is the first prince of the Lèvres Kingdom and I…" A gasp escaped my lips as I realized the colossal blunder I'd just made.

A heavy silence fell onto the corridor. Well, that was to be expected. After all, Flèche's entourage had just witnessed a random countess from another nation slap their prince across the face. Sure, I'd managed to stop his outburst, and the ice had disappeared, but that probably didn't make it any more acceptable in their eyes.

Flèche's entourage slowly started marching toward me. *This isn't good. Are we about to get arrested for lèse-majesté?! Whatever happens, I need to at least protect Char and Canon.*

However, my expectations turned out to be completely wrong. Instead of arresting us as I'd thought they would, Flèche's attendants lined up before me and lowered their heads in perfect synchronization. "Lady Mercure! Thank you so, so much! You saved our lives!"

Huh? They're thanking *me?!* As I stood there, frozen stiff with incomprehension, Flèche's attendants began bombarding me with cheerful comments and remarks, their earlier formality a distant memory. Perhaps they thought that they could act more casual around me since I seemed to know their master.

"We've always struggled with how to handle things when His Highness's magic goes haywire," one of them said. "Every single time, a number of us end up frozen solid. Of course, His Highness would always thaw us out as soon as he returned to his senses, but until then… Well, we had to put up with the cold."

"No one has ever been able to stop His Highness when his magic flared up," another immediately added. "We've invited powerful mages from all over the continent, but His Highness's mana reserves and magical abilities are simply too much for anyone to handle. Yet, you managed to snap him out of his trance! And with just a slap!"

Well, it was a mana-infused slap, to be specific, but I decided not to comment on it. It was more trouble than it was worth.

Meanwhile, Flèche had somehow managed to pull himself back to his feet. “Aaah, master! As I thought, you’re the only one who can stop me! That’s why you have to marry—” he started but was quickly interrupted by a group of guards rushing over from the other end of the corridor.

“Your Highness, we have a problem! Another person pretending to be a mage is causing trouble in the city!”

“Whaaat, *again*?” Flèche groaned, an annoyed expression replacing his smile. It seemed to be a work-related matter, so I decided not to intervene and to observe the situation. “What terrible timing. I was in the middle of proposing to master!” he muttered sullenly but still turned to the guards to handle the matter—no, scratch that, to show *me* that he was handling it. He kept throwing me little glances, as if begging me to commend him for doing his job, just like he used to do back when he was my apprentice.

“You’re doing great,” I said, and Flèche once again pushed his head out toward me. I also knew what that meant—“Pat my head, master.” I’d met Flèche when he was a child, so I’d always indulged his whims, but he was an adult now. *Surely, he’s not going to ask me to pat his head every time he does something right, is he?*

A commotion ran among Flèche’s entourage.

“What is His Highness doing?!”

“That stance… Has he lost his mind once again?!”

Despite their comments, Flèche didn’t budge. At this rate, his assistants would only grow more worried, so I reluctantly treated him to a head pat.

“What should I do with you?” I said with a sigh as I stroked his hair.

I could tell by the relaxed look on Flèche’s face that he was thoroughly pleased. Meanwhile, his entourage grew even more confused.

“Prince Flèche? Shouldn’t you go back to work? Everyone’s waiting for you,” I said.

“Oh… You’re right. But it’s a bit of a troublesome matter, and it’s going to take a *really* long time. I don’t want to go…” he muttered evasively.

“These days, people pretending to be mages have been causing havoc around the city, and we have just launched into a formal investigation,” one of his assistants told me. It seemed

that it wasn't a secret matter. "The hatred for mages is presently at an all-time high right now, so I would advise against leaving the palace, Lady Mercure."

"Thank you for the warning," I said, and the assistant bowed at me, an apologetic look on his face.

"We were hoping to show you around the royal capital, but, with the current situation, it would be unwise."

According to Flèche's assistant, it seemed that the bishop of their main cathedral had recently changed, leading to a surge in antimage sentiment. Just like in the Tête Kingdom, having mana was frowned upon, and mages had to live as inconspicuously as possible.

The Lèvres Kingdom was still better off than the Tête Kingdom—where the Mercures were the last-standing house of mages—but, at this rate, it was only a matter of time before things got to that point. A group of radical Motar cultists had taken it upon themselves to impose restrictions on the places mana wielders were allowed to go, banning them from entering certain shops, and subjecting them to verbal abuse and even physical violence. Of course, the Faith did nothing to stop these extremists, tacitly approving of their actions. As the royal family couldn't openly challenge the Motar Faith, Flèche's hands were pretty much tied.

"The mages have obviously tried to resist that oppression, as they couldn't possibly continue living that way," Flèche's assistant continued. "Some of them traveled to the royal capital and were protesting peacefully in the streets, trying to raise awareness of their situation. However..."

Apparently, as the mages were appealing to the public for their cause, one of them suddenly pulled out a blade and started slashing at innocent passersby. Because of this, the people who had previously started feeling sympathetic toward the mages quickly turned against them.

"His Highness went to check on the situation and successfully arrested all the mages involved, including the one who'd attacked the townsfolk. But, after examining the man, His Highness discovered that he didn't actually possess any mana."

"What?" I said in surprise. "What do you mean? Could it be...?"

Flèche nodded at my words. "One of those antimagic zealots had infiltrated the mages, pretending to be one of them. He hadn't been able to use magic, but that wasn't a problem, as a lot of people can't even though they have mana. With the state of

magic in this day and age, it would have been near impossible for these people to see through his lies."

"Right. Mana detection spells aren't used anymore, after all," I said.

Nowadays, the only way to tell if someone possessed mana was if they used magic after receiving their blessing or if strange phenomena began occurring around them. For example, while Lam hadn't been able to use magic, her mana would often cause light to appear around her at all times of the day and night, which led to her family discovering her condition.

"That, and the fact that the mages who have gathered at the capital don't know each other, as they'd come from all around the kingdom. In other words, they wouldn't have been able to tell a Motar zealot had joined their ranks," Flèche said.

I nodded. "That makes sense; it was just a temporary gathering."

Because of one person's actions, mages were now all seen as dangerous by the people of the kingdom, leading to them being under constant attack. Flèche had offered temporary shelter to the mages who had been affected by the incident in the palace, but it seemed that the Motar zealot's stunt had sparked creativity among his brethren, leading to the appearance of copycat incidents all over the capital.

As for the royal family, they were divided. While Flèche was sympathetic to the mages, his younger brother was on the Motar Faith's side. The king claimed to be neutral.

Flèche used to be such a self-centered boy, I never thought I'd see him help other mages one day. He truly did grow up, didn't he?

Sure, he was still prone to letting his magic go haywire, but he was carrying out his duties as First Prince of the kingdom and was loved and respected by his subordinates. Just like a mother would her child, I was proud of my disciple's growth.

"Master, I'm really sorry that things have turned out this way. I was planning on organizing a feast in your honor, but we'll have to postpone it to tomorrow. Please get plenty of rest in the meantime," Flèche told me before leaving. The servants apologized as well, looking just as sorry as their master.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him. "Dealing with the incident comes first. More importantly, I can use magic as well. Perhaps there's something I could do to help you?"

"I don't want to trouble you, master. I'll be fine on my own,"

Flèche assured me. Urged by his subordinates, he left the palace with a brisk stride.

The assistants he entrusted us to began leading us to our rooms.

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Trying his hardest to keep his racing heartbeat under control, Flèche Laîné Lèvres reveled in the joy of finally standing face-to-face with the woman before him. *I'm so, so happy! I knew bringing her here was the right choice—even if I had to nudge fate a little.*

A few weeks ago, Flèche had felt a very familiar mana signature coming from the Tête Kingdom. After a little investigation, his suspicions were confirmed: That mana unmistakably belonged to the person he had been searching for all this time. *I've spent years looking for her, yet she was so close all along... Talk about hidden in plain sight.*

By the time Flèche became aware of the world around him, he already carried the memories of his previous life. That was a given, of course, as he'd specifically arranged for that outcome when designing the reincarnation spell he'd used on himself. *I've successfully reincarnated with all my memories, but it seems that master hasn't... I'm not the one who cast the spell on her, so I'm not really sure what went wrong.*

On that fateful day, upon realizing that there was no saving her, Aurora's first disciple had forcibly reincarnated her, claiming it was better than to never see her again. Flèche had agreed with him—he didn't want to lose his precious master either. As such, Flèche hadn't stopped him. In fact, he had even agreed to put their differences aside and had helped with the spell.

However, it seemed that even his skillful fellow disciple hadn't managed to perform a perfect reincarnation on the dying Aurora, and he'd fumbled some of the finer details, such as the selection of her new identity and the preservation of her memories.

Once they were sure the spell had been a success, Flèche hadn't hesitated a single second before following Aurora to her new life, casting a spell on himself so he'd reincarnate with his memories intact. Even if she didn't remember him, Flèche swore that he would find his way to his beloved master.

Fortunately, he'd been born a prince in this new life as well

and, thanks to the memories of his past life, had managed to navigate life without any major difficulties so far. But, to his dismay, finding Aurora had been proving to be much more difficult than he'd anticipated, even with his social status.

But then, through a complete coincidence, he'd found her. It'd all started when a large army of zombie leapers was annihilated in a single day in the Ouragan mountain range. As Flèche had wondered who could've performed such a feat, he'd felt an extremely familiar mana signature coming from a little town in the neighboring nation only a few days after the zombie leaper incident. He'd promptly sent one of his subordinates there and was met with a shocking discovery.

"The mana signature you've been tracking undoubtedly belongs to the Countess of Mercure, the Earl of Mercure's wife," his subordinate had assured him.

Stunned by the revelation, Flèche had pressed his pill-bug-patterned handkerchief to his mouth. *I've finally found her! This Countess of Mercure* must *be master's reincarnation!*

Flèche had been ecstatic. He had finally found the woman he'd been searching for all this time! However, one word his subordinate had mentioned had lingered in his mind. "The Earl of Mercure's 'wife,' you said? You mean to say that the owner of that mana signature is *a married woman*?"

"Yes. She and Lord Mercure were wed several months ago. She is his second wife, and they have a son together—though he is adopted."

Flèche had felt as though he had been slapped in the face. "I-Impossible... I've finally found her, yet you're telling me she has a *husband*?" While Flèche did respect and admire Aurora as his mentor, he also harbored deep romantic feelings for her. Yet, the woman he was so madly in love with—to the point of being willing to die and be reincarnated just to be with her—was now married and had a child.

The shock of that revelation had caused him to collapse to his knees, his brand-new handkerchief falling out of his pocket and landing on the floor.

"I was too late!"

"Y-Your Highness! Please get a hold of yourself!" his subordinate had urged, as two others rushed to help him back up. Unlike in his previous life, Flèche was surprisingly well-liked and respected by his entourage. Perhaps it was because he had

learned from his past mistakes and was more thoughtful in his actions this time around.

"I wanted to welcome her to the palace and make her my queen… But… Why…"

"Your Highness?! O-Oh no, this isn't good!" one of his subordinates had exclaimed, signaling to the others with his eyes that something was wrong.

"How cruel… How awful…"

With every word Flèche had spoken, the temperature of the room had dropped. Ice had begun blooming over the windows and furniture, coating the room in white frost. The prince struggled to keep his emotions under control—every time he felt some sort of agitation, his magic would accidentally activate, and there was nothing his assistants could do to stop it. These sorts of incidents had happened countless times in his past life, and it seemed that reincarnation hadn't fixed his condition. The servants, who were pretty much used to the prince's outbursts at this point, let out startled shrieks before scampering away at once.

"I *have* to take her back."

Determined to see Aurora one way or another, Flèche had used his influence to summon her to the Lèvres Kingdom. However, he hadn't expected her to show up accompanied by her husband and child.

From what he'd gathered, his beloved Aurora had suffered years of oppression at the hands of the family she'd reincarnated into, the Ivoires. He despised himself for not having been able to guide her reincarnation to a less hostile life. As if that weren't cruel enough, she had been forced into marriage with a man who cared nothing for her, while his servants treated her like dirt. She'd even become the laughingstock of high society. Apparently, her lack of relationship with her husband was a well-known fact among nobles, though it seemed they had begun appearing together more frequently in public as of late.

Something's definitely wrong with that Earl of Mercure. How can he be married to master and not cherish her?! She is so charming, there's no one in the world who can compare to her! I'll destroy anyone who dares to hurt her, mark my words!

But then again, perhaps the Earl of Mercure's lack of interest in his wife was a good thing. *If I play my cards right, I might be able to convince him to let master stay with me.*

Ever since meeting her as a child in his past life, Flèche had been entranced by Aurora, the woman he'd deemed his savior. So, now that he was the first prince of a kingdom, he intended on doing everything in his power to take her back. This time, he would cherish her with all his being and devote himself to honoring her as a disciple should—well, not that she had any idea about his feelings.

Regardless, Flèche had resolved to put his goal into action.

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As I watched Flèche's rapidly retreating figure, I suddenly felt a strong grip on both of my hands. Two different hands had wrapped tightly around each of mine, pulling me in opposite directions.

"Lam."

"Mother."

Burning ruby-red and clear sky-blue eyes locked onto me.

"Char? Canon?"

The two of them must've been very confused about what'd just happened. After all, they'd just witnessed the first prince of Lèvres talking to me—a nobody countess from another nation—as if we had known each other for years.

Char already knows about my past life, but Canon does not. How should I explain my relationship with the prince to him?

The boy was even more perplexed than Char. *Well, not that I can blame him. Anyone would've found my conversation with Flèche suspicious.*

My husband and son still holding my hands, I racked my brain for an explanation that would convince Canon. One thing was for sure, I couldn't just pretend nothing happened.

We were soon ushered to our rooms by the servants Flèche had assigned to attend to us. Char and I would be sleeping in the same room—as we were husband and wife—while Canon's was located just across the hall. Since Flèche was busy, it meant that the three of us would be having some impromptu family time.

Now that I think about it, we haven't had many occasions to spend time with just the three of us at home... Perhaps I should make it more of a habit from now on.

We took a seat at the table, on which traditional snacks and

tea were spread out. Char took a sip of his black tea and stared at me from behind his cup. “So? Is that guy an acquaintance of yours, Lam?” he asked.

I was impressed he had the gall to call the prince of another nation “that guy,” but that was Char for you—arrogant to the bone.

“Yes, he’s an old friend of mine. Just like me, he has retained the memories of his past. He’s not the same age as in my memories, but his appearance and quirks are exactly the same as back then.”

I glanced at Canon. He still didn’t know about my past life.

“You should tell him. He’s graduated from the schoolhouse *and* is set to become the next Earl of Mercure. He ought to know,” Char said as if he’d read my thoughts. I was a little surprised; I hadn’t been expecting him to make a statement like that, in support of Canon.

“So you think that I should tell him for the sake of our house?” I asked.

“Not just him. I think Fouet and Barre ought to know too. Well, at least that’s my opinion. It’s up to you whether you want to tell them or not, of course.”

“Char…”

He truly had changed so much in such a short time. Unlike before, he’d started taking into consideration what would be good for the Mercures and the future of our house. *He’s acting more and more like the head of the household with each passing day.*

Though Char had shared his opinion, it was up to me to make the decision. What would be the best thing to do—for the sake of the Mercures and for myself?

Until now, I had claimed that I’d learned all the spells I knew while bedridden at my parents’ house due to my weak constitution. Canon hadn’t questioned my story directly, but I had a feeling he wasn’t entirely convinced. Now that he’d graduated from the schoolhouse and had moved to the main mansion, we’d been spending more and more time together. It was only a matter of time before my excuses stopped working on him.

I suppose I should tell him the truth. Continuing to lie to him sounds like a recipe for disaster.

I let out a small sigh and looked in turn at my husband and

son. “What should I start with?” I muttered. “Canon, there’s something I’ve been keeping from you: I have the memories of someone who lived five hundred years ago. In other words, I suppose you could say I’ve been reincarnated.”

To my surprise, Canon didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest by the revelation, almost as if he’d expected it from the start.

“You don’t look surprised at all,” I observed.

“Well, your story about being ‘self-taught’ in magic, and the way you’ve always used your weak constitution as an excuse for everything… It all seemed a bit too convenient. I’ve been suspecting something was off from the start—although I didn’t expect you’d been reincarnated. So reincarnation *is* possible?”

“Ugh! You’d figured it out already?!”

As it turned out, Canon was far more composed and mature than I had realized. Had he been playing the part of an innocent teenage boy in front of me all along?

“*Ahem*!” I cleared my throat loudly. “Not only does the first prince of this kingdom also have his memories of his past life, but he used to be an acquaintance of mine back then. It seems that he’d planned for us to meet after recognizing my mana signature.”

“What kind of relationship did the two of you have?” Char asked. “He asked you to marry him.”

“He used to be my second disciple. Back in my past life, I used to teach magic to children—just like now.”

Canon blinked in surprise upon learning that the prince used to be one of my pupils, just like him.

“Canon, remember the magic book I lent to you some time ago? The one with all the Water Magic spells? Most of them were spells Prince Flèche had used or created in his past life.”

“The *prince* came up with these spells?!” Canon exclaimed.

“Yes, he did. Um, Canon? Is something the matter?”

The boy dropped his eyes, a blank look on his face, and muttered, “I’m frustrated. I want to design spells too.”

It seemed that he harbored some kind of rivalry toward Flèche, as both had Water Magic as their main attribute.

I never thought of it before, but Canon’s overly cautious nature might actually be an advantage when it comes to developing spells. I hadn’t taught him how to create new magic yet, but if that was something he was interested in doing, I had no qualms in helping him pursue that path.

Flèche has such a large quantity of mana that he's always struggled to keep it in check—just like his emotions. As a result, any spell he performs ends up being way more powerful than necessary. He hasn't created that many spells himself, but it wasn't rare for him to accidentally transform the entire area into a winter wonderland whenever he tried to design one.

In contrast, Canon had an average amount of mana but was very mindful about his magic control. However, he was way too prudent and hesitant to take risks. *If you combined both of them, you'd end up with the perfect mage*, I thought, amused.

"Now you know the truth. Do you have any questions? I don't mind answering them," I told the boy.

He seemed to ponder for a moment, glancing timidly at Char before returning his gaze to me. "How long has father been aware of your secret?" he asked.

"If I recall correctly, I believe I told him the night of the incident with the armor bear and Gourdin."

"That's…quite recent," Canon said. "So he didn't know either before then?"

Char replied to his question with a silent nod.

When we were done with our conversation, Char told Canon to go get some rest in his room, and the boy obediently did as he was bid. Left to ourselves, Char and I continued our discussion, seated on opposite sides of the table. The snacks before us were completely different from those in the Tête Kingdom, with lots of dried fruits and solid, fermented milk treats. As for the tea, they seemed to favor strong milk tea over lighter varieties. I had to say, it was all quite delicious. Char always mocked me for having "defective taste buds," but that was absolutely, positively not at all true in the slightest.

"By the way, Lam, about our earlier discussion… Why did your former disciple propose to you? Did you know it was him? Is that why you agreed to come all the way here?" Char asked, his voice uncharacteristically strained and a slightly displeased look on his face.

Did he suspect me of having ties to the Lèvres Kingdom? *Is that why he asked Canon to leave the room?* After all, this wasn't the kind of conversation we could have in front of a child. *But I'm not a spy from the Lèvres Kingdom!*

"No, I didn't know Prince Flèche was my former disciple," I replied without hesitation to ease his worries. "And I'm just a

mere countess; it's not like I could be scheming anything with the prince. I mean, you know the kind of life I lived up until a few months ago…"

I was aware my conversation with Flèche had been incredibly suspicious, but I truly hoped Char would believe me. However, it seemed that he wouldn't be so easily convinced, if the increasingly sullen look on his face was anything to go by.

"You're much more powerful than 'a mere countess,'" he retorted. "Besides, social status doesn't matter when it comes to infidelity."

"Huh? I-Infidelity?!" I gawked at him, completely taken aback by his words. "A-Are you suggesting I've been having an affair with the prince?!"

"Well, he proposed to you, didn't he?"

"He did, but… I hadn't been expecting it either," I mumbled. Flèche was like a son to me! And besides, it wasn't as if Char were in love with me or anything of the sort. We'd definitely grown closer after I regained my memories, but it was more of a sense of camaraderie from living under the same roof—nothing more.

Regardless, it was a bit vexing to be accused of cheating. I understood his concern, as people suspecting me of having an affair with the prince of another kingdom would be a disaster for the reputation of our house, but I didn't expect him to care about it *that* much.

Either way, there was nothing I could've done about this situation. Not only did I have no idea the prince was my former disciple, but I also didn't expect him to propose to me all of a sudden.

"This is the first time I've seen him in this life," I continued in the hopes of clearing the misunderstanding. Char was still looking just as glum. "I couldn't tell you why he proposed to me… Perhaps he's feeling lonely?"

"We're talking about a grown adult—and a prince at that. There's no way he'd be feeling *lonely* like some little kid."

"I suppose you have a point…"

Flèche had only been ten years old when I'd met him in my previous life, so I tended to still treat him like a child.

"I've been thinking of something too. I haven't had time to ask him for any specifics yet, but, the fact of the matter is, Prince Flèche also has the memories of his past life. Could that mean there are other people like us somewhere in the world? I still

can’t remember how I died or why I was reincarnated, but maybe Prince Flèche knows something…”

“Either way, I’m sure the only reason he invited you over was to check if you remembered your past life. Now that he knows you do, there’s no reason for us to stay here much longer. We were supposed to leave in a month, but we can probably bring our departure forward by about ten days. What do you think?” Char asked, grabbing me by the hand before standing up.

“We’re not in that much of a rush, though… Besides, I’m worried about the persecution of the mages Prince Flèche was talking about earlier.”

“Lam… You’re not planning on sticking your nose into another nation’s affairs, are you?” he said, shooting me a reproachful look.

I decided to share my thoughts with him. “While it seems that this matter concerns only the Lèvres Kingdom for the time being, we have no assurance the antimage movement won’t spread to the Tête Kingdom. If mages continue to face persecution, there might soon not be any mages left to speak of. We can’t allow something like the mage hunt from four hundred years ago to repeat itself.”

“But… If we start intervening in another nation’s business, it might lead to international issues and—” Char started, but I interrupted him.

“It might. That’s why we should help Prince Flèche in secret! It’s a great idea, don’t you think?”

“I don’t agree.”

He didn’t seem convinced in the slightest, but I wasn’t one to give up. “It’ll be a great occasion for you to learn disguise spells too!” I said cheerfully. He’d already mastered a bunch of offensive and teleportation spells, but there were still tons of other uses of magic he didn’t know.

“Hey, don’t just go ignoring me when I speak.”

I flashed my husband my best smile and announced, “Come on, let’s go!”

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At the very end of a cold pitch-black marble corridor, in an altar room accessible only to authorized personnel, Bishop Haine of the Membre Cathedral, the largest church of the Motar Faith

in the Lèvres Kingdom as well as its base of operation there, was shaking from head to toe. His lavish robes and the ornate pendant hanging from his neck were the unmistakable marks of his rank. The Motar Faith had built cathedrals in all key locations across the continent, appointing clergymen to oversee their operations, and Haine was one such bishop.

Beside Haine stood a young teenager of small stature, his hood pulled low over his face, along with a knight in armor bearing a greatsword on his back. The pair did not look like men of the cloth—in fact, they exuded a solemn, almost otherworldly presence.

"Lord Chaos, are you intending to carry on with these attacks for much longer?" Haine eventually asked the teenager, who flashed him a mischievous smile.

"I'm just so *bored*! The zombie leapers and the caniba bats I scattered around were all wiped out before doing anything fun. I wanna do more experimentation!"

"I-I understand, but if you keep on causing mayhem around the royal capital, the entire Lèvres Kingdom will soon fall into turmoil. If that happens, people's devotion to the Faith will begin to waver," Haine said, trying to reason with him.

"Huh? Thaaat's got nothing to do with meee," the hooded figure replied in a singsong voice. "These idiots are the ones causing trouble, not me. Besides, you never know—if the city falls into chaos, perhaps more people might end up praying to our Lord Motar for salvation."

"But the royal family has started getting involved in the cases. If this continues, it could lead to a very troublesome situation."

Haine was desperate to make these two pesky visitors leave peacefully before they escalated the situation further. *If something bad were to happen, I might be demoted like the Tête Kingdom's bishop's aide. I refuse to let that happen—I don't want to leave this kingdom yet.*

Dissimilar to the majority of power hungry bishops of the Motar Faith, Haine had always disliked conflict of any kind. All he wanted was a nice, peaceful life. As such, he didn't wish to see the Lèvres Kingdom descend into chaos—in fact, he'd very much like to avoid anything that might threaten his comfortable existence.

All of a sudden, the tip of a glimmering sword pressed against the base of his throat. A startled cry escaped his lips. Glancing to

the side, he saw that the knight accompanying Chaos had drawn his greatsword, the point of it gleaming with mana.

He can use magic? No way… He's a holy knight!

Haine's legs turned to jelly, and he didn't dare utter another word. All he could do was stand in place, trembling in fear.

"Hey, Muscle! You can't just go pointing your sword at the bishop," Chaos admonished the knight, who reluctantly put his sword away. "We need him to keep an eye on the kingdom for us, after all. And don't worry, Mr. Bishop. You'll be fine! I'll head back to the headquarters once I've had my fun, pinkie promise! Ah, unless you're volunteering to become my new toy instead?"

Haine's face paled at his words. "Not a chance!" he replied without pause, shaking his head vehemently. He absolutely refused to become *these* people's new test subject!

Still, I can't believe a saint and a holy knight have shown up here…

The saints were the Motar Faith's magical elite. There were only ten of them, and, for the most part, they all had warped senses of ethics and exceedingly dangerous beliefs. Other than the Holy Father, only a handful of cardinals could rival their power.

I don't care what you do, just leave the cathedral—no, get out of the kingdom entirely!

Haine didn't want them to start causing trouble in this peaceful land. Desperate, he prayed fervently to Motar, hoping that these two would leave before things got out of hand.

Chapter Three: The Countess Meets a Saint

After resting in our room, Char and I used magic to teleport outside the palace and into the city to investigate the fake mage attacks. We'd told the servants and attendants Flèche had assigned us that we wished to stay in our room for the remainder of the day to recover from the trip. Thankfully, they'd accepted the excuse without question. Flèche had originally planned a banquet for us that evening, but it had been postponed to the following night due to another incident happening in the city, so we were free to spend the rest of the day as we wished.

Since we didn't have much information about the case and were completely unfamiliar with the city, we'd decided to leave Canon behind for today.

We'd set the coordinates of our destination to the backstreet we'd arrived in when entering the city and had teleported there. Just as it had been earlier, there was barely anyone in the alleyway—perhaps the residents had gone out to work.

Char had actually been the one to suggest this destination, and I had to say it was the perfect place to teleport to unnoticed. We occasionally crossed the odd passerby, but the illusion spell I'd cast on us kept our presence hidden. Once we reached a sufficiently secluded spot, I undid the magic, letting the illusion fade away.

"Should we head to a larger street?" I suggested. "The more people, the better."

"If I remember correctly, there should be a public square around the corner," Char said, referencing the layout of the city from the map he'd studied. It was a huge help as I had a tendency to get lost when left to my own devices. I still hadn't fully grasped the geography of the current world, and while I could technically rely on my magic to guide us, I'd rather avoid it. I didn't want to overexert myself and collapse again.

"Give me your hand."

"Huh?" I responded, confused, but did as I was told. After Char

firmly grabbed it, he began leading us through the backstreets with brisk steps. “H-Hey, slow down! You’re going too fast,” I protested. Lam’s body was so weak, I was having a difficult time keeping up with his long strides.

He looked at me and tilted his head to one side. “Should I carry you instead?”

“N-No, thank you. I’ll just use my magic to float above the ground.”

“We’ll get in trouble if people notice we’re mages,” he pointed out.

“Right. I hadn’t considered that. Please just walk a little slower, then.” We’d stick out like a sore thumb if Char started carrying me in his arms like he did when I exhausted myself. I would very much like to avoid that.

Char looked like he wanted to argue but ultimately held his tongue, adjusting his pace to match mine. We came out of the alleyway, laundry fluttering in the breeze above our heads, and arrived in a busy street, much livelier than anything I’d seen in the Tête Kingdom.

“This is the largest street in the royal capital,” Char told me. “There’s a plaza straight ahead and shops all around it.”

“What’s that large building over there?” I asked.

“That’s a cathedral of the Motar Faith.”

“They truly are everywhere, aren’t they?”

“They have a foothold in all nations in this part of the continent. I’m pretty sure they have a cathedral in each capital,” Char told me.

I looked around. “Still, that town square sure is busy. I suppose it makes sense, considering we’re at the center of the royal capital. Look, there’s even a street performer in a strange costume putting on shows for the crowd— Wait.” I stopped myself. “That’s not a show!”

The “street performer” was shouting something to the people around him, all while dancing and swaying to draw attention. He was holding a signboard that said, “I stand against the discrimination of mages!”

“Yaaah! Yaaah! No discrimination! No discrimination! I’m a mage, and I stand against the discrimination of mages! We mages will resist!” the man shouted in a strange, exaggerated voice while waving his sign around. It was a bizarre sight.

I refuse to believe that man is a fellow mage, I thought in slight

disgust.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who wanted to keep my distance from the man; the passersby also seemed unsettled by him.

Just what is his deal?

He claimed to be "against the discrimination of mages," but his spectacle only served to hinder the efforts of the others.

"That's not a mage," Char commented, eyeing the man with suspicion. "He's basically causing a ruckus on the cathedral's doorstep, yet no one has come out to stop him yet. That's fishy."

"You're right about that," I said. "Besides, I can't feel any mana coming from him."

"If anything, what he's doing is making ordinary people even more unsympathetic toward mages. The Faith *must* be letting him do this on purpose."

"You think he's one of those antimagic zealots parading as a mage and causing trouble to make the rest of us look bad?"

"Based on what the prince told us, that's highly likely."

The situation in this kingdom sure is complicated, huh?

For now, I simply used a sleeping spell on the street performer to make him shut up. He was bothering the general public, after all.

"Shouldn't Prince Flèche be somewhere in the city?" I wondered out loud.

"He doesn't seem to be around here. Aren't there spells that can track people or something?" Char asked me.

"There are, but they drain mana quickly," I explained. "You have to constantly cast them on your target, and I'm not sure that I could pull it off with my current stamina."

"Then don't. We can't have you passing out again."

Recently, Char had become a lot more attentive to my health, likely because I had a tendency to collapse after using too much magic at once.

"Well, I don't think we'll manage to learn anything worthwhile here. Should we go inside the cathedral?" I suggested.

Char whipped his head around toward me, a horrified expression on his face. "Wha— Are you *out of your mind?*"

"We can't?"

"Well, it's not that we *can't*... But if they recognize us, it'll be a huge pain to deal with."

"Then all we need to do is change our appearances, and

they'll be none of the wiser. That's where the disguise spell I told you about earlier comes into play. It's another practical application of my trusty redecorating spell, except that, this time, we'll use it to color our hair and eyes."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Char said, his voice strained.

I chuckled ominously, and he immediately bolted off into an alleyway to try to escape me. His attempt was futile, as I just cast my spell on him from behind. I could almost *feel* the silent cry that escaped his lips.

"Phew, I successfully dyed that inconveniencing husband of mine."

The shock must've been too much for him as, the second he caught sight of his new, colorful appearance, he staggered forward without a word.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "This spell should be harmless, but..."

"I'm...fine," my husband replied, though his voice sounded the slightest bit unsteady.

I quickly cast the same spell on myself, grabbed him by the hand, and crossed the town square to the cathedral.

The cold white stone building was grand and conspicuous, with enormous, heavy doors through which people continuously entered and exited. I stepped inside to be met with a wide, tranquil room with perfectly aligned columns and stained-glass windows depicting the saints. Churchgoers sat on the benches, absorbed in prayer, while a young monk was reading a passage from the sacred scriptures. Despite the chaotic situation in the kingdom, the cathedral remained quiet and serene.

"You can immediately tell this is a cathedral of the Motar Faith. I went to the one in our neighborhood once when I still lived at my parents', and it looked just like this. It's interesting that this one is the exact same shape despite being in a completely different kingdom," I commented while looking around, but Char didn't reply. "Char? Are you still mad?" I asked.

"No. I just can't believe you chose *these* hair colors for us. There's something really wrong with your sense of aesthetics. Now we're going to stand out even more—in a bad way."

"But they're so cute." I pouted, admiring his locks, which flowed in a beautiful ombré from light pink to a soft lavender. Mine were similar, except they gradated from light blue to pale yellow. Our new hair colors were so nice and vibrant—I loved it!

As for our eyes, I'd made them the same exact orange, as I planned on pretending we were siblings to anyone who asked.

This way, our identities will remain a secret, I thought, pleased with the amazing disguises I'd concocted. I'd suggested changing our clothes as well, but Char rejected my idea.

"Can't we get farther into the cathedral?" I asked, looking around.

Char shook his head. "All the other rooms are off-limits to the public."

"What a shame. We might need to use magic to break into them, then. Still, I wonder why the Motar Faith in this country has started hunting mages down all of a sudden. I mean, why *now*?" I wondered out loud.

"Who knows? Maybe they just feel like it," Char shrugged. "They're such a pain to deal with, no matter the country."

"You don't mince your words, do you?"

We sat at a bench nearby and observed the mass, but nothing seemed particularly unusual. I supposed we had no choice but to use magic—such as illusion and confusion spells—to sneak into the back of the cathedral if we wanted to learn anything worthwhile. The incidents Flèche had told us about were so large-scale that there *had* to be someone pulling the strings from the shadows. To me, the prime suspect was definitely the cathedral's bishop—the highest-ranking member of the Faith in the kingdom.

As we silently listened to the monk's sermon, I suddenly felt someone stand up behind me. "Ha ha! What funny hair colors!" a bright voice said, breaking the serene atmosphere of the cathedral.

Turning around, I saw that it belonged to a young boy, the hood of his robes pulled low over his face. I stared at him, perplexed, while Char tensed beside me as if he were wary of the boy.

He looks like a regular teenager, but could there be more to him than meets the eye? Is he the bishop? Surely not.

The boy leaned in, blatantly disregarding personal space, and let out a playful giggle. "What spell did you use? I thought the saints were the only ones who knew disguise magic. Why can ordinary mages like you use it?"

As soon as I heard these words, I immediately understood why Char was wary of him. Not only was he able to see through

my magic, but he had casually mentioned the saints. Was he a member of the Faith? Even if he wasn't, there was definitely *something* going on with him.

Perhaps he knows about the incidents that have been happening around the capital.

I decided to try talking to him. "Are you the bishop?" I asked.

He burst into another bout of laughter. "It's not just your hair color that's funny, but your personality too, miss! Sorry to disappoint, but, no, I'm not the bishop."

"You don't work here?"

"I'm a member of the Motar Faith, but I'm not affiliated to this place, nope! I'm from the main church."

"The *main* church?!" I echoed in shock.

The Lèvres Kingdom was quite far away from the Faith's main base of operations, so I assumed he must've come here on some sort of mission.

I took a good look at the bold, impudent boy and caught a glimpse of the self-confidence and arrogance so typical of those in power. His blatant lack of respect for those around him only reinforced this impression.

"Lam. Step back," Char said, tugging at my sleeve.

"What's wrong?"

He brought his lips to my ear so that the boy wouldn't overhear and said, "That kid is probably a saint. He's dressed just like one I've seen before."

I stifled a gasp and stared at my husband in shock. It didn't seem like he was lying. "So that's why he managed to see through my magic."

I didn't expect to run into a saint *this* soon.

But, just as I suspected, they know more spells than regular mages... Perhaps they undergo some sort of training at the main church.

So, to sum up the situation, we were currently facing a boy who was most likely a saint *and* who had found out I could use magic.

"Are you a mage from Lèvres?" the boy asked me. "Why is it you can use spells only the Faith's chosen are supposed to know? Why did you come to the cathedral with everything going on at the moment? Did you come to pick a fight with me? Ha ha! That's great! I've been waiting for someone to challenge me!" the hooded boy exclaimed, seemingly delighted at that prospect.

Taken aback by his barrage of nonsensical questions, Char and I stared at the boy in confusion.

"It was worth causing all this mayhem. I only came to this country to vent my frustrations—I never expected to reel in something so interesting!"

What did he just say? Was he the one behind the fake mage attacks? "Vent his frustrations"? Did he come here to torment innocent mages who were already struggling with discrimination, just because he was *frustrated*?

"I take it you're the one who started the antimage movement in the kingdom," I said, trying to confirm my theory.

Bathed in the colorful light streaming through the stained-glass window, the boy flashed me a wide innocent grin. "And what if I am? You're both mages, aren't you? Are you going to use your magic on me? Ha ha ha! Do it! That sounds like so much fun!" he said excitedly. He clearly wasn't feeling an ounce of remorse for what he'd done.

It didn't seem to me like he held any sort of animosity toward mages in particular; more like he was a bored child looking for entertainment. To him, the trouble he'd caused to the entire kingdom was probably nothing more than a game. *Good grief, what a troublesome child.*

I turned to the boy, whose bright laughter was once again disrupting the tranquility of the cathedral, and asked him bluntly, "Are you a saint?"

"Yup! I'm Chaos, the tenth saint!" he said, revealing his identity without hesitation as if we were merely exchanging pleasantries. He then flashed us a sharp, provocative glance as if to challenge us. "And who are *you*, miss and mister with the funny hair?"

"Um..." I hesitated. I didn't want to cause trouble for Char and the others, so I absolutely couldn't reveal that we were from the House of Mercure.

As I stood there, trying to come up with a plausible response, Char chimed in. "As you've guessed, we are mages from this country."

"Yes," I nodded, going along with his storyline. "I'm Laamu and he's Chaaru. We're siblings."

Chaos stared at us pensively before breaking into another broad grin. "You two don't look related at all."

"We don't have the same mother. My sister doesn't like to talk about it, so we'd appreciate it if you could drop the topic," Char

said.

Chaos didn't pry into our personal lives any further. My husband also took this opportunity to shoot me a heavy warning glare as if to tell me to hold my tongue. It seemed that, not only did he not like the disguises I'd come up with, he wasn't fond of the fake names I'd chosen either.

"You two are going to play with me, right? Right?" Chaos pleaded, his eyes sparkling like a big puppy presented with food.

However, before we could answer, he began to channel Wind Magic into his hands as if unable to contain himself any longer.

"Hey! We're still in the cathedral!" I admonished him. Was he about to use his magic inside the building?

Judging by his actions, it seemed that his idea of "playing" was to engage in a magic duel. But if we were to start fighting in the middle of the cathedral, it was highly likely we'd end up destroying the building and injuring the people who'd come to pray.

Isn't he supposed to be a saint? Shouldn't he be more respectful of the cathedral and the worshippers? Actually, as a saint, he should endeavor to protect *the followers of the Faith, not* harm *them.*

Char and I eyed him warily, waiting for his answer. However, the boy simply tilted his head to the side, a nonchalant look on his face. "Yeah, I know. And?"

He really hadn't thought anything through, had he?

Surely, he didn't plan on causing harm to innocent bystanders. He was a saint of the Motar Faith—someone those people respected. He would at least put up a barrier to prevent them from getting injured during our fight, right?

"There are people all around us. If you start using magic, you'll hurt them."

"What's the problem with that? If these dimwits get hit by my magic, it'd be their fault for not sensing the danger and running away faster. Besides, what are they even doing here in the first place? They should know the streets haven't been safe lately and that the Motar Faith is in the middle of a conflict with the mages. Do they think they can just stroll into the cathedral and not get caught up in it? That's ridiculous." Chaos's innocent air disappeared, replaced by a surprisingly cruel expression. "Also, if they're followers of the Motar Faith, they should be happy to die for one of the saints!"

I was appalled. How in the world had he reached *that*

conclusion? I truly could not understand what was going on in that boy's head. However, I didn't have time to argue before Chaos channeled another spell—flames, this time. *Is he about to use Fire Magic in here?! Even Bombe has more common sense than that!*

Scandalized, I quickly put up a magic wall around Chaos to prevent his attack from reaching the churchgoers. It was similar to the spell I'd used to protect the abducted ladies from the caniba bats, but this time, I chose to contain him within the barrier rather than shielding the bystanders. This approach was easier on my body as it required covering a smaller area and, therefore, consumed less mana.

I can't afford to use too many large spells with this body, or I'll collapse in no time. I have to carefully manage my mana if I don't want to overexert myself again. Until I rebuilt my stamina, I had no choice but to be extra careful when using magic.

Chaos probably hadn't noticed my spell as his magic detonated within the confines of the barrier, causing a massive explosion to erupt inside, and he let out a small yelp.

Oh, dear, I thought, observing the situation. The barrier had cracked and a soot-covered Chaos stumbled out of it. It seemed that he hadn't anticipated my spell at all.

"You shouldn't cause a fuss inside a cathedral. Has no one ever told you to be quiet in public spaces?" I chided him.

He looked completely flabbergasted, like he had no idea why his spell had blown up in his own face instead of reaching its target. However, he clearly didn't take kindly to being attacked if the pout on his face was anything to go by. "Shut up! I just let my guard down for a second," he said, his face turning red with anger.

Aw, how adorable. Shouting and pouting when things didn't go his way—he was still clearly just a child at heart.

Chaos's spell had caused the churchgoers to take notice of us, and they all started murmuring among themselves in confusion.

"Wh-What just happened?"

"That boy just used magic! Is he a mage? I can't believe he'd dare use his powers here of all places!"

"It's an affront to Lord Motar! And what about those two with the strange hair? Are they mages too? Can't they refrain from fighting inside the cathedral?!"

"Good grief. This is why I hate mages."

With their prayers interrupted, the congregation began leaving the cathedral, their expressions oozing annoyance. While Char and I were indeed mages, Chaos was actually a saint, but since they didn't know that they'd ended up lumping us all together. A sullen look appeared on the boy's face.

"Look what you've done. You've angered the followers of your own faith. As a saint, aren't you supposed to be an example for them? To be righteous and pure?"

Unfortunately, my words didn't reach Chaos. He seemed to be the type to prioritize his own amusement and emotions over anything else, no matter the situation.

"I told you to shut up, miss! I couldn't care less about those ignoramuses who can't even tell the difference between saints and mages! C'mon, let's keep going! I haven't lost yet!"

I sighed. "I keep telling you that you can't just use your magic anywhere you please."

Sure, the churchgoers had left the building, but the cathedral was still a public space; we couldn't fight in here and risk damaging it. I couldn't believe the Motar Faith had made that clueless boy a saint. They really needed to choose their personnel more wisely.

Completely unfazed by the disapproving looks and comments from the churchgoers, Chaos was already preparing to cast his next spell. "Ha ha ha! I'm amazing, you know? My magic is much stronger than anything you can imagine!" This time, he unleashed a large-scale water spell, washing away all the perfectly arranged pews. Char and I easily dodged the spell by flying over it.

I can't believe Char has already mastered the floating spell. He really is a prodigy, isn't he?

Next, Chaos threw Lightning Magic and Wind Magic at us. As expected of a saint, he could use all attributes, but he had one major flaw: He was much too slow.

He's clearly not used to fighting. I'm assuming he doesn't have many occasions to use his powers on the daily, huh? Unlike him, Char and the other Mercures have a lot more experience fighting monsters and the likes.

Dodging his spells, I racked my brain to come up with a way to pacify him when, all of a sudden, a boulder came hurtling toward me from another direction. *Wait, what?! A boulder in a cathedral?!*

I hurriedly used my magic to pulverize it. Standing where the attack had originated from was a knight clad in pitch-black armor.

Who is that man? I wondered. *More importantly, what terrible fashion sense. All black,* really*? He'd look so much better with some pink flowers adorning his helmet and mantle!*

As I stood there, mentally criticizing his choice of outfit, the tasteless man rushed toward Chaos. "Lord Chaos! Are you all right?"

"You sure took your sweet time, Muscle! As a holy knight, isn't it your job to protect me?"

"But you're the one who ordered me to patrol around the city —" The knight paused and cleared his throat awkwardly. "Ahem, my apologies. Please give me your orders."

"Capture those mages over there! They're *fascinating*—they're not saints, yet they can use spells only we are supposed to know! Don't you think they'll make for perfect test subjects?! You can only use Earth Magic, but I guess it's better than nothing, huh? With those two, I'll finally be a step ahead of my brother!"

"As you command, Lord Chaos."

Muscle, the knight, unsheathed the large sword on his back and pointed it at Char and me. He seemed to be Chaos's subordinate despite being visibly older.

"Lam, I'll take care of the holy knight. It'll be the perfect opportunity to test out the new Aurora spell I learned," Char said, unperturbed by the new threat. Without missing a beat, he began channeling his magic. The new spell he was eager to try was a lightning-based technique that allowed one to move so quickly that they were almost impossible to see.

Hmm... I'd say he's gone a tad overkill, I thought as I watched him knock down the knight with a single kick. On top of the speed boost, he'd also used magic to reinforce the strength of his leg *and* had imbued the sole of his shoe with Lightning Magic. The second his foot made contact with Muscle's armor, the knight was launched backward.

Well then, my turn.

Chaos still hadn't learned his lesson, hurling flames at me with reckless abandon. I easily blocked them and cast a Dark Magic spell right at his feet.

The next instant, he began to yell in horror. "Aaah! What's going on?! I'm getting swallowed up by the floor!"

“My, is it your first time seeing Dark Magic?” I asked.

“Dark Magic? H-Heresy!” he stammered in shock.

“Is that how the Motar Faith views it? You know, Dark Magic is just another attribute. It’s actually quite practical, especially in places with lots of obstacles and— Oh. He can’t hear me anymore.” My spell had completely swallowed him up, leaving only silence behind. “Phew, looks like I’ve successfully trapped that insignificant little firebug.”

I could always release him whenever I wanted, so it wasn’t like he’d be stuck in my Dark Magic forever.

“Well then, should we head back to the palace? Canon must be bored all by himself,” I said.

“If you’re bringing the saint, you should probably bring that huge knight too,” Char suggested.

“Good point.” I nodded and used the same spell I’d used on Chaos to capture the knight as well.

The two of us returned to the palace, where I promptly got told off by my former disciple for leaving without permission and for capturing Chaos and Muscle.

“So, you brought back a saint and a holy knight? That’s why I don’t like having my guests wander off without permission…” Flèche said with a sigh. “Still, to march into the cathedral all on your own—that’s very you. And I don’t mean it as a compliment.”

“I didn’t do it on my own. Char was with me,” I pointed out.

“That’s not the problem.”

Chaos and Muscle—whom I had released from their darkness prison—were sprawled out on the floor, unconscious.

Flèche hummed pensively. “What should we do with these two? One option would be to make them spill the information we need and eliminate them right after. After all, you *did* say that kid is the mastermind behind the fake mage attacks—though he can’t be that strong, since you caught him so easily.”

It seemed that Flèche was determined to eliminate the saint and the knight to prevent them from causing more trouble in the future—but I couldn’t bring myself to let such a young boy’s life end like that. It was painfully clear that no one had ever bothered to teach him common sense or empathy, content only to drill magic into him. He reminded me of the Mercure children before we’d fired Gourdin, and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“Your Highness, if you don’t need the boy, could you give him

to me? I'm sure I can straighten him out and turn him into a respectable young man," I said.

"That again?" Flèche sighed. "Listen, master, I'm sure you can handle any problem child after dealing with that pesky first disciple of yours, but getting involved with the Motar Faith won't end well."

"But..."

I was about to argue when Char, who stood behind me, chimed in. "I'm of the same mind as His Highness. You shouldn't do anything to draw the Faith's attention. If they learn that you've captured one of their saints and holy knights, they might send others after you."

He *did* have a point. *I can't put the entire House of Mercure in danger on a mere whim.* We still didn't know our opponent's true strength, after all.

"I suppose I don't have a choice, then. I'm going to keep them hidden in the shadows and keep an eye on them for now," I said, dejected.

Time didn't pass in spaces created by Dark Magic, meaning people did not age and plants did not grow. Food didn't rot either. For that reason, spells used to store things were all Dark Magic.

As such, I decided to keep Chaos and Muscle inside the shadows for the time being.

"There we go. I've sealed away these two insignificant insects."

After that, Flèche requested that we have a private conversation, just the two of us, for a little while. It just so happened that Char was away, having been asked by one of Flèche's subordinates to give him a rundown of what had happened at the cathedral.

Flèche seemed to be in a much better mood than before. "We're finally alone, master!" he exclaimed happily, offering me a sweet, soft smile.

"Your servants are still around, so we're not *technically* alone," I pointed out.

"Never mind the details. I've been searching for you for *so* long, I'm just happy we can finally talk."

"I'm really sorry for all the worry I've caused you. I didn't have any memories of my past life until very recently."

I recounted to him how I'd regained my memories, and he

quietly nodded in understanding. “I see.”

He’d apparently reincarnated with his memories intact from the start, so his situation was a bit different from mine.

“There must’ve been an issue with the spell, I suppose. Still, I’m glad you remember now. I probably still would’ve looked for you and brought you here, even if your memories hadn’t come back.”

“Thank you. By the way, Flèche, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” I said hesitantly. “I can’t seem to remember how I died in my past life. Well, more specifically, I can’t recall the end of my life at all.” I still had a clear image of my daily life with my disciples, but everything after that was a complete blur. “Do you know anything? If you helped cast the reincarnation spell on me, you must’ve been there before I died, right?”

Perhaps Flèche could shed some light on the mystery of my death. I waited expectantly for him to tell me what happened, but, to my dismay, he didn’t seem inclined to answer. He clamped his lips tightly together, and for a brief moment, a pained expression crossed his face, as if he were trying to endure something. I couldn’t help but wonder why he looked so sad all of a sudden.

“It’s better if you don’t remember,” he said, his voice strained. “I don’t want to be the one to tell you what happened.”

“Why?” I insisted.

But Flèche didn’t reply. Instead, he offered me a faint smile, his expression tense and pained. I really wanted to know what was causing him such anguish.

In the end, I was unable to convince him to tell me what happened.

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In his past life, Flèche Laîné Lèvres had been born as Glacial, the second prince of his kingdom. Well, officially, that was the case. In truth, he was the product of an affair between the queen and her lover. As such, while he was technically recognized as a prince to the outside world, inside the palace, he was treated with disdain. He was forced to live in an old, separate building and wasn’t allowed to make any public appearances. His father’s concubines and his older brother persecuted him tirelessly, and even the servants refused to interact with him.

He was just a weak, lonely little prince who didn't belong anywhere. For those reasons, Glacial grew up without any understanding of the world, common decency, or love.

For better or for worse, he had been born with incredible magical potential. This led to an incident when he was ten, where all the mana stored in his body erupted violently—the backlash of never having received a proper magical education. The old, run-down palace he was locked in soon frosted over with a thick layer of ice, and the servants nearby were turned into icicles.

Confused and afraid, he knelt alone on the cold floor, clutching his head and trembling. At that moment, he couldn't care less about what happened to him. His knees were numb, he was too cold to move, and any strength he had left was gradually leaving his body. No one would come save him. He just wanted the suffering to end as quickly as possible.

The king contacted an elfin mage who luckily happened to be staying in his kingdom at the time and ordered her to come to the palace as soon as possible. It wasn't because he was concerned about his son, but that he didn't want the damage spreading any further.

The elfins were a now-extinct race known for their extraordinary magical abilities. They were even said to be the founders of magic itself. They were so rare that even five hundred years ago there was only one elfin in the entire kingdom. Being rather asocial, she refused to come to the palace herself, instead sending her disciple—Aurora Ibrusus, the girl who would later become known as the witch of legends.

And so, Aurora marched empty-handed into the detached palace. She destroyed the frozen doors and headed straight to the center of the building where Glacial was cowering, unable to control his magic.

"Good grief, master really says the most unreasonable things sometimes. 'It's a child causing issues, so you're the best person for the job'—yeah, right. She just doesn't want to deal with the royal family," Aurora grumbled under her breath as she stepped into the icy chamber.

The sharp sound of footsteps on the frozen floor reached Glacial's ears, and even in his dazed state, he managed to grasp that someone was approaching.

They must be here to stop my magic—to kill me.

Despite repeatedly telling himself that he didn't care what happened to him anymore, the boy was still terrified, and he curled up tighter in on himself on the floor.

The footsteps soon came to a halt, and Glacial timidly opened one eye, only to see two skinny legs right before him. Looking up, he saw a young girl, her hair a peculiar shade of green, eyeing him with curiosity.

This was Glacial and Aurora's first meeting.

The girl let out a sigh. "I see. You have too much mana so it began to overflow and turned into ice, your preferred attribute," she said, nodding to herself.

She's not that scary, Glacial thought. *I suppose I don't mind her killing me. I hope she'll make it quick so it won't hurt, though.* Right as that thought crossed his mind, Aurora suddenly extended a hand over his head and said, "Sorry, kid."

Thinking that his end had finally come, Glacial shut his eyes and braced himself for whatever was to come. Aurora placed her hand on his head—and he suddenly felt a strange sensation, as if the mana that had been rampaging inside his body was being absorbed. After a few seconds, the cold feeling disappeared, and he heard Aurora let out a sigh.

"Phew, all done. I've successfully absorbed that insignificant little prince's mana."

Huh? "All done"? But I'm still alive?

Confused, Glacial opened his eyes again, only to find that the ice covering the old palace had melted. Some places were a little wet, but the thick layer of ice had disappeared.



“You’re lucky I got here before you used all your mana. Can you stand up?” Aurora asked, but Glacial shook his head.

She grunted a “hup,” picking him up with surprising ease considering her slender frame, and carried him out of the run-down, detached palace. Then she headed to the main palace, but they refused to let her go in with the prince in her arms. Of course—none of these people had ever accepted Glacial for who he was, even before his magic went haywire. And after this incident, they probably didn’t want him anywhere near the main palace.

“Excuse me, but His Highness is extremely weak right now. Someone needs to nurse him back to health,” Aurora protested.

“My apologies, Miss Aurora, but Prince Glacial has never left the detached palace up until now,” the grand chamberlain replied calmly. “I believe he would feel more comfortable there…” He wasn’t the only one refusing to let Glacial into the palace—everyone was.

Aurora eyed the staff members in front of her, an incredulous look on her face. “Are you telling me to take him back to that old, run-down palace?”

“That is where he has lived all his life. We shall send servants to take care of him later on.”

Aurora’s eyes narrowed into slits, and she started yelling at them. “Are you *insane*?! There’s no way I’m going to leave this child alone in that cold, dirty place! I’ll look after him myself until he recovers!”

The palace’s staff gasped at her defiant attitude. “M-My apologies, but we cannot allow you to do such a thing,” the grand chamberlain said, offering Aurora a small smile as if he were trying to reason with a child.

While she later went on to become the witch of legends, at that time, Aurora was still only fifteen years old. The staff must’ve assumed she would be easy to deal with due to her age.

But the words she uttered next shook them to their core. “Do you know how to handle him if his condition worsens? Can you save him if his magic goes wild again?”

The staff members exchanged anxious glances; not out of worry for the prince, but because they were scared of getting caught up in the chaos if the prince lost control of his mana again.

Talk about self-centered.

“W-We cannot let you take him without His and Her Majesty’s permission…” the grand chamberlain said.

“Do you think I care about the permission of people who don’t even come to check on their son when he’s suffering? I’ll have my master send someone to sort the details out with you later. I’m here on her orders, so she’ll deal with any complaints you may have. Goodbye!” With those words, Aurora used a teleportation spell and vanished from the palace with the prince.

And so, this was how the second prince of the kingdom was abducted in front of everyone’s eyes—though the royal family would find a way to cover the story up later.

Surrounded by warmth—a feeling he was unaccustomed to—Glacial awoke from his peaceful slumber and cracked his eyes open. He was lying on a wood-framed bed which, despite being visibly old, felt robust and well maintained. A handmade blanket made of a patchwork of mismatched patterns was draped over him, and flames danced in the magical fireplace beside his bed. There had been no fireplaces in his old detached palace.

After teleporting out of the palace, Aurora had put him on forced bed rest, claiming that his body was exhausted after using so much magic at once or something along those lines.

Where did that girl go? Glacial wondered, slipping out from under the covers and padding toward the door.

The next instant, a thunderous boom echoed through the house, followed by the sounds of people arguing loudly. “I won’t accept him! I *won’t*!”

“Oh, stop whining, will you? I’ve already reported the situation to master, and she gave me her go-ahead. I’m making this boy my apprentice, whether you like it or not!”

“Don’t go deciding things on your own! Who said I was okay with you having another disciple?!”

“I’m your teacher! *I’m* the one who makes the decisions around here!”

“You’re a despot, that’s what you are!”

Another round of booms and crashes resounded through the house, causing the floor to tremble.

I recognize that girl’s voice, but who is she arguing with? Glacial cautiously opened the door. He stepped out and made his way down the staircase at the end of the hallway as it seemed that the noises were coming from downstairs. He soon arrived in

front of the room where the sounds were the loudest and cracked the door open.

“Take this!”

There, he was met with the sight of jet-black flames roaring violently across the room, the searing gusts of heat making his overgrown bangs whip around his face. “Wha… What are those?” he muttered in shock.

Up until Aurora came to save him, he’d never seen anyone else use magic before. Even then, the spells she’d cast to calm his rampaging mana and teleport them out of the palace hadn’t had any visual elements to them, so it was his first time seeing anything of the sort. As he stood there in shock, Aurora coincidentally turned toward the door and spotted him. A boy who seemed a bit older than him stood beside her, looking sullen.

“Oh, you’ve woken up. How are you feeling?”

A weak “Fine” was all Glacial could muster at that moment.

“Good. Well then, let’s give you a bath, put you into some clean clothes, cut that overgrown hair of yours, and have dinner, shall we?”

“Huh?!” Without giving him a chance to argue, Aurora cheerfully grabbed his arm and began leading him to the bathroom. “Wait, I can wash up on my own!” he blurted. He was already *ten*. He couldn’t let a girl help him bathe!

“You can? Even though you’re a prince?” Aurora asked.

“I always did everything myself at home. It’s true,” he added as if to emphasize his point.

The servants had refused to take care of him, so he eventually had to learn how to do things on his own.

Aurora hummed pensively. “Well, if you say so. Here, take this towel with you. As for the soap, you’ll find plenty in the bathroom, so use whichever one you like.”

Glacial nodded and stepped into the colorful bathroom. Soap bottles were aligned on the shelves, each sporting a different label with its name and instructions on how to use it.

“Hydrating shampoo, silky-smooth shampoo, color-changing shampoo, straightening shampoo, curling shampoo… What is all this? I’m kind of scared to use any of these… And over here we have refreshing soap, slimming soap, color-changing soap, strengthening soap… This one’s a really creepy color too.”

Overwhelmed, Glacial picked the “silky-smooth shampoo” and

the “refreshing soap.” Both of them smelled nice, like herbs and verdure. He’d once heard that, in addition to casting spells, mages also manipulated plants and minerals to create potions. These soaps and shampoos must’ve been made by Aurora herself. Much to Glacial’s relief, there were no drastic changes to his hair or body when he used them.

He stepped out of the bathroom and found a set of boy’s clothes waiting for him. They clearly weren’t new, but they were clean, at least. *Do they belong to that boy from earlier?* Glacial wondered. His own clothes had been left in tatters after the chaos at the palace, so he gratefully accepted the new garments.

He quickly changed and left the room, only to be immediately stopped by a voice calling for him. “Hey, you.”

Turning in the direction of the voice, he saw the boy from earlier glaring at him. His rough and aggressive behavior contrasted sharply with his fluffy pink hair and soft androgynous features.

“Don’t get cocky just because Aurora took a liking to you,” the boy spat. “That girl has a tendency to bring in any stray that crosses her path, be it dogs, cats, or even hedgehogs. I’ll never accept you as my junior disciple! *Never*!”

“Disciple? What are you talking about?” Glacial asked, confused.

The other boy frowned and closed the distance between them, his scowl deepening. However, before he could get to him, a hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him away from Glacial.

“Épée! Don’t bully kids younger than you!” Aurora reprimanded him.

“Oh, shut up, Aurora. I’m not bullying him,” the boy—Épée—shot back.

“Right, sure. Well, now that His Highness is done with his bath, let us have dinner, shall we?”

Épée directed his glare to her this time. “Don’t act so high and mighty when *I’m* the one who cooked it.”

“True, you did cook it—and then proceeded to launch it all over the room with your magic.”

“I used time-turning magic to fix it, so stop whining,” Épée grumbled. “Not like you could do any better—your cooking’s so bad it tastes like *mud*.”

“Hey! Don’t compare other people’s cooking to mud; that’s not

very nice. Besides, my food is always packed full of nutrients. It's good for you."

"What you make isn't food—it's *garbage*."

The two of them bickered all the way to the dining room, and Glacial followed them. Delicious-looking dishes were laid out on the handmade tablecloth draped over the antique table. Glacial couldn't believe that the rude, ill-mannered Épée could make such appetizing food.

As they ate, Aurora explained her plans for Glacial. "Your body is incredibly weak right now," she told him. "Not just because of your mana outburst, but because your life up until now wasn't good either. But don't worry!" She sat up straighter, puffing out her chest with all the authority a fifteen-year-old could muster. "I've decided to take you in as my disciple. You may stay here until you're fully recovered."

And so, Glacial was practically forced to become Aurora's disciple. Épée, her other disciple, had a terrible personality, and would take any opportunity he could to try and kick Glacial out—a behavior very unbefitting of a senior disciple. The only thing the two of them had in common was their adoration of Aurora. That's why Glacial hadn't tried to stop him when Épée had suggested forcibly reincarnating her.

Under Aurora's tutelage, Glacial learned magic at an impressive speed. And, at last, with his new mastery of ice magic, he was able to take his revenge on the people who'd wronged him all this life. He went so far, in fact, that Aurora had to stop him before he could do more damage. Still, he didn't regret anything he'd done. These were all choices he'd made for himself—including forcing his own reincarnation to be with her in the next life as well.

However, there was still one thing weighing on his mind: Where was Épée? He was supposed to have reincarnated as well, but, no matter where Glacial—now Flèche—looked, he couldn't find him. Even using his influence as the prince of the Lèvres Kingdom yielded nothing. Knowing his fellow disciple, he must've been out there causing trouble, but *where*?

Oh, well. Despite his awful personality, he's actually very clever and shrewd—much more than me. I'm sure he must be doing all right.

As for his other source of worry—the fake mage attacks—it seemed that the case was pretty much closed. He had the mages

who had come to the capital under his protection, and Lam had arrested the mastermind behind the attacks, though he wasn't exactly pleased with how she'd chosen to deal with him. Glacial would have frozen him solid and smashed him to pieces, but Lam preferred to "keep an eye on him."

Well, that's master for you. I finally understand why Épée was so angry with her in her last moments. She's always been way too soft and trusting. Even now, she thinks that she can straighten out that saint kid. There's no way she'll manage, though.

But Flèche knew all too well that reasoning with her was pointless—Aurora simply wouldn't listen. Unless she was locked away, she would continue doing whatever she pleased. Glacial didn't dislike that side of her, though—in fact, it was precisely why he wanted to stay by her side and watch over her. Yet, she'd refused his marriage proposal…

That man is not worthy of her. I'll never accept it.

Glacial had no intention of giving up on Aurora just yet.

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South of the Tête Kingdom and the Lèvres Kingdom lay the desolate Ongle Empire. Though it might be more accurate to say it *used* to lay south of them, as the country was currently ravaged by a civil war, which had reduced it to little more than a lawless wasteland. The conflict had begun over a disputed succession, and to this day, there was still no resolution in sight.

In that war-torn nation, a certain individual held immense power—a young man known as the King of the Underworld.

"Damn it, those bastards of the Motar Faith are *everywhere*. What do you mean, they've started getting involved in the war of succession? Can't they just pray in their cathedrals and stay out of this? What a pain," Épée grumbled, his frustration evident as he sank into the large leather couch, crossing his legs. His slender frame, unusual pink hair, and androgynous features seemed at odds with his title, but, make no mistake—he was, in fact, the King of the Underworld.

Though he was always clad in luxurious clothing, it was his intimidating aura alone that made everyone bow in submission. His eyes held not a trace of light, only an impenetrable darkness.

All of a sudden, one of his subordinates burst into the room, practically bouncing with excitement. "Lord Épée! I've just

received some *juicy* information from the neighboring kingdom!"

"It's probably the same boring trash as always. If you dare waste my time with more nonsense, I'll blast a spell right through your skull," Épée threatened the man.

"My, my, how scary," the subordinate said lightly, though his body subtly tensed, preparing to bolt at a moment's notice. "Anyway, word is, a saint was spotted in the Lèvres Kingdom—causing a full-on rampage inside a cathedral of the Faith, no less. And that's not all. Apparently, he's been releasing modified monsters into the wild too. The guy's a complete lunatic!"

"The Faith is full of morons. Their arrogance grows more unbearable by the day—it's starting to get on my nerves. I've tolerated them so far because they've been buying weapons, drugs, and people from us, but at this rate, it might be time to get rid of them once and for all."

"What a *great* idea, my lord! Time to expand our sphere of influence!" the subordinate cheered. "Oh, and we've received one more piece of information, but I don't think it will be of any interest to you."

"What is it?" Épée asked coldly, gathering mana in his hand.

"Eek! P-Please don't start casting your magic!" he begged. "According to one of my sources who was in the vicinity of the cathedral when it all went down, the saint and the holy knight accompanying him were almost instantly defeated by two mages with weird hair colors."

"Weird hair colors?" Épée repeated.

"Yeah, like ridiculously tacky. If I remember correctly, one of them had a light blue to yellow ombré, while the other had the same thing but in lavender and pink." The man's face lit up. "Oh! Pink! Just like you, Lord Épé— *Eek*!"

A bottomless pit opened at the man's feet, its depth filled with a whirlpool of pitch-black shadows—Épée's doing. That spell was merciless: Once trapped in the black void, there was no escape until the caster decided to cancel it. These types of extreme methods were nothing unusual for him; in fact, he used them pretty much on the daily. Fortunately for his subordinate, he'd managed to jump out of reach of the pit.

"The next time you mention my hair," Épée said, his voice cold as ice, "I'll blast you to pieces." He had always felt self-conscious about his cute pink hair. While he technically had the ability to alter it with magic, he couldn't bring himself to do it. There was

only *one person* who was allowed to mess with his hair.

Where in the world are you, Aurora?

A sudden realization jolted him out of his thoughts. Could it be...?

"Wait. Did you just call those mages' hair colors 'tacky'?"

"Um, yes." His subordinate nodded, cautiously sidestepping to put more distance between himself and the black hole. "I dunno who they are, but I'm pretty sure hair like that has to be magic. Sure, some people have colorful hair, but not many—and definitely not *pastel ombré*. How tasteless— Eek!"

The man barely leaped aside in time as a second pit opened right beneath his feet.

"Wh-Why did you do that?! I didn't mention your hair!" the subordinate protested.

"Shut up," Épée snapped. "Track down these mages and bring them to me. Now! And, by the way, ombré hair isn't *tacky*! It's *avant-garde*—the world just isn't ready for it yet!"

Utterly perplexed by Épée's outburst, his subordinate scuttled out of the room. He was used to his boss's antics by this point, but as a precaution he preferred to no longer remain in the same space, just in case his lord opened a third black hole in the floor.

I have no clue why he wants to meet these mages, but I guess I'll just tell my guys in Lèvres to start looking for them. I don't think I've ever seen the boss this excited before.

Épée, now alone, was in a great mood. "I don't know about five hundred years ago, but I haven't seen a single person with ombré hair in this lifetime," he muttered to himself. "I can't believe it; I've looked *everywhere* for her, and she was right under my nose all this time. Soon, Aurora—soon, I'll finally see you again."

His dark eyes sparkled with hope—with *ecstasy*.

"And, this time, I won't let you go."

Chapter Four: The Countess Takes a New Disciple?

In the deep, gloomy darkness, Chaos, the youngest saint of the Motar Faith, sat with his knees hugged to his chest. There was nothing else around him, and he couldn't even tell how much time had passed since he'd ended up there—and it was all the fault of that woman with the weird hair.

I had no idea there were still people who could use such powerful magic outside the Faith. The cardinals kept repeating that "proper magic is granted only to the chosen of the Faith," but, clearly, that was just a bunch of lies!

Chaos was used to the darkness, so that in itself didn't bother him. But the thought of what awaited him filled him with unease. He'd learned from a cardinal that the Motar Faith and the mages were sworn enemies, so he knew he wouldn't escape this situation unscathed.

Did I get too carried away this time? But I've always said I wanted to live my life the way I want to. I'm strong enough to do what I please.

Chaos prided himself on being "special"—which he really was. Why else had an orphan like him been chosen to become a saint of the Motar Faith otherwise? Ever since he received his new title, there was nothing he feared anymore. Well, except maybe for the Holy Father and the cardinals.

As such, he had decided to live however he liked. Take the creatures he'd altered and released into the wild, for example—he just did it because he wanted to have fun! What was the harm in that?

I've been persecuted all my life. Can't they just let me have some fun?!

All he wanted was to have a good time, yet that heretic of a mage with her stupid Dark Magic *had* to start lecturing him.

"Stop ordering me around! I'm a *saint*, damn it!" he yelled into the darkness, unable to stop himself.

To his surprise, a voice echoed down from above, "Oh, my, I was starting to worry about you, but you seem just fine."

It was that damn woman with the weird hair!

"Shut up and let me out of here! I'll make you my new test subject, mark my word!"

"How about we have a little chat first?"

"Huh?! Why should I talk to *you*? I'd much rather release zombie leapers and caniba bats into the wild. That's a lot more entertaining!"

I wonder what type of monster I should scatter around when I'm out of here… It was just so much fun watching all those people panic because of the pandemonium he'd unleashed.

"Huh? What did you just say?" the voice overhead asked, audibly confused—understandably so, considering the bomb Chaos had dropped on her. He *did* just confess that he was the one behind the zombie leapers and caniba bats outbreak.

"Ha ha! But it's too bad—all the monsters I released ended up disappearing for some reason."

A heavy silence followed and then the mage spoke, her voice tight, "I'm the one who killed the zombie leapers and the caniba bats before they could cause too much damage to the Ouragan Mountains and the town of Crimine."

Chaos nearly shouted that she was lying but stopped himself when he realized she'd correctly named the exact locations where he'd set the monsters upon the public.

I've never mentioned the locations to anyone… Could she be telling the truth?

The mountains and the town of Crimine were close to the Lèvres Kingdom, so it wasn't like she *couldn't* have dealt with the monsters, but he'd absolutely not been expecting this turn of events.

I'd specifically released those vicious, enhanced monsters for the holy knights to deal with them! If things had gone according to plan, the people would've realized that mages are useless and praised the Faith. It was such a good strategy! Yet, that woman wiped out my monsters before I could do anything…

With both her spells and her actions, that weird witch had surpassed all of Chaos's expectations. She wasn't just a heretic—she was *dangerous*. However, for some reason, she kept cheerfully talking to Chaos as if they were friends.

"How about you leave the Faith and become my disciple?" she offered.

"No way in hell! Let me out of here!"

Why in the world would she want to make him her *disciple*? Not only did that witch have an awful sense of aesthetics, she was absolutely bonkers to boot. And now, here he was, detained by her. Talk about rotten luck.

"But if I release you, you'll just cause trouble again, won't you? I can't have you releasing monsters everywhere; it'd be too annoying cleaning up your messes. Perhaps I should seal your mana first, then let you go?"

A creeping sense of dread welled up inside Chaos.

She's going to seal my mana? No. No way. No way. *I won't let her take my magic away from me!*

Chaos was a chosen one. He was *special*. But if he lost his mana…

No! I won't go back to that place! I won't*!*

Chaos floundered, at a loss. What should he do? He wanted to get out of this place—he *had* to get out—but the more panic clawed at him, the harder it was to think clearly.

I won't be able to go on without my mana.

But the witch didn't give him time to get his thoughts straight before using her magic on him. A wave of dizziness crashed over him, and he started to feel sick.

My body is growing weaker by the second… Is it because she's siphoning my mana?

He tried to resist, but the witch was just too powerful for him. And so, all he could do was sit there and endure as she stripped him of his powers.

If this keeps going, I'll…

He managed to endure the spell for a few seconds, but there was a limit to how much a teenager could take, and he ended up losing consciousness halfway through.

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I, Lam Mercure, was presently in the middle of a conversation with my husband in our room in the palace of the Lèvres Kingdom.

"I didn't collapse, even after using all these big spells at the cathedral," I said proudly. "I wonder if that means my stamina has improved."

"You're celebrating a bit too soon. Those Dark Magic spells you used on the saint and the holy knight are slowly draining

your mana, aren't they? Hurry up and break them before you pass out again," Char said, overbearing as always. Despite his harsh tone, I knew he was concerned for my well-being. He'd truly become much kinder as of recently.

"You're right; if I keep these spells up, it'll definitely cause a toll on my body."

Ever since regaining the memories of my past life, I'd remembered how to circulate my mana through my body, which had resolved most of my health issues. I wasn't bedridden anymore and could finally live normally. However, if I used too much magic at once or pushed myself too hard physically—basically, if I did anything beyond my normal routine—my body would quickly remind me of its limits.

For that reason, I'd decided not to overuse magic until I built up my stamina some more. I didn't know how long it'd take for this weak body to become as resilient as the average person's, but I did feel a bit stronger already.

Not wanting to collapse again, I decided to heed my husband's advice and release my spell on the saint and the holy knight, opting for a less taxing method to restrain them.

First, I used Dark Magic to strip them of their mana while they were still in the darkness. Dark Magic was pretty nifty, as it tended to have more unique spells than other attributes.

Then, I released the little troublemaker of a saint and his muscle-headed knight from the shadows and restrained them with magical bindings. Chaos didn't seem to appreciate it much, as he immediately began yelling at me to return his mana to him.

"No. You haven't reflected on your actions in the slightest, have you?" I asked with a sigh. "If I give you back your magic right now, you'll use it to do bad things again."

Unlike the boy, who was still yelling and cursing at me, the knight, Muscle, remained completely silent, though I assumed that was simply his nature. He didn't budge nor did he try to stop Chaos's outburst. From what I understood from their brief interaction at the cathedral, it seemed that, as a saint, Chaos held a higher rank than him in the Faith, so it was likely he didn't feel it was his place to admonish his superior.

As such, Chaos freely continued his tirade without interruption. "You damn lovebird mages! Don't think the Faith's higher-ups will let you get away with this! They'll do everything in

their power to get their revenge on you! They must've noticed that I've stopped responding to their communications, and it won't take them long to figure out where I am."

"Is that so? Thank you for letting me know," I said lightly.

My tone clearly didn't sit well with Chaos, as his face turned an even deeper shade of red. I'd really hoped he'd agree to become my apprentice and that the two of us would grow closer, but it seemed it might take more time than I expected before he came around to the idea.

"Just give up on that nuisance of a saint," Char said, visibly fed up with the boy's antics. "He seems to be around the same age as Canon. Just how did they raise him to be this selfish and bratty?"

"Well, this is exactly what I picture would happen if you taught a child nothing but magic and shoved him on a pedestal, completely neglecting to impart on him things like how to live in the real world or relate to others," I said, feeling bitter toward the people who raised this poor boy.

Char hesitated, seemingly taken aback by my bluntness. "Well, you sure don't mince your words," he said eventually.

"Neither do you," I shot back.

Chaos was way too overexcited for us to have a proper conversation right now, so I decided it might be a better idea to try talking to Muscle first. I grabbed the noisy saint and tossed him into the other room before closing the door on him. I assumed we'd have an easier time worming information out of Muscle if his superior was in a different room.

"Well then, pray tell why you and Chaos decided to come persecute the mages of the Lèvres Kingdom," I said, turning toward the muscular knight. "They were already barely scraping along without the need for you to come make their lives harder, so *why*? The difference in power between the Faith and this nation's mages is glaringly obvious, so it seems odd to me that you'd still waste your time mounting an offense against them."

Muscle remained silent. It seemed that, just like Chaos, he had no intention of answering my questions. I gave him a moment to change his mind and then started gathering Dark Magic in my hand.

"I didn't want to resort to this method, but if I leave this problem unsolved, it'll risk causing trouble for my precious family and disciples, and I refuse to let that happen. I'm sure you

must have clearer answers for me than that boy in the other room."

With those words, I cast a mind-affecting spell on Muscle—a truth spell, to be precise. I could've used a potion instead, but unfortunately, I didn't have the necessary ingredients on hand. Flèche might have them, but potion-mixing took time, so I decided that, all things considered, using my magic would be quicker.

A dark mist coiled around Muscle before sinking into his body. The next instant, he lifted his head, which had been bowed in silence, and fixed his gaze on me.

"Char, I have used a truth spell on him," I explained to my husband. "Now, he'll answer all our questions without being able to hide anything—well, as long as he knows the answer, that is."

"That sounds like a useful spell. I'd love to learn it."

"I wish I could teach it to you, but Dark Magic is notoriously tricky for those who don't have it as their primary attribute. Then again, you're so good at magic, you might just pull it off regardless."

"We can worry about that later. For now, we need to focus on asking questions," Char said, gesturing toward the knight.

I nodded. "You're right. Muscle, was it? Let me ask again: Why did you and Chaos start causing trouble for the mages in the Lèvres Kingdom?"

Unlike earlier, this time the knight actually replied to my question, his face utterly devoid of expression. The magic suppressed his emotions and free will, compelling him to answer whatever I asked truthfully.

"We came to Lèvres and carried out this plan because Lord Chaos was bored," the knight replied in a monotone voice.

Char tilted his head to the side and muttered, "Well, that wasn't a very useful answer."

"Yes, that's the major flaw of truth magic," I said. "You'll get different answers to the exact same question depending on your target's knowledge and understanding of the events. That's why you need to be very careful about how you word your questions as well. The target will only answer what you directly ask them."

"I see. That's why you chose to use it on the knight and not the brat. With that personality, he probably wouldn't have given us any useful answers."

Muscle stood there with a vacant look on his face as Char and

I discussed the spell.

"I have another question," I said, turning back to him. "Why did you choose Lèvres specifically? There are mages in other nations too."

"Because there is a mage in the royal family. We needed to weaken the mages even further."

"Huh?" I assumed the mage he was referring to was Flèche. But… "Why would you need to weaken the mages just because a member of the royal family happened to be one as well?"

"Because it would be too dangerous to let him become king."

As the first prince, Flèche was next in line for the throne, according to the order of succession. He was a mana wielder but also exceptionally capable in all other respects. In Lèvres, the prejudices against mages were not as entrenched as they were in neighboring kingdoms, so no one really opposed him—well, that was up until very recently.

"Some of the Faith's members feel uneasy about letting a mage ascend to the throne," Muscle continued. "As such, Lord Chaos has taken it upon himself to come to Lèvres and trick the mages into causing a riot in the hopes of weakening the first prince's claim to the throne."

"He decided to do this without being ordered to? Won't he get in trouble?" I asked.

"Most likely not. It is the will of the Faith, after all. They were already planning on sending the saints and holy knights to deal with Prince Flèche in the future. Lord Chaos simply acted ahead of schedule."

"I see."

Most members of the Faith probably didn't like the idea of having a mage at the head of a kingdom. Based on the current situation and what I'd read in the Faith's history books, I was now positive that the Faith was responsible for the gradual decline of magic over the past five hundred years. After the horrors they'd committed to achieve their goal, they clearly wouldn't hesitate to tamper with Lèvres's line of succession in order to prevent Flèche from ascending to the throne. It might not even be the first time they had resorted to such tactics. Well, not that I thought they could defeat Flèche *that* easily, despite their apparent confidence. They still had no idea what my second disciple was truly capable of.

"The fake mage attacks were also caused by Chaos?" I asked.

“Yes. We’d had some of our people infiltrate the mages from the very start. Besides, it was us who called the mages over to the royal capital to ‘bring awareness to their cause’ in the first place.”

“Really? And, just to clear this up, there were real mages among the mix too, right?”

“Of course,” Muscle said, his face remaining impassive. He hadn’t moved an inch since I cast the truth spell on him.

“What will happen to them?” I asked.

“Each participant had to give us their name and address. We plan on using this information to threaten or arrest them when the time comes.”

“Oh, dear. How scary.”

As it turned out, Chaos had been playing those poor mages like pawns since the very beginning. Not only had they ended up making fools of themselves and causing the masses to become even more unsympathetic toward their crusade, but the Faith now knew their identities and could use that information to their advantage.

“Well, the situation has pretty much been dealt with, so I guess that’s that. We caught the instigators, and Flèche has started taking measures to prevent something similar from happening again.”

I undid the truth spell, and Muscle fell to the floor with a loud thud, unconscious. Spells that tampered with the mind were always harsh on the target, so I tried to avoid using them unless I absolutely had to.

“Lam, you’ve used a lot of spells today. How are you feeling?” Char asked, more concerned about me than about the knight passed out on the floor.

“I’m fine. But I probably shouldn’t use any more magic today.”

I tried to be as careful with my health as possible. I didn’t want to collapse and cause trouble to Char and the others again, so, as frustrating as it was, I had to endure it.

I dragged Muscle to the same room I’d locked Chaos in, and Char and I decided to call it a night. To be honest, I wasn’t exactly tired yet, but I knew Char would scold me if I told him that, so I didn’t argue.

“If only those two were willing to repent,” I said with a sigh.

“Don’t get your hopes up too much. Anyway, we have that banquet to attend tomorrow, right? Go to bed already.”

“F-Fine.”

It felt like Char was even more overprotective of me recently, and I was fairly certain it wasn’t just my imagination. While I appreciated his concern, it always left me feeling a bit flustered, so I wasn’t sure how to handle it.

The next day, Flèche held a banquet to celebrate our arrival in Lèvres, just as he had promised. As the guest of honor, I started getting ready early, enlisting the help of the maids Flèche had assigned to me to change into my dress—the one I’d secretly packed in my bag.

“Oh, my, what a unique gown,” one of the maids commented.

“This combination of colors is…*interesting*. It reminds me of His Highness’s favorite suits,” another said.

I couldn’t help but smile at their compliments. It *was* my favorite dress, after all.

“Isn’t it just?” I said proudly.

In high spirits, I finished getting ready and joined Char and Canon, who were waiting for me. Both were dressed to the nines, looking sharp.

“Char, Canon, sorry for the wait,” I said to get their attention.

They turned toward me and instantly froze. *What’s wrong?* I wondered.

“L-La— You… That dress…” Char stammered, seemingly too shaken to form a proper sentence.

“Mother, did you *have* to pick that particular pattern?” Canon added, as shocked as his father.



Needless to say, I was *not* pleased with their reactions.

"What, you don't like it?" I said with a pout.

"Absolutely not," Char replied, not pulling any punches. "And here I thought I'd confiscated all of your ugly dresses before we'd left. I can't believe one slipped through the cracks."

"I agree with father. I believe it would be better if you changed into another dress, mother. This banquet is not the appropriate place to wear a mouse-squirrel-rabbit-patterned gown. Besides, they look...strange."

With both of them ganging up against me, I found myself at a bit of a disadvantage.

"Come, I will pick your gown," Char said with a sigh. "I'm taking this stupid dress out of your hands until we're home."

"No way! Even the maids liked it! They said it was 'unique,'" I protested.

"Did they really mean it as a compliment, though?" my husband retorted.

I'd been holding on to this dress specifically for an event like this, but Char and Canon wouldn't budge. They confiscated it, and I had to begrudgingly change into the sad, patternless cream gown Char picked for me.

When I was done, Char took me by the hand, and the three of us hurried to the banquet hall, arriving just in time.

"Good grief, we almost didn't make it because of you. Something really is wrong with your fashion sense," Char grumbled, still clearly annoyed by the whole situation.

"But it's such a cute dress," I muttered.

"There's nothing 'cute' about those creepy animal faces. Not only did they look weird, but their expressions were off too, like they were angry. Canon agrees with me."

"Do you?" I asked, glancing at my son, who nodded in agreement.

"Yes. They were all very poorly drawn."

Well, this proved once again that my husband and son didn't have an ounce of artistic sensibility.

The three of us made our way through the reception room, chatting with each other. The place was filled with elegantly dressed guests enjoying the festivities.

What a splendid banquet, I thought, taking in the ambience.

To be completely honest, it was far superior to the party we'd attended at the palace. The walls and curtains were adorned

with patterns inspired by the feathers of peacocks, a bird native to the Lèvres Kingdom. Apparently, they had redone the walls and installed these curtains specifically for the banquet. Yellow tablecloths with purple polka dots covered the tables, and the floor was laid with a striped rug in shades of green and bright pink.

"This place is even uglier than our study," Char commented. "These colors are making my eyes hurt."

"Really? I disagree; I find it vibrant and charming," I said.

The banquet hall was on the first floor of the palace and extended out to the courtyard, where rare, harmless monsters were roaming. Pink rabbits were popping their cute little heads out of the ground, while the critters lounging in the pond in groups were known as capycats. Due to their friendliness, a lot of people used to keep these monsters as pets five hundred years ago. I'd actually had a couple of pink rabbits myself when I'd been a child in my past life.

The dishes laid out on the tables were extravagant as well, showcasing the wealth of the kingdom.

We walked around the room for a bit until Flèche made his appearance, dressed in a very creative suit with an abstract design. The mix of blue, orange, white, and yellow made for a rather striking vision that reminded me of the works of art I'd seen around the palace the day before.

"What a lovely suit," I commented, admiring him from a distance.

"You're kidding, right?" Char said. He eyed me with a mixture of shock and exasperation. "So he got his sense of aesthetics from you, huh?" he added under his breath.

Flèche made his way to us, a bright, princely smile curling his lips.

"Master, thank you for accepting my invitation! Here's a present for you," he said, draping around my shoulders the colorful, flower-patterned shawl that he'd been holding.

"Th-Thank you."

Taking a closer look at his gift, I saw that it wasn't flowers printed onto the fabric but large, lionlike monster heads. Rather than looking angry or fierce, they seemed somewhat sleepy. I thought it was quite funny.

"Why in the world did he pick *that* pattern?" I heard Char whisper. He and Canon were staring at the shawl with matching

expressions of disbelief.

Having been raised in that bleak, run-down side palace, Flèche had always been drawn to colorful and vibrant things. His sense really shone through in both the shawl and the decor of the banquet hall.

I also noticed that the staff working at this event were awfully cheerful, far more so than I'd expect from typical servants. I'd caught a glimpse of it the day before, but it was becoming clear that they genuinely loved and respected Flèche. Some of them even used simple spells to assist with their tasks, like setting the table. This surprised me, considering mages didn't have the best reputation in the kingdom.

Flèche must've noticed my confusion, as he explained, "Most of my subordinates are mages. I find them, take them in, and teach them magic based on their individual aptitudes. That's why so many of them are happy to work for me."

"My, my, so you're basically their teacher," I said with a smile.

To think that my former disciple had grown to the point where he was teaching magic to others himself... An indescribable feeling welled up my chest. I was... I was *moved*.

"'Teacher' is a grand word for it. I'm just having them learn magic because it's beneficial for me, nothing more."

"That still makes you their teacher—and a good one at that."

Seeing the positive influence Flèche had on these people, I couldn't help but feel that all the time and effort I'd invested in raising my disciples had truly been worthwhile.

Flèche truly has grown into a remarkable young man since the last time I saw him, I thought, my heart filled with pride. He pushed his head toward me, and I stroked his hair, quietly commending him for all he'd accomplished.

"Hey, Lam," Char snapped, grabbing my hand and pulling it away from Flèche. "You're my wife, remember? You can't just go and pat some other man's head like that!"

Canon nodded vigorously. "Father's right, mother. That's *adultery*."

"I-Is it?!" I exclaimed, hurriedly hiding my hands behind my back at the mention of the word "adultery."

I thought I heard something akin to a tongue click coming from Flèche's direction, but it must've been my imagination.

We chatted some more before Flèche turned to greet the crowd. "Thank you for gathering here today, everyone. Allow me

to introduce our esteemed guests of honor: the Countess of Mercure, her husband, and their son. They are exceptional mages, and at my request, they have come to aid us in addressing the ongoing mage persecution movement. Lady Mercure, in particular, is someone I hold in the highest regard as she is something of a mentor to me. It is actually all thanks to her that the recent turmoil in the capital was brought to an end."

A commotion ran through the crowd at his words.

"I am incredibly thankful for their help, so I will not tolerate any disrespect toward them," Flèche resumed before turning to me and flashing me a bright smile. "Please enjoy the party, master."

After his speech, the three of us were met with such hospitality it almost surprised me. Everyone was very kind and welcoming to us, most likely thanks to Flèche's warning. People came to greet us from every direction, and, while I did my best to respond to them, I quickly started feeling overwhelmed. As for Char, he was as aloof as ever, while Canon answered all the guests' questions politely, clearly not used to these types of social gatherings.

When the banquet came to an end, the three of us left the reception hall. Flèche bid us goodbye before returning to the room to handle the aftermath of the party. I was a little tired but in a great mood—the event had been lovely, the decor stunning, and the food absolutely delicious. As such, I started back to my room in fairly high spirits.

I have Flèche and the people of this kingdom to thank for such a good time.

As we slowly progressed down the long hallway, I saw a young lady leaning against the wall a few meters ahead. She was looking straight in our direction.

Wait, is it me she's looking at? Our eyes just met.

The young woman was thin and wearing an elegant blue gown that accentuated her delicate figure.

If she has something to say to me, I should hear her out.

I told Char and Canon to head back to our rooms first and approached the young woman, curious as to why she seemed so interested in me.

"Is something the matter? You've been staring at me this whole time."

My words were met with a glare. Given that she was inside

the royal palace, I assumed she must be the daughter of a high-ranking noble. I had never met her before, though, and I couldn't recall doing anything to earn her animosity.

"Are you the countess His Highness called over from the Tête Kingdom?" she asked.

When I replied that I was, she narrowed her already-small eyes even further. It seemed that she had an issue with my answer.

"Do you have no sense of shame?!" she spat. "Marching into another nation's royal palace and leading the prince by the nose when you're already married?!"

"You seem to be mistaken. His Highness Prince Flèche invited me, and I came with my husband and my son. As for the prince, I never once tried to seduce or manipulate him."

Flèche was my disciple—he was like a little brother or even a son to me. There was no way I could ever hold romantic feelings toward him, and I was certain he wouldn't appreciate anyone thinking we were lovers either.

"You're lying! Why else would the prince have given you such a warm welcome? I've never seen him hold so lavish a banquet before or smile that much! Besides, I know that he proposed to you!" she said triumphantly.

"Yes, and I declined his proposal. Besides, he wasn't being serious anyway. So you don't—"

I was about to say that she didn't need to worry when she interrupted me.

"His Highness would *never* say something like that as a joke! He meant it!"

She kept arguing with everything I said. All I wanted was to clarify the misunderstanding, but she refused to believe me.

This is quite a pickle.

I didn't even know who she was or what she wanted with me in the first place.

"The next queen will be *me*! Not some lowly countess from a puny kingdom! Know your place!" she shouted, her voice much louder than I would have expected from someone so slender and delicate. When she was done, the door to a nearby room opened, and a group of soldiers, presumably, clad in armor stepped out, carrying weapons.

"Hmph! How stupid of you to wander around here on your own. This is where you meet your demise! Don't worry; I'll make

sure to let everyone know how you died. I'm sure I can come up with a nice story. Let's see—maybe I'll say you weren't content with just seducing the prince despite being married and tried to make a pass at every other man in the palace as well. Then, you got caught and died in a *terrible* accident!"

For someone who appeared to be a high-born noble lady, what she said was disturbingly gruesome. Then again, the noblewomen of the Tête Kingdom weren't much different in that regard.

"Hurry up and kill her!" she ordered the men in armor, who pounced on me all at once.

We were still in the middle of the royal palace, so it was highly unlikely that this girl would be able to get away with her plan if she caused bloodshed here, but it seemed that she hadn't thought this through.

Unless... Does she have so much influence that she doesn't need to worry about consequences? I wondered.

It was probably fine for me to fight off the men—it was self-defense, after all—but I didn't want to cause too much of a mess in the royal palace of another nation. With Wind Magic, I sent the first men charging at me flying, and when the other two threw themselves at me, I used a teleportation spell to send them to the courtyard.

Oh, oops, wrong direction. I accidentally teleported them to the party venue instead of the courtyard.

Eh. Flèche was still in there, he'd probably deal with them for me... Surely.

"Phew, I sent those insignificant insects flying."

The young woman went into a panic upon witnessing my magic. "Y-You're a mana wielder?!" she exclaimed, *finally* seeming afraid of me.

"What if I am? Actually, didn't Prince Flèche introduce me as a mage?"

For someone so obsessed with Flèche, it seemed she hadn't even been listening when he was speaking.

"Whatever! I can't let you stand in the way of me and His Highness! I'll contact the Motar Faith, tell them I stumbled across a dangerous mage, and they'll deal with you for me!" she declared.

"Oh, will they, now?" another voice came from behind the young woman, causing her to freeze up.

“Huh? Wh-Who’s there?”

Char—who was supposed to have returned to our room—was standing right behind her. I was just as surprised as the young woman. Why had he come back?

“I noticed a group of soldiers acting suspiciously, so I decided to return and make sure everything was all right,” Char explained, his tone calm. “Seems like I made the right call.”

It appeared that the noblewoman had initially brought more soldiers than the three who attacked me.

She turned around, and the moment her eyes landed on Char, she seemed immediately captivated.

No surprise there. Char is quite popular among the noble ladies of the Tête Kingdom too, after all.

However, most of them understood that their infatuation would remain unrequited, never going past the staring-at-him-from-afar stage, as none had ever managed to engage him in a proper conversation. Besides, most of the ladies feared him as much as they fancied him due to the intimidating air that surrounded him.

“What exactly were you trying to accomplish by coming after my wife with those soldiers? Just so you know, if your answer doesn’t satisfy me, I *will* send you flying to the Ouragan Mountains without giving you a chance to plead your case,” Char said.

I could tell by his tone that he was serious, so I hurriedly stopped him. “That’d be too cruel, Char. How about you just send her flying to the Membre Cathedral instead? The Ouragan Mountains are far too harsh for a regular noble lady like her.”

“Excuse me? Did you just call me a ‘regular noble lady’?!” the young woman whined. “I’m the only daughter of a duke, and a relative of Prince Flèche! Show me some respect, will you?!”

“Oh, my, is that so?”

Before coming to Lèvres, I’d studied the ducal houses just to be prepared. Needless to say, I never imagined the daughter of one of them would be quite *this* feisty.

“Is that handsome man your husband, then? Even though you have such a good-looking partner, you were still trying to seduce His Highness? You little tart! Why do all these men fawn over you like that? I don’t understand!”

“I told you, it’s all a misunderstanding,” I protested.

I couldn’t help but feel that the noblewomen of five hundred

years ago were far more graceful and refined in their manners than those of today. It seemed that magic wasn't the only thing that'd changed since then.

"I can't believe my wife would be treated like this so soon after our arrival. I was right; we absolutely should move up our return to the Tête Kingdom. Let's go, Lam." Char made his way to me and grabbed my hand, pulling me along with him.

As I had no intention of staying here any longer, I let Char lead me away from the young woman. However, she started making a scene behind us.

"Stop right there!" she demanded. "We're not done here!"

I knew that if I didn't deal with her, she'd keep pestering me and causing us trouble for the rest of our trip. Char and I could handle her with no issue, but I didn't want her assaulting the staff or Canon.

Should I give her a little warning? I wondered.

She had grabbed my arm and was pulling it while shouting at me. *Yes, I think it would be in my best interest to get her out of the way for good.*

I held out a hand in front of me and began channeling mana through my body in preparation for using Light Magic.

"What an ill-mannered girl. I have *just* the spell for you."

Raising my hand above my head, I cast my handy-dandy illusion spell. I first created a canvas of light, on which I began projecting different elements to blink our surroundings into something new. But then, I added a little twist to it. All of a sudden, terrifying zombie monsters began appearing from the shadows I'd created. Of course, they were illusions as well.

"Huh?! What? What's happening?!" the young woman exclaimed, looking around the hallway in confusion. There were zombie monsters everywhere.

Zombie leapers, zombie crawlers, let's add a zombie dragon or two... Ah, yes. Perfect.

Shaking like a leaf, the lady took a few step backs, on the precipice of bursting into tears at any moment. The monsters surrounded her and began to flock in her direction.

She let out a scream, gathered her skirts in her hands, and fled in the opposite direction with impressive speed. But then, she tripped and fell to the floor, the monsters closing in on her.

"Noooooo!"

Right as the illusionary monsters were about to reach her, I

used a teleportation spell to send her to the party venue, just like I'd done with the soldiers from earlier. Even if Flèche wasn't there, his subordinates would most likely deal with her for us.

"Well then, Char, let's return to our room, shall we?" I suggested.

"That was a surprisingly lenient punishment you gave her," he remarked.

"Well, I didn't want to overexert myself, so I went for an easy spell. It's actually a spell we used five hundred years ago for troublesome children who refused to listen," I explained.

Char looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn't, and the two of us resumed walking toward our room. That was when it hit me.

Oh, my—we're holding hands as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Before I'd realized it, my hand had found his, and I'd grabbed it without a second thought.

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"J-Just what in the world is wrong with that woman?! I can't believe she dared to teleport me *here*! And that horrifying spell from earlier..." Lady Typhonne muttered through gritted teeth, seething with anger, as she waded through the capycat pond.

The men she'd sent to attack the Countess of Mercure were here as well, some having fallen into the pond like her, while others had their heads lodged in the holes dug by the pink rabbits. Typhonne struggled toward the shore of the pond. Her dress—one of her favorites—had soaked up the water and weighed her down like lead, making the task even more difficult. After much effort, Typhonne finally crawled out of the water.

"Ugh! How humiliating!" she exclaimed. "I won't let that woman get away with this!"

Typhonne had been raised like a princess, always pampered and adored, so the way the Countess of Mercure had treated her was a shock she could hardly process.

She was lying on the ground near the pond, catching her breath, when a few servants dashed out of the banquet hall and into the garden, perhaps alerted by the disturbance. And, lo and behold, Typhonne's beloved Prince Flèche appeared right behind them.

“Your Highness!” she cried out with joy. The circumstances were far from ideal, but seeing the man she loved approaching lifted her spirits despite everything.

“Are you all right?” Flèche asked. “We suddenly heard a commotion coming from the garden, so we rushed over to see what happened.”

At his words, Typhonne scanned her surroundings. She hadn’t noticed before, but this was the garden that was connected to the banquet hall.

“Ugh! That vile woman! I can’t believe she did this!” Beside herself with rage, Typhonne lifted her gaze to the surprisingly calm Flèche once more. “Your Highness, the Countess of Mercure is extremely dangerous! Not only did she threaten me by manipulating monsters, she also teleported me into the pond! She is not worthy of your attention!”

Flèche listened to her complaints in silence, which Typhonne took as a sign to continue.

“She kept using all these strange spells… How creepy! Mana wielders are nothing but *monsters*!”

The moment the words left her mouth, Flèche’s calm expression hardened, his gaze turning as cold and sharp as ice.

“I see. Is that all you had to say?”

“Y-Your Highness?” Typhonne stammered, noticing the shift in his demeanor.

“I, too, am a mana wielder, as are the others here. But rest assured, if you have such a strong aversion to mana wielders, I can arrange for you to leave the royal capital. If I remember correctly, the margrave of a distant region is looking for a wife. He’s fifty years old, has a terrible temper, strange inclinations, and a myriad of mistresses, but since you are so young, I’m sure he will treat you kindly. Sounds like a wonderful opportunity, doesn’t it?”

“Huh? Wh-What…”

Starting to realize the implications of his words, Typhonne’s face went pale.

“Master is really important to me, yet you’ve spoken badly of her. That’s not very nice. Also…” Flèche paused, glancing sharply at the men behind Typhonne. “What exactly did you order those men to do to her? Well, no need to answer—I have a pretty good idea. I’ve tolerated you hovering around me so far, but you’ve tried to harm my master, and that’s where I draw the line.”

“Please, wait!” Typhonne pleaded. “Your Highness, why are you defending that woman?! Not only is she a mana wielder, but she’s clearly a lady of loose morals as well! She was trying to seduce you even though she’s already married!”

“Despite what I just said, you’re *still* bad-mouthing master. I’m done talking to you, so I’ll let my subordinates handle the rest. You will take full responsibility for bringing dangerous men into the castle, won’t you?” With that, he turned on his heel.

“Wai—” Typhonne sprang to her feet, attempting to chase after him, but his subordinates immediately stepped into her path.

“Take her away,” the prince ordered coldly before returning inside.

“Yes, Your Highness!” his subordinates replied in unison, following his orders and dragging Typhonne away.

And so, having offended the prince, Typhonne was permanently banned from the palace, before being unceremoniously shipped off to the countryside to marry a petty margrave.

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Several days had passed since the banquet, and the city was still a little unsettled after the fake mage attacks, but I hoped I’d get the chance to finally go do some sightseeing soon. As had become my routine over the past few days, I’d spent time with Flèche and had walked around the castle before retiring for the night to the room he’d prepared for Char and me, which is where I currently was.

Speaking of Flèche, he’d been sending me extravagant gifts every single day since my arrival in Lèvres. I supposed it was to be expected—he was a prince, after all. He’d often give me presents in our past life as well, but the sheer volume of gifts he’d sent me this time was on an entirely different scale.

“Where did you get that dress, Lam?” Char asked across from me.

Char’s gaze was fixed on Flèche’s latest gift, which I was holding in my hands.

It was a gown covered in lace and pink ribbons, complete with a set of matching accessories tucked into the box.

“Prince Flèche gave it to me. Isn’t it adorable?” I replied.

An annoyed look appeared on Char's face. For some reason, he seemed to be in a bad mood.

"I was so shocked when I saw the prince at the banquet. To think there's someone in this world with worse taste than you. And then, on top of that, he has the audacity to challenge me by sending you dresses. He's got some nerve, doesn't he?"

Hearing my husband's complaints, I couldn't help but think he had a point. In my past life, Flèche had been my disciple, so him giving me presents was totally fine, but it wasn't appropriate for a man to send clothes to a married woman.

"But it's not like I can just send it back... I suppose I'll give it to Mine when we go back home," I said.

"Good idea," Char nodded. He seemed satisfied with my response, and his bad mood began to lift.

I shrunk Flèche's gift down with my magic and packed it into my travel bag.

A short time later, we suddenly heard a commotion outside our room.

"It sounds like it's coming from the hallway," I said. "I can hear people yelling and running."

I was curious, so I left the room to see what was happening, Char following close behind. I stopped someone who was rushing by and asked them what was going on.

"A sudden guest has come to visit His Highness," he told me. Apparently, that guest had introduced himself as a saint from the Faith.

Well, that's a visitor Flèche can't turn away. So a saint has come, huh? That doesn't bode well. I'd better go find Flèche in case he needs backup.

I grabbed Chaos and Muscle, who were still in the room I'd locked them in a few days prior. "Char, I'm going to meet with the saint. He must be here to collect these two," I said.

Char didn't respond but rose to his feet, clearly intending to accompany me. I saw no reason to object, so I let him join me.

It was the middle of the night, so the hallway was almost empty, save for a few people here and there. We made our way to Flèche's chambers with Chaos and Muscle in tow, both restrained.

I'm just going to show this new saint his comrades are alive. That should reassure him.

We ran into a few servants on our way to Flèche's rooms, but

none of them tried to stop us. Perhaps Flèche had instructed them to allow us free rein around the palace.

We took up positions in front of Flèche's rooms, and I pressed my ear against the door, trying to catch any bit of conversation I could before we headed inside. Char did the same thing, practically leaning over my back to do so. The proximity made me feel a little nervous.

"Are you really going in there, Lam?" he asked me in a hushed voice.

"Yes," I replied just as quietly. "It's my job as a teacher to help my disciples when they're in trouble."

"Does that guy really need help, though?" Char muttered. "But, if you're set on it, I won't stop you. However, you can't use magic. Between arresting the saint and his knight and dealing with that duke's daughter, you've been relying on mana almost every day since we got here. And you've already cast a fair number of spells today, with Canon's lesson and holding the saint down when he started to struggle. If it comes down to it, I'll handle it," he assured me.

I hummed pensively. "I suppose that, at your current level, you could easily take on a saint with similar abilities to Chaos. Plus, we have Prince Flèche on our side too."

"Who cares about him?" Char muttered, his body still pressed up against mine. He sounded vaguely irritated.

All of a sudden, voices started coming from inside Flèche's rooms. We fell silent at once, straining our ears to catch every word. Surprisingly, we could hear them quite clearly.

"As such, we demand that you return our saint to us immediately," an unfamiliar voice said. "We have already confirmed that he is somewhere within these walls. Should you insist on concealing him, the Lèvres Kingdom will face severe consequences. I advise you to make a wise decision."

"My, my, such a bold statement coming from a mere saint. Should I take your words as the official stance of the Motar Faith?" Flèche asked.

"Yes."

From the tone of the voice, Flèche's interlocutor sounded to be quite young, probably around the same age as Flèche and me.

"Very well. Then, allow me to respond as a representative of the Lèvres Kingdom. The saint we captured has sown the seed of

conflict within my kingdom, caused extensive damage to our cathedral, and injured countless innocent townsfolk. What, pray tell, does *your* representative have to say about that?"

Flèche was right. Chaos and Muscle had caused an uproar in their unilateral decision to torment the mages of Lèvres, had damaged a historic cathedral, and had roped in innocent civilians in the process. To make matters worse, the people in the cathedral were devout followers of the religion Chaos and Muscle were members of!

"Mind your tone," the saint said coolly. "Besides, why am I talking to you, a mere prince, and not the king right now? Are you trying to insult the Motar Faith?"

"Well, I'm the only member of the royal family who can use magic, so I'm the one who deals with saint-related matters."

"You're looking down on us."

"As are you. If you wish to talk to the king, you'll have to send us someone of comparable rank. Saints are just followers of the faith who happen to have a little bit of mana. It's not like you're involved in the running of the organization, right?" Flèche said, not pulling his punches.

I would've expected nothing less from my second disciple! He clearly had no intention of accepting the saint's outrageous requests and letting him walk all over him.

He could've chosen to do as the saint had told him to keep the peace, but that would've meant taking responsibility for something he hadn't done.

Flèche knew he wouldn't be able to convince the saint to leave peacefully—the Motar Faith was much more powerful than the Lèvres Kingdom, after all.

He might offend them by refusing their demands, but I'm sure he'll figure out how to handle it. Well... As long as he feels like it.

There were only two *little* issues with that. One, no one knew when Flèche's motivation would kick in and, two, he'd definitely end up causing a huge mess when it did. Ever since he'd been a child, Flèche had had a bad habit of thinking he could just freeze anything and anyone he didn't like and call it a day. Back then, his mana pool had been absolutely enormous, much larger than my other two disciples'.

I'd actually sneakily used my magic to see how it compared in this lifetime, and it seemed to be pretty much the same. Because of his exorbitant mana pool, he'd struggled at controlling his

mana, and his spells always ended up way more powerful than necessary. If he were to take action against the Faith, it was likely that a lot of civilians and buildings would get caught up in it.

But then again, he seems more mellow and mature than in our past lives. I want to believe he'd be a bit more careful now.

The saint's voice pulled me out of my thoughts—the two of them still weren't done talking.

"Hah. You dare look down on a saint. Don't come crying to me when you realize the errors of your ways."

"How naive of you to think you can win against me. Ignorance truly is scary, isn't it? I've left the Motar Faith alone so far because I didn't feel like dealing with you lot, but if you start annoying me, I might just go and freeze you all once and for all."

"Don't get so full of yourself just because you can use a little magic."

At this rate, it seemed like the two of them would just keep bickering back and forth without ever reaching a resolution. It was probably only a matter of time before they started fighting, and if that happened, the ones who'd suffer most would be the servants of the castle.

Flèche may have been more considerate of his surroundings than before, but he still struggled at controlling his feelings and mana—as I saw firsthand when we arrived at the palace. I didn't want him to accidentally hurt any innocent people in the process.

Well then, as his former teacher, I suppose it's my job to step in and stop him before things go too far.

I opened the door and marched into the room, dragging Chaos along.

Flèche sat there clad in his princely outfit, opposite a saint wearing a hooded indigo-blue cape. It seemed that this was most saints' usual attire, not just Chaos's.

"I've heard *everything*," I said when I came to a stop.

Flèche's face lit up when he saw me, and a pale pink blush spread on his cheeks. "Master! Did you come to visit me? I love you!"

Meanwhile, the saint was observing me with a slightly annoyed look on his face. "Who are you? You say you heard everything but *still* have the guts to act this insolently toward me, knowing who I am?"

"Indeed, I do!" I declared without hesitation.

“You— Huh?” He clearly hadn’t been expecting me to reply in the affirmative, if the way his mouth opened and closed like the goldfish I used to have as a kid was anything to go by.

He wasn’t wearing his hood, so I was able to clearly see his ivory hair (the same color as Chaos’s), sharp indigo-blue eyes, and refined features.

My goldfish was cuter, I thought. *Flèche seems on the verge of losing control, so I should probably stay for now.*

With Chaos still in tow, I plonked myself onto the nearest sofa—which was quite soft and luxurious—without asking for permission. The saint finally noticed Chaos’s presence, and he stared at his former colleague with a slightly stiff expression.

There were four sofas at the center of the room, with Flèche and the saint sitting on two of them, opposite each other. I’d taken a seat on the third one, granting me a view of their profiles from where I sat. Char followed suit, hauling Muscle along, and sat beside me without a word.

This is a bit of a tight squeeze. Muscle takes so much space that Char has to sit closer to me than he normally would.

Flèche was watching us with a look that suggested he wanted to say something, though I couldn’t quite figure out what. *Char is my husband, so we’re not breaking any sort of etiquette rule by sitting like this… Right?*

“Master, isn’t it a bit cramped over there? Come sit beside me,” he offered.

“Lam’s place is beside me, not you,” Char cut in before I could respond, as arrogant as ever.

“Wha—”

“She’s *my* wife, after all,” he added.

“Oh, please. Stop playing the besotted husband when your marriage is only one of convenience. Master is destined to marry *me*.”

“Oh? So, not only are you in love with my wife, but now you’re claiming you intend to steal her away from me, Your Highness? This will become an international incident, you realize?”

For some reason, the two of them had started squabbling with each other, completely ignoring the visiting saint.

Sighing inwardly, I decided to step in. “Will you two stop already? This isn’t the time or place for this.” I turned toward the saint. “Now, Mr. Saint, I’m sorry, but I have no intention of handing Chaos back to the Faith. I plan on making him my new

apprentice."

"Huh?"

"I know you came all the way here to retrieve your colleague, and I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I have decided to take his education into my own hands, and as such, I cannot return him to the Faith. As you can see, he's unharmed, and I have no intention of hurting him in the future."

The saint didn't say anything, staring at me with a scowl. By contrast, Chaos was fidgeting around, struggling against his restraints.

"Néant, brother, I…" he whined in a small voice after some hesitation.

I blinked in surprise. *"Brother"?*

However, the saint—who I now knew was called Néant—ignored his plea. "You good-for-nothing. You've tarnished the title of saint."

A frightened expression appeared on Chaos's face at his words, and he gazed at Néant like a kicked puppy.

"I made a mistake by making you a saint. I'm disappointed in you." He sighed. "I'll need to find a new candidate now."

What does he mean by that? I wondered. They were both saints, yet it was clear that Néant held the higher position.

The fear in Chaos's eyes deepened. "No! Anything but that! I don't want to become this crazy witch's apprentice! Please don't take my title away from me. I don't want to go back *there*! Anything but that!"

He was flailing around so much that he ended up falling from the sofa.

Néant tracked Chaos's movements, a cold look in his indigo-blue eyes, before raising a hand in his direction, electricity crackling in his palm—Lightning Magic.

"L-Look out!" I exclaimed.

However, Néant's spell was deflected before it could reach Chaos. Char had countered it with one of his own lightning spells.

"You stopped it. Thank you, Char," I said, relieved.

"I don't want you to use magic, if I can help it," he whispered to me. "You might collapse again."

I let out a defeated noise.

I knew for a fact that Flèche wouldn't have lifted a finger to protect a saint, and I hadn't been expecting Char to do it either,

so I had secretly been preparing to do it myself. But to think that Char had seen through me like that… I'd been thinking it for some time now, but his senses were razor-sharp.

Up until very recently, the Mercures had only been able to use one spell each, which hadn't given them a lot to work with. To compensate, they had sharpened their instincts and honed their physical abilities to near perfection, lest they not stand a chance against the dangerous monsters they fought on the regular. Their combat prowess was exceptional, and their intuition far surpassed the saints' and even mine, who relied almost exclusively on magic.

"Lam, I *know* you don't want the kid to die. Stop underestimating me," Char added, his trademark scowl etched across his face.

Meanwhile, Néant was observing us pensively.

He muttered to himself, "Is he a mage from the Lèvres Kingdom? He's quite good for a regular mage. I suppose I'll need to deal with him before he becomes a threat to the Faith." He began preparing to shoot another spell, this time at Char.

But before things spiraled into a full-blown battle, there was something I needed to ask him, so I decided to step in. "Hold on a minute. You used an offensive spell on Chaos just then, didn't you? Why did you attack one of your own? He's a saint, just like you."

"'Just like me'? That failure? Don't make me laugh," he scoffed. "There's a clear hierarchy among the saints. I'm second in rank, and he's tenth—the very bottom. The saints in third position and up are allowed to appoint the rest of the saints and assign them missions, you see. We're nothing like those small fries at the lower rungs."

Apparently, a saint's rank determined their position among the others, with the top three having authority over the rest.

"I see. I take it you're the one who appointed Chaos as the tenth saint, then," I said.

Néant nodded. "He showed the most magic potential out of the remaining children from the orphanage, so I gave him a chance. But it was a grave mistake. As one of the top three saints, it's my duty to eliminate those who fail at their responsibilities. I can't keep good-for-nothings in our ranks, after all. So don't stand in my way if you value your life," he said, glaring at me, a sinister look in his eyes.

I assumed he was trying to intimidate me, but I wasn't scared of him in the slightest.

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Still restrained, Chaos slowly lifted his upper body. His gaze never once left his brother, who stood a few meters away, a surly expression on his face. He couldn't afford to look away if he wanted to survive.

Muscle also has his arms bound, so he won't be of any help right now.

Néant's ivory hair and slanted indigo-blue eyes were the exact same as Chaos's. Why wouldn't they be? The two of them were real brothers, related by blood, after all. However, their upbringing had been worlds apart from that of ordinary siblings.

The two of them grew up in a small orphanage located near the Motar Faith's main church. Unlike other orphanages, the one they lived in was beautiful, and the children never had to go hungry. However, there was a catch: Only children with a large mana pool and a talent for magic were allowed to stay.

This beautiful orphanage was actually a special facility for children with large quantities of mana. This was its only value, and the reason it was different from the regular, poor orphanages.

The Motar Faith's main church wanted individuals with mana and strong magical abilities among their ranks, ones who had been molded to its ideals and purposes. As such, they had built this facility in a nearby town to produce what they called "saints" and "holy knights."

Only children with sufficient mana were deemed "suitable," while those who lacked it were cast out and sent to other, more neglectful orphanages—if they were lucky. If there was no space for them in any other institution, they were discarded. They weren't simply thrown into the street, no—they were forced to become experiment subjects for the saints or living targets for the holy knights to practice their magic on.

Unlike his gifted older brother, Chaos hadn't been chosen to become a saint. The Faith had judged him to have no magical talent, and as a result, he had been discarded and sent to the holy knights' training grounds. There, he was made into a moving target for their drills—a disposable pawn, desperately

fleeing for his life while they unleashed spells on him as if he were a rebellious mage opposing the Faith.

As there were many knights and very few targets, the odds of survival for the children thrown into the training grounds were virtually nonexistent. One by one, his friends from the orphanage fell, but Chaos kept running, relentlessly, desperately—until he found himself cornered.

This is the end, he thought. Without any regard for his surroundings, he unleashed his magic in all directions, squeezing every last bit of mana he could into the spell in a final, desperate attempt to save himself. He kept going until his consciousness began to fade, and only then did he realize that all the holy knights who had been chasing him were dead.

After that, his world changed.

The sound of his brother's footsteps approaching made him lift his head. Before he could fully grasp what was happening, he was appointed as a saint and began receiving a special magical education. Despite being the lowest-ranked of the saints, he was granted the freedom to do as he pleased without anyone reprimanding him. It felt like a dream come true.

But his brother's curtness puzzled him. He hadn't always been that way. When they were first accepted into the orphanage, they had supported each other through every hardship. However, the moment the gap in their abilities had become apparent, their relationship began to fracture. That was why Chaos had felt so happy when his brother came to fetch him and appointed him as a saint.

Yet, that happiness was short-lived. Beyond issuing orders as his superior, Néant barely interacted with him. Even though they were finally both saints, Néant still didn't act like the brother Chaos remembered.

This saddened Chaos. It made him *furious*. He wanted nothing more than for his brother to acknowledge him again. Desperate for attention, he started playing little pranks, hoping they'd catch his brother's eye. Unfortunately, that damn witch had foiled all of his plans before his brother even had a chance to notice them.

And now, here he was—captured by the witch, with his brother standing before him, intent on taking his life.

The fear of becoming a "target" again and the sorrow of having been abandoned by his own brother intertwined, driving Chaos to the edge of insanity.

I… I… What should I do?

Why did things *always* turn out this way? Why did the people around him *always* have to get in his way? He'd finally managed to rise above his past, yet the second saint, his own brother, was about to take it all away from him. If he was dismissed now, he would lose his place in the Motar Faith for good.

"No, no, no! I don't want to become a target again! I don't want to be discarded! Nooo!" he cried out, his sudden outburst causing everyone else in the room to stop in their tracks.

Néant glanced at his brother writhing on the floor pathetically before turning back to face the insolent fools, who didn't even flinch despite standing before a saint. Then, he let out a loud, conspicuous sigh.

"What a bunch of idiots you are, getting on your high horses just because you can use a bit of magic and managed to capture Chaos. I'll show you fools harsh reality," Néant said, preparing to cast his magic.

Flèche crossed his arms as he watched him. The mild smile he had been sporting since the beginning of their conversation twisted into something darker, almost vicious. "Do you intend to continue using magic in the royal palace of Lèvres? You *do* realize that it'll be a big problem if you hurt the people here, right?"

"Shut up," Néant retorted. "I'll make up some sort of cover story later. There are many believers of the Motar Faith around the world, and they'll all take my word for it."

He was right. The Motar Faith's modus operandi had always been to cover up scandals and fabricate stories to manipulate the truth. This was how they'd effectively rewritten history itself. Only a select few chosen by the Faith knew the true extent of their manipulation—Néant among them. He had been chosen by the Holy Father himself. As the Holy Father never appeared in public, most people doubted his existence, but he was very real. Being the second saint, Néant had met him before, and they had even exchanged a few words. Néant held nothing but respect and admiration for the head of the Faith.

"Rest assured, Your Holiness. I will eliminate anyone who stands in your way," the saint muttered, preparing to launch the spell forming in the palm of his hand at Chaos and those fools of Lèvres.

No regular mage could stop a saint's attack—Néant's win was assured.

Néant and Chaos had clawed their way from their past as orphans and risen all the way to the top of the Motar Faith. Needless to say, it had not been easy. Néant had even managed to snatch the position of second saint by suppressing his own emotions in favor of efficiency, something Chaos had been unable to do.

There was no way Néant would lose to a bunch of naive mages who had never struggled a day in their lives.

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I'd risen from the sofa and stood face-to-face with Néant when Chaos suddenly started screaming from his position on the floor.

"Huh? Why are you yelling all of a sudden?" I asked, confused. Peering down, I saw that the boy had completely broken down and was struggling against his restraints, his body wracked with panic. "What's happening to you? 'Target'? 'Discarded'? What are you talking about?"

I couldn't help but wonder why Néant's coldness had shaken him so badly. But no matter how many times I asked him what was wrong, he just kept screaming and refused to answer.

Néant, on the other hand, seemed to know exactly what was going on. "Hmph. What an idiot," he scoffed. "If you're so scared of getting discarded, then why didn't you just stay put and wait for orders? Instead, you ran off, got captured by Lèvres, and ruined the reputation of our faith. And now, you have the gall to complain about paying for your mistakes? Well, rest assured; you won't be discarded again. I'm going to eliminate you right here and now. That's my responsibility as your older brother."

"Your older brother?" I echoed, glancing back and forth between Chaos and Néant. "I thought you two looked alike. So you are brothers, huh? But why are you trying to kill him, then? Then again, I remember spotting my disciples trying to kill each other a couple of times. Is that what's going on here?"

Flèche blatantly averted his gaze at my words. My disciples did *not* like each other, and they'd often hurl genuinely dangerous spells at each other behind my back. Flèche hadn't instigated many of the fights himself, but he had no problem freezing his fellow disciples whenever they got on his nerves.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, master," Flèche said

innocently. “The three of us got along just fine. What you saw wasn’t us *fighting*—we were just playing around, and— Oh?” He stopped himself upon noticing the death glare Néant was shooting at us. I supposed our constant getting off topic must’ve started to annoy him.

“Blood relations mean nothing to us saints,” he said coldly. “I only made Chaos a saint because I thought he could be useful to me. But now, I’ve come to realize that he’s nothing more than a burden. I’ll be better off discarding him and finding a more suitable replacement.”

He sounds just like the former aide of the Cerveau Cathedral’s bishop when he claims he’ll “discard” Chaos.

I didn’t know what Chaos had meant when he said he didn’t want to be a “target” again, but I could guess what the brothers meant by “discard.” And it was highly likely this mindset had become the standard among mages and members of the Motar Faith.

Take the House of Mercure, for instance—how did they come to treat the children studying at their schoolhouse like disposable pawns? I personally thought the root of it all lay in the absurd requests the Faith kept throwing at them.

The Motar Faith had always been the Mercures’ main client. The royal family and certain nobles hired them from time to time, but their business was a mere drop in the ocean compared to the countless jobs the Faith sent their way. Moreover, the balance of power meant that the Mercures had no choice but to prioritize the Faith’s requests over those of the king’s or the nobles’.

As such, they’d been forced to subject the children to grueling training; otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to complete the tasks demanded of them. And had they failed to fulfill those expectations, the House of Mercure would pretty much have lost its entire raison d’être. Where would they have stood among other noble houses, then? Their position would have become even more precarious than it already was, and they would have been at risk of losing their livelihood. In the worst-case scenario, they might have gotten eliminated altogether.

In an age where hostility toward mages ran rampant, such an outcome was disturbingly plausible. For that reason, the Mercures had no choice but to prove themselves useful to society by putting their magic to practical use. Any hint of

rebellion, dissent, or defiance toward the Faith or the royal family would have been met with swift retribution. The saints and holy knights would immediately be dispatched to deal with them, and with how weak the Mercures used to be, they would've been no match for them. Their only option was to endure and meekly accept the Faith's unreasonable demands.

The power dynamic has shifted slightly now that I've taken things into my own hands, though.

Mere months ago, the children of the schoolhouse had had to fight tooth and nail to simply survive the schoolhouse's grueling training, unable to even afford to save their classmates. Once they'd graduated from that wretched place, they would've been sent on dangerous missions, where they'd most likely have met untimely deaths. There was a reason all the previous Earls of Mercure had died so young.

I couldn't just stand by and let children be tortured like that.

I didn't know why or how I'd been reincarnated, but if I could save my fellow mages from those who oppressed them, then perhaps my reincarnation had a purpose after all.

No—just saving the mages won't be enough. The root of the problem lies in the Motar Faith itself.

Just how cruel did they have to be to willingly "discard" children without a second thought? Behind the saints' flaunting of their powers, there must've been countless children suffering in silence, just like Chaos. I could see why the boy had been so terrified of getting his mana sealed now. Without magic, he couldn't be a saint anymore and would undoubtedly get "discarded" once the Faith learned of it.

This religion is beyond twisted.

Néant must've gotten tired of the conversation not progressing, as he started shooting flames at everyone in the room. I watched in exasperation as the roaring flames closed in on me.

Good grief, these brothers! Can't they be a bit more careful with where they use their magic? Néant is an adult and keeps acting like he's above everyone else, but he has less common sense than the Mercure children.

Char stepped in front of the flames before they reached me and used one of the defense spells he'd just learned to block the attack.

"Thank you, Char," I said.

“Just performing my duties,” he replied.

The defense spell he’d used was different from the one I’d cast to protect myself from Lilyrossa at the king’s party. It was a Dark Magic spell, and rather than deflecting the attack, it reversed time on everything that had come in contact with the flames, making it as if nothing had happened.

This way, the flames won’t spread to the furniture. Good thinking, Char.

He’d kept asking me to teach him Dark Magic, so I’d started giving him impromptu lessons during our free time, and he’d managed to learn all these difficult spells in record time. His talent for magic truly was exceptional.

Meanwhile, Flèche had started unleashing his ice magic, his lips curled into a contemptuous smile. He might appear gentle, but once he deemed someone an enemy, he showed them no mercy. His mana pool and offensive power were the largest of all three of my disciples, so he definitely was a force to reckon with.

“You just attacked master, didn’t you?” he said, his tone calm and even. “Out of all things, you tried to harm my precious, beloved master. You’re going to regret it. I’m going to thoroughly freeze you until not even your heart remains unscathed, then I’ll break you into tiny pieces, pulverize them, and erase you completely.” He punctuated his sentence with an ominous chuckle, unleashing a powerful ice spell. Néant’s flames sizzled into nothing the instant they came in contact with it, filling the room with steam.

As for Flèche’s ice, it simply didn’t melt, which was what made it so troublesome to deal with in the first place. It was just as tough and stubborn as its master.

The saint was clearly no match for my disciple.

“Impossible!” Néant exclaimed. “How can a mere mage like you be this powerful?! The only things you’re supposed to be able to do with Water Magic are create water and splash it around! And *you*!” he said, turning toward Char. “Just what in the world was that spell?! Normally, Light Magic is used for defense, but it clearly wasn’t that. Was that Dark Magic?!”

I analyzed Néant’s abilities from my seat on the sofa. He’d been able to see through both Flèche’s and Char’s spells, but it seemed that he wasn’t familiar with Dark Magic.

Dark Magic had always been a polarizing attribute, even five hundred years ago. And now, it seemed to have been

categorized as an especially dangerous and problematic form of magic, even more so than the other attributes. While things hadn't been as extreme when I was Aurora, there had already been regions that discriminated against Dark Magic users even back then. And, now, it seemed that the Motar Faith refused to even teach it to their saints.

Personally, I liked Dark Magic and used it often. It was a difficult and dangerous attribute, but one of my disciples had had it as a primary attribute, so I was used to it. My own teacher used to wield it as well.

I turned my focus back to the battle. Néant might have been a saint, but he stood absolutely no chance facing both Char *and* Flèche at the same time. Each of them was already powerful enough on his own, and with me waiting in the wings, the odds were definitely stacked against him.

"You looked like you were quite confident in your abilities, but it turns out you're all bark, no bite," Char commented ruthlessly.

"If that's all it takes to become a saint, then I could easily become one myself. No, I may even be able to become the new Holy Father," Flèche added with a gentle smile that contrasted sharply with his mocking tone.

Néant's face flushed with anger at Flèche's words, and he yelled, "Shut up! Do *not* talk ill of His Holiness! He's above the rest of us!"

It seemed that he really liked the Holy Father, huh?

However, Flèche and Char paid him no mind and started raining attack upon attack on him, to the point where he couldn't afford to cast anything other than defensive spells. In the end, I hadn't even had to lift a finger.

"Damn it... Am I going to lose to some mages?" Néant muttered through gritted teeth, swiftly maneuvering around the room in an attempt to dodge the barrage of attacks.

He didn't clear them all. Some of Flèche's ice coursed up one of his feet, locking him in place, now unable to dodge Char's incoming lightning spell. He tried to cast something quick and defensive to block the attack but didn't make it in time. Letting out a pained groan, he fell to his knees, hurt.

Flèche came to stand before him and froze his second leg so he wouldn't be able to run away.

"Phew. I finally froze that insignificant insect," he said. "I might as well freeze the rest of your body while I'm at it. It's the only

fair punishment for using magic against master, don't you think?" His icy gaze locked onto the saint, and he raised a hand to cast another spell, but I intervened.

"Enough, Flèche! Capturing the saint is enough," I said.

"Master?!" Flèche exclaimed, looking at me with a scowl.

"I've decided to redo his education, along with his brother's."

"Enough with the jokes, master," Flèche said. "He's a much higher rank than Chaos, you know?"

"I do. But I refuse to kill him in front of his younger brother. And I'm sure I can find a way to straighten him out," I declared.

Flèche seemed exasperated by me, but he didn't protest any further. "You're way too much of a soft touch, master. I'm worried about what he'll try to do, so I'm at least going to absorb his mana. I'm not that good with meticulous spells, so I *may* end up overdoing it, but...eh. Oh, and I'll restrain him so he doesn't try to hurt you."

Using the same spell that I had used on Chaos, he first sealed Néant's mana, then created ice bindings that he wrapped around the badly beaten saint. When he was done, he used a Dark Magic spell to shrink him, along with his brother, who'd been swept up in the spell. Though Flèche's main attribute was water—and more specifically, ice—he could wield every attribute, just like me.

The two brothers were now small enough to fit in the palm of a hand. He did the same thing with Muscle before grabbing an insect cage he kept as decor in his room and tossing the three troublemakers inside.

"There, now things should be a bit quieter. Master, I'm giving you this cage, but be careful with the saints, okay?" he said, handing me the cage.

"I will. Thank you."

"And remember, you can just swat these insects if they get too loud."

"I think I'll pass on that. It'd leave a bad taste in my mouth." I grabbed the cage and peered inside, addressing the brothers and Muscle. "From today onward, you three are my disciples."

"Get lost!" Néant and Chaos started squeaking in high-pitched voices, to my dismay. Personally, I thought it was a pretty appealing offer. Saints really were feisty.

"Well then, we're going to head back to our room," I said, leaving the room with Char.

But then, as I turned around to bid Flèche good night, I caught a fleeting glimpse of him looking troubled, and my breath hitched in my throat.

“Prince Flèche?” I murmured.

My voice seemed to pull him out of his thoughts, and he smiled at me.

“Yes? Is something the matter, master?” he asked, tilting his head to the side. “Ah, I know—would you prefer to stay in my room?”

Had my imagination played tricks on me, or had I truly seen a hint of sadness on his face? Out of my three disciples, Flèche had always felt both the easiest yet the most impossible to read at the same time. Actually, scratch that—none of them had been honest with their feelings.

“You shouldn’t invite people into your room so easily, Your Highness. What if they turn out to be dangerous?” I lectured him.

“Can I just say the same thing right back at you?” he mumbled before clearing his throat. “Ahem. You’re always welcome to my room, master. Come whenever you’d like.”

“I won’t!”

I couldn’t help but feel like he’d deliberately switched the topic.

I won’t press any further for today. He probably has a lot on his plate with what just happened.

Feeling a bit like I’d been played, I exited the room without another word.

Chapter Five: The Countess’s Past

With the saints dealt with, Char carried Lam back to their room in the palace of Lèvres. She seemed to be in a rather bad state, which worried Char. She hadn’t expended that much magic the past day, but the fact that they were away from home coupled with all the spells she’d cast the previous day must’ve taken a toll on her body. As for Flèche, he was so busy dealing with the aftermath of the saint’s visit that he wasn’t able to accompany them back to their room.

Thank goodness that pest didn’t follow us, Char thought.

The royal palace was in turmoil after the (fake) mage attacks during the protests, and most people thought that the royal family ought to take responsibility for the incidents. Being a prince sure wasn’t easy.

Char lowered Lam onto the bed, and the corners of her lips curled downward. “My stamina hasn’t improved at all,” she lamented, visibly frustrated. “How am I so exhausted after only using a few spells? This body is so inconvenient!”

“Stop flapping about and lie down,” he said. “Until you’ve regained your stamina, if you ever want to use more magic than your body can handle, let me know and I’ll do it for you. I have more than enough mana.”

“I will. Thank you, Char,” Lam replied with a smile.

For some reason, he sometimes felt a little flustered whenever she looked at him like that. He had no idea why, though.

“Ever since I was a kid, even after using magic the whole day at the schoolhouse, I never felt tired. I wonder why,” he mused out loud.

Even when Fouet and Barre had exhausted themselves of mana, Char would still be fine. As such, he was confident in his mana pool.

“Do you need something, Lam?”

“No, thank you. I’m going to sleep. You should head to bed too. You’re tired, aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” Char replied after a brief silence.

Lately, he’d been feeling increasingly worried about his wife’s

lack of stamina. He wanted nothing more than to leave Lèvres and take her back home.

Confused as to why he was so concerned about his wife all of a sudden, he distracted himself by fussing over her and making sure she had everything she needed.

After some time, Lam's breathing grew slower. She had managed to fall asleep. It didn't seem like she was feeling worse than usual, and Char let out a sigh of relief.

However, he was still feeling restless and struggled to fall asleep. Deciding to take a walk to try and work out his thoughts, he stepped into the corridor, only to find Flèche standing outside the door.

"What do you want?" Char asked dryly. "Lam is sleeping. If you want to talk to her, come back tomorrow."

"That's not why I'm here," Flèche said, shaking his head. His eyes met Char's. "I wanted to talk to *you*, Lord Mercure."

"Wha—"

Char had nothing to say to the prince. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with him. He could tell this situation would be a pain to deal with, so he decided to ignore the prince and resume his walk, but Flèche's voice stopped him.

"There's something I need to tell you about master. You keep repeating that you're her husband, but you don't know her past, do you? If you knew the real her, you wouldn't be playing the perfect husband anymore."

"How about you mind your own business? If I have any questions, I'll ask Lam directly," Char replied curtly.

A callous and somewhat cruel expression rippled over Flèche's features. He'd *never* make that kind of face in front of Lam, Char was certain of it.



“So you just admitted you know nothing about her. I was right—you really aren’t worthy of master. You ought to give her to me.”

Char felt much more irritated than he normally would at Flèche’s remarks, perhaps because they had to do with Lam. This proved just how important she’d become to him.

As the head of the House of Mercure, it is my duty to protect my family. I don’t care that he’s Lam’s former disciple—I’ve grown an attachment to her, and I have no intention of handing her over to him, prince or not.

And, of course, Flèche being Flèche, he didn’t bother to hide his dislike of Char either. “Master truly is wasted on you. Did you know that, five hundred years ago, she used to be a living legend, to the point where you can still find her name in history books to this day? If you understand the gap between you two, then you better get out of my way,” he said, dropping all semblance of politeness. Well, he was a prince, so it wasn’t like he *had* to be polite with Char in the first place.

“I told you, this is none of your business. Stop talking about my wife’s private life,” Char replied. He turned on his heel and headed back into the room, his desire for a walk having completely evaporated.

“*We’re* the ones who helped master reincarnate—and we paid the price for it. You have no right to call yourself her husband,” Flèche said, his tone full of venom, but Char didn’t so much as glance back at him.

After slamming the door shut, he returned to his wife’s side. A complicated feeling rose from within him as he gazed at her peaceful sleeping face.

“Lam… Just who in the world are you? A ‘living legend’ from five hundred years ago… That’s just like Aurora,” he muttered.

His brain went into overdrive as he thought back on Lam’s bountiful magic knowledge and abilities, the strange color of her hair, and all the elaborate Aurora paintings adorning the walls of the palace of Lèvres.

He’d boldly declared he’d ask Lam directly if he had any questions about her past, but in all honesty, he wasn’t entirely sure if he *could* ask her about this. It seemed that his wife still insisted on keeping secrets from him.

Will she leave if I ask her about her past? If I found the courage to ask, and it shattered everything we’ve built together… I— No, what

am I even thinking?

His conversation with Flèche weighed heavily on his mind.

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Char is acting weird this morning, I thought as I sat up in the bed and observed him. I was feeling a tad better than the previous night, but not well enough to do much more than this.

He wasn't like this last night. Did something happen while I was sleeping? I'm worried about him…

Whenever our eyes met, he'd instantly avert his gaze. It was bothering me so much I couldn't leave it alone, so I decided to question him. "Char? What's wrong? Is there something on your mind?"

Char opened his mouth as if to answer, then closed it again and shook his head without elaborating. It was so unlike him, I couldn't help but feel even more concerned.

After a few awkward seconds of silence, he came to my side and pulled the covers back over me. "You still haven't recovered, so just stay in bed today," he said, putting me on forced bed rest so as not to have to answer my questions.

I grumbled at his stubbornness. He really *was* acting weird! On top of that, he kept sneaking glances at me.

Yet, he doesn't want to tell me what's on his mind…

I had a feeling that pressing him for answers would be a waste of time. He wasn't generally this obstinate, so I was completely puzzled by his attitude.

He's usually the kind of person to speak his mind without ever hiding anything, so this is very unsettling.

Unable to stand this uneasiness, I decided to try asking him again what was wrong. "Are you angry about something? Is it because I ate all the sweets we received as a present? Or because I sneakily changed the pattern of your spare pajamas?" I asked.

His gaze landed promptly on me. "Lam. Fix my pajamas right this instant."

Judging by his reaction, it seemed that neither the sweets nor the pajamas were the cause of his foul mood. What could it be, then?

"Did Prince Flèche send me more presents? Is that why you're angry? Or did he say something to you while I was asleep?"

“Why are you talking about *him*?” Char snapped, his mood souring even further. “Do you like him that much?”

“No reason in particular,” I replied, slightly taken aback by his reaction. Flèche had been acting weird last night when I’d said goodbye to him, so I’d simply been wondering if something had happened between him and Char. There was nothing more to my question.

“Lam, you’re not planning to break off our marriage and marry the prince, are you?”

His question caught me off guard. “Wha— Why is that immediately where your mind goes to?!” I stammered.

“Well, you keep saying you want to divorce me. Do you hate being my wife that much? Adding to that, I *know* you’re still hiding things from me,” he said, his tone accusatory.

“Hiding things from you?” I repeated, confused. “Oh! Are you talking about the cookies I baked and brought to distribute to the palace staff? If you’re wondering where they are, I don’t know either. They disappeared at some point, and I never got a chance to hand them out.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Canon and I threw the cookies away right after we arrived in Lèvres.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. The culprits behind the disappearance of my cookies had been Char and Canon all along?!

“If it’s not the cookies, then what is it?” I asked. “I genuinely have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Char let out a sigh and pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead. “What I’m talking about is the fact that you’ve hidden the truth from me—that you were once a mage so powerful, your name still appears in history books to this day.”

“Huh? You—” I froze, Char’s words running through my head.

Had he figured out I was Aurora?

But what happened? Why now?

“The prince called you a living legend from five hundred years ago,” Char continued, oblivious to my inner turmoil, as he slowly made his way to the bed. “That makes it sound like…”

He put one knee on the bed and leaned forward, looming over me.

“It makes it sound like you’re Aurora,” he finished.

No words left my mouth as I scrambled to collect my thoughts, desperately searching for an excuse.

What should I reply? Is he just speculating I might be Aurora? Or does he already—

I still hadn't told him about my true identity, but Char was clever. After hearing Flèche call me a "living legend," he must've started piecing things together. Well, at least that was what I concluded from his words.

This isn't good. What should I do?

Should I tell him the truth? Now that I was certain Char was someone I could trust, there was no reason to keep it a secret any longer. After all, the only reason I hadn't told him I was Aurora was because I wasn't sure how he'd react and thought he probably wouldn't even believe me in the first place.

But now that those concerns are gone, perhaps I should tell him?

The only problem was that, after seeing his collection of Aurora portraits and trinkets and how excited he became every time we stumbled upon Aurora merch, I felt a little awkward at the idea of telling him I was the real deal.

"I'd already noticed it before, but after seeing all the Aurora merch in this country, I realized that you really *do* look like Aurora. Canon said so too." My eyes shot wide open in surprise, but he paid me no mind and continued, "And then, you have that prince practically confirming that you're Aurora. Lam, you..."

Still lying on the bed, I looked up at him. This was the perfect opportunity to confess.

If he were to accept my true identity, I—

"What would you do if I really was Aurora?" I asked, staring into his eyes. I was curious to see how he'd react.

"I—" Char started.

But before he could finish, a knock at the door interrupted him. The next instant, Canon poked his head into the room.

His hair and clothes were pristinely arranged, and he looked like a picture-perfect noble boy. However, unlike most nobles, he'd actually gotten ready by himself. From what I'd been told, the Mercure children were taught how to handle their own grooming and attire at the schoolhouse. Now that he'd graduated, he'd been assigned a valet, but he still preferred to get dressed on his own. "I don't like having other people touch me," he'd once told me.

"Good morning, Canon," I greeted him.

"Good morning, mother. I heard you are still feeling unwell. Can you get out of bed?"

“Oh, yes, I’m completely fine. Sorry for worrying you,” I said, offering him a smile to reassure him, but it was obvious he didn’t believe me.

Then, he noticed that I was squirming to get out of bed—well, to escape from under Char to be exact—and a frown creased his brow.

“Father, mother is still recovering, so you shouldn’t make her do anything strenuous. Seriously, what is that position?”

I felt my face flush with embarrassment at having my son point out the awkward situation Char and I were in.

“Char, move back, please,” I said hurriedly.

Thankfully, he obliged, probably feeling just as awkward as I did.

I tried to get up as well, but my husband and son worked together to force me back under the covers.

“You ought to rest, mother,” Canon insisted.

“F-Fine, I will,” I grumbled.

I wanted to act in a manner befitting of a mother, but it was proving difficult given the situation. *Ugh, if only this body wasn’t so weak!*

I once again found myself feeling bitter about the previous Lam’s unhealthy living habits. While it wasn’t her fault that she almost never received proper food, on the rare occasions that she did, she’d sometimes claim that the food would be wasted on her and refuse to eat.

Why did you waste so many chances to eat proper food, girl?! I honestly wanted to punch my past self in the head.

“Please don’t push yourself too hard, mother,” Canon said. “Oh, that reminds me, I ran into a messenger from the prince in front of your room earlier. His Highness wanted you to have breakfast with him, but I refused in your stead. Since you’re still not feeling the best, I thought it’d be better if we ate in here today.”

He flashed me a bright smile, but for a split second, I thought he looked a bit…intimidating? Almost as if he were trying to pressure me into agreeing with him. But there was no way a sweet boy like him would ever do anything of the sort to me.

“R-Right,” I said, dismissing the glint in his eyes as nothing more than my imagination and waving him closer. “Let’s have breakfast as a family today.”

“Yes. And please teach me magic again when you feel better,

mother. I hope we'll be able to go home soon," Canon said.

"I will. Let's hope I can recover quickly."

We'd been in Lèvres for quite some time now. Perhaps he was feeling homesick? For the sake of my beloved son, it would indeed be best if we returned home soon.

"With the saints dealt with and the oppressed mages under Prince Flèche's protection, I just need to have one last chat with him, then we can go home," I said.

I was glad we'd come to Lèvres, as it'd allowed me to meet my former disciple again and see how much he'd grown. With how reliable he had become, I'm sure he'd be a great prince, as well as a great king in the future—well, as long as he felt like it, that was.

"I'd like for us to do some sightseeing as a family before we go. We weren't allowed to leave the palace before, but now that people have stopped attacking mages in the streets, we should be able to go."

Char's face soured at my suggestion. "You're still feeling unwell, aren't you? We'll go—but only once you've fully recovered."

"Father's right, mother. Please be patient for now," Canon added, switching back into lecturer-mode.

There were barely any traces left of the shy, reserved boy I'd met when I regained my memories.

He sounds and acts more and more like his father with each passing day, I thought. And, to my dismay, he'd mostly taken on Char's annoying habits.

Canon must've noticed the hint of regret in my eyes, yet he completely ignored it in favor of giving instructions to the servant who'd brought our breakfast.

"Look, mother," he said once everything was ready. "Our food's here. Say 'aaah.'" With a smile that indicated he wouldn't take no for an answer, he brought a spoonful of soup to my lips. He might have become a tad more forceful these past few weeks, but his innocent smile was still as adorable as ever. He really was my pride and joy.

Unable to resist his cuteness, I obediently ate my breakfast. Char was watching as well, making sure I was eating enough.

"You have a very light appetite, so you need to eat food packed with nutrients," he said.

"A simple solution would be the emergency ration packs we

used to eat at the schoolhouse, but they're so disgusting, we can't feed them to mother," Canon added.

"I agree. Those taste like dried-out garbage mixed with manure," Char said, his face twisting in disgust. "They're just as bad as the cookies Lam made that one time—no, scratch that. The cookies were worse."

Upon hearing his slanderous accusations, I paused my meal and shot him a glare. "Excuse me? Whose cooking are you comparing to dried-out garbage and manure?" I asked.

Now that I was more familiar with the Mercure estate, I'd taken to baking cookies from time to time to give as thank-you presents to the servants of the mansion. I thought this was very countess-like of me—but it seemed I was wrong. For some reason, the servants all refused my treats, and Char had even banned me from the kitchen. It was so unfair!

"You didn't even try a single bite of my cookies," I pointed out.

"I don't need to eat them to know they're garbage."

"How rude! They're full of love and nutrients."

"Full of weird stuff, you mean," Char shot back. "Chef told me all the dreadful ingredients you put in them. Vegetable powder you made yourself, acrid glowshrooms, bittersweet berries, spicy carrots, and dried spikefish."

"They're all good for you!" I protested.

"None of that belongs in cookies! Also, you can buy most of those ingredients in powder form at the market, so why did you put them in whole for the cookies?!"

"They're obviously more efficient that way. It's one of the basics of potion making. Having everything raw would've been even better, but I couldn't find raw spikefish, so I settled for dried."

"Those fish have bones, skin, and spikes. They're not meant to be eaten raw!"

"I would've mashed them up with magic, of course."

Canon—who'd been watching our squabble—let out a little sigh. "Mother, we're in the middle of breakfast," he said.

"R-Right, sorry about that, Canon. Your father was being mean to me," I said, resuming my meal.

I felt a little less lethargic after arguing with Char. At this rate, I might be able to get out of bed tomorrow.

※

Flèche was pacing around his room, trying to hide his irritation. The coldness coiling around his body was even chillier than usual. If he sat still, his magic might accidentally leak out again—and it was all because of Flèche's beloved master's husband, Char Mercure.

How infuriating. He stole master from me! I should just freeze him solid!

And, of course, Lam being Lam, she refused to leave the earl and her adopted son, even though that damn House Mercure made her go through hell and back. She was still as softhearted as she used to be in her past life.

Even though it's that softheartedness that led to her death in the first place… You have got to be kidding me.

Flèche didn't necessarily *want* to deprive her of her freedom, but this wasn't the first time (or even the second) that he'd thought of locking her up for good. Épée would've done it without hesitation. He wasn't as lenient as Flèche.

The Mercures had begun talking about returning to their country soon. Flèche knew their departure was inevitable, but the thought of being separated from his beloved Lam was unbearable. And so, he kept claiming he was busy dealing with the aftermath of the fake mage attacks to delay the goodbye. However, there was a limit to how long he could stall their departure.

Why, master? Why won't you stay with me? Why did you choose that good-for-nothing earl over me? Why*?!*

Flèche kept pacing around his room, paying no mind to his maid's pleas to change out of his head-to-toe gold-and-silver tiger-striped suit.

She accepted the dress I picked especially for her, yet she still refuses to stay here with me.

Ever since his reincarnation, Flèche had devoted himself entirely to his beloved master, tirelessly promoting her achievements to win her more admirers and commissioning merchandise in her honor. He'd been so diligent in his proselytizing that the royal capital of the Lèvres Kingdom had become known as the Holy Land of Aurora fans. He'd even displayed portraits of her all around the palace and made sure everything would be perfect for when she joined him and became his wife.

But master is too nice, so she can't abandon the Mercures.

Flèche had thoroughly researched the House of Mercure and found out that all of them had suffered quite difficult lives.

Still, that doesn't give them the right to monopolize my *master.*

Annoyed, he stormed out of his room and marched down the hallway, ignoring his servants' frantic cries of "Your Highness, your clothes!" until he reached the room where Lam was staying.

According to his subordinates, she was no longer unwell. Her "son" had refused to let Flèche visit her for the past few days, insisting she was too sick to see anyone, but surely, she must be well enough to at least speak by now.

He knocked on the door, and the person he had come to see —Lam herself—answered. A smile tugged at his lips when he saw that she seemed well. Behind him, his maids continued to nag him to change, but their voices were drowned out by the joy he felt at seeing his master again. If only he could see her every day... How happy he would be. This made him resent the two men in the room with her even more. They got to bask in her presence every day, as if it were something they were entitled to.

Hmm, it looks like both Lord Mercure and his son are in there too.

Lam—Aurora's family was Flèche and his fellow disciples. Not the Mercures.

"Master, I'm glad to see you well," Flèche said with a smile, and Lam flashed him a bright grin in return.

Her smile alone was enough to make Flèche feel uncharacteristically giddy.

"And you look as fashionable as ever, Flèche. Your outfit is beautiful."

"Thank you, master."

Both in this life and the past, his master was the only person who had ever understood his aesthetic sense. Behind her, the Earl of Mercure and his son were staring at Flèche with wide, horrified eyes. They clearly did not understand art.

"I'm so sorry for disappearing for these past few days. You must've been worried. My body in this life is a little weak, so I get exhausted easily if I use too much magic," Lam said dejectedly. Flèche's desire to protect her from the world grew even stronger at her words.

Back when she was still Aurora, she had been strong and in perfect health. No matter how hard he and his fellow disciples tried, they could never escape from her care. But in this life, not only did she not have her memories until a few months ago, but

her body was weak and couldn't handle using magic for long periods of time. Flèche simply *had* to protect her.

"Master, there's something I want to talk to you about. Just the two of us, if that's possible."

A worried look appeared on Lam's face, and Flèche could tell she was about to agree when Char's and Canon's voices rang out in protest.

Are they trying to get in my way again? Flèche thought, as Char joined them, casually wrapping an arm around Flèche's beloved Lam's shoulders.

"Lam, you've got guts to agree to a rendezvous with another man right under your husband's nose," he said.

"Wha— That's not what this is!" Lam protested. "Flèche is my disciple. He's like a son to me! We're leaving soon, surely I can spend some time with him before we go, can't I?"

Flèche's heart sank as Lam's words hit him. Hearing her state to his face that she didn't see him as a potential romantic interest *stung*. But he stayed silent and observed Char's reaction. As it turned out, the Earl of Mercure seemed to be quite soft when it came to his wife, as he eventually agreed so long as they stayed within his sight.

As a result, Lam and Flèche decided to have tea in the garden, as it was visible from the guest room, meaning Char would be able to rush out if anything were to happen.

Well, I suppose this is fine, Flèche thought as he guided Lam to a table in the garden while the servants began preparing tea and sweets for them.

"We can finally chat, just the two of us," Flèche said, eliciting a little chuckle from Lam.

"Indeed. I'm really sorry for being bedridden for so long."

That hadn't been Flèche's point, and he almost let out a sigh at her words.

"No, what I meant was those two are finally— You know what? Never mind. As long as I get to talk to you, I'm happy." There was no point in him complaining now.

"Master? Is it true that you're going to be heading back to the Tête Kingdom soon?" he asked in a small voice.

"It is. I'm feeling a lot better, so it is high time we go home."

Flèche had been anticipating that response, but it still hurt to hear it directly from her. However, he wasn't about to give up.

"About that, master... I've thought about it, and I really don't

want you to go. Won't you stay in Lèvres? I know why you're staying with the Mercures—you're too kind to leave them now that you know their past."

"Did you look into them?" Lam asked.

Between the mountain of work the earl and his aides had to manage, the servants who mistreated Lam, the estate's lack of manpower, and the children at the schoolhouse risking their lives daily due to their teacher's abusive methods, the Mercure estate was hardly any place to live. Flèche wanted to rescue her from that environment as soon as possible.

"I did, because I want to know everything about you, master. Um… If you're worried about the Mercures, I will do everything in my power to help them. So please, stay with me?" Flèche pleaded. Now that he'd finally reunited with her, he didn't want to let her go. "We have more than enough space to accommodate all of them here," he continued. "I won't let anyone oppress mages again. I'll make this place a great country for mages to live in, just like I made Aurora so popular. So, please…"

But Lam was simply looking at him awkwardly. "I'm sorry, but in this life, I'm the Countess of Mercure. I have responsibilities and can't just rely on you for everything when you're so busy yourself. I've heard this is an important time for you. They're about to decide on the next king, right?" she asked.

How cruel. He'd specifically reincarnated in this world just to see her again. If anything, he *wanted* her to rely on him! However, she'd lost her memories, so she had no idea how distressed he felt. No—even if she *could* remember her last moment, she still wouldn't be able to understand his feelings. She must've had no idea of what was going on, or she would've tried to stop him and Épée from trying to reincarnate her.

I want *to tell her about what happened, but I* can't*. I don't want my precious, beloved master to have to relive those horrible moments again. It's better if she never remembers it.*

These memories would only hurt her. As such, Flèche decided to never mention what happened and to take the secret to his grave.

All I want is for her to stay with me in this lifetime. If I am by her side, I'll be able to protect her. I won't let anything of the sort happen to her ever again!

He couldn't tell her what she wanted to know—but he didn't want her to leave his side.

“Please, master, can you reconsider?” he pleaded.

Lam simply shook her head. “Things were a bit of a mess at first, but my life with the Mercures isn’t that bad, all things considered. I even have the opportunity to teach again, although it’s not quite the same as in my past life. Don’t get me wrong; you’re still very dear to me—my adorable disciple—but I want to treasure my new family as well.”

Why won’t she understand?!

“*I’m* your family! And this is where you belong!” Flèche blurted out, frustration surging within him.

With a crisp crack that pierced the air, the flowers in the garden instantly froze, shattering into tiny pieces.

Realizing he’d just raised his voice at Lam, Flèche let out a gasp as he came back to his senses. He didn’t want to act so unsightly in front of her, he knew that he shouldn’t, but he’d been unable to hold back his feelings.

“Why won’t you stay, master? It’s always been my dream to live together with you in this lifetime, just like before.”

He was about to get down on his knees, but Lam reached out and stopped him.

“Flèche,” she said softly. “I’m so incredibly proud of you. You’re strong enough to stand on your own feet, and you’ve been carrying out your duties as the prince admirably, even without me by your side. Things are different from back then. There are so many people who love you other than me. Just look around you.”

To Lam, Flèche was now a full-fledged mage who didn’t need her anymore. Most disciples left their master’s side after a few years to live on their own. Aurora had done the same with her own teacher, but Flèche and his two fellow disciples had clung to her, refusing to let go.

It’s fine if I don’t stand on my own. I don’t want *to.*

Overwhelmed, Flèche raised his voice again. “*We’re* the ones who sent you here! We even gave up on our old lives to follow you! So why won’t you stay with me?!” he yelled, the words ripped from the depths of his heart as though he were bleeding his very soul out.

Lam looked at him in puzzlement, before a gloomy look clouded her face. “What do you mean, you sent me here? Don’t tell me you…”

She must’ve realized her disciples had used forbidden magic

to forcibly reincarnate her.

Her face is all pale. I shouldn't have let it slip…

Reincarnation spells were complex, unstable, and dangerous. Whether the user succeeded or not, they ended up losing their own life in most cases. For that reason, these spells were forbidden among mages. It was no surprise Lam would be horrified to hear her own disciples had used such a taboo technique.

"We knew it was risky, but we *needed* you! Please, master, don't leave me! I don't want to have to go through that grief again… I can't lose you again!" Flèche embraced Lam like a child clinging to his mother.

But the next instant, a cold voice came from behind Lam, and the prince was forcefully pried from her. "Do not touch my wife."

The newcomer was, of course, the man who dared to call himself Lam's husband: Char Mercure. Not only was he nothing more than a weak mage kept around by the foolish king of the Tête Kingdom for no reason, he also didn't know a thing about Lam, yet he dared interrupt Flèche.

"Char Mercure," he spat. "I really do not like you. You barely know master, yet despite your marriage being one of convenience, you pretend to be a besotted husband. I won't let you have her. I'll take her back from you, even if I have to resort to force."

Flèche had tried to keep his feelings under control for so, so, *so* long, but he was tired of acting like a Goody Two-shoes. The entire garden began to frost over as if in response to his words. He hadn't wanted to resort to this method, but it seemed he didn't have a choice. Without that pest by her side, Lam would eventually have to resign herself to her fate. She might try fighting back, but as long as Flèche played the waiting game, she'd eventually tire herself out. She simply couldn't win against him with her current body.

Lord Mercure summoned some Fire Magic to protect himself against Flèche's attack, but it wouldn't last long. A regular mage like him who didn't know any of the techniques from five hundred years ago could never hope to beat him. Soon, both he and his spells would be frozen solid.

"Stop it, Flèche!" Lam urged him, a frantic look on her face.

"No," he replied like a petulant child. "I won't stop, even if you're the one asking. Unless you promise to stay with me for

the rest of your life."

The Mercure boy rushed over and used some weak flames to try and fight off Flèche's attacks. Seeing that the two of them weren't up to the task, Lam was preparing to cast a spell to make all the ice disappear at once in order to protect them.

But right as Lam was about to unleash her spell, Flèche noticed that something felt very wrong. A fifth mana signature had appeared, and Flèche cautiously scanned the garden.

What is that mana signature? It doesn't belong to any of us.

It didn't feel like either of the Mercures', or Lam's, Flèche's, or even the saints', who were still locked inside the insect cage. No, it was much denser, much darker, yet incredibly nostalgic at the same time.

Flèche knew to whom it belonged.

What is he *doing in the palace? And why now? Don't tell me—did he realize Aurora's here?*

Disbelief filled Flèche. The man had dared to sneak into the palace in broad daylight! That bold and arrogant presence was the exact same as it used to be back then. To think he'd choose to act at this moment—his meticulous planning and viciousness were still first-class.

Shit! Why now?!

Flèche started panicking and, the next instant, Dark Magic spread across the garden. He'd launched a surprise attack.

"Crap!" Flèche cursed, but by the time he'd realized what was happening, it was too late. The pitch-black darkness surged through the garden in angry waves, relentlessly swallowing the others up.

The spell eventually dissipated, leaving only silence in its wake.

"Master?!" Flèche shouted, panic rising in his chest.

However, despite Flèche's claims that he would protect her in this lifetime, Lam was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Six: The Disappearance of the Countess

Char stared at the garden in disbelief.

What just happened?

An outsider—someone who was not the prince or anyone else residing within the castle—had used a Dark Magic spell. This he knew. However, everything that happened after that was beyond his understanding.

"Shit!"

Judging by the fact that whoever this person was had managed to snatch Lam from under their nose without leaving a trace, Char could tell the perpetrator was no ordinary mage.

A saint? No, they're not that powerful. Even the second best of them barely put up a fight against the prince and me. But if it wasn't the work of a saint, then who did this?

Lam didn't have many enemies. Sure, she'd blown a marquis's wig off at a party, turned a gaggle of noble ladies into hair balls, cursed the bishop's aide with a bad body odor spell, frizzed another lady's hair until it doubled in volume, and wrecked a tea party she'd been invited to, but these were all rather tame compared to the dirty tricks other nobles played on each other.

Could the culprit be an enemy of mine, then? Did they abduct her as a way to mess with me?

That didn't add up either. Char had been right there, yet they hadn't acknowledged him. If this was a message for him, wouldn't they have left some kind of clue?

Canon was staring at the empty spot where Lam had vanished, his face haunted, as if he couldn't believe that a mage as powerful as her had been swallowed by a single Dark Magic spell, just like that. Char felt the same.

His gaze shifted to the prince. Flèche's body was frozen, his face stiff with shock. But something about his expression differed from Canon's.

Almost like he knows *who did this.*

Thanks to the training he'd undergone at the schoolhouse, Char was good at reading people's expressions. He was sure of

it: The prince and Lam's abductor knew each other.

"Hey, what just happened?" Char asked him.

However, the prince refused to explain. "You're an outsider. This doesn't concern you," he said curtly. "It's between *him* and me. I'll go save master alone."

"Save," huh? So Lam really *had* been abducted. Well, Char just had to go find her, then.

That prince has no intention of working with us. He'll try to do everything on his own, no doubt.

Not that Char was too surprised. The prince had been hostile toward him and Canon ever since they'd stepped foot in the Lèvres palace and had made it clear he thought they were beneath him. Why would he ask for their help? There was no point in trying to change his mind—and no time to waste on it either.

"Father, let's go after mother," Canon urged him, visibly panicked.

"That goes without saying. We'll get her back, no questions asked. But, first, we're going to make a stop at the mansion."

Canon's brow furrowed. "Why?! We ought to go after her *now*!" he protested—just as expected.

Char closed the distance between the two of them and whispered in his son's ear, "I've learned how to use tracking spells, and I've already put a mark on Lam so we can follow her trail."

"Tracking spells?" the boy echoed in confusion.

"They allow you to locate anyone you've put a mark on," Char explained. "The only downside is that only the caster can see the target's location, but they consume less mana than large-scale detection spells and are much easier to use as well."

There were two types of tracking spells: One allowed you to detect someone's location from afar, and the other required you to place a mark on them beforehand in order to track them. Lam had taught Char the latter just a few days ago, deeming the former still too advanced for him at the present time. Thankfully, the one she'd taught him was quite easy, so even someone like Char, who wasn't familiar with magic from five hundred years ago, had managed to learn it in no time.

And it just so happened that the mark he'd put on Lam to test out the spell during their little lesson was still active. At the time, he hadn't felt like removing it (even he couldn't explain why), but

now he was glad that he hadn't.

"First, I'll determine her location. During that time, you'll go tell the others what happened and summon them to the courtyard of the mansion," Char instructed.

"Yes, father!"

"I'll draw a teleportation circle in the courtyard with the coordinates to wherever Lam is being held and head out immediately. You'll follow after me with the twins and the other two. You know how to use teleportation magic, right?"

Canon nodded. "Yes. Mother has taught me how to use the rough teleportation spell. Having your circle will make it even easier."

"We don't know yet if the person who abducted Lam is working alone or if they have accomplices, so try to come as fast as you can."

"I will!"

Char threw a glance at the prince—he was muttering some sort of incantation under his breath—then he told the servants of the palace that they were leaving and teleported to the Mercure estate with Canon. While the boy was fetching the others, he began to draw a teleportation circle in the courtyard in preparation of heading to Lam's location.

I'll use the mark I put on her to pinpoint where she is. I've never done this before, so I might be slightly off, but I should be able to teleport close enough to where she is. Then, I'll add the coordinates to the circle so that Canon and the others can follow after me. Although, to be honest, I still have no clue what's going on. Based on the prince's reaction, could Lam's abductor be someone from her past?

Char hadn't been alive five hundred years ago, and he knew nothing of that time or of Lam's past life. That was exactly why he felt an irrational surge of anger whenever he saw her with Flèche. He couldn't relate to their shared history, and that thought gnawed at him. That odious prince was right: Char might be Lam's husband, but he knew nothing about her.

"I hope her health doesn't deteriorate further after this…" he muttered.

He didn't know why Lam had suddenly disappeared or who was behind it, but one thing was certain: Not going after her was *not* an option. He went to check the coordinates of the mark on Lam when…

“That’s weird. What’s going on?”

For some reason, he couldn’t see them anymore, even though he could before. It was almost as if something were jamming the connection.

Some sort of interference spell?

If the person who’d abducted Lam really was someone from her past, then it would make sense for them to know spells Char wasn’t familiar with.

“Shit. What rotten timing,” he cursed under his breath.

How was he supposed to go save Lam now? These types of spells were beyond his understanding.

Is there really nothing I can do? he lamented, falling to his knees in frustration, his head hanging low.

No matter how hard he racked his brain for a solution, nothing came to him, and with each passing second, his anxiety and frustration grew.

A few moments later, Canon joined him, the twins in tow. “Father! I brought Fouet and Barre. Is something the matter?” he asked, noticing Char’s tense expression.

“I tried to teleport to Lam, but I can’t pinpoint her location anymore. I’m assuming the abductor must’ve used some sort of interference spell to jam the connection, but I’ve never seen anything of the sort before,” Char explained. Frustrated with his own incompetence, he punched the ground so hard that the gravel cut into his skin, and blood began to seep from the wound.

“Father, please calm down,” Canon urged. “You’re the only one who can figure out mother’s whereabouts. We can’t save her without you. Let’s try to find a solution together.”

“What solution? What do you want me to—” Char was about to snap when a realization struck him. “Aurora’s manuscripts.”

The books in his collection contained tons of spells he’d never even heard of before. Lam had started translating them for him, and he’d been working his way through them, learning new spells whenever he had the occasion, but they’d barely scratched the surface.

Perhaps I’ll be able to find a clue in the books I haven’t read yet, he thought.

Char had recently become able to grasp some ancient Elfin—the language Aurora had written her manuscripts in—by repeatedly comparing the translated books with the originals.

Nothing is impossible to a willing heart, as they say.

Perhaps I can understand the untranslated books by myself now.

He stood up and started preparing a teleportation spell.

“F-Father?!” Canon exclaimed.

“Lord Char, where are you going?” Fouet asked.

“To the study,” he said before teleporting, Canon and the twins following close behind with their own teleportation spells.

Char wasn’t exactly eager to let them into his collection room, but now wasn’t the time to worry about keeping up appearances.

He opened the secret passage and rushed into the little room, bringing armfuls of untranslated manuscripts back to his desk.

“Th-These are…the Aurora manuscripts the madam hasn’t translated yet?” Fouet asked.

Char nodded. “I’m going to decipher any book that seems relevant and try to find a way to teleport over to Lam regardless of her abductor’s interference. From the looks of it, it seems that these books are the only ones about teleportation and interference spells… There aren’t that many.”

Without wasting a second, he began leafing through the books at incredible speed. Meanwhile, Canon and the twins—who couldn’t read ancient Elfin—cheered him on, watched over him, and took peeks at his collection room without permission, gawking at the sheer number of Aurora-related items he’d gathered over the years.

Finally, Char’s hand stopped upon reaching a certain page.

“I’ve found something! This spell here allows one to teleport without knowing the precise coordinates of their destination—though it seems it’s not as accurate as the other ones.”

According to the description of the spell, one could teleport to someone’s location simply by thinking of them and their mana signature. However, it was also labeled a “highly difficult” spell that could only work if the caster knew their target well enough to visualize them perfectly. If they failed, they could be sent to a totally random location.

It’s risky, but I don’t have much choice here.

Thankfully, Char was very familiar with Lam’s appearance and mana signature after living with her for the past few months. If he took one of the Aurora portraits from his collection—especially one that most closely resembled Lam—and used it as a reference, he should be able to manage the spell.

Without wasting a second, he returned to the courtyard and began to follow the manuscript's instructions. Of course, Canon and the others had followed him as well.

"I'm coming with you, father," Canon said with determination.

Char shook his head. "No. This spell has a very low success rate. I'll teleport on my own first. If I make it there without any issues, I'll send word, and then you and the twins can join me."

Char copied the magic circle from the book and stepped into the center of it. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't scared, but the idea of losing Lam for good terrified him even more. That was just how deeply he had grown attached to her.

And so, under the watchful gaze of Canon and the twins, Char completed the spell from the book. The next instant, he vanished into thin air.

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A familiar perfume reached my nostrils as I was swallowed by the Dark Magic spell. When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a dazzlingly extravagant yet completely unfamiliar room.

*This is...*not *the palace's garden*, I observed. *It looks like someone's bedroom.*

Every centimeter of wall and floor space was covered with items made of gold, silver, and precious stones, making the room look quite grand, almost overwhelmingly so.

I don't dislike it, though.

I then noticed that I was currently sitting on a large sofa chair.

Where am I? That magic from earlier, it was a teleportation spell, wasn't it? I lost consciousness for an instant, so I have no idea what happened.

As I looked around to try and make sense of my surroundings, I became aware of two arms wrapped around my waist. They were a little slender for a man's yet slightly more muscular than I would expect from a woman's.

I let out a startled cry and tried to push myself away, only for the arms to tighten around me, pulling me back.

"Aaah!" I exclaimed, falling backward onto the person behind me.

"Here I am, basking in the nostalgia and emotions of finally seeing you again, but you're still as restless and jittery as ever, huh?" an oh-so-familiar voice languidly spoke in my ear, a hint of

amusement lacing the conceited tone of their words.

Huh?

I knew the owner of that voice.

No, impossible. He's supposed to be dead.

Nostalgia welled up within me. I'd spent the most time in my past life with the person I'd just thought of, after all.

"How about you say something, huh, Aurora?" the man behind me asked, his arrogant tone the exact same as *his*.

But this voice… It has *to be him. I was wondering if the others had reincarnated too when I first met with Prince Flèche, so maybe…*

Grabbing the arms wrapped around my waist, I tried to steady my racing heartbeat. I opened my mouth to speak, but my voice was uncharacteristically shaky—which was to be expected. After all, I hadn't thought I'd see him again in this lifetime. Sure, he could've been a bit more delicate instead of abducting me in front of everyone, but he was still a significant part of my past.

Trying my hardest to keep my feelings in check, I took a deep breath and said, "Y-You really took me by surprise, Épée. Couldn't we have had a more *normal* reunion?"

I couldn't hide my emotion, and my throat tightened. I felt seconds away from bursting into tears.

I couldn't believe it. After seeing my second disciple again, I'd found myself reunited with my first disciple as well.

And one right after the other, no less!

I'd entertained the possibility of Épée having reincarnated too, after my meeting with Flèche, but words couldn't capture how overjoyed I was to see him alive and well.

He used to be younger than me in our past lives, but he seems to be around the same age as me this time. He might even be older.

His brash personality, on the other hand, hadn't changed one bit. "Shut up," he snapped, rude as always. "I can't believe you left me out while you went to have fun with shitty Glacial. How heartless of you."

He went on to tell me that he had first come to Lèvres after hearing rumors of someone matching my description being spotted there, just to see for himself. But when he saw me chatting with Glacial, he grew annoyed and impulsively teleported me back to his place.

"Still, you shouldn't have attacked me like that. You scared me! The others must be panicked out of their minds… Why didn't you

just come talk to me?" I asked.

"D'you really think Flèche would have let me inside the palace with that rotten personality of his?" Épée shot back. "Also, shouldn't you have put up a bit more of a fight? I barely had to lift a finger to catch you. Did you lose your touch after being reincarnated?"

"What a disrespectful boy you are."

Épée had been my disciple for the longest out of all three of them. Just like Flèche, I'd taken him in and raised him like my own son. I would be lying if I said I hadn't made a few…*mistakes* in his education, but he was still my precious disciple. Although, unlike the other two, he basically never listened to me.

"Anyway, that doesn't matter. From now on, you're going to live here with me. You're not allowed to leave—end of story."

Épée, being Épée, had started spouting ridiculous "rules" without even asking for my input.

"Well, that'd be a problem. After all, I'm—" I started to argue, but he interrupted me.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You're Lam Mercure, the wife of the Earl of Mercure of the Tête Kingdom, right? Your father, the Baron Ivoire, basically sold you to the Mercures. Oh, and you and the earl have an adopted son together."

I was surprised by how much he knew. "You found out a lot in so little time. First Prince Flèche, now you…"

Épée snickered as if to say it was nothing. "You can easily find out that much if you know the right people," he said. "Though, I have to say, tracking you down was *not* easy. It's been, what, twenty years now? I couldn't do much as a kid, of course, but I've spent every waking moment looking for you. Seems like you haven't been doing the same, though."

"I—"

"You didn't have your memories, I know. And you still don't remember how you died. That's why you didn't think of going to look for your disciples who reincarnated alongside you. I guess it's my fault. I was panicked. Maybe my magic was unstable when I cast the spell, or perhaps I messed up some of the details. Or maybe your injuries were too severe, and the spell just malfunctioned."

I hadn't even told him anything yet, but he already knew why I hadn't gone to look for him or Flèche.

In spite of his rough personality, Épée was actually the

smartest of all three of my disciples. He was well-versed in magic theory and handled mana with surprising finesse. He was so clever, in fact, that he would often modify preexisting spells or even create entirely new ones.

"Hold on, Épée," I said, interrupting his mumbling. "Are you the one who cast the reincarnation spell on me, then?"

I'd tried asking Flèche for more detail about my reincarnation, but he'd dodged every single one of my questions. The only time he'd actually mentioned something himself had been right before Épée abducted me, so I hadn't been able to hear the full story.

Reincarnation spells are both incredibly difficult and incredibly dangerous. No one ever uses them—no. It's not that they don't *use them, it's that they* can't*.*

Not only did reincarnation spells consume a ton of mana, but they were accompanied by severe magical backlash. If I'd know that my precious disciples were thinking of using one, I would have stopped them immediately.

These types of spells fail ninety percent of the time, and the price of attempting one far outweighs any potential benefits. Ah, but…

Flèche's words from earlier echoed in the back of my mind.

He'd said, "We're the ones who sent you here."

"I suppose that show-off of a prince didn't tell you anything," Épée said, as if he could read my mind. The two of us had been together for so long, we could pretty much tell what the other thought at all times. "Glacial and I both orchestrated your reincarnation. I wanted to do it myself, but I only have slightly more mana than the average mage. I really didn't want to have to ask that mana-for-brains idiot prince for his help, but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do."

So, basically, he was the one who had designed the spell while Flèche had provided the necessary mana. I'd always known he loved formulating complex spells, but I never expected him to succeed at making a reincarnation spell, especially considering how many people died trying such a feat.

"That's amazing, Épée!" I exclaimed.

"Eh, it was nothing much. Reincarnation spells are just a matter of manipulating time and life, much like Dark Magic—my specialty. I guess I just have a natural affinity for it. Besides…it's not like it was a *complete* success. You lost your memories and didn't reincarnate where I intended. There might be other issues

too."

"It was *almost* a complete success. As your teacher, I'm very proud of you!" I said. "Oh, and could you let go of me soon? I can't see your face like this."

"You're just as carefree as ever, aren't you?" he grumbled with a small sigh but slowly unwrapped his arm from around me.

I rose from the sofa and turned around, taking in his fluffy light-pink hair with pale blond highlights, golden eyes, androgynous features, and sharklike teeth that went well with his usual haughty smirk. Aside from the tattoos snaking up his neck and arms and his excessively showy clothing, he hadn't changed a bit from his past life.

"You look exactly the same as you used to," I remarked.

"You too. It would've been a pain to search for you if you looked like a completely different person, so I made sure you'd keep your appearance just as it was," he explained.

"So *that's* why I look so much like my past self. I was confused why I hadn't changed at all. Your magic is as impressive as ever."

If I'd just reincarnated normally, it would've been impossible for me to keep my appearance—especially since no one in the Ivoire family looked anything like me.

"Still, how nostalgic it is to see you again," I said with a smile. "I'm glad you're doing well in this life too. By the way, I think Prince Flèche and the others must be really panicked that I disappeared all of a sudden. I'd love to stay here and celebrate our reunion, but do you mind if I just go back for a bit to tell them everything is fine?"

"What are you talking about? No way. I told you, you're going to live here with me from now on. You don't need to go back *there*. Actually, I don't have any intention of letting you out of here ever," Épée said. From the look on his face, it was obvious he was serious.

"Well, that would be a bit of a problem," I replied. Char, Canon, and Flèche must have been worried sick, after all. "Would you like to come to the Mercure estate with me? I can introduce you to my new family," I offered.

Épée pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead in exasperation. "You really haven't changed *at all* in five hundred years, have you?" he said with another sigh.

"By the way, Épée..." I started, suddenly remembering what I meant to ask him. "Do you know how I died? I remember my

childhood and the time I spent with you and the others, but the entire end of my life is a mystery to me. It's like there's a fog obscuring those last moments that I can't see through."

"That must be another flaw introduced by my magic," Épée said. "I was juggling a bunch of spells at the same time to keep you alive until I was done with the reincarnation process. I must've messed something up."

"You were using other spells and the reincarnation magic at the *same* time?!" I exclaimed, gawking at him in shock. "How did you not die?! Ah, but you reincarnated too. So is that how you...?"

"Shut up," he snapped. "You're annoying me, so I'm not gonna tell you how you died."

With that, he fell silent and wouldn't budge. I knew from experience that once he got into one of his moods, there was no way to coax him out of it. As I stood there, racking my brain for a way to persuade him into telling me what I wanted to know, a knock on the door echoed through the lavish room.

Épée clicked his tongue and, adroit as ever, used his magic to reluctantly open the door. "What do you want?" he said dryly.

Peeking my head from behind him, I saw a group of men I'd never met before. Their clothes were all of high quality, but the men themselves were slouching, and their hair was unkempt and disheveled. The stark contrast between their refined attire and their lackadaisical demeanor left me puzzled.

As I continued observing them, one of the men's eyes landed on me, and he let out an "Ah!" jabbing a finger in my direction.

"Master Épée brought a woman to his room!" he said.

The men's collective gaze swung toward me.

"You're right! Our boss finally has a girlfriend! It's a miracle!"

"He's always been popular with the ladies, but he's never shown interest in any of them before."

"Hey, boss, introduce her to us!"

These men had gotten the situation completely wrong, but I couldn't exactly blame them—after all, this was (most likely) Épée's bedroom, and I was in it. It was all *his* fault for creating such a misleading atmosphere, really.

Still, who are these men? There are one, two, three...four of them. And they call Épée "master" and "boss." Could they be his disciples? Aw, look at him go! He used to be so antagonistic toward everyone, but he has his own pupils now! As his former teacher, I'm very proud of him!

I cast a warm look at Épée, unable to hide my joy, but his brows knit together to give me a pointed glare. “Aurora…you’ve *definitely* gotten the wrong idea about this. I can feel it.”

“What do you mean? I’m proud of you for having your own disciples. I’m glad to see how dependable you’ve grown up to be,” I said, feeling inspired by his transformation.

Épée simply sighed for the umpteenth time. “I knew it,” he said. “Listen well, Aurora—these guys aren’t my disciples. They’re my *underlings*.”

“Underlings?” I echoed, tilting my head in confusion.

“I’ll explain later,” he told me before turning to the men. “Hey. If any of you lay a finger on her, I’ll kill you, you hear?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the men began to hoot and whistle.

“Looks like our master has finally found love!” one jeered.

“C’mon, boss, tell us her name!”

Épée repeatedly tried to shoo the men away but to no avail. They were still excitedly commenting on the “relationship” between Épée and me.

When will he tell them we’re not actually lovers? I wondered, feeling a little awkward.

Not now, apparently. Instead of clearing up the misunderstanding, he was giving them all sorts of irrational commands like, “Treat her like you would treat me,” etcetera.

“Got it—then we’ll call her ma’am!” one of the men replied.

All Épée was doing was making things worse, so I decided to intervene. “Um…I’m not Épée’s girlfriend.”

The men blinked in surprise before exchanging knowing looks.

“Oooh! Our master has an unrequited love! Oops, that was a bit indelicate of us, guys.”

“Hmm? Are we interrupting, then?”

Épée—whose mood had visibly soured even more now—extended a hand forward in silence and cast a brutal attack spell at the men. “Scram!”

Startled screams escaped them as they backed away from the door before fleeing in a panic. I was impressed they’d managed to dodge one of Épée’s attacks, but it did make sense if they were his disciples—although Épée denied they were.

“You shouldn’t use magic against your own underlings,” I admonished a grumbling Épée.

“They’re fine. They’re the top brass here. That little spell is nowhere near enough to hurt them.”

“Are they mages?” I asked in curiosity.

“They used to be outlaws. They had mana but couldn’t use magic. I took them in and started teaching them some spells, and they turned out like this.”

“So they *are* your disciples!” I said with a bright smile.

“I told you they’re not,” he protested sullenly.

He slammed the door closed from afar with his magic. Then, before I could even process what was happening, he pulled me into another hug—this time, from the front.

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Épée was a nameless child.

He was born in a small village deep in the mountains, in a normal family with parents and older and younger siblings. However, it was immediately evident after his birth that his main magic element was Dark Magic. Horrified, his parents refused to give him a name and, instead of treating him like a son, forced him to work like a slave until they eventually abandoned him in the mountains when he was eight years old.

While mana wielders weren’t discriminated against back then, Dark Magic in particular was considered taboo in certain places. Unfortunately for Épée, the village he was born in was located in one such region.

There were far fewer mages who specialized in Dark Magic, making it an incredibly rare attribute. This was part of the reason people like Épée were discriminated against so much.

At the time, an intelligent monster lived in the nearby mountains, and it would periodically ask for a sacrifice from the neighboring villages. There weren’t very many intelligent monsters, but those who were could understand human speech and talk, with some even able to command other monsters. The one near Épée’s village was capable of doing so.

This monster would feed off other creatures for most of its sustenance, as well as livestock the villagers offered to it once a month. But there was nothing it enjoyed quite as much as the flesh of children. For that reason, the surrounding villages took turns sacrificing one of their young to the beast each year. In exchange, the monster provided the villages its protection,

resulting in fewer attacks from the other mountain creatures.

As such, the only reason Épée had not been killed as soon as he was born, despite his natural affinity for Dark Magic, was so that he could, one day, be offered to the beast as a sacrifice. He had been repeatedly told this ever since he was old enough to understand speech and had long since accepted his fate. Besides, his life as the village slave was hardly a pleasant one.

A resigned expression weighed down his face as the villagers tied him up and led him to a secluded spot deep into the mountains, hidden behind luxuriant trees. No villager ever dared to venture this far, as it was a highly dangerous place.

"Don't come back, you hear?" the man who had once been Épée's father ordered, a stern look on his face.

Épée followed his retreating form with blank, hollow eyes, before settling against the trunk of a large tree and letting his eyelids sink closed.

At just eight years old, he was already weary of his family, the villagers, and the world itself. If he stayed here, the monster would soon come for him—to put an end to his life. To him, the villagers and that beast were one and the same: Both wanted to hurt him.

Épée had to mature much faster than other boys his age due to his circumstances, so he understood what was about to happen to him, and that there was no escaping it. No matter what he did, it would be futile. Soon, the exhaustion of his days as a slave caught up with him, and he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Thump, thump.

Épée was jolted awake as the ground began to tremble beneath him. He could feel the beast approaching.

It had been early morning when he'd been brought here, but it was now completely dark. He angled his head to look up at the sky through the thick canopy of trees. The next instant, a shadow loomed over him, and he felt the beast's breath on his skin. At last, it had come to claim the sacrifice that had been offered to it.

Out of curiosity, Épée allowed himself to examine the beast. As expected, an enormous lizard-like monster stood there, drool seeping from its maw as it stared at him. It was as terrifying as the rumors made it out to be.

I should have run away, Épée thought—and hated himself for it. It was too late now, so he simply sat there, awaiting his fate.

Suddenly, a boom echoed through the mountain, and the creature collapsed to the ground in a cloud of dust. Épée stared at the beast's motionless form, confused.

"What just happened?" These words escaped him before he could even process them.

A quizzical sound left his mouth as he noticed a figure standing on the other side of the beast. Épée bent forward to get a better look at them, thinking they must've been someone from the village. But, to his surprise, the figure turned out to be a girl, seemingly barely older than him.

"Phew, I made that insignificant lizard eat dust," the girl said, dusting off her hands as she stomped over the beast and made her way to Épée.

Her facial features were certainly uncommon around these parts, and her clothes were of much better quality than anything Épée had ever seen. She was wearing a tasteful robe over a shirt and shorts, as well as sturdy-looking boots.

She came to a stop in front of Épée and flashed him a carefree smile as bright as a blooming flower. No one had ever looked at Épée with such kindness before.

"Subjugation complete! Master only told me roughly where to find that monster, so it wasn't easy tracking it down. Sorry it took me so long to come to your rescue. My name's Aurora; I'm a mage."

She proceeded to explain to Épée that she lived in a forest close to the capital and had been sent by her master to kill the monster in the mountains as part of her training. Apparently, a man from one of the other villages that had to give sacrifices to the beast had reported the monster's existence to the officials of the remote town beyond the mountain. This was considered serious treason by the other villagers, as they had always relied on the monster to protect them from harm in exchange for the sacrifices.

As it turned out, the "traitor" was the father of the next child who was to be sacrificed to the monster. With the town officials' help, he was able to leave the mountain and move into a quiet corner of their remote town.

Épée thought back to his father and how happy he'd been to offer his own son as a sacrifice, gloating when the other villagers thanked him.

"Anyway, long story short, the margrave of this region sent a

bunch of people to deal with the monster, but they all failed miserably," Aurora continued, brushing back her shoulder-length hair. "So he ended up commissioning my teacher for the job."

She crouched in front of Épée, who was still sitting against the tree, and held out a hand to him with no hesitation.

"Come with me. There are other monsters in this mountain. They weren't too aggressive because of that other, stronger monster up until now, but now that I've killed it, they're going to be much more active."

Seeing that Épée wouldn't budge, she grabbed his hand and yanked him to his feet with surprising strength for someone her age and size. Épée thought she was going to send him back to his village, but the girl didn't make any mention of his family.

"What's your name?" she asked instead.

Épée didn't answer. He *couldn't*—he didn't have a name.

"Uh..." Aurora flashed him an awkward smile as she scratched her cheek. "Can you speak?"

He nodded.

"So, what's your name?"

"...ve one," Épée muttered. He repeated more clearly, "I don't have one."

Aurora's lips parted in surprise, and she looked as though she'd just pieced the situation together. "I see. Then, I'm going to give you one. From today onward, you're Épée. You know, my teacher is the one who gave me my name. She chose it when she took me in as her disciple," Aurora explained, despite Épée not asking.

Then she said the most outrageous thing Épée had ever heard.

"And since I named you, that makes you *my* disciple!"

Épée gawked at her. "What?!"

You're clearly just a kid too! You look barely older than me!

He wanted to protest, but before he had a chance to, Aurora used her magic to teleport them out of the mountains. They arrived right in front of a tree house—a *literal* tree house, as in, rooms arranged inside of an enormous ancient tree that had its interior gouged out. There was even a little door carved into the trunk.

Dragging him along, Aurora swung open the door and barged into the tree house without hesitation. "Masteeer, I've killed the monster! I took some of its scales as proof! Oh, and I've also

brought the kid the villagers were going to sacrifice to it," she announced.

Épée gawked in awe at his surroundings. The inside of the tree was much more spacious than he thought. They had arrived in a large entry hall, the walls lined with shelves carved directly in the tree's flesh. Dried plants were dotted alongside them. Two little steps led to a counter, behind which were a wooden desk and a chair. His eyes scanned the assortment of unusual objects: strange maquettes, spherical maps, delicate wands, and rugs woven from plants. He'd never seen anything of the sort back at the village.

Aurora, whose attention had returned to him, was watching him with a smile. "The first floor is my master's shop," she explained. "But she's always sleeping, so I usually have to tend it myself."

The shelves behind the counters were packed with all sorts of medicine bottles. This must've been an apothecary. In the village, some people called themselves doctors and sold medicine, but they did so alongside their farming duties, so they didn't have any proper shops.

More importantly... Where are we?

Aurora had said she lived near the capital. Épée remembered one of the peddlers who occasionally visited the village mentioning that mages could use magic to travel great distances in the blink of an eye.

He was listening to Aurora ramble when the door at the back of the shop opened and a figure stepped forward—a tall woman with light brown skin and long black hair that cascaded all the way to her waist. She was wearing the same kind of clothes as Aurora. It was hard to tell exactly how old she was, but Épée thought that she seemed to be around the same age as his mother.

However, what caught his eye was the shape of her ears, which were larger than those of regular humans and slightly pointed at the tips.

"Is it your first time seeing an elfin?" Aurora asked, noticing his surprise.

When he nodded, she explained that the elfin were an ancient race, and that there were only a handful of them left in the world. Not only were they taller than humans and had a distinctive ear shape, but they also excelled at magic. There had

been no people like Aurora's master in the village, so it came as a huge shock to Épée.

The woman glanced at him before narrowing her eyes at Aurora. "Aurora, how many times have I told you to stop picking up things from wherever you go?"

Aurora didn't even flinch. "He's not a thing, he's a person."

"This is why I hate humans," the woman said in exasperation. "You always *have* to have a comeback for everything."

"The villagers offered him to the monster as a sacrifice, so I've decided to take him as my apprentice. I even gave him a name! He's called Épée," Aurora announced.

"Isn't that the name of the pink rabbit you had as a child?"

"He looks like him, doesn't he?" Aurora replied with a grin. "He's all dirty right now, but I'm sure his hair must be a lovely shade of pink under the grime."

She'd named him after a *rabbit*? This might have been the biggest shock Épée had experienced since meeting Aurora.

As a side note, the original Épée—the rabbit, that was—had lived a fulfilling life, cherished by Aurora until it passed away from old age.

"Épée, this is my master, Finis. She's court mage to the royal family, per request of the king, but she's lazy, so she always sends me to do all the annoying stuff."

Finis eyed Aurora and Épée in turn before saying, "If you've taken in a disciple, then you're ready to take your independence."

Aurora froze. "Wha?"

"You don't know? Once a witch has reached a certain level of mastery, taking a pupil is a declaration of independence. It's an ancient elfin custom that has been passed down through the ages. Most witches claim their independence between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. You're only twelve, but since you managed to defeat that monster in the mountains, you should be fine on your own. Congratulations, Aurora—you've officially graduated from my tutelage."

"You never told me any of this," Aurora remarked.

Finis shrugged. "That's what you get for not doing your research. Phew! That's a load off my shoulders. I'm happy to see you've finally become capable enough to stand on your own two feet."

Aurora must've thought the three of them would be living

together. The shock of it all shook her to her core, and she began to panic.

"My kin told me many times that raising a human wasn't easy, but it was quite an enjoyable experience," Finis continued. "I don't think I'll be taking on any more disciples, though. I want to live my life as I please."

"You were already doing just that," Aurora pointed out.

Finis didn't acknowledge her comment. "I'm giving you one of my vacation homes. I'll send your belongings to you later, so you can start living there from today onward."

"Wait, that's—" Aurora attempted to protest, but her master didn't let her.

"You'll still be tending the shop, of course. And doing the jobs I give you."

Aurora blinked in surprise. "Huh? Then I'll just be doing the same thing as before, won't I?"

Once again, Finis ignored her. "You will also need to find your own path as a witch," she said. "I'll remain in this country for a while longer, but eventually, I'll leave. I want you to live a life befitting of a witch raised by an elfin teacher."

With that, Finis held out a hand and a magic gust of wind enveloped Épée and Aurora. The next instant, Épée found himself teleported to yet another unfamiliar location alongside the girl. This building, he realized, would be their new home from now on.

Aurora had been kicked out of her master's home because of him. Several emotions swirled within Épée—guilt for causing her to lose her home and panic at the idea of what awaited him once she threw him out. He had nowhere to go, after all. Despite how rude and arrogant he would become over time, at that moment, he was still a sensitive boy.

He threw a timid glance at Aurora. Over the course of his life as a slave, he'd learned how to read people's thoughts, emotions, and movements to escape from danger. That skill had saved him from serious injuries more times than he could count.

But, to his surprise, Aurora simply threw herself on the sofa in the room they'd been teleported into and exclaimed, "Phew, I managed to skip shop-tending duties today!"

She really didn't seem to care too much about the situation.

"Oh, right. I need to get a room ready for you! Ah, but first..." She stood up, seemingly having thought of something, grabbed

Épée by the arm and led him to a room at the back of the house.

Épée couldn't afford to get kicked out, so he obediently followed her.

"This is the bathroom," Aurora explained as she opened the door to the room. "The bathtub's at the back of the room. Do you know how to use it?"

That must've been her way of telling him to go wash up. He *was* quite dirty compared to her.

I've heard the peddlers mention bathtubs in their stories, but it's my first time seeing one for myself.

There had been no bathrooms in his village. His family would get water from the nearby river and clean their bodies with washcloths. As for Épée, he wasn't allowed to bathe himself, so he'd sneakily jump into the river whenever he could to wash away the dirt and grime unnoticed.

"Hmm... How should I explain it to you?" Aurora muttered. She led him by the hand into the room and explained how to get hot water out, how to use soap, and so on and so forth. "I'll be in the same room as before, so if you need something, just call for me, okay?"

She turned around to leave, but Épée unconsciously grabbed her by the arm before she could. "Hey. Um... I'm going to have to leave when I'm done washing up, right?"

Aurora tilted her head to the side in confusion. "Huh? Why should you? You're my disciple, so you're going to live here with me from now on. I told you I'm going to get a room ready for you."

"You're not throwing me out? Even though you were kicked out of that other house because of me?"

"Well, according to master, I would've had to leave around next year anyway, so it doesn't make that big of a difference. Besides, *I'm* the one who decided to take you as my disciple, so I won't throw you out. You know, I may only be twelve, but I can kill monsters and make medicine. I often courier letters or find lost items, and I can even protect the city and craft items. I made a bunch of connections while helping master, so I can live on my own just fine. Master has taught me all these things. My point is, I'm perfectly capable of supporting myself and at least one disciple, so you don't need to worry. Go ahead and take your bath."

Épée wouldn't have believed her if he hadn't seen her kill the

monster earlier.

She left the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and Épée washed himself as he was told, using his mana to make warm water come out of the faucet.

As a side note, elfin women didn't call themselves "mages," but "witches." As for elfin men, they couldn't use magic. Having been raised by an elfin master, Aurora called herself a "witch" as well. From what she told Épée, she'd been abandoned by her parents—just like him—and Finis had taken her in.

Several days after Épée and Aurora started living together, Épée was faced with his biggest problem so far.

"Her food is disgusting."

Aurora, ever diligent in caring for her disciple, prepared Épée's meals every day. However, her food was so bad it defied the realm of culinary logic. It made the measly leftovers his family fed him back at the village seem delicious in comparison. Just what in the world did she put in her food for it to taste that awful?

Unable to take it any longer, he approached her one day and said, "I'll take care of the housework from now on."

Having been forced to do chores his whole life, he was pretty much an expert when it came to cooking and cleaning.

Her food's gross, she can't clean to save her life, and she doesn't even know how to wash clothes properly. She doesn't have any basic life skills.

Besides, doing housework was pretty much the only way Épée had to repay her for giving him a place to live.

I don't know why I'm so drawn to help her.

Fortunately, his chores here were much easier to handle than the grueling tasks he'd been forced to do at the village. Here, there were tools that responded to mana, like a faucet that distributed hot water, a stove that turned on on its own, and appliances that operated automatically, making chores much quicker and easier. He was able to finish them in no time.

"You're amazing, Épée!" Aurora praised him. "You're so much better at cooking and doing laundry than me!"

"You have so many magic items and recipe books here, so how do you manage to make food that tastes so bad?" the boy asked.

"I *do* follow the recipes. I just add my own little twist to them," Aurora said. She clearly had no intention to stop with her

culinary experiments anytime soon, so Épée decided he'd take care of all the cooking from then on.

"And stop leaving the laundry lying around when it's done. You need to learn how to put things away properly," Épée lectured her while he started tidying up around the house.

"No, don't touch these! I won't remember where they are if you disorganize them!" she protested as he started collecting the dirty bottles lying haphazardly on the shelf after he was done putting the laundry away.

"Shut up. How do you want me to organize anything in this dump? It's your fault for not clearing up after yourself," he said, refusing to listen to Aurora's complaints.

"Nooo! You can't!"

All in all, aside from the occasional bickering, their life together was going pretty well. Épée took care of the housework while receiving magic lessons from Aurora. The first thing she taught him was how to make medicine using a cauldron.

"Witches' potions are very helpful to others, so as long as you know how to make them, you should be able to make a decent living anywhere," she explained as she tossed ingredients into the cauldron. The two of them were currently on the first floor of the house. "That's why my master taught me how to make medicine before anything else."

A lot of medicines were quite easy to make, so they made for good magic training. After that, she taught him basic everyday life spells, defense spells, communication spells, and so on and so forth. Little by little, Épée's spell repertoire began growing.

Aurora also told him how to make magic items.

"These are magic stones—petrified monster cores. They're used a lot in items used for housework. Basically, how they work is that they react to people's mana and can then be used to do all sorts of things," she explained, showing him a bunch of little red stones before demonstrating how to craft an item using them. "You see that unfinished lantern over there? I'm going to use magic to give the magic stone the effect I want it to have and put it into the lantern. Just like with the illusion spell I taught you, having a clear image of what you want is what matters most here."

She enchanted the magic stone with a Light Magic spell.

"You can pretty much put the magic stone wherever you want. This time, I'm going to set it in the little hollow at the center of

the lantern."

She did just that, and a faint light began to emanate from the lantern.

"Many workshops specialize in large-scale magic item production," she continued her explanation. "It takes a lot of skill to craft these, after all. You can also give an item an effect by combining it with another item. You don't *have* to use magic stones every time."

Apparently, the house they currently lived in used to be normal, but Finis had embedded magic stones in all corners of it to make it the way it currently was.

As it turned out, Épée had a real talent for magic, and he became able to start working as a professional mage in no time. On top of that, he was very clever and adroit, so medicine-making and item-crafting came easily to him as well.

Aurora had also taught him how to read and write, as he needed to be able to read grimoires. She also wanted him to learn about general common sense and basic social etiquette, skills he'd need to interact with others while working.

However, Aurora had learned her common sense and etiquette from her elfin master, so they were a little unconventional, to say the least. As such, Épée had no choice but to visit towns to learn proper common sense from other people. Thanks to these little excursions, he managed to gather a lot of "underlings." Whenever someone tried to pick a fight with him, he'd hurl spells at them without hesitation, and before he knew it, he'd accumulated a number of self-proclaimed "underlings."

The longer he lived with Aurora, the more at ease he became around her. However, by the time he hit puberty, he realized that his feelings for her went beyond simple friendship. He didn't want to acknowledge it, but it seemed that he had started to see his mentor, Aurora, in a romantic light.

Needless to say, being around her at all hours of the day and night brought him countless inner struggles. No matter how old he became, Aurora was still behaving as if she were his mother. How old was he when he began to find it irritating, he wondered. In any case, his youth was spent alongside Aurora.

No matter how hard he tried to communicate his feelings to her, she remained blissfully unaware. Épée soon began to secretly eliminate any man who dared to approach her.

At the time, he still naively believed that Aurora was bound to

notice his feelings at some point. It was just the two of them, after all.

But then, catastrophe struck.

Aurora began to take in more disciples into their home. It was at that moment that Épée felt like he truly understood what Finis had meant when Aurora had brought him home with her—the girl had a tendency to indiscriminately adopt anything she took a liking to, be it dogs, cats, hedgehogs, or even humans. And to make matters worse, her two new disciples clearly were there to stay.

I don't want *her to have other disciples!*

He tried to drive them out of the house countless times, but they stubbornly refused to leave. In the end, they remained in the house with Aurora and him, much to his frustration. And the worst part? They both had feelings for Aurora too. It wasn't even funny!

Épée regretted not having been more assertive about his feelings in the past.

After that, time passed peacefully, and soon, Aurora came of age and became the court's mage, filling in the empty shoes of her own master. Why? Because Finis had disappeared all of a sudden.

There was only one note left behind in her home, and it said, "I'm going on a journey." However, it seemed that Aurora had already been anticipating her master would leave, as she didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

"She waited until I came of age, didn't she?" she whispered, her expression tinged with a faint sadness.

Seeing her like that, Épée felt an inexplicable urge to protect her—and so did his fellow disciples. After that, their competition for her affection escalated even further.

This is exactly why I didn't want her to take in more disciples.

Some more time passed, and then, *that* day arrived—the one that still filled him with anguish, even now.

Aurora didn't know how she had died. Épée thought it was better that way. He had no intention to tell her what happened, ever.

Aurora had always wanted to do everything in her power to protect the world, and so she faithfully did her job, which included cleaning up after others' messes. She remained a soft touch through and through until the very end.

That those idiots couldn't do anything without relying on her, the court mage, and still dared to kick up a fuss at every little thing irritated Épée to no end.

She should've just abandoned those fools to their fate. She could've gone anywhere in the world and lived her life freely.

If Épée had known things would turn out like they did, he would've made her quit her job, taken her to a land with no one around, and locked her up for the rest of her life. That way, she wouldn't have had to die such a stupid death.

The moment that spell hit her and she'd been flung to the floor, anyone with eyes could tell that there was no saving her. She couldn't speak, her breathing was shallow and ragged, and even Épée's flawless restoration spells couldn't halt the damage from spreading. To make matters worse, he'd used so much mana earlier that his usually swift restoration spells felt impossibly harder to perform than usual.

"Shit!"

He tried to keep her alive, but Aurora's body grew weaker with every passing second. He couldn't save her.

The only one who could is Finis... But she's left the country.

Even with all three of them working together, Aurora's disciples couldn't restore her body to what it was. Épée had a solid grasp of magic—he knew his limits.

The three of them gathered around the dying Aurora. Her second disciple was in a state of panic, while the third one was in a daze, completely unresponsive. For once in their lives, the three of them thought the same thing.

"I'm not about to just sit by and do nothing," Épée said in a strained voice before turning to Aurora's second disciple. "Glacial, lend me some mana. I won't let her die like this."

Neither of them wanted to say goodbye to Aurora, so Glacial —who *never* listened to Épée under normal circumstances— silently began to let out his mana. As for Aurora's third disciple, he still couldn't use any useful spells, so Épée ignored him altogether.

He didn't care that the technique he was about to perform was forbidden, or that it had a low success rate, or that it could cost him everything. All he wanted was to stay by her side. All while keeping Aurora alive, he used advanced Dark Magic to reincarnate her, carefully specifying the conditions of her new life.

He pulled out a knife from his pocket and planted it deeply into Aurora's barely breathing chest. Then, he slit his own throat to follow her in death.

He didn't know what happened after that. He didn't *care*. The reincarnation had been a success, so now, all he had to do was ensure he wouldn't repeat the same mistakes. He hadn't expected Glacial to reincarnate as well—perhaps he'd used the remnants of Épée's spell to set up his own reincarnation—but that didn't matter. Right now, Aurora was in his hands—and this time, he fully intended on keeping her locked up and out of harm's way. In this life, he could do it.

"You know, I'm actually older than you this time, Aurora," he said as he wrapped his arms around her.

He chuckled lightly when he felt her twitch in surprise in his hold. She instantly relaxed, though, and that felt like a stab in Épée's heart.

She knows it's me, so she has no reaction.

If it had been any other adult male embracing her, she'd be frozen in place. Why? Because she wasn't used to men touching her. Épée and his two fellow disciples had always kept any man who dared to approach her at bay, never giving her the chance to develop any comfort with the opposite gender.

"Really? How old are you?" Aurora asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Oh. You're right—you're three years older than me."

Her voice was a little shaky, but that was it. She was *still* treating him like a child.

It's high time she starts to see me as a man, Épée thought.

"That's right. So I can provide for you in this life," he said.

"I can't stay with you, though. I have a family to go home to. But I'll come see you again," Aurora said, before immediately preparing to teleport away. She'd always been doing whatever she wanted, regardless of the opinion of the people around her.

However, something disturbed her mana as she cast her magic, and the spell failed.

"H-Huh? That's weird. My spell didn't work," she said, confused.

It *couldn't* have worked. As soon as he'd teleported back with Aurora, Épée had put a spell on her to prevent her from using her magic. He'd gone with an interference spell, which fell under the Dark Magic category. It was a much more efficient way of

restraining someone from using their magic than sealing their mana.

He'd made it more complex than regular interference magic so that even Aurora wouldn't be able to easily undo the spell. And when she did, he could just put another one on her. She would never be able to leave. It was a brilliant plan, if he dared say so himself.

This way, she wouldn't have to meet such a tragic fate ever again.

Chapter Seven: The Countess’s Rescue Operation

He got me.

I tried to use my magic to teleport back to the royal palace of Lèvres, but my spell didn’t activate. I was entirely positive this was the effect of an interference spell.

And Épée is the only one who could’ve cast it on me.

As I tried to undo his magic, I quickly realized it wasn’t a regular interference spell. Épée had combined several complex spells so that it couldn’t be easily removed.

Not that I’d expect anything less from him. I can *undo the spells, but it’s going to take me a while.*

Épée had always had an insatiable thirst for knowledge—perhaps as a result of his upbringing—and used to love experimenting with his spells. In his past life, he had become very good at making his magic as complex and vicious as possible, but his technique had gotten even better. Unlike me, who’d spent twenty years not remembering anything about my past life, he must’ve continued studying magic this time as well.

He’s even better at it than he used to be. As his teacher, that makes me very proud, but having my magic blocked… It’s a bit annoying.

Plus, unless I’d heard him wrong, he’d told me he would “provide for” me. It seemed that he didn’t have any intention of letting me leave, no matter what.

But why?

I was happy to see him again, to witness how much he’d grown. He might be a bit bossy at times, but he and Glacial were still my precious disciples. They were my family.

In truth, I was so happy to see them again that I almost cried. But I’m their teacher*—I can’t cry in front of them. That’d be too pathetic.*

I had every intention of treating my now-grown disciples as equals, like the accomplished and independent mages they had become, but with Glacial proposing to me and Épée trying to lock me away, I found myself at a bit of a loss. Why were they clinging to me so much? Most mages eventually left their

teacher's side to refine their craft and take on their own disciples, just as I had done.

But…

Épée and Glacial refused to do that. It wasn't because they weren't ready to cut the cord, though… It felt to me like their actions were motivated by something bigger, like they were afraid. Perhaps this was related to my death—and the reason they'd reincarnated here with me. Unfortunately, neither of them seemed willing to talk about it.

I decided to ask Épée some more questions while working to undo his spells.

I want to know about his new life, after all. I can just fiddle with the spells while we talk.

"Is your name Épée now too?" I asked, still in his embrace.

"Yeah. I grew up an orphan this time, so I decided to use the name that you so *graciously* bestowed upon me in my past life. You know, the same one you gave to your rabbit."

He was still holding a grudge about the fact that I'd named him after my pink rabbit five hundred years ago. I didn't see why. Pink rabbits were incredibly useful creatures, as their eggs were key ingredients in healing salves. Not to mention, they were absolutely adorable—all pink and fluffy, just like Épée himself.

"An orphan? You didn't choose the circumstances of your reincarnation?" I asked.

"I didn't have time," he replied. "If I had, I wouldn't have made you reincarnate into that horrible family. Besides, being an orphan was pretty useful for certain things. I managed to dodge the Motar Faith's blessing ceremony. Have you *seen* what they do to the kids during that thing?"

"I only vaguely remember mine. I was a child and didn't have my past memories back then. I think that the priest was carrying some sort of cup?"

As a child, the previous Lam hadn't been interested in anything, so she'd simply been obeying her parents' orders. As such, she hadn't even tried to understand what was going on in the cathedral.

"Those cups are old mana-sealing items," Épée told me. "They allow others to seal anyone's mana, even if the one bestowing it doesn't have any. All of the cups are terribly made, though, so there are cases where the seals just break on their own, especially on those with a lot of mana."

“So that’s how it is…” I muttered. Blessing, mana wielders, and mana sealing… I was starting to piece things together. “That’s why some children retain their mana even after their blessing. I always found it odd that there were so few people who can use magic now compared to five hundred years ago.”

“You only just regained your memories, so it makes sense you wouldn’t know much about the current world, especially since you spent most of your life cooped up indoors. Don’t worry—I’ll look after you from now on, so you don’t need to concern yourself about this kind of stuff. I won’t let you leave the building, but I’ll make sure you have everything you could ever want.”

“I can’t stay here. I’m married, and I have things to do at home.”

“Your home is *here*, Aurora. Besides, the marriage between you and your husband is just on paper. You don’t even fuck, do you?”

I felt my jaw drop.

I don’t remember raising such an ill-mannered boy!

“É-Épée! Mind your language! That was *vulgar*!” I admonished him.

“Looks like I hit the mark,” he said with a smug grin, finally releasing me from his arms. “I got an inkling when I learned your son’s adopted.”

“Regardless of that, they’re my family in this life,” I said.

However, just like Flèche a few hours prior, Épée refused to accept that truth.

“*I’m* your family. Well, either way, you can’t use your magic right now, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

As it turned out, even the strongest witch in history could be rendered powerless if you sealed her magic.

A dark smile curling on his lips, Épée went to lie down on the bed on the other side of the room. Meanwhile, I kept working on undoing his magic.

I’m nowhere near done with it, though… There’s nothing else for me to do in the meantime either, with Épée having gone for a nap.

The fact that he was able to sleep just like that meant he was sure I wouldn’t be able to run away just yet.

And he’s right, but still. That doesn’t make me feel great.

I painstakingly continued my work until another knock echoed through the room, waking Épée up. He glanced at the

door in annoyance.

"What now? I'm sleeping," he said as he stood up from the bed and opened the door with his magic.

The same men from earlier were on the other side.

"Boss, the big shot of the Motar Faith is here to discuss *you-know-what*."

"That was today? Good grief, talk about oblivious," he grumbled but reluctantly made his way out of the room, although not before telling his underlings to keep an eye on me while he was gone.

And here I thought this might be my chance to escape. I suppose it won't be that easy. Still, I wonder what the Motar Faith wants with Épée.

His underlings' magic abilities weren't nearly as good as mine, but I currently couldn't use any spells.

I won't be able to escape like this, so I might as well do some intelligence gathering. Épée called these men the "top brass" earlier, so they must know things.

Two of the four men stayed to make sure I didn't make a break for it, while the other two followed Épée to his meeting. There was little point in sitting around idly, so I decided to start questioning the two who'd remained.

"Where are we? And what's Épée's job?"

The two men glanced at each other, blinking in surprise.

"Did Master Épée not tell you anything, ma'am?"

"Well, that won't do, will it? If you're living here, you're bound to figure it out one day anyway..."

For some reason, they'd started calling me "ma'am" after our previous encounter. I decided not to correct them this time. Right now, I needed information.

"This is our base of operations. We're located on the edge of the Ongle Empire," one of the men told me.

"The Ongle Empire?!" I exclaimed, panicking slightly upon realizing that I wasn't in Tête or Lèvres.

Flèche might be looking for me using detection spells, but it's going to take him forever to find me here. He's always struggled with anything that wasn't offensive magic, after all.

I'd heard from Char and the twins that the Ongle Empire was in the midst of a civil war. They deemed it important for me to learn about the political situation of the neighboring nations, so they'd started teaching me a little about it during our usual

general knowledge lessons.

If there's a war going on, running away while I can't use my magic might not be a great idea.

I decided to keep interrogating the two men.

"You said that this is your 'base of operations,' right? What is your job here? From what I can tell, you can all use magic, can't you?"

"We, uh... We're just members of an organization."

"An organization?"

"Ahem! Did I say organization? I meant a *company*. We're employees of Master Épée's trading company. He's the head of a very large operation, doing business on a massive scale, you see."

For some reason, the two men had begun mincing their words when I asked them about their professions. They refused to meet my gaze, but I didn't know if it was because they were trying to hide something or they were just shy.

"A trading company? So you're merchants, and Épée is your boss?" I asked.

"Yeah, exactly!" one of the men replied without missing a beat. "We sell and deliver goods to those who need them. Honest work, really!"

"Oh, my, I see you're working hard. That's very commendable," I said with a smile.

One of them chuckled sheepishly. "You heard that? She complimented us," he said to his companion.

"Doesn't feel half bad, eh?" the other replied.

Épée's actions in this life baffled me, but it seemed that he was running a prosperous company with a vast network of employees under his command.

Both he and Flèche have matured so much since the last time I saw them. A sense of warmth spread through my chest as I thought about how far they'd come.

After a short moment, Épée came back, having finished with his meeting.

I flashed him a bright smile. "Épée! Your underlings told me everything! So you're a merchant now? That's amazing!"

"Huh?" he said, visibly perplexed, before glancing quizzically at the two men who'd stayed with me.

It seemed that he'd wanted to keep me in the dark regarding his job. I wasn't too surprised—he'd always been a bit of a

secretive boy, after all.

"She asked what you do, so we told her you're the head of a trading company," one of the men explained hurriedly.

"I see," Épée said after a short pause. "So that's why she reacted like that."

Though his usual grumpy demeanor hadn't changed, there was a hint of satisfaction in his expression after my compliment.

"I heard that your guest was someone from the Motar Faith. How did it go?" I asked, my tone tinged with concern. The Motar Faith was notorious for their hostility toward anyone with mana, and I couldn't help but worry they might try to sabotage Épée's company.

"Oh, yeah, it went just fine. They're actually among our customers," he replied, a nonchalant look on his face.

"What?! So you're selling things to them?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"Yeah. They're a pain to deal with, but they pay well."

"And they're not the master's only customers—he also does business with the royal family and nobles as well!" one of Épée's underlings added proudly.

"Oh, my, that's wonderful!"

The Motar Faith used to hire Char for monster extermination jobs and other tasks that required magic, so I assumed they must've had a similar relationship with Épée's company.

"So, as you can see, I have more than enough money in this life to look after you. Just let me provide for you this time," Épée told me.

"This *again*?" I asked.

"You'll be stuck inside, but I can guarantee you a life of luxury," he insisted.

"No, thank you." I rejected his offer once again. "It's not as if we'll never see each other again. Can't I just come visit you from time to time?"

From the side, I caught murmurs from Épée's underlings.

"Did you hear that? Master Épée proposed to her!"

"Aw, he got shot down, though."

Épée remained unfazed. "No. You might just vanish again. You've already done it before," he said, his tone accusatory.

Maybe I did, but I can't remember any of it…

What could have happened in those missing moments in my memory to make Épée and Flèche act so overbearingly

protective?

"Besides, your home has always been and will always be with me, right? So I won't let you leave this place."

"You're being completely unreasonable. What's gotten into you? You've always been so calm and composed... This isn't like you at all," I said.

First Flèche, now Épée... My disciples seemed determined to ignore everything I had to say.

"I've always been like this, I just didn't have the means to act on it before. I literally regretted it to death in my past life. This time, I'm not making the same mistakes."

Having no idea what he meant, I felt myself getting increasingly confused.

"Anyway, right now, you can't even step a foot out of this room, so those idiots can't rescue you. Stop thinking about them and just come to terms with the fact that you're living here now."

I tried to argue *again* that I couldn't do that, but he refused to hear me out. As for his underlings, despite their comments, they were still on his side. It seemed that I didn't have a choice, and the only way I could leave this place would be to undo the interference spell he'd put on me.

"It's your loss, Aurora. Just resign yourself to your fate," Épée said, a triumphant smirk curling on his lips as he grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the bed.

H-Huh? Is he going back to sleep?!

I didn't know how his underlings interpreted the situation, but they left the room in a rush.

"We're gonna leave you two to it, then."

"Wouldn't want to get in the way, after all."

"I think they misunderstood the situation," I said, trying to escape Épée's grip.

"They didn't, though?" he replied, tilting his head to the side and flashing me an innocent smile all while pulling me toward the bed.

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A large, extravagant mansion loomed over an otherwise barren land. Char stood before the unfamiliar building, having successfully cast his teleportation spell.

It was a risky bet, but it looks like I made it here alive.

The faint traces of mana lingering in the air confirmed what he had hoped—Lam was nearby.

I should call Canon and the twins over.

He knelt and traced a magic circle into the reddish soil, linking it to the one in the courtyard of the Mercure estate to allow for their teleportation.

While I'm waiting for them to arrive, I'll start investigating on my own.

He approached the fence surrounding the building and took advantage of the open gate to sneak into the courtyard. Lam should be somewhere in the area.

Anxiety gnawed at him. He couldn't help but worry about his wife. Lam was strong-willed and good at fighting and magic, but her constitution was incredibly weak.

I hope she's not passed out somewhere, he thought, a knot tightening in his stomach.

Char scanned his surroundings. Unlike the well-maintained grounds of the Mercure estate, the land around the mansion was wild and overgrown. As for the building itself, it was gaudy, with tasteless embellishments that screamed "nouveau riche." The stark contrast between the overly ornate mansion and the untamed wilderness surrounding it was jarring.

"She *should* be somewhere around here."

The climate and architecture were unlike anything he'd seen in Tête or Lèvres. Char didn't have time to dwell on it, but it seemed clear this was another nation entirely.

"Where are you, Lam?" he muttered, glancing around.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps echoed from within the mansion.

"There's an intruder!"

"Captain's orders—we've got to eliminate them!"

"Hell yeah! My magic's itching for a fight!"

The door of the mansion swung open and a group of men burst out, spells at the ready. They were wearing nice, good-quality clothes, but their postures and overall demeanors seemed pretty rough in Char's opinion.

Who are these guys? They're all mana wielders from what I can see.

It wasn't often that you saw so many mages gathered in one place. Whatever this mansion was, it seemed to house a mage organization far larger than the House of Mercure.

"Are you from the Motar Faith? Or are you nobles, perhaps?"

Char asked the men.

"Huh?!" one of the men snapped, his brow furrowing in visible displeasure. "Don't lump us in with either of those bastards! All they're good for is cash flow."

His comrades rowdily yelled their agreement.

"We're the *super* intimidating mafia of the Ongle Empire, that's who we are!"

"I see..." Char said, letting out a sigh of relief that the men were neither part of the Motar Faith nor nobles. This meant he could wipe the floor with them in self-defense without worrying about any potential international repercussions.

"Have you seen a woman with light-green hair around here? She's my wife," he said.

The men began yelling and grumbling again.

"D'you really think a woman would come all the way here?!"

"If we spotted one, I'd invite her over in a heartbeat!"

They started attacking him, all while yelling about how much they'd love to catch a glimpse of a woman. Char quickly realized these men weren't interested in reasoning.

I can't waste time fighting them, though.

All of a sudden, a deafening boom rang out as several of the men unleashed Fire Magic spells. Whirlwinds of flames flared into existence, spiraling a blazing vortex around him. Char's eyes widened in shock as he recognized the familiar sight.

"That's...the fire spell Lam taught to Bombe..."

Next, Wind Magic tornadoes and a deluge of water crashed toward Char with relentless force. The attacks were identical to the ones Lam had taught the twins and the kids. No regular mage could wield such powerful spells.

What in the world is going on here?

Char's mind flashed back to Flèche's reaction when Lam had been abducted.

Just as I thought, the person who abducted Lam must be someone from her past.

There must be clues inside the building—actually, it was highly likely that Lam herself was in there.

"I suppose my best course of action right now is to deal with these guys and get inside the mansion."

Char prepared a lightning spell and unleashed it on all the men at once. He knew a single spell wouldn't be enough to defeat them, but it would serve as a start.

To his surprise, the men started panicking upon seeing that Char could use the same kind of spells as them.

Their magic is weak and sloppy, but they can use more spells than regular mages. Plus, there's a lot *of them...*

While Char had only started learning Aurora's spells recently, he was a seasoned fighter. His experience allowed him to assess that he could probably defeat the men—though it wouldn't be quick or easy. While his magic might not be as advanced as theirs, he knew his combat skills were far more refined.

I've already knocked down a fair few of them, but more keep pouring out of the mansion. This is starting to get tough.

As he kept on hurling spells at the men, Char felt someone teleport behind him. Turning around, he saw the twins standing there with Canon, Bombe, and Mine.

"Sorry for the wait, Lord Char," Fouet said. "Wow, this place sure is something, huh? Wait..." He caught sight of the men attacking Char, and his expression soured. "Do we have to fight them?"

Char nodded. "Lam is somewhere around here—most likely inside the mansion."

His words caught the children's attention. Bombe, in particular, seemed very excited. "Can we use our magic then?"

"Of course," Char replied. "But if it gets too dangerous, teleport back to the mansion right away."

"Okay!" Bombe replied, already charging toward the men. "Taaake this!" he shouted, unleashing one of his signature fire spells.

"I'm going to level the ground with you!" Mine yelled, helping Bombe by using her own magic.

The men panicked when rays of light started falling from the sky, obliterating everything in sight. It was the spell Lam had taught Mine. Similar to Dark Magic, there were few mages who specialized in Light Magic, at least according to Lam, so Char surmised that they had never seen anything of the sort before.

"We'll make quick work of these ruffians for you, Lord Char, so you go ahead and look for the madam," Barre said airily as he assisted Mine and Bombe with his Wind Magic.

Beside him, Fouet let out a long, deep sigh. "Lord Canon and I will draw the attention of the men over there, so you can press forward, Lord Char. Once we're done, Barre and I will send the children home and join you inside," he said, visibly reluctant to

fight outside his work hours.

"Thanks," Char replied before charging into the mansion, evading the spells flying in every direction. Inside, he encountered even more men, but he dispatched them swiftly.

As he climbed the stairs, he stumbled upon a group of men dressed in fancier clothes than the ones downstairs. However, their overall bearing was just as rough and unrefined.

"Who the hell are you?" one of them asked, eyeing Char warily.

"Have you seen a woman with light-green hair around here? She should be somewhere inside," Char said.

The men exchanged suspicious glances until one spoke up, "Light-green hair? Is he talking about the boss's woman?"

"Did Master Épée steal someone's girlfriend? Not bad, not bad," another commented before focusing his attention back on Char. "Still, how the hell did you get in? We told the others to get rid of the intruders, so what are they doing?" he grumbled.

One of the men glanced out the window and let out an exclamation of surprise. "What the hell? They're all down! And the garden's a mess!"

That last part was definitely Mine's work.

It seems that the twins and the kids won down there.

This meant that the twins would soon join him inside. However, Char didn't have time to dwell on that detail.

"So Lam really is here? Tell me where I can find this 'Épée' guy."

"No way in hell. We won't let you take a single step farther. No one's getting in the way of the boss's first love!"

Char surmised that he was currently in the base of operations of some sort of underground organization, and the person who'd kidnapped Lam was their leader.

The men downstairs called themselves a "mafia," didn't they?

Then, that must've meant that the men before Char were the top brass. Judging by their looks and attitude, they seemed like no-good scoundrels.

"Lam is my wife. I'd like her back," he said, a frown on his face.

A stir ran through the group of men.

"Wait, what? Boss's first love is a *married* woman?!" one of them said.

"Damn, that's Master Épée for you! How immoral!" another added excitedly.

“I don’t care who you are; you’re not getting past here!”

With that, the men began hurling powerful spells at him, completely disregarding the structural integrity of the building surrounding them. The walls shook as the spells collided with them. Char raised an eyebrow in surprise. He hadn’t expected the men to start willingly destroying their own base of operation.

One of the men noticed his reaction and—even though Char hadn’t asked anything—smugly explained, “We can destroy the building as we please. Master Épée will just use his Dark Magic to rewind time and make it as if nothing had happened here.”

“Dark Magic?” Char whispered, thinking back on the moment Lam vanished in the garden of the Lèvres’s royal palace.

He was sure of it now—that Épée guy was the one who’d abducted her.

“I see. Then you don’t mind if I don’t hold back either, do you?”

The men braced themselves, preparing to defend against whatever powerful spell Char was about to unleash. However, no matter how long they waited, Char remained still, showing no signs of attacking. Growing impatient, they decided to make their move but soon noticed that something was wrong.

“I can’t move! What’s going on?!”

“My wife taught me that you can manipulate someone’s nervous system with Lightning Magic,” Char explained. “So I’ve infused just a small amount of my mana into yours to paralyze you. You probably won’t be able to move a muscle for a while. I’m in a rush, so I’ll be on my way now.”

The Mercure children were taught about the human body at the schoolhouse to prepare them for the rare missions where they fought humans instead of monsters. When Lam had mentioned that Char could use his Lightning Magic to manipulate the nervous system, it had reminded him of these anatomy lessons, and he’d asked her for more details about how he would go about it. This was the first time he’d ever used it on someone, but it turned out to be successful.

Char ran past the paralyzed men and dashed up another flight of stairs. The thought of something happening to Lam filled him with a terror so intense that an overwhelming pressure squeezed his chest. He’d never experienced anything like this before. He was slowly starting to realize why he’d been acting so weird since he’d met Lam, why he was so irresistibly drawn to her.

Who cares about her past? My feelings for Lam are more than simple admiration. I actually…

Ever since regaining her memories, Lam had injured the mansion's servants before firing them all, complained about the schoolhouse's curriculum, and done all sorts of other unacceptable things. However, her actions had truly changed the House of Mercure for the better, and she'd quite literally saved a lot of people—including Char himself. He had been too blinded by the house's rules and principles to see how wrong it all was, but Lam had helped him break free from those constraints and led him to a brighter, warmer place. Above all, Char was utterly captivated by her cheerfulness and bold, unpredictable nature.

After running without pause throughout the entire mansion, Char came upon a set of double doors deep within its interiors. Not wanting to waste another second, he dashed toward them, kicking them open with all his strength.

"Lam!" His panicked cry echoed throughout the entire room.

There, beyond the double doors, stood his wife, Lam, struggling against a man who was forcibly tugging her by her arm toward a bed, his form obscured by hers.

"Let me go! I don't remember raising you to be like this!" Lam yelled, trying to resist the man's designs. Her eyes shot wide open in shock from Char's entrance. "Char! I can't believe you found this place!"

Unfortunately, this caused her focus to slip, and her grip weakened just enough for the man to successfully push her onto the bed. She fell onto the mattress with a startled cry.

Char rushed over to her and caught a glimpse of the unfamiliar man behind his wife. The man wrapped his arms around Lam and shot Char a look full of animosity. "Who the hell are you?" he spat.

"I'm the one who should be asking you that. Abducting another man's wife then dragging her into a room to assault her? You've sure got some nerve," Char said, sheer anger sharpening his tone.

He'd never felt such intense rage before, but he couldn't suppress the inner turmoil elicited by the scene unfolding in front of his eyes.

The man glared at him, not bothering to hide his hostility. "So, you're Aurora's husband, huh? It's a good thing you came here—saves me the trouble of looking for you. I planned on dealing

with you at some point," the pink-haired, androgynous man said, stroking Lam's hair as if to provoke him.

Fury burned through Char's entire body. However, one word in the man's sentence shook him to his core.

"Huh? 'Aurora'...?"



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To the far east of the Tête Kingdom lay the town of Cœur, home to the main church of the Motar Faith. Cœur was technically part of the Dukedom of Brunel, but the Faith held more power than the duke himself. People whispered all around the nation that the true ruler of the region wasn't the duke, but the Holy Father of the Motar Faith, though none of them knew if the Holy Father truly existed, considering he never appeared in public. The one actually managing the affairs of the Motar Faith was one of the cardinals.

However, despite the gossip and doubt, the Holy Father *did* exist.

A young man stood on the highest floor of the Cœur Cathedral, gazing absentmindedly out the open window. Outside, the sky was a perfect expanse of blue, unmarred by a single cloud. A refreshing breeze, gently caressing his cheeks, brushed by him, making his pure-white robes flutter.

"The days all blend into one another without anything happening. I'm getting rather tired of waiting," he said.

The cities were ever so slowly falling into disrepair, and so were the ethics of the people inhabiting them. With each passing day, spells were fading from memory. The world truly had become a boring place.

"Not that that has anything to do with me. I couldn't care less."

Ever since that fateful day, the young man felt as though the world had come to a standstill and lost its color. He extended a pale, slender hand toward the sky, but what he sought remained out of reach. Those painful memories had left him with a gaping pitch-black hole in his heart, from which festering blood leaked endlessly, refusing to heal over.

"I want to see you."

That wish was the only thing that kept him going. Ever since that day, he'd been waiting and waiting to see his beloved again.

Without that hope, I probably would've...

As he gazed up at the sky, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps making their way up the stairs. Only a handful of people were allowed in this part of the cathedral, so he quickly surmised who it might be.

A moment later, a middle-aged man appeared in the room, his breathing rough and heavy.

“There you are! Why can’t you just stay still for once?! It’s always so much work having to look for— Eek!”

At the young man’s glance, as he inwardly wondered why he should obey his interlocutor’s orders, the middle-aged man let out a frightened cry. The young man’s annoyance must’ve shown on his face; he’d always been bad at social interactions.

“Why are you in such a hurry, Cardinal Rumeur?”

High-ranking members of the faith like the cardinals didn’t usually run around looking for him. Something serious must’ve happened.

In all truthfulness, the young man didn’t really care, but he still encouraged the cardinal to speak up.

“W-Well, two of our saints are missing! Apparently, they’ve been impossible to contact for days.”

“Could they have just fled?”

“Impossible!” Rumeur said. “We’ve been treating them so well, so why would they do that? Besides, betraying the Faith is a grave criminal offense! All saints have tracking spells on them that allow them to be located by the other saints, and the highest-ranking ones will find any deserter to punish them. Why would they risk making an enemy of the Faith, knowing the consequences?”

“And? What do you want me to do about it?”

“We need you to locate the two missing saints. The other saints haven’t been able to find them, for some reason. You’ve been casting tracking spells on each new saint appointed, have you not?”

“I have. I’ve been told that’s the rule or something.”

The saints always changed, so the young man had no clue which was which. As such, he only ever called them by their number.

“What are the numbers of the missing saints?”

“Two and ten! They both traveled to another nation and stopped communicating soon after.”

“Understood,” the young man said, focusing on the tracking spells he’d cast. However… “Interesting. The spells I put on them have been completely wiped away. I could track their movements until they entered the Lèvres Kingdom, then nothing.”

“How could that be? That’s completely unheard of!”

“Someone must’ve overwritten my spell. I didn’t think anyone in this day and age could use such powerful spells, though. There isn’t a single trace left. Even back in the day, there were very few people capable of such a feat—in fact, I can only think of a handfu—” the young man paused, a strange unease creeping into his thoughts. “Could it be…?” His face stiffened and he raised his head.

“What’s wrong? Is something the matter?” Rumeur asked, eyeing the young man.

“There is something I wish to investigate. I’ll take over this case.”

“*You* will?! No way. We just need you to figure out the saints’ locations. Please do not leave the cathedral of your own—Nooo!” Rumeur didn’t have time to finish his sentence before the young man leaped out of the window.

The fluttering of his robes gradually dissipated as he plunged into a magical space he’d conjured, and all that was left was the view of the small town and its surrounding forest.

“He truly is no ordinary individual,” Rumeur muttered, his lips trembling as he let out a dry sigh.

He was the newest cardinal, and, in truth, he had no idea how long the young man had been part of the Motar Faith. He had been around for as long as Rumeur could remember, at least since his childhood, and his appearance hadn’t changed a hair since then. To him, the young man was both awe-inspiring and terrifying at the same time.

“Where in the world did you just vanish to, Your Holiness?”

When he finally snapped out of his confusion minutes later, he ran down the stairs to inform the other cardinals that the Holy Father had just jumped out of the window and disappeared into thin air.

Meanwhile, the young man arrived in the Lèvres Kingdom. Perched on the roof of the Membre Cathedral, he observed the dusty city, his hood flapping in the wind.

“There’s not a single trace left of what this place used to be,” he remarked.

While he had been holed up inside the Cœur Cathedral, the other nations had undergone drastic transformations. Everything he once knew had vanished, leaving only himself behind.

“I hope you’re the one behind the incident,” he whispered, staring forlornly at the royal palace of Lèvres. “I’ve been waiting for you for so, so, *so* long—powerless and apathetic as I am.”

On that day, he’d wanted to go with them, but his lack of ability had held him back. And so, he stayed, alone, suffering and lamenting his own powerlessness. Still, he managed to survive until now. He didn’t know if that’d been a good decision or not. He only knew one thing—he missed her.

The young man closed his eyes and whispered the name of the person he loved, “Teacher…”

Side Story 1: The Second Disciple's Happy Afternoon

That afternoon, Glacial was decorating the living room with large, blooming flowers. He found the petals, with their unconventional patterns of purple, yellow, and green, and the twisty stems to be quite lovely.

Meanwhile, Aurora piled the cookies she'd just baked onto a plate and brought them to the living room, where all three of her disciples were relaxing. Currently, the four of them all lived together under the same roof.

"Boys, I made you a snack!" she called.

Glacial's eyes began sparkling as he finished arranging the flowers in the vase. Épée, on the other hand, let out an "ugh" from where he was sprawled on the couch, his face darkening, while Aurora's third disciple put down his book, said he felt unwell, and quickly retreated to his room, locking the door behind him.

"If he can run this fast, surely he must not be feeling that bad," Aurora commented, her brow furrowing. "I suppose I'll set a few cookies aside for him and bring them to his room later."

Glacial thought to himself that he probably wouldn't take them, but he didn't say anything, not wanting to spoil his beloved master's mood.

Épée, on the other hand, had no such qualms. "Aurora, go and bury that garbage in the garden. I can't believe I can smell that disgusting stench all the way from here," he said.

Aurora picked up a cookie and gave it a sniff, and Glacial did the same. It smelled healthy, with just a hint of charring.

"Don't worry, Épée, they smell just fine!" Aurora declared, placing the plate of cookies on the table.

"Where does that confidence come from?" Épée muttered, before adding, louder, "Just so you know, I'm not eating that crap."

With that, he left and ran to his room, locking himself inside, just like her junior disciple. Épée probably wouldn't eat any cookies either.

“These two are heartless. Your cookies are delicious, master,” Glacial said. He took a seat, picked up a cookie and brought it to his lips; a perk of being Aurora’s disciple.

“Glacial,” Aurora whined. “You’re the only one who eats my cooking.”

“Your cooking and your sweets are the best in the world, master.”

“Thank you. You’re such a kind boy,” she said, visibly moved, wrapping her arms around Glacial, whose mouth was filled with the cookie.

Then, she sat next to him and the two of them continued eating together.

I have master all to myself today! Glacial gloated inwardly.

He was the only one out of her three disciples who would eat Aurora’s cooking.

It’s nothing compared to the poison and inedible objects the people of the palace used to put in my food. At least, it’s properly cooked.

Having been exposed to poison more times than he could count, Glacial’s taste buds had become completely numb by the time he’d met Aurora. According to his research, he could fix them with magic, but he kept them that way on purpose.

Nothing in the world could make me give up this position.

It was only in these moments, as they ate together, that Glacial didn’t need to worry about Aurora’s other two pesky disciples and could focus his attention solely on his master. He knew that the other two hadn’t had easy childhoods either, but they clearly had much less willpower than him if they couldn’t bring themselves to eat a few cookies.

And so, Glacial happily enjoyed munching on his snack with his beloved master.

“They’re good...right?” Aurora asked, blinking at him, her expression filled with uncertainty. Glacial thought that she looked very cute at that moment. Despite being five years younger than her, Glacial had developed a subtle affection for Aurora—his master and current guardian.

“Yes, they’re delicious. You’ll make a great wife one day, master,” he complimented her.

Just like his taste buds, Aurora’s were completely destroyed after all those years of eating Finis’s cooking. Not that she was aware of it.

Children remember the taste of their parents' cooking as the best thing in the world, and Aurora is the same. She's even inherited Finis's recipes.

In other words, this was all Finis's fault. Elfins didn't care about taste—their only concern with cooking was ensuring maximum efficiency in getting the necessary nutrients. This mindset had led to the creation of the bizarre cookies Aurora baked. On top of that, she'd made questionable changes to the original recipe, to the point where Glacial wondered if these could even still be considered cookies.

Master... You're so cute. I love you.

Glacial savored his blissful snack time with his master to the fullest. Even after Aurora and he were done eating, Aurora's two other disciples remained holed up in their rooms, most likely afraid of her offering them the same questionable cookies again.

Cowards.

This meant that Glacial could have Aurora to himself for a little longer.

"Master, why don't we go get ingredients for dinner together?" he suggested.

She nodded. "We should. You'll help me?"

"Of course!" Glacial said brightly, taking her hand and leading her to the backyard.

They had garden plots back there, where all sorts of fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, and herbs were growing.

"How about I make dinner tonight?" Aurora suggested.

"What a great idea! I'm looking forward to eating your cooking, master," Glacial said. At that moment, he thought that they sounded very much like a married couple, and a warm surge of happiness filled him.

Unfortunately, Glacial knew that when dinnertime rolled around, Épée would inevitably snatch the ingredients from Aurora and cook an actually decent meal. According to Aurora, his cooking was "exquisite"—much to Glacial's annoyance. As for his junior, he'd undoubtedly side with Épée, being an unabashed glutton. It was only in these moments that those two got along.

But back to the present time. A witch's garden could grow anything regardless of the season, so Aurora's always boasted a mix of spring and fall vegetables.

"Let's have some pumpkin today!" Aurora declared, pointing at the enormous, orange vegetable.

Glacial nodded. “That one seems ready for harvest.”

He didn’t mind gardening. The royal palace where he’d been raised had a vegetable garden as well, but he had never been allowed to set foot in it. Here, though, he could breathe freely without anyone restricting him or locking him up. And it was all thanks to Aurora.

“What else should we get, master?” he asked, carrying the giant pumpkin in his arms.

“Let’s get ingredients for a salad,” Aurora replied, though her vague answer didn’t exactly give him much direction.

“Okay. I’ll get some of these leafy greens and herbs, then.”

“Thank you, Glacial. I’ll go catch some fish in the creek at the edge of the garden in the meantime.”

That’s right—Aurora’s garden also had a little river running through it, teeming with fish from all seasons.

Once he was done harvesting the vegetables, he joined back with Aurora—who’d caught enough fish for the four of them—and together they made their way back inside.

Aurora began preparing dinner immediately afterward, and just as Glacial expected, Épée snatched the ingredients and utensils from her, while her junior disciple chased her out of the kitchen. And so, the four of them enjoyed a delicious pumpkin soup, accompanied by a fresh salad and some fish grilled with herbs.

Side Story 2: Fouet Observes the Married Couple

Fouet loved slacking off. Well, it'd be more accurate to say that he simply hated anything that was too tiring. His brother, on the other hand, was pretty much the opposite—he couldn't sit still, which was why he was in charge of outdoor missions. In fact, he *wanted* to do them. As for Fouet, the only reason he was Char's aide was because he tended to slack off if left to his own devices, so Char had no choice but to keep him within his sight to make sure he stayed on track. Assisting his workaholic of a boss was, quite frankly, exhausting work, but recently, Fouet had started getting more and more chances to slack off, and it was all thanks to Lam, Char's second wife.

Ever since that fateful day, Char had begun spending more time with his wife, time during which Fouet was free to take it easy, much to his delight. It also helped that the Mercures had put the Cerveau Cathedral on their blacklist, meaning that they didn't have to deal with their outrageous requests anymore. Char didn't need to go on long work trips, or work overtime or on his days off anymore, and the number of risky jobs he had to take on had significantly decreased.

Lam had pretty much saved Fouet's life in more ways than one.

However, there was one little issue with this whole situation—Char and Lam's relationship was really testing his patience. The two of them were making so little progress, it was starting to get on his nerves.

If there was no spark between the two of them, I wouldn't care, but they're clearly interested in each other. So, why can't they just take things further?

It was obvious to Fouet that Char had feelings for Lam. After all, he had never paid nearly as much attention to his previous wife. As for Lam... Well, she hadn't realized how she felt yet, but she was clearly starting to warm to him.

The two of them were currently sitting at a bench in front of the fountain in the garden, enjoying a nice conversation. They

looked just like a young newlywed couple in love.

Char tucked Lam's hair behind her ear, and she turned beet red, turning away from him in embarrassment.

Okay, that's enough PDA. Still, I can't help but worry about these two.

Char had never received any sort of tutelage that focused on enhancing emotional intelligence, so Fouet couldn't help but be concerned his master's understanding of love was limited to showering the person he liked with excessive attention, much like a child.

Then again, Barre and I didn't receive any education in matters of the heart either, but we're clearly much more mature than Lord Char in that aspect.

Neither of them had ever had a romantic partner, yet Fouet was—for some reason—convinced that he and Barre understood love better than Char did.

As Fouet observed the two lovebirds, he watched as Char closed the distance between himself and Lam. He took her arm with one hand while his other hand slipped around her back, pulling her into an embrace. Lam's face turned even redder and she began floundering about in embarrassment.

Come on, Lord Char! You're almost there! Fouet silently encouraged his master.

But right as Char's lips were about to meet Lam's, her head suddenly drooped back limply.

Huh? What just happened?! Fouet wondered, bending forward in curiosity to catch a better glimpse of the scene.

Char, on the other hand, didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

"Did you pass out again? Good grief, you're hopeless," he muttered, a look of fond exasperation in his eyes.

What in the world...

He later learned that, having spent most of her life cooped up inside, Lam had never developed immunity to the opposite gender, and she would inevitably pass out every time a man got too close to her. What a troublesome condition.

I know! I'll prepare some strong smelling salts for her. The madam should have tons of handwritten medicine recipes lying around in the mixing room.

Fouet remembered seeing a recipe for "The Ultimate Awakening Tonic: Guaranteed to Revive Anyone (For

Interrogation Purposes).” It seemed just like what Lam needed. He recalled telling Barre that one could prove useful, so he knew exactly what went into it. The ingredients wouldn’t be easy to find, but Fouet was determined to make it—both to help his lord and to ensure he could continue to slack off in peace.

Side Story 3: The Countess Works Out

It was a fine and refreshing day, and I was going through my usual muscle training, swinging my broom around in my exercise clothes. Any deviation from my daily routine, and my body would make me suffer the consequences.

If I used magic, I'd collapse.

If I overexerted myself during exercise, I'd collapse.

If I stayed up just a bit too late reading, I'd collapse.

I couldn't take it anymore! Why? Because every single time, Char had to carry me back to my room. Not only did I feel awful for inconveniencing him, but—most of all—it was unbearably embarrassing!

I can't just keep swinging my broom around. I need to find a more efficient way to train.

I'd tried to increase my strength with a potion, but potions were just that—potions. They couldn't fix the underlying issue. Besides, tampering with the human body with magic was notoriously difficult to begin with.

I need a training routine that will allow me to build muscle without moving too much. But what?

Unable to come up with an answer on my own, I decided to go ask the other Mercure residents for inspiration.

My first stop was my son's room.

"An exercise to build muscle, you say?" Canon asked. He was casually reading a book while balancing in a one-handed handstand.

He looks slender and delicate, but he's actually much stronger than I thought, I noted, impressed.

Apparently, the children used to do muscle training every day at the schoolhouse. Canon told me that even Mine could do a one-handed handstand without magic. Five hundred years ago, people used to rely on magic exclusively for a lot of things, but nowadays, it seemed that they'd learned how to do them using only physical strength and other skills. Perhaps they'd actually progressed in that regard.

"Um… Can you do a handstand without support?" Canon asked me.

“Only if I use magic,” I replied.

“I’ll help you, so how about you give it a try?” he offered, coming back up to his feet. “You’re wearing pants today, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

I nodded. “If you don’t mind.”

Okay, all I have to do is put my hands on the floor and… Hup!

I vigorously kicked off the ground in Canon’s direction, and he easily caught my legs.

“I did it! I did a handstand!” I cheered. But then, something went wrong. “Huh? Aaah!”

While I had managed to get myself vertically upside down, my arms weren’t anywhere near strong enough to support my body. They failed, bending beneath me, and I ended up falling on my face.

“M-Mother?!” Canon quickly helped me recover, and I settled into sitting on the floor. “It seems that handstands are still a little difficult for you,” he noted. “How about you go ask Fouet and Barre for advice? They’re much more experienced than me, so they might know of a good way for you to build up your strength.”

“G-Good idea,” I stammered, still a little shaken. “Thank you, Canon. I’ll go look for the twins.”

I left my son’s room and made my way around the estate, on the hunt for Fouet and Barre. Fortunately, I quickly found them jogging in the garden. They spotted me and ran over.

“Is something the matter, madam?” Barre asked.

I nodded vigorously. “It is! I need you two to help me come up with an exercise routine for me.”

The twins stared at me in puzzlement then exchanged a silent glance. They often communicated this way, by just looking at each other.

“You could try running… But it might be a bit much for you,” Barre said.

I nodded reluctantly at his words. Given my current condition, I’d collapse within minutes if I tried running.

“Then how about a brisk walk around the garden?” Fouet suggested. “Once you feel comfortable enough, you can gradually increase the speed.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll give it a try.”

The twins resumed their jog, and I began walking at a steady pace along the same track.

They're way too fast! I noted once they'd passed me multiple times. *How frustrating! I used to be able to run too in my past life!*

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as I watched them move with such ease.

It's fine. For now...I need to do...what I can and...

My breath grew labored and my vision started to blur. Panting, I ended up in a crouch on the ground.

"Madam?!" the twins yelled, running over to me.

"Sorry for getting in the way of your training," I wheezed. "I'm going to get some rest."

It turned out that brisk walking was still a little too much for my body. I decided to simply walk at a normal pace from now on.

"You should ask Lord Char for advice," Fouet said. "He's very self-disciplined when it comes to physical training, so he might know a good approach for you."

"A-All right. I'll go see him once I've caught my breath."

I didn't want to bother the twins any longer, so I headed back inside as soon as I was able.

Good grief, this body is driving me insane.

To my surprise, Char wasn't in the study today but in his room. It seemed that he wasn't too busy with work at the moment.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, glancing up as I entered. He set his book aside and stood up. "It's rare for you to come to my room."

"There's something I'd like to ask you," I said. "Um... Do you know a good exercise routine? I've been thinking of moving on from my usual broom swinging and taking things to the next step."

"I don't think you *need* to push yourself so hard."

"I do. I can't keep collapsing every time I use a bit of ma— Eek!" Before I could react, he'd scooped me up in his arms. He took me to the back of his room, where he set me down on a sofa and brought me a towel.

"You were exercising before coming here, weren't you? You're all sweaty."

"Ah, uh, s-sorry about that. I was looking for new exercises to help me build stamina. I've tried doing a handstand and brisk walking, but I couldn't maintain either for long."

Char let out an overexaggerated sigh. "Stop exercising for today. Your body's almost at its limit."

“But…” On the cusp of protesting, I bit my tongue. He was right—my body was already starting to feel the strain. If I stubbornly refused to stop, I’d just end up collapsing again. “Is there really no good way for me to build stamina?”

“How about you try adjusting the weight of your broom? Your daily broom swinging has been working, hasn’t it?”

I nodded. “I can do it without collapsing halfway through.”

“I’ll order you new brooms, all with different weights,” Char said thoughtfully. “We might even be able to use them for the younger kids’ physical training.”

It was a bit embarrassing being lumped in with the schoolhouse’s youngest students, but Char’s suggestion made sense.

“I haven’t been able to come up with a better idea, so I’ll take you up on that. Thank you.”

I decided to stick to swinging my broom around for the time being. I was glad I’d asked Char—I could always rely on him whenever I had an issue.

“Though, if you insist, I suppose I don’t mind helping you exercise,” he said, suddenly lifting me from the sofa and placing me on his bed.

“You will?” I asked expectantly.

“Sure. After all, the kind of exercise I have in mind requires two people. Don’t worry—all you need to do is lie back.”

I paused. “Wait a minute.”

I felt like his words had a deeper meaning to them… Eventually putting two and two together when I saw the teasing smirk on his lips, I felt my face heat up instantly.

“Wha… Wha… Do you mean—”

Surely, he wasn’t suggesting that the two of us should engage in…intimate activities, was he? That would be outrageous.

“What else could I mean?” he said, unabashed.

“Y-You’re the *worst*! I can’t believe you’d say something like that! I want a divorce!”

To be honest, I wasn’t too familiar with…*those* things, since I’d never had a relationship with a man in either of my lives, but I had a feeling it was something *indecent*. As such, I absolutely refused to even entertain the idea. Besides, Char and I may be married, but we didn’t have *that* kind of relationship.

“I reject your offer,” I said, standing up in a huff and storming toward the door. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him anymore.

He’d seemed so unbothered when making that outrageous suggestion, and my own reaction made me feel like a clueless child. It was infuriating.

I’m the witch of legends, for crying out loud!

To add insult to injury, I tripped over my own feet before I could reach the door and ended up falling on my face in front of Char.

Wah, I look pathetic! I wept inwardly, trying to get myself back to my feet.

But then, my body was lifted from the floor—Char had walked over to me and picked me up in his arms once again.

“Sleep here today,” he said, dropping me onto the bed before resuming his reading. I hadn’t noticed before, but the book he was reading was one of my own manuscripts that I’d translated a few days ago.



He sure is diligent—no, perhaps "obsessive" might be a better word.

In the end, I fell asleep while gazing at him and had no idea what happened after that. What I *did* know, though, was that when I woke up the next morning, Char's face was right next to mine on the bed, and I let out the loudest scream of my entire life.

Side Story 4: Aurora and Her Disciples Make Soap

A pot was bubbling on the fire, in which thick and viscous pink and light-blue substances swirled together in a beautiful spiral.

“Looks good!”

I was currently giving my disciples a mixing lesson. Today, they would be learning how to make soaps with different properties. My clever first disciple had already started making his own, but the other two didn’t know how to just yet.

“The most commonly made soaps are refreshing soaps, slimming soaps, fragrance soaps, and color-changing soaps,” I explained. “You made a skin-hardening soap last time, didn’t you, Épée? I saw it in the bathroom.”

“That one’s *mine*. If anyone other than Aurora uses it, I’ll beat you up.”

“Don’t threaten your juniors,” I chided him.

He was always trying to pick a fight with the other two. I didn’t know what to do with him anymore.

“Oh, please, I wouldn’t use that filthy soap even if you begged me to,” Glacial sneered haughtily.

“G-Glacial?! What did you just say?” I exclaimed, gawking at him.

“How about you learn how to make your own soap before acting like a pompous bastard, meathead?” Épée shot back.

“Well, maybe *you* should focus on gaining a few centimeters before worrying about reinforcing your body, shorty.”

Paying no mind to his two seniors’ bickering, my third disciple muttered, “I think I’ll try to make a breast enlargement soap. Teacher, could you test it for me and see if it works?”

Épée and Glacial both froze, their heads snapping toward him.

“The hell are you talking about?!” Épée snapped. “Why would anyone want to artificially make them bigger? Natural’s the way to go, you moron!”

“For once, we’re in agreement,” Glacial chimed in before turning toward me. “Ah, but don’t worry, master—I prefer them small anyway.”

I tilted my head to the side in confusion. “What do you mean?”

I had no idea what the three of them were talking about, but at least they’d stopped arguing. I decided to take that as a win. The house tended to end up in shambles when they fought, and cleaning up after them was always a hassle.

“The first steps of making soap are the same as I just explained,” I said, resuming the lesson. “Now, we’ll move on to adding the desired effects. I’ll divide the mixture I’ve made into three earthenware pots, and you’ll use magic to add whatever effect you want to your soap. You can find a list of examples in this book, so feel free to take a look if you need inspiration.”

I took a step back and observed my disciples as they made their soaps. I preferred to let them work autonomously rather than micromanage every little detail.

Épée immediately made a muscle-reinforcing soap, without even needing to look at the book, and handed it to me for inspection.

“Done. You can put it in the bathroom, but don’t use it too much,” he told me.

“Why? It sounds so useful,” I protested.

As for Glacial, it seemed that he was struggling with the soap-making process. “I can’t stabilize my mana, but I feel like I’m so close… Might as well just freeze it all. Soap is hard anyway, so it won’t make a big difference.”

“Stir stir stir stir stir stir…” my third disciple muttered as he just mixed the contents of his pot over and over again. Though he did seem uncharacteristically motivated for once, his abilities just weren’t up to par. I decided that him trying was good enough for today.

“C’mon, Aurora, let’s leave those two dunces behind and go play outside,” Épée said.

The other two immediately reacted to his words.

“Are you trying to steal a march on us?” Glacial said, his tone accusatory.

“We’re not done yet,” my third disciple chimed in. “You shouldn’t disrupt teacher’s lesson.”

“It’s your own faults for being dumber than slimes,” Épée shot back. “If you’re not happy with it, just finish your soaps faster.”

I could tell a new fight was brewing.

“Master, I think the ones who’re done should go wait out the rest of the lesson in their room,” Glacial suggested.

“I agree,” my third disciple chimed in.

“Screw you!” Épée snapped.

“Quit it, you three!” I intervened, but they paid me no mind.

Glacial lobbed his half-frozen bar of soap at Épée, who dodged it before snatching his muscle-reinforcing soap from my hands and hurling it back in retaliation. Épée’s attack sailed past his target and hit my third disciple’s arm. Upon contact, his muscles immediately began bulging. The soap then ricocheted off him and plopped squarely into his pot, causing the half-finished concoction within to splash onto the other two boys.

Ample, voluptuous breasts sprouted on their torsos out of thin air. It seemed that, even though my third disciple hadn’t been able to completely finish his soap, his endless stirring had imbued it with *some* effects.

“Pfft. You two look adorable. Those look great on you,” my third disciple snickered.

“You dunce! Fix this, right now!” Épée bellowed at him.

“Masteeer,” Glacial whined, a pout on his face. “You have to kick him out! He wanted to use that soap on you!”

The mixing room was in complete pandemonium. I had to intervene.

“Enough! Stop fooling around during lessons!” I yelled, imbuing the soap left in the cauldron with a “catification” effect and dousing my disciples with it.

It canceled the effects of all the other soaps and left them with cat ears and tails.

“Meow? What the *meow* is this?!” Épée exclaimed.

“Meow-ha-ha, you look meow-nificent, Épée,” Glacial laughed.

“He’s not the only one who’s turned into a cat, you meow? You did too, Glacial. Ah, meow too,” my third disciple commented.

The three of them turned toward me in unison.

“You’ll keep the cat ears and tails for an entire week!” I scolded them. “You’ve been fighting nonstop during every lesson—it’s high time I punish you for your behavior! Oh, and by the way, the effect of this soap can’t be undone by any other soap.”

“That’s so unfair, Aurora! I swear I’ll make a soap that can cancel yours out, meow-rk my words!” Épée declared.

“Sure, go ahead,” I said. “Well, if you can make soap with those cute paws of yours, that is.”

“Ugh!”

And so, my three disciples were forced to spend an entire

week as cat boys. Countering their spells was never enough to make them stop their antics, so I'd ended up resorting to humiliation as a desperate measure.

I did not know yet that I'd need to use countless similar punishment spells in the future.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing the second volume of *The Countess Is a Coward No More! This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break.*

In this volume, we're introduced to Lam's former disciples. I made sure to infuse each of them with plenty of personality, and I had a blast writing them.

Once again, TCB-sensei outdid themselves with the illustrations. Thank you so much for making everyone so handsome—from Char and the others to Lam's disciples. I can't get enough of the contrast between Flèche's and Épée's appearances.

Just like last time, the cover made me squeal with excitement. I'm assuming the building in the background is the palace of Lèvres. It's such a gorgeous backdrop!

The manga adaptation of this series started serialization a little while ago, illustrated by Unomai-sensei. I'd be thrilled if you checked it out. The story unfolds beautifully in the manga, and Lam looks really cool. I won't spoil it for you, but you should definitely go read it for yourselves!

On another note, I noticed that, while we've had some *literal* hair balls in this series, we've never had any actual pets. I wanted to introduce some but didn't get the chance, and now the second volume is finished. If the opportunity arises, though, I'd love to include them.

The editing process was a little difficult this time, so I am very, very, *very* thankful to my editor. It's all thanks to them that this volume saw the light of day. I can't thank them enough. Their name should be included on the cover. It absolutely should.

As we reach the end of this afterword, I would like to once again thank everyone who was involved in the production of this book, as well as all the readers. It's all thanks to you that I can release these books, and I'm incredibly grateful.

I hope you'll continue to support me from now on.

Ageha Sakura









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by Ageha Sakura

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