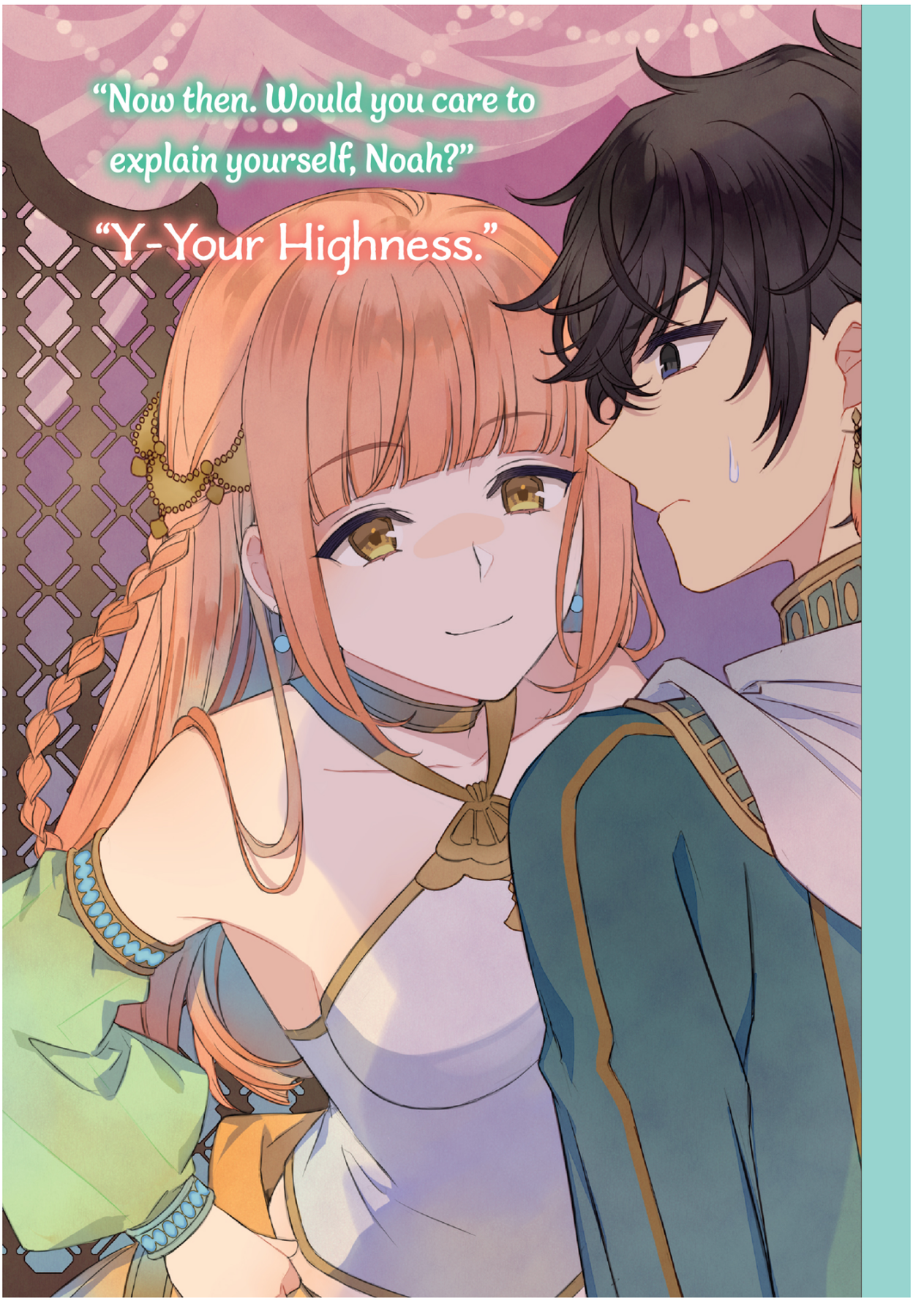

TOUKO AMEKAWA
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4
The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess


TOUKO
AMEKAWA
Illustration
KUROYUKI
4
The Legendary Witch
Is Reborn as an Oppressed
Princess


The congregation stirred with quiet murmurs as Noah brought the blade to his lips and placed upon it a solemn kiss.
“All that I am and will be has belonged to Your Highness.”


Noah guided her gracefully into his arms. His hand slid to her back, supporting her with a tenderness as if she were something precious and fragile.
Lowering his voice, he leaned closer to her ear and whispered to her.
“Dia.”
Hearing her name in that low, coarse voice sent a shiver down her spine.


"Now then. Would you care to explain yourself, Noah?"
"Y-Your Highness."

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Prologue

Lemilsia's king had, for some time now, been a broken man.

"It was clear from the start that he was unfit to wear the crown," the courtiers had whispered among themselves. The king had harbored an intense hatred for his elder brother, orchestrating a coup to strip him of his birthright and claim the throne for himself.

Then, one day, a witch with opal-colored eyes arrived in the kingdom. The witch, whose eyes reflected all the different types of magic, was accompanied by a black-haired youth. When the king confronted this youth, it was said that his very soul was torn from him.

