
3
Ageha Sakura
ill. TCB
The Countess Is a Coward No More!
This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break!


3
Ageha Sakura
ill. TCB
The Countess Is a Coward No More!
This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break!


"I have full confidence in this new dress."
"I'm saying this for your own good: For the party, pick one of the dresses I bought you."


Épée
The Ongle Empire's "King of the Underground," Aurora's first disciple in his past life. Surprisingly skilled in intricate magic despite his rough manner of speaking.
Char
The Earl of Mercure. Possesses an outstanding potential for magic. Admires Aurora and enjoys collecting keepsakes from her life, especially her manuscripts.
Lance
The Motar Faith's Holy Father. Aurora's third disciple. Extended his lifespan with magic.
Flèche
The First Prince of the Lèvres Kingdom. Aurora's second disciple in his past life. Specializes in water and ice spells.
Canon
Char and Lam's son. Not related by blood to either of them but has a good relationship with Lam. Training diligently in preparation to become the next earl.
Lam
The Countess of Mercure. The reincarnation of the witch of legends, Aurora. Has a weak constitution in this life but has retained her talent for magic.


"I just regained
the rest of my
memories."

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Chapter One: The Countess’s Identity Gets Discovered
4. Chapter Two: The Countess Counterattacks
5. Chapter Three: Welcome Party and Intentions
6. Chapter Four: The Countess Regains Her Memories
7. Chapter Five: The Countess’s Final Battle
8. Chapter Six: The Countess Obliterates an Insignificant Threat
9. Side Story 1: The Children Hold the Fort
10. Side Story 2: The Husband, the Wife, and the Wannabe Secret Lover
11. Afterword
12. Bonus Textless Illustrations
13. About J-Novel Club
14. Copyright

Chapter One: The Countess’s Identity Gets Discovered

What started it all?

Char sat in the gloomy schoolhouse, his arms wrapped around his knees. Despite being only five years old, he’d already given up on everything.

The boys’ dormitory was like a cell, the clothes the Mercures had given him were cheap and of poor quality, and the training he had to endure daily was so needlessly harsh, it bordered on abuse. But he knew that if he didn’t meet the Mercures’ expectations, the only thing awaiting him was a miserable death.

Then again, no one would mourn him if he were to pass away; not his parents, who had chased him from their home as soon as they’d learned he had mana, and certainly not the Mercures. These people viewed the children in their care as mere objects. They wouldn’t grieve for him. He’d most likely end up discarded somewhere like trash. Char had already seen it happen several times since entering the schoolhouse. The teacher would abandon the students on the training grounds and dispose of their bodies when no one was looking.

Char didn’t know why he should keep on living. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t want to die.

Curled up on his bed in the large dormitory where he and the other boys were confined, Char found his gaze drifting to the empty bed beside his. It had belonged to a slightly older boy who had died just a few days ago. He had been friendly, and for some reason, he had taken it upon himself to look after Char. The boy would often come talk to him, despite how unsociable Char was. Apparently, he had been an orphan from another country, whose relatives had sold him to the Mercures when they’d heard that the house was looking for children with mana.

A single picture book lay on the otherwise empty bed. It had been one of the few belongings the boy had brought to the schoolhouse, and Char remembered seeing him gazing at the book as if it were the most precious thing in the world, despite his

struggles with reading and writing. Soon, an adult would come and throw the leftover possession away.

Char climbed down from his bed and picked up the book. Having been raised in a noble household, he had been taught to read from a young age.

"*The…Witch of Legends*?" he said, reading the title aloud.

It seemed to be a book about a mage—something very rare in the Tête Kingdom.

"Aurora Ibrusus?" he muttered as he opened the book.

Inside, it was written that the book had been made in the Dukedom of Brunel. From what he could tell, the book seemed to chronicle the adventures of a mage named Aurora, who was portrayed as a brilliant mana wielder, capable of casting a variety of offensive spells across all attributes. The illustrations depicted her defending a villager by defeating a monster with Lightning Magic, saving a prince trapped in a palace of ice with Fire Magic, and using Light Magic to dismantle an evil organization.

According to the afterword, Aurora was a real person who had lived five hundred years ago and had indeed possessed the ability to wield all attributes. Even though she had been born a mana wielder, she was still admired and respected to this day.

Char wondered what the boy who used to occupy the bed beside him thought about when reading this book. The idea of someone being able to wield several magic attributes seemed far-fetched at best, let alone all of them.

After glaring silently at the book for a moment, Char set it down on his own bed.

Maybe if I become better at magic, I'll become someone people need, just like the witch of legends.

The existence of Aurora had cast a faint light in Char's pitch-black future.

※

Chasing after his abducted wife had brought Char to the Ongle Empire. He'd entered the suspicious-looking mansion looming over the desolate land, only to be attacked by waves of mages, seemingly all belonging to the same organization—the existence of which was inconceivable in this day and age.

By any other countries' standards, it was already considered strange for a nation to have an officially sanctioned house of mages, such as the Mercures. Most nations' mana wielders lived in hiding, like in Lèvres, although it was difficult for them to completely hide their powers, which tended to lead to discrimination and persecution. As such, an organization of this size—much larger than the House of Mercure—was an absolute oddity.

Moreover, all the mages here were capable of casting spells that had long since disappeared. Char recognized them as the spells Lam had begun teaching him and the other Mercures—ones that she knew from her past life. The person who'd abducted her must've been someone she was acquainted with from that time too.

Char's thoughts returned to the organization. If the Motar Faith learned of its existence, there was no doubt they would attempt to snuff it out. After all, the Faith's saints and holy knights were supposed to be the only ones privy to these ancient spells, which gave them an edge over regular mages and allowed the Faith to keep them in check. Char himself had been at the Faith's beck and call, forced to work into exhaustion until mere weeks ago when his wife had put a stop to it.

After fighting the organization's mages, Char burst into a gaudy, overly ornate room, where he finally found his wife being held captive by a man who claimed to be her former disciple. To his shock, the man had referred to her as "Aurora."

Aurora—the name of the witch of legends. The very figure Char had admired since his youth. The one who'd saved him from despair when he was a child. The one he held so dear in his heart.

Lam is...Aurora?

Char was struck dumb by the revelation. But once he regained his composure, he found himself surprisingly at peace with that truth.

Lam had never explicitly told him that she was Aurora, and he had never tried to question her about her past. However, reflecting on it, he realized just how many traits his wife shared with the witch of legends. They had both lived five hundred years ago, bore an uncanny resemblance to each other (along with sharing the same distinctive hair color), were incredibly knowledgeable about

magic, and could wield any spell without difficulty. Add to that, Lam's second disciple—Flèche, the first prince of Lèvres—had divulged a vague but similar insight about her past life.

So, she really is…

Deep down, Char had always suspected that his wife was Aurora. All her first disciple did was confirm Char's suspicions and lay the truth bare before him: His wife was the reincarnation of the strongest witch in history—the figure he'd looked up to since he was a child.

He was hit with a sudden reality check.

The witch of legends currently inhabited a body so weak that the slightest effort made her collapse. Even when she tried to be careful, she often ended up passing out more times than not. On top of that, the food she cooked was gross, her sense of aesthetic abysmal, and she was impulsive and stubborn. As he confronted the truth before him, he could almost hear the image shatter of the perfect witch he'd arbitrarily constructed in his mind when he was a child. She'd even managed to get herself abducted by her former disciple without being able to fight back.

As it turned out, the Aurora that Char had worshiped all these years was merely a glorified illusion he had created in his head.

Just what in the world was I expecting?

Char couldn't help but let out a small sigh at how absurd everything suddenly felt. The only thing he knew for certain was that Lam had saved him twice—both when he was a kid and now that she was his wife. That was all that mattered.

Right now, I need to make sure she's safe. I don't have time for idle thoughts.

Lam was still in that shady man's clutches—literally. Eyeing Char with embarrassment, she struggled to escape the man holding her from behind, but to no avail. To make matters worse, they were sitting on a bed, which only heightened Char's irritation.

"Lam, we'll talk later. Let's go home," he said curtly.

"I-I would like to, but, um…I can't get away right now," Lam replied hesitantly.

Char knew that Lam could easily free herself with her magic, but for some reason, she seemed to be struggling.

"Why aren't you using your magic?" he asked, feeling that something was amiss.

“Char, I… I can’t convert my mana into magic at the moment,” Lam said awkwardly. “He’s put several interference spells on me, and I’m in the process of unraveling them, but it’s not easy.”

To cast a spell, one needed to stimulate the mana cycling through one’s body and refine it to release it as magic. The spells this man had cast on Lam must have been preventing her from executing one of these steps, which explained why she was trying to escape his hold using strength alone. Though she’d never manage to break free with such a frail body.

Letting out another sigh, Char walked up to his wife, grabbed her hand, and tried to pull her up.

A pitch-black blade of wind shot toward him from point-blank range—the work of the man behind Lam, no doubt.

To block the attack, Char immediately cast the defense spell Lam had taught him. Had it been any regular person with normal reflexes, they most likely would’ve died on the spot.

This man had every intention of killing Char.

“Épée! That was dangerous!” Lam said, turning her head around to scowl at the perpetrator.

“I should’ve known you’d side with the weakling,” he sighed.

So this man was the “Épée” the goons in the hallway had been talking about. Meaning, he was the head of this organization. He was quite visibly hostile toward Char, and the feeling was mutual. Char had no intention of letting him get away after he’d been manhandling his wife.

“Let her go,” Char ordered coolly.

“No way. *You* scram,” Épée replied, tightening his hold on Lam, not bothering to hide his animosity.

“I don’t think so.”

Neither of them had any intention of backing down.

“Aurora, hope you don’t mind if I kill your husband,” Épée said nonchalantly, preparing another pitch-black wind spell.

“Épée, stop! Char, just—just run away!”

Char’s eyes widened in shock at her command.

“He’s my first disciple,” Lam added by way of explanation. “You can’t win against him!”

Judging by her reaction, this Épée guy had to be stronger than him. Char had only recently begun to learn how to wield other spells and attributes, so it would be nearly impossible for him to

defeat someone like Aurora's first disciple—someone who had his memories of five hundred years ago.

I know *that, but it's still infuriating.*

Char took a moment to calmly analyze the situation. The man in front of him would definitely be more annoying to deal with than that prince from Lèvres.

But I'm not about to leave without Lam after coming this far.

The twins were done with the thugs in the courtyard and should be joining him soon. Char had dealt with all the remaining mages, so they'd be able to come straight here after sending the kids home.

※

At the present time, I, Lam Mercure, was frantically working on unraveling the mana-blocking spells that Épée had cast on me. If I didn't manage to free my magic, not only would my honor as a teacher be sullied, but more importantly, Char's life would be in danger. In this life, he and I were family. He was important to me, and I refused to let him come to harm.

Char's potential seems boundless, but his magic knowledge isn't up to par yet, and he's had very few occasions to fight other mages. While his physical abilities easily surpass those of Épée, my first disciple specializes in Dark Magic, which is notoriously annoying to deal with. He's always been the biggest problem child of all three of them…

On top of that, said problem child had over twenty years in this lifetime to polish his magic even further.

Even I don't know just how much he's grown since the last time I saw him.

It was far too risky for Char to try to face him right now, which was why I had urged him to run. But, not only had he not heeded my warning, he seemed determined to fight Épée head-on, and my disciple didn't look like he was going to hold back either. Both of them were as stubborn and competitive as they came.

If they won't listen to me, then I really need to hurry and remove these interference spells, I thought, focusing back on the task at hand.

But Épée, who hadn't budged from behind me, kept getting in my way, poking and pinching my cheeks and ruining my

concentration.

Char grew visibly more irritated at the display.

“Damn, Aurora, you’ve already undone half the spells? Now, that’s the witch of legends for you. Guess I’ll just have to add more.”

“What? More?!”

A wave of dread washed over me, and I resumed my thrashing about. To my surprise, just as I felt his magic wriggling behind me to make good on his threat, I managed to break free from his grip.

It seemed I had made the right choice by trying to escape this place when I had; if he had doubled the interference spells on me, it would have taken me *days* to untangle them.

Under normal circumstances, I would have been able to easily repel or cancel his spells, but, as Épée had said, I had only undone half of the spells he’d cast on me, meaning I could only use less than half of my mana at the moment. Needless to say, I couldn’t do anything against his magic in my current state.

“Char, Épée, how about you two try talking things out before fighting?” I suggested. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find some common ground.”

“That doesn’t really benefit me, though, does it?” Épée asked, as blunt as ever.

I began to panic.

“I don’t want to talk to him either. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man that can be reasoned with.”

Well, Char had refused my proposition as well.

“Aurora, I don’t want you to get caught up in the cross fire, so just stay put, you hear?” Épée told me. “I’m serious. *Please* don’t try to interfere.”

“He’s right, Lam. It’ll be too dangerous for you to get involved when you can’t use your magic.”

Hold on a minute. Why were *they* lecturing *me* now?!

I don’t understand…

Épée put some distance between the two of us and began to cast a Dark Magic spell, the kind that would swallow its target on contact.

It’s a modified version of the one I used on the saint and his knight. Once it catches its target, it’ll keep on shooting offensive spells at them as long as they’re in the darkness. Needless to say, the victim would

most likely never see the light of day again.

Épée didn't hesitate a single second before firing the spell at Char, who had already adopted a fighting stance. His sharp reflexes allowed him to dodge. Having undergone that barbaric training at the schoolhouse, his body was nimble enough that he could evade attacks where other mages would've resorted to blocking them with magic. Unfortunately, he was still at a disadvantage, as Épée parried all the lightning spells he hurled at him without breaking a sweat.

"Hmph. You can use some pretty legit spells for a shitty fledgling mage," Épée commented.

He was about to use another Dark Magic spell when footsteps echoed down the hallway.

Have Épée's underlings arrived? That's not good. Char is already struggling against Épée alone. If his underlings join the fray, he won't stand a chance!

Panicking, I grabbed a pillow from the bed, preparing to throw it at Épée to give Char time to escape. A mere pillow wouldn't stop my disciple for long, of course, but it was better than nothing.

If push comes to shove, I can throw the duvet at him too. Though, I'm not sure how far I'll manage to throw it with these skinny arms of mine...

To my relief, the people who appeared were two men I was very familiar with. The twins—sporting identical hairstyles, though their hair colors were different—barged into the room with an air of urgency.

"Lord Char, are you all right?!" Fouet asked.

"We've dealt with the thugs in the yard and sent the kids back home. Is the madam— Ah, there she is."

I bent forward so that they could see me better and yelled, "Fouet! Barre!"

"Madam," they breathed, a look of relief appearing on their faces.

"Lam can't use her magic right now, so I need to deal with this man myself. He's about on the same level as her," Char explained to the twins, speaking rapidly.

I didn't know exactly how strong Épée was now, but I could tell Char would struggle. Épée's mana pool was only slightly better than that of an average mage, but his knowledge of magic and his

ability to craft new spells weren't to be trifled with.

He can come up with new spells on the spot based on his opponent's abilities, but Char and the twins aren't that advanced. I haven't taught them that yet.

It was now three versus one, but Épée didn't seem bothered by that in the slightest. He most likely thought he'd win, regardless.

"Looks like I have to fight *three* little fledglings now, huh? Well, not that it makes much of a difference. I'll make chicken skewers out of you!" he said, before erecting a barrier of light around the bed. It'd repel any offensive spells and protect me as long as I was inside.

Then he began casting a large-scale fire-and-dark compound spell.

"Stop, Épée! Do you want to destroy the whole building?!" I shouted.

"That's why I'm using Dark Magic too, Aurora. That way, I can use all the flames I want, and they won't damage anything outside the space I've created with my Dark Magic. Then, I can just fence these three fledglings inside the space and finish the job," Épée explained, preparing multiple spells at once as if it were nothing.

Dark Magic was his preferred attribute, but he was so dexterous he could use any other type with equal ease.

His spells won't hit me, though, thanks to the barrier.

Watching the four of them engage in combat, I could tell that Épée was on a completely different level from the Mercures.

That's my first disciple for you—an absolute pain to deal with.

Confirming my observation, it didn't take long for him to get the upper hand over the Mercures. If it weren't for their physical abilities, they would've lost much earlier. Unfortunately, they were too busy dodging Épée's Dark Magic spells to even think about striking back.

I'm almost done removing Épée's spells. Char and the others still don't seem willing to run away, so I hope they'll at least hold on until I finish, I thought, anxiety gnawing at me.

But then, the temperature of the room began to drop. At first, I didn't think much of it, supposing it was just a slight chill in the air, but it soon became much more intense. We were indoors, so it made no sense for it to be so cold all of a sudden.

Could it be…

It seemed that Épée had reached the same conclusion as I had.

"Hmph. So *he's* come too, huh?" he said, looking around the room. "He's still as slow and dumb as ever, isn't he? Even the fledglings found this place before he did."

The second the words had left his mouth, the large window at the back of the room burst into pieces with a loud crash, and the temperature plummeted.

Sure enough, the person I'd suspected had arrived, his hands grasping the window frame. His light blond hair fluttered in the wind, and his face was expressionless, just like a mannequin's. I didn't know what floor we were on, but I knew it couldn't be the first. He must've used his magic to fly up here.

"Prince Flèche," I said as he climbed through the window.

Despite being the first prince of a kingdom, he'd come all alone. Perhaps he'd deemed that none of his subordinates could match Épée's strength, or perhaps they were awaiting his orders somewhere else. I suspected that he thought he was the only one who could defeat his fellow disciple.

Flèche cast a glance at me—I was still sitting on the bed where Épée had left me—and seemed to instantly understand the situation. He'd always been incredibly sharp, even as a child, despite his laid-back demeanor.

"Are you all right, master?!" he exclaimed. "Did that basta—*Ahem*, that man who looks oddly like Épée do something to you? He must have, right? If not, you'd have given him a good smacking and run away from here already."

I nodded. "He did. This is the real Épée. Just like you and me, he got reincarnated as well. He abducted me from the palace and placed some spells on me to prevent me from using my magic. I'm almost done removing them, though."

Flèche began trembling as I explained the situation to him. "He will *pay* for this. I can't believe that he tried to keep you all to himself when you were powerless! He even took you to his *room*!"

"Huh? Wait, *that's* what you're angry about?" I asked, taken aback.

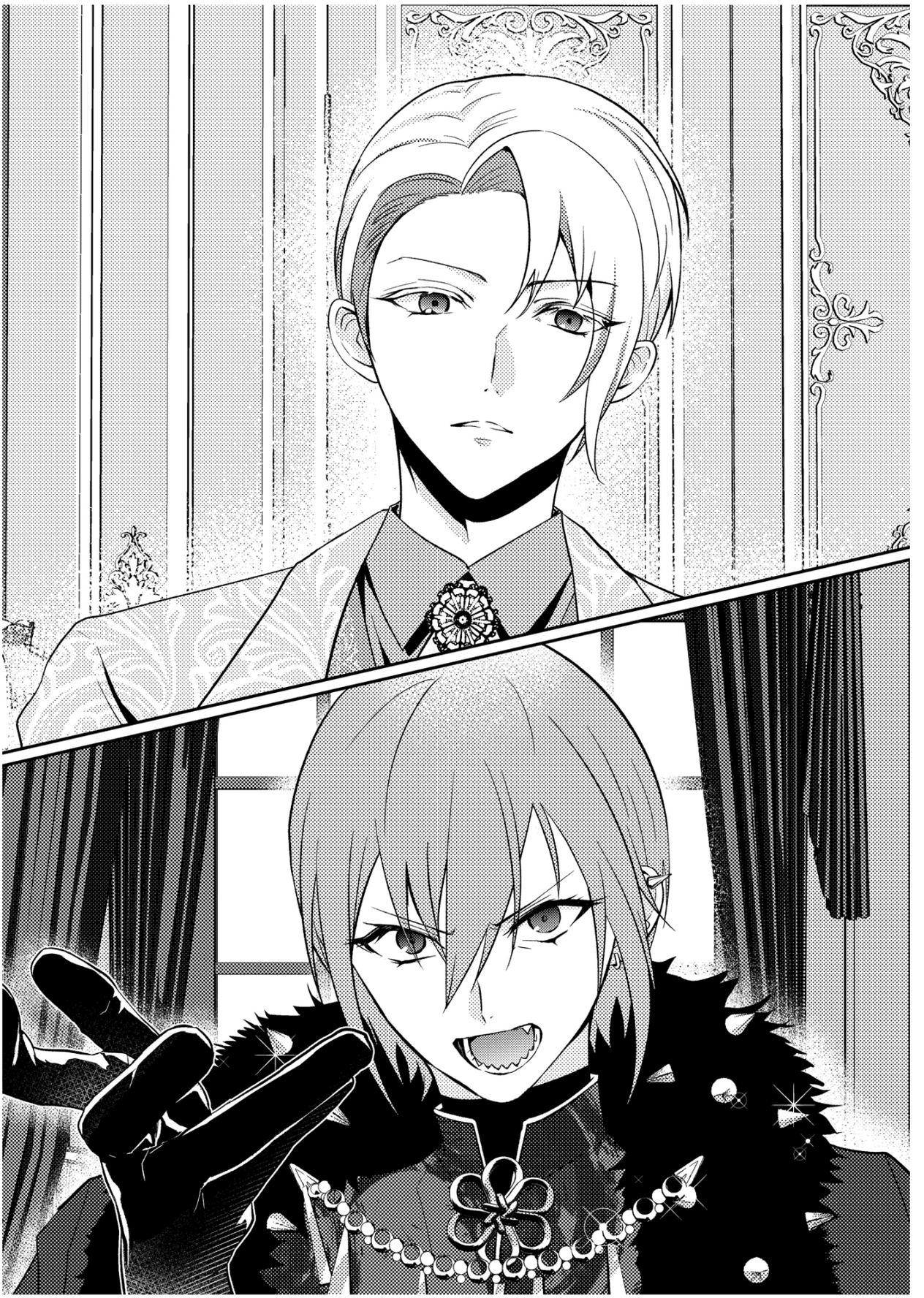
My disciple didn't reply, making his way to the center of his room. He went to stand right in front of Épée and shot him an ice-cold glare.

"Long time no see, Épée. Five hundred years, in fact. You were a

bit rough with master, weren't you? Breaking into my palace and abducting her out of the blue. Even *I* haven't had the chance to take her to my room yet in this life."

"Huh?" Épée spat. "Remind me, who do you have to thank for your reincarnation? That's why I hate you damn silver-spoon bastards. You always act like it's a given that others will do everything for you. You should learn the meaning of the words 'thank you' before even thinking of taking Aurora to your room. Anyway, don't worry about your beloved master. I'll provide for her and make sure she has everything she needs in this life."

"You can't just make decisions for her. Besides, master will marry me and become the queen of Lèvres."



I hadn't agreed to either of their propositions, yet they still began to squabble over which of them I'd stay with. It was a scene I had witnessed countless times five hundred years ago.

They're incorrigible. But Épée finally dropped his guard. It's now or never!

I quickly undid the last of the spells that were blocking my magic. At last, I was free. It was as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and my body felt much lighter.

"I made it in time. Thank goodness Épée is too busy bickering with Prince Flèche to notice."

Now that I had my mana, escaping would be a piece of cake. I could teleport wherever I wanted. Undoing Épée's spells had taken a bit of a toll on my meager mana pool, but I could probably manage a few more spells before collapsing.

I stood up from the bed and sneaked past the barrier of light. While it repelled any attack from the outside, escaping from within was actually quite easy.

Char saw me moving and quietly made his way over. "Are you all right, Lam?"

"Yes. I've finally broken the spells Épée cast on me."

"Thank goodness. Let's escape while we still can."

Char was sharp, so he'd understood my intentions without me even needing to explain. He glanced at the twins, and they nodded, seemingly having caught on as well. Just as you'd expect from people who had faced countless life-or-death situations together, their coordination was amazing.

"Come, Lam," Char whispered, pulling me in an embrace and guiding me toward the twins.

I threw a glance at my two disciples. They'd begun hurling spells at each other and weren't paying attention to us, so we managed to regroup with the twins without any issue.

"Let's go," I said, preparing a teleportation spell.

Char and the twins had used up a ton of mana to keep up with Épée, so they must have been near their limits. I, on the other hand, still had more than enough mana to teleport us out of here even after undoing the Épée's interference spells. Removing them hadn't cost all that much mana, but you needed to have a very good grasp of the way mana flowed within your body and flawless control over it.

Épée felt me activate my magic, as he let out a startled “Ah!” But it was too late.

“I’m sorry, Épée,” I said. “Let’s have a more peaceful reunion next time, shall we? We’ll have a proper conversation then.”

The last thing I saw was his face contorting in frustration before the teleportation spell took us to our destination—which was, in fact, not the Mercure estate.

“Why did you teleport us to the palace of Lèvres?” he asked, throwing me a reproachful glare once he caught up to the situation.

That’s right—I’d teleported us back to the room we’d been staying at in Lèvres.

Char quickly glanced around to make sure no one had seen us teleport, but the room was empty.

“Well, I was abducted in Lèvres, so I thought I should probably tell the people of the palace that I’m fine,” I explained. “We weren’t supposed to leave just yet, and I don’t want this to turn into an international problem. It’ll be annoying to deal with.”

It had already been half a day since I’d disappeared from the palace, after all.

“I could’ve just handled it myself later,” Char retorted.

“I also have to tell them that Prince Flèche is fine.”

I didn’t want the Mercure reputation to suffer because of me, and I hoped we could maintain a good relationship with the people of Lèvres.

“Oh, and I need to get the cage with the saints too. If I leave them here, His Highness will definitely freeze them when he comes back.”

“You *still* haven’t given up on taking those three as your disciples?”

I pretended not to hear his sigh and began searching around the room for the insect cage where the saints were imprisoned. But it was nowhere to be found.

“How strange,” I remarked. “I remember leaving it on this shelf. Did someone move it while we were away?”

Could it have fallen to the floor when Épée’s spell hit the castle? Or had Flèche thrown it away while we were gone? Or maybe a kind third party had moved it to another room.

“Well, I suppose I’ll use a tracking spell to—”

I began to cast my magic, but a sudden wave of dizziness washed over me, forcing me to lean against Char for support. It seemed that my body had reached its limit.

Already?! I thought I could manage at least one more spell.

Char quickly grasped what was happening, lifting me into his arms without a word.

"I'm going to explain what happened to the people of the palace, and we'll head home for the time being. Is that all right with you?" he asked me.

I let out a defeated whine. "Yeah… Thank you."

"Most of the prince's subordinates are mana wielders, so they should understand. Let's hurry up and leave before he comes back and causes us more trouble. I'll return later to get the saints, all right? The prince adores you so much he probably won't kill them without permission, even if he does freeze them."

The twins nodded in acknowledgment of his plans.

"Fouet and I are technically trespassing here," Barre said. "It'll be in everyone's best interest to leave sooner than later."

"I agree. Plus, I'm tired. Can we go home and rest already?" Fouet said, not even bothering to come up with an excuse.

The three of them must've used up every last ounce of strength they had to save me. They'd only begun learning proper magic recently, so facing off against Épée had definitely taken a toll on them.

Char went to inform Flèche's subordinates of the situation. He told them that I wasn't feeling well after being abducted, and that Flèche was currently in Ongle, but that he should be back soon. Now, we could safely teleport back to the Mercure estate without risking an international incident.

I also had Char ask the servants to contact us when they found the cage with the saints in it. According to them, no one had seen it after I had vanished from the garden—but then again, the palace had been in such pandemonium that no one even had been thinking about the cage.

"I've relayed your message to the servants," Char said when he returned. "Was that all?"

"Yes. Thank you," I replied, grateful for his solicitude. "Épée and Flèche's fights usually last for several hours. They might even be at it for days, depending on how it goes. Even five hundred years

ago, they were like this. They probably won't be coming after us for a while."

"I see. Then let's leave while we still have the chance. We can't take them both on at the same time just yet," Char said, seeming somewhat frustrated.

With that, he effortlessly cast a teleportation spell, and we landed in the garden of the Mercure estate, all in one piece.

We're finally back.

My eyes landed on the mansion for the first time in forever, and my body instantly relaxed. It seemed that, at some point, I'd started seeing the Mercure estate as my home, the place where I belonged. Char also looked relieved as he looked around the garden, and so did Fouet and Barre. I wondered if they'd begun to see the Mercure estate as a place of comfort. If that was the case, it was a positive development.

"Where are Canon and the others?" Char asked.

"Resting in their rooms, I would assume," Fouet replied. "They looked pretty worn out after the fight."

That caught my attention. "What fight?" I asked.

"Right, we haven't had a chance to fill you in yet. The older kids helped us rescue you," Fouet explained. "Though, we immediately sent them home once we were done dealing with the thugs in the yard of that building you were locked in. It would've been too dangerous to have them go any farther."

So the children had gone to Ongle with Char and the twins? I made a mental note to go thank them later.

"I see. Were they hurt? I'm worried about them."

"They're perfectly fine, just a few scratches. They've become good mages, all three of them. It would've been *so* annoying to dispatch all of those thugs with just Barre and me, so I'm glad they were there."

A realization hit me: Char, the twins, and even the children had traveled to an unfamiliar, foreign land just to rescue me. And Fouet spoke of it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Thank you," I said, a warmth spreading through my chest. "I'm incredibly thankful to all of you. For everything—both for what you did last time and for this."

By "last time," I was referring to the incident with the aide of the Cerveau Cathedral's bishop, when he had hired thugs to abduct

me. The Mercures had all worked together to rescue me that time as well.

To them, I have truly become part of the family.

This was where I belonged in this life. These people were my precious family and the children my adorable new disciples. They had *accepted* me. That thought filled me with a profound warmth.

Yet, I couldn't shake my growing concern for my former disciples. I had hoped they would have lived good lives after my death, eventually passing away peacefully from old age.

I would have wished for nothing more than for them to find happiness with someone else and to live long fulfilling lives.

Because they were my family, and I loved them deeply.

But, for some reason, both my first and my second disciple had reincarnated alongside me. At first, I was relieved to see that they seemed to be thriving this time around. They had even taken on their own apprentices!

As soon as I'd learned of their reincarnation, I drew a line, telling myself I shouldn't interfere with their new lives. I had hoped they would do the same—let go of the past and embrace the present.

Yet, everything they had done so far had completely defied my expectations.

I wonder what went wrong.

They had always been a bit peculiar in our past lives, refusing to take their independence and insisting on living under the same roof as me even though they were no longer children. But back then, they hadn't worn that desperate look of fear on their faces. That meant *something* had happened in the past that still haunted them to this day.

And it's most likely my fault.

It explained why they were so insistent on keeping me by their side.

I still couldn't remember the end of my past life. But, as things stood, I simply couldn't bring myself to leave my disciples to face their struggles alone.

It may sound overprotective considering they're grown adults now, but I can't help worrying about them… I really hope I'll manage to have a proper heart-to-heart conversation with them one day.

I hadn't been able to do that this time, not in Lèvres nor Ongle,

which was proof that I still had much to learn as a teacher.

Unfortunately, even though I'd turned down their propositions, I had a feeling they wouldn't give up so easily. They would most likely seek me out again. When that happened, I absolutely couldn't let the Mercures get hurt in the process. I needed to come up with a strategy to ensure my disciples and I could have a calm conversation without anyone getting in danger.

I should set up some traps to prevent them from causing too much damage. As long as they don't seal my magic again or try to gang up on me until I run out of mana, I should have a shot at keeping things peaceful.

Thinking it through, I realized the situation wasn't as dire as I had initially believed. Épée and Flèche were still wary of my powers. The fact that Épée had immediately sealed my magic as soon as he abducted me was proof of this. It made sense, of course. I was once—and still was—considered the greatest witch of all time. There was a reason I'd gained that reputation.

The only problem is this weak body of mine.

It was the only thing holding me back, and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Lam?" Char said, pulling me out of my thoughts. "I don't know what you're thinking about, but you should go get some rest for now. We were away for a long time, and you were abducted. You must be tired."

He came to support me to make sure I wouldn't fall as he gently urged me to go to my room. Just as he'd said, my body was nearing its limits.

"Oh, and also..." As we slowly made our way toward the mansion, I waited for him to continue. "Once you've recovered, I want you to tell me the truth about your past."

A startled gasp escaped me.

"I told you we'd talk later, remember?" he added.

So much had happened, I'd completely forgotten...

Char knows I'm Aurora!!!

※

After that, I spent a few days on enforced bed rest.

This bed and I have become quite familiar, haven't we? I mused.

But this morning, the doctor finally gave me the all clear to leave my room. I put on one of my favorite dresses—patterned with little legged lemons—cheerfully swung the door open and dashed out into the hallway. While the mansion was still as old and brooding as ever, it somehow felt brighter now, perhaps because its residents were much happier than before.

Now, all this hallway needed was a little makeover. I was thinking yellow for the floor, baby pink with light blue stripes for the walls, and bow-shaped chandeliers—about five should do in place of the old ones. That'd be perfect. To make it extra adorable, I could even add decorations that looked like whipped cream to the support pillars and embed fake red and green candy into the handrail.

Gazing down the hallway, I remembered that I needed to find a way to deal with my disciples in the future.

I've already removed the tracking spell Épée put on me when we were in Ongle, and I lifted all the interference spells. Even if he were to come barging in here, I should be able to handle it.

He probably wouldn't come this soon, though. Despite what others might think, he was actually quite a cautious boy. When he had abducted me in Lèvres, he'd stayed hidden until the very end, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Knowing him, he'll carefully plan his strategy before making his move. I just hope we'll be able to have a peaceful conversation the next time we see each other.

As for Flèche, while it wasn't impossible that he'd try to come alone, it was unlikely. He wasn't usually as extreme as Épée—probably because, unlike my first disciple, he tended to be a bit more considerate of my feelings. But knowing how wild his magic became when he got worked up, regardless of his intentions, I still felt a tinge of apprehension.

I really needed to prepare measures to protect the Mercures from a potential attack.

"But first…"

I had to fulfill my promise to Char.

Now that he knows I'm Aurora, I need to have a proper conversation with him.

Apprehension gnawing at me, I stepped through the open door into the study where I hoped to find Char. Sure enough, he was

there alongside Canon, who was diligently helping him with his work. Canon must've had enjoyed the time he'd spent with us in Lèvres, as he didn't seem nearly as scared of Char as he'd previously been. The two of them were finally behaving like father and son.

As for Char, he was sitting at the strawberry-patterned desk, signing some documents.

I rushed over to them and announced, "Char, Canon, I've finally recovered!"

The two of them immediately glanced at me, gazes filled with suspicion. I'd been in such poor health all this time that it seemed they didn't quite believe me.

"Lam, you should rest for one more week, just to be safe. Not only did we travel to another country, but you had to fight a saint, someone put weird spells on you, and you had to use teleportation magic to get us out of Ongle," Char told me sternly.

"Father's right, mother. You already tend to faint easily as is," Canon added.

Ouch. They have a point, but...

I couldn't do as they told me, even if I wanted to. It was only a matter of time before Flèche and Épée made their moves.

And they definitely won't hold back this time.

As such, I'd need to take preemptive measures to ensure things wouldn't get as messy as they had before.

Staring my husband right in the eye, I said, "It won't be long before my disciples try to come here. I want to have a proper conversation with them this time—and for that, I need ways to pacify them. I was thinking of putting a barrier around the estate and setting up some traps to help them cool their heads a little."

Unfortunately, the Mercure estate was horribly understaffed, and while all members of the household could technically use magic, half of them were just children with no combat experience. It definitely wouldn't hurt to personally put up some traps and barriers around the place to repel any potential threat.

"We'll set up the traps for you, mother," Canon offered. "We should be able to do it if you teach us how. I'm sure that even the little ones can help. It'll be good practice."

That could indeed be an option. Traps didn't consume that much mana, and it'd be a good opportunity for the children to

practice various types of magic. Plus, it would feel a little like setting up pranks, which they should enjoy.

"All right. I'll teach you and the others how to make all sorts of traps later. You can also try to come up with your own."

"Thank you, mother!" Canon said excitedly.

Trap spells were a favorite among children in my past life as well.

I was happy to see Canon act like the teenager he was for once.

"Setting up the barrier might be a little too complicated for you, though. It's best to let adults handle such large-scale spells," I said.

Barriers were a bit trickier, as they required not only a lot of mana, but also the technical expertise to ensure they were uniform.

"I'll do it," Char chimed in. "You just have to give me directions."

"It'd be faster if I—" I tried to protest, but Char cut me off.

"Absolutely not. You've *just* recovered from the trip. Do you want to relapse?"

He closed the distance between us and set a hand on my forehead. "You still feel warm," he commented, his brow furrowing.

I felt like Char understood my own health better than I did—even though it was *my* body.

"Anyway, if that's all, you can return to your room. You should stay in bed a little longer, just in case."

Overprotective as always. He tried to escort me back to my room, but I hurriedly stopped him.

"Wait. There's something else we need to talk about," I said, looking up at him.

He stopped and shifted his ruby-red eyes to meet mine.

It took every bit of courage I had to continue. "Um... I... I've come to fulfill my promise to you. I'll tell you everything about my past."

For a moment, Char simply stared at me in silence. He must've sensed that I wouldn't go back to bed, no matter what, so he eventually nodded in resignation. "Fine. I'll hear you out."

"I'll leave you two be," Canon said before leaving the room. Perhaps he had sensed that we were about to have a serious conversation and had decided to give us some privacy.

I didn't mean to make him worry...

I wouldn't have minded if he had stayed, but ultimately, it

would be best to first tell the truth to Char, then let him decide whether he wanted to share it with the other Mercures.

Taking a seat in the chair Canon had been using, I settled in without a word. As for Char, he sat on a nearby sofa and assumed a position that suggested he was ready to listen.

"Well, uh… I think you may already be aware of this, but…" I threw him a hesitant glance, and he silently urged me to continue.

I took a deep breath, and I finally told him the truth. "Just as Épée said, my name in my past life was Aurora Ibrusus. I'm the witch of legends who lived five hundred years ago. Well, the title of 'witch of legends' was given to me only after my death."

After my master Finis had vanished, I had become the most powerful and knowledgeable mage in this part of the continent, which was why I'd later come to be called a legend. As for the "witch" part, it was simply how elfin mages called themselves, since men couldn't use magic, and I'd naturally adopted the title as well, my magic teacher having been an elfin. Many female mages used to do the same back then, even if they had no direct connection to the elfin people. Nowadays, the term had fallen out of use, and both men and women referred to themselves as "mages."

"I'm sorry for keeping it a secret. I just didn't know how to tell you… I've shattered your dreams, haven't I?"

Char was a die-hard Aurora fan. The secret room connected to his study was full of Aurora portraits and items that allegedly used to belong to her, as well as books from five hundred years ago. That was why I hadn't wanted to tell him—I'd feared he would be too stunned to process the admission.

"You didn't" was all he said before encouraging me to elaborate, his face completely expressionless.

"The Lam you first met wasn't the current me. I hadn't regained my memories yet at that point. I only remembered my past life after I smacked my head against the wall when my handmaiden pushed me. That unlocked my memories of being Aurora," I explained. "I could've told you and the others the truth back then, but you wouldn't have believed me, would you? That's why I kept it a secret. Even I realized how far-fetched it sounded."

Char didn't say anything in response. He must've agreed with my assessment.

“After some time, I decided to tell you that I had my memories of five hundred years ago. I considered telling you about my real identity as well…but I just couldn’t bring myself to.”

Not only had I thought that there wasn’t really any point in talking about who I was in my past life, but I also had another reason for not telling him.

“After seeing your Aurora collection with all the portraits, the merch, and my old manuscripts that were never published, well… There was no way I could’ve told you I was the real deal!” I said, all but shouting toward the end.

I paused, and an awkward silence fell over the room. Char was visibly uncomfortable—he didn’t even dare look at me—and his cheeks were slightly red. It was my first time seeing him like this.

Seeing as things wouldn’t progress unless I resumed my story, I pulled myself together and continued. “As for Épée and Flèche, they were my disciples back when I was Aurora. I don’t really know why or how, but they’ve reincarnated with me… Actually, based on what Épée said, it seems like *they* are the ones who set up my reincarnation. I tried to ask them for more details, but they kept evading the question, so I don’t know the whole story,” I said. “But I think that the fact that I don’t remember the end of my life as well as the reason my body is so weak must be due to the reincarnation spell malfunctioning.”

“Your health has been gradually improving, though,” Char pointed out. “I’d say your weak constitution is most likely a consequence of the life you lived with the Ivoires.”

I was impressed by his ability to remain composed and make accurate observations in the face of such extraordinary revelations. He was right; I’d been fainting less and less often recently. Maybe there was still hope for me.

Char seemed to sink deep into thought for a moment before he eventually muttered, “I fought Aurora’s disciples?”

He must’ve felt quite conflicted about this revelation.

While he did look somewhat frustrated, I couldn’t help but admire how well he’d managed to keep up against mages that were completely out of his league. He still had plenty of room to grow.

“To think my wife is the mage I’ve admired ever since I was a kid and has been so close to me all along… It sounds unbelievable,” he

said.

"Yeah… I know."

"But based on your magic knowledge, the color of your hair, and what your disciples said… There's no doubting it. You're the genuine article."

He sounded deeply moved. Meanwhile, I was surprised by how easily he had accepted my real identity. I had expected him to be shocked, in denial, or even angered by the revelation. I'd mentally prepared myself for it.

But he simply cast a calm gaze at me, a small smile curling on his lips. "I'm glad you're Aurora."

I absolutely hadn't been expecting this reaction and had no idea what to reply.

Eventually, I asked, "Aren't you disappointed?"

He'd seen me collapse at the slightest thing, and he'd had to carry me around more times than I could count. Not only that, but he had seen me disheveled in the morning and had likely heard me mumble strange things in my sleep.

"Why would I be? I'd argue I've done much more to disappoint you," he replied.

"Are you talking about your Aurora collection?"

It *was* indeed embarrassing. But…

"I don't mind it all that much," I assured him. "Actually, I appreciate the fact that you've collected all of my manuscripts, and I was happy to hear you say so many nice things about me."

I hadn't expected copies of my old books to still exist in this day and age. It wasn't beyond reason to have believed they'd all been destroyed. Granted, it sounded like Char had struggled to get his hands on them.

The Motar Faith would never have let documents from five hundred years ago circulate, had they known about them.

While I couldn't say for certain *how* my books had survived all these centuries, I assumed it was because people could no longer read Ancient Elfin—the language I had written them in.

"Anyway," I continued, feeling a little embarrassed, "as you can see, I may be the witch of legends, but at the end of the day, I'm just a normal human. Still, I have to say, it's a mystery why only *my* name is left in the history books, while no other mages are remembered. Perhaps it's because the Ventre Kingdom—the place

where I used to live—was located in this area?" I mused.

Reminiscing about the past, I gazed out the window. The sky stretched out in a beautiful expanse of blue, and the weather was simply perfect. Char had insisted I go back to bed after this, but perhaps it might be nice to have a little walk outside while we set up the barrier. Well, if my body would cooperate, that is.

"Lam," Char called my name suddenly, and I turned back to him.

He looked as stoic and composed as ever.

"Aurora or not, in this life, you're still my wife. So, feel free to live here however you wish," he told me.

I felt a slight stirring in my chest as I gazed intently into his ruby-red eyes. "That's very generous of you," I said. "Yet, I can't help but wonder—why are you accepting me so readily?"

He should've doubted my words or gotten angry at me for hiding the truth from him.

But he didn't. He instantly believed me and accepted everything without question. I really don't understand him.

"To begin with, I don't dislike you. In fact, I've grown attached to you. I *was* surprised to learn that you were the witch of legends, but I'm not angry at you or anything—I don't have any reason to be. Besides, it sounds entirely plausible: As I've told you before, the portraits of Aurora all look remarkably similar to you."

"Th-They do."

"It also explains why you can read ancient Elfin and how you can improvise all sorts of spells in an instant. Everything falls into place now that I know you're Aurora."

I couldn't believe that his hardcore devotion to Aurora had inadvertently worked in my favor.

"Besides, who you are doesn't matter to me as long as you're you," he added matter-of-factly after a short pause.

His words made my heart race.

"You may have been Aurora in your past life, but revealing that to me doesn't change who you are now."

Char had accepted me.

He'd reassured me that he wouldn't treat me any differently, no matter my past.

His words just now made me so happy. If he genuinely wants to continue treating me as he has, if I'm truly allowed to have this…then I

want to believe him.

For a moment, Char studied my expression in silence, waiting for my response. Then, he said, “So I won’t divorce you.”

We had been having a serious, weighty conversation, yet his final remark was so quintessentially *him* that I couldn’t help but laugh. He was always true to himself, no matter the circumstances. That fact alone reassured me more than anything else in the world.

“I should tell the others that I’m Aurora. They’ll eventually find out anyway,” I said.

“I can inform the twins if you want. And Canon too,” Char offered.

I nodded. “Thank you. I’m entrusting the matter to you, then.”

It felt like a wise decision to leave it to him. He was the head of the family, and it made sense for him to handle matters concerning the household.

At last, I could finally consider the matter of my true identity resolved. Char had accepted me for who I was. I couldn’t have felt more relieved.



I thought we were done, but Char leaned in a little closer and said, “I want to know more about you.”

His tone had shifted.

I hadn’t been expecting that. A surprised “Huh?” squeaked out of me as I avoided his gaze, feeling restless.

“Um… You already know more or less everything about my life as Lam, so how about I tell you about my past as Aurora instead?”

“Absolutely. I want to hear about your real life as Aurora—not just the stories people tell.”

“It’s true that the tales everyone knows are overly glorified,” I said. “I was just a regular girl who loved magic so, *so* much that I ended up mastering it through sheer passion.”

I decided to tell Char about my childhood in my past life. I couldn’t quite explain why, but something about him made me want to open up about myself. I wanted him to know everything about me.

A gentle breeze drifted in through the gap of the open window as we gazed at each other awkwardly.

※

In my past life, I was born a normal baby girl in a regular village. Back then, what later came to be divided into three nations—Tête, Lèvres, and Ongle—was a single, unified realm called the Ventre Kingdom.

In a corner of this vast nation, there was a small, peaceful village that was known for its fruit cultivation. That was where I, Aurora, was born.

There, I had a typical family, and I hadn’t even become Aurora yet. I was Ahn—a name that was normal and incredibly common. However, my parents never used it, preferring to refer to me as “it” or “that thing.” They always seemed somewhat nervous when interacting with me.

Magic used to be much more common then, and even regular villagers made use of magical tools. Those who could wield magic in my village used it to take care of the fruit trees or to make domestic chores a little easier. All in all, the villagers led peaceful, quiet lives, making a living from the fruits they grew.

As someone who was anything but ordinary, I was an anomaly

in their lives.

According to them, I was an “abnormal” child. From what I’d been told, since the day I’d been born, I had been able to use magic as effortlessly as breathing. My parents were utterly flabbergasted the first time I’d used magic without ever even being taught.

I personally didn’t care about how or why I could use magic, and simply let my curiosity guide me without dwelling on the details, making up spells to my heart’s content. My parents often urged me to stop, but I refused to listen. Magic was far too much fun for me to give up.

As I grew older, the scale of my spells expanded, and the other villagers began to resent me, labeling me as an out-of-control child. Meanwhile, my parents kept exhorting me to be “normal,” even going as far as to punish me harshly at times. But it was pointless. I refused to meet their nonsensical expectations. Being normal was *boring*.

I can use magic, so why should I stop? It’s not like I’m hurting anyone. Is being normal really that important?

I loved magic and just wanted to have fun with it—that was all there was to it.

They don’t have to get angry at me just because I’m using slightly unusual spells! I’ve even helped them by making it rain during the recent drought as well as having protected the village from a storm.

No one in the calm, peaceful village could stop me.

One day, I climbed onto the thatched roof of our humble little house and shot a ton of steam at the sky using a spell I had created. It formed a bunch of light-pink rain clouds. I’d figured I’d help the elderly couple who lived near our house who kept complaining that the weather was too dry.

A light drizzle began to fall from the colorful clouds, dampening the earth below. This would give the villagers a break from watering the fields.

Hmm… I’m bored. I can just leave it be, and it’ll keep raining.

Thanks to my magic, the village’s fruit harvest would be bountiful this year too. They still found me creepy for being able to use all these huge spells at my age, but I had given up on trying to make them accept me.

Living in a community sure isn’t easy.

With a little Wind Magic spell, I leaped from the roof and landed on one of the huge, fleshy flowers with short stems I had grown all over the garden with my Wood Magic. The flowers, light purple and baby blue, smelled sweet, just like the cookies the mayor's wife sometimes made.

I want a cookie. The mayor's wife only bakes them when the mayor has guests over, and there's never any left for the rest of us—at least I've never had one. Oh, she must have baked some again today. I can smell them from here.

I hopped down from the giant flower, cut its stalk, and held it over my head like the parasol the mayor's wife used. Then, I sprang into the air and began idly flying from one end of the village to the other, over and over again.

My parents had long stopped yelling at me not to use magic. It seemed that they had completely abandoned the idea of making me normal.

Oh, I have an idea! I'll try exploring outside the village today.

I spent most of my time inside the village, and so did everyone else. A peaceful life in their isolated little bubble—this was all these people knew.

I feel like mom once told me not to step outside the village… Eh, whatever. I'm seven now; I'm big enough to venture out for a bit. If I stay here any longer, I'll pass out from boredom!

I had just celebrated my seventh birthday a few days ago and was confident I was now a fully-fledged villager. And so, I decided to go explore the grassland nearby.

From the village, all I could see was an expanse of yellow-green grass the height of a small child, stretching far into the horizon. A peddler who had visited the village some time ago mentioned that a vast forest lay beyond it.

If I get lost, I can just look for my pink clouds. If I follow them, I'll end up in the village eventually.

With that plan in mind, I tossed aside my flower umbrella and set off on my adventure. Using magic, I turned the grass into colored stones to create a passage through the grassland. It was really fun. I was used to playing alone, because the village's children avoided me.

I'd left the village at noon and reached the forest in the early evening. It took longer than I'd expected because I got caught up

in all the fun along the way.

I should go home soon. I won't be able to see my clouds anymore at night.

A quick Wind Magic spell later, and I hurriedly flew back in the direction I'd come from, blissfully unaware that all the village's adults were looking for me.

"Where did that thing go?! Where's Ahn?!"

"Damn! It always sticks out like a sore thumb, but when we're actually looking for it, it suddenly disappears!"

Once I got near the village, I began to hear the adults yelling my name as they searched for me. They sounded angry.

Am I about to get yelled at again? I haven't done anything wrong, though, I thought, annoyed, when someone spotted me.

"There it is! Ahn!"

"Ugh."

I was about to bolt when another adult barked, "Come here! The mayor's looking for you!"

Something about their attitudes felt a little different today, and I stopped in my tracks.

"The mayor?" I asked.

Did *he* want to yell at me?

I couldn't shake off the impression that the villagers were acting weird. Had something happened?

"Hurry up and go see him. His guest wants to talk to you."

Before I had a chance to process the events unfolding, the adults surrounded me and ushered me to the mayor's house.

Oh well. If things get annoying, I'll just escape.

As I was forced to step inside, I braced myself to confront the mayor, one of the adults who considered me a nuisance.

The mayor's wife was there too; she sat with their guest in their drawing room.

Oh. The cookies she baked! I marveled, my eyes glued to the plate on the table.

The mayor's guest watched me fidgeting restlessly in silence for a moment before finally speaking. She was a tall young woman with dark skin and long, flowing black hair that cascaded down to her hips. "So this is the girl who created those strange magic rain clouds," she said.

"Are you gonna yell at me for using my magic?" I asked with a

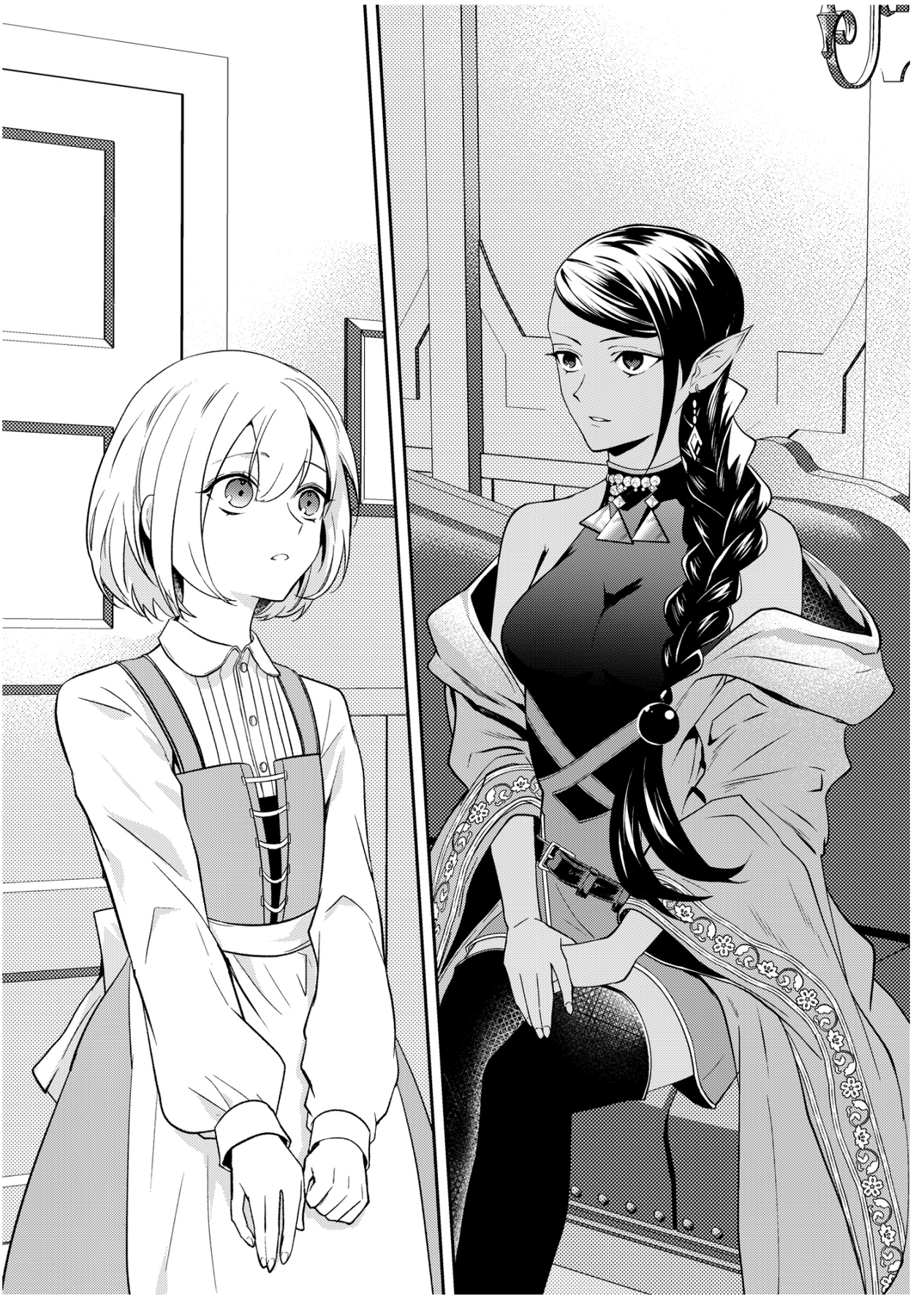
frown.

In response, the mayor smacked me over the top of my head, even though I hadn't done anything wrong. The bearded man typically sported an intimidating expression, but acting unusually humble, he apologized to the woman, "I am so, *so* sorry. This child is completely ignorant of the ways of the world." He turned back to me. "Mind your manners, Ahn. Our guest has traveled a great distance from the royal capital to come see us. She is the court mage, one of our nation's magical elite."

I let out an unimpressed hum. I had absolutely no idea what a "court mage" even was.

"My name is Finis. I've heard reports of strange spells being used in this area as of late, so I've come to investigate the cause," the guest said, eyeing me lazily.

Her ears, which peeked out from her hair, were much longer than a regular person's. They arched upward and were pointy too. Seeing someone with different ears from mine and the other villagers' piqued my interest a little.



“I have never seen any spells that create colorful rain clouds like the ones currently hovering over the village. Of course, rain spells exist, but it is my first time witnessing anything like this—especially in such a boring, empty village like yours.”

“You probably shouldn’t say that in front of the mayor,” I remarked, prompting the man to clear his throat.

“Good grief. My apologies, Ahn has always been a bit of a strange child,” he said.

I’d heard that one plenty of times. Throughout my life, I’d been constantly rebuked for not being “normal.” But even though I was used to it, it still annoyed me.

“She can use all these strange spells, even though no one has ever taught them to her. We’re at our wit’s end. If you’re interested, we would happily let you take her.”

Finis nodded at the mayor’s offer. “What about her parents? Wouldn’t they oppose the idea of me taking away their daughter?”

“Oh, not at all,” the mayor said, shaking his head vigorously. “Her parents would be glad to be rid of her. They simply can’t do anything for fear she’ll retaliate with her strange spells. Aside from that, we’ve just kept her around because her magic has been slightly useful in tending the fields.”

The mayor’s declaration sent a little shock through me. I knew that my parents found me difficult to handle, but I had convinced myself that they must at least care about me—I was their daughter, after all. They’d kept me fed, given me a bed, and provided me with clothes to wear. They grumbled about having to take care of me, but they did the bare minimum.

I’d thought that, even though they liked to complain, they didn’t hate me to the point of chasing me out of their lives…but it seemed that I’d been wrong.

Have they just been taking care of me because they were scared of what I could do to them?

That revelation was absolutely devastating to my barely seven-year-old self.

“Ahn has a little brother, Sivan. They’re worried she’ll hurt him,” the mayor explained.

“Rude. I’ve healed him when he’s gotten hurt, but I’ve never injured him myself,” I protested.

I had no reason to harm my little brother in the first place.

Sivan was a sweet boy who'd just turned four. My parents showered him with affection—something they didn't do with me—and I also tried to show him love in my own way. But my parents didn't like me interacting with him. My mother had especially strong reactions whenever she saw me trying to take care of him.

"Don't get near Sivan!" she'd shriek. "You'll have a bad influence on him! *He's* normal, so don't ruin his education!"

Of course, my father agreed with her. "That's right. Besides, what if you hurt him with your magic?!"

"Get out! I can't relax and care for my son when you're in the house!"

I would never use a dangerous spell in my brother's presence, but my parents refused to believe me. To them, I was an anomaly, something that they couldn't understand and should stay away from, a dangerous being who could harm their beloved child at any moment.

Based on their words, it seemed that they thought that, because I was a child, I might accidentally lose control of my magic and harm someone even if that wasn't my intention. But that was ridiculous. I had the wisdom to practice my more experimental spells *away* from others.

My parents must've thought that I didn't understand these sorts of things, since they'd neglected me my entire life, but I did. As everyone kept their distance from me, I'd grown to have a more objective view of the world and had taken to seeing the bigger picture, much more so than the other children in the village.

But, at the end of the day, I was still a seven-year-old girl. I could act like a grown-up all I wanted, but I didn't have the means to leave the village and go live elsewhere.

Sivan didn't hate me, but since my mother was always hovering over him, I had very few occasions to talk to him. In a few years, he'd probably end up keeping his distance from me, like our parents.

Finis studied me in silence, and, seeing as I wasn't saying anything, she turned back to the mayor. "I will accept your offer and take this girl into my care."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, eyeing her in surprise.

The mayor was the one who replied to my question. "Miss Finis is saying that she'll take you with her to the royal capital. This is in

our village's best interest. Your parents have already given their consent."

They must have discussed it while I was out playing in the grassland.

Unsure how to respond, I simply stood there in silence, looking at the floor.

"You are different," the mayor said. "The other villagers are scared of you. You do not *belong* here—do you understand?"

I remained silent.

So *now*, they were treating me like I was a sensible and reasonable child? While I was annoyed with how unfair adults were, at that moment, I was struggling to process my feelings, so all I could do was nod without a word.

I'd always been planning to, one day, leave this tiny, empty village and its people who were afraid of any spell that was unfamiliar to them. And now, I had the opportunity to do so. Surely, it couldn't be all that bad, right?

"What will I do at the royal capital?" I asked.

"You'll be my research subject," Finis told me, her tone calm and indifferent. "I have never heard of a little village girl with no magical education who is able to create new spells on her own as if it were nothing—especially large-scale spells like those you've been conjuring."

"Your research subject?" I repeated.

"Yes. I will be analyzing the potential of humans by observing you."

Her response was so vague that I still had no idea what awaited me.

"I don't understand," I said, tilting my head to the side.

"I see human children are much stupider than I thought. Listen well: You will live with me in the royal capital and help me with my magic research. In your spare time, you will be doing chores. Those will be your responsibilities from now on. You do not have the option to say no."

"I think I get it."

I noted that she had casually included chores to the list of things I'd be doing. Oh, well. At least I wouldn't find myself in any life-threatening situations as long as Finis needed me for her research. If things got dicey, I could always run away.

Besides, she said she did magic research. Is she good at magic to the point of researching it? Will she teach me new spells if I ask?

Strangely, I felt more curious than scared or anxious. I could picture the others labeling me as "abnormal" once again for letting my interest in magic dictate my actions. But this was *my* "normal." I couldn't change who I was so easily.

The mayor subserviently bowed to Finis and thanked her. He seemed happy to finally be rid of me.

Not that I care.

And so, I was teleported to the capital with nothing more than the clothes on my back. My parents hadn't even come to say goodbye—only a handful of villagers, including the mayor, were there to see me off.

After my first experience with teleportation, I found myself in a large, unfamiliar wooden house with a high ceiling. Dried plants hung from its dimly lit walls, and all sorts of minerals I'd never seen before lined its shelves.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The royal capital. This is both my home and shop," Finis replied.

"Can I try that spell you just used? The one to teleport really fast?"

"Later. It would be annoying to fetch you if you ended up somewhere strange."

"But it's not a no?"

She asked me to sit on one of the shop's chairs, and I did as I was told. I still had a ton of questions for her.

"The people of the village were happy to see me go," I remarked. While I was aware there was no point in dwelling on it, I couldn't help the hint of resentment that crept into my voice.

Finis must've noticed as well. "They are honest people, at least," she said as she fiddled with the items on a nearby shelf, her expression remaining neutral. "They were afraid of you, but they never even thought of trying to use you for their own benefit."

"Using me?" I asked.

"Yes. Their village could have become much more prosperous had they tricked and used you. It's a good thing your village was filled with cowards who were too scared of what you might do in retaliation. An even worse scenario would have ended with them

killing you.”

Her reasoning gave me mixed feelings.

As we spoke, Finis kept rummaging through her shelves, taking out all sorts of different items: a spinning wheel, a trolley, a vase… All of them were much too big to fit on the shelves, but I assumed she must’ve used magic to make them smaller.

After some time, she finally pulled out a few large pieces of clothing.

“At last, I found them—the children’s clothes those customers returned that one time.”

“Returned?” I echoed.

Oh, right—she said this was her store. Looking around, I spotted a wooden counter, an old fitting room, and a bunch of vials of what I assumed was medicine.

“A family of nobles once ordered some clothes for their child so that they could travel incognito. But I put too many enchantments onto them, and their child couldn’t use them, so they returned them.”

Finis unfolded the clothes and set them down on the wooden desk beside the counter. There was a navy-blue hooded robe, a white shirt, and a pair of gray shin-length pants. They gave off a feeling of luxury, which was to be expected considering they’d initially been made for a noble child.

“Can I really have them?” I asked.

“You should be able to use those difficult enchantments to their fullest potential. Can you not?”

“I think I can. Tell me what they are later.”

Apparently, the clothes I used to wear in the village would have looked out of place in the city, so I immediately went to change into my new outfit. According to Finis, the robe—a bit big on me—was imbued with all sorts of enchantments that were meant to protect the wearer, and I was excited to put it to the test.

“From today onward, this is your home,” Finis said. “As long as you follow my rules and instructions, you can spend your time however you wish. Oh, and please don’t touch the items in the shop.”

She even provided me with an adorable room and some exciting meals. Though she expected me to do chores in exchange, the tasks all felt new and fresh, so I worked diligently,

tending her store and making medicine day after day.

As for the research she'd mentioned back at the village, it seemed that all she needed to do was observe me, nothing more. She didn't do any weird experiments on me nor did she treat me badly—it was quite the opposite, actually. She was much warmer and kinder to me than the people of the village had ever been. My chores weren't too annoying either, as she had all sorts of assistive magic items lying around the house, meaning I just had to do the bare minimum.

The term "magic item" was a general one used to talk about tools that worked with mana. By using magic stones—a material that acted as a substitute for mana—one could use the tools without having to rely on one's own magic. The items were widely relied on, as not everyone in the world could wield mana, and even mages often used them for the convenience they provided.

All in all, my new life with Finis felt like a blessing. When I told her I wanted to learn how to read and write, she hired a teacher to help me and even allowed me to read the magic books in her collection. I often asked her to teach me the spells she used, and—though she was a bit reluctant at first—she eventually warmed up to the idea. It seemed that she'd come to the conclusion that the more spells I knew, the less work she'd have to do herself. Of course, I didn't just rely on the spells she taught me, and I came up with my own all the time.

My environment had drastically changed in the span of just a few days. I was now allowed to use magic as much as I wanted and even got praised the more spells I cast! I never wanted for anything either. Finis might not have been a great cook, but she made what she called "kids' meals" for me. They didn't taste *good* by any means, but the food my mother cooked back at the village consisted mostly of raw vegetables (since they were easy to prepare) and the fruits that were too bad to sell, so I didn't mind Finis's cooking all that much.

On top of that, she made an emphasis on letting me make my own choices. When I decided to adopt a pink rabbit, she simply watched from afar with interest but didn't stop me. While she did call me a child, she never treated me like one, and I really appreciated that.

At some point, she decided to promote me from research

subject to disciple. Then, when I was twelve, I became independent, took three disciples of my own, and went on to become a fully-fledged witch.

※

As the morning sun streamed into the study, Char listened attentively to the tale of my past life.

“All of this to say that my master Finis was like a mother to me,” I concluded. “She even gave me a new name after taking me in.”

“You didn’t mind that she changed the name your parents gave you?” Char asked.

“Not at all. In my village, it was common for the first daughter to be named Ahn, which means ‘eldest daughter’ in the old language of the region. As you can see, my parents didn’t put much thought into my name. There were over ten Ahns in the village.”

“That’s a lot,” he remarked.

“That’s why I prefer the name my master gave me—Aurora.”

It was up to one’s own self to truly determine what was important, names or otherwise.

As I reminisced on Aurora’s childhood, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. To this day, I still cherished those warm memories. They were what shaped me as a person and, as such, meant the world to me.

“Despite claiming that she didn’t know how to raise human children, my teacher pampered me in her own way,” I continued. “She’d ask people in the city what little girls usually liked and always bought me all sorts of cute things.”

“Cute things… I see,” Char said, taking a sip of his now cold coffee.

A grimace crossed his face while he glanced around the room, as if a realization had just struck him.

I did the same, minus the grimace, taking in the decor. Char’s study was filled to the brim with adorable items, including his strawberry-patterned desk and the cushions covered in ribbons.

“Now that I think about it, the kind of things she bought me were just like the adorable decor in this room,” I mused.

“That’s what I feared,” Char said, giving me a slightly

exasperated look. “I finally understand the cause of your aesthetic preferences.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” I asked.

But Char didn’t reply. Instead, he nodded to himself thoughtfully. “Just as I thought, even as Aurora, you were still unmistakably *you*.”

He smiled as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and I eyed him with suspicion. He seemed to be satisfied about something, but I had no idea what it could be.

“Lam, just like I told you earlier, you being Aurora doesn’t change how I feel about you. I have taken a liking to you and don’t intend on letting you go. I’m not going to divorce you either.”

“Is that so?” I asked, looking down slightly in embarrassment.

“I have admired Aurora my entire life, and I respect her a lot as a mage. But I respect and admire *you* as well,” he said, leaning in closer. “You changed our family for the better. We’re facing fewer unreasonable demands from the Church, and you’ve reformed the way children are trained at the schoolhouse. Now, the members of our household no longer have to risk their lives. You accomplished what I could never have thought to achieve.”

His expression was sincere as he shared his feelings with me.

“Despite everything we’ve put you through, you’ve helped us change for the better. Whenever I watched you improve our environment one thing at a time, I felt like all my mistakes and misconceptions were being laid bare before me. Before long, I found myself truly cherishing you and your positivity,” he continued, his expression unchanging.

“I also cherish everyone in the Mercure family. Including you, of course,” I said.

“That’s not what I— Whatever. Your face is still awfully pale. You should go get some more rest. Oh, that reminds me. The doctor gave me some medicine for when you don’t feel well.”

While I could eat pretty much anything, medicine was a different story. I disliked anything bitter, which unfortunately was often the case with most medicines.

“I-I-I feel much better, I promise. I don’t think I need any medication. Besides, I need to go tell the twins that I’m Aurora or things might get messy later,” I hurriedly said, trying to change the topic.

“Stop with those childish excuses. I already told you I’d tell the twins and Canon myself,” he said, his tone calm and unwavering.

As he spoke, I felt something flick past my lips into my mouth. Could it be…

“So bitteeer!”

It was medicine—and the especially bitter kind at that. I felt like I was about to collapse, but the taste was so intense that it refused to release my consciousness. To make matters worse, the medicine dissolved in a split second, making the indescribable taste spread all over my tongue.

“Uuugh, Char! This tastes so *bad*!” I complained, tears welling up in my eyes at how foul the medicine was.

Char eventually dropped his serious expression, a mischievous smirk tugging at his lips. “It’s still better than those homemade cookies of yours.”

“My cookies are much tastier than this—I think. They’re not *this* bitter!”

It was evident from Char’s face that he, in fact, unambiguously did not agree with my assessment.

He’s become a lot more expressive recently, I thought idly.

With a sigh, Char made his way to my side of the table and steadied me. It was almost like he was hugging me, which made me feel both restless and at ease all at the same time. What a peculiar sensation.

I was also surprised to note that, even though I was currently in physical contact with a member of the opposite gender, I hadn’t passed out.

In my confusion, a strangled “Wh-Why?” escaped my lips before I could process it.

Though it was definitely an improvement from the other times Char got close to me, it appeared I still couldn’t think straight.

“Lam, physical contact is something you get used to through practice. Soon, you’ll stop fainting every time I hug you,” Char said.

“Wait—you can’t just do this out of the blue,” I protested. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

However, Char didn’t seem fazed by my reaction. He brushed my bangs aside with his hand and pressed his forehead against mine.

Aaaaaah! A surprise attack!!!

I began panicking on the spot, and my heart beat faster than it ever had before. My entire face all the way to my ears felt hot, and my hands (which I had no idea what to do with) were shaking.

The calmness I'd felt earlier must have been my imagination. That or it was a hallucination caused by the medicine.

"You seem fine, Lam. I wasn't expecting this," Char said, looking somewhat happy.

"I'm anything *but* fine."

I was embarrassed, my heart was racing, and I felt like I was about to lose my mind. All I could do was sit still. Somehow, though, I didn't *dislike* this situation.

I once again found myself bewildered by these feelings I'd been having for some time now.

Why do I only *feel like this when Char is around?!*

As for Char, he looked as if he could see right through me.

How frustrating.

If we combined the years I'd lived in my past life plus this one, I was technically older than him, yet I felt like a complete child. It was pathetic.

For some reason, I was also beginning to feel drowsy.

"Oh, right. The doctor said that medicine can make you feel tired as a side effect."

"That's the sort of thing you should tell someone about sooner," I complained, but it was too late. Perhaps it was the medicine, or perhaps my body had reached its limits, but my eyelids were becoming heavier and heavier.

And so, just like that, I fell asleep in Char's arms.

※

After tucking Lam into bed, Char returned to his study and called Fouet and Barre over to discuss Lam's true identity on her behalf.

"There's something I need to talk to you two about. It concerns Lam. She just told me about it herself."

The twins stood in the overly cutesy study lit by the morning sun, listening carefully to what their master was about to announce.

"The witch of legends, Aurora Ibrusus is actually—" Char

started, but Barre interrupted him.

"Aurora... She's that historically famous mage you collect merch of, right?"

"Ooh, the stuff in that room, you mean?" Fouet jumped on the bandwagon. "We were quite surprised when we saw it. We didn't expect you to have *that* kind of hobby, Lord Char."

Their comments only made it harder for Char to reveal the truth, but he knew he couldn't keep it a secret from them.

"Yes, *that* Aurora. She's actually..."

Fouet and Barre stared at him in confusion. It was unusual for their master to be so evasive.

Char steeled his nerves before finally delivering his words. "She's actually Lam."

A long, heavy silence fell over the study. The twins were frozen in place, matching expressions of disbelief on their faces.

"What? You're kidding, r-right?" Barre eventually managed to nervously stammer. "The madam is the *witch of legends*?"

Fouet snapped out of his confused stupor as well. "It's true that she is very knowledgeable about things from five hundred years ago, but... You're saying that she is *the* Aurora Ibrusus?"

"I am."

Once again, silence enveloped the room. Char had just made an outrageous claim, yet given everything Lam had done up until now, it felt strangely plausible to the twins.

"I learned of it for the first time from her disciple in Ongle," Char continued. "I was just as shocked as you are now. But Lam herself confirmed that he was telling the truth."

"But why didn't the madam tell you until now?" Barre asked in confusion.

"She said that she, um, found it difficult after stumbling upon my collection," Char replied awkwardly.

"Oooh." The twins nodded in unison, as if everything suddenly clicked into place.

Char wanted to disappear.

"Aren't you happy, Lord Char? Your wife turned out to be the mage you admire so much," Fouet said.

"Plus, with her around, the Mercures could be considered to be as powerful as a house a hundred mages strong," Barre added.

Now that the initial shock had passed, they seemed completely

unfazed about the revelation.

"That's it? You've just accepted it?" Char asked.

"Well, it was a surprise for sure, but the madam is the madam, so..." Fouet shrugged.

"If anything, things make *more* sense now that we know she's Aurora," Barre added. "What about you, Lord Char? How do you feel?"

Char pondered the question for a moment, and ultimately decided to divulge his true feelings. "I was a bit puzzled at first, but I've reached the conclusion that I don't care about her past. Aurora's reincarnation or not, it doesn't change who she is inside. Every time I look at her, I feel foolish for even questioning it."

The twins nodded in understanding.

"I *am* worried about what her disciples are up to, though," Char continued. "But I intend to help Lam set up some safety measures against them."

While Lam was the witch of legends, there was one area where she might have fallen short: the education of her disciples.

※

When I woke up at noon, Char informed me that the twins were now aware that I was Aurora. He must've told them while I'd been sleeping. Apparently, the fact that Char believed I really was Aurora, combined with all the spells they'd seen me perform and the fact that I already had disciples, had been enough to convince them of my true identity, and they had accepted the truth without any hesitation.

The side effects of the medicine wore off the next day, and I decided to have a little talk with the twins myself. I had been keeping the truth from them all this time, so I felt like they deserved to hear the admission from me directly.

I caught them in the middle of training in a corner of the garden and told them about my true identity.

They listened attentively until I finished, but their reactions were surprisingly relaxed.

"So, it's really like Lord Char said. You truly are the reincarnation of Aurora Ibrusus. Now, that was a surprise," Fouet said nonchalantly.

“So *that’s* why you know all those unusual spells,” Barre added. “It also explains why you could read Aurora’s manuscripts and teach the spells to us so effortlessly. But I have to admit, I never expected the legendary witch to have such a terrible sense of aesthetics. Just look at what you did with the study and the schoolhouse.”

Fouet nodded vigorously at Barre’s words. “It also seems like the witch of legend has no talent for cooking. I’m quite relieved that your aesthetic choices and recipes didn’t make it to future generations!”

As we stood among the flower beds, the twins began making unnecessary comments about my cooking and artistic sense.

“*That’s* what you’re surprised about?” I asked with a frown.

But I had to admit, part of me was glad they hadn’t changed their attitude toward me, even after learning that I was Aurora. I didn’t let it show, but I felt a deep sense of relief wash over me.

“By the way, madam, how are things going between you and Lord Char? We recently entered his secret room and found it was full of Aurora merch. You really are loved—in more ways than one.”

“You went into his hidden room?” I asked, surprised.

“Lord Char was grasping at straws to find a way to rescue you when you were abducted, but he didn’t know where you were. So he decided to look through his collection of Aurora manuscripts in that room to find a spell to locate you. Fouet, Canon, and I just so happened to be there when he did,” Barre explained.

“Oh, dear. So, many people saw his collections? The poor thing,” I muttered.

I felt a bit bad for him. At the same time, a warm feeling welled up inside me as I thought about all the lengths Char had gone to in order to rescue me.

“Isn’t it incredible that Lord Char’s beloved wife turned out to be Aurora? What an amazing twist of fate,” Fouet commented, visibly amused.

“Isn’t it just?” Barre chimed in. “And speaking of which, it sounds like you’ve stopped fainting every time Lord Char gets close to you, madam. That’s quite an improvement!”

“Wha—?!”

Why did Char have to mention that to the twins?! How

embarrassing!

"Poor Lord Char. I can't believe you used to pass out every time you two were having a moment," Fouet sighed. "You're not completely indifferent to him, though, are you, madam?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, my body stiffening.

"I'm saying that you're *clearly* drawn to him," Fouet explained.

"A-Am I?"

"You are. It's obvious to anyone that you don't act the same way around him as you do around us."

"Well, Char *is* my husband, after all. Isn't it normal that I would behave differently with him?"

"That's not what Fouet means, madam," Barre interjected. "He's saying that when you're with us you don't blush and fidget nor do you act awkwardly out of nervousness. You're only like that around Lord Char, right?"

"How did you know?" I asked.

The twins fell silent.

After a few seconds, Barre said, hesitant, "Madam... You're too honest."

Fouet, being Fouet, was visibly trying to repress his laughter. "I would love for you to say those words directly to Lord Char. It would elicit quite an amusing reaction from him."

"I'd love to see that," Barre said, exchanging an amused look with his twin brother.

I, on the other hand, had no idea what was so funny. "Why? What was wrong with what I said?"

Barre hummed. "Well..."

Fouet shared a look with him and nodded. "Yeah. We believe that you should try to figure it out for yourself."

They could've just told me instead of chuckling to each other.

"Fine, I suppose. Then I'll—" I had barely started my sentence when a strange feeling washed over me. "H-Huh?"

All of a sudden, my legs felt like jelly and my head began spinning. I wasn't feeling particularly unwell today, yet I found myself having a difficult time keeping my balance.

I'm dizzy. I'm probably going to collapse again.

I'd *just* recovered from my last bout of fatigue, but my body was already pulling another stunt on me. How frustrating.

As I fell to my knees, the twins rushed over to my side, concern

etched on their faces.

"Madam!" Fouet exclaimed.

"Are you feeling unwell again? Let's take you back to your room for now."

"We need to let Lord Char know as well."

Listening to the twins' frantic chatter, I couldn't help but wonder what was happening to my body. The two of them accompanied me back to my room, but the dizziness didn't subside.

"Just wait here, all right, madam? We're going to fetch Lord Char," Barre told me.

"Please take it easy," Fouet added.

With that, they hurried away, their footsteps echoing in a matching rhythm as they rushed to get Char.

Sitting on the bed, I tried to make sense of what was wrong with me.

I'm not feeling particularly bad, and my body seems fine... I'm just dizzy.

It felt different from my usual bouts of exhaustion.

I wonder what's causing this. After coming back from Lèvres, I'd finally begun noticing some progress compared to how I felt after regaining my memories... What a shame.

A rather loud knock at the door pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Come in."

As soon as I said the words, the door swung open, and Char rushed into my room, Canon following close behind. The twins must have summoned them both for me.

"Lam, we heard from Fouet and Barre that you almost fainted again."

"Mother, are you all right?!"

They peered at me with worried expressions.

"Unfortunately, it's true that I nearly passed out. I'm feeling fine, but I can't seem to stay on my feet."

Char settled into the chair beside my bed, his concerned gaze fixed on me. "Aren't you just fainting more often because you did so many things that you weren't used to, one after the other? We spent quite a bit of time in an unfamiliar country, and then you got abducted... It's a lot."

Canon nodded. "You might just be overtired, like father suggested."

“Perhaps I am, but…”

Today felt different, and yet I didn’t have any tangible proof that it was, so I couldn’t explain why. Besides, as Char had mentioned, our trip to Lèvres must’ve been contributing to my fatigue. Not only had I used magic several days in a row, but I’d also reunited with two of my former disciples, which had been a huge shock.

“Well, either way, you should get some more rest,” Char said.

“Yes, mother. Listen to father,” Canon urged me. He’d started siding with Char more often than with me recently. Somehow, they always agreed with each other when it came to my health and the way I dressed.

“If anything happens while you’re resting, I promise to protect you,” Char assured me.

I could tell that he was doing his best to reassure me. He sure had changed a lot over the past couple of months, huh?

“Please feel better soon, mother.”

“Char, Canon, thank you,” I said, fidgeting nervously. “It seems that my disciples are staying put for the time being. I’ll try to think of a way to be able to use magic no matter what when they make their mo—”

Char and Canon didn’t let me finish my sentence.

“You just sleep for now,” my husband said sternly.

“Please focus on feeling better, mother,” Canon added.

The two were once again banding together to urge me to rest.

They can be really intense when they want to be.

I knew that they were only saying this because they were worried about me, though, so I couldn’t really protest. Their concern made me feel like we were a real family, and I decided to listen to them for now. I could think about what was causing my current condition once I felt better.

“Mother, I’m going to call for a maid to take care of you, and I’ll tell the twins that you’re resting while I’m at it,” Canon informed me before turning to Char. “Father, please put mother to bed.”

“P-Put me to bed?! I’m not a child!” I argued.

But Canon briskly left the room, paying no mind to my protests.

As for Char, he did as Canon had asked, helping me lie down on the sturdy bed. Resigning myself to my fate, I let my body relish in the sensation of the soft, freshly washed sheets beneath me.

Suddenly, Char’s voice broke the silence. “If only I were

stronger… You wouldn't have to bear so much for us," he murmured, a tormented expression clouding his features.

Char's magic was improving at an alarming rate day after day. Under normal circumstances, he most likely wouldn't have felt this way, but meeting my disciples and learning my true identity must have made him insecure about his lack of strength.

"Your magic is improving much faster than my disciples' did in my past life," I said to reassure him. It was the truth. "Most people can't learn spells one after the other like you've been doing. Plus, you can cast them almost perfectly after reading about them once. Even my former disciples weren't capable of such a feat."

"But I'm still nowhere near Aurora's—near your level," he said, eyes downcast in frustration.

I could've told him that there was no point in worrying about it so much, but I knew my words wouldn't reach him—not in his current state.

Instead, I decided to try another approach. "Your way of learning magic is actually very similar to mine. And so is the speed at which you've been improving."

He stayed silent, so I kept going.

"I love magic so, *so* much that, no matter how many spells I used, it never felt like I was studying. The same goes for you, right? You've come so far because of your admiration for Aurora, haven't you? My master used to say that those who pursue what they love tend to improve faster than those who simply see it as studying."

Having been read like an open book, Char remained silent. He had a habit of looking away when he felt awkward or embarrassed. The more time I spent with him, the more aware of his quirks and mannerisms I became.

He might seem difficult to approach at first glance, but he's surprisingly straightforward and easy to understand.

As I thought about this, I suddenly remembered the conversation I'd had with the twins earlier in the garden. *Why now?*

"He's saying that when you're with us you don't blush and fidget nor do you act awkwardly out of nervousness, right? You're only like that around Lord Char."

"I would love for you to say those words directly to Lord Char. It would elicit quite an amusing reaction from him."

No matter how much I told myself to stop thinking about it, their words played on repeat inside my head. I shook my head and tried to shove their remarks to a corner of my brain, but to no avail.

It's useless.

Then again, this could be a good opportunity to ask Char about the meaning behind the twins' puzzling comments.

That's right—when you don't understand something, the best thing to do is just ask what it means.

I worked up the courage to bring it up with Char and said, "Char? Have you ever found yourself blushing and fidgeting, or acting strangely out of nervousness around someone before?"

He tilted his head to the side in confusion at my sudden question. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" he asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

"You've never felt your heart beat faster or your mind go blank when looking at someone?" I asked, describing what was happening to my body to him in detail.

After pondering the question, he peered at me and asked, his tone somewhat cautious, "If you're asking this, does it mean this has happened to you?"

"Ummm, I…"

"Is there someone who makes you blush when you look at them? Who makes you nervous? Who makes your heart race?" Char asked, his tone almost accusatory.

Feeling slightly overwhelmed by his intensity, I nodded. "There is."

As soon as the words left my mouth, a grim look registered on Char's face, and I could feel displeasure radiating from him. It seemed like that hadn't been the right answer.

"Who is it who makes you feel that way?" he asked sternly.

Why is he getting angry?

He seemed really annoyed all of a sudden, and I couldn't fathom why.

"Well, it's…"

Char stayed silent, waiting for me to continue.

Steeling my nerves, I looked at him straight in the eye, and said, "It's you, Char."

He froze, a look of pure shock rippling over his face. Perched on

the chair beside my bed, he stared into space, not moving a muscle. I wondered what had gotten into him.

"Char, are you all right?" I asked, but he didn't reply. "Helloooo?"

Still no answer.

"Char? Your Lordship?" I tried again but nothing.

I must've given the wrong answer again.

"Oh, dear. What should I do?" I muttered, gazing at his frozen—albeit still handsome—face. I sat up slightly and poked his forehead with my finger, but he remained unresponsive.

Surely, he'll snap out of it at some point, right?

Having run out of options, I lay back down in bed and closed my eyes. He'd probably come back to reality eventually.

I wonder why Fouet and Barre said he'd have an "amusing" reaction. This is hardly amusing; he's just frozen in place.

Then again, it was the twins we were talking about—they'd probably be pleased to see an unusual side of their master. They might look dutiful and obedient at first glance, but they actually loved playing pranks on the rest of us. Their relationship with Char wasn't merely that of an employer with his employees; they also felt like close friends or even siblings.

I assumed this bond was a result of all the years they'd spent together at the schoolhouse. I'd never been close with my siblings, neither in my past life nor this one, so I didn't quite understand how they felt.

Anyhow, I supposed I will just sleep for now. I should be able to stand up again when I wake up.

I was still wondering why this sudden bout of exhaustion was so different from the others. I couldn't really put it into words, but it didn't just feel like I was unwell, more like my body was...changing, somehow.

As I closed my eyes, my body began feeling strange again. One moment, my head would hurt and throb, and the next, the pain would disappear, and my mind would feel clear again.

This has happened before.

It was the exact same sensation as when I had hit my head and regained the memories of my past life.

Now that I think about it, why was I the only one who lost my memories? Épée and Glacial had kept theirs, after all. *What was different in my case?*

Magic strongly reflected the feelings of its user, and this was especially true for Dark Magic. A theory came to mind.

Épée had refused to tell me how I'd died in my past life. What if he had wished I would forget about the events leading up to my death while casting the reincarnation spell on me, and it had influenced his magic?

But why?

It wasn't just him—Glacial had refused to tell me how I'd died as well. What were my disciples hiding from me?

Oh, my head hurts again.

As I pondered those questions, I felt my consciousness slip somewhere deeper than usual.

Chapter Two: The Countess Counterattacks

I felt myself hazily awaken in a dimly lit space reminiscent of the early morning sky, and immediately understood that I was in a dream.

I remember this place.

An overwhelming sadness enveloped me, and my chest began to hurt as if it were being constricted. But I was so desperate, I didn't have time to dwell on the pain. Remnants of altered mana danced in the sky before my eyes.

My head hurts. How rude—I'm in a dream, so why do I feel pain?

The pain was so intense that it caused a red light to flicker in front of my eyes.

On the other side of the light lay familiar scenery—I'd seen it in my past. I caught hazy glimpses of it in between flickers, vivid images being brought back to me as if they were being stabbed into my heart.

People being tossed around by rampaging mana.

The price of their actions raining down on them.

Unstoppable magical explosions destroying city after city like so many tidal waves.

"No! I have to stop them!" I yelled.

However, no one reacted to my words. Even I couldn't hear myself. I wanted to protect everyone, but my body wouldn't budge.

An enormous explosion erupted, and the scenery in front of my eyes vanished in an instant, replaced once again by the dimly lit space. I could feel my blood running cold and the thumping of my heart through my hands.

Somehow, I understood that the scene I had just witnessed was something that had really happened five hundred years ago. But why had I remembered it now? Was it because I'd reunited with my two disciples?

But I still don't understand what *exactly I saw. Does it have anything to do with my death?*

I had only been able to catch fragments of it. I couldn't

remember how things got to that point or what happened after.

"I'm cold." I crouched down, a freezing chill racing through my body.

My headache had subsided and the discomfort that usually plagued my body was gone as well. Yet a wave of anxiety began to rise from the depths of my chest. I was all alone—and I was terrified.

My disciples certainly wouldn't let themselves be overwhelmed in a situation like this.

They were strong-willed boys; something as trivial as this wouldn't make them waver. I'd thought that I was the same, but facing this uneasiness alone proved to be surprisingly challenging.

The dimly lit space began growing brighter and brighter. I would most likely wake up soon.

In the end, I had only managed to recall some vague memories.

※

I woke up to Char sleeping beside me. His long lashes were caressing his cheekbones, and with his eyes shut, I couldn't see their ruby-red color. The only sound in the room was his soft, steady breathing.

He must've moved from the chair to the bed while I had been asleep. Somehow, I never managed to feel him move, no matter the circumstances. As he used to fight monsters all the time, he naturally walked in a particular style that kept his presence hidden.

Good grief, why does he always get in my bed? Surely, he'd sleep better in his own room, right?

I reached a hand toward him and gave his well-proportioned body a rough shake. "Char, wake up."

The clock on the shelf and the sun rays shining through the window announced that it was already morning.

As I stirred my husband, I noticed that the discomfort I'd been feeling the previous day had completely vanished, almost as if it had never even been.

Oh, I feel great this morning. I should be able to use my magic today, so I might work on some traps to stop my disciples from raiding the mansion. They're most likely going to get tired of fighting each

other soon.

As I made my plans for the day, feeling a little cold due to the chilly morning air, Char finally opened his eyes.

"Good morning, Char. My bed must be quite comfortable for you to sleep so soundly," I said, my tone tinted with the tiniest hint of annoyance, but Char being Char, he paid it no mind. He'd also snapped out of the frozen state he'd been in yesterday.

"I suppose. I don't really know why, but I always sleep well in your bed. It makes me want to sleep here every night," Char said, the sarcasm of my words lost on him.

In fact, he'd taken my comment at face value, and I was scared he might *actually* come to sleep in my bed every night.

"You have your own room. Sleep there," I said. "You already have a tendency to overwork yourself, so the least you can do is make sure you get a good night of sleep."

"Are you worried about me? Do you want me to get enough rest?"

"I-I do."

I could tell that he was thinking about something based on the serious look on his face. However, I had learned from watching him that whatever he was about to say would be nothing good.

"You want me to get a good night's rest," he started, "and I sleep better with you. Therefore, we should sleep in the same room. Besides, aren't a husband and wife supposed to share a bed?"

Just as I'd feared, his reply was completely absurd.

"Char, you have once again said something outrageous with your 'I just had a genius idea!' face on," I pointed out.

"It's not outrageous. I read this once in a book unrelated to magic that the twins had, so it *must* be common sense. I don't know how things were five hundred years ago, but now, it's normal for married couples in the Tête Kingdom to sleep in the same room," Char explained as if I were an ignorant child.

He was completely serious.

I had recently realized that, despite how much Char liked to treat me like I was completely ignorant in the ways of the world, his own notion of "common sense" was questionable at best. The twins didn't seem so bad compared to him on that front, but when it came to things like marital relationships, no one in this

household knew a single thing.

A consequence of growing up isolated from the rest of the world and struggling to fit into a prejudiced society, no doubt. Well, not that I can criticize them.

My own knowledge of marital relationships was just as limited. In my previous life, I had lived with my family as a child, but our home had been so cramped that we'd shared a single bedroom between the four of us. As for my master, she'd remained unattached my entire life, and I never got to meet her family, so I didn't know if her parents shared a bed or not.

"Elfins aren't interested in romance. It's a miracle if we marry even once in our long lives," she had told me during my teenage years. No wonder they'd been an endangered tribe...

As Aurora, my interactions with the opposite gender had been few and far between, limited to my disciples, none of whom had ever experienced dating themselves. In other words, despite my age, all I knew about married life I'd heard through small talk and gossip, and my understanding of the actual dynamics of that kind of relationship was almost nonexistent.

That's no good. I don't know if he's telling the truth or not, so I can't come up with any good counterarguments.

Char—who seemed to be in a great mood—looked like he had every intention of arranging for us to sleep in the same room from now on. If we did, I was afraid that my heart, which already had a tendency to beat wildly when I was around him, would get even louder.

I'm just going to drop the topic and wait for him to forget about it. We have quite a lot of things to do, so he probably won't have time to dwell on it anyway.

Char had said that he slept better with me, but that couldn't be true. He was the type of person who felt more at ease alone than around others.

That's right. I don't have time to get distracted over every little thing he does, I thought, trying to reason with myself.

For now, I needed to tackle that barrier and those traps I'd had to postpone due to my health.

"We need to work on defenses when we can," I told Char, trying my hardest to hide my agitation. "And my disciples should make their move soon, so the other Mercures should be told about

them."

However, Char didn't seem as enthusiastic as I'd hoped. "Are you feeling well enough to do that?"

"Of course," I replied.

Char's silence spoke volumes. With how often I collapsed, my claims of feeling fine held little credibility. But this time, I actually meant it.

"I don't know why, but I'm feeling great this morning. I had an awful dream, though."

"Did you? You didn't cry out in your sleep," Char told me.

"I-Is that so? That's good, I suppose."

It seemed that Char had been keeping an eye on me, even while he was sleeping.

"What did you dream of?" he asked.

"It was from five hundred years ago—memories of my past life."

Char paused.

"I felt like I was seeing glimpses of memories I'd forgotten, almost as if I was about to remember something," I explained. "I saw a fragmented scene of *something*. It made me feel uneasy, but I can't articulate why."

"A fragmented scene?" Char replied.

"There were people in danger, and the air was overflowing with altered mana."

"Altered mana?" Char asked, confusion crossing his face as he tried to make sense of my words. "What does it mean to alter one's mana?"

"There are technically two ways to use mana: You can either release it directly as magic or alter it before unleashing it. For the former, when releasing it as magic, you typically either manipulate your mana before casting it as a spell or cycle it inside your body to enhance your physical abilities."

Char's ruby-red eyes were silently urging me to continue.

"As for the latter, five hundred years ago, there used to be magic items with the ability to alter mana, though they are now long gone. These items were much more powerful than the ones that were simply imbued with mana, which caused many people to flock to them. As a result, they became quite popular and... Oh. I feel like I'm about to remember something."

How had these items become popular with mana wielders in

the first place? No mages usually chose to alter their mana themselves, even five hundred years ago. While altered mana was more powerful than regular mana, mages never used it, as mana that had been forcibly altered always came with dangerous side effects. Any responsible mage stayed away from the technique.

I snapped back to reality and remembered that I was in the middle of a conversation. “Sorry, Char. I got distracted.”

“Don’t push yourself if you’re unwell,” he replied, visibly concerned.

“I’m fine, so let me keep going. Altering mana requires very advanced knowledge and skills.”

As such, most magic item researchers and crafters avoided this practice—all of them, except *him*.

“The altered mana in those items I just mentioned causes undesirable side effects, because the maker forcibly distorts the essence of the mana during the crafting process.”

Normally, mana dissipated on its own after a while. Altered mana, on the other hand, was so powerful that it lingered in the atmosphere in an unstable state.

“I don’t remember what caused the altered mana I saw in my dreams, but it cannot be something good.”

For now, I still didn’t know the whole truth, so I decided to stop my explanation.

“I see.”

Char didn’t ask me any more questions either. Instead, he said, “If you’re going to set up the barrier and the traps right now, I’ll come with you. You can use my mana.”

“Thank you, Char. That’s very helpful. But there are actually a few tricks to making traps without using too much mana. I’ll explain everything to you in detail later, so let’s head to the mixing room. I’ll show it to the children later as well,” I said.

“Oh, speaking of the kids, I told Canon and the other two that you’re Aurora,” Char said on our way to the mixing room, which was located in a separate building on the estate.

“Thank you,” I replied after a short pause. “Did they say anything in particular?”

“Not really. Canon had the same reaction as me, and Mine and Bombe seemed excited by the news.”

“I-I see.”

I let out a quiet sigh of relief. I was glad none of the children had reacted negatively.

Char and I walked for a bit until we reached our destination. The small two-story building was now stocked with all sorts of material for experiments.

I went up to the second floor, which was where we kept the ingredients, and began rummaging through the haphazardly arranged wooden crates. It wasn't tidy by any means, but it was already much better than it was when I first regained my memories.

Before I'd revamped the space, not only had there been a dire lack of variety in the materials, but everything had been coated in a layer of dust as well.

"First, we need to pick the base ingredients for our traps," I said as I took out different materials from the boxes.

"Are traps made the same way as medicine and magic items?" Char asked.

"You don't need materials to make traps, but it's easier if you use them. Hmm... Oh, this goopclay is excellent!" I reached inside a vase and retrieved a shiny, ocher-colored lump of mud. Its slightly unpleasant odor was one of its main characteristics.

Seeing me handling the sticky clay with my bare hands, Char let out an "Ugh" and furrowed his brow. I wish he wouldn't look at me with such an accusatory gaze. I was simply planning on using this clay to make some nice and sturdy traps.

"Char, can you grab that cobweb for me? Oh, and the medicine box opposite it too."

"Sure."

However, it seemed that he didn't just dislike goopclay but cobwebs as well, if the grimace on his face as he reluctantly pinched the branch with cobwebs hanging from it between his finger and thumb was anything to go by.

Ingredients in hand, I made my way back to the first floor.

"Well then, let's begin," I declared, standing in front of a large cauldron with my sleeves rolled up.

First, I added the goopclay and cobwebs to the pot, then the power-enhancing agent, and started mixing the whole thing with a silver ladle. The pot had actually been enhanced with magic beforehand to ensure it wouldn't break from small explosions. It

was so sturdy, dropping a rock inside wouldn't even scratch its surface.

"The kinds of traps I'm about to make aren't like those non-mana wielders use for hunting; they're magical traps," I explained. "Typically, people tend to go for the kind that creates illusions."

"Would that work on your disciples, though? They don't seem like the type to get fooled by that," Char said.

"You have a point... But I don't want to *hurt* them. I know; I'll add a mana-absorbing effect as well."

"Sounds good." He nodded, diligently observing me make the traps.

I handed him the ladle. "Would you like to try adding an effect? You can pick anything you want. Don't hesitate to ask me if you have any questions. There are also some books on trap-making over there."

Char thought about it for a while before saying, "I think we need a way to intercept flying enemies. I'll help you install a barrier later, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Good point. Then let's use some more of the cobweb from earlier. We'll work it just like we did the clay, then do this, and this, and this, and voilà! It can stop flying spells now."

As we mixed the now-liquid clay and the cobwebs, they began combining together.

"Next, we'll need to have everyone come and add some of their own mana to the trap. That way, it'll recognize all of our signatures and won't trigger against us."

"I see."

"The trap will immediately activate when an intruder enters its range. It'll stick to their body, to be specific, and it won't budge until the makers of the trap—you and me, that is—cancel its effects," I explained.

"I'm going to try adding some of my own mana... Like this?" he asked.

"Yes. You're doing great!"

It seemed that he had understood how to make traps just from observing me. But when I complimented him, he suddenly averted his gaze.

Aw, no need to be shy.

After that, Char proceeded to make many more traps using the

rest of the goopclay.

He really is a fast learner, huh? He can even understand spells after seeing them only once.

I had no doubt that Char was suited to the art of magic. Being able to improvise spells without being taught how to was a valuable talent not many mages had. If we lived in an age where learning magic was embraced rather than frowned upon, Char could have become as powerful as I had been when I was Aurora. This only made the current state of the world all the more lamentable.

He's progressing much faster than I expected. He has a lot of mana too, though not as much as Flèche, who had so much he couldn't keep it all under control.

Once we were done making the traps, we poured the sticky mixture into strategic locations around the estate—all over the perimeter, of course, and we also scattered some in random spots throughout the grounds.

"We've put it in all major locations. As for the rest, let's leave it to the children. It'll make a nice training drill for them," I said.

Char nodded. "Good idea."

"Next, let's tackle the barrier. Barriers are a subcategory of Light Magic, as you may have seen with the one Épée set up around me while you two were fighting. We could make it with an item, but this time, I'll have you rely solely on your magic for practice."

He listened carefully to my instructions, a focused look on his face.

"If you know how to make barriers, you'll be able to use them in various situations."

Grabbing his hands, I began to describe how to regulate the flow of his mana, and he skillfully began building a barrier, which looked like a transparent membrane. Explaining magic using only words was difficult, but Char was able to understand everything I was saying without any issue.

But as I held his hands and guided him through the process, I noticed him begin to fidget uncomfortably.

"Are you all right? Did you use too much mana?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine. I still have more than enough."

His face looked a little red to me, but if he said he didn't feel unwell, then I supposed it was fine.

The last thing I had him do was build a barrier from scratch, and he made a colossal one that covered the entire estate.

"It's a nice, thick barrier. You're good at this as well," I praised him.

"Are you sure it's enough?" he asked.

"Yes. It should stop people from passing through and block offensive spells to some extent. My disciples might be able to break it if they work together, but they wouldn't do that willingly. They never got along, even five hundred years ago."

I felt Char cast a questioning gaze at me, but, as he didn't speak up, I didn't know what he wanted to say.

We still had some time to spare, so I decided to add some traps to the barrier as well while I was at it. After that, I taught Char a few more spells and reinforced the mansion's defenses, and our job was pretty much done.

Fortunately, I didn't faint or collapse that day.

※

The next day, a messenger from the royal palace of Tête arrived early in the morning. We hadn't been expecting such a thing, so Char and I were flustered when we received him.

According to the messenger, the king had summoned us to the royal palace to brief him on the details of our trip to Lèvres. We'd already submitted a written account of the event, but it was possible the king was a little confused with how much we'd strayed from our original itinerary because of what happened with Épée.

"Hmm... Perhaps our report wasn't clear enough," I said.

"I don't think that's it. The king is likely just using this as a pretext to foist an absurd job upon us," Char replied.

It seemed that he didn't trust the king whatsoever.

I can't blame him.

The Tête Kingdom's leaders were the type of people who'd exploited the Mercures until the point of exhaustion, only to then burden them with even more difficult jobs. Though Char's tasks had decreased after the incident with the Cerveau Cathedral, that didn't mean that the Mercures had *nothing* to do. They'd simply gone from a ludicrous workload to a more normal amount.

It'll be annoying if the king tries to saddle Char with a new job. We

have *to refuse.*

With that in mind, I decided to accompany Char to his audience with the king.

And so, a few days later, the two of us set foot into the royal palace of the Tête Kingdom. Sporting a subdued lavender dress, I walked through the palace with the confidence that befit my title of countess.

The palace's interior was a lot more simple than Lèvres's, and there were no cute ornaments or colorful pictures adorning its walls.

We progressed through the corridor, its pure white marble floor leading to the open doors of the throne room.

This would be my first time speaking to the king, and a sense of curiosity bubbled within me.

I've seen him from afar before, but I wonder what kind of person he is.

Rows of guards were lined up on either side of the spacious throne room, while the king's advisors stood just ahead of us. The man situated at the end of the large runner must've been the king.

It's quite obvious.

He was wearing an ornate cloak and had a crown on his head, after all. Kings used to dress like this five hundred years ago as well.

They would look so much more extravagant and stylish with feathers in their hair... I suggested that to the king in my previous life, but he dismissed the idea.

Following Char's example, I bowed to the king. This courtesy was also the same as it used to be five hundred years ago.

The king of the Tête Kingdom was a quintessential middle-aged man. He had a wife and children, but his progeny probably wouldn't be ascending to the throne anytime soon, as all of them were still quite young.

The king cleared his throat and addressed Char, his tone regal, "I have summoned you today to discuss the matter of Lèvres."

Paying no mind to the king's solemn demeanor, Char curtly replied, "I've written you a report already."

True to himself, he didn't hesitate to speak his mind in that insolent way of his.

"Why did the prince of Lèvres invite your wife to his country?"

the king asked.

"He thought someone he once knew looked like her, but it turned out it was a completely different person. The prince seems to be a rather impulsive man. We had a calm exchange, the country's impression of us was positive, and everything concluded successfully. If that's all you've brought us here to discuss, then we'll take our leave."

Char technically had to obey the king's commands since he was the Earl of Mercure. However, the king had always been wary of magic, so he remained fairly hesitant to confront Char when he defied his orders.

"I've heard that you have quite a bit of free time lately, Lord Mercure. You always seem to be home," the king said, the accusation light in his tone.

His comment only served to make Char's cutting retorts even sharper. "That's completely untrue. Where did you even hear such nonsense? I'm still actively handling monster extermination requests, and I send you reports on each one without fail. Is this palace staffed with such incompetent officials that they can't even read a simple document?"

I can understand why he'd get angry after that remark.

Now that he knew teleportation magic and stronger offensive spells, he didn't have to spend as much time on each job. He used the time he saved to deal with office work or to take occasional breaks, but he was still hard at work. The king had no right to be dissatisfied with him. Everyone needed to take a breather from time to time.

Besides, monster extermination missions weren't his only responsibility; he also had to take care of his duties as Earl of Mercure. As for the other members of the House of Mercure, the twins were busy looking after the children in our schoolhouse.

It wasn't like a single person from our household had the luxury of idleness.

He's absolutely barking up the wrong tree.

Recently, there were actually very few cases involving dangerous monsters or large criminal organizations—matters that truly required the expertise of a mage. From what I'd heard, most people who hired Char did so for trivial issues that hardly warranted his skills, claiming that it'd be faster to have a mage

take care of them, or that they had spotted a monster in their territory and were too scared to investigate themselves. There had even been one time when someone hired Char to deal with a monster, and when he arrived, there had been no monster but a young noble lady of marriageable age dressed up to the nines waiting for him.

It's absurd that the Mercures should waste their time dealing with such trifling matters.

"If that's all, we'll take our leave now," Char said.

However, the king wasn't done. "W-Wait," he stammered, stopping Char from leaving.

Everyone else in the throne room remained silent, and I listened attentively to the conversation unfolding between my husband and the king.

"If you have more free time, you could take on a little more work," the king continued. "Tasks requiring mages' expertise have been increasing lately. I have even received requests for your assistance from other nations."

Even among Tête's neighbouring countries, the House of Mercure was renowned as one of the few mage houses left. While we didn't usually interact with other foreign nations, their rulers occasionally hired Char's services through the king or the bishop. These nations had a similar mindset to the Tête Kingdom: They loathed mages, but they needed them for certain jobs, such as dealing with strong monsters. As for the king, he made a pretty profit connecting the Mercures with these foreign rulers.

Char raised an eyebrow and, watching the king closely, stated, "Like I said, we can't accommodate any more jobs. We simply optimized our processes to reduce our excessive work hours. You know that all our predecessors died young. Until recently, we'd been putting our lives on the line to handle an unreasonable amount of work, to the point where it defied common sense."

The air was electric with tension. I took a small breath and decided to keep quietly watching over the situation. It'd be nice if the king backed down now. But if he didn't and insisted that Char put his life on the line for his benefit again, I would ensure the appropriate consequences followed and secure a safe working environment for the Mercures.

And if I couldn't, we could simply leave the kingdom. The

Mercures didn't need to fear the Faith or the saints and holy knights anymore. We could make a living just fine without accepting jobs from the king. If anything, *he* would be the one to lose out.

"The work we've delivered hasn't decreased, has it? In fact, the quality has likely even improved," Char added.

"I'm sure you can take on a few more additional tasks," the king said.

"We absolutely cannot," Char replied brusquely, causing the king's brow to furrow.

But then, someone appeared from the back of the room. His clothes screamed "clergyman," so I assumed it must've been someone of the Motar Faith.

"He's the bishop of the Cerveau Cathedral," Char whispered to me, having noticed my confusion. "I didn't know he'd be present today."

The bishop—or whatever his title was—was layered in tons of accessories. Not only did it look gaudy, but that style didn't suit him at *all*. He would look much better wearing some simple pastel robes, in my humble opinion.

"Are you refusing to obey the king's command?" the bishop asked Char.

"If his command is for us to die, then yes, I refuse."

"How disrespectful! You're a noble, are you not?!"

So, basically, the bishop was telling Char to sacrifice his life for the king.

The people from the Cerveau Cathedral are truly infuriating, each and every one of them.

With my fists clenched, I glared up at the bishop. "Char, if we can no longer remain nobles in the Tête Kingdom, let's move abroad."

"Lam?" my husband asked quizzically.

"We owe these people nothing, especially with the way they've been treating us."

Clearly not appreciating me, a mere countess, intervening in the conversation, the bishop redirected his ire away from Char. "A lady of humble origin such as yourself should refrain from speaking out of turn. I am currently in the middle of an important conversation with the Earl of Mercure."

Based on the fact that he'd brought up my background, he must've hailed from a prominent noble family himself.

Unfortunately for him, I wasn't the type of person who simply bit my tongue. "Well, what do *you* know about the House of Mercure?" I retorted. "Char and the others have been ruining their health and risking their lives without complaining even once about all the ridiculous missions you and the king sent them on."

"I sure hope they haven't been complaining," the bishop said, brushing off my words. "We provide you mana wielders with work out of the kindness of our hearts! Without our support, you wouldn't survive in this kingdom. If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut and continue working for us! Don't whine about a few extra tasks! Consider that the one giving you these missions is our god, Lord Motar himself!"

"You've been 'providing them with work'? That's not how I would describe it. What you've been doing is imposing your values on the Mercures and exploiting them to the point of running them ragged. You use your position to torment those who are weaker than you; *that* is the reality of the situation."

This man seemed to think that he could get away with anything just because we were mana wielders—because we had no choice but to obey if we wanted to survive in their kingdom. He and the king had no qualms with sending Char and the others on impossible missions.

I *hated* the way they treated us like we were disposable pawns. It was because of these men that the Mercures approach to education had become so harsh, and that the weaker students had been left to die on the training grounds, while those who survived were gradually worn down by the demanding tasks that were forced upon them.

"I see. So the Motar Faith is the cause of the House of Mercure's suffering. I don't know how much you yourself are involved, but the fact remains that you are hurting Char and the other Mercures—and I will not allow *anyone* to harm them."

The more I listened to the nonsense this man was spouting, the angrier I became. The Mercures weren't replaceable tools, yet this man was treating them as such, exploiting them without a single care in the world.

My precious family!

“What?” the bishop spat, glaring at me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. What a disrespectful girl. What can an uneducated little countess like you do? I could use my authority as a bishop of the Motar Faith to dispose of you whenever I please.”

“Try it, if you can. I’ll retaliate right here and now.”

“Lam, you’re provoking him too much. We can just refuse and leave,” Char said, surprise clear on his face at how uncharacteristically aggressive I was being.

“I’m *angry*,” I replied.

The way the bishop and the king were treating Char looked to have annoyed him, but he was just letting it slide. That he was so used to their abuse made me both sad and frustrated.

He’s become numb to it.

As such, I was angry on his behalf.

“Lam…” Char muttered, confused, and I felt his gaze on me.

But I had no intention of backing down. With a swift motion, I drew a circle in the air and directed it straight at the bishop. “Take this! My new and improved bad-smell spell: Shining Durian!”



“Durian?!” the bishop exclaimed, a look of shock crossing on his face.

The next instant, he let out a scream as the spell that shot out of the circle struck both him and the king.

“That’s right! The other Mercures weren’t fond of my usual bad-smell spell, so I tweaked it a little. It still has a strong odor, but at least it’s the delightful aroma of durians, which are quite yummy!” I declared proudly.

“The *delightful* aroma of durians?! What in the world are you saying?!” the bishop exclaimed.

Beside me, Char murmured a quiet “I don’t like durians either.”

“Oh, dear me. Is that so?” I asked.

“But thank you—for worrying about us.” Char smiled like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

As my spell enveloped the bishop and the king, their bodies glowed with light. Neither of them would know exactly what I had done, but from today onward, they would emit the enchanting fragrance of durians.

“Hmm? This stench… Is that coming from me?” The king seemed to finally understand what was happening to him, and he began panicking. “A-Avare! Do something about this! My entire body stinks of durian!” he demanded, making an impossible request to the bishop.

“B-But, Your Majesty…”

The bishop, apparently called Avare, was visibly alarmed as well and was in no state to help the king. His ranking as the top clergyman of the kingdom had done nothing to save him from this disgrace.

“Both the bishop of the Cerveau Cathedral *and* his aide are problematic individuals, huh? Couldn’t they have found more suitable clergymen for these positions?” I wondered out loud.

The Motar Faith was a powerful institution, but perhaps they had started struggling with personnel over the years. One just needed to look at the bishop to see such an example; he was decked out from head to toe in shiny accessories, and he practically reeked of money. Though, I supposed right now he mostly just smelled like durian…

“From today onward, the House of Mercure won’t be accepting jobs from the royal family or the Motar Faith,” I declared. “Oh, and

I wouldn't try attacking us if I were you. You'll just hurt yourself."

Non-mana wielders wouldn't stand a chance against the barriers and the traps that Char and I had installed to stop my disciples from attacking us.

"Char, let's go," I said, grabbing my husband by the sleeve—he was still frowning because of the durian smell in the air—and preparing to cast a teleportation spell.

"Seize them! They have committed lèse-majesté!" the king ordered, and soldiers appeared from all corners of the room.

They must have been hiding, waiting for the king's command to surround us.

I threw a sharp glare at the king and the bishop.

Lèse-majesté—what a convenient excuse. Those in power can impute crimes on others for the stupidest reasons.

The leaders of Tête hadn't done a single thing to deserve our respect, yet they were demanding we obey them blindly.

"Don't you know that Char will make quick work of those soldiers?" I asked the king. "We don't want to see any unnecessary casualties."

The king remained unfazed by my remark. His soldiers completely outnumbered us, after all. "He can try. I'll immediately call for the saints and the holy knights to apprehend you!"

Avare and the king seemed to think that the Faith was stronger than the House of Mercure, so they were using them to threaten us into submission.

Letting out a sigh, I said, "You're hopeless. Shining Durian!"

I felt a bit bad for the knights, but the Mercures' freedom was more important to me right now. And so, I cast my durian spell on everyone else in the room and on the palace itself before teleporting back home with Char. I'd probably lift the spell from the knights and the building later, but I had no intention of ever letting the king or the bishop off the hook.

It was tradition in this kingdom to give nicknames to kings and bishops based on their most notable traits. Perhaps, one day, history books would refer to the current king and bishop as the King and Bishop of Durians.

Char and I landed in the Mercure estate courtyard, where Fouet and Barre came to greet us.

"Welcome home, Lord Char, madam. What did the king say?"

Fouet asked.

"Eh, he probably just wanted to palm off some more work on us, didn't he?" Barre said. "That's the only thing he ever talks about."

Char thought for a bit before replying, "We are out of a job."

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?!"

The twins were visibly confused.

"To be precise, we won't be taking missions from the crown or the Faith any longer," Char clarified.

"I see. Things turned sour at the palace, didn't they?" Fouet said.

"You finally turned them down! Congratulations, Lord Char," Barre cheered.

For the twins, no longer having to deal with the king's and the bishop's impossible requests was joyful news, and they didn't hide their glee.

"I still intend to accept jobs from other noble houses, but we may receive even more criticism than before. If that happens..." Char trailed off, and I stepped in to continue.

"We'll move to another nation, all of us."

"What?!" the twins exclaimed, their eyes widening in shock.

"Can we do that? I mean, is it even *possible*?" Barre asked.

"Of course. It'll only take a moment with teleportation magic, and we can take the mansion and the schoolhouse with us too. Don't worry; I've done it before, five hundred years ago. I know what I'm doing," I assured them.

"I see," Fouet said.

"I guess we should be able to do whatever we want if we use teleportation magic," Barre added.

The twins gazed into the distance and didn't ask me any further questions.

※

Bishop Avare left the palace and made his way back to the Cerveau Cathedral in a state of panic.

"This durian smell isn't fading!"

After the Mercures teleported away, he had borrowed one of the palace's bathrooms to attempt to remove the stench, but it

didn’t seem to help; the odor clung to his body, and worse, it seemed to only get stronger over time. The entire castle stank of durian as well.

“Damn it! If I don’t find a way to deal with this, it’ll be setting a bad example for my subordinates. How can I *live* like this? Hmm? Wait a minute…”

Avare suddenly thought back to Cépieux, his former aide. One day, he had shown up at the cathedral smelling utterly foul, and although the stench had faded after a while, it had eventually returned—and much stronger than before. Later, when the hairy, malodorous creature Cépieux had become had shown up on the cathedrals’s doorstep, Avare had been at a loss for words.

Since I couldn’t cover up his crimes or endure that stench, I got rid of him by sending him back to the main church. But wait…

Cépieux had started smelling bad after a visit to the Mercure estate. As for his transformation into a human hair ball, it had happened after he’d tried to abduct the Countess of Mercure.

It can’t be…

Up until now, Avare had thought the Countess of Mercure to merely be the sickly daughter of a baron, harmless and forgettable. But now, he realized…

She has to be the culprit!!!

That woman had snapped at the king and Avare in the throne room *and* had cast a bad-smell spell on them. Then, when she had finished kicking up a fuss, she’d teleported away in an instant. It was entirely plausible that she was the one behind what happened to Cépieux. Now that Avare thought about it, he had also heard rumors of her sending a nobleman’s wig flying through the window and splashing juice on a couple of ladies at a party at the palace.

“That wretched woman… It turns out she’s even stronger than the Earl of Mercure. I’ve underestimated her.”

Avare knew he had to deal with her, and the sooner, the better.

“I need to send an urgent message to the main church. The holy knights will certainly eliminate this threat for me!”

Feeling the flames of revenge igniting within him, Avare promptly sent a messenger to the Motar Faith’s main church.

※

It was a bright and refreshing day in the Kingdom of Lèvres. As Lance, the young man who had come from Motar Faith's main church, walked through the dry, seemingly endless streets of the capital, he looked up at the sky, an expression of melancholy etched on his face.

"She's not here…"

He had impulsively teleported from the Cœur Cathedral to Lèvres but had been unable to find the person he'd been looking for. And so, there he was, aimlessly wandering down the streets of the capital, his white robes fluttering in the wind.

Teacher, where are you? I have been looking for you everywhere, but I can't find you… I suppose that, even after all this time, I am still a failure of a magician. If you used a large-scale spell, I could find you, but… Oh, right. I need to look for the saints.

He had been solely focused on his own objective and had completely forgotten the cardinal's request.

I'm the one who said I would take it on, but I forgot… Why am I always so inept? I can't even manage a single errand without you, teacher…

Shoulders slumped, Lance cast another detection spell spanning over the entire kingdom.

I should be able to sense their presence from here. Well, if they are still in Lèvres, that is.

After a few seconds, Lance felt faint traces of the saints' mana signatures coming from the palace. It was a minuscule amount that felt as though it might vanish at any moment, barely enough to be noticed.

Someone must've sealed their mana. To think that someone who doesn't belong to the Motar Faith can use such spells in this day and age. Could it be…

Coincidentally, Lance happened to be near the palace. He could feel his heart racing, and his cheeks flushed with growing anticipation. Once he found the saints, he might be able to find traces of the person he'd been seeking.

Teacher. Teacher. Teacher. Teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher! There are so many things I want to ask you once I find you…

He looked up at the inclining road that led to the palace and noticed that it was lined with street stalls, all of which seemed to

offer the same sorts of goods. Lance's eyes widened in surprise.

Th-These items, they're...!

The stalls were overflowing with perfectly crafted Aurora merch. His body trembled in delight.

"I can't believe it... Who made these wonderful creations?! If I had known about this, I would have come to Lèvres much sooner."

Back when the Motar Faith had begun ostracizing mages, rumors about them spread like wildfire, tarnishing mages' reputations across all regions. With all of Aurora's remarkable achievements, some of the Faith's followers naturally sought to defame her. But Lance, the Holy Father, refused to let that happen, using his influence and magic to punish every last one of them. As such, Aurora became revered as the witch of legends, and tales of her accomplishments spread far and wide. This was why Aurora was currently renowned in many regions as the only mage worthy of respect.

Aurora merch, huh? It reminds me of the time I collected all of teacher's belongings.

After Aurora's death, Lance had gone through her destroyed house and gathered all of her belongings. He'd brought them to his new home to keep them all safely stored away.

Several years ago, however, one of his subordinates, fueled by a power trip, had sold everything.

"She was just a mana wielder! Why shouldn't I make some money from her stuff?!" the man had protested when Lance went to deal with him.

Once Lance had done away with his subordinate, he'd retrieved Aurora's belongings, but to his dismay, he found some had already been sold on before he'd arrived.

To this day, he'd never been able to locate them. It went without saying that the event caused him a tremendous shock. But seeing all of these new pieces of Aurora merch offered him some comfort.

Could it be that my efforts to share stories about teacher inspired people to create these items? But these depictions are much too accurate for a figure from five hundred years ago. Take that painting, for example; it's so radiant, it looks just like teacher. Who could have ordered these?

Lance had been entirely focused on finding his teacher, but an

unsettling feeling began to surface within him.

Could those two have reincarnated alongside her? If that's the case, I can't afford to waste any time!

Lance purchased all the Aurora merchandise on display and used his magic to send it to his rooms back at the Motar Faith's main church. Then, he set up some rough coordinates and hurriedly teleported to the palace of Lèvres. Casting a presence concealing spell on himself, he boldly marched into the castle, studying his surroundings as he made his way to his destination.

"So this is what modern palaces look like, huh? They didn't used to be so flashy back in the day. Everything's in primary colors. It's garish," Lance commented before a realization hit him. "Hold on… I've seen this type of decor before."

A certain person's face appeared in the back of his mind.

"Could it be…?"

Trying to compose himself, the young man continued following the faint traces of the saints' mana.

※

Néant was glaring at the gaps in the woven mesh of the insect cage, irritation coursing through him. Several days had passed since those strange mages had tossed him in here, and it didn't seem like he would be getting out anytime soon. No matter how much he thrashed about, his mana wouldn't return, which meant he couldn't break the cage. On top of that, no one ever came into the room where the cage was kept.

He didn't feel hunger or thirst, perhaps because of the spell the prince had cast on him, but he hated being stuck in here.

I can't believe these damn mages sealed my magic and shoved me into this cage.

Being the second highest-ranking saint of the Motar Faith, Néant had previously been completely confident in his magical abilities. Losing against another mage should have been impossible for him in this day and age.

Damn it. These people must be part of some sort of organization. I need to inform the main church as soon as possible, or the Faith's authority will suffer. We also need to deal with the Lèvres Kingdom as a whole. We can't allow a dangerous man like the first prince to

ascend the throne, or we'll be in trouble… What am I saying? I have failed my mission. I can't go back there.

He had so much on his mind, yet he couldn't do anything about it because he was trapped in this cage. Despite knowing it was futile, he continued to try to break free, but even he found his efforts ridiculous.

His younger brother Chaos and the holy knight Muscle were locked in here with him, but both of them were just sitting in a corner with their arms around their knees, shrinking in on themselves.

Tsk. How useless. How about you two try using your brains for once? Néant thought, annoyed at the two idiots who kept getting in his way.

But then, he suddenly felt a familiar presence getting closer, and he braced himself. Saints underwent all sorts of training, so Néant had become able to detect people even with his mana sealed.

Someone's approaching.

The person who appeared was someone Néant would have *never* expected to see here. The young man who stood in the room had distinctive black-and-white hair and silver eyes. Clad in a flowing white robe, he seemed to be around Néant's age, yet Néant was acutely aware that this man was not only much older but also a superior presence as well.

"Your Holiness…" he breathed out, his voice trembling, moved that the Holy Father himself had come to his rescue.

But the young man simply looked at the cage with emotionless eyes. "Number two and ten. And a knight is in there too."

Unbeknownst to Néant, the Holy Father didn't remember the name of any of his subordinates. In fact, it was doubtful whether he even remembered their faces. He must've recognized them from their mana signatures. After all, the Holy Father was the kind of person to immediately forget any information that didn't interest him.

"You." The Holy Father looked at Néant. "I don't understand how you ended up in this situation, but I'm going to help you out, so please give me a concise explanation of what happened. How did two saints and a holy knight end up in an insect cage?"

With that, he effortlessly shattered the cage, and Néant along

with the other two tumbled out, their bodies gradually returning to proper size.

"Ooh, Your Holiness! Thank you so much for going out of your way to come rescue us! I never would have imagined you would come to our aid personally!" Néant exclaimed.

Since the day he had met the Holy Father, Néant had held a deep admiration for him. He was so overjoyed, his arms wouldn't stop shaking.

"No need to thank me. Could you please tell me what happened now? Who locked you inside that cage?"

With a gasp, Néant hurriedly got to his feet and fixed his posture before heatedly explaining the situation to the Holy Father. "The prince of Lèvres used a strange spell to seal my mana and lock me inside this cage. Fortunately, you saved me before that woman turned me into her toy."

"'That woman'?" the Holy Father repeated.

"The prince called her his 'master.' Given that she's married, I believe she must be a noblewoman. My brother mentioned that she can wield some truly terrifying spells."

The Holy Father's eyes widened. "She... She really is alive. She *did* reincarnate..."

Not understanding the reason for his surprise, Néant tilted his head in confusion. "Your Holiness?"

After taking a quick look around the room, the Holy Father grabbed a pen and paper that were lying there and began drawing some sort of symbol.

Looking at the intricate illustration, which was mostly composed of circles and lines overlapping, Néant guessed it must be some sort of special magic circle.

"Your Holiness, what are you drawing?" he asked, a solemn expression on his face.

"A portrait, of course. Did the woman you mentioned look like this?"

"What...?"

Néant dropped his gaze to the sketch once again.

So, it's not a magic circle but a drawing of someone's face...? No, no, no. Impossible. I can't tell who that's supposed to be at all! It doesn't even resemble a woman—actually, it doesn't look like a human being at all!

Staring at the drawing of some unknown object, he found himself at a complete loss.

"Did you see this beautiful woman?" the Holy Father asked again.

Beautiful?! That strange scribble?!

Néant was growing increasingly agitated in the face of this perplexing challenge. But a helping hand came to his rescue in the form of his younger brother, Chaos.

"Um, Your Holiness, the woman we saw had light-green hair and could use strange spells. She killed entire groups of zombie leapers and caniba bats, and she said that she wanted to make me her disciple. How outrageous."

The Holy Father's surprise only grew at Chaos's words.

The next instant a soft, tender smile appeared on his lips—one he had never shown to anyone before.

"Ah! She did reincarnate, there's no doubt about it. Did the other two keep her for themselves? I won't let that slide. Should I go harass them, maybe? Oh, but I'm so glad teacher was safely reincarnated!"

The two saints and the holy knights stared in confusion at the Holy Father, whose cheeks were uncharacteristically red. Néant had met the Holy Father in person before, and his impression had been that he was a detached man with no interest in anything whatsoever. Yet, here he was, buzzing around excitedly as he prepared to head home.

"I should return to the main church. There's something I need to do."

"Your Holiness?! Please wait! What about us?" Néant asked in desperation.

Despite being the second highest-ranking saint, he had failed his mission. Not only had he not succeeded in killing Chaos, but he had even gotten himself captured by the first prince of Lèvres. As a result, the Holy Father himself had to go out of his way to come rescue him. If he returned to the main church, he would most likely face a harsh punishment.

But the aloof Holy Father simply and curtly replied, "I don't care."

"Wha...?!" Néant whispered, confused.

And it wasn't just him feeling this way; Chaos and Muscle stared

at the Holy Father in bewilderment.

"Oh, right. Those who make mistakes are supposed to get punished, right? Unlike the cardinals, I really don't care about rules, so how about you just do whatever you want. Goodbye."

The moment the words left his mouth, the Holy Father disappeared without even looking back. It seemed that he'd meant it when he'd said he didn't care what happened to them.

Based on the events that had just unfolded, the Holy Father must've had a different objective in Lèvres. He'd seemed more interested in the prince and the woman Néant had mentioned than in him, Chaos, or Muscle.

Damn it!

Néant had looked up to the Holy Father for years, pouring himself into his work as a saint for him. All he wanted was for the Holy Father to acknowledge him. But, to Néant's dismay, today's events proved that the Holy Father couldn't care less about him.

He was at a loss. He couldn't return to the main church, as doing so would result in severe punishment for failing his mission. So where was he supposed to go?

Am I to live as a stray mage, struggling to simply get by? Me*?*

This was the most humiliating fate that could befall Néant after all those years spent persecuting mages. For the first time, he became aware of how terrifying it was to be the one hunted. But what else was he supposed to do? He only knew how to exist as a member of the Faith. Chaos and Muscle must have come to the same realization, as their faces were pale with dread.

A wave of despair crashed over the two saints and the holy knight.

※

For some time, Holy Father Lance had dedicated himself to searching for clues about his beloved. However, he was struggling to find anything helpful. Before he knew it, several days had passed with no results. Thinking things couldn't go on like this, he teleported back to the Cœur Cathedral, where he was met with the sight of the Cardinal Rumeur agonizing over a mysterious report. He hadn't even noticed that Lance had returned.

He looks busy.

The cardinal, a man nearing forty, had been the one to inform him about the saints' disappearances. Being the youngest of all the cardinals, the others often pawned off their work on him.

Lance decided to slip past him in silence, but something Rumeur muttered stopped him in his tracks.

"A spell that makes one smell like durians? I've never heard of anything like this before... Is this some kind of prank? Sending someone to verify it would be such a hassle. I might just ignore it..."

From behind Rumeur, Lance peered at the paper in his hand—a written report, most likely. The cardinal finally noticed his presence and let out a startled cry.

"Y-Your Holiness?! We have not heard from you for days, but you have finally returned! I'm aware of your skill, so I wasn't too concerned about your well-being, but the other cardinals scolded me for letting you leave alone."

"I'm free to go where I want and do as I please. The cardinals have been growing quite impudent lately. If this continues, I might just have to erase all of you."

"What a gruesome joke," Rumeur said with a sneer, clearly not taking him seriously.

I've already done it before—and quite recently too. Oh, right. Officially, it was labeled as an accident, wasn't it?

Only Lance and the oldest cardinal knew what had happened, which explained why Rumeur wasn't aware of the truth.

"All japery aside, could you please give me that report about the durian spell?" Lance asked.

"Are you jesting again?"

Lance chuckled. "I'm completely serious."

And I wasn't joking earlier either.

"Fine. Here it is, Your Holiness. I was about to throw it away," Rumeur said, respectfully handing the report to Lance. "If I may, what do you intend to do with it?"

Lance looked at Rumeur with a cold, relaxed smile, his eyes revealing nothing of his thoughts. "You don't need to know."

"Eek!" Rumeur shrieked, his entire body trembling as he felt a chill run down his spine.

Lance paid him no mind, now heading to his well-used room, his eyes scanning through the report. The room had been

refurbished several times, but this was where he'd lived for the past centuries.

"The king, bishop, and a few soldiers of the Tête Kingdom began smelling like durians all at once. The Earl of Mercure's wife, a local mage, is the culprit. We request the holy knights intervene and subjugate this heinous mana wielder," Lance read. "A spell that makes the target smell bad, huh? How nostalgic. Teacher would use it on scoundrels all the time back in the day. Although, it didn't make them smell like durians back then."

Lance wanted to go to the Tête Kingdom.

"But why does it say here that she's someone's wife?" he wondered out loud.

He still didn't know if the woman mentioned in that report was the person he'd been looking for or someone else who could use similar spells.

"I need to investigate this matter."

Lance didn't make public appearances, so almost no one except for the saints and the cardinals knew what he looked like. If he went to the Tête Kingdom as the Holy Father of the Motar Faith, it would most likely cause some sort of commotion, which he did *not* want to deal with.

Hmm... What should I do? Numbers two and ten and one of the holy knights are missing, so I suppose I could disguise myself as one of them. But pretending to be a saint would make me stand out as well... I'll be a holy knight, then.

Lance quickly devised a persona for himself and began preparing for his trip to the Cerveau Cathedral in the Tête Kingdom.

※

Lance had no memories of the outside world. For as long as he could remember, he'd only known the small room he was locked in, with its white ceiling, white floor, and white walls interspersed with transparent glass panels.

He received regular meals and fresh white clothes, and occasionally, people came to talk to him. He'd been given a basic education and books to keep him entertained. But he had no freedom—not that he'd been familiar with the meaning of that

word at the time. As such, he had no reason to question the monotony of his life.

He did know, however, that the place he lived in was called a “research institute” and that the people there regularly collected data from him because his magic was special.

Null magic was a rare type of magic, one that was entirely devoid of any attribute. It was the only type that regular mages could not wield. Whenever someone crafted a magic item, it would always end up attributeless, no matter the type of magic that had gone into its creation. But while the magic produced by items was *always* attributeless, mages couldn’t generate it by themselves. Thus, the only way for a mage to wield null magic was through a magic item.

But Lance was different; he could do it without the help of an item. For that reason, he had become an ideal research subject for the people of the institute.

However, one fateful day, Lance’s world was shattered without any warning—literally.

The entire research institute was demolished.

Large holes appeared in the white ceiling and walls, and the glass panels cracked, splintering into pieces, as the mages who had been studying Lance fled the destruction. As he had never been outside, he had no idea what to do when the place fell into chaos. He found himself aimlessly walking around in circles.

His attributeless magic wasn’t much help, as all he could do with it was move people and objects slightly, making it rather useless.

The commotion eventually died down and everything fell silent, but Lance still hadn’t left his room. He’d never set foot beyond the now broken glass of his windows and walls. Even when the researchers had needed to collect data, they would visit his room, not the other way around.

He had to step into the unknown, and he was afraid.

As he stood there, unsure of what to do since everyone had left, he felt the eyes of someone watching him from a hole in the ceiling. Glancing up, he saw a young woman peering down at him.

I’ve never seen her before…

He didn’t know what she was doing there, but from the way she gawked at everything with curiosity, he surmised that she wasn’t a

mage from the institute. Seeing that Lance wasn't leaving, she slipped down from the ceiling. Lance froze in surprise, apprehensive of how to react to his first contact with a stranger.

As she fell, he fired an attributeless spell at her, perhaps out of fear, but she easily dodged it and landed in his room.

"If you're here, I suppose you must be this institute's experimentation subject," she said as she approached him. "Did they keep you locked up here? Why aren't you running away?"

Lance didn't know how to reply to her barrage of questions. "Run away? Where should I go?" he managed to ask, his true feelings surfacing in that moment.

He didn't know if he had parents or siblings out there, and the only people he knew, the mages from the institute, had all fled. He was unable to make any sort of decision on his own.

What would be the right thing to do?

He cast a pleading glance at the woman, who, after a moment of thought, stepped closer and took his hands. "If you don't have anywhere to go, you can come to my house. It's not that big, but we can probably fit one more person."

With that, she fired a bright white spell at the wall, and a large circular chunk of it disappeared.

Light Magic.

More holes appeared in the walls beyond the first, one after the other, the spell tunneling through the building, until eventually, the outside world came into view, a refreshing breeze flowing in.

This was Lance's first time seeing such a colorful sight.

Wow, that's amazing... No, wait a minute. Is that woman the one who destroyed the building? Is she dangerous?

He threw a few nervous glances her way, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Let's go!" She grabbed his hand again, stepped through the hole she had created, and began walking toward the outside. Lance let her lead him until they finally emerged from the research institute, and the wind caressing his cheeks became stronger.

The dirt underneath his feet was soft, and the sky above his head was a beautiful expanse of blue. The real world, which he had until now only experienced vicariously through books, lay before him.

"What's your name?" the young woman asked him.

“They called me Lance.”

“Okay! I’m Aurora. Well then, Lance, I’m going to teleport us to my house, all right?”

Without sparing another glance at the building she had destroyed, she used a teleportation spell, her hand still gripping his. Lance had also learned about teleportation magic, but it was his first time experiencing it.

The place they landed in was smaller than the research institute but bigger than his former room.

“This is my house,” the woman announced. “I live here with my two disciples. Starting today, you’ll be my disciple too.”

“Your ‘disciple’? What does that mean?” Lance asked.

Aurora took a moment to think, searching for the right way to explain. “Hmm… I guess you wouldn’t have learned about disciples at the research institute. It’s similar to ‘student.’ Do you understand that word?”

“Yes. The man who taught me general knowledge and how to read and write at the institute said that he was my teacher and I was his student,” Lance said.

“Yep, that’s exactly it. From now on, as your teacher, I’ll be teaching you magic and practical life skills.”

“All right.” Lance obediently nodded after a brief pause.

He didn’t fully grasp what Aurora meant, but he understood that being her student meant he could live in this house. He wouldn’t know what to do if she took him back to the institute or chased him out of her home; therefore, for now, agreeing to becoming her disciple seemed the safest choice.

And so, from that day onward, Lance became one of Aurora’s disciples.

But, as it turned out, life as Aurora’s student was quite tough. He struggled with magic, Aurora’s cooking was disgusting, and her two other disciples were mean to him. But still, he remained by his teacher’s side. Because it felt nice—unlike the institute, her home was noisy yet warm.

Moreover, Aurora helped him figure out his true talent: According to her, Lance’s attributeless magic lent itself very well to item crafting. But unlike the researchers from the institute, who’d locked him up and studied him for research purposes, Aurora guided his learning. She treated him like a human being. Plus,

despite her being so young, she knew a lot of things and was even more knowledgeable about magic than the people of the institute.

The other two told me that the mages of the institute were experimenting with dangerous magic, and that's why she destroyed it.

Lance thought of Aurora's two other disciples as his upperclassmen—not that they had ever helped him in any way, like true upperclassmen should. But he was aware that, as Aurora's latest disciple, he was at the bottom of the food chain.

But one day, I'll be better at magic than them. I will!

Regardless of all the minor annoyances, Lance's meeting with Aurora marked the beginning of the happiest period of his life. At that time, he genuinely believed that things would remain this way forever.

Chapter Three: Welcome Party and Intentions

Flèche returned from the Ongle Kingdom, his blood boiling with frustration. He had spent three days and two nights fighting with Épée after Lam vanished, until his fellow disciple eventually declared their conflict a “waste of time” and sent him all the way back to Lèvres, despite the fact that he had been hurling spells at Flèche just as much.

When Flèche stepped into the castle, he could tell something was wrong. His subordinates had rushed to him as soon as he’d arrived, and when he asked them what had happened, they told him that several problems had arisen while he’d been away.

The first issue was that the saints and the knight had escaped. The room where they had been held was now empty.

Did someone come to save them while I was gone? But only someone with a high level of magic understanding and abilities could have broken that cage. Could it have been a higher-ranking member of the Motar Faith? I need to reinforce the palace’s defenses.

Whoever had come had erased any trace of their mana—on purpose, no doubt. They must’ve been quite skilled.

Ugh, my head already hurts because of the matter with Épée. What a pain the Motar Faith is. Maybe I should just go destroy their main church for good.

To add to that, on the second day of his absence, Flèche’s uncle—the king’s younger brother—had formally challenged him to a fight to become the heir to the throne. Flèche had always avoided his uncle because he was terrified of magic and openly discriminatory toward mages.

Does my uncle really think he can win against me? There really are too many weirdos in this world. How annoying.

Flèche had tried to refrain from using large-scale spells inside the castle as much as possible. He *did* have a tendency to freeze his surroundings whenever he lost control of his emotions, but the only people who had ever witnessed it happen were his close subordinates. He’d never used a single spell in front of his uncle,

which likely explained why the man was confident enough to challenge him. Flèche had simply tried to be considerate, not wanting to frighten his uncle unnecessarily, but it seemed that his good intentions had backfired.

Ugh, what a pain. How am I supposed to go see master now? I want to teleport over to her, but I can't!

He needed to deal with his own problems first, in the unlikely event that it had bad repercussions on her—he absolutely could *not* let that happen.

As he stood there, brainstorming a strategy to confront his uncle, he received word that the very man had come to see him.

"Now?" He sighed. "Might as well just freeze him for a bit, then. Will he leave me alone if I give him enough of a fright?"

With that, he begrudgingly made his way to his uncle, dragging his feet.

At this point, maybe I should just become king. Ooh, what if I created a country for mages? Master might move here then!

With that decision made, Flèche resolved to confront his uncle as quickly as possible. Channeling a large quantity of mana into his hands, he briskly made his way forward.

※

Avare, the bishop of the Cerveau Cathedral in the Tête Kingdom, stood before a statue of Motar, a triumphant smile on his lips. Half a month had passed since the disaster at the royal palace, and the main church had finally sent a holy knight to help him.

"Ha ha ha! At last! The holy knight has removed that infuriating durian stink from my body! Those days of having to smell that wretched scent are finally over. This is the result of my pure deeds, there is no doubt about it. Our Lord Motar always stands by the righteous!"

The holy knight had appeared at the cathedral out of nowhere and was currently being led to a room by one of Avare's subordinates. He'd be staying for some time, so Avare had made sure to arrange a relatively lavish room for him, as a way to show his gratitude for removing that durian stink from him as soon as he'd arrived.

Still, that knight is a weird one. For some reason, he was overjoyed when he studied the effects of the durian-scent spell…

The Motar Faith's holy knights and saints were rumored to have eccentric personalities, for the most part. Apparently, a lot of them liked to carry out experiments on other human beings.

Avare decided to not let the knight's quirks bother him.

Well then, he must have calmed down by now. I'm going to go pay my respects to him again and tell him about the Mercures. Heh heh heh, enjoy your last moments of ease, you impudent mana wielders. Soon, you'll come to understand the true power of the holy knights of the Motar Faith.

Jubilating, Avare eagerly made his way to the room he had arranged for the holy knight.

"Sir? It is I, Avare. Is your room satisfactory?" he asked politely.

The knight opened the wooden door, its surface etched with intricate patterns, and poked his head out of the room. "It is," he said, his expression unchanging.

That knight was incredibly difficult to approach, as Avare couldn't seem to read his emotions.

Oh well. His personality isn't all that important as long as he's on my side.

Pulling himself together, Avare told the knight the reason for his visit. "As you may already be aware, there are two reasons why I asked the main church to send you to our cathedral."

"Lifting the bad-smell spell that was cast on you and doing something about the House of Mercure, or whatever it is they're called," the knight said.

"Indeed! Those vile people are a bunch of scoundrels who think that they can do whatever they want simply because they have mana. They have even threatened the king and me! The Countess of Mercure in particular is an absolutely heinous woman."

"Is that so?" The knight lifted his gaze, staring at Avare without blinking, as if he wanted to say something. "A 'heinous woman,' you say?"

"Y-Yes!" Avare stammered. "She is a terrifying witch with light green hair."

"Green…"

"Such a bizarre hair color! You never see people with hair like that nowadays! And it's not just her hair; her way of thinking is

utterly twisted as well!”

“I see,” the holy knight replied, a broad grin appearing on his lips. “I will think about what to do with you at a later date.”

“What to do with me?”

Was he being evaluated on his abilities to bad-mouth mana wielders? In that case, Avare was looking forward to what the main church had in store for him.

“Well then, I am going to see the Mercures, so could you please send a messenger over to let them know of my visit?”

“Oh, there is no need to bother with a messenger for these people. Just barge in on them without warning. Ah, but then again, I suppose there might be some protocols you need to follow, as a member of the main church.”

“Protocols… Yes. Yes, exactly.” The smile on the knight’s face grew wider. With what little Avare could read of his intentions, he was getting the impression that the knight wouldn’t accept any obstacles in reaching his goal.

“Hmm… Then how about—” Avare began but was interrupted by someone teleporting right beside him.

Whoa! That scared me! he thought, recoiling in surprise.

He didn’t care if the newcomer was an esteemed figure like a saint or a holy knight; it was bad for his heart!

The man gave Avare a quick bow before turning to the holy knight, the look on his face a mixture of fear and exasperation.

Now that I’m taking a good look at him, I recognize his clothes. Those are the robes cardinals wear.

All of the higher-ranking members of the Faith could use rare, peculiar spells.

The cardinal, Rumeur, paid no further attention to Avare and addressed the holy knight in a stern tone. “Your Holiness, could you *please* stop disappearing without a word? I felt like my heart was about to stop.”

“I left traces behind so that you could go after me, though, didn’t I?”

“Still. I do not have the authority to stop you from leaving, but please allow me to come with you at the very least. I was worried.”

Avare couldn’t believe his ears. “His… His Holiness?!” he exclaimed.

The knight’s smile immediately vanished, replaced by an

expressionless gaze. “Aw. I’ve barely arrived, yet my identity already got exposed. I didn’t want this to turn into a big deal.”

Avare felt an eerie, almost otherworldly aura emanating from the holy knight—no, from the Holy Father.

Rumeur was visibly scared as well, but he stood his ground. “If you don’t want ‘this to turn into a big deal,’ as you put it, then you should refrain from teleporting away on your own in the future.”

“Are you ordering me around?” the Holy Father asked, his tone so cold that it sent a shiver down Avare’s spine.

“It is not an order,” the cardinal replied despite the color draining from his face. “Merely a request. What has gotten into you recently? You never used to vanish like this before,” he added, his tone almost pleading.

The Holy Father merely stared back at him blankly.

That kid doesn’t seem to understand jokes or common sense. He just looks dangerous, Avare thought, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to stay at the main church anymore. I want to meet with the Countess of Mercure,” the Holy Father replied.

“Why would you go out of your way to talk to a foreign married noblewoman? You’ve never met her, have you?”

“That report about the durian stink spell was true, and the woman who cast that spell is none other than the Countess of Mercure. It has piqued my curiosity.”

As their exchange continued, Avare began to devise a plan in his mind to win the Holy Father’s favor. His goal was to create a situation that would both work to his advantage and make the Holy Father and the cardinal obligated to him.

Promotion, promotion, money, money, money!

He waited for the perfect moment to speak before interjecting into their conversation. “I-Is that so? Your Holiness, might I request that you entrust this matter to me? It would be preposterous to ask an esteemed figure such as yourself to visit the Mercures’ estate! We should make them come to us. If we mention that you wish to see them, they won’t be able to refuse!”

The two men glanced at him.

“Since you are gracing our humble kingdom with your presence, we ought to organize a lavish reception at the royal

palace," Avare continued. "We can simply invite the Mercures there."

Rumeur had begun eyeing him with suspicion, so he immediately added, "Of course, there are other reasons why I believe we should hold a reception. Many nobles frequently visit the royal palace, but none have had the honor of seeing Your Holiness in person. They are surely eager to behold your visage. It would be the perfect opportunity to make them witness your grandeur firsthand—both the regular nobles and those insolent mana wielders of House Mercure."

The Holy Father turned his head away, an uninterested look on his face. "You're offering to organize a meeting between the Mercures and me, right? I'm fine with anything as long as I can see the countess. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't make me wait too long," he said.

Rumeur didn't seem overly pleased by the situation, but he didn't make any move to stop Avare.

"Th-Then I shall get everything ready!"

Later that day, Avare announced to the entire kingdom that the royal family would be holding a banquet to celebrate the Holy Father's visitation.

※

On that day, the Mercures received yet another letter from the king. The twins brought it to Char in his study, and he opened it, a look of suspicion on his face, while I observed him from where I sat on the sofa. Unlike the last letter we'd received, this one bore both the king's and the bishop's signatures.

"It says they're holding a banquet to honor the Holy Father's visit to the kingdom," Char muttered as he read the letter.

This piqued my interest, and I moved to stand behind him at the strawberry-patterned desk to read the letter for myself. Char didn't try to stop me, so I assumed he didn't mind.

"Just like that other party we attended together, it says that attendance is mandatory for all nobles. It's in a few days, so we don't even have time to prepare or anything. Inviting us to a celebration related to the Motar Faith... They *have* to be plotting something," Char said.

“I think so too, especially after the fight we had with the king and the bishop at the palace,” I added.

I took another look at the date of the event and noticed that it was only ten days from now. Char was right; it was much too sudden.

“So there really is a Holy Father, huh?” I remarked. “Then again, I guess the second saint *did* mention that he truly exists.”

“We don’t really have any reason to celebrate his visit. Plus, preparing for a party is such a hassle.”

I shared Char’s annoyance.

“I agree. But the letter says that they’ll overlook our previous insolence and promise us better treatment if we attend. It does sound too good to be true, though.”

“It’s too suspicious. We probably shouldn’t go.”

The crown had always treated the Mercures like dirt. Well, not exactly—Char *had* received some level of faux respect, but it was just so that they could use him and his magic. Most people actually looked down on mages and were afraid of them.

“It’ll allow us to see what kind of person the Holy Father is, so I think it might still be worth it,” I said. “If things go badly, we’ll just move abroad as planned. It’ll give us one last opportunity to see if the king, the nobles, and the Motar Faith are truly irredeemable.”

“I think we’d just be wasting our time.”

Our last audience with the king had been wildly unpleasant, but perhaps he and the bishop had changed their ways since. If they had truly reflected on their actions, we could even start taking on their jobs again—depending on what they entailed, of course. And if they were truly beyond saving, we always had the option of moving somewhere a little more comfortable.

“Perhaps they’ve seen the errors of their way and want to apologize to us?” I suggested.

“Impossible,” Char replied.

The twins, who stood a little ways off, were of the same mind as him.

“I agree with Lord Char,” Barre said.

“Me too,” Fouet chimed in. “But I *am* curious about what the Holy Father looks like. I’d like to see him once. Oh, look; it says that you can take two attendants with you to the party.”

“Oh, really? I want to come too, then,” Barre said.

The twins sure were curious.

“The Holy Father might retaliate if we do anything. We don’t know how strong he is, so if we’re going, we’ll need to stay vigilant, all right?” Char said.

“Leave it to me! My body is too weak for me to use my own mana, but I’ve been thinking of creating a system to absorb your mana, so I can cast all the spells I want!”

“Sure, I don’t mind. Do I have to do anything in particular?”

“You just need to circulate your mana through your body as if you were casting a spell yourself.”

Char obediently did as he was told.

“I’m going to put a Dark Magic spell on you that’ll absorb your mana, but don’t worry, I can always undo it later.”

“You don’t have to. You’ll need to use my mana again, anyway.”

“But it means you’ll have a Dark Magic spell on you at all times…”

“I’m telling you, I don’t mind,” he declared curtly.

“Then could you hold out your arm for me?”

He did as instructed, and I grabbed his arm, applying the absorption spell to part of his mana.

“There’s now a crest on your arm because of the spell. As long as it’s there, I can draw on your mana whenever I need to, even if we’re apart,” I explained.

Char rolled up his sleeve and stared at the dark blue symbol that resembled a flower which had appeared on his arm. This little spell was all it took to allow one to draw magic from another being at will, unless they found a way to remove it. In a way, it was a rather frightening spell.

As a side note, Épée must have used something similar on Flèche when he forced my reincarnation, as he had mentioned borrowing his mana to accomplish it.

To show Char and the twins that the spell had worked, I used my husband’s mana to launch an enormous firework outside the window. Countless little sparks shot up into the sky, rising higher and higher until they burst all at once.

“Ooh, this is my first time seeing something like this, but it’s quite pretty. I’d expect a loud bang with an explosion like that, but I assume you must have suppressed the sound with magic, right?” Barre said.

“I’m sure it would be even more beautiful at night,” Fouet added.

While the twins praised me, Char didn’t seem as pleased. “Lam, don’t use magic for no reason. You might be using my mana, but casting spells still puts a strain on your body, doesn’t it?”

“Yes… You do have a point.”

I’d normally retort that a useless spell or two wouldn’t hurt me, but he was right; it was best for me to conserve my stamina in case I needed it later.

“It’s good that your mana issue is fixed, but I have another concern about this party,” Char said. “We’re expected to dance.”

Char, Barre, and Fouet’s gazes all turned to me. They must’ve thought that my body was so weak, I would collapse after a bit of dancing. And, well, they were right…

“Madam, I assume that there is no need to mention that we’re concerned about your stamina. But we have another worry: You’ve never danced before, have you?” Fouet said, his tone tinged with concern.

I flashed him a bright smile. “Don’t worry! I learned how five hundred years ago.”

To prove my point, I demonstrated a few of the dance steps.

“Ooh, an ancient dance,” Barre said, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I’ve never seen one before.”

“Me neither. But it does look like the kind of dance you’d read about in a history book,” Fouet added.

Their reactions took me aback.

“Ancient”? “The kind you’d read about in a history book”? How rude!

As it turned out, the dances I knew were now relics of the past, and no one performed them anymore.

Well, that’s not good. I don’t know any modern dances.

I’d managed to somehow never be required to participate in balls up until now, but being a countess, it seemed I wouldn’t be able to escape that fate this time.

“It’s a well-known fact that you have a weak constitution,” Char said. “You shouldn’t be required to dance, but I’m worried about what the king might say.”

His point was valid, but I had to admit, I was interested in dancing. I would be frustrated if I let this opportunity slip, and I really wanted to try out the latest dance styles.

“This could be a good opportunity for me to learn,” I said.

“Wha—?! What are you saying?!” Char exclaimed.

“Char, could you teach me how to dance?”

He hesitantly glanced at the twins, and they immediately shook their heads. I didn’t understand what had just happened, but it seemed they were silently communicating something.

“Uh, I can’t teach the madam. I only know how to dance the male role of the dances,” Barre said.

“Me too. And I assume it must be the case for you as well, Lord Char,” Fouet added.

Listening to their conversation, I realized the main issue with my plan.

“Oh, right. There aren’t any women in the household who can teach me how to dance.”

Well, I supposed that couldn’t be helped, then. I probably wouldn’t have time to hire a teacher before the party. And even if I hadn’t been in a hurry, having a teacher—or anyone who wasn’t a mana wielder for that matter—come to the Mercure estate was nearly impossible. No one wanted to come near our house!

“I shall learn modern dance at a later date, then, and go pick out an outfit for the party. I just so happen to have ordered a new dress in case we were invited somewhere.”

The words had barely left my mouth than Char and the twins began grumbling all at once.

“Ugh, madam…”

“Another one of your creations, I suppose?”

“You… You ordered a dress on your own again?! I told you to go through me or Canon when you want a new outfit!”

On top of the stipend I received just for being the countess, Char also paid me for my job at the schoolhouse. Therefore, all the dresses I bought were with my own money, so I didn’t think Char had any right to object.

“I have full confidence in this new one,” I declared.

“I’m saying this for your own good: For the party, pick one of the dresses I bought you,” Char said.

The twins nodded.

“Lord Char’s right, madam. You might shock the Holy Father if you wear a dress with a ridiculous pattern,” Barre said.

“Then again, that could be amusing in its own right,” Fouet

added.

I groaned, unable to hide my irritation. “Ripe bananas aren’t a ‘ridiculous pattern,’ mind you.”

“Ah. So it’s bananas this time? I see you’re really into fruits lately,” Barre said.

“Those lemons with legs on the dress you’re wearing today are quite striking as well,” Fouet remarked.

“You will *not* be wearing a banana dress. Pick a patternless one!” Char insisted.

And so, a lengthy and passionate debate erupted over the gown I would wear to the ball.

Ten days went by, and the banquet was finally upon us. We all eagerly finished getting ready and stepped outside the mansion. The night breeze was cool, and the bright moon lit up the estate’s garden.

In the end, I’d decided to wear the dress Char had picked out for me. It was a mature, formfitting gown in a deep crimson color that reminded me of Char’s eyes.

“It is a beautiful gown,” I conceded. “But I still think that my ripe banana dress would have been just as nice! Drawn on the lining on the inside were actually little poisonous lizards that you can only find in southern countries, and—”

“Enough with that banana dress. You’d stand out in a bad way wearing a gown patterned in those bananas; their brown splotches looked like stains. Besides, the one you have on suits you perfectly. You look beautiful.”

“Huh? I-I-I-Is that so?” I stammered, caught off guard by his sudden compliment.

Char grabbed my hand. “Yes. I can say it without a doubt; you will be the belle of the ball tonight.”



He was usually so rude and brusque, yet he sometimes said shocking things like this with a perfectly straight face. In these moments, I always found myself thinking that his good looks made it all the more unfair.

Well, if he insists, I suppose I should give up on the banana dress…

Completely at the mercy of Char's calm, charming grin, my legs shook as I stepped into the carriage that would take us to the banquet. Since the party took place at night, the children would be staying home. Canon, Bombe, and Mine had already graduated from the schoolhouse, but they were still much too young for me to feel comfortable bringing them to an event so late at night.

I didn't expect Char to compliment me out of the blue like that. My heart is still racing.

Speaking of Char, his outfit tonight featured accessories that matched the color of my dress.

He really does look good in anything. It's no wonder all the young noble ladies swoon over him. I mean, he's definitely nice to look at, and his personality isn't as bad as it used to— Wait. What am I even thinking?!

Sitting opposite my husband in the carriage, I was suddenly hit by a wave of embarrassment, and I struggled to look his way.

I'm getting that indescribable feeling again. I had completely forgotten about it recently.

Char appeared to be staring at me. "Lam? Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. Don't worry about it," I replied, hurriedly averting my gaze from him and opening the window.

"You were making all sorts of interesting faces."

How dare he say that without even knowing how I feel? What a rude man.

The refreshing night breeze brushed over my cheeks, and I gazed at the illuminated royal palace in the distance. It stood out against the black canvas of the night. They must have used items powered by magic stones to make it shine so brightly.

Magic stones were actually semipermanent, so there was no worry of them running out of mana anytime soon. These types of magic items were quite rare nowadays, and only the crown and the Cerveau Cathedral had access to them. They were, after all, ancient relics from a long-lost era when crafting magic items was considered normal.

Those items are quite old now. They might break soon.

In this day and age, there were no mages who could repair magic items—other than Épée and me. Flèche struggled with delicate tasks, so it was better not to rely on him for repairs.

The Mercures now had quite a wide array of useful magic items at their disposal, as I'd improved a lot of them myself. However, we'd kept that under wraps. All the Mercures told me that the Faith would make a big deal about our magic items if they learned about them, so they preferred to leave them at home. As such, we only ever used them within the Mercure estate. Based on our previous audience with the king and the bishop, I had to admit they had been right to be cautious. Keeping the magic items a secret had definitely been the right move.

I looked outside the window once again and, feeling a bit sentimental, muttered, "The city is pitch-black at this hour."

"Was it not like that five hundred years ago?"

"No, cities were brighter at night. I don't know if it was a good thing or not, but we always had a lot of magic items lighting up the streets."

"How interesting. I wish I had been alive back then," Char said.

If he had lived in that era, he most likely would have become an outstanding mage with a legacy of remarkable achievements. I felt awful for mana wielders in this day and age. No matter how talented they might be, they had no way of fully developing their potential. They were simply used like objects and exhausted for their abilities until they collapsed.

"Let's transform this era together. We can create a world where mages are free to live as they choose," I said.

Char paused for a couple of seconds before nodding. "Let's."

It would be difficult to change people's ideologies with just the members of the House of Mercure. After all, the current world was almost entirely hostile toward mages.

But still, if there's something I can do in this lifetime to save persecuted mages…

The efforts my disciples made to bring about my reincarnation wouldn't have been in vain.

Yes. I can change this world.

Something that my former self had failed to do.

If I had been able to save everyone on that day, the world wouldn't

have turned out like this. This time, I will… Huh? "Save everyone"? "On that day"?

The words that had flashed through my mind without context left me feeling bewildered.

Is the current animosity toward mages the result of something that happened five hundred years ago? Ever since I had that dream a few weeks ago, my memories have slowly started returning to me.

But whenever I tried to prod any further, the memories would vanish from my mind. It was incredibly frustrating.

"Do you feel unwell again?" Char asked, likely having noticed that I was acting weird.

"No, I feel fine. It's just… Never mind."

If even I didn't understand what was going through my own head, there was no point in talking to Char about it. It'd just confuse him.

"You can't start a sentence and not finish it. I'm even more worried now."

"I just felt like I was on the verge of remembering something. But I couldn't, in the end."

I shifted my attention back to the window when Char leaned in closer, his gloved hand making contact with my shoulder.

I let out a silent cry, and unable to pull away, I simply stared at him in shock. The shadows cast by the dim light of the carriage obscured his expression, but it seemed to me that he was just as surprised by his own action as I was.

"Why are you making that face? *I'm* the confused one here," I said, the words escaping me before I had a chance to consider them.

Char thought for a bit before replying, "My body moved on its own when I saw you making that expression."

"That doesn't make any sense."

Feeling my heartbeat begin to race again, I gulped. Silence fell over the carriage.

I need to calm down. It's ridiculous that I'm the only one bothered by this. Char definitely doesn't think this is a big deal, so I shouldn't dwell on it.

Our carriage eventually reached the royal palace. We'd talked about teleporting over when it was time for the banquet, but that would have caused a huge panic among the people not used to

seeing magic, so we'd given up on the idea. As such, we'd decided to be considerate to the others and travel by carriage.

I climbed down from the carriage, using Char's hand for support, and gazed at the illuminated palace. The banquet hadn't started yet, and most guests hadn't arrived, but I could already hear an orchestra playing inside. It was a nice, relaxed dancing tune.

"We've arrived earlier than planned," I commented.

They hadn't even started letting guests in yet, so Char and I decided to promenade through the palace gardens. Thankfully, the many magic lanterns lit up our surroundings. I glanced around nervously, wanting to keep as much distance from other nobles as possible. Dealing with them would be too much of a hassle.

"Don't worry, almost no one ever comes here," Char said. "This is where I escape when I want to avoid people."

This corner of the gardens did appear to be unpopulated. Feeling reassured, I decided it would be best to wait here until the party started. Then, we could head to the reception area.

I'm a bit sad that I can't dance tonight, though. It's been forever since the last time I had such an opportunity.

I knew I shouldn't push for it, but it truly was a shame.

Then, as if reading my thoughts, Char said, "If you really want to, I don't mind doing one of those ancient dances with you. As long as you don't overdo it and wear yourself out."

What perfect timing. Although, I still didn't like that he and the twins called the dances I knew "ancient."

"We can dance without worrying about being seen," he added.

He was right; it was just the two of us here.

The twins, who had arrived at the same time as us in another carriage, were currently exploring the inside of the palace. The two of them could take care of themselves no matter what happened, so I wasn't too worried about them roaming around freely.

"My ancient dances might be a little difficult for a modern boy like you," I pointed out.

Char silently came to stand before me, a defiant grin on his lips. "I'll just follow your lead."

"W-Will you?"

I didn't think he'd rise up to the challenge, and I began panicking slightly.

“Do you think you’ll manage to keep up with my speed?” I asked, trying to hide my turmoil.

“Don’t overdo it and make yourself collapse,” he warned me. “Besides, how do you want to go fast on a tune like this one?”

The music that was playing inside the castle was a slow waltz. Refusing to admit that he had a point, I silently held out a hand to him. He’d said he’d follow my lead, and I had every intention of taking him up on that offer.

“Let’s begin, Char.”

Illuminated only by artificial lighting, in a dark corner of the gardens, Char and I slowly began moving in time with the music. He seemed to have no trouble copying my steps.

Right. His motor coordination is very good, after all.

I decided to increase the difficulty a little. I used to be quite a good dancer back in the day. Whenever I was invited to the royal palace, I would often have my disciples accompany me, and we’d attend parties together. But they’d always fight about who would get to dance with me, and I’d end up having to dance with each of them every single time.

I’d upped the dance complexity, but Char was still having no issues keeping up. But then, the orchestra began playing another, faster tune, and I increased the speed of my steps on top of throwing a couple of more advanced ones into the mix.

“Lam, don’t overdo it,” Char warned me.

I chuckled. “I’m still perfectly fine. How about you? Are you struggling to keep up with—?!”

All of a sudden, the heel of my shoe landed on a bumpy protrusion, throwing my balance off, and my body fell forward. It seemed that I had slipped on a pebble with my high heels.

“A-Aaah!”

“Lam!”

Char steadied my body, preventing me from tumbling to the ground, but in my panic, I ended up clinging to his chest with all my strength. I hurriedly loosened my hold.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine” was all Char replied.

For some reason, his heartbeat was as fast as mine.

“Char, your heart is pounding,” I said before I could stop myself.

He looked down at me, a look of shock on his face, before

slowly bringing his hand to his chest. “You’re right,” he said, a satisfied smile settling on his lips. “It is.”

His arms tightened slightly about me.

Why? I can’t move away like this.

Feeling shy, I asked, “Um, I think the banquet might start soon, so could you let go of me?”

Char slowly released me.

The atmosphere had turned a little strange since I’d tripped.

“We should head to the palace,” Char said.

“Yes. It’s a shame we can’t use teleportation magic, though. Oh, what if we tried floating? Perhaps the others wouldn’t notice!”

“Your condition is still unstable, so don’t use any more magic today. If you really have to, make sure to use my mana.”

“I’m feeling fine, it’s just… These high heels are a little difficult to walk in,” I said.

It wasn’t like I couldn’t endure a little discomfort, but these definitely weren’t the type of footwear I’d willingly reach for.

“So that’s what it is.”

Char stared at my heels for a few seconds before picking me up, a completely nonchalant look on his face. Surprised to have suddenly found myself lifted off the ground, I hurriedly slung my arms around Char’s neck, clinging to him.

“I’ll carry you all the way to the banquet hall.”

“I can still walk, so you really don’t need to! Look, we can even see the entrance from here!”

“It’s dark. What if you fall on the way? It’s too dangerous.”

Considering I had tripped mere minutes ago, there wasn’t a lot I could say to argue with him. And so, I kept silent and let him carry me to the royal palace.

Char set me down in a corner of the ornate party hall, and I let out a relieved sigh.

Oh? The palace doesn’t smell like durian anymore. Did someone from the Motar Faith come to remove the spell?

We didn’t have anything special to do at the party, so Char and I decided to simply stay near the wall. If we stood out too much, it was possible guests might come and annoy us, so I quietly and leisurely snacked on the appetizers laid out on the tables while looking for a drink.

I-Is that…

I quickly spotted glasses of my favorite beverage and grabbed one, downing the sparkly golden juice in one go. I'd never get enough of that unique aroma and creamy texture!

"Aaah! The castle's durian juice truly is exceptional."

"Are you drinking that weird stuff again? It smells terrible," Char said.

"But it's so tasty."

I tried to offer him a glass so he could take a sip, but he backpedaled, a look of disgust on his face. "Don't get that thing near me."

It seemed like Char really didn't like the scent of durians.

"I'm fine with this," he added, reaching for a glass of red wine and draining it.

What a shame. I just wanted him to experience the true greatness of durian juice.

"Do you think the king and the people of the Motar Faith will make their appearance later?" I asked, glancing around the party hall, where our esteemed guest was nowhere to be found.

"Probably."

Some nobles were stealing glances our way, but none of them came to talk to us.

Maybe they've learned that they shouldn't engage with us for their own good.

Recently, the Mercures had been making waves in society—well, I had been especially, as I didn't hesitate to punish the nobles who crossed me. Perhaps rumors of my actions had begun to spread.

Waiting beside Char for the king to make his appearance, I decided to get myself another glass of durian juice.

"It's going to start soon," Char said, directing his attention to the staircase at the center of the party hall.

I had learned from the two parties I'd attended at the royal palace that the king's appearance at the top of the stairs was announced with a fanfare of trumpets. Sure enough, just as Char had predicted, the orchestra began to play, and four silhouettes emerged: the king, the Cerveau Cathedral's bishop, and two other men. It was dark where they were, so I couldn't see them very well, but one appeared to be young and the other middle-aged. Each wore unique, extravagantly luxurious attire, with hats pulled low

over their eyes.

"Which one is the Holy Father?" I wondered out loud as the men began descending the stairs.

"Based on their clothes, I'd say the younger one," Char said. "The other one is probably a cardinal. Either way, I don't understand what important figures of the Faith like them are doing in this tiny kingdom."

"The Holy Father seems to be around the same age as us. Do you think he's the real one?" I asked.

Char simply shook his head, as if to tell me he didn't know either. "At any rate, it seems that the Tête Kingdom has drawn the Faith's attention, and it might be because of us."

The party hall filled with the sound of clapping as everyone welcomed the Holy Father.

"Let's stay here for now and wait for them to make their move," I said, reaching for my third glass of durian juice.

The king reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped forward to introduce the Holy Father and his fellow clergyman. "Thank you all for gathering here today. It is my honor to present to you our esteemed guests from the Motar Faith: Cardinal Rumeur and His Holiness the Holy Father!" he announced, his tone reverent.

The crowd erupted in applause. The Holy Father slowly scanned the room, almost as if he were looking for something in particular.

Hmm? I feel like I've seen the Holy Father somewhere before... No, impossible. He comes from another country.

The Cerveau Cathedral's bishop stepped forward as well, coming to stand right in front of the king, proving the real status that the Motar Faith held in the Tête Kingdom.

"What a wonderful day for you all, believers of the Motar Faith! However! There is one miscreant among the crowd who does not belong in this holy place!"

An uncertain atmosphere enveloped the room. I was confused too: He and the king had personally invited everyone here, so what was he even talking about?

Someone that the bishop would deem a miscreant... It has to be one of us, right?

Char must have thought the same thing, his gaze trained on the bishop's every move.

"Your Holiness! A heinous mage is hiding among the guests!

Not only does she constantly disrespect the Motar Faith, but she has also caused much suffering by casting dreadful, foul smell curses on innocent people!"

Ah, yes. He was definitely talking about me.

Behind the bishop, the king nodded in agreement.

So you two are in cahoots. I see now.

Far from feeling bad for what they'd said to Char and me during our last audience, they'd gone running to the main church to arrange our punishment.

But does the Faith really have someone who can remove that *spell?*

I readied myself, my durian-scent spell on call at my fingertips.

"Step forward, you vicious mage! I shall bring down the iron fist of Lord Motar upon you!" the bishop declared.

He was acting even more self-important than usual, perhaps fueled by the presence of the Holy Father and the cardinal. How amusing, considering he'd been cowering in panic because of my durian spell only a few weeks ago.

"Lady Mercure! You're here, aren't you?!"

Ah, he'd finally mentioned me by name.

Fine. I'll come to you, if you insist.

I began marching toward the center of the banquet hall under the curious eyes of the partygoers.

"Lam, don't," Char urged from behind me.

"Don't worry, Char. I'm just going to make sure I live up to the bishop's expectations."

He followed me as I continued pushing my way through the crowd.

"Madam?!" I heard the twins exclaim from a corner of the room.

Oh, that's where they were.

I strode forward until I stood before the bishop.

"So you did come, you heinous mage! What a foolish girl, strutting out here so confidently," he said, a triumphant look on his face as he pointed a finger at me. "The Holy Father will punish you for your crimes today! Your Holiness, this woman is a heretic who refuses to obey the teachings of the Motar Faith. I implore you to bring the judgment of Lord Motar upon her!"

The Holy Father slowly made his way toward us, his face still obscured by his hat.

I stayed silent as the bishop continued throwing nonsensical

accusations at me.

“That woman is an enemy of the Faith! She has threatened nobles with her frightening magic, cast a curse on the king and me, and is now compelling the mana wielders in her household to refuse the duties we have so graciously bestowed on them! She is a wretched soul who repays kindness with betrayal!”

“She is! She is!” Some of the nobles in the crowd nodded.

“She sent my wig flying!”

“She turned me into a hair ball!”

“She destroyed my garden!”

I vaguely recognized their faces; they were all people I’d punished before. Also, I would like to point out that I hadn’t been the one who’d destroyed that last lady’s garden; Mine had.

They’re taking advantage of the Holy Father’s visit to play the victims, huh?

I had to take my hat off to them for being such great and tenacious actors.

Char stepped in front of me, as if to shield me from the criticism. “You’re all barking up the wrong tree. If you continue to insult us, we’ll do as you wish and leave the kingdom. That should put an end to your grievances,” he said.

The hall buzzed with murmurs from the nobles as they realized how much the loss of the House of Mercure would impact them.

“What a vile gathering this is. Let’s go, Lam,” Char demanded.

“Wait, shouldn’t we address the misunderstandings about our house first? Especially clarifying the fact that you were overwhelmed with work. I can handle what they say about me, but I don’t want them to get the wrong impression of you and the others.”

“I refuse to let you be exposed to these people for even a moment longer,” he insisted.

The twins poked their heads from behind him as he glared at the bishop. It seemed that they had crept forward behind us.

Char prepared to cast a teleportation spell to take us all home, but a smooth and clear voice stopped him before he could. “Wait.”

It was the Holy Father. The intervention was so surprising that the four of us froze.

“Your Holiness?!” the bishop exclaimed. “Will you pass your holy judgment upon those miscreants?”

“How wonderful! Please hurry and punish them!” the king cheered.

Both he and the bishop seemed in high spirits. I truly worried about the future of this kingdom.

However, the Holy Father’s tone was ice-cold as he idly turned to them. “Would you please shut up? Your voices are rather irritating.”

What…?

To my shock, he seemed quite critical of the king and the bishop.

“Just what in the world is wrong with you two?” he continued. “You have isolated a woman, ganged up on her, and demanded that I punish her based on accusations whose truth I have yet to verify. I can hardly believe how low this kingdom has sunk.”

“But, Your Holiness! These people are heinous heretics!” the bishop exclaimed, panic beginning to overcome him.

“What are you talking about? The only heretic here is you,” the Holy Father said, irritation evident in his voice.

The next instant, a sharp sound echoed through the party hall. One of the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling shattered, reacting to the surge of mana in the air. Screams erupted from the guests closest to the chandelier, and panic quickly spread through the crowd.

“Wh-What?! I, Avare, am an honest, devout believer of the Motar Faith! What are you accusing me of?!”

“You’ve come to me and wrongly accused a woman of crimes she didn’t commit. That makes you a heretic. Besides, I am sure you must have said something to anger Lady Mercure in the first place,” the Holy Father declared curtly.

“Wha…?!”

His first point made no sense, but he’d hit the nail on the head with the second. Perhaps there were some sensible people among the Motar Faith.

“She is a woman with a strong sense of justice; she would never do anything with impure intentions. If she ever used her magic against someone who wasn’t a mage, she would hold back. The spell she cast on you was just a bad-smell one, wasn’t it? You need to stop blowing everything out of proportion.”

Based on his words, it seemed that he was the one who had

removed the durian smell from the bishop and the palace.

He must be good at magic, then.

In this day and age, it was surprising to see such a skilled mage.

"Oh, and I've found proof of corruption and falsified account books within the Cerveau Cathedral. You're fired."

Clearly not having expected the Holy Father to dismiss him out of the blue, the bishop dropped his jaw to the floor. But the next instant, his face reddened with anger, and he sputtered, "C-Cut the nonsense, you young fool! I'll show you exactly what happens to those who cross me— Aaah!"

The bishop suddenly floated into the air before he was rocketed straight up. His body collided with the ceiling, the impact sending him crashing back down to the floor in the middle of the hall.

"Phew, I've sent that insignificant insect flying," the Holy Father said. He turned to the king. "Would you like to try flying like a bird as well? It might be a pleasant experience."

The king's head swung vigorously from side to side, his entire body shaking like a leaf.

"Is that so? Well then, I'll come find you later to talk about appointing your successor."

The Holy Father's unexpected attitude and his use of magic had left the partygoers frozen in shock. However, he paid them no mind and turned to me.

"Lady Mercure," he started, his voice much gentler when addressing me. "You have my deepest apologies for the trouble the bishop of the Cerveau Cathedral has caused you. I'll make sure to punish him myself, so you can rest assured."

"I-Is that so?" I stammered.

"Yes. He attempted to cause you harm, and that is a serious crime in itself."

The Holy Father walked up to me and removed his hat. The instant I saw his face, I let out a gasp. It was very familiar to me: His distinctive black-and-white hair, his unusual eye color that resembled silver, and his gentle expression were all so nostalgic.



“You…”

“I’ve missed you, teacher. I’ve stayed alive for the past five hundred years, all in the hopes of seeing you again.”

The young man before me was undoubtedly my dear third disciple, who used to live under my roof five hundred years ago.

That clumsy yet hardworking, good, honest boy…

For a while, all I could do was stand there, speechless.

“It really is you, Lance,” I managed to say eventually. “When you said that you’ve been alive all this time… Do you actually mean it? You’ve lived for five hundred years?”

I hadn’t known I would see him again in this lifetime. I had thought that only Épée and Glacial had followed me into this life and that Lance had simply remained in the past. I couldn’t believe we’d been reunited in such an unexpected place.

“Yes. Unlike the other two, I wasn’t good enough at magic to reincarnate alongside you. But I wanted to see you again just as much as they did. So I used magic to prolong my life,” he explained.

“You managed to prolong your life?”

It wasn’t impossible per se, but it required a lot of skill. It would have been difficult for Lance to pull it off with his magic as it was at the time.

There are too many things I don’t know.

If he was telling the truth, Lance would have lived for an unfathomable *five hundred years*. He was looking at me with a gentle gaze, his expression weary and somewhat detached.

He’s been alone this entire time? Because when I was reincarnated, I left him behind?

That thought made my chest hurt. Yet, Lance didn’t seem to think much of it. He was simply smiling at me softly.

“It’s all right, teacher. You don’t need to worry about anything. I’ll do everything in my power to protect you,” he said.

“Huh?” I replied, still struggling to process the shock of our reunion.

Beside me, Char asked, “Lam, don’t tell me… Another one?”

He’d already encountered my other two disciples, so he didn’t seem particularly fazed this time.

I nodded. “He’s my third disciple.”

“Just as I feared.”

Lance looked at Char and smiled. “Nice to meet you. You must be Lord Mercure—teacher’s husband.”

“So what if I am? Also, why is a former disciple of Aurora the head of the Motar Faith?” Char asked, rude as ever even toward the Holy Father.

“It’s a complicated story. Teacher, since I finally got to see you again, could we please have a proper discussion? Ah, I’ll deal with those troublesome individuals first.”

“Wait.” My brain still couldn’t process what was happening.

But Lance simply smiled at me like he used to five hundred years ago and continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “I’m thinking of using that spell you taught me—the one that makes it so they have lullabies playing in their heads for the rest of their lives.”

With that, Lance cast his magic on the party hall, and everyone except from the Mercures and the cardinal let out confused screams.

“For the rest of their lives? That’s too mean!” I hurriedly said. “Make it a hundred days, the poor things.”

“If you insist. Oh, speaking of magic, that aroma spell you cast on the bishop and the king was wonderful. It almost made me like durians,” Lance said as he adjusted his spell.

“I-I see.”

When he was done, Lance turned back to me. “I want to go somewhere quiet with you to have a proper conversation, teacher.”

I also wanted to talk to him. I wanted to know how things had come to this point and why he’d become the head of the Motar Faith. There were just too many things I didn’t know. Not to mention, I was worried about him. He’d just spent the last five hundred years alone.

“I have many questions for you as well. Do you mind if Char stays with us?” I asked with some hesitation.

Lance nodded amiably. “Not at all. Well then, I will teleport us elsewhere. This place is too noisy and not suitable for a conversation with you.”

A voice cut in from behind, interrupting Lance. “Y-Your Holiness! You can’t!”

It was the other man of the Motar Faith. Cardinal Rumeur, was it?

“I do not know what is happening here, but *please* stop running off on your own,” the nearly middle-aged man said, casting a pleading glance in Lance’s direction.

“Don’t worry, cardinal. You just need to keep quiet, and there will be no issues,” Lance replied, his smile carrying an edge that made it clear he wouldn’t allow any objections.

He had become a lot more assertive than he’d been before, perhaps due to his position as the Holy Father of the Motar Faith. His behavior definitely differed from how it used to be five hundred years ago.

Hmm, where should we go to have a chat?

Borrowing a room in the palace would just be asking for more trouble. I also wanted to steer clear of any buildings associated with the Motar Faith, as I didn’t know what dangers might lurk within those walls, and I was still quite flustered from my reunion with Lance. For that reason, I wanted us to have a nice, relaxed conversation somewhere safe where no one would bother us. By process of elimination, only one place met that criteria.

“Lance, would you like to come to our mansion?” I offered.

Before he could respond, the cardinal interjected, “How insolent! Not only did you call His Holiness by his name, but you dare invite him to your home?!”

“Please shut up,” Lance said, his voice low as he shot the cardinal an icy glare. “Lady Mercure can do whatever she wants. She is more worthy of respect than I am.”

“What is the matter with you, Your Holiness? You’ve been acting so strange today!” the cardinal exclaimed, understandably confused.

I chose to remain silent, not wanting to reveal that his superior had once been my disciple in my past life, since that would only complicate things further.

As for Lance, he had shifted his gaze back to me, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “I’m so happy that you’ve invited me to your house again in this lifetime. Cardinal, please take care of the aftermath here. Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to return.”

Then, he took my hand, a bright smile lighting up his face. “Let’s go to your home, teacher.”

I noted that, unlike the other two, he wasn’t outwardly hostile toward Char either. Speaking of Char, he seemed a little hesitant.

“Are you sure we can let him inside the mansion?”

“He doesn’t seem to have any ill will, so it should be fine,” I assured him. “And it’ll be better than discussing things here.”

He nodded and reluctantly teleported us and the twins back home, leaving the chaos of the royal palace’s party hall behind.

We landed in the quiet garden of the Mercure estate, and I saw Lance glancing around, a smile curling on his lips. He had always loved gardens and parks ever since I’d taken him in. Some parts of him remained the same as they once were, while others had changed completely. I was happy to see him again, but I didn’t know how to interact with him, knowing he’d been alive for the past five hundred years.

“Wow, what a big estate,” he commented, his gaze roving from the flower beds to the small path and the schoolhouse in the distance. “Are you the one who designed that vibrant building over there, teacher?”

“Oh, the schoolhouse? Yes, I did remodel it. It’s cute, right?”

He nodded. “It’s lovely,” he said, still happily looking around the garden.

“Thank you, Lance. Let’s head inside, shall we?”

With that, we led him into the mansion. He might have once been my disciple, but right now, he was the Holy Father of the Motar Faith, so we ushered him to the formal drawing room.

How in the world did that boy become the Holy Father? He’s never been the type to be interested in anything that required effort.

Due to his peculiar upbringing, he’d been lethargic and apathetic most of the time. Unlike my other two disciples, he hadn’t been particularly combative; instead, he’d been a calm boy who’d preferred to take things easy. It seemed utterly implausible that someone like him would be involved with the Motar Faith, especially as their leader; this seemed the complete opposite of everything he was.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to let you be alone with Lam. I’ll be staying for the entire conversation,” Char said.

In this country, it was deemed inappropriate for a married woman to be alone in a room with any man other than her husband, as it was considered a form of infidelity. While the other members of House Mercure didn’t really count, the rule still applied to Lance, since he was a guest.

“That’s fine,” Lance said with a nod. “You’re teacher’s husband. I don’t mind if you stay.”

Hmm?

There was something about his tone that felt a bit off, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

At any rate, it was decided that this conversation would involve the three of us. Char and I sat on a sofa in the drawing room, and Lance took a seat on the other side of the coffee table.

“Well then, let’s begin. There are so many things I want to ask you, Lance,” I said, trying as hard as I could to maintain my composure.

“I have questions for you too, teacher,” he replied, flashing me a radiant smile.

I still couldn’t feel any ill intent coming from him, even now that we were away from prying eyes.

I nodded. “That’s fine.”

Regardless of the chaos of our reunion, he was still my beloved disciple. I wanted to know more about him and what he had experienced during our time apart.

“Part of my memories are a little hazy, but I’ll answer any question you have to the best of my ability,” I said.

I didn’t know if I’d be able to give him all the answers he wanted, though.

A puzzled expression crossed his face at my words. “Your memories are hazy? What do you mean by that, teacher? You seem to remember me just fine.”

I nodded and proceeded to tell him about the strange phenomenon that had happened to my body, just like I had my other two disciples, while Char observed in silence beside me. “I don’t remember how I died. I still have my memories of you, Épée, and Glacial, but I’m missing everything related to my death. The other two explained to me that they used magic to trigger my reincarnation, but they refused to tell me how I died.”

“Ooh, I see. Then perhaps I shouldn’t tell you either. Did Épée erase your memories of your death on purpose? He’s skilled in magic, so he probably could have done it.”

“Maybe. But not having my memories makes me even more anxious. It’s so unsettling not being able to remember such an important event in my life. I feel like my memories have been

slowly returning to me, but only in fragments, so I still don't know what really happened," I explained.

Lance glanced at me hesitantly. "Um, does your husband know about all of this?"

"He does. I've told him about my past and my true identity."

Trying to be considerate of me, Char looked at Lance and nodded. "Don't worry. I know who my wife truly is."

"Really? She trusts you a lot then, doesn't she? Well, now that I have a better idea of the situation, I'll tell you everything I know, teacher. You died shortly after I turned seventeen. You were twenty-three at the time."

Char's eyes widened in surprise as they snapped back to me. It turned out I had met an early death as Aurora, and the news struck me hard.

"As for the cause of your death…" Lance continued. "Well, you sacrificed your life to protect others. Let's put it that way. It was a very *you* way to go. Though, if you ask me, you should have just abandoned those people to their fate."

For a brief moment, his expression turned icy—a completely uncharacteristic look for such a gentle boy.

"And? Did I manage to protect the people you're talking about?" I asked.

I had been wondering about that ever since having that dream the other night, worried I hadn't been able to save those I had meant to protect.

Lance quietly nodded. "They all lived in peace thanks to you. But at some point, humanity forgot what you'd done for them and repeated the same mistakes over and over again. I couldn't have cared less about the world after you were gone, so I abandoned them to their fate."

While I believed he was telling the truth, I had a feeling he was carefully choosing his words so as not to upset me.

"Lance, why did you become the Holy Father of the Motar Faith? That religion didn't exist five hundred years ago, right?"

He nodded. "It was founded after your death."

"Are you the one who created it?"

"No. One of the cardinals did."

I thought of the overly serious man who had been with him at the palace.

“The one we met earlier?”

“No, another one. He’s at the main church right now.”

“Right now? Wait, has he been alive for five hundred years as well?” I asked in surprise.

“Yes. He’s from a long-lived race—the elfins, just like your own teacher. But since he’s a man, he can’t use magic,” Lance explained.

Five hundred years ago, there had already been so few elfin people in the world that most people believed they didn’t exist at all, even back then. The elfins possessed a deep knowledge of magic, but only the women among them had the ability to wield it. Elfin men biologically couldn’t use spells. Not that I had ever met one myself before; my teacher had been the one to explain all of this to me.

Oh? Something about elfins seems to be nagging at the back of my mind… But I can’t recall what.

I decided to ignore the weird sensation in my brain and focus on Lance’s story.

“I asked that elfin man to teach me how to extend my lifespan, and in exchange, he requested that I become the Holy Father of the Motar Faith in name only. That’s how I ended up in this position.”

“Lance, you’re leaving out way too many details,” I said.

He’d always had this bad habit of completely ignoring anything that didn’t interest him.

“It’s not my fault; things that don’t have a direct link to you don’t matter. I really don’t care enough to remember other details.”

I felt a tinge of concern upon realizing that he hadn’t grown much as a person in the past five hundred years.

“So you knew that the Motar Faith was persecuting mages, yet you didn’t do anything to stop them?” I asked.

“These mages pushed all of their problems onto you and couldn’t save you in the end. What worth do their lives have? Besides, I wasn’t actively involved in the oppression of mages at any point. The cardinal started it all on his own before I knew it,” Lance said, his voice calm and devoid of emotion.

“Why are you talking about it as if it doesn’t concern you? As the Holy Father, you should have stopped him.”

“But I just don’t care.”

This wasn't good. Either he was saying this as a joke, in which case it was in really poor taste, or he was serious and it was hopeless. A large emotional chasm loomed between the two of us.

"The mages of this era are suffering greatly, Lance. Just take the Mercures for example: Things were utterly dire by the time I came here. Mana wielders are being persecuted all around the world. They're struggling. You're the representative of the Motar Faith, aren't you?"

He blinked in surprise as if he were hearing this for the first time. "Is it really that bad?" he asked, his tone as nonchalant as ever.

There was a limit to how detached one could be in the face of such suffering.

"Just how have you been living all this time? Did you not go outside much?" I asked.

"I did, at first. I used to travel the world to spread word of your achievements. When I was done, I helped develop new magic tools, searched for you, read the books you'd written and learned new spells, searched for you, occasionally made an appearance at the saints' appointment ceremonies, and searched for you. But, recently, I stopped doing half of those things, and I mostly just spend my time at the main church."

So, he'd been spending most of his time looking for me. I had been about to scold him for neglecting his responsibilities as the head of the Motar Faith, but his explanation only made me feel guiltier for abandoning him.

"I'm sorry for leaving you alone, but, Lance, the Motar Faith has been very, very cruel to the mages. As the Holy Father, you can't simply ignore the situation," I said, trying to reason with him.

"Is that so? I don't care, so I didn't know."

"You...don't care?"

He was the representative of the Motar Faith, yet he *didn't care* about what his subordinates had been doing? Mana wielders were being persecuted and subjected to unfair treatment simply for being born with magical abilities. They could lose their lives, and no one would mourn them. To make matters worse, the Faith was sealing people's mana under the guise of a religious ceremony, preventing them from ever using their magic. If the seal on someone's mana broke, or if the blessing ceremony failed to work,

they would be labeled as heretics. Of course, this was only the situation in the Tête Kingdom, but things probably weren't too different in other nations.

"Enough is enough, Lance. While you may have not contributed to the mages' suffering yourself, as the Holy Father, you have the responsibility to make things right. Many people have suffered due to your indifference."

The Mercures, the mages in Lèvres, the previous Lam... All of them had been oppressed just for having mana, which had caused them immense suffering.

But my pleas didn't seem to reach Lance. All he did was shrug his shoulders awkwardly and say, "But it's such a hassle."

His words had barely reached my ears that I unconsciously stood up, leaped over the table, and swung a clenched fist into his jaw.

The anger and frustration caused by my feelings not reaching him had mixed with my desperate wish for him to understand, creating a storm of raw feelings that I hadn't been able to contain. I had tried to nurture my disciples into sensible people, but...

This boy hasn't absorbed any of it.

The moment my mana-infused punch made contact with his chin, Lance was launched upward, crashing into the ceiling just as the bishop had earlier.

"I punched that insignificant little disciple of mine...even though it won't resolve anything. I'm a horrible teacher."

His upper body lodged into the ceiling, Lance swung his legs back and forth to try to extricate himself from the hole, until he eventually used his magic to descend, healing his reddened jaw while he was at it.

"Lance, you're *strong.* From now on, I want you to use that strength to help those in need. I didn't teach you magic so you could lead a meaningless life, merely being used by others as a symbol of power."

Lance earnestly listened to my admonishments and eventually nodded. "If that's what you wish, teacher, then I'll do it."

He'd always struggled with emotions, yet he was genuinely trying to understand what I was telling him. Having been raised in a research facility, he sometimes struggled to discern right from wrong and had difficulties making decisions on his own.

And here I thought he had improved on that front after living with me. Perhaps it is because we spent five hundred years apart, but he seems to have regressed on certain points.

This made me realize that I still had to work on my education methods.

Lance raised his face, staring at me intently. I couldn't tell from his expression if he felt remorse about what he'd done or not. "I'm thinking of stepping down from my position as Holy Father. I stayed with the Faith because it was easy; they provided me with food, clothes, and shelter, but I have more than repaid my debt to the cardinal who helped me in the past."

"You make it sound so simple," I said.

"Resigning from one's position isn't particularly hard. So, teacher, when I stop being the Holy Father, can you let me stay with you?"

I blinked at him in surprise.

"House Mercure is a house of mages, right?" he continued. "I can use magic, so I fit the criteria."

"Well, that's true, but…"

"I need somewhere to stay, teacher."

I glanced at Char and noticed the confusion lurking beneath his blank expression. With how much suffering the Motar Faith had caused the Mercures, it was only natural he would feel so conflicted. Nonetheless, he seemed to understand that Lance wasn't the main perpetrator behind the Faith's oppression of mana wielders.

"I don't mind you having a husband, teacher, and I can even help him with his work," Lance said. "If Lord Mercure is your husband, I'm fine with being your concubine. As long as I can stay by your side, I don't care what form our relationship takes."

Char's expression instantly changed, and he held out an arm in front of me as if to hide me from Lance.

"Lance, do you know the meaning of the word concubine?" I asked.

He nodded. "I do. I'm around five hundred years older than you, after all. And I told you, didn't I? I don't mind that you're already married."

So he understood the meaning of the word? It must have been a tasteless joke, then.

“I’m not looking to form a harem, but we’re in dire need of security personnel and a teacher for the schoolhouse, so if we were to hire you, it would be for one of these two positions.”

Char had a displeased look on his face, as if to say he’d prefer if we didn’t hire Lance at all. “Lam, I have no intention of providing for your secret lover, especially not someone who used to be the Holy Father. What if he tries to harm the kids? It’d be too late to regret it then,” he said.

The Motar Faith was the root cause of the oppression of mages, which explained why Char was anxious about letting Lance into our home. Lance had said he’d step down from his position, but that didn’t change the fact that he still would have once been the Faith’s leader, after all.

Char was the head of the household, so I felt it was best if I respected his opinion. He had made significant progress since I first regained my memories, to the point where it was hard to believe he was the same man who once left children to die on the training field.

I *was* worried about Lance, but he was an adult now—one who’d lived for five hundred years and could use magic. Regardless of the situation with the Mercures and the Motar Faith, he was more than capable of living on his own.

Lance chuckled at Char’s words. “Teacher’s secret lover? I see my new junior is quite harsh.”

“Your *junior*? I just stated the obvious—as Lam’s husband.”

“But you started learning magic from her after me. That makes you my junior. Teacher’s other two disciples always used to tell me that I had to obey them, since I was the last one to join. Oh, don’t worry; I won’t ever be that mean to you. Well, unless…” Lance didn’t finish his sentence, but the implications were crystal clear.

I could feel anger oozing from Char’s body.

“Teacher, can I give your new disciple some…*guidance*?” Lance flashed me a bright smile as he made that outrageous request.

“Absolutely not,” I replied.

“Lam, I’m going to kick him out,” Char warned me. He probably couldn’t stay silent after being insulted in his own home.

“Char…”

Things looked like they were about to escalate, so I hurriedly put a stop to Lance’s antics. “Lance, let’s resume this discussion

later. The Mercures have their own circumstances to deal with, and you're technically still the Holy Father at the moment."

"Aw, teacher, you're no fun."

I needed to have a long discussion with Char about Lance before deciding what we'd do with him.

Char probably won't let him move in with us, though. I feel bad for Lance, but he'll probably need to find somewhere else to stay.

Lance reluctantly agreed to let things go for now.

"We'll decide whether you can come live here or not later," I said. "For now, could you please tell me more about what happened five hundred years ago? I really want to know how I died."

His expression darkened at my words, so much so that I could actually tell, which was quite unusual for him. "I'm not sure if I should. I agree with the other two: I don't want you to be sad. All I'll say is that you tried to protect the people from corrupted magic items and that you used up all of your power to save them."

Épée and Glacial hadn't budged even when I'd insisted they tell me how I died, but Lance was a lot easier to convince. He'd said that he didn't want to tell me, yet he'd already given me snippets of information.

"Corrupted magic items"? That part intrigues me.

He was most likely telling the truth. What he said correlated with what I'd seen in my dreams. I might be able to squeeze more details out of him if I probed a little further.

"Those idiots forgot the favor you did for them and grew more and more impudent. I should have just erased them all, but I wasn't powerful enough back then..." Lance muttered under his breath.

I'd never seen him utter such gruesome words before. But the scary expression on his face immediately disappeared, replaced by his usual calm demeanor.

"Oh, this reminds me, you met with Épée and Glacial, teacher, didn't you? You mentioned them earlier."

I nodded. "I saw them a little while ago," I said, thinking back on my two other disciples.

They'd both grown into respectable young men.

That seemed to remind Lance of something, as he leaned forward suddenly. "Does Glacial live in Lèvres, perhaps?"

“How did you know? He’s the first prince there. As for Épée, he’s a merchant in Ongle.”

“A merchant? Knowing him, he must be dealing with some shady things… Oh, well. I suppose I can put off going to see them for a bit longer.” He shrugged. “Teacher, I am thinking of returning to the royal palace before deciding what to do next. Lord Mercure, I’m entrusting her to you during my absence.”

With that, he rose from his seat, a soft smile on his lips.

Char shot him a sharp glare; the sour look crinkled his face. “I don’t need you to *entrust* my wife to me. It’s none of your concern.”

“Aww, let’s make efforts to get along, shall we? After all, we’re like women in the same harem, with you being teacher’s first wife. Though I suppose that’d be first husband? Ah, well, see you,” he said before teleporting away without even waiting for our answer.

All three of my disciples were much too free-spirited.

“I’m so sorry about this, Char,” I said awkwardly. “I never would have thought that one of my disciples would turn out to be the Holy Father. I’m still in shock, to be honest.”

Char didn’t let his feelings show, but as the head of House Mercure, he definitely had his own thoughts on the matter. It probably didn’t help that Lance had neglected his duties all this time and seemed completely unfazed about all the atrocities the Faith had committed around the continent. That was much too irresponsible. I had punched Lance to punish him for what he’d done, but that probably wouldn’t be enough to make my frustration go away.

“I’m a failure of a teacher,” I sighed.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with the actions of someone you knew in your past, Lam. He’s older than you now, so you shouldn’t act like you’re still his guardian,” Char said.

He was trying, in his way, to tell me to stop berating myself for what Lance had done.

“We’ll worry about how to deal with the Motar Faith later. Right now, I’m worried about you—both because of what your disciple said about your past and because you don’t look well. You probably haven’t noticed, but your face is even paler than usual today.”

“Huh? Do I really look that unwell?”

“You do. You started growing whiter and whiter after punching

your disciple. You should go to bed."

I could tell he was worried about me, so I decided to indulge him for once. "Thank you, Char. I'll do as you say. Today's events might have taken a bigger toll on me than I thought. I don't feel particularly unwell, though."

"Healthy people aren't this pale," Char pointed out as he grabbed my hand and guided me to my room.

Then, he asked one of the maids nearby to help me change out of my dress and left the room.

There were so many things rushing through my head. Everything felt jumbled and chaotic, and I couldn't seem to find a way to organize my thoughts. Perhaps I really was sick.

I decided to heed Char's advice and immediately lay down in bed once I was done changing.

The events leading to my death are weighing on my mind more and more with each passing day.

Despite how restless I felt, my body eventually ran out of steam, and I lost consciousness.

Chapter Four: The Countess Regains Her Memories

My consciousness was pulled down into a white spiral, sinking deeper and deeper.

My head hurts.

I felt like I was on the verge of remembering *something* but failed to grasp it, causing my anxiety to grow with each passing second. Perhaps the reason I was so on edge compared to usual was my reunion with my third disciple, whom I had thought I'd never see again.

According to Lance, an elfin man created the Motar Faith and is currently a cardinal. Were there other elfins around back then, save for my teacher? Somehow, I have a feeling that I might know him…

A whirlpool of thoughts swirled in my mind.

"I want to create a world where we do not need to rely on mages," a voice echoed inside my head.

Who'd said that? And when had I heard those words? The more I tried to remember, the stronger the pounding in my head grew. I felt *terrible*. But then, just like last time, fragments of my past suddenly returned to me.

A researcher in magic items making a speech in the royal palace of the nation I used to live in five hundred years ago.

A crowd applauding and cheering for him.

The dwindling number of mages working for the crown, having lost the trust of the people.

Back then, my disciples used to urge me to quit. I didn't have the full context, but snippets of conversations were coming back to me. When Finis, my teacher, vanished, I'd filled her empty shoes and began working for the crown like she used to.

That much I remembered.

There used to be other mages working in a similar capacity as me, but in the flickering scene I saw in my memories, I was the only one left.

My headache worsened. Perhaps my brain was trying to recall memories buried even deeper within me.

I'm on the verge of remembering. It feels just like when I first regained my memories, my instinct as a mage told me.

I had a feeling that reuniting with all three of my disciples had lifted the lid on my past.

That's right. I... I...

I was the last mage working for the crown. Just as Lance had said, I was trying to protect the people as part of my duty. But then...

I collapsed.

I fell.

My disciples screamed.

They looked on the verge of tears, so I tried to tell them everything was all right, but no words left my mouth. I couldn't move my body at all. I didn't remember what happened after, but I assumed I must've been reincarnated.

My death had been so horrible that it had deeply traumatized my disciples.

I know there's nothing I can do about it now, but I'm glad all three of them are alive and well.

I felt my consciousness fall even deeper into these buried memories, reflecting on the events of that time.

I never told my disciples, but I felt really sad when Finis left.

The woman who had practically raised me had vanished out of the blue. That had come as a huge shock to me. I had *known* she wouldn't stay with me forever—she'd even told me as much herself—but I hadn't expected her to leave without even saying goodbye. That had really hurt me.

I truly thought of her as a mother even if I knew she'd hate me calling her that. Yet, she'd left, leaving only a lazily written letter behind. Then again, I supposed it was very *her*...

I didn't want to be too obvious so as not to worry my disciples. Causing concern for those around me because of my personal struggles would make me a failure as a teacher.

I have to pull myself together.

But despite my efforts, my heart remained in turmoil, and I couldn't focus my attention on anything. Still, she had entrusted the position of court mage to me, so I resolved to at least fulfill my duties to the best of my abilities...even though the only missions I was ever assigned were those beyond the capabilities of the other

mages. And so, I poured my heart and soul into my job, hoping it'd allow me to forget the pain in my heart caused by her sudden departure.

Then, one day, Epocha, a traveling researcher specializing in magic items, appeared at the royal palace. Just like Finis, he was an elfin but a male. While elfin men had mana, their bodies couldn't turn it into spells, meaning they couldn't use magic. They did excel at other things with their mana, though, such as item crafting and potion making. Being a long-lived race, elfin people were all very knowledgeable about magic. As such, a lot of them either became researchers or doctors—well, that was what Finis had told me at least, and Epocha didn't seem to stray from the rule.

"I want to create a world where we do not need to rely on mages," he had said.

The royal court seemed very interested in what he had to say. After all, if his words were true, it would be possible for even those who struggled with magic to live comfortably without having to rely on mages.

People who were good enough at magic to do it as their profession were convenient to have around but difficult to manage. Most of them were free spirits with no regard for authority and who basically did whatever they wanted. Moreover, they all took great pride in their work and, as such, were rather arrogant. As most professional mages operated individually, their prices were steep, and that wasn't to mention the fact that they refused to take on jobs they didn't like or that some were so particular that their quirks ended up causing trouble for those around them.

The stronger they are, the more particular and free-spirited they tend to be.

The ruling class of the time was dissatisfied with the mages in their nation; they didn't want individuals with their own free will but rather pawns who would obediently carry out orders. As such, they unanimously decided that, rather than commissioning mages, it would be more convenient for them to put magic items in the hands of their subordinates and task them with those missions.

Following that decision, Epocha—whom the king had taken a liking to—was immediately elevated to the rank of royal

researcher in magic items, further expanding his influence thanks to his adept social maneuvering.

As for the items he crafted, they quickly became a hit among those who disliked using magic themselves. At first, he made only tools that assisted with everyday tasks before expanding to large vehicles, and even weapons for the kingdom's order of chivalry.

His items circulated all over the nation, helped by the fact that they were both cheaper and more efficient than regular magic items.

"We don't need mages anymore!"

"They're just money-sucking parasites clinging to outdated practices!"

This caused an anti-mage sentiment to spread like wildfire through the kingdom, prompting many mages to leave the country in shame, taking their talents and techniques to other nations. I kept working for the crown, but it didn't feel great hearing all those people talk badly of magic, as it was something very dear to me.

Besides, there were many things that magic could achieve that items simply couldn't replicate. It wasn't "outdated" by any means; magic was still full of potential...but only for those who studied it properly.

There were those who didn't take it seriously, and there were ordinary people who didn't have many occasions to use it in their daily lives, not wanting to improve their skills, learn new spells, or pay mages an honest wage for their work. These kinds of people would much rather buy a cheap item that could do the job for them. This was the only reason Epocha's items became so popular. I'd *known* that, but that didn't make it less painful at the time.

Since some mages themselves agreed that the items were efficient and practical, others were forced to lower the prices of their services, taking on the missions they were assigned without question, even though this left them struggling to make ends meet. Yet, despite their efforts, the demand continued to shift from mages to magic items.

But the situation did not end there.

As it turned out, behind Epocha's convenient and user-friendly tools lay a darker truth: All of his items required the user to pay a hefty price. Most people didn't realize this and kept buying these

tools without knowing how they were made or what went into them.

I was the first to recognize the danger they posed. One day, while dismantling some out of curiosity, I noticed something strange: Epocha had incorporated a function that transformed regular mana into altered mana directly within the items. They didn't utilize altered mana outright; instead, they converted the user's mana into altered mana upon activation, which was much harder to notice even for mages. Only those who had studied under veterans with ancient magic knowledge would've been able to see through the subterfuge. I assumed that whoever had inspected these items to see if they were fit for use had missed it as well, and that was how Epocha had obtained his license to sell them. I didn't know who had conducted the inspection, but this was a huge problem.

Good grief, what were those big shots thinking, granting permission for such dangerous items to be produced?!

Altered mana was much more powerful than regular mana. Finis had once told me that there was a time when people used items like the ones Epocha was selling, but once they realized the dangers of altered mana, they immediately stopped.

This was because of the very nature of altered mana: Unlike regular mana, it lingered in the air after being used. A high concentration of altered mana could lead to serious incidents, such as sudden explosions, and had harmful effects on the human body—phenomena that sounded very much like what had been happening in the kingdom since Epocha had arrived.

It's ancient knowledge, so it's no surprise that most people aren't aware. But I can't let the kingdom continue to allow this.

I rushed to the royal palace to ask the king to ban Epocha's corrupted items, but he refused to listen to me, insisting that the recent disasters and the rising health issues among his people couldn't possibly be linked to the items.

And so, the kingdom didn't take measures right away.

I was furious. How could the king make such claims without even looking into the matter?

It was then I realized that Epocha had most likely been aware of the side effects of his items and had laid the groundwork by convincing the king there was no connection between them and

the strange phenomena happening in the kingdom.

Some time passed, and the kingdom *finally* realized that Epocha's items were dangerous. They made a public announcement requesting people to stop using them, but it was too late.

It would have been impossible to save everyone, even with the utmost efforts of my disciples, the remaining mages, and me. The rampant altered mana permeating the kingdom was causing explosions and health issues everywhere, devastating the lives of the people.

This was when everyone remembered that the court's mages existed—though it was just me at that point—and they came crying to me.

Yes... I finally remember.

I had been teleporting all over the kingdom, trying desperately to fix the issues caused by the altered mana. Everywhere I went, people berated me, demanding, "Why did you allow such dangerous items to be sold?" and "What were you mages doing until now?"

Some even defied the king's orders and continued using the corrupted items, insisting, "Nothing bad has happened to me, so I don't see why I should stop." They'd become so dependent on these items that they couldn't bear to stop using them. But I didn't let the criticism faze me and continued to protect the people from the effects of the altered mana.

The reason my disciples refused to tell me about my death was because of how harsh and miserable the circumstances around it had been. They were doing it out of concern for me.

Then, it happened.

Explosions began erupting in the middle of the royal capital.

If I remember correctly, a group of people who opposed the ban on Epocha's items gathered to protest and all used their items at the same time.

Each explosion triggered an even stronger one, causing a chain reaction and, by the time I heard the news and teleported to the scene, the city had already turned into a blazing inferno, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The altered mana that had accumulated in the air formed a vortex that threatened to detonate at any moment. I instructed

my disciples, who had followed me out of concern for my safety, to rescue the people of the capital and destroy any corrupted items they could find, while I focused on dealing with the altered mana. With how concentrated the mana had become, I had a feeling that the next explosion would be massive, potentially powerful enough to level the entire kingdom.

Fortunately, in the nick of time, I cast a powerful light barrier around the city, protecting it from the mana vortex explosion. However, in the city's place, I took the full force of the explosion head-on.

These were the circumstances behind my reincarnation.

I feel terrible for what I made my disciples go through…

I'd dragged them into a conflict between mages they had never asked to be a part of and left them to deal with the consequences. I wouldn't have been too surprised if they'd blamed me for it. Regret washed over me, along with another stronger headache.

I always feel sick when unlocking new memories.

The pain and nausea were becoming unbearable. I was asleep, yet I could sense my breathing grow more erratic with each passing second—not to mention the emotional pain I felt after recovering my memories.

It hurts… It's so painful…

As I struggled and squirmed in the empty white space of my dreams, I suddenly heard a voice shouting my name in the waking world.

"Lam!"

Despite how shaky my legs were, I mustered every ounce of strength I had and began walking in the direction of that voice. I didn't know why, but the me in my dreams had decided that following it was the right decision.

At last, my consciousness returned to the surface as my body jolted awake. I could still hear my name being called continuously from beside me. Drawn to that voice, I opened my eyes and was met with Char's face looking down at me from above. My breathing was still rough, and my body trembled like a leaf, but the headache and overall sickness began to fade.

"Char?" I muttered weakly, peering up at him.

There was no doubt about it: The one who'd called me back to reality was my husband.

“Was I crying out in my sleep?”

If so, he must have been worried about me.

The room was illuminated by a soft light that Char had conjured with his magic, a spell I had written in one of my manuscripts back when I was Aurora. My body instantly relaxed, perhaps out of relief, and I began to cry for some unknown reason. If Char had seemed concerned before, now he seemed completely panicked.

“Are you really feeling that bad? I’m going to call for a doctor—no, medicine will be faster. I’m going to send a servant to fetch one of the remedies we stock in the mixing room.”

“I’m all right, Char. I surprisingly don’t feel that sick. If anything, I’m doing much better than before I went to bed.”

It was just my tear ducts that had decided to act out on their own, for some reason.

“Then why are you crying? You’re not just pretending to be fine, are you?” Char asked me.

I slowly sat up and shook my head. “I don’t know why I’m crying either. I just felt so relieved when I saw you…”

A look of bewilderment registered on Char’s face at my words. He reached a hand toward my face and gently began brushing away my tears.

“I had a dream—of some real events from five hundred years ago,” I explained, before realizing something. “Right… I just regained the rest of my memories.”

The shock of it all was so overwhelming that I couldn’t help but feel incredibly vulnerable at that moment. Even though I didn’t want to bother Char, I couldn’t help it.

“Lam, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I can tell just by looking at you that they’re not pleasant memories. I can’t even begin to imagine what you must have gone through, but I know it was bad, since even your disciples refused to tell you about it.”

I nodded silently. “You’re right. I just remembered a very painful part of my past.”

Just like last time, I had seen the circumstances of what led to my death—events that likely had a direct connection to the current oppression of mages. As Aurora, I had successfully prevented my home nation from being destroyed, but my efforts hadn’t been enough to change people’s opinion of mages. These

circumstances had led to the creation and expansion of the Motar Faith, resulting in a level of mage persecution that was far greater than anything seen before.

In the end, I didn't manage to save anyone.

People called me the witch of legends. The strongest mage of all time. Yet, I had died without resolving anything, causing such despair in my disciples that two took their own lives while the third went on to suffer for five hundred years.

How pathetic.

As I sat there, feeling crushed by the weight of my emotions, Char softly pulled me into his arms. I didn't know if he was aware of my inner turmoil, but it didn't matter. His embrace was soothing, making me feel as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

"Char?"

"I wasn't alive five hundred years ago, so I can't relate to your past, but I have resolved to be there for you, no matter what the truth of it may be."

His awkward warmth sent even more tears flowing down my face. I didn't want anyone to see me act this pathetic, but alas.

I slowly let my body relax against Char, allowing his kindness to envelop me.

"You should get some more rest," he told me. "I'll be by your side if you can't sleep, and I'll wake you up if you have another bad dream."

"Thank you. I'll tell you everything once I've composed myself."

"I already told you you don't need to push yourself."

"I *want* to tell you," I said, and Char silently listened to me. "Besides, I have to accomplish what I was unable to do in my past life. Although I don't know how well that'll go with my current body."

With that, I drifted back to sleep in his arms.

※

In his base on the outskirts of the Ongle Empire, Épée was busy tackling the backlog of work that had piled up on his desk.

After Aurora had left, he'd fought Glacial and kicked him out of his home before fixing his base of operations with magic and

healing his wounded underlings. This took him some time, and as a result, a mountain of unattended tasks awaited him.

Opening the window, he watched the sunlight start to break through and shine over the foggy wasteland surrounding his home.

Aurora.

He'd finally found his former teacher, yet she'd managed to escape in no time. It was frustrating, but at least it shouldn't take him too long to see her again. He knew where she lived, after all.

She was moving. She was alive. Well, I shouldn't be surprised considering I was the one who set up her reincarnation.

She wasn't injured and barely breathing, like the last time he'd seen her. She was alive because he'd made her reincarnate. Because he'd taken her life with his own hands. He had never been able to forget the sensation of that moment. That was why he had been so, *so* relieved to see her alive and breathing in this lifetime.

She was still the exact same as she used to be five hundred years ago, and his reincarnation spell seemed to have succeeded for the most part. There had been some minor issues, but he could always fix them in the future.

This time, he'd make sure that Aurora would never be sad again. He would destroy anything that brought her pain. His only regret about his past life was not having been able to save her, so this time, he *needed* to stay by her side and protect her.

As he took care of his work, lost in his thoughts, one of his subordinates rushed into his room, a thick stack of papers in his hands.

"Boss! A big shot from the Motar Faith just contacted us. They ordered weapons for the holy knights, and they sent us a sample to replicate. Said they wanted 'em fast. These are all blueprints and specification documents."

"What? We're not manufacturers. If they want weapons, how about they commission a workshop or something?"

"But you can do it, boss, can't you? You're super clever, and your magic is amazing, and you've already taken care of a bunch of unreasonable jobs for the Faith. I took a glimpse at the blueprints, and the weapon design doesn't seem that hard. Even we can make them! I wonder if they have some sort of shady reason for coming to us," his underling said, waving the stack of documents in his

hands.

Épée snatched them from his hands. “Let me see.”

He was good at reading and understanding blueprints.

I think I could design something more efficient myself. But I don’t wanna draw too much attention to my magic, or it’ll be a pain…

As he inspected the documents, he suddenly squinted, his brow furrowing in confusion. “Wait. This is…”

“What’s wrong, boss? Ah, if you wanna take a look at the sample, the client left us this,” Épée’s underling said, starting to panic because of how weird his boss was acting.

Épée grabbed the model weapon the Faith had sent them and inspected it. “It’s real—the same kind as those corrupted items from back then. I don’t know who decided to commission us with these, but they’re trying to make a fool of me, aren’t they?”

Not only was someone attempting to recreate the weapons that had caused so much damage five hundred years ago, but they had commissioned *him* to make them.

“You’re acting weird, boss. Is there something wrong with it?” his subordinate asked.

Épée looked up at him from his chair behind his desk, a twisted smile curling on his lips. “*Everything* about it is wrong. I suppose I have no choice but to make it better myself.”

“Ooh, for real? That sounds like so much fun! Hold on a minute, I’ll go fetch my fellow tinkerers!”

With that, Épée’s subordinate happily dashed out of the room to get his friends. Everyone working in this organization was just like their boss—they didn’t have an ounce of patience.

Épée dropped his gaze on the sample again. “It really is one of those damn weapons that alters the user’s mana… I can’t believe someone had the audacity to send me something this ridiculous.”

Of course, the Faith didn’t know who he was, so it wasn’t like they’d chosen him on purpose for this mission. Still, Épée couldn’t help but wonder how the Faith had access to these documents.

That didn’t matter. These items, the ones who’d created them, and those who used them had caused harm to Aurora…

“To think that the Motar Faith would be dealing with items like those… Now that I know, I won’t show them any mercy.”

Épée couldn’t believe that something with such strong ties to his past had resurfaced now, right after he’d been reunited with

Aurora. What a strange twist of fate.

Glacial, Lance, and I had consigned all these corrupted items to oblivion at Aurora's request. So how did the Faith get their hands on this?

The weapon they'd sent him was the exact same as the ones that used to be common five hundred years ago. It was one of the many corrupted items that had circulated in the past—the very ones that had killed Aurora—and this weapon functioned by converting altered mana into offensive spells. Because of their user-friendly design, these weapons had been distributed to knights and mercenaries who weren't particularly skilled in magic to use during monster extermination missions and other tasks.

Weapons weren't the only things using altered mana back then.

Anyone could use these tools regardless of their abilities or mana pool. However, altered mana had strong negative consequences for the environment, as it could cause sudden explosions and harm the item's users. Additionally, the more people used these items, the more altered mana would accumulate in the atmosphere, eventually coming back to bite them. As a consequence, many people fell ill or were caught up in explosions because of these items.

However, the man who'd brought these items to the kingdom (and who had the royal family in his pocket at that point) had completely denied any correlation between his tools and the environmental phenomena happening throughout the nation. And so, the people believed him and kept using the items until the kingdom was destroyed...or it would have been if it hadn't been for Aurora and her stupidly soft nature. She'd sacrificed her life to save these people. How infuriating.

I don't know who sent me this, but it looks like people are about to make the same mistakes again, huh?

Some of the materials required to make these items were difficult to obtain, but the Faith had assured him they would supply everything needed. Just as his underling had said, the weapons themselves were easy to make, to the point where anyone could make them by following the blueprint even without fully grasping the underlying logic. With enough practice, it was the kind of item that could be crafted almost effortlessly. This was probably why the Faith had commissioned him for the job, even

though he'd said that item-crafting was out of his area of expertise.

The Faith always wants to hire us for their dirty work and annoying requests.

Plus, they always sent messengers to assign them missions, so Épée didn't even know what their main client looked like.

They didn't mention anything about it, but making corrupted items like this one comes with some health hazard for the crafter too. Five hundred years ago, workers in various workshops across the kingdom fell ill due to these cursed tools. And now those bastards from the Faith want us to create these items while conveniently omitting the side effects. They're really taking us for fools.

Items that scattered altered mana were nothing but harmful, and Épée had no intention of destroying what Aurora had given her life to protect.

"I'm going to rewrite these blueprints and create the *best* item. One that doesn't use altered mana."

The man who had popularized these corrupted items five hundred years ago had prattled on about wanting a "world where no one needs to rely on mages." But he'd just been spouting annoying, pretty words. His true goal had been something else entirely.

He just had an inferiority complex because he couldn't use magic and was trying to get a higher social position by getting rid of mages.

That man hadn't had any genuine beliefs or convictions; his actions had been fueled solely by pure egoism.

Well, either way, the Faith made a big mistake by commissioning me for this job.

Épée thought back on the elfin man who'd been behind the corrupted items—the man who'd caused Aurora's death. He'd assumed that the man had died during the final explosion, but if he hadn't, it wouldn't be surprising if he was still alive. Elfins were a long-lived race, after all.

No matter. If someone was trying to do something similar in this day and age, Épée would absolutely squash their plan.

※

Days had been starting later and later at the Mercure estate.

Except for the children, the Mercures had always been a household of night owls. I was the only one who went to bed early, due to my weak physical condition. But when I woke up this morning, my body felt much lighter than it usually did.

I haven't felt this refreshed after sleeping in a long time.

My head didn't hurt, I didn't feel nauseous, and I didn't think I had a fever. Thankfully, I hadn't dreamed about my past again when I'd fallen back asleep.

Perhaps it's because I regained all my memories, I surmised. *Ugh, but I showed quite a pathetic side of myself to Char... I was so uncharacteristically whiny. I even cried and let him hold me.*

I shook my head vigorously in an attempt to knock my memories of the previous night out of my mind.

I've never acted like this, even with my parents or my teacher. I need to be careful not to let it happen again.

I'd always thought I needed to be strong at all times and hadn't intended to change my ways...but I was struggling to keep up a tough front before Char.

A lot of things have been weighing on my mind, but those can wait. First and foremost, I need to get up and get dressed.

I shifted onto my side, unable to calm myself, and locked eyes with Char, who was lying on my bed, watching me.

"Huh? What are you doing here?" I asked.

Actually, now that I took another look at the situation, it seemed that I was gripping his shirt.

What is my hand doing there?!

As if he'd read my mind, Char nodded, not making any move to change his position. "I slept here since you wouldn't let go of me. I couldn't bear to wake you up when you were sleeping so soundly."

"I-I'm so sorry! I can't believe I did that..." I exclaimed, releasing my hold on his clothes.

"You seem to be doing better than yesterday," Char pointed out.

I nodded, feeling my face heat up. "Yeah, I'm doing great today! So, um..." I looked him in the eye and, my heart racing in my chest, added, "Th-Thank you for yesterday. I slept well thanks to you."

I had spoken so fast that my words had come out a little jumbled.

A look of surprise crossed Char's face before being replaced by a smile. "That's good to hear. You look well, but can you get up?"

“Of course.” I nodded. “How long was I asleep for?”

“It hasn’t been a day yet. You went to bed in the early evening, woke up at night, fell asleep again, and it’s now morning. Do you have a fever?” he asked, placing a hand on my forehead to check my temperature.

Another wave of restlessness hit me when his palm made contact with my skin. Not only that, but I was feeling even *more* flustered than usual.

“You’re a little warm. You might actually have a fever.”

“N-No! I don’t!”

I hurriedly sat up, making sure to put as much distance between the two of us as I could.

“S-See? I’m feeling perfectly fine!” I declared.

“If you say so…” he said with a doubtful gaze.

He clearly didn’t believe me. How awkward…

“Anyway, I’m going to get changed, so please go back to your room.”

I slowly got out of bed and moved behind Char, gently pushing him as he stood up. He had woken much later than usual because of me, and I couldn’t keep him from his duties any longer. And above all, I was feeling incredibly awkward.

“Fine, fine,” he said, his expression unchanging as he made his way to the door, but he turned around before opening it.

Since I had still been pushing him from behind, his sudden movement put barely any space between the two of us.

“Wh-What are you…?!”

I immediately tried to back away but didn’t react quickly enough.

Char circled his arms around my waist and pulled me in a tight embrace. I hadn’t been expecting him to do anything of the sort, and my body temperature shot up. This hug was also lasting longer than it had last time.

I completely froze in place, unable to do anything until he finally released me.

“Char, why did you…”

“I felt like it,” he replied, perfectly calm. He was so much more composed than I was!

Why did I always end up feeling so overwhelmed when he did things like this?

“Your face is all red,” he added, a pleased smile curling on his lips.

I couldn’t pick why, but his comment made me feel a tad frustrated. “I-I don’t know what you mean— I’m perfectly fine!” I insisted, wanting to hide my inner turmoil. “I-I-I-I’m going to get dressed now! You should go. If you don’t hurry, you’ll fall behind on your duties, won’t you?”

I was hoping his work would function as a pretext to kick him out of my room.

Char shook his head. “Not really. After what happened with the king and the Faith, I have a feeling we’ll have a lot of free time in the near future.”

“Oh, is that so? Then we’ll need to come up with a new way to get work. Let’s discuss it once I’m done changing.”

“Even your ears are red,” Char remarked, amused.

“Leave me alone!!!”

I pushed at his back and, at last, managed to get him out of my room, closing the door behind him. As I leaned against it, my legs gave way, and I collapsed on the spot.

Why am I only like this in front of him?! And why is he instigating so much physical contact recently?!

No matter how much I pondered the question, I couldn’t come up with an answer. Magic was much easier to understand than whatever was going on with me at the moment.

For a while, I simply sat there, wondering what was wrong with me, but I eventually gave up and got ready for the day.

I should get changed.

With that, I put on one of my casual dresses before heading down the stairs to go to Char’s office. Whenever I was looking for him, chances were he was in there.

Everything’s fine. I’m feeling much more composed now. Just stay calm, Lam. Stay calm. I gave myself this mental pep talk before knocking at his door.

Just as I’d predicted, Char was inside. He let me in, and I went to take a seat on my favorite spot as of recently, the sofa with the ribbon-patterned cushions.

“Your complexion looks fine,” Char said.

“Yes. I don’t look as sickly as I used to thanks to you—”

“You were all red earlier, though.”

I gasped, and my face instantly flashed hot, thinking back on the events of that morning.

"I-I wasn't! That was—"

"You know, it doesn't feel half bad to see I'm having some effect on you."

I stared at Char as he closed the door and walked over to me. I couldn't overlook *that* comment.

"Some effect? You? On me?" I asked.

"You've lived for longer than me, yet you're completely clueless when it comes to these sorts of things, huh?"

"What things?"

Char looked down at me and let out a sigh. "Looks like we still have a long way to go."

He hadn't replied to my question. But I didn't let it bother me and decided to move on to another topic: our prospective move, which I had been thinking about for quite some time now.

With how tense things had become between us and the king and the Cerveau Cathedral's bishop, it might be difficult for Char to keep living as the Earl of Mercure. He'd probably be stripped of his peerage, so I was thinking that we could move somewhere else and work as professional mages.

I had a few ideas for our new home. "What would you think of living on an island in the south? My master took me there once five hundred years ago. It was warm and rather enjoyable. Or we could build a hidden house in the middle of a forest. What do you think? Is there somewhere you'd like to go?"

He hesitated a little before replying, "Somewhere near the ocean."

I hadn't been expecting that response.

"I've only gone there for work before, but I like how calm it makes me feel," he added by way of explanation.

I nodded. "That does sound nice."

"Our house doesn't have many members as of right now, so moving shouldn't be that difficult," he said.

As we discussed our relocation plans, the twins suddenly rushed into the room.

"Lord Char, it's an emergency! Barre just got his hands on some shocking news!" Fouet exclaimed.

"Oh, the madam's here too. Look at you two, getting along so

well this early in the day."

Barre's words made me feel flustered again.

Meanwhile, Fouet's lips curled into a knowing smile. "I see things are progressing in the right direction, Lord Char."

"The madam is much too easy to read. Yet, she's completely oblivious to her own feelings…"

"She was raised by an elfin woman, right? I wonder if that's why she struggles with these sorts of things. Elfins apparently live much different lives than humans, after all."

"So we should assume that the fact that she has stopped passing out every time Lord Char is in the vicinity is progress already?"

The twins were just saying whatever they wanted at this point.

"Oh, right. I almost forgot why we came here in the first place. The Motar Faith's main church has begun poking their noses into the Lèvres Kingdom's affairs. At the rate things were going, it seemed almost certain that the first prince would inherit the throne, but the Faith has begun outwardly backing the king's younger brother."

Char and I exchanged glances. We'd just met with the Holy Father, yet he hadn't mentioned anything about this, not even a hint.

"Do you think Lance knows what the Faith is doing?" I asked.

"He should still be at the Tête royal palace, so he can't be involved. Besides, he doesn't strike me as the type to be interested in foreign politics."

"Good point. He doesn't get involved in things he considers too much of a hassle, so someone else must be behind this."

I was worried about Flèche, for various reasons. He likely wouldn't be harmed by ordinary means, but I was scared he'd destroy the entire city and the Motar Faith's main church in retaliation.

Barre, who had brought us the news, seemed baffled by the situation as well, which was rather unusual for him.

The Faith has apparently been keeping an eye on Lèvres for quite some time now.

The anti-mage movement organized by Chaos was a good example of how they'd been interfering with the kingdom.

"I'm a little worried, so I'd like to go see what's happening in

Lèvres," I said.

"What do you want to do this time—" Char began, but I interrupted him.

"One of my disciples is involved with Lèvres and another is part of the Faith. As their teacher, I can't help but worry. I just want to see what the situation is. If they can resolve it by themselves, I won't get involved."

Besides, there were certain details of Lance's story that weighed on my mind, in particular his relationship with the cardinal who'd helped him prolong his life. Lance had said that man was an elfin, and that he was still alive. But elfins were rare, and one didn't come across them often, especially men, as they tended to be recluses who dedicated their entire lives to magic research.

Could it be someone I know...?

Suddenly, I was reminded of the memories I'd unlocked in my dreams the previous night. I couldn't shake off the feeling that the man who'd forced so many mages to give up on their craft five hundred years ago and the Motar Faith must've been connected in some way.

"Is the cardinal who Lance mentioned Epocha? No, that's impossible, isn't it?"

I still lacked information, but there were many things I wanted to confirm and needed to know.

Char and the twins seemed confused upon hearing the name of someone they didn't recognize.

I should tell them about it.

I didn't know if it was because of my exchange with Char last night, but my heart felt much lighter than it had when I'd woken up from my dream.

I decided to tell them the truth. "I remembered the rest of my past last night, and there's something I want to talk to you about. I think it might have a connection to the Motar Faith. It also concerns my disciples."

To be honest, I didn't want to recall these memories, but I believed the Mercures had a right to know since I kept dragging them into my messes.

"So does that mean you remember how you died?" Barre asked.

"You don't need to share it with us if you don't want to, madam," Fouet assured me.

Just like Char, they were being considerate of my feelings.

“Thank you. But I’m fine.”

I paused to take in a small breath and recounted my dreams to Char and the twins. I told them how I’d followed in my master’s footsteps and become a court mage, about Epocha and how his items had become popular enough to the point of creating an anti-mage sentiment across the entire kingdom. I told them that Epocha’s items actually had dangerous side effects and about the altered mana that would accumulate in the air after their use, leading to explosions and people losing their lives.

I laid bare almost everything I remembered without hiding a single detail.

“In the end, I lost my life protecting the kingdom from an altered mana explosion. Then, Épée and Prince Flèche organized my reincarnation.”

Char, Fouet, and Barre were at a loss for words. As for me, I was a little tired from having spoken so much, but my body didn’t feel particularly bad otherwise. It seemed that I wouldn’t need to go back to bed right away today.

“Anyway, I would like to know if Epocha is still alive.”

It would be bad if he’d begun distributing dangerous items again. Plus, I was determined to rescue the children the Faith was raising to become saints and put an end to the rampant discrimination against mana wielders.

“I also want to have a long discussion with Lance. And I’m worried about Lèvres as well…”

I had a lot on my plate, and it was a little overwhelming, but I refused to simply stand by and do nothing.

“I get it now. I’ll help you. We can think about the move later,” Char said.

Barre suddenly let out an “Ah” as if he’d just remembered something. “I forgot to mention that the Cerveau Cathedral’s bishop was officially fired, and the news has been making quite a stir. Apparently, a cardinal named Rumeur has stepped in to take over his duties for the time being. It seems that the Holy Father has followed through with his threats.”

It sure looked like he had. I had no doubt that he must have told the news to Cardinal Rumeur out of the blue, and that the man was now busy running around trying to get the Cerveau

Cathedral back in shape.

"Oh, and we'll have a new king too. A relative of the current one."

We all fell silent.

Good grief. That boy really went and forced the king and the bishop to step down from their positions.

The kingdom was in complete pandemonium because of it.

"Also, for the past few days, the people have been holding a festival in the streets to celebrate the Holy Father's visit," Barre added. "Things are certainly chaotic, aren't they?"

"A festival…"

If things were different, I would have loved to take a peek at it.

"Are you curious about the festival, Lam?" Char asked me.

"Yes. I've never been to one in this lifetime, after all."

"It's nothing more than a noisy gathering with too many people," he replied.

"A huge waste of time," Barre added.

It seemed that the Mercures weren't big fans of large events.

"Lam and I will go check on Lèvres to see what's happening over there. Fouet, you'll stay here on standby. If anything happens, immediately let us know through magic. As for you, Barre, you're on information-gathering duty."

"All right," Barre said. "But will you and the madam be fine alone?"

"We'll take Canon with us," Char replied.

Barre nodded. "That makes sense. He's been there before, so he's already a bit familiar with the lay of the land."

"I'll send him home if he's useless."

Aw, Char was still saying that sort of thing.

Canon would likely be fine, though. He was becoming stronger and stronger with each passing day. Plus, he was my son—my pride and joy. I knew I could trust him.

I immediately went to his room and told him about the situation in Lèvres. He agreed to come without a moment's hesitation. "I understand, mother. Besides, I've been thinking that I would like to visit Lèvres again."

"Thank you, Canon. It'll be reassuring to have you with us."

And so, just like before, the three of us would be teleporting to Lèvres.

※

Some time had passed since Flèche had returned from Ongle, and he was right in the midst of a battle for the throne. He'd warned his uncle, the king's younger brother, to stop his schemes, and then, with his father's blessing, he had publicly announced that he was the next heir to the throne. In response, his uncle had rallied troops from who-knows-where and launched an assault on the castle. This had all unfolded several days ago.

I froze all his troops, so that problem has been dealt with for now.

However, the current main issue was that the Motar Faith had begun to officially support his uncle. As a result, the people who harbored a dislike for mages were rallying together to try and get the king's brother on the throne, encouraged by the Motar Faith.

Good grief. What is the Faith doing, poking their nose into a nation's affairs? Well, not like they're any threat to me.

The Faith had dispatched holy knights to support his uncle, but it was clear that Flèche still had the upper hand in this succession war.

But, this morning, Flèche felt something was wrong. He received a report that the mages under his command were getting pushed back by the enemy. No ordinary mage should have stood a chance against his men, since Flèche had taught them magic himself. If they were struggling this much, the Faith had to have dispatched reinforcements stronger than the saints to bolster their ranks.

What's happening?

Flèche entrusted the palace to his nearby subordinates and teleported over to the front lines of the conflict. When he arrived, he was met with the sight of the Faith's saints, holy knights, and regular soldiers standing in neat lines, firing spells at his troops. The battle was taking place on a wide, completely bare wasteland with no infrastructure whatsoever. There were a few slightly elevated mounds here and there, but nothing big enough to provide cover.

Looks like even the Faith's regular soldiers can use mana to some extent. That's the Motar Faith from you; they persecute mana wielders but apply double standards when it suits their needs.

Reacting to his wrath, Flèche's ice magic lashed out to assail the

holy knights on the front line.

I failed to control my emotions again… Even though master told me to be more careful.

Alongside the holy knights and soldiers, there were eight saints fighting—the entire collection of them minus the two who had been intercepted in Lèvres before. It seemed that the Faith hadn't found replacements for them yet.

I don't know how strong the first saint is, but the others shouldn't pose too much trouble. The one who came to the palace didn't put up much of a fight, after all.

Flèche decided to simply deal with his opponents one by one, starting with those who would be the most troublesome. But then, he noticed that the normal soldiers at the back had all gone eerily silent.

Who's giving them orders?

Flèche scanned the regiment, but he couldn't identify anyone acting as commander. Just as he reached the conclusion that something was amiss, several carriages loaded with boxes rolled into view on the enemies' side.

What are those?

The boxes were opened, and, one after another, the soldiers all grabbed something from inside them—weapons, perhaps? Using a long-range vision spell, Flèche focused on the items.

They're definitely weapons—swords, by the looks of it. Well, I'm assuming they're just to give the soldiers some peace of mind, since these won't be of much use against mages. But I feel like I've seen weapons with that exact same design somewhere before…

The swords the soldiers were holding were oddly twisted and glowing. They didn't seem practical in the slightest; in fact, their shape was quite unsettling, the kind that'd give people shivers. As Flèche zoomed in on the weapons, a gasp escaped him.

These look just like those corrupted items from five hundred years ago! Flèche realized, the color draining from his face.

He could never forget those wretched things that had taken Aurora's life.

How have these items resurfaced? They caused such a horrific disaster in the past that master had to sacrifice her life to protect the people. We destroyed every last one of them, so…how did the Faith get their hands on more?

Flèche desperately struggled to keep his reason from shattering under the weight of his rage.

Did they learn nothing from what happened back then? Do they intend on using these items again? Did they just forget?

A thin layer of ice spread on the ground around him, his mana leaking from him outside of his control.

I can't believe they'd dare to use those ridiculous items in front of me. I'll smash all of these weapons to pieces until not a single one is left, Flèche resolved, biting his lip.

The soldiers activated their swords in sequence, causing the blades to glow. These weapons worked by firing mana from the tip of the blade. All of a sudden, a voice yelled, "Charge!" and the soldiers began their attack all at once.

Damn it! I have no choice but to wipe them out before they can use the items! Flèche thought in a panic.

Just as he was about to spring into action, something bizarre happened. Black smoke began engulfing the Faith's soldiers, who shrieked in horror. It looked like the spells they'd tried to use had backfired on them.

"What's happening?" Flèche muttered.

The magic items must have malfunctioned. He caught a glimpse of the holy knights caught up in the chaos, but the saints were nowhere to be seen.

Seriously, what's going on? There was too much smoke for him to get a clear view. In a snap decision, he ordered his troops to hold their fire until they could figure out what was going on. He couldn't possibly let them charge headfirst into that mess.

The smoke eventually cleared...but the soldiers were nowhere to be found.

"Huh? What are those?"

He blinked, trying to wrap his head around the unbelievable sight before him. There, in front of him, lay a massive bunch of big, overly shiny golden and silver hedgehogs running around in a panic. If his beloved master were here, Flèche knew she'd probably call them "adorable."

I guess I can just leave them like this...? He thought, staring at the hedgehogs, unsure of what to do. *I should probably gather the weapons and destroy them, just in case.*

He'd barely told his subordinates to grab the magic items lying

on the ground when a strong mana signature appeared behind him. Turning to check, he saw Épée—who he'd just been fighting a few days ago—standing right there, looking excessively proud of himself.

Seeing the smug grin on his fellow disciple's face, Flèche was able to put the pieces together and understand what had happened to the Faith's soldiers, as well as why Épée had come to see him despite their mutual hatred of each other.

"What do you think of my masterpiece?" Épée asked.

"It made for a beautiful sight. So you're the one behind this weird smoke. What are those items in the first place? Why do they still exist in this day and age?" Flèche asked, assuming his fellow disciple might know something.

"The Motar Faith sent me an urgent request recently. They commissioned me to make magic items they could use as weapons."

The items are quite poorly made for something Épée has crafted, though, Flèche thought.

"They wanted me to recreate those damn weapons from five hundred years ago and even sent me blueprints. That pissed me off, so I completely changed how they worked inside but kept the design the same so they'd have no idea," he explained.

"And you chose to add a function to turn the users into hedgehogs..."

"Aurora likes small critters like these, so I figured it'd make her happy. I'm thinking of catching a few and giving them as a present to her."

"I thought the same thing when I saw them."

Just as one would expect from Aurora's disciples, they knew her preferences well.

"I'm going to deal with the bastard who ordered those items from me," Épée said. "I have a feeling I'll find them at the Faith's main church, whoever they are."

"I want to come."

"Aren't you in the middle of a succession war?"

"With the Faith's soldiers out of commission, I only have my uncle to deal with, and my subordinates alone are more than competent enough to take care of that. Besides, I've already laid the groundwork to ascend the throne whenever I choose to. After

all, I want things to be perfect when I welcome Aurora to my kingdom. So first, I need to crush anyone who seems like they might criticize her."

"I've never seen you so meticulous before."

Flèche nodded. "I thought it'd be best to secure my position first so I don't make the same mistakes as in my past life."

Five hundred years ago, Flèche—known then as Glacial—had also been a prince. He had been the son of a king whose primary philosophy was to ignore anything that threatened his comfortable existence, while Flèche himself had been persecuted for possessing an unusually high amount of mana. Needless to say, their relationship had deteriorated to the point of no return. After Aurora had saved him, Flèche had gone to stir up trouble with the royal family a few times, but after that, he'd tried as much as possible never to get involved with them.

That had been a huge mistake. If he had eliminated them all and claimed the throne for himself, perhaps he could have saved Aurora. Flèche often lamented how foolish he had been back then.

Determined not to repeat the same mistakes in this life, he resolved to forge a different path. This time, he would become king and ensure that Aurora would live a happy life, no matter what.

Chapter Five: The Countess’s Final Battle

Having meticulously prepared for our trip, Char, Canon, and I teleported to the Lèvres Kingdom, this time with no carriage or luggage.

We landed in the same backstreet as our previous visit, and I was surprised by how quiet the city was, perhaps because of the current succession crisis.

Canon glanced around before pointing at something in the distance. “Mother, look at the snow cloud over there. It doesn’t usually snow in Lèvres, and even if it did, it wouldn’t be just in one spot like that. It seems strange.”

“You’re right. Let’s go investigate.”

The three of us made our way toward the large snow cloud. I had an inkling that Flèche had something to do with this.

“I can more or less see where it is from here. We’ll take forever walking all the way there, so I’m going to teleport us again,” Char said before doing just that.

Char really is incredible. He’s much better at setting coordinates than I am.

Not only was Char able to replicate any spell on the spot, he could do it for *any* attribute. His potential truly seemed to know no bounds.

“Lam, are you all right?” he asked me.

“Yes. I feel fine today as well.”

Ever since regaining the rest of my memories, I had been collapsing less often.

“I’ll be the one casting spells. Lam, all you have to do is give me instructions. We don’t know whether using magic might have an impact on your health again.”

“You worry too much. But fine, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Before us, troops from the Lèvres Kingdom were in a pitched battle with those from the opposing Motar Faith. Char cast a spell of flight on us so that we could better observe the situation. Thanks to him, neither Canon nor I had to use magic.

The higher altitude had cooler air, and I began shivering. After

noticing, Char draped his coat over my shoulders.

"Thank you." I said.

"I learned how to handle temperatures like this at the schoolhouse. Should we teleport away?"

I shook my head. "I want to find Prince Flèche. The snow is probably his doing."

Based on how cold it was, he couldn't be far.

As my gaze swept over the battlefield below, I noticed crates being brought to the Motar Faith's side, from which soldiers were unpacking strange, twisted swords.

"That design…" I gasped. "Are those corrupted weapons?! Why does the Faith have so many of them?"

My hunch had turned out to be true—and maybe things were even worse than I'd thought.

"Weapons? I've never seen weapons with that design before. Are they some sort of magic item from your past?" Char asked, visibly confused.

Canon fidgeted anxiously.

"In my past life, an elfin man called Epocha circulated similar-looking corrupted items. I saw them in my dreams; they had the same exact design. These must've been produced in the present day, though."

"Wait, so does it mean they're one of those things that produce altered mana or whatever it's called? It'll be bad if the soldiers use them then, right?"

"Yes. We need to stop them, but…"

We were a bit too far from the battlefield.

Perhaps we could make it with a teleportation spell. Let me try to calculate the coordinates…

Back in the day, these items had been handed out to knights and soldiers who lacked the ability to wield mana, as well as to mages who struggled with their craft. However, the widespread use of these items resulted in catastrophic consequences for the kingdom. The altered mana they emitted accumulated over time, leading to disasters across the land and causing health issues to those in the same vicinity.

I don't know how the Faith's soldiers got their hands on these weapons, but I need to stop them! I can't let the people repeat the same mistakes they made five hundred years ago!

But I didn't even have time to move as the soldiers all readied their items in unison.

No! I won't make it in time! I panicked.

Seconds trickled by and...nothing happened. Had the items malfunctioned? They didn't even appear to be producing any altered mana.

I can't feel anything. It seems like the item didn't even alter the soldiers' mana. Perhaps whoever recreated this item didn't do it right. It is a weapon from five hundred years ago, after all.

As I observed the situation from afar, black smoke began spouting out of the items.

What's happening? This doesn't feel like altered mana.

The smoke billowed up, engulfing the soldiers and blotting out the battlefield. We were far enough not to be directly affected, but since our view was obscured, I had no idea what was going on.

"Should I go help extinguish the fire, mother?" Canon asked.

I shook my head. "No, stay here for now. I don't think that smoke is coming from a fire."

It felt more like Dark Magic than Fire Magic to me. I attentively watched over the scene and, soon, the smoke dissipated, revealing a bunch of hedgehogs that were all a little—no, *very* shiny.

"Oh my! I've never seen this breed of hedgehog before!" I exclaimed, covering my mouth with both hands in amazement.

I want to take one home!

"Wait, it obviously has something to do with that smoke from earlier. The soldiers all disappeared," Char pointed out from beside me.

I forced myself to curb my excitement.

"So that item wasn't a weapon but a tool to turn the soldiers into hedgehogs. It looked just like those corrupted items I'm familiar with, so I couldn't help but panic a little."

"But who would think of turning the soldiers into hedgehogs? Surely, the Faith wouldn't have done it to their own troops. There would be no benefit to them," Char replied.

"I assume Prince Flèche must be behind this? He's on bad terms with the Faith, after all. Then again, he's not very good at precise spells like these..." I muttered.

Flèche had so much mana that he tended to struggle with anything that required finesse, and turning people into

hedgehogs seemed far too complex for him. I would more likely expect him to flood the enemy with a wave of Water Magic or freeze them solid.

"Épée's the one who's good with intricate Dark Magic spells. But I can't imagine him helping Flèche for any reason. Well, unless it benefits him too," I mused.

But no matter how much I thought about it, the only person that came to mind when I looked at those shiny golden and silver hedgehogs was my first disciple.

"They're so cute... I want one," I whispered, staring at the lovely, adorable creatures. They were exactly the kind that made my heart flutter.

"You can't, mother," Canon told me sternly. "Please come back to your senses. They're soldiers of the Motar Faith! We can't keep them as pets."

"Canon's right, Lam. These are grown adults, not hedgehogs."

Having been lectured by both my husband and son, I reluctantly gave up on the idea of taking one of the cute hedgehogs for myself.

Speaking of, the hedgehogs were currently darting around in a panic, their hard quills glimmering in the sun. None of them seemed hurt from what I could tell.

I sighed in bliss. "They're so cute. Oh? I think I found Prince Flèche. Épée's with him too."

Char's expression darkened at my words.

"Those two don't get along, so there must be a reason they're together," I added, and we agreed to try approaching them.

On the way, we stumbled upon a shocking scene: Saints and holy knights from the Faith were engaged in a battle against what appeared to be a group of thugs.

Why are they fighting saints? That's dangerous. Hmm? Wait, I've seen these people before...

I recognized some of the thugs as Épée's disciples-slash-employees.

What are they doing in Lèvres?

They should have been in Ongle. All of them were wearing hooded cloaks—the uniform of Épée's company, perhaps?—and were chasing after the people of the Motar Faith.

The people whom I assumed to be saints were panicking and

barking orders at their subordinates.

"Damn it! What's going on here?!" one saint said. "First, we get attacked by ice spells, then our weapons malfunction, and now there are weird, creepy hedgehogs popping up one after the other on our side! Plus, those merchants can use spells only we and the holy knights should know! Let's retreat and ask the cardinal to come up with a new plan!"

The knights under his command replied as best they could while falling back.

"We should have won!" the saint spat. Then he yelled at Épée's men, "I can't believe you bastards made us defective items! Why would a powerful ancient weapon turn into a hedgehog-mass-production tool?!"

The merchants lowered their hoods, roaring with laughter.

"Gya ha ha! Our improved items were a huge success! Everything went according to Master Épée's plan!"

"Those glitzy hedgehogs look so damn cool! Hey, how about we capture a few and sell 'em?"

"You moron! What if they turn back into humans?! Our company's policy is 'Trust above everything else'!"

Épée's men were completely ignoring the saints and chatting among themselves.

"What the hell are you talking about?!" the saint exclaimed, his anger boiling over. "If you've turned against the Faith by selling us defective items, you won't get away with it!"

I began to understand the situation. Épée's company must've been the one that developed the items that had turned the Faith's soldiers into hedgehogs.

I'm assuming he must've purposefully given them dysfunctional items.

Épée would have never made an item like the corrupted ones from five hundred years ago. He likely never had any intention of delivering the weapons the Faith had commissioned from him and had instead crafted this wonderful item that turned its user into an adorable hedgehog. Now, that's my first disciple for you!

The rage of the saints and holy knights was mounting, but Épée's men kept laughing among themselves.

"We're just doin' as Master Épée told us to. We don't really care about the Faith, anyway. Hey, guys, how about we make more

hedgehogs?" one of them said, eyeing the spare magic items in the crates.

"But the boss said we can only make the Faith's people use 'em. Said Lèvres's soldiers are off-limits."

"But the saints and the holy knights are fair game, right?"

"Exactly! Most of them have already turned into hedgehogs, but there are still a few who are human."

"Ha ha! Looks like we found some new prey!"

Chaos broke out once again on the battlefield. I kept a watchful eye on Épée's men as we soared through the sky, but it seemed they were more than capable of handling things on their own. They were quite strong, just as you'd expect of people who learned magic from my first disciple.

"Ha ha ha! Look at 'em turning into hedgehogs one after the other! Saints ain't all that special after all, are they? Master Épée's a thousand times stronger than any of them!"

"A thousand times? More like a million times! Hey, look! The last holy knights are trying to make a run for it."

"Surround them! Surround them!"

Épée's men ruthlessly shoved the magic items into the hands of the saints and holy knights, who struggled to resist but to no avail. They were forced to activate the weapons against their will.

"One more hedgehog! Fire! Gya ha ha!"

On that day, Épée's subordinates turned many of the Faith's people into hedgehogs, until the entire ground was blanketed with small shimmering gold and silver critters. This surreal event would go down in history and be spoken of for generations to come.

"We can leave them to their own devices and keep going," I said, and the three of us left the chaotic scene behind to join my two disciples.

I'm so glad I feel well today. It looks like we're going to have a lot on our plate.

The panic spread to the soldiers of Lèvres, and the battlefield was in a state of complete pandemonium, but my disciples were too wrapped up in their conversation to notice.

"Épée! Prince Flèche!" I called out from above.

That instantly snapped them out of their distraction, their heads whipping around to look at me with breakneck speed.

“Aurora?! What the hell are you doing here? It’s dangerous! Go home!” Épée yelled at me.

“Master! Did you come because you were worried about me? I love you! Marry me!” Flèche exclaimed.

The two of them were the same as usual. Seeing how little they’d changed since our past lives made me feel a little relieved.

I asked Char to lower the three of us in front of my disciples, and he did. We were standing far enough from the hedgehogs that we wouldn’t risk getting dragged into the chaos caused by Épée’s underlings.

“Épée, are you the one who made that item to turn the Faith’s soldiers into hedgehogs?” I asked.

My first disciple, who was probably the one who knew best what was going on here, glanced at the battlefield and nodded. “Yup. I put a little spell of my own into the Faith’s corrupted items.”

“So those weapons are the same as the ones from five hundred years ago. I overheard your employees saying that your company delivered them. Does that mean you tampered with items that belong to the Faith?”

“Exactly. Can you believe those fools dared to commission me to craft corrupted items? They even oh-so-kindly provided me with the blueprints to make them. So obviously, I made a bunch of little changes to them. It was a pretty fun job, and my underlings had a great time too.”

I was glad to hear he had enjoyed the task.

“You’ve always loved magic and item-making, after all,” I mused.

He used to love crafting all sorts of creative items to show off to me.

“I see you brought your husband along again today. Who’s the other one?” Épée asked, gesturing toward Canon.

Char wore his usual surly expression while Canon fidgeted nervously. Right, he’d never met Épée before.

“Please don’t scare my son,” I scolded him.

“Ooh, your adopted kid. Right,” Épée said, nodding in acknowledgment. He’d investigated me before, so he knew I had a son.

“Canon, this is my first disciple, Épée. He has a foul mouth, but he wouldn’t attack a child, so you don’t have to worry.”

My disciple observed Canon with interest. “His main attribute is Water Magic, huh? Looks like he has more potential than stupid Glacial over here.”

Flèche’s brow furrowed at his fellow disciple’s jab, a chill radiating off him.

“No fighting, you two. This isn’t the time,” I chided them. “Let me summarize the situation to see if I understood everything. The Faith is trying to invade Lèvres, and to achieve their goal, they’ve resorted to using copies of a corrupted item from five hundred years ago.”

“Yep, that’s right.” Épée nodded.

I’d always wondered how the Faith were the only ones who had access to knowledge from five hundred years ago. If Lance, the Holy Father, was as uninvolved with them as he claimed to be, then something must be up with that cardinal he mentioned. The name “Epocha” danced in the back of my mind.

“And the Faith commissioned you to make these copies, but you deceived them by delivering weapons that would turn their men into hedgehogs,” I continued.

“Precisely. They’re perfect weapons that don’t produce any altered mana whatsoever. You like ’em, don’t you?”

“Yes! I love hedgehogs!”

Glancing at the battlefield, I saw that there were even more critters than before. Épée’s employees must have continued their shenanigans while we weren’t paying attention, and it seemed like the battle had reached its conclusion. The soldiers from Lèvres had begun retreating, all seemingly very confused by what had gone on.

“Are you all right, Prince Flèche? It seems like your kingdom is in complete chaos,” I said, shifting my gaze to my second disciple.

“Yeah. We’re done here, and I trust that my subordinates have dealt with the intruders in the castle. All I need to do now is—” He stopped midsentence.

A new mana signature had suddenly appeared in the air, unnaturally powerful. Upon noticing it, my two disciples immediately went to help their men evacuate.

“Char, I want to get the hedgehogs to safety,” I told my husband.

“Fine,” he replied with reluctance.

“Thank you!”

Using a new wind spell he’d just learned, he lifted the hedgehogs off the ground and carried them to safety. As for Canon, he was staring fixedly in the direction the mana signature seemed to be coming from.

“That mana signature is his, isn’t it?” Char asked with a frown, his gaze shifting toward the source of the energy.

Each individual’s mana tended to exhibit unique characteristics based on their personality and preferred attribute. Char’s, for instance, felt stiff and crystal clear, while Canon’s was soft and tranquil. According to my master, mine was fuzzy and elusive, giving the impression of spreading around freely.

But the one that had just appeared, while steady, didn’t have any quirks; it was completely blank.

“You’re right, Char. I think it is.”

The lack of distinctive features was proof that it belonged to Lance, my third disciple, who specialized in attributeless magic.

Attributeless magic was typically produced by magical items and was unreproducible by humans. But Lance was an exception, having been born with the rare ability to wield it himself. As such, his mana signature felt like no other’s.

He then learned how to use attributes when he became my disciple.

Though, that didn’t change the fact that attributeless magic was his preferred type.

He’d used his magic during the party at the royal palace, so Char had been able to recognize his mana signature.

A few moments later, two figures appeared on the side where the Motar Faith’s soldiers had been. As expected, one of them was my third disciple.

“Lance… It really is you,” I muttered, watching him from afar.

He must’ve teleported over from the Tête Kingdom. Clad in his Holy Father robes, he stood firmly on the ground of Lèvres, exuding more mana than I’d ever felt from him before.

Upon hearing me utter his name, my other two disciples’ eyes shot wide open. They’d thought that Lance was long dead, just as I had until a few days ago. The only ones who knew that he’d extended his lifespan to live to this day, and that he was the Holy Father of the Motar Faith, were Char and me.

“Has Lance reincarnated as well?” Flèche asked.

I shook my head. “No, he hasn’t.”

Épée frowned, seemingly having put the pieces together. “So he managed to extend his lifespan? Those spells are complicated. He couldn’t even use regular magic five hundred years ago.”

Lance marched forward one step at a time, looking around at his surroundings, but it was just him and the other person who’d teleported alongside him. All of the Motar Faith’s soldiers, saints, and holy knights had been turned into hedgehogs. He stood still for a moment before suddenly raising his head, as if he’d noticed us.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Canon, Char, and I advanced toward Lance to discuss with him the current situation between the Motar Faith and Lèvres, and my two disciples followed closely behind. Seeing our approach, Lance flew over to meet us.

And so, for the first time in this lifetime, I was reunited with all three of my disciples at once. The situation might not have been ideal, but a smile naturally crept onto my face as a wave of nostalgia washed over me.

My disciples were like my children; they were incredibly dear to me. I was so, *so* glad I was able to see them again in this life.

Lance briefly glanced at Épée and Flèche before shifting his gaze to me. “What brings you here, teacher? With your husband and…your son, I assume?”

Char and Canon eyed him with vigilance.

“Hello, Lord Mercure. Long time no see,” Lance cheerfully greeted Char.

“Weren’t you supposed to step down from your position as Holy Father?” Char replied coolly. “Why are you still wearing those robes?”

“Unfortunately, I have a mountain of things to take care of before I can resign. It’s a hassle. Besides, I wanted to come pester Glacial a little. I’m not happy that he invited teacher to his kingdom without telling me and that he popularized all that merch of her. It’s unfair.”

“Lance, this goes beyond ‘pestering,’” I chided him.

He apologized meekly.

“On a different note, did you really force the king and bishop of the Tête Kingdom to abdicate?”

“Yes. They were rude to you. I couldn’t let that slide,” Lance replied. He was just as calm and composed as the last time I saw him, but there was a subtle darkness in his expression.

I hoped he was fine. The main difference between our last meeting and now was that Épée and Flèche were here, and that there was another member of the Faith not too far away.

“Lance? You’re acting a bit strange compared to last time, so I’m a little worried. Did something happen?” I asked.

“Nothing at all. You’re imagining things, teacher.”

I didn’t believe him.

I was also a bit concerned about the glares he was throwing at my other two disciples—sharp, full of animosity, and nothing at all like how he looked at Char and Canon.

Plus, he mentioned wanting to “pester” Flèche… I’m more and more concerned about what’s happening here.

Épée and Flèche were glaring at him as well, looking like they had something to say, perhaps about the fact that he’d appeared on the Motar Faith’s side—and that he was dressed as the Holy Father, no less. They didn’t know about the kind of life he’d lived up until now.

“Why the hell are you wearing those robes? Did you convert to the Motar Faith?” Épée asked, his stare intensifying.

“If this is meant to be a joke, it’s in very poor taste. You’ll make master sad, dressing like this,” Flèche added.

A small smile curled on Lance’s lips at their words. It was a harsh, dark smile that seemed to carry despair, resentment, and anger yet also held a hint of resignation. I had never seen him make such an expression before.

“I don’t care about the Motar Faith whatsoever. They’re just a convenient organization that provided me with food and shelter up until now. Plus, one of their members taught me how to extend my lifespan.”

The Faith wasn’t just a “convenient organization,” no matter how one looked at it. But to Lance, it truly was what they were. Due to his upbringing, Lance had a tendency to classify things in a very straightforward manner.

“Teacher, there’s something important I want to discuss with my fellow disciples. Could you please take your husband and son and give us a moment?”

“You don’t want me there?” I asked, finding it odd.

“I’m sorry,” Lance replied with a smile.

“Fine. But please play nice.”

With that, Char, Canon, and I put some distance between them and us. All three of my disciples were eyeing each other with displeasure, but it didn’t seem like they were about to fight—at least not yet.

“Lam, stop making that face. They’re adults. Surely they can handle a conversation,” Char said, noticing my anxious gaze fixed on my disciples.

“They’ll always be children to me,” I protested.

“Their feelings will never get reciprocated, huh?” I heard Canon mutter beside me.

As I pondered the meaning of his words, Char suddenly moved. Glancing up at him, I noticed that he was looking in the distance, a cautious expression on his face. “There was one more member of the Motar Faith who came with your disciple, wasn’t there?”

I suddenly remembered the figure that had appeared alongside Lance.

“We’re a bit too far to see his face. Unlike Lance, we can’t rely on his mana signature to identify him,” I said.

The man was fiddling with an enormous closed box that hadn’t been there before, doggedly trying to open it.

Can he not use magic? I wondered. That meant that he probably wasn’t a saint or a holy knight.

He eventually opened the crate, and the second I saw what was inside, I instinctively fired some Light Magic at it. Char and Canon stared at me, utterly dumbfounded, and even I was taken aback by how quickly my reflexes had kicked in. My disciples all turned toward us at once, seemingly shocked by what I’d just done as well.

I returned to my senses with a start and looked at them. “I’m so sorry, I must have scared you. Even I’m shocked by what I just did.”

“I know you wouldn’t use magic without a reason, Lam,” Char said, reaching out a hand and trying to help me calm down in his own way. He was the only one who had regained his composure already. “What were those things you just destroyed?” he added.

I collected myself and explained, “That box contained items similar to the weapons the Faith’s soldiers were using—corrupted

artifacts from five hundred years ago. They were a different kind, but they work in the same way and have the same side effects. It doesn't seem like Épée's men brought them here, so I'm assuming that man over there must have."

It appeared that the Faith had brought real corrupted items this time, the kind that produced altered mana. The man who'd teleported here alongside Lance opened another crate. This one was filled with another kind of corrupted item, another weapon that allowed the user to use powerful offensive spells regardless of their magical abilities.

"Mother, should I attack those items?" Canon asked.

I nodded. "If you can—but don't push yourself too hard."

"Please leave it to me," he replied before instantly freezing all the crates, his eyes sparkling with determination.

"You've become very good at distributing your mana, Canon. You froze them to perfection."

My praise delighted him. How adorable. However, his next words were a little less endearing. "Should I freeze that man as well? He seems to be a bad person, based on what you were saying."

"Hmm… I'd like you to, but not yet. Wait a minute."

The man from the Faith turned to Lance and said something, interrupting his conversation with Épée and Flèche.

"What a hassle," Lance said, pausing his discussion to teleport back to the man.

There were no other members of the Faith around. The hedgehogs began darting around, as if to beg Lance and the man for their help. Perhaps they assumed they could return them to their original appearances with magic.

"Char, Canon, I want to listen to their conversation, so let's get closer," I said.

"Sure. I'll fly us over," Char replied, doing just that as Flèche and Épée followed us.

Lance glanced down at the hedgehogs, a look of annoyance etched on his features. The little critters were seemingly imploring him for aid, but his eyes were cold and completely devoid of emotion. It seemed that my little lecture from last time hadn't worked on him.

"What are you looking at me so expectantly for? I'm not all-

powerful; I can't undo those annoying spells my fellow disciple likes to come up with. You are all delusional. When will you realize that the Motar Faith is a complete fabrication crafted by that cardinal over there, including 'Lord Motar,' your supposed god? Poor fools, clinging to that lie as if your lives depend on it," he declared coldly and without sugarcoating his words.

The hedgehogs all looked like they had received a huge shock.

Aw, I'm starting to feel bad for them. I'll restore the appearance of those who seem to be sorry for their actions, I decided.

Then again, even if I returned them to their human forms, I wasn't sure they'd have anywhere to go. The teachings of the Motar Faith must've been deeply ingrained within them, and it would take a long time from them to completely break free.

As I watched over the hedgehogs, feeling conflicted, the man beside Lance suddenly pointed at us.

"Lance! Hurry and kill them! They're mages from this era. You're stronger than them, are you not?" he exclaimed in a raspy voice that echoed through my head.

I had heard that voice before. Right as that thought hit me, a gust of wind swept through the area, blowing back the man's hood, revealing a nervous-looking man with glasses and pale hair.

A gasp escaped me. "Th-That's...!"

I instantly recognized him. Five hundred years had passed since the last time I'd seen him, but he looked almost exactly the same as he had back then.

"Epocha..."

The man looked at me, an expression of surprise crossing his face. Did he remember me?

"My, my, you look awfully familiar. Where do I know you from?" he asked, staring at me with a blank gaze.

"It's only natural you wouldn't remember me. It's been five hundred years, after all," I replied.

We'd crossed paths back then, but it wasn't like we'd been close. That he didn't recognize me right away wasn't all that surprising. After all, elfin folk were pretty much indifferent to anything that didn't revolve around magic.

My master had a knack for forgetting anything I said that didn't pique her interest, no matter how many times I repeated myself.

A chilling aura began radiating from Épée and Flèche in

reaction to Epocha's lack of recognition.

The cardinal must've found my response curious, as he cast a puzzled look at Lance, silently requesting an explanation. Lance stared back at him, his usual calm smile plastered on his face. "I have achieved my objective, so I am hereby ending my agreement with you. I won't listen to your commands any longer."

Epocha appeared slightly shaken by his response.

Wanting to know what else Lance was about to say, I listened carefully to his next words.

"You have taught me how to extend my lifespan so that I could reach my goal: to find the person I love most in the entire world. In exchange, I have ensured your safety. But, after five hundred years, I have finally found my teacher again, so I no longer need to remain the Holy Father or protect you," my disciple continued, his tone calm and steady.

Epocha regarded him with suspicion. "Are you claiming that woman is *the* Aurora?" he asked, glancing at me skeptically, as if he didn't believe I was.

"Yes, she is. Epocha, thank you for your hard work until now," Lance said, flashing him a bright smile.

Their exchange had left me slightly confused.

"Wait. You can't just spring that on me like that. Besides, that woman must be lying. Reincarnation magic is impossible unless one pays a heavy price," Epocha urged.

Most people would never even attempt to perform it.

However, if the spell existed, there was a way to execute it. Some even allowed the caster to make up for the mana and technique they lacked by offering a sacrifice. These types of spells were large-scale ones that mages would use maybe once in their lifetime. In fact, they were usually so difficult that most couldn't even attempt them. Personally, I'd never used any.

Yet, Épée's spell had miraculously succeeded—although it had required both a ton of Flèche's mana, along with the lives of both Épée and me in exchange.

That had been the scene in my dreams that had caused me the biggest shock: I'd seen my first disciple slit his own throat in front of my eyes. Flèche following him into death afterward had further reinforced the spell. Due to this coincidental combination of unplanned contributions, all three of us had been able to safely

reincarnate—something completely extraordinary.

“What a heartless man you are, Epocha. You easily agreed to my conditions because you thought that reincarnation magic was a myth and that teacher would never return. Oh well. Anyway, I’ve upheld my part of the contract,” Lance said, his expression colder than I had ever seen. “You taught me useful spells—especially the one to prolong my life—which allowed me to live until now. In exchange, you asked me to protect the Faith and act as your bodyguard no matter what happened. Our contract stated that it would conclude once I found teacher, and I have done just that. Therefore, our agreement has been fulfilled.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a shimmering contract appeared in thin air before shattering into pieces on the spot.

“Was that a magic contract?” I asked, staring at the pair in shock.

Magic contracts used to be quite common in my past life. They were a special type of magic item that bound each party to their promise by absorbing some of their mana. The penalty for failing to uphold one’s end of the agreement was horrifying: The transgressor would find themselves on the receiving end of a powerful magic attack and, in the worst-case scenario, even lose their life. It seemed that they must have fallen out of use when discrimination against mages became more widespread, as there was no trace of them ever having existed in the modern world.

So this was why Lance had remained the Holy Father of the Motar Faith all this time.

“W-Wait!” Epocha exclaimed, audible panic in his voice. He clearly hadn’t been expecting this turn of events.

“By the way, I’ve always despised you. You’ve caused nothing but harm and sorrow to teacher. I’ve used you for my own gains, but I believe it would now be for the better if you disappeared for good. Goodbye.” A cheerful smile on his lips, Lance fired a merciless lightning spell at Epocha.

Back in the day, he had been terrible at attribute magic and had only ever used the weakest, easiest spells he could get away with. But now, he was able to wield all attributes with no trouble whatsoever.

Lance and Epocha had spent the past five hundred years

together, yet he hadn't hesitated to use his magic against him... I stared at the scene, unable to believe what my disciple had just done.

"Phew. I've erased that insignificant insect," he said matter-of-factly, leisurely rotating his arms and cracking his neck.

Then, turning to Épée and Flèche, he prepared to cast another offensive spell—this time, at them.

I was so shocked by his behavior that all I could do was stare at him in horror.

"As I said earlier, I am angry at you both. What you did was so unfair!" he said.

It seemed that my other two disciples had no intention of letting Lance talk to them like this.

"'Unfair'? In what way? We didn't let you help us reincarnate Aurora because you were useless back then. That's all there is to it. Stop acting like a brat," Épée said.

Flèche nodded. "Exactly. You couldn't even use half of the most basic spells at the time. We couldn't let someone with subpar magic like you get involved in the process."

They took a stance, ready to attack, clearly wanting to accept Lance's challenge.

"Stop it, you three!" I scolded them, just like I used to back when they'd been my disciples.

To my shock, Lance refused to obey.

"Don't try to stop me, teacher. I haven't been able to calm my anger since that day you collapsed five hundred years ago. I hate Épée and Flèche for leaving me behind, I hate this world that was built on your sacrifice, and I hate the people of the Motar Faith for forgetting what you did for them and being ready to repeat the same mistakes. I don't believe anyone who has been deceived by their words and has oppressed mages deserves any protection. But above all, I hate myself for having been so powerless."

Seeing him on the verge of tears left me speechless. I couldn't bring myself to lecture him, the guilt of having left him alone for five hundred years weighing heavily on me.

Taking advantage of my hesitation, Lance fired a Light Magic spell at my other two disciples, but they were easily able to dodge it.

"Teacher. Five hundred years is a really, really long time, you

know? It makes you lose your mind."

I had no response to that. He'd kept his feelings concealed when he'd visited us at the mansion, but as I'd thought, there was no way he hadn't been affected.

"I couldn't stay the same as I used to be back then. I was so happy to see you again, but I'm still sad and angry. I feel like I don't understand myself anymore," he continued, noticeably troubled.

His words sounded to me like a cry for help.

I want to help him. But how?

Walking up to him, I laid a hand on his head, which was hanging low. "Lance, I'm sorry for leaving you all alone."

If I hadn't collapsed back then, Épée and Flèche wouldn't have had to die. Lance wouldn't have ended all alone. Perhaps the Motar Faith wouldn't even have been founded.

I should've done something earlier.

If I had, perhaps the future would have been different.

Tormented by regrets, I felt as if I had been plunged into darkness. But then, I felt the warmth of a hand on my shoulder. Looking up, I found that Char had come to stand by me, a scowl on his face. Whenever I found myself hurting, he was always right next to me, silently offering his support. And every time I witnessed his kind gestures, no matter how difficult to understand and clumsy they were, I always felt a little more reassured.

"I can pretty much imagine what's going through your head right now. Stop taking responsibility for everything. There's a limit to what a single mage can do alone, and exceeding that limit won't result in anything good. You did everything you could back when you were Aurora, didn't you?"

He was right. Back then, I had been so busy putting my life on the line to protect the people, my disciples, and the kingdom, that I barely had time to think of anything else.

"Your disciples did their best to support you in their own way. That's how you got reunited with all three of them. It's quite the miracle, when you think about it. Personally, I think it's much better than if you had never seen them again."

Having been raised at the Mercures' schoolhouse, Char had grown up surrounded by death. As such, his way of thinking regarding these things was rather simplistic. Yet, despite how

plain his reasoning was, it rescued me from my spiral of despair.

Wait. I'm not the one who needs saving right now. I need to reassure Lance!

My third disciple was looking at me with pleading eyes. "Teacher. I should be strong enough to be of use to you now. Humankind forgot about your sacrifice; that's why they started persecuting mages. So I've decided we'll abandon them to their fate and go live somewhere quiet together," he said.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"I found a hidden elfin village. You'll be able to research magic to your heart's content over there. Don't worry: I'll eliminate anything and anyone who causes you trouble. Oh, and the Mercures can come as well. Not only are you all victims of those selfish people's whims as well, but you're teacher's precious family, after all."

"Lance, you can't just make decisions for me like that," I said.

We clearly weren't on the same wavelength, and it was starting to make me panic. Anxiety was gnawing at me: It felt like no matter what I said, my words would no longer reach him. Five hundred years had passed since he'd been my disciple, after all.

"I'm sorry. But I'm not actually asking for your opinion on the matter. I don't need you to save me anymore." Another dark smile curled on his lips, his regular smile seemingly swallowed by it forever.

I grew even more nervous.

"Having been raised in that research facility, I never knew what I *wanted* to do. I never strongly wished for anything. But when I lost you, I finally realized what my dream had been all along: to live a nice, peaceful life with you. The simplicity of it is quite shocking, right?" he said, staring at me as if enraptured.

The moment the words left his mouth, I felt altered mana course through my body, and I collapsed, my legs giving out under me.

"Lam!" Char exclaimed, catching me before my face could hit the ground.

I couldn't move. Even speaking took effort.

"I've got you. Don't push yourself too hard," Char said, crouching down and peering at my face. "But you don't look unwell. So it must mean…"

“Yes. It’s likely just what you think,” I replied.

Looking to the side, I saw that Épée and Flèche were in similar states, kneeling on the ground, powerless.

The same thing happened to all three of us at the same time, so it’s likely magic is at play here.

I glanced at the assumed perpetrator—Lance.

“Wow, it worked. I’m not good at complicated spells, so I was a bit worried, but it turned out exactly as I hoped,” he said.

“What did…you do? That wasn’t an offensive spell, was it?” I asked.

“I’ve figured out the weakness of reincarnation magic. Those spells are built on a very delicate balance, which explains why only perfectionist freaks like Épée can successfully perform them. But that balance can be temporarily thrown off when exposed to attributeless magic. I’m glad I found this solution. It would have pained me to use an offensive spell against you,” Lance said with a smile. “This method is very efficient against reincarnated people, since the influence of reincarnation magic remains strong within them. The cardinal I just killed taught me that once.”

Despite the situation, my disciple was all smiles.

“I can see you didn’t know that, teacher. I’m happy I knew something you didn’t for once. Living for so long isn’t so bad after all.”

I immediately began thinking of a way to get myself out of this predicament using the hints he’d accidentally monologued.

“So fixing the balance you disturbed would correct everything, right?” I asked.

“In theory, yes. But what can you do in your current state? Your body’s equilibrium is completely off and even your mana is unstable.”

He was right: I probably couldn’t do anything, at least not right now. The only other person who might’ve had a solution, Epocha—the one who’d taught this to Lance in the first place—had been killed by that lightning attack earlier. I had no choice but to find a solution and execute it myself.

“Lam, can you tell me what to do?” Char asked from my side, propping me up.

I slowly glanced at him.

“I don’t understand what your disciple did to you. But I’m sure

you must know how to fix your body's equilibrium, or whatever it is, right? I'll do it in your stead," he assured me.

"Char…"

"I refuse to let things go his way. Canon, use a communication spell to call the twins. I don't love the idea of leaving the mansion defenseless, but we need as many people as possible here."

"Yes, father!" Canon nodded, immediately doing as he'd been told.

"In the meantime, I'll help speed up Lam's recovery," Char explained.

Even I had never experienced fixing a tear in a reincarnation spell. It sounded incredibly difficult, yet Char clearly planned on doing it all by himself.

Despite that he'd announced his intentions loud and clear, Lance made no move to stop him. He must've thought there was no point because Char wouldn't succeed on his own. I could see why: Most mages in this day and age were seriously lacking in magical knowledge and weren't able to counter many spells, after all.

But I've been teaching Char magic these past few months. Even if Lance has heard about the Mercures, everything the public knows is most likely from before I regained my memories. Besides, it would take years for a mage who just started learning proper magic to become skilled enough to fix a reincarnation spell. That's why Lance doesn't see Char as a threat.

If it had been any other mage, he would've been right—but this was Char we were talking about.

Lance had his back turned, checking if his spell had worked on my other two disciples. It was now or never. I had faith in Char's abilities.

"Char, can you feel the flow of mana in my body?" I asked.

"I can. I think I can identify which part is influenced by the reincarnation spell too—it doesn't flow in the same way. But it's odd. I've checked my mana and the twins' before to see what they're like, but yours is completely different in its construction, almost like it's not that of a regular human."

"A side effect of having been reincarnated, I'd assume. Still, I can't believe you noticed all that in a split second. You truly are gifted," I said, impressed. "There must be a tear in the section of

my mana that has been influenced by the reincarnation spell. Lance specializes in attributeless magic, which is notoriously good for tampering with people's mana, so we might struggle to find the rip. I'll help you."

"Sure, but don't overdo it. We can't have you damaging your body even more."

Char's words felt heartening. Despite having been born in this age of mediocre magic, he always managed to perform stronger spells than I imagined him capable of and had saved me countless times in the past.

He's always helping me, so I've grown to trust him.

"Thank you, Char," I said, watching him as he diligently inspected my mana. "When I'm with you, I always feel like things will be all right in the end."

My words caught him by surprise, and he blinked at me repeatedly.

After a few seconds, he eventually nodded, a tender expression on his face. "Yeah. Everything will be just fine," he said as if to reassure me.

Oh my. Someone's a little less grumpy than usual today.

A moment later, the twins teleported over, and Canon began explaining the situation to them.

Canon has become a lot more reliable as well.

I couldn't help but feel impressed by how much the Mercures had grown.

I'll be able to help Épée and Prince Flèche once I can move.

While whatever Lance had done to us wasn't painful, I imagined they must feel frustrated not being able to move their bodies. I could see that they were surrounded by their own subordinates, and I was glad to see their people held them in high esteem.

I focused my attention back onto my mana.

"I found it," Char said.

Barely any time had passed since we'd started looking for the tear in my mana, yet he'd just located it.

"Huh? Already?" I asked, dumbfounded.

The work had been halved, since both of us had been focused on the task at hand, but I couldn't believe he'd found it so quickly.

"I just have to restore this part, right?" he asked.

"Yes. Try to picture closing the tear by filling it with more mana.

I'm really sorry, but my control is all over the place right now, so you'll have to do most of the work."

"I'll do my best. It feels like it'll be faster for me to do it than if you were to fix it yourself."

He held me in his arms so that he could focus on repairing the rip more easily and began channeling mana into the damaged area. Having his mana in such close proximity made me feel a little fidgety, even though it absolutely wasn't the time for it.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"No. It's just that I can feel your mana inside me."

I could sense him gently fixing the equilibrium of the reincarnation spell.

"Mother!" Canon exclaimed all of a sudden, interrupting his explanation to the twins.

Lance had returned. The Mercures immediately surrounded me as if to protect me from him, seething with anger.

"I'm sorry for the wait, teacher. I'm feeling a lot better after pestering the other two. Should we leave soon?"

The tear in my mana wasn't entirely fixed yet. It'd still take some more time for it to be back to normal, so Char couldn't stop right now. Then again, I didn't think the Mercures stood a chance against Lance, no matter how strong they'd become. He had five hundred years of experience, after all.

They probably would have managed against the old him, though. He used to struggle a lot with magic.

I was trying to think of a way to stop Lance when all of a sudden, a strange creaking sound reached my ears, and everyone turned in the direction it came from.

"Epocha!"

Since I was unable to see what was happening from my spot on the floor, Lance's cry alerted me to the news that Epocha was alive.

I had heard that unpleasant creaking sound before: It was the noise made when Epocha's corrupted items activated.

Based on that sound, it seems like he's about to unleash an offensive spell—and a big one at that. I can't believe he was still hiding more items.

As I sat there, trying to make sense of the situation, the sound grew louder and louder. Turning around, I managed to catch a glimpse of Epocha through a gap between two of the Mercures.

He had removed the outer layer of his clothes, and I saw that he had one large magic item covering his entire body.

Is that how he survived Lance's attack? I've never seen this item before. I can feel nasty mana coming out of it.

It felt the same as the twisted mana produced by those items that had almost destroyed the Ventre Kingdom.

It feels very potent too. A single spell using that item would create an enormous quantity of altered mana. In the worst-case scenario, this entire area could be obliterated by the shock wave of the attack and its side effects.

Things were not looking good.

It seemed that Epocha's item hadn't been able to fully protect him from Lance's attack, as he had visibly suffered some damage. He staggered back to his feet, his expression devoid of vitality, just like a zombified monster.

"I have no intention of rotting away here," he said, a sinister determination emanating from him. His eyes were bloodshot, and I could tell he wasn't in his right mind. "I have finally created the world of my ideals, so I refuse to die now! You damn mages, always looking down on me just because you can use a bit of magic..."

Activating the weapon strapped to his body, Epocha slowly made his way to us.

"I've sunk the standing of you meddlesome mages, hunted you down until most of you were dead, and erased any traces of utilitarian spells, medicine, and items so that only those of the Motar Faith knew of them. I turned mages into nothing more than useful tools for our convenience. If things had gone to plan, I would have kept becoming more and more powerful and eradicated all mages but...! My efforts weren't enough!"

"What are you saying?" I asked.

Epocha's ego was the real reason mages were oppressed. Perhaps he'd always felt inferior to us for not being able to use magic. His actions could be summed up in one word: egotistical.

"All I wanted was to create a world where those who can't use magic could live comfortably! A world that is kind to those without mana!" he continued.

Well, that sure *sounded* nice. It was the exact claim that had seduced people five hundred years ago. But that didn't work on

me anymore.

Because of him, our kingdom back then turned into the furthest thing from a "kind" world.

Seeing Epocha right now, I could confirm without a hint of doubt that he hadn't created those items to help people. Not only that, but he hadn't learned from any of his past mistakes. Despite his assertions that he just wanted to help, he couldn't care less about what happened to people because of his items.

Perhaps, he had truly held those ideals once. But now, all I could sense from him was an insufferable ego and a need for approval. He was just a man who hated mages and felt inferior to us, nothing more.

I understood that people who couldn't use magic must be dealing with their own share of struggles. However, if they used Epocha's items, the world would face yet another calamity like the one from five hundred years ago.

I have to stop him.

Epocha was about to attack us with his new corrupted item. My body still wasn't in the best condition, and I still couldn't get up, but I had to do *something*.

Everything will be fine. I managed to protect the world from that enormous explosion five hundred years ago. He only has one item now, so things should be more manageable…right?

Then again, I didn't know how much power his new item held. He must have been working on it these past five hundred years.

"Lance, undo the spell on Épée and Flèche, now!" I ordered my third disciple.

He hesitated. "While casting it on someone is almost instantaneous, removing it will take time. I'm not as clever as the other two, after all," he said, looking frustrated despite being the one who had caused this mess in the first place.

Épée and Prince Flèche won't be able to move right away then…

Too bad. Their fighting power would've been useful.

I could ask Char to help them, but they'd hate it. I don't want them attacking him while he frees them.

That meant my best option was to ask Lance for his help.

"Lance, we're stopping him. I'll be up soon," I assured him.

"But, teacher, my attributeless magic is the same as the one produced by magic items, and that's what Epocha's using right

now," my disciple said.

"Which means it won't be very efficient."

"Yes. It'll just cancel his attacks. I will try using attributes, but my spells won't be as powerful."

"Don't put yourself in danger, all right? If things get dangerous, don't hesitate to fall back," I told him.

Then, I slowly tried putting some strength in my hands. Seeing that I could now move my upper body, I looked in turn at Char, the twins, and Canon. There was something I absolutely needed to tell them right now.

"I'm so sorry for having dragged you into this. You shouldn't have had to get caught up in something so dangerous."

While I couldn't have anticipated what was happening here, I had still involved the Mercures even though it had nothing to do with them. They were victims of my bad decision-making. Besides, the only reason their house was struggling in the first place was a consequence of the events of five hundred years ago.

I had failed to avoid that tragedy before, so the responsibility of dealing with Epocha fell on me and my disciples, as we'd been alive back then. All I'd accomplished at the time was temporarily saving my fellow countrymen, but I hadn't fixed the root cause of the issue. Because of that, many mages and mana wielders ended up being treated unfairly, and it would require both time and effort to fix the way things had become.

"This time, I need to stop things before they escalate too much," I said.

Char had just finished fixing the tear in my mana, and I felt power coursing through my unstable body. I could now move everything above my knees.

"Lam, I told you to stop trying to do everything on your own. A single person can't fix all the world's problems—that sort of thing only happens in fairy tales. Besides, it's not like what's happening right now has nothing to do with us. We are alive and breathing, after all," Char said, looking at me with a somewhat surly expression as he propped me up. "Do you still not think I can help?"

I understood what he was trying to get at but didn't know how to reply.

"Am I still that unreliable in your eyes? No, forget that. The truth

is, I probably am."

"I don't think you're unreliable."

Char had saved me countless times already. Even now, he was the one who'd fixed the tear in my mana. Yet, for some reason, I hated the thought of putting him in danger. I didn't want him to get hurt because of something I'd been involved in five hundred years ago.

"Your mana is about eighty percent fixed now, but you shouldn't push yourself too much. I'll take care of everything you can't handle. A husband's duty is to protect his wife, after all."

"You don't need to bring up our marital status right now," I pointed out. "You've already helped me more than enough so far. I'm incredibly thankful, but you don't have to keep putting yourself in danger for me."

"We're your family—you can rely on us. When will you stop treating us like we need to be protected?" he asked, staring me in the eye.

"When? Well, never, that's the whole point. It's exactly because you're my precious family that I don't want to drag you into my messes. Why won't you understand that?!" I replied, raising my voice. "It's my duty to stop Epocha. It's because of my mistakes that things turned out the way they did. This time, I fully intend on seeing it through, even if it costs me my lif—"

Before I could finish my sentence, something cold pressed against my lips, blocking both my vision and my thoughts in a split second. All I did could stare ahead of me, my brain unable to process the situation.

Wh-Wha...? What's going on?!

It took me a long time to fully understand what Char had done.

I... He...

He had stolen a kiss from me, and I'd let him do as he pleased. Perhaps encouraged by my lack of resistance, Char tilted his head and deepened the kiss. My head felt fuzzy, and my heart thudded loudly in my ears.



I began running out of breath and instinctively pounded on Char's chest to make him stop. At last, he released my lips. I was met with the sight of the twins and Canon staring at us.

How embarrassing…

"Char… You…" I muttered, looking down and using my hands to cover my ears, which were undoubtedly bright red. "What in the world did you just do? And at a time like this?! You've been taking way too many liberties recently," I protested.

But Char seemed completely unfazed by my reaction, wearing a defiant expression.

He keeps initiating sudden physical contact recently, and I can't understand why.

Worse than that, though, was the fact that I didn't dislike any of it.

What's happening to me?

My emotions were all over the place. Meanwhile, Char leisurely shifted his hold on my body to support me again.

"I'm fine. I can walk on my own," I assured him.

Leaning on him, I rose to my feet. Char made sure that my body was steady before looking me in the eye, appearing even grumpier than usual. It seemed that he wanted to say something.

"Lam, stop making it sound like you're about to go to your death. It's unpleasant. I have no intention of losing you."

Finding myself on the receiving end of his quiet anger and serious expression, I felt guilty about my earlier statement. I couldn't argue that I wasn't willing to risk my life, because it would be a lie. But this was just how dangerous going to stop Epocha truly was.

"I just meant that I'd protect you and the others no matter what, but…" I muttered unintelligibly, scrambling for excuses.

"We don't need you to do that. Canon, the twins, and I can take care of ourselves. You just need to make sure *you're* safe," Char told me sternly, his attitude unwavering despite the situation.

Somehow, that reassured me—even though I knew I shouldn't be relying on him.

"Are you *sure* you can walk?" he asked me.

"Yes, I'm fine. My body is almost entirely back to normal, thanks to you."

Char, who was still propping me up, his arms wrapped around

me like in an embrace, seemed worried, but I could move just fine. I just felt a little lightheaded. Considering how weak my body was in this life, I really wasn't doing too badly right now.

"That man and the Motar Faith might be connected to your previous life, but we're affected by them as well. I have no mind to simply watch you fight him from the sidelines. We're all here to help you—we *want* to help you," Char said.

I felt the warmth of his body against my back, and I blinked once. My heart fluttered in my chest.

I can't believe the Mercures care so much about an inexperienced countess like me. I don't want them to get in harm's way, but…

In all truthfulness, I was terrified of facing Epocha alone. My heart urged me to seek someone's help, and the Mercures were all allies I could rely on.

But can I really ask them to help me settle my past?

As if he'd read my thoughts, Char met my gaze and nodded.

That gave me the final push to make my decision, and I turned toward my new family, my resolve solidified. "I want you to help me, but only if you don't push yourselves too much. Please lend me your power to stop Epocha," I said, waiting for their reactions.

Char nodded, and so did the twins and Canon.

"Leave it to us, madam," Barre said. "We'll show you the result of the training you gave us."

"Exactly," Fouet added. "We may not look like it, but we all have a strong sense of duty. We always repay our debts."

Canon turned to me, a mature smile on his face. "I'll be fine. So please, father, could you let go of mother?"

At his son's words, Char finally released his hold on me.

Glancing at Epocha, I saw that he was preparing to use his corrupted item. He threw me a glare full of venom and said, "Aurora! If it wasn't for you, my plan wouldn't have failed! I should have erased you completely five hundred years ago!"

He must've been ready to make his move. The item, equipped on his body like a garment, glowed, and he shot an offensive spell at us. A strong shock wave of attributeless magic powered by altered mana surged toward us.

"Everyone, remember that defensive spell I taught you?" I asked.

Immediately, the Mercures used a Light Magic spell to block the

attack, and I did the same. We managed to protect ourselves against the first wave of Epocha's offense. But then, a large explosion erupted near us, and Canon—who was the closest to the blast—was sent flying despite the spell's protection. Fortunately, he didn't seem to have suffered any serious injuries, but he had landed quite a distance away.

The attack had been so powerful that, other than the spot we stood on that had been protected by our spell, the surrounding area had suffered quite a lot of damage. There were craters in the earth, each spewing black smoke. I was relieved we were in a desolate area, far from any buildings or innocent bystanders. Épée, Flèche, and the hedgehogs, who were a bit farther away, seemed fine.

I decided to have Canon fall back and told him to ensure the safety of the hedgehogs, Lèvres's soldiers, and Épée's men.

Epocha didn't seem too surprised we'd managed to block his attack; he likely anticipated he wouldn't be able to take me down with a single hit. His sharp gaze was still riveted on me. "After you stopped that blast, the kingdom declared my items were dangerous and banned their use."

"Well, wasn't that to be expected? They couldn't leave dangerous items circulating," I pointed out.

Was he trying to say that it would have been better for everyone to die so that there would have been no trace of the side effects of his items?

"People lauded you as a hero, while I was banished and forced to find a new land to perform my experiments on," he said, shooting me an accusatory glare.

Again, what else had he been expecting? There was no need to blame *me* for the consequences of his own actions.

Plus, he just confessed to having used the Ventre Kingdom to perform his experiments. What happened to his "I want to make the world a better place for people who can't use mana" spiel? Just as I thought, he's only been making these items for his own selfish ambitions.

Epocha's statement just now proved that he'd been harboring malicious intent all along. To him, the people who'd fallen victim to his items were merely the result of his "experiments."

"This item right here is my masterpiece! What you just saw was

merely a test run. Its true power far exceeds the blast from five hundred years ago!”

The words had barely left his mouth that Epocha unleashed his second attack wave, which was indeed more powerful, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle.

Another explosion followed, blowing everything away, including the ground.

That’s not good. If he keeps firing spells one after the other like this…

As I feared, altered mana began building in the air as a side effect of his item. This always happened, no matter what, when someone used an item powered by altered mana.

There wasn’t much of it yet, but if we didn’t stop Epocha quickly, we risked an explosion like the one from five hundred years ago.

Epocha would get caught in the blast as well, so what is he doing?

His new item was far more powerful than his previous creations, and even though he was only wielding one at the moment, it generated a significant amount of altered mana.

“I can’t believe you dare blame teacher for what happened to you. Cut it out, Epocha!” Lance said, firing a lightning spell at the man. “She deserves to be treated like a hero! She truly, absolutely, undoubtedly is an incredible person!”

Epocha countered Lance’s spell, his attacks getting increasingly powerful and producing even more altered mana.

Perhaps I ought to use stronger spells as well, regardless of my physical condition.

“Watch, Aurora! This is the full power of my item!” Epocha shouted.

The next instant, thick, pitch-black altered mana engulfed our surroundings.

It’s so potent I can barely breathe.

Altered mana could both cause explosions and negatively impact the health of those who breathed it in.

This is the same situation as five hundred years ago—no, it’s worse. Epocha’s item is really living up to his promises.

The effect of the altered mana was scarier than Epocha’s attacks. Each and every particle responded to one another, and the whole thing seemed ready to explode at any moment. But something was strange—Epocha would definitely get hurt as well

if a blast occurred right now. He was currently digging his own grave.

Does he have a countermeasure to survive the explosion?

Or did he simply plan on dying in the blast as well?

As I panicked thinking of the impending danger, Char suddenly stepped in front of me and said, “Lam, I’m going to attack that man. The effects of the altered mana will only get worse if we let him use his item again, right?”

Char ended up not even needing to attack Epocha. All of a sudden, the item that was wrapped around his body exploded and crumbled to pieces.

Huh? It self-destructed? Was there a defect in his item?

It must have broken under the sheer power Epocha had forced it to unleash.

“Where’s Epocha?!” I exclaimed, the smoke caused by the explosion concealing his whereabouts.

It had been such a big blast that he couldn’t have escaped unscathed. But right as that thought crossed my mind, a spell was shot at us from somewhere within the thick smoke. Fortunately, we all managed to dodge it at the last minute. Behind us, Canon was protecting my two other disciples and the hedgehogs.

Thank you, Canon. It seems that everyone is all right. But since we got attacked, it means that…

The smoke had finally dissipated and, sure enough, Epocha was still alive. However, I immediately noticed that his body seemed somehow stiff.

“That’s…!” I finally understood what the issue was. “His body…isn’t elfin anymore?”

He hadn’t survived Lance’s spell because of his magic item—his body itself had been transformed. The skin peeking from his torn clothes was silver, and I couldn’t even spot a single drop of blood on it.

That hard, metallic material that was revealed by the explosion was the undeniable evidence that he’d forsaken his elfin body.

Not only did he not sustain a single injury, but his “body” is also under the effect of a constant restorative spell.

Elfin bodies were more or less the same as human bodies. Just like ours, they could get hurt or sick, but it seemed those rules no longer applied to Epocha’s current form.

His new body seems to be putting practicality first… I can't say it's in particularly good taste, though. He could've at least made it cuter by making it cake-patterned or something.

"Epocha, you made your body itself into a magic item, didn't you?" I said.

"Bull's-eye. My new form is made from the strongest materials I have developed over the past five hundred years. I have replaced everything with magic items, so altered mana has very little effect on me. This is a revolutionary invention, unprecedented in the entire history of elfinkind!"

So this was why he'd been scattering all that altered mana—to give himself an edge in this battle. Good grief, I really wished he would think of the trouble he was causing to others.

"The spells I've been casting with my item all produce tons of altered mana," he continued. "My attacks may not have affected you much, but the side effects are a much bigger threat, aren't they? I suspect the altered mana is already starting to have negative effects on your bodies."

He was right. I was starting to have trouble breathing, my head hurt, and my body felt heavy. If we had to classify altered mana into one of the big categories, it'd fall into attributeless mana. As such, it could easily tamper with people's mana, and no defensive spell could fully protect one from its effects.

"No matter how many times you try to purify it, Aurora, you'll never be able to keep up with my constant stream of altered mana. It's much easier for me to produce it than it is for you to cleanse it, after all."

Things were not looking good. We technically had the numbers advantage, but it wasn't enough. Besides, I could tell that Canon's body was reaching its limits after being exposed to so much altered mana.

Getting him out of here was the priority right now.

"Canon, retreat to somewhere safe before the altered mana harms your health. If you can, grab the hedgehogs too," I told him.

They might be members of the Motar Faith, but I'd feel bad abandoning those poor hedgehogs to their fate.

"But, mother, what about you and the others?" Canon asked me, visibly hesitant to go.

As we spoke, I saw Epocha preparing to launch another attack. “Canon, go. Now!” My voice peaked as I panicked.

Suddenly, a whooshing sound shot past me from behind Canon, a sharp magical projectile aimed directly at Epocha.

Huh?

The spell struck Epocha just in time, interrupting his spell, and severing his arm in the process. He had barely managed to shield his vital spots at the last moment.

“Tch. I missed.”

Turning around, I saw Épée, who had been unable to move because of Lance, standing behind Canon. It seemed that he’d managed to fix the tear in his mana all on his own.

“Épée, are you all right?” I asked.

“I had to wing it a bit, but I managed to fix the balance of my reincarnation spell. I’m the one who cast it in the first place, so it wasn’t too much of a struggle. I just needed some time.”

Now that’s my first disciple for you—clever as ever.

“Glacial should be able to fix it at some point too, right?”

I glanced at my second disciple. He seemed to be struggling quite a bit and clearly wouldn’t be able to move anytime soon. “Épée, help him.”

“No way. I don’t have time to waste on him right now. Also, your kid’s body is reaching its limits. If you don’t want him to kick the bucket here, you should send him away,” he said, thrusting his chin in Canon’s direction. “Don’t worry about Glacial. I’ll put a defensive barrier around him, so he won’t die.”

“Thank you, Épée. Canon, take the hedgehogs and teleport back home. You’re in charge of protecting the mansion until we’re done here.”

Canon seemed reluctant to comply, but Char took my side, and he eventually nodded, albeit reluctantly. “I understand, mother, father.”

He gathered up the hedgehogs and teleported away with them to the Mercure estate. Meanwhile, the twins—who fortunately seemed fine—were flying a little farther away, using their Wind Magic to dispel the altered mana in the air.

Épée assessed the situation with a quick glance before casting a Dark Magic spell all over the area. “Aurora, I’ll suck up the altered mana with my magic. I dealt a pretty nasty blow to Epocha, but

he's not a moron. He must have more tricks up his sleeve."

I nodded. "I'll be careful. If you're going to take care of the mana, I should be able to focus on taking him down."

Having Épée and his Dark Magic reassured me. A chilly wind blew up from beside him—Flèche's magic, no doubt. Being able to undo part of Lance's spell must've riled him up.

It seems that he's managed to partially fix his mana. I don't have time to help him, but it should only be a matter of time before he can move again.

His magic was indiscriminately freezing things around the battlefield. Even part of the ground near Epocha was covered in ice.

As I prepared to cast an offensive spell, Char called out from beside me, "Lam, how are you feeling?"

"I'm still fine. But the longer this drags on, the more we'll be at a disadvantage because of the altered mana. It's risky, but I'm going to engage Epocha up close. You go assist the twins."

It didn't take long for Epocha to notice my approach, and he redirected his attacks toward me. But he couldn't keep up with my speed, and none of them hit me.

My body still feels fine. I'm not having any issues so far.

I used Dark Magic to suck up all the altered mana in my way, all while using Mine's favorite "ground-leveling" spell to attack Epocha. Then, I also used a compound fire and lightning spell to make lightning shoot down from the sky and pillars of fire to rise from the earth right in front of him.

Then I blocked his escape by creating a wall with Water Magic and ensnaring his feet with roots created out of Wood Magic, before hitting him with my ground-leveling spell for the second time and making rocks rain down on him.

Glancing around to check on the others, I saw that they were all frozen in place with shock, their jaws hanging open as they stared at the scene.

Why do they seem so surprised? I wondered.

Oh, well. I didn't have time to think about that right now. Collecting myself, I used another spell against Epocha, this one a mix of ice and wind.

※

Char stared in disbelief as his wife fired spell after spell at their opponent right before his eyes. He *knew* that, in spite of her tendency to collapse after using the slightest bit of magic, his wife was actually an incredible mage. She was the witch of legends, after all. Yet, never in his wildest dreams had he imagined she possessed *this* level of power.

She's so strong…

It seemed that Lam had simply been unable to use magic to her fullest potential because of her poor health. Not only could she wield spells from any attribute with no issue whatsoever, she could even use compound spells while flying in the sky.

It defied logic.

"This is why they call Aurora the witch of legends," Épée said, seemingly unable to not comment on Char's expression of awe. "Her talent is just outstanding. She's the strongest mage of all time. No one stands a chance facing her in a fair fight, be it in this life or in the last. She hasn't lost a single bit of her power, even after being reincarnated."

He seemed incredibly frustrated. Char could see why: Lam seemed to be in a dimension of her own. He found himself thinking that his wife, the strongest witch of all time, must've been quite lonely. After all, no ordinary mage could ever hope to see the same landscape as she did.

As he stood there, in awe of Lam's power, she kept firing spells at Epocha, completely overpowering him. But her opponent was tenacious.

"I'll go too. I should be able to help a little," Char said, using Wind Magic to join his wife in battle, his gaze fixed ahead.

The twins were handling the altered mana just fine on their own. If anyone could do with the help right now, it was Lam.

Chapter Six: The Countess Obliterates an Insignificant Threat

I watched the others from my vantage point in the sky. Lance was firing spells at Epocha, while the twins were protecting the others from the altered mana, and Épée was breaking up the flying particles with his magic, neutralizing the threat.

The closer I got to Epocha, the denser the altered mana became, making its effects more pronounced.

As I fired a barrage of attacks at the elfin, not giving him a single second of respite, Char flew to my side. It seemed he'd chosen to come help me instead of the twins.

"Lam, I'll attack him too," he said.

"Thank you, Char. But don't overwork yourself, all right?"

I prepared a Light Magic spell, the same one as I'd used five hundred years ago, and dove toward Epocha. Beside me, Char expertly copied my spell.

"Again?" I muttered.

His ability to replicate any spell in an instant made me feel reassured to have him with me. Until now, I'd always seen him as someone I had to protect—not as an equal in battle—in spite of how many times he'd urged me to. But after seeing him today, I realized this had to change. The logical part of my brain *knew* he was a great ally. Still…

"It's all right, Lam. Our attacks should reach him," he assured me.

"You're right."

The distance between us and Epocha was rapidly closing.

But then, the man's metallic abdomen parted open, and a silver cylindrical magic item emerged from within, its barrel pointed at us. It fired a spell at us more powerful than anything Epocha had used previously; as if he had concentrated a massive quantity of altered mana into the blast. It seemed he'd been hiding yet another trump card.

"Ugh!" I groaned through clenched teeth as the attack swept over us.

Char and I ramped up the power of our attacks, not about to let ourselves get overwhelmed by magic.

"I… I refuse to let the past five hundred years go to waste!" Epocha yelled as he fired spells at us with all his might. "Aurora! If I wipe you from the world, I'll be able to stand back up as many times as I need to!"

He seemed to truly believe in that statement. Even with one arm lost and his metallic body breaking down, Epocha did not cease in his assaults. The outcome seemed all but decided, yet he kept firing spells at us from the magic item in his abdomen.

"How stubborn. Let's keep pushing," I said.

If I dodged his attacks, they would reach the twins and my disciples behind me, and I absolutely wanted to avoid that. As such, my best course of action right now was to defeat him by redirecting his own spells back at him.

The annoying part will be destroying the items. Once broken, they'll release all the altered mana accumulated within them, and the more powerful the item, the likelier it is to unleash a massive explosion.

Since Epocha's entire body was made of magic items, I needed to be especially careful of the shock wave of altered mana that would occur once I destroyed it. Five hundred years ago, I'd taken the impact of the explosion head-on, which had led to my death. Back then, I'd erected defensive barriers everywhere to shield the citizens from the explosion, so I hadn't had enough mana left to protect myself.

This time, I would be more careful. But it was likely the blast would be even stronger than in my past life, if the copious amount of altered mana already spouting out of Epocha's body was any indication. It swirled around, part of it already igniting and setting the area around Epocha on fire—the telltale sign of a large incoming explosion.

This is exactly what happened back then.

The flames flared up, and, as Char quickly put a protective light spell around us, Epocha took advantage of the momentary distraction to retreat, putting more distance between us and him.

Behind us, Épée and the twins continued to disperse and dispel the altered mana, so it wasn't as dense as it was nearby. The soldiers of Lèvres, as well as Épée's employees, had already escaped, so they were safe as well.

And yet, despite the others' efforts, there were still little combustions erupting here and there.

We were so close to finishing him off. Altered mana really is annoying.

Once again, I found myself struggling against the same phenomenon as in my past life.

Thankfully, the damage should be mitigated due to the twins' and my disciples' efforts this time.

Still, I was worried. I hadn't destroyed Epocha's body yet, but it was already releasing such large amounts of altered mana that I was afraid of what would happen once I dealt my finishing blow. There were still many things I wanted to do in this lifetime, yet it seemed I might have no choice but to sacrifice myself to defeat Epocha.

What a shame. But I have to do it. This time, I refuse to let anyone die because of me.

Even if I died, Char and my disciples would still be there to stop the Motar Faith. I knew for a fact they wouldn't let it continue to thrive.

Not that I have any intention of going down without a fight. But I would die content knowing the others would be there to ensure the world's future. I do need to warn them not to use a reincarnation spell again, though.

All of a sudden, my body lurched forward out of my control, and I almost spiralled to the ground. It seemed I was still suffering from the effects on Lance's spell.

My mana is running low.

It was frustrating not being in my best condition.

As I stared fixedly ahead, I suddenly felt Char's hand grab mine. Despite the tense situation, I immediately felt myself calm down when his warm palm came in contact with mine.

"Don't be nervous, Lam. You don't have to fight him alone."

I turned around and gaped at him. "Char...? Wait, do you want to come with me?!"

In my past life, I'd jumped into the maelstrom of altered mana by myself to destroy the magic items that had caused the blast. I'd brushed my anxiety off, claiming it was all to help the kingdom's citizens, but in all truthfulness, I had been terrified back then. It seemed that Char had understood my current fears just by looking

at me.

I felt my heart stir and, for some reason, found myself thinking that I really, *really* didn't want to die here.

But…

I gave myself a mental slap: Now wasn't the time to be a coward. I couldn't drag Char into this.

"Witch of legends or not, you don't have to bear everything alone," he said.

"But, Char, destroying Epocha's body will be dangerous."

"All the more reason for me to come with you. I might be nowhere near your level in terms of magic abilities right now, but I have every intention of catching up with you in the future. So you can't die here."

What should I do? I don't know… I hesitated.

Despite my rational mind urging me to confront Epocha alone, I found myself unwilling to let go of Char's warm hand. I longed to spend more time with him, to live by his side from now on as well.

"You're still feeling the effects from that spell your disciple cast on you," Char added. "You've used so many spells in a row that your reincarnated mana is back to being unstable."

"You're even able to sense these sorts of things now?"

"I want you to use my mana. That way, you should be able to cast spells regardless of the imbalance in yours."

Just like me, Char had been born with a large mana pool. As such, I could borrow plenty of it without impacting his health.

"I'm going to need to use a lot of it. To defeat Epocha, I can't afford to hold back. Is that still all right with you?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's the only way I can be of use to you right now. You can borrow as much as you'd like."

I hesitantly squeezed his hand back. "Thank you. I'm going to take you up on that offer, then."

With that, I turned back to face Epocha, but the flames born from the altered mana igniting blocked my view, obfuscating him. Using Wind and Water Magic to clear my way through the fire, I rushed forward, determined to close the distance between us. Char supported my body all while continuously providing me with mana.

Almost there! I can see him!

I managed to catch a glimpse of Epocha's mechanical body

through a gap in the flames.

As I began casting an offensive spell, I exclaimed, “There he is! Char, I’m going to attack—”

But I was barely done preparing my spell when Epocha suddenly lost his balance.

Huh? What just happened?

Looking closely, I noticed that his legs were frozen solid.

Ice that doesn’t melt even though we’re surrounded by flames… This can only be—

A quick glance around told me it wasn’t just the ground near Epocha; the entire area was covered in a thick layer of ice. Flèche’s anger at being unable to undo Lance’s spell must’ve released in a paroxysm of ice, freezing the entire battlefield. And luckily, it just so happened to reach the spot where Epocha stood. I hadn’t taken its effect into account before, but it truly was a happy coincidence.

I can make it…I think!

Char and I kept going until we arrived right in front of Epocha.

“Thank you, Char. Without you, I wouldn’t have made it all the way here,” I said, channeling one last spell into my hand—the strongest Light Magic spell I could use, one that came with intense heat.

Char added a layer of complexity to my magic by infusing it with a lightning spell of his own through the mana he was providing me with. A crackling whirlpool of light and thunder surged forward from our joined hands.

I didn’t teach him how to do that yet. He really grew as a mage during this fight. I wonder just how much further he’ll go in this short amount of time.

He’d claimed that he would become as strong as me one day, and perhaps he truly would. I couldn’t help but feel a little excited by the prospect of finally knowing a mage who could rival my abilities.

Now’s not the time to think about this. I need to focus on my spell.

With Char still propping me upright, I finally unleashed our compound light and lightning spell, blasting it at Epocha. When our spell hit his abdomen, the heat and shock of it caused him to arch backward as he let out a surprised cry, the radiant vortex of light and thunder ruthlessly eating through his metallic body.

“Lam, let’s quickly finish dealing with him and go home. We

have a move to prepare," Char told me.

For some reason, I felt my eyes begin to burn at his words.

"Yes, let's go home...together."

A shock ran through Epocha's body, and a large crack appeared on its metallic surface. Parts of it began to melt, while the fissure gradually spread all the way to the edges.

"N-Nooo!!!" he shrieked in despair in his last moment, his body melting along with the altered mana surrounding him.

But Char and I couldn't relax just yet.

I will settle all the issues I caused in my past!

Epocha's screams eventually faded. A tremor ran through what remained of his body, spouting out one last mass of altered mana, so large and dense I couldn't even hope to clear it with my magic. It swirled like a wild vortex—almost as if it were alive—growing thicker and thicker until, finally, it exploded in a massive blast that sent light, fire, and wind flying in all directions. In the next instant, an enormous shock wave rippled toward Char and me.

And that wasn't the end of it: Epocha's body continued to spew altered mana, enveloping the entire area in a thick cloud that made me feel sick.

Our last obstacle!

I pulled myself together and used Dark Magic to absorb as much altered mana as I could, trying desperately to contain the explosion. Thanks to Char, I still had enough mana to use my magic.

"Char, are you all right? I've been using a lot of your mana. It isn't putting too much of a strain on your body, is it?" I asked.

"I'm the one who should be asking if you're fine. Though, I suppose you don't seem to be doing so badly."

"I'm perfectly fine. Being able to use your mana instead of mine is much easier on my body!" I replied.

But despite all that, I knew we only had about a fifty percent chance of surviving the shock wave. The silver lining was that the blast had happened far enough from the city that I wouldn't need to spend as much energy trying to protect the townsfolk.

As I focused on absorbing the altered mana, I suddenly felt my magic grow stronger. Glancing beside me, I saw that Épée had joined us without my noticing, channeling his own magic into mine.

In my past life, I dealt with the situation entirely by myself. Having Épée help me this time is definitely making this easier!

Then, I saw thick ice materializing out of nowhere, enveloping the flames produced by the explosion. Unlike the ice that had been appearing randomly all around the battlefield earlier, this time it was clearly formed with purpose. And sure enough, Flèche showed up on the opposite side of Épée. At last, he had managed to fix the tear in his mana caused by Lance's spell. Speaking of my third disciple, he and the twins were using large-scale defensive spells to protect us from the continuous stream of altered mana.

W-We're going to make it!

Unlike in my previous life, I could see myself surviving this. Putting more power in my spell, I channeled every last bit of my own mana to wipe away the altered mana, gradually absorbing it with Dark Magic.

One more push!

All of a sudden, I felt my magic gain even more strength—except that this time, it didn't come from Épée.

Could it be…?

I glanced beside me and saw that Char had begun channeling Dark Magic into my own spell, all the while continuing to supply me with mana.

Impossible…

He was distributing his mana between himself and me with such dexterity, I almost couldn't believe my eyes.

Wait, did he learn the spell Épée and I are using just by looking at it again? He's way too good at adapting to situations! I thought, completely dumbfounded.

Yet, despite my astonishment, I was also incredibly heartened.

The three of us absorbed the last of the altered mana. Before long, there wasn't a single particle of it left, and the explosions stopped. The scattered fires that had raged around us were extinguished as well.

Silence enveloped the battlefield. The ground around us was completely uneven because of all the spells we'd unleashed in a row, with some areas scorched by the explosion.

We all canceled our wind spells and descended to the ground. My feet barely made contact with the earth before my body—which I'd forced to remain upright through sheer willpower—

collapsed, and I had to lean against Char. I didn't have the strength to move. Even looking around was too much effort. All I could do was rasp in breaths, staring straight up at the sky. I could see the worry in Char's eyes as he gazed down at me.

"Char, are you hurt?" I asked.

"No. But I don't have a single drop of mana left. All I want to do is teleport home to properly fix that tear in your mana, but I'm completely drained."

"Don't worry about me—my body will be back to normal after a good night's sleep. But I'm all out of mana as well. Phew, we really obliterated all that insignificant altered mana."

As I lay in Char's arms, unable to move, the twins rushed over to us.

"Lord Char! Madam! Are you all right?" Fouet asked.

"Can you stand up, madam?" Barre added. "I would offer to carry you home, but we have used up all our mana and can't use magic anymore."

It wasn't just them; Épée and Lance must've exhausted all their mana as well. Flèche probably hadn't, though, if the ice that continued to appear on the ground because of his leaking magic was any indication.

"Lam, I'm going to carry you," Char said, doing just that and walking away on foot, the twins following close behind.

Nestled in his arms, I looked up at the sky. It was so blue that I could hardly believe it had been shrouded by a thick cloud of altered mana just moments before.

"Now that things have calmed down, we just have to wait for one of us to have enough mana to send a message over to the mansion and have Canon come get us. He can probably manage to teleport us all back," Char said.

"I agree. It's our best op…tion…"

I could not recall anything beyond this point. My body had used up all its strength, and I simply fell asleep in the arms of the person who made me feel safer than anyone else.

※

Jostled by the bustling crowd in the streets of the ever-busy capital of Lèvres, Chaos, the former tenth saint of the Motar Faith,

stood at a complete loss, flanked by his brother Néant, who had once held the rank of second saint, and the holy knight Muscle. Just how many days had passed since the three of them had escaped from the palace of Lèvres?

We've been tossed into the streets with nowhere to go. What are we supposed to do?

It had been nice of the Holy Father to break them out of the insect cage they'd been trapped in, but they had nowhere to go anymore. They couldn't return to the Motar Faith after what had happened. Scratch that, even if they had been able to go, Chaos wouldn't have chosen to. He didn't want to get punished, after all.

Muscle never spoke a word, simply agreeing to do whatever Chaos decided, while his brother Néant had suffered an even greater shock than he had and was now completely useless. It seemed that the way the Holy Father had treated them had completely broken him; all he did was stare up at the sky with vacant eyes, like a dead fish.

The three of them had changed from their Motar Faith uniforms to regular clothes they'd bought in the city. Then, one day, after several weeks of wandering around the city, they started hearing rumors that the Motar Faith had been dissolved. Chaos didn't pay them any mind, thinking they must've been empty gossip, until he learned that the Membre Cathedral had closed down for good.

Wait... Those rumors were true?!

Chaos felt both shocked and relieved at the same time. With the Motar Faith out of commission, no one would come after them to punish them.

Néant was even more shaken by the news, to the point where he couldn't even take care of himself, so Chaos took it upon himself to diligently look after his brother. Néant might have tried to kill him, but he simply couldn't bring himself to abandon him to his fate.

"Hey, Muscle. Do you think the Motar Faith is really gone?" he asked.

The habitually silent holy knight nodded gravely. "I heard rumors that the cathedral in the Tête Kingdom was shut down as well, and so was the one in Ongle. Speaking of, the civil war in the empire—which the Faith was involved in—has finally come to an

end.”

Betraying all expectations, Muscle might have been the most reliable out of all three of them right now. He was more aware of the state of the world than Chaos and Néant and had even learned rumors from who-knows-where.

“Do you think they’ll punish us if we go back to the main church to check?” Chaos mused. “I can’t trust those rumors. It just doesn’t make sense!”

“Would you like to go? If you remember the coordinates, we should be able to teleport over there.”

“I mean, I do remember them, but…”

What if the Faith hasn’t been dismantled and they capture us? The mere thought of it made Chaos’s legs shake in horror.

The Holy Father had let them go, but that didn’t mean the other members of the Faith would do the same. Perhaps the first saint, who was rumored to be stronger than even Néant, would attack them.

“I believe that going to confirm whether the rumors are true or not would be for the best. It will affect our actions moving forward, after all,” Muscle added.

“I-I know that, but I’m scared.”

“I will protect you.”

Encouraged by Muscle’s support, Chaos grabbed his useless older brother and teleported to the Dukedom of Brunel, where the Faith’s main church was located. They landed near the Cœur Cathedral, and Chaos warily surveyed his surroundings while Néant remained unresponsive, as always.

“There’s almost no one here,” Chaos noted.

The streets in front of the building that were usually bustling with people wearing clerical robes were eerily quiet. Chaos cautiously peeked inside the cathedral, but there was no sign of life within.

Has the Motar Faith really been dissolved?

Perhaps it was because they’d waited several days before coming, but the church was completely empty. Feeling his legs about to give under him, Chaos leaned against Muscle, a feeble chuckle escaping his lips. “It’s true… There’s no Motar Faith anymore.”

Just like that, the organization that had made his life a living

hell had disappeared in the blink of an eye. An indescribable void sunk into his chest.

"I spent my entire life here...and for what?" he muttered, crouching in the middle of the street with Muscle, unable to move.

The shadow of a man's silhouette grew on the ground before Chaos's eyes. He and Muscle looked up, only to be met with the sight of the Holy Father—the very person who'd released them from that damn insect cage—staring at them with a calm expression.

"Your...Holiness?" Chaos said weakly.

"We meet again," the Holy Father replied.

His bearing was still the same as before, but without his clerical robes, Chaos felt like his overall presence had transformed. He seemed liberated, or perhaps apathetic. In that moment, the Holy Father reminded Chaos of himself, his brother, and Muscle.

"Is the Motar Faith really gone for good?" Chaos asked.

"Yes. I eradicated it."

So the Holy Father was the one who'd dismantled it?

"What will you be doing from now on, Your Holiness?"

"I haven't decided yet. For now, I'm going to focus my efforts on dismantling the last resisting factions of the Faith. Don't you feel bad for those poor people who still believe in that sham of a religion?"

The Holy Father made it sound like he was doing it for the good of the people, but Chaos thought it was quite cruel of him. After all, even if the religion in question was a hoax, there were still people who found solace within it—like his brother.

"What about you three? Where are you headed?" the Holy Father asked.

Chaos hung down his head, unable to reply. He didn't know. There was nowhere for them to go.

The Holy Father stared at him in silence for a while before making an absolutely unexpected suggestion. "Would you like to come with me? As embarrassing as it sounds, I'm not well-versed in modern culture, since I spent the majority of my life within the confines of the cathedral. It would be a great help if you could tell me about the current trends and societal norms."

"Wh-What?!" Chaos exclaimed in shock.

He couldn't believe he would be traveling with the Holy Father

—someone who had always felt like an unreachable figure to him. Though, he had to admit, he was slightly terrified of him. Plus, it wasn't like he and the other two knew a lot about the world either, considering they'd been with the Faith since they were children.

But...

Chaos glanced at his brother, who was still in a daze. Perhaps working with the Holy Father would reignite something in him.

He glanced up at Muscle who nodded, as if he'd reached the same conclusion.

"Your Holiness, we would love to come with you," Chaos said.

The Holy Father didn't care about the Faith's rules, but he was an incredible mage. Staying with him would ensure they wouldn't get punished for failing their mission.

A small smile curled on the Holy Father's lips. "Let us go, then. Ah, but please call me Lance. We'll stand out too much if you call me 'Your Holiness.'"

Chaos didn't know what kind of stroke of luck had led to this moment, but he and his brother—two former saints—along with Muscle would be traveling with the Holy Father from now on.

"Oh right, I'm thinking of starting a new religion to replace the Motar Faith," the Holy Father said immediately after their departure.

Once again, it was a completely unexpected statement that took Chaos by surprise. "Huh? Your Holi—I mean, Lance, what are you talking about?"

"I'll call it the Aurora Faith. It'll be the best religion ever, dedicated exclusively to honoring, celebrating, and venerating the greatest witch of all time, Aurora Ibrusus."

Chaos felt his face twitch.

I'm already starting to question my decision. Have I made a mistake following him?

Paying Chaos no mind, the former Holy Father continued to enthusiastically talk about the new faith he planned to create.

※

I woke up in the royal palace of Lèvres. Apparently, Flèche's subordinates had rushed over to us after I'd collapsed and offered to teleport me over to Lèvres, let me rest in the castle, and look

after me until I woke up.

They did a great job.

I asked if Char was in the palace as well, and they confirmed that he was. Char and the twins must've decided that it would be better to wait until their strength was somewhat restored before teleporting back home, especially since the children could manage the estate in their absence.

With the dispute for the throne now resolved, the palace of Lèvres had regained its tranquility. When I inquired about the details, the attentive servants tending to me kindly explained how the conflict had come to an end. Following the battle in the wasteland, Flèche was officially named heir to the throne, and his uncle was imprisoned. Flèche promised that Lèvres would be reborn as a nation that didn't discriminate against mages.

If that's true, perhaps I should add it to my list of potential new homes.

Speaking of Flèche, he was currently busy running about the capital to deal with the aftermath of the Epocha incident. As for Épée, he'd stayed at the palace to regain his strength for a bit before returning to Ongle with his own subordinates, claiming that he had "things to do." Maybe he had left his company unattended for too long and work had piled up.

Lastly, after telling the others to apologize to me in his stead for his conduct, Lance said he was going to dismantle the Motar Faith and disappeared without another word. The Membre Cathedral—the Faith's main base of operations in Lèvres—had already been shut down, and I was wondering what would happen to the remaining believers. Not that I could do anything about it. Still, having everything they believed in be upended in an instant must've caused a huge shock to the most devout followers of the Faith.

"Oh, it seems that some of my mana has returned," I noticed.

My body felt much better as well—perhaps Char had finished fully fixing the rip in my mana while I'd slept. The makeshift fix I had him do when we were fighting Epocha had some issues, so I was thankful he took the time to do it properly this time.

Right as I got out of bed, Char—who'd been informed by the servants of the palace that I'd woken up—rushed into the room. I greeted him, and he began giving me a summary of everything

that had happened after I'd lost consciousness. Realizing that it would be tiring to have this conversation while standing, we settled side by side on the bed.

"I'm glad you seem well, Char. What about the others?" I asked.

"The twins are fine. As for me, I've regained enough of my mana to teleport us home. The hedgehogs are still at the mansion where Canon took them, but we'll send them back to Lèvres in the future. Apparently, the prince will be keeping them. He said that you can come here whenever you want to see them, or some crap like that."

I had to admit, I felt a bit excited about the idea of being able to see the adorable hedgehogs again.

I'll have to change them back into humans some day, though.

A chuckle slipped from me, and when I looked up, my eyes met Char's. As always, looking at him always made me feel a bit restless—even though there was no reason for it. And, after *that*, being around him made me especially nervous.

"Char? There's something I've been meaning to ask you. Why did you kiss me?"

He seemed confused by my question. "I just felt like it."

There it was again—his typical nonchalant response. However, I had no intention of letting it slide this time around.

"But why did you kiss me on the lips? That's, um…" I trailed off.

"What's the issue with two people in love kissing each other? You didn't dislike it either, did you?" he asked, completely serious.

His surprise attack left me momentarily speechless, and all I could do was blink repeatedly in confusion. "T-Two people in love?" I repeated, my voice betraying me by cracking.

My brain was still struggling to process his words. I was just a mage! I wasn't familiar with romantic love—I'd never experienced it, either in my past life or in this one.

"Lam, I've been thinking about this for a while, but you're really dense compared to other people," Char said, a surly look on his face as he extended a hand forward and pinched my nose.

An indignant pout formed on my lips. "Do you really love me?"

"That's what I keep telling you. Don't I always say that I've taken a liking to you?"

He *had* said it on numerous occasions in the past. But I had no idea he'd meant it in a romantic sense.

“I just thought you found me amusing.”

“You…” He let out a long sigh. It seemed that my response had come as a bit of a shock to him. “Why would I kiss someone I find *amusing*?”

“That’s, um…a fair point,” I admitted.

Only a pervert would go around kissing people indiscriminately. I couldn’t picture someone like Char engaging in such behavior.

“I’ve waited for you, Lam. All this time, I’ve hoped you would come to realize your feelings on your own. But watching you now, I can see that day will never come.”

The two of us were staring at each other. Being on the receiving end of his gaze felt a little painful.

“How about you finally admit that you like me?” he asked.

“What are you talking about so randomly?”

“I’ve been sure of it ever since you basically confessed your feelings to me.”

“Seriously, I don’t understand. What do you—” I tried to say, but he interrupted me.

“You blush whenever you see me. Sometimes, you panic and you act out of character. You said it yourself, didn’t you?”

Thinking back on it, I had once told Char about this after collapsing.

“I did notice those reactions myself. But despite how flustered you got every time I approached you, you never rejected me. I also confirmed that you don’t react that way around other men. Also, you’ve been passing out less often when I get close to you, haven’t you?” he continued.

Everything he said was true. The more I listened to him, the more I realized that he might have been right.

I hung my head down, unable to counter any of his arguments.

He’s been observing me all this time? That’s so embarrassing…

I tried to stand up to compose myself away from Char, but he grabbed both of my hands and pulled me back down. I couldn’t escape anymore.

But I… No. What am I doing? Char is earnestly telling me about his feelings. I can’t run away.

He was always honest and would never do anything sly like sugarcoating his words or trying to deceive me.

So, I need to give him a proper reply with my own words.

I thought back on our relationship so far. He had always been right by my side, ready to help me whenever I found myself in trouble—in Crimine, in Ongle, and during the fight with Epocha. He'd never faltered, even when confronted with situations much too difficult for him to handle, always putting my safety above everything else. Not only that, but he'd managed to show impressive growth every single time, always surpassing my expectations.

Just like this time.

Char being with me until the very end had saved me—not only physically but also mentally. No matter what happened, he refused to let me go confront my problems alone, even if I planned to. Though I would never say it out loud, having him by my side during the battle with Epocha had been incredibly comforting.

Not only that, but he genuinely aspired to become as strong as I was—as Aurora. The thought of one day working alongside someone with the same abilities as me filled me with a faint feeling of expectation. After all, while I loved magic, I'd never met anyone who could see the same world I saw, save for my teacher. This partly explained why I had felt the need to shoulder everything on my own after she vanished, since I had been the strongest mage left.

I know that it was incredibly egoistical on my part to just charge ahead on my own like that every time there was an issue. Plus, I have to admit, I was lonely. I was actually happy when Char offered to share my burden and fight alongside me.

If you asked whether I had feelings for Char, the answer was probably. I had gradually become drawn to him since he was always by my side, and my feelings must've grown over time. Being with him made me both relaxed and anxious at the same time, but I didn't *hate* this feeling.

All in all, it seemed that Char might have been right all along.

"Is this what it feels like to love someone?" I asked out loud, making myself even more embarrassed in the process.

"That's what I keep telling you," Char replied, his expression unchanged as he peered down at me.

As I gazed at his calm expression, something seemed to fall into place for me. "I see. So *this* is what it feels like to love you."

Admitting my feelings made me feel even more bashful.

Char watched me in silence before bringing a hand up and gently stroking my cheek. “Lam, I’m in love with you, and you’re in love with me. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Is…that so?”

“We’re married, aren’t we?”

I surprisingly found myself at peace with this. As Char said, it wasn’t like I *shouldn’t* have feelings for him.

My cheeks and ears burning, I looked up at him again. Char slowly bent forward, pressing his lips to mine. The feeling of his cool lips gently brushing against mine made every last trivial doubt I had vanish completely.

A random thought flitted through my hazy mind: *I suppose I can’t divorce him anymore.*

From that day onward, Char began showing his affection for me even more openly than before. And so began this happy, albeit slightly embarrassing, chapter of our life.

※

In the middle of a quiet forest, under a canopy of luxuriant, deep green leaves, a young man stood motionless. “Another gleam.”

The trees around him were actually all houses, their insides having been carved into livable spaces. They all stood scattered around each other in a disorderly fashion.

The young man headed to one of them and slammed in its front door. “Finis! Another one of our kin died!” he announced to the person inside.

The young man was from a race that had the ability to tell when one of their own had passed away.

However, the woman he’d announced the news to seemed completely unfazed, swaying back and forth on a well-loved rocking chair, her expression showing only disinterest. While she only looked to be in her late twenties, she was actually much, *much* older than he was.

“Please stop making such a fuss,” she said before pausing, seemingly focusing on something. “Oh. *He’s* the one who died. I expected it would happen sooner or later.”

The man grew indignant at her lack of reaction. “Aren’t you frustrated? All the knowledge he’s accumulated over the years disappeared in an instant, just like that!”

“That is what death entails, yes.”

The young man bit his lip. It was likely he’d get the exact same reply from everybody else in the village. The reason the death of one of his kin made him emotional to the point of yelling lay perhaps in the fact that he was half human.

Finis gazed at him and, uncharacteristically for her, continued, “He meddled too much with human affairs. It was high time for him to go.”

“Did you know him?”

“I did,” Finis replied after a brief pause. She was always expressionless, yet, right now, the young man noticed that she was frowning a little.

“You didn’t get along with him?”

“Nothing of the sort, no. We had no strong relation with one another, like most elfins. This village is a bit of a unique situation, after all.”

“I see.”

The village in which the young man had been born and raised was a tranquil, small community where only a handful of elfins lived. According to what he’d been told, elfins tended to prefer living alone and wouldn’t normally create settlements like this one.

Finis used to travel the world as well. Then, one day, she appeared in the forest out of the blue and was asked by the young man’s mother—another elfin woman—to look after him while she was away. Just like that, his mother left when he was still very young.

It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that Finis raised him. She had experience with child-rearing, something incredibly rare among elfins, and hadn’t seemed to mind looking after him whatsoever. And so, she had stayed in the village with him.

The young man would occasionally venture beyond the forest, but he always returned to Finis’s home. All the other elfins in the village were men, meaning that, except for Finis and him, no one else could use magic. The other villagers spent most of their days shut inside their homes, working on their research and experiments, and Finis and the young man would regularly help

them. The two of them had lived like this for over a hundred years.

Having an elfin mother and a human father, the young man aged slower than regular humans, perhaps due to the elfin blood in his veins. While he seemed to be in his twenties, he was actually over a hundred years old.

"I wonder how he died," Finis mused, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I'd always thought he was too stubborn to die even if he was killed."

For someone who had no interest in others whatsoever, she seemed to be fixating on the elfin who'd died quite a bit.

"Are you *sure* you don't hate him?" the young man asked.

"I have almost never talked to him. But it is true that I hold a personal grudge against him," she replied, a distant look in her eyes.

"You could've just killed him with your magic, if you disliked him so much. That would have been easy for you, right?"

A tired expression crossed her face. "I thought about it, but I decided against it. I didn't want to get involved with the human world again. I'm fed up with them."

"I'm half human too, remember?"

"You're an exception. Just like her."

The young man knew that the "her" in question was the other child Finis had raised before him. She'd mentioned it was a human girl, so he assumed she'd already died a long time ago.

"Should I go investigate how that man you hated so much died?" he offered. "I know you won't go yourself, since you think everything is a hassle."

"You don't have to," Finis replied after a brief pause.

"I'm curious too, so I'll be going regardless if you agree or not."

With that, he quickly prepared for his trip before pausing at the tree house's door.

"I'll be off for a bit, then. I'll come back to the village once I've figured out how he died."

Elfins usually took things at their own pace, so it was common for them to claim they'd do something and end up not doing it at all. The young man had been made painfully aware of that fact over the past hundred years. As such, he usually took action in their stead.

"See you, Finis."

“Try not to get involved in whatever troubles humans are causing,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You always say that. Don’t worry, I won’t interact with humans all that much.”

“Good. Be careful out there, Vesper.”

The young man smiled at his foster mother before teleporting over to the nearest town.

Side Story 1: The Children Hold the Fort

Soupir II, the former king of the Tête Kingdom, was livid. “Those damn Mercures… I shall make them regret ever insulting me!”

Because of the Countess of Mercure, he’d ended up falling into disgrace alongside the Holy Father and had been forced to abdicate his position. He currently lived somewhere near the royal palace.

“I cannot believe such humiliation has befallen me. Those cursed mana wielders will pay for what they did!”

For the past few days, he had instructed his subordinates to monitor the Mercure estate, and he had received word that only the children were currently present. It appeared that the Earl of Mercure and his wife, along with the other adults, were away for whatever reason.

It’s the perfect time to strike. With the adults gone, I can trample that damn house for good.

Soupir had a plan: He would raid the estate, destroy it, and kill all the children. He gave the order to his troops, of whom he was very proud, and had them break into the Mercure estate while he observed the situation from afar.

Mwa ha ha! How easy! I cannot wait to see that impudent countess’s face contort in sadness and anger when she sees what has happened to her family. She’ll try to beg for my forgiveness, but it’ll be too late!

Once all of Soupir’s soldiers had surrounded the estate, they charged forward in unison, ready to attack. But then…

“Aaaaaah! My bodyyy!”

The panicked cries of his soldiers echoed from all around the estate.

“Wh-What’s happening?!” Soupir exclaimed.

The second his men had tried to step into the courtyard, some weird, sticky substance had ensnared them, preventing them from moving.

“What in the world is this disgusting stuff?!”

Soupir felt himself begin to panic.

Damn it! I did not expect we'd run into something like this. Is it some sort of spell?

As things stood, not a single one of his soldiers could do as much as enter the courtyard. All around the outskirts of the Mercure estate, you could see soldiers stuck in that weird goop.

What to do?

But no matter how much Soupir pondered the question, he couldn't come up with an answer. He was completely unfamiliar with magic, after all. As such, he decided to leave his men behind and scurry back to his mansion. He could still hear them screaming for help as he left, but he couldn't care less about them at that moment. Taking only the few soldiers who hadn't gotten close enough to step in the goop, he returned home as if nothing had happened.

The soldiers he'd left behind, on the other hand, were at a loss. He was the one who'd given them the order to raid the Mercure estate, yet he'd left without a second thought when things had gotten sticky. All of them were terrified to have been left behind in that creepy place.

Terrifying mana wielders live here—will we be able to make it home alive?

As they stood there, panicked and unable to move, a group of small children trotted over to them, eyeing the unfamiliar soldiers with curiosity but no discernible wariness.

I know! We can just trick those brats into freeing us! Then, all we have to do is storm this place, kill every single one of those cursed mana wielders, and our mission will be complete.

One of the soldiers extended out a hand and gently beckoned the children over. "Hi there. Sorry to bother you, but we're stuck and we can't move. Will you be so kind as to help us?"

The children stared at him in surprise, their pure and innocent eyes sparkling.

A little farther... If I extend my arm a little farther, the brats will be within my reach.

Then, he could grab one of the kids and threaten the others into freeing them. But things didn't go as he'd hoped. The children completely ignored him, huddling together and muttering among each other. They eventually seemed to reach a conclusion and turned back to the soldiers.

“Evewyone who gets caught in the twaps is a bad pewson!”

“They said we can attack and pwactice our spells on them!”

“I’m going to go tell Canon and the othews we got a catch!”

The children extended their hands toward the soldiers, and one ran off somewhere.

What are they trying to do?

Eventually, magic-looking light began to shine from their palms. Even though the soldiers’ opponents were children, they had a really bad feeling—they instinctively knew that they might be done for.

“I’m going to use a spell to make pwetty flowuhs gwow on deiw heads!”

“Then I’ll use one to make deiw bodies smell like bwead!”

Being too young to understand the concept of restraint, the children relentlessly cast spells on the soldiers caught in the traps.

The former king’s men’s screams could be heard all over the estate.

※

Canon was currently in his room, resting, along with Mine and Bombe, who had come to check on him. His only role during the fight with Epocha had been to support the adults from afar, but he’d still come out of it with some wounds. As such, the mansion’s servants had been looking after him since he’d returned. The altered mana had made him ill, but as he’d left almost immediately, his body would definitely recover.

When he hadn’t been able to fight anymore, his father had told him to manage the estate in his absence. Since he had been of no use on the battlefield, Canon was determined to at least fulfill that task properly.

As he sat in bed, pondering over his duties as the next Earl of Mercure, Bombe, who had been sleeping on a chair nearby, suddenly raised his head just as one of the small children from the schoolhouse barged into the room.

“Lots of bad people!” the little girl exclaimed. “They all got caught in the webs!”

“Huh? The webs? Are you talking about the traps in the garden?” Bombe asked.

The girl nodded vigorously. “Yesh! The othews awe alweady playing! Come play with us too! Huwwy!”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Bombe said, standing up on weary legs and letting the child lead him outside by the hand.

Mine and Canon stood up and went after them.

They went to check the traps set up around the perimeter of the estate, only to find a bunch of large lumps covered in flowers that somehow smelled like bread.

“What are those things? Guys, there’s weird things caught in the traps,” Bombe said, looking up at the strange objects that had been lifted up by the traps.

Canon approached one of the flower lumps and noticed it moving. He also thought he heard a muffled voice coming from it.

“The little ones turned them into these...*things*, but I think they’re actually humans,” he said. “I want to hear what they’re doing here, so let’s restore one back to their regular appearance.”

On one lump he undid the spells the children had cast, and, sure enough, a man in a soldier’s uniform emerged.

“Soupir II ordered us to come raid the Mercure estate! I’ll tell you everything I know, so please spare my life!” the man immediately confessed, visibly terrified.

Soupir II? That’s the name of the former king, Canon thought.

Taking a good look at the soldier, he saw that his clothes seemed of good quality and looked very similar to those the royal palace’s soldiers usually wore. Perhaps he was telling the truth.

“The other flower lumps must be soldiers as well, I assume. Right, didn’t mother pick a fight with the former king? I assume he must’ve sent his army to attack us in retaliation—though his men ended up defeated by the traps and the little ones.”

Regardless of whether the attack had been a success or not, Canon couldn’t let that man go unpunished after he tried taking revenge on his mother. He was *angry*.

As the substitute head of the family, it was his duty to settle this matter once and for all.

“I’m going to go take care of a little job. Look after the house while I’m gone,” he said.

Mine and Bombe immediately understood what he was trying to do.

“Wait, Canon, does your body feel all right? Are you going to go

against the former king?" Mine asked.

"I'll stay back and keep an eye on things here. The little ones seem to still want to play, so how about you take a few of them along with you?" Bombe said.

Canon nodded before heading to the former king's current residence, a handful of the youngest children in tow.

The next day, someone found all the people inside the former king's home unconscious and smelling of bread, though their lives were apparently not in danger. Soupir was the worst off, his body not only covered in flowers and loaves of bread, but he was also frozen solid, with cute quill pens and seaweed growing from the ice. It was a peculiar sight.

For a while, stories about a ghost coming to curse people in their own homes at night spread around the royal capital of the Tête Kingdom.

Side Story 2: The Husband, the Wife, and the Wannabe Secret Lover

After returning from Lèvres, we all went back to our usual routines. As my overall health felt much better now that I had regained my memories, I began seriously planning our move with Char and the twins, since the Tête Kingdom had become quite unwelcoming to us.

Char and I were currently sitting side by side on a sofa in the office, the midday sun streaming through the windows. A rough map of the continent was set on the table, and the two of us were discussing where we would relocate to.

I'd heard from the children that the former king had taken advantage of our absence to try raiding the estate. That coward couldn't even face us directly. Fortunately, his troops got caught in our traps and repelled by the children, but I refused to let this happen again. I especially didn't want to risk putting the youngest students in danger. What a shame. I'd just started thinking it would be nice for the children to have more contact with the outside world, so I felt even more conflicted about this whole thing.

"Lam. I agree that we have to move, but you worry too much about the kids," Char said.

"Well, *you* don't worry enough. Should I remind you of what happened with Gourdin?" I retorted, and he didn't have anything to say in response.

After we'd arrested him, Gourdin had kept escaping from any rooms and cells we'd locked him in and had even tried to break out of the mansion. Every time, he'd tried to harm us or the children, so I ended up sealing his mana and banishing him from the estate. I asked the twins to deal with him, and they told me that they'd "dumped him in a forest." I was a bit curious about which forest it was they'd left him in.

"Going back to the topic of the move, I found a suitable location near the ocean for us earlier," I said.

"Earlier?" Char asked.

"Yes. Prince Flèche sent me a magic message to tell me that

there is an entire island that's currently unoccupied in Lèvres's territory."

"What?! I can't believe that prince's gall. He's always trying to get you into his kingdom."

"But I think it's not too bad of an offer. The people of Lèvres have been slowly changing their ways recently, and the government is trying to completely eradicate any discrimination toward mages. Besides, we'll be living on an island, so we don't really have to worry about anyone coming to attack us and we can take it easy."

And since we could all use teleportation magic, living on an island should pose us no issue. All we needed to do was create a teleportation device for the staff who couldn't use magic, and we would be set. We could take anyone who wished to keep working for us along and hire more personnel in Lèvres.

"We still know so little about the world. How about we temporarily accept his offer until we decide on our forever home?" I suggested.

Char seemed to think for a bit before suddenly turning to face me. "Hey, Lam?"

"What is it?"

"It's finally just the two of us in here, so how long do you plan on talking about the move?"

"Hmm?" I looked up at him and tilted my head to one side, confused, eliciting a sigh from him.

I felt like he'd been sighing a lot recently.

"Is there something else we need to discuss?" I asked.

"I was a moron for expecting you to understand romance. Is it because you were raised by an elfin?" he mused, not bothering to sugarcoat his words.

Then, he leaned forward and dropped a kiss on my temple.

"Char, you're heavy," I said, trying to push him away.

"You really know how to ruin the mood, huh?" Char said. Despite his words, he was smiling.

I knew I wasn't in the best position to criticize him, but my husband sure was strange. But despite his quirks, I found myself utterly charmed by him.

"Sorry for changing the topic, but I'm thinking of going to look for my teacher soon. Lance told me he knew of a hidden elfin

village, but since he just disappeared out the blue, I'm not really sure where to look."

"Can't you locate him with your magic?"

"I could, but he willingly chose to leave. I was a bit hesitant to forcibly summon him in these circumstances."

Char fell silent.

"So, about that. I'm actually in contact with that wanna-be secret lover of yours through communication magic," he told me awkwardly.

"What? Did you two become *that* close?"

"We're not, but our interests just so happen to align. We just exchange news from time to time," Char said, pulling out a card that looked like a piece of identification from his pocket. "He sent me this recently. He says it's proof that I'm officially a 'follower of Aurora.'"

I had no idea what he was talking about. "What's that thing?" I asked, staring at the suspicious card.

"Your wanna-be secret lover said he dissolved the Motar Faith and established a new religion to replace it—the Aurora Faith. Then, he sent me that thing even though I didn't ask."

"That boy... I can't believe he's doing such ridiculous things behind my back again!"

He'd finally stepped down from his role as the Holy Father of the Motar Faith, so why had he put himself in a similar position again?

Not only that, but he created a religion without even telling me about it!

I needed to give him a stern talking to the next time I saw him.

"Wait, Char. You're telling me that you're carrying that suspicious card on your person at all times?" I asked.

He hurriedly put it back in his pocket, perhaps scared that I would try to take it from him.

"It's not suspicious. Besides, I've officially converted from the Motar Faith to the Aurora Faith."

I threw him a suspicious glare. This was my first time hearing about this. Then again, I could easily picture Char happily agreeing to convert to a religion that had my name.

"Although..." Char paused, pulling me close with a satisfied smile on his lips. "I don't really need that piece of paper, I suppose.

As long as I can be by your side, anything is fine by me.”

How unfair of him to say something like that. Now, I couldn’t lecture him anymore!

And so, I simply stayed silent and leaned into his chest.



Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing the third volume of *The Countess Is a Coward No More! This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break* (I just realized how long that title is). I'm very grateful to you all for sticking with me until now!

In this volume, we finally see all three of Lam's disciples together, and the issues caused by the Motar Faith have finally been resolved—for now. In the web novel version, Lam and the Mercures moved to an island and lived happily ever after—"The End." However, for the published version, I decided to introduce a new twist and continue the story. That's right—*that* woman is alive! As for the Mercures, I intend to keep them going strong!

Once again, TCB-sensei drew gorgeous illustrations for this volume! Lam, Char, and the background on the cover are all so, so, so, so, so, so, so, *so* beautiful! My heart always thumps in my chest every time I receive the files for the covers of the volumes, and I inevitably find myself exclaiming "Ooh!" out loud. Lam's red dress and the rose petals scattered around give her a fiery and ardent look! I keep grinning when I see how much closer she and Char are standing on the cover compared to the two previous volumes. Lance looks lovely as well! When I first saw the illustration, I was smiling the whole day. The second volume featured Flèche on the cover, and the third Lance. I've arbitrarily decided that I want Épée to get his turn one day as well.

For this volume, I once again found myself stressing over the revisions and edits. But thanks to my editor's support, this volume saw the light of day. I'm so thankful to them—both for this series and *Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain*. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them, as well as you, the reader, for your continuous support. It's all thanks to you that I was able to publish this volume of *The Countess Is a Coward No More! This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break* (this title really is way too long). Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

I hope to see you all again soon!

Ageha Sakura






S
W
N





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Countess Is a Coward No More! This Reincarnated Witch Just Wants a Break Volume 3
by Ageha Sakura

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon
Edited by Jasmine Thone

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 Ageha Sakura
Illustrations by TCB
Cover illustration by TCB

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by OVERLAP, Inc.
This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025