No common citizen knew of this event, but within the walls of the castle, there were those who remembered it well.

Seven years had passed since that fateful encounter, and now the Kingdom of Lemilsia stood on the brink of great change.

The kingdom's chief conjurer stood before the court and announced, "His Majesty, the king, has passed away."

None of the court showed signs of grief or confusion. To them, the king had long been nothing more than a cumbersome figurehead.

"Now that His Majesty has departed this life, there is but one among us fit to rule. In accordance with tradition, after three years of mourning, this individual shall ascend to the throne." The conjurer, clad in a black robe, turned to face the young man standing behind him. "Prince Sieghart."

The crown prince nodded before stepping forward.

The royal court, composed entirely of aristocrats, immediately knelt before him. Sieghart—now fifteen years of age—had been the de facto ruler of the kingdom since long before his father's death.

"While my father yet lived, you bore many hardships," he said. "For standing by me and supporting me in my youth, I extend my gratitude."

"Your Highness, we are unworthy of such words!" the nobles exclaimed, visibly moved.

Sieghart offered them a brief smile of gratitude before his expression hardened again.

"Now begins the truly hard work. Over the coming three years of mourning, I shall undertake the rites of purification, and through that, I shall inherit the power of my father. When that time comes, I shall awaken the strength of our kingdom's founder, King Reinard. And with that strength," he said, his obsidian eyes narrowing, "our kingdom shall wield the power to bring even the mightiest nations to their knees."

"Oh, Your Majesty! Our king!" the nobles cried in reverence.

Turning to the chief conjurer, Sieghart issued his next command. "Begin preparations for erecting the barrier. Once the proclamation has been issued to all citizens, restrict any movement in and out of the kingdom."

The chief conjurer wore a bemused expression. "The border closure during the royal mourning period is something that is known to everyone. Should we not proceed without further delay?"

"I want to minimize the confusion," Sieghart replied. "What will happen three years from now will greatly affect the people as well."

"As you command," the chief conjurer said, bowing deeply.

Sieghart allowed a grin to cross his lips. The courtiers of the royal court were already issuing orders to their subordinates, the chamber bustling with activity. He slowly lowered himself onto the throne—something forbidden to him while his father still lived.

He whispered to himself, "When the preparations are complete, I shall go to claim her. Wait for me, Adelheid."

The confrontation with his cousin came to his mind's eye.

Leonhard, at last, I will take her back from you.

Chapter 1

Within the cathedral of Avianoia Royal Castle, the kingdom's most distinguished figures had assembled.

It was not only Karlheinz—the chief conjurer of the kingdom—and the various ministers of the court who stood in attendance. In a specially appointed gallery on the second floor, members of the royal family had taken their seats: Queen Consort Cassandra; Crown Prince Wilhelm, the eldest at seventeen years of age; and Prince Ehrenfried and Princess Emilia, both sixteen.

Seated behind them, upon a king's chair, was King Volkhard, resting his cheek on his hand as he gazed down at the proceedings below.

Finally, the moment had arrived. Stepping forward in his ceremonial robes of state, Karlheinz announced the commencement of the ceremony.

"It is time for the conferral of knighthood to begin."

Throughout many realms, conjurers entrusted with the protection of their monarchs and lands were awarded the title of *knight*. The Kingdom of Avianoia was one such realm. While commonly referred to as conjurers in daily life, magicians who served under the direct command of the state were classified as knights.

Among them, exceptionally skilled knights without hereditary titles could be awarded a unique station: Knight Peer. This rank was rarely granted, and in Avianoia, the last to receive it had been Karlheinz, more than a decade ago.

And so, due to the novelty of the occasion, there was an air of excitement among those gathered. Observing the assembly with a single sweeping glance, Karlheinz turned to the girl who stood in front of the altar.

"Princess Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz, if you would do the honors."

The moment Princess Claudia stepped forward, the congregation released a collective gasp of admiration.

Claudia moved with grace, her milk-tea-colored hair

shimmering faintly in the light of the candles. Intricately braided and styled into an elegant updo, it was adorned with a glass tiara. The tiara accentuated her features, lending her an almost divine radiance.

Her attire, befitting the sanctity of the ceremony, was a white gown. The silhouette followed the lines of her form, enhanced by intricate gold embroidery.

This gown, like all her garments, had not been tailored by the hands of a craftsman but conjured through the magic of her loyal attendant—a secret that no small number of envious noblewomen had tried to uncover, unsuccessfully.

“Princess Claudia grows more radiant by the day,” one guest murmured. The faux pas of breaking the silence of such a solemn ceremony went unpunished only because all in attendance felt the same. “She possesses such refined grace despite only being thirteen years of age.”

Claudia smiled at those gathered as she left the altar and made her way toward the crimson-carpeted aisle. She was draped in a ceremonial mantle, which emphasized her small frame—smaller than most others her age. Wide eyes framed by long lashes, a straight nose, and small lips painted a delicate red—all contributed to a beauty both adorable and refined.

After surveying the crowd, Claudia closed her eyes briefly, allowing her happy expression to fade into a mask of solemnity. When she reopened them, the atmosphere in the cathedral seemed to deepen.

When she spoke, her voice was clear and beautiful. “Come forth, my Noah.”

At her words, the heavy doors of the cathedral creaked open.

The congregation turned, squinting into the sunlight until the tall figure of a dark-haired youth emerged. His gaze lay unwaveringly on the princess in front of him. She met his eyes with her own. He marched forward without hesitation along the crimson carpet toward the altar.

The young man’s strikingly handsome features were enough to draw audible gasps from the onlookers; his elegant, almond-shaped eyes had a coldness about them, and yet also a sincerity, bearing a resolute strength that seemed unshakable. Though his physique was muscular, a certain leanness showed that he had

room to grow.

The youth's polished boots came to a halt before the princess.

"Your Highness," he said as he knelt before her in his black military uniform.

The scene of the two of them in the cathedral was so stunning, it could've been mistaken for a painting.

"My loyal servant. My sword and my shield," Claudia said, repeating the words she had memorized. Extending her right hand into the air, Claudia weaved her magic. Silver light coalesced around her fingers, forming the shape of a sword. "Swear to me your eternal loyalty, and in return, I shall grant you my strength and bestow upon you the honor you deserve."

Noah bowed his head before her.

"As my knight, you shall be my pride and hold yourself with dignity." Claudia held the spectral blade, now complete, over Noah. "Now, swear to me your eternal loyalty."

The method of taking this most sacred oath varied—some laid the blade upon their servant's shoulder, while others pressed it lightly to their neck.

All eyes were fixed on Claudia and Noah, eager to see how this pair would conduct their version of the ceremony.

Noah knelt and raised a gloved hand to gently grasp the edge of the blade—not to repel it but to lift it delicately, as though cupping a maiden's chin. The congregation stirred with quiet murmurs as Noah brought the blade to his lips and placed upon it a solemn kiss.

Then he finally spoke.

"From the very beginning... All that I am and will be has belonged to Your Highness."

A soft laugh escaped Claudia's lips before she raised her voice to proclaim, "Then I declare before all present: In the name of His Majesty the king, I hereby affirm that Noah is now a proud knight of this realm!"

Cheers erupted throughout the cathedral. At sixteen, Noah had reached the age of majority in the kingdom, and with it, he'd obtained the noble title of Knight Peer.

***

After the knighting ceremony concluded, Claudia retreated to the cathedral's waiting room, where she removed her ceremonial mantle and gave it to her ever-loyal attendant, as she always did.

The mantle, adorned with embroidery and gemstones, was far too heavy for her slender thirteen-year-old shoulders. She let out a small sigh of relief.

"Your performance earlier was truly magnificent, Your Highness," he said after taking the white mantle and folding it carefully over his arm.

"Oh my, 'magnificent'?" Claudia replied with a soft laugh, finding the whole thing ridiculous now that they were tucked away in a quiet room. "I wasn't the star of the ceremony. That was you, Noah. You were resplendent. I couldn't be prouder."

Reaching out, she gently patted his head, a gesture she'd been making since he was a child. His soft, tousled black hair had retained its pleasant texture over the years, and she found herself smiling fondly.

"Congratulations on your knighthood, my dear, sweet Noah."

"Your Highness, thank you for your kind words." Despite how he replied, his expression was troubled.

Having recently turned sixteen, Noah seemed to be maturing more by the day. In most kingdoms, sixteen marked the age of adulthood, and this milestone had brought with it a shift in his outlook. He had always been a quiet child, but now his reticence had grown into a maturity that belied his youth.

"The titles and ranks bestowed upon me matter little," he continued. "Whether as your servant or your knight, my duty remains unchanged."

"Oh? And what might that duty be?"

"To dedicate everything I am to you, Your Highness," he said, his unwavering gaze meeting hers. "If you would permit it, I would require nothing more."

His sincerity had never changed throughout the years. Claudia knew that she once would have rebuked such declarations. She would have insisted that Noah deserved to live his own life, free from devotion to her.

But now, Claudia understood him better. Her wielding his life for her purposes while entrusting her own life to his care—this was how Noah desired to live. To accept all of this and give it to

him was the highest honor that she could bestow upon him—higher than the title of knight.

"During the ceremony," she began, her voice soft, "news reached us about your homeland."

Noah's expression grew still as she spoke, lowering his eyes slightly.

"Indeed, the Kingdom of Lemilsia has sealed its borders because their king has passed away," Claudia explained. "Under the guise of a mourning period, they've erected a magical barrier, limiting movement in or out of the country."

"I recall hearing that such rituals once existed in that kingdom, long ago."

"Perhaps your ancestor, Reinard, left behind some form of magic."

The unusual activity in Lemilsia had been detected a week prior. Formerly crown prince of the kingdom, Noah had renounced any claim he had to the throne at the age of nine, leaving his homeland behind to serve Claudia. Two years ago, however, he had encountered his cousin, Sieghart—a meeting that had unveiled some unsettling truths.

Claudia had uncovered Sieghart's involvement with the dispersal of cursed magical artifacts and other suspicious activities. She had refrained from doing anything rash, choosing instead to proceed with careful planning before confronting him. However, they had recently received the news that Noah's uncle, Lemilsia's king, had passed away. Sieghart, it seemed, was now poised to ascend the throne. And now they had learned that Lemilsia had erected a magical barrier at its borders as a part of its observance of a long three-year mourning period.

"Word of the impending closure of the border was circulated in advance," Claudia said. "Cedric managed to leave the country in time, though it appears he was the only one allowed to do so."

"Do you believe the barrier was designed to keep enemies out or to trap the citizens within?" Noah asked, deep in thought. "Like the barrier surrounding the underwater academy..."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it were the latter. Or, at least, it wouldn't surprise me if it functions the same way."

Noah sighed. "Whatever the nature of the barrier, I can break it on your command. However, I suspect you have no intention of

forcing your way in just yet."

"Indeed, the timing is premature," Claudia agreed. "If Lemilsia is spreading cursed artifacts across the world, a single misstep could result in innocent lives being lost—especially those most vulnerable."

As Claudia lowered her eyes, Noah knelt, taking her hand and looking up at her.

"One by one, the curses are being dismantled," he said firmly. "You've devoted seven years to this effort, Your Highness. Please, don't appear so heartbroken."

"Noah…"

"When all is ready," he continued, "I am certain everything will proceed exactly as you have planned. Until then, you must keep your spirits up."

I shouldn't be surprised that he's matured so much, Claudia mused. *He's stood by my side and been my rock for the past seven years.*

She smiled softly and placed her hand on his head once more.

"During the ceremony, you kissed my sword," she said.

"Ah, yes. I did, didn't I?"

"Whatever possessed you to do such a thing?" she asked, her lips curving into a playful grin. She had left the specifics of the ceremony entirely to Noah's discretion. Knowing his preference for simplicity, she had expected him to keep things understated. Yet his impassioned gesture had taken even her by surprise.

"It was so gallant," she said playfully. "I must confess, it made my heart flutter a little."

Noah looked at her seriously. Years ago, such teasing would have turned his cheeks red, leaving him fumbling for words. But of late, Noah had grown into a man of quiet confidence, unperturbed by Claudia's lighthearted jests.

Now, he even allowed himself a faintly mischievous smirk, one that carried a subtle challenge.

"If I succeeded in stirring Your Highness's heart, then I can say the effort was worth it."

Oh my, Noah's become just a touch impudent, Claudia mused, narrowing her eyes in mock reproach as she pursed her lips.

Noah, unfazed, added, "I once thought receiving a knighthood unnecessary. But now that the ceremony is complete, I realize it

was an unexpected blessing."

"Oh?" Claudia prompted.

Still smiling, Noah lowered his gaze slightly. "It feels as though I've been able to prove to the entire kingdom that I belong to you, Your Highness."

Claudia chuckled softly, feeling as though she were humoring an incorrigible child.

At that moment, the door to the waiting room burst open, and a young woman rushed in, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Noah! Claudia! Congratulations, both of you!"

"Emi!" Claudia exclaimed as she recognized her older sister, before catching the sobbing Emilia in a warm embrace.

As Noah rose to his feet, he watched as the sixteen-year-old princess clung tightly to her younger sister.

"Why are you crying, Emi? Is something the matter?" Claudia asked, her demeanor shifting into the innocence expected of a thirteen-year-old.

Still clinging to her, Emilia sniffed and replied through her tears, "How could I not cry? *My* little Claudia, presiding over a knighting ceremony! You were adorable... Beautiful... Absolutely radiant! Truly, the world's most perfect princess!"

"Tee hee! That makes me so very happy! But the world's most perfect princess is you, of course, Emi!"

"Impossible! No matter whose opinion it is, I won't concede—*you* are the world's most perfect princess!" Emilia declared tearfully.

Releasing Claudia, Emilia turned to Noah, her teary eyes now fixed on him. "Noah, truly—truly, congratulations! From serving Claudia since you were nine, rising from an orphan's station to being awarded a knighthood. It's all because of your tireless efforts. Ugh, I-I'm so...so...!"

Emilia couldn't finish her sentence without once again breaking into tears of happiness.

"Princess Emilia," Noah interjected gently, before conjuring a handkerchief, "I am deeply honored by your words, but might I suggest you wipe your tears first?"

"Indeed, Emilia," came a new voice as two figures entered the room: Crown Prince Wilhelm and Prince Ehrenfried.

Taking in Emilia's tearful state, Wilhelm let out a sigh, his

expression a mix of exasperation and fondness. “Ah, what a sight. I know it’s tears of joy, but you’ll only worry Claudia like this, won’t you?” He turned to his younger sister. “Isn’t that right, Claudia?”

“No, no!” Claudia insisted, hugging Emilia once more. “I’m so happy that Emi came to give me a hug!”

“Oh my. Our little sister is too good for this world…” Wilhelm muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead as though overwhelmed by her goodness.

At seventeen, Wilhelm had grown into a fine young man. His youthful idealism had matured into a sense of unwavering justice, earning him the admiration of even the kingdom’s common folk.

The tearful Emilia, on the other hand, was the subject of numerous marriage proposals from foreign princes. One night, with a blush on her face, Emilia had revealed to Claudia, with the caveat that Claudia revealed it to no other living soul, that she corresponded each night via magical mail with one of the princes.

Lately, Emilia’s affection for Claudia had only grown stronger, likely because she knew she would soon be leaving the kingdom. For her part, Claudia intended to treasure every moment of her sister’s love before Emilia’s inevitable parting for marriage.

“Honestly,” Ehrenfried sighed softly, lowering his intelligent eyes. “You’re both far too sentimental. Wilhelm, Emilia—you should act more composed, like me or Noah.”

“Ehren!” Claudia said with a giggle.

Ehrenfried bore faint shadows under his eyes, likely due to being constantly called to advise various magical organizations across multiple kingdoms. Though he claimed he did it out of his love for learning, he was perpetually overworked by his responsibilities in magical research. Still, over the years, his delicate features had grown even more refined, endearing him to his many admirers.

“Claudia is thirteen now,” he continued matter-of-factly. “Of course, she handled the ceremony flawlessly. As for Noah, his knighthood was inevitable. I fail to see why you’re all so emotional.”

“Oh, really, Ehrenfried,” Emilia retorted with a sniff as she wiped her tears with the handkerchief Noah had proffered. “I saw you nearly tear up during the ceremony yourself!”

“W-Well…” Ehrenfried stammered.

Claudia giggled as she watched her siblings banter. “Thank you for watching over me. I know you were all cheering me on!”

“Claudia…” They all turned to her, touched.

“But,” Claudia said, “today’s congratulations shouldn’t be for me. They should all go to Noah!” Taking a step closer to Noah, she looked upon him with a radiant smile. “Isn’t that right, Noah?”

“Your Highness…” Noah shifted in place. He’d seen Claudia’s true intentions.

Though he’d declared that he didn’t need the recognition, Noah’s efforts had been undeniable. It was precisely this dedication that had earned him the rarely conferred title of Knight Peer, a distinction that all present knew was well deserved.

“Securing Father’s approval was an extraordinary feat, you know,” Claudia said, still smiling.

“She’s right,” Wilhelm said. “Even our father has acknowledged you, Noah. Hold your head high.”

Claudia, too, wished for her loyal knight to bask in well-deserved praise. She felt a deep desire to shower Noah with every ounce of recognition he had earned.

“There’s a party awaiting us,” she said. “Father has promised to attend, and I suspect Karlheinz has been brimming with excitement, even if he doesn’t show it.”

“I’m not sure I want to witness Karlheinz in such a state, even as his student,” Noah replied wryly.

“It’s a rare sight, so we absolutely can’t miss it! Now, let’s head off—”

Claudia abruptly fell silent.

At the same moment, Noah froze beside her, his magic stirring in response. Both of them acted in unison, their magical awareness surging as they probed their surroundings.

Something’s coming.

Claudia gave Noah a look, and he immediately conjured a barrier around the room. The defensive magic solidified just in time, quelling the brunt of the disturbance. Even so, the air trembled violently, sending a wave coursing through the space.

Emilia let out a short scream.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” yelled Wilhelm.

The three older siblings clutched their ears against the sudden, painful resonance. Though Noah’s barrier had mitigated the

impact, the unnerving vibrations left a ringing pain in their ears.

Something has come into contact with the kingdom's protective barrier, Claudia realized. *The disturbance is directly above the royal castle—right overhead.*

Raising her head, she addressed her loyal servant, who was already standing protectively before her.

"Noah."

"Yes, Your Highness," he replied, lifting Claudia into his arms.

Claudia looked back toward her siblings, flashing them a confident smile.

"I'm going to investigate with Noah!"

"Claudia?!" Emilia shouted, voice laced with concern.

There was no need for detailed instructions; Noah knew how to proceed. He would teleport them directly to the very site of the barrier's disturbance.

What a dreadful feeling. Even without seeing it...

And with that, the pair vanished.

***

King Volkhard halted in his tracks and fixed his gaze upon the sky. Karlheinz, who walked beside him, also stopped to calmly examine what lay above.

The kingdom's protective barrier, a masterpiece of magical craftsmanship woven by the nation's finest mages led by Karlheinz, was designed to repel all unauthorized teleportation and offensive spells from foreign powers. It was the pinnacle of defensive magic, nearly impervious to any threat. Yet, at that moment, something was trying to break through it.

"Well," Volkhard said with a throaty chuckle, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the anomaly. "What do you suppose that is, Karlheinz?"

The object was wreathed in gold, reflecting the sunlight.

"It does not appear to be a spell," Karlheinz replied, "and yet, it is exuding some kind of strange magic. It is as though a star itself has descended from the heavens."

Karlheinz stepped between the king and the potential invader, his robes sweeping behind him.

"It appears that the barrier is holding," he explained, "but the

possibility that it is dangerous remains. The object appears to be of considerable weight."

"Is that right?" Volkhard asked with a grin. "How interesting."

Whether the object had targeted the royal castle or arrived by pure coincidence, the king's curiosity had been piqued.

"Lower the barrier and bring it into the castle," Volkhard commanded.

"Your Majesty," Karlheinz said, a note of warning in his voice, "I must protest. Should this whim result in harm coming to you—"

"Who said anything about handling it myself?" Volkhard interrupted, gesturing dismissively. "We have just the right person for the task. Besides, see? It seems I needn't summon him."

Volkhard turned in anticipation. Karlheinz sighed, not needing to look to know who was coming.

"Your Majesty," the chief conjurer began, but Volkhard cut him off.

"My daughter's servant has been newly knighted—it would be a shame to let the ceremony be the only spectacle at his coming out party," he said before gesturing to the gathering crowd. "Besides, even the court has gathered to witness the spectacle."

At that moment, the telltale sign of a teleportation spell manifested. Out of the light stepped the young swordsman cradling Princess Claudia in his arms. Upon seeing the king, the raven-haired youth gently set Claudia down and knelt before him.

Cheers erupted among the gathered nobles when they saw him.

"Look, the princess's knight!"

"A knight born of this land, trained by the esteemed Karlheinz himself, and sworn to protect Princess Claudia!" exclaimed an older gentleman with a nod of approval.

Volkhard chuckled softly, stepping closer to appraise the debutant knight.

"Well done. A dependable servant always arrives precisely when needed."

"I merely followed the command of my liege," Noah replied. "It is Her Highness who possesses foresight."

"Father!" Claudia interjected, her voice bright and innocent as she pointed skyward. "What is that sparkling thing in the sky?"

Her carefree innocence starkly contrasted with how she had

comported herself during the ceremony.

"That," Volkhard said, amused, "is something attempting to breach our barrier. It reeks of foul magic."

"Oh? Then, Father..." Claudia tilted her head with a playful smile. Her innocent act seemed out of place, for beneath the surface was the composure and authority of a ruler. "Can Noah destroy it?"

"Ha!" Volkhard laughed heartily, delighted by her audacious suggestion. He turned to his chief conjurer. "Lower the barrier, Karlheinz."

"As my king commands," Karlheinz replied. He sighed and then, with a flick of his wrist, the barrier rippled, its translucent surface parting to allow the invasive presence entry.

What descended from the sky elicited gasps and trembling among the nobles.

"What... What is that?"

"It can't be!"

The entity revealed itself as a magical beast. It was larger than an ox, with a lion's body and the head and wings of an eagle.

"A griffin," Volkhard mused.

Usually, a griffin wouldn't be cause for concern, but this one was out of the ordinary. It writhed in agony, and let out a grating cry as it fell. One of its golden wings appeared to be afflicted by something, and Claudia believed that was the cause behind this griffin's more violent behavior.

The beast's eyes locked onto her as it fell. Perceiving her as the weakest among the gathered figures, it tried to steady itself midair, its talons extended toward her.

Then, Noah stepped forward, flourishing his sword toward the griffin in a flash of steel. He slashed his sword diagonally, and the air seemed to split. From it, a burst of wind buffeted the griffin, but it was able to withstand the onslaught. The nobles began to shout in a panic.

"What's going on?! It's completely unscathed!"

"Did his magic miss?!"

Fools, Volkhard thought. *What are you even watching? His strike was not meant to wound.*

"Step back, Your Highness," Noah told Claudia calmly.

"Thank you, Noah!" Claudia said as she dashed to her father's side. "I'll stay behind Father."

Volkhard extended his arm to shield her with his cloak, before returning his watchful eye to the fight before him.

“Claudia,” he said, “your knight refrained from attacking outright to slow the griffin down, didn’t he?”

“Yes! Because if he’d struck it then…” Claudia peeked out from beneath the cloak with a giggle. “It would’ve messed up my hair!”

“Ha!”

A terrible cry silenced all further chatter as the griffin slammed into the ground. Standing atop the beast’s back was Noah, his blade plunged deep into its spine.

Cheers erupted from the previously terrified nobles.

“Incredible! A single griffin could devastate an entire town, yet he felled it with such ease!”

Noah leaped lightly from the griffin’s back, dismissing his conjured blade as he knelt before the king.

“It is done, Your Majesty. Your Highness.”

“Well done, Noah!” Claudia cheered.

“Not bad,” Volkhard said. “Was your first skirmish as a knight underwhelming?”

“Not at all, Your Majesty. It is an honor beyond measure to wield my blade before your eyes.”

Volkhard laughed, turning to Karlheinz.

“You must feel proud as his mentor. Surely you’ll praise him?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Karlheinz replied coolly. “If Noah could not handle something of this level, he’d be unfit to protect the princess.”

The conjurer then looked toward the fallen griffin, his expression turning grave. He stepped toward its carcass and extended his hand.

“More importantly, Your Majesty…”

Volkhard followed his gaze.

The griffin’s flesh had transformed. What had once been feather, flesh, and fur was now solid gold.

The nobles began to murmur as they too noticed the change. Noah stepped between Claudia and the carcass, scowling at it.

“What is it, Karlheinz?”

“It’s pure gold, Your Majesty,” the mage replied after a moment’s pause.

“What?”

“What was just moments ago a living creature is now a solid mass of pure gold—it has transformed entirely into *metal.*”

***

Having returned to her room within the royal castle, Claudia sat in a chair by the window, gazing out at where the griffin had been felled.

She had exchanged her ceremonial white gown for a deep-crimson dress—simple yet elegant, tailored for everyday wear. Though lighter than her formal attire, it was warm enough to ward off the chill. Her hair, typically sleek and straight, had been released from its elaborate braids and styled into soft, flowing waves using magic.

Now comfortably attired, Claudia sipped a cup of tea prepared by Noah, the warmth spreading pleasantly through her. She glanced up at the man of the hour, who stood beside her dutifully.

“You may rest as well, Noah,” she said gently.

“Thank you, Your Highness. However, I’ve hardly expended any energy,” he replied. He didn’t appear to be lying, having taken mere moments to dispatch the griffin. Claudia chuckled softly, before leaning forward and placing her chin in her hands as she once again gazed out the window.

“That lump of solid gold… I wonder how many citizens could live in luxury for the rest of their lives with its worth?”

The golden remains of the griffin were now surrounded by several conjurers, deliberating over how to handle its disposal. A council would no doubt need to be convened to decide its fate.

“Father has ordered an investigation to determine if the griffin was some kind of biological weapon from an enemy nation,” Claudia remarked. “Given that it targeted the castle and attempted to breach the barrier, I suppose it’s only natural to be wary.”

Noah listened to her silently.

“Still, its immense weight will make it troublesome to move, even after the analysis. I imagine Karlheinz will manage, though I’m sure he will be visited by another bout of stomach pains for his troubles,” she added with a teasing smile.

“Your Highness,” Noah finally interjected, watching her as she dangled her legs where she sat. “Should you not examine the

griffin yourself before your father decides its fate?”

“Oh? And why is that?” Claudia inquired, arching a brow.

“Because that griffin is not a weapon—it is a cursed creature transformed into gold,” Noah answered, casting his stare below.

Claudia smiled as she continued to look out the window, her chin in her hands.

“I suppose you’re right. If I had to guess, I’d say that griffin was cursed and fled from somewhere else, only to fall here by chance.”

It had likely realized that it was going to fall and sought a safe place to land. The castle grounds, with its greenery, had probably seemed preferable to the crowded cityscape below.

“And its attempt to attack me…” Claudia mused. “That was a move made in desperation—to strike at the weakest-looking target in a bid to escape.”

She felt some pity for the creature. Yet, the moment it turned its talons toward her in Noah’s presence, its fate had been sealed. Regardless, even if it had been left alone, it likely would have perished soon enough.

“A curse that turns all things to gold…” Claudia murmured. “Whether living or not.”

“The Golden Falcon,” Noah muttered under his breath.

Claudia’s smile widened. “You remember the rumors, then? We heard them three years ago, in a kingdom built in a desert oasis. Their king had just passed away, and the entire nation was in chaos.”

“Ordinarily, a change in monarchy wouldn’t disrupt the populace so,” Noah remarked. “However, in that kingdom…”

“Yes. The only legitimate heir had gone missing. The queen, carrying her unborn child, had fled the palace and raised him in secret among the commoners for fifteen years.”

To find the lost prince, the palace had launched a frantic search, gathering every fifteen-year-old boy in the kingdom.

Claudia laughed softly, recalling the memory. “When you took on your adult appearance, I feared you’d be swept up in their search, so I assumed an adult guise myself and pretended to be your older sister. It was such fun, wasn’t it?”

“As long as Your Highness was satisfied,” Noah replied, though his expression betrayed that he didn’t remember that time so fondly.

Claudia giggled, her eyes drifting back to the window.

"The kingdom of gold and sand, Sharavia. Their national treasure, the 'Golden Falcon,' that was said to have helped their previous king build the nation in a thousand nights..."

She touched the cold glass with her fingers, the chill seeping into her skin.

"Tell me, Noah. Don't you think winters here in our kingdom are dreadfully cold?"

The comment seemed to come out of nowhere, but Noah's expression shifted subtly, as though he understood exactly what she meant.

Instead, he lifted his hand and asked, "Then, shall I adjust the room's temperature?"

"Magic could warm the room, yes." Claudia rested a finger against her cheek as though in deep contemplation. "But wouldn't it be nice to be somewhere with open skies, now that your knighting ceremony is complete?"

She put on her usual act, though she knew that Noah had already understood what she was asking.

"For example," she continued, her lips curving into a mischievous smile as if struck by sudden inspiration, "what if we traveled somewhere warm?"

"As Your Highness commands," Noah replied, bowing his head.

Claudia beamed at him. "There's a good boy."

***

The western continent's desert stretched like a golden ribbon across the continent, dividing the land into its northern and southern realms. Although the desert served as the sole bridge between the nations, it was a treacherous land where death claimed many who dared to cross.

Nonetheless, travel was a necessity; the economies and cultures of one great nation to the north and another to the south were intertwined through trade and migration.

Teleportation magic existed in this world, but such spells were neither universally accessible nor without their limits. Only conjurers of great skill could move things with great mass or over great distances. And so, the profession of desert guides took on

immense importance.

Many people dreamed of gaining wealth and undertook the perilous, days-long journey on foot or by caravan to trade their wares. And to these travelers, the most important stop on their journey was the great oasis at the heart of the desert. From this oasis, the kingdom of Sharavia was born, growing into a nation full of life despite its young age.

“Phew!” Stepping into the shade of a building, Claudia reached up to remove the veil covering her face, exhaling softly as the oppressive sun momentarily abated.

The sand reflected the sun’s harsh light, radiating heat and bathing everything in the kingdom in a golden glow.

A paved stone road, partially buried by the sand, extended toward the distant palace. Along its sides, merchants’ stalls stood in rows, their vendors enthusiastically hawking wares.

“Come, weary travelers! Dried meat to sustain you on your journey across the desert—priced fairly for you today!”

“Cool yourself with fresh papaya! Come, try a bite! I’ll even throw in a little something extra!”

The streets bustled with people carrying goods. The majority seemed to be travelers; the midday heat had driven most of the city’s residents indoors.

“It’s been three years since our last visit, but it seems even livelier than before. Don’t you agree, Noah?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Noah sighed, watching as she excitedly took in her surroundings.

His attire today differed from his usual formal garb. Following Claudia’s instructions, he had donned loose, embroidered garments in white, with a robe draped over his shoulders. His attention was fixed solely on her.

“Removing your veil under the bright sun may cause you to feel ill, Your Highness.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine,” Claudia replied cheerfully. “The frost magic you wove into my clothing is doing an excellent job of keeping me cool.”

She twirled, spreading her arms to demonstrate. Her dress was a vivid turquoise. Its soft, sheer fabric, puff sleeves, and airy design allowed Noah’s enchantment to circulate easily. The hem, where the turquoise deepened to a rich blue-green, was

embroidered with beads in hues of red and gold.

The dress, which Noah had made with his magic, was comfortable to wear in the intense heat of the desert and suited Claudia well.



“This country seems far more hospitable now than it did three years ago. Look,” Claudia said, gesturing with a nod of her head.

Noah followed her eyes to the water channels running through the city. Clear, sparkling water coursed through them, seeming to come from beyond the grand gate that separated the city from the palace.

“Thanks to these waterways, the capital feels cooler than the surrounding desert. It’s a clever way to make life easier for those who can’t use magic,” Claudia observed.

“I believe the water is produced through magic rather than drawn from the oasis,” Noah noted.

“They must have skilled mages in their service. To employ mages that can produce such a vast supply of water in this environment must cost a fortune…” She gazed at the thriving city. That meant that this kingdom was producing the wealth necessary to afford that kind of luxury. “Hard to imagine that this was little more than a puddle in the sand a mere twenty years ago.”

This had once been the site of a small, fleeting oasis surrounded only by sand as far as the eye could see. The water had come and gone with the season. A few other nations dotted the desert, but those were limited to permanent oases that never dried up.

“Usually, the barren land here would never have been able to support a kingdom like this,” Claudia remarked. “At least, not until the late king, once a mere bandit, came into possession of a treasure of extraordinary power.”

The story had reached Claudia’s ears during her first visit to this kingdom three years prior.

She had been sitting in the corner of a lively tavern, listening to the other patrons speak as she sipped her fruit juice.

“The late king,” a drunken patron had said, slurring his words, “wrested the Golden Falcon from those wretches who oppressed us desert folk!”

“The Golden Falcon?” Claudia had asked in her guise as an adult.

“A treasure blessed by the gods of the desert,” the man explained, his voice swelling with pride. “The Falcon grants great riches! But the king… He didn’t hoard its wealth for himself. No, he

used it to become a ruler, to build this nation, and to give refuge to us, the impoverished wanderers of the sands."

His words drew other patrons into the conversation.

"He hired mages to expand the oasis, giving water freely to those who couldn't afford it!"

"He had the mages build us houses near the water, so we could live without fear of dying of thirst!"

"He erected markets and inns to draw merchants who crossed the desert and created our beautiful city!"

And yet, their beaming faces soon grew heavy with sorrow.

"He was a truly magnificent king... But now that he's gone, what are we to do?" one man lamented.

"The prince..." another said. "He is still here among us somewhere! For the king's sake, we must work together to find him!"

"Aye!" the room erupted.

Claudia asked, "And this Golden Falcon... What exactly is it?"

Her question prompted the men to exchange glances before launching into a flurry of explanations.

"They say it lays a golden egg every day!" one proclaimed confidently.

"No, no," another countered, "I heard from my grandfather that it's a giant mass of gold. That massive palace? It was built to house it. The king scraped off pieces little by little..."

"That's ridiculous! The king would never do something like that," a third interrupted. "The Falcon's just a metaphor for a map! It shows the location of gold veins buried beneath the desert sands!"

Each person presented a different story, each stranger than the last. Claudia tilted her head and giggled. But then, from a shadowy corner of the bar, a man who had previously remained silent now spoke up.

"It's magic. Whoever possesses the Falcon can turn living beings into solid gold."

Claudia turned sharply toward him. The man downed the last of his drink and placed a gold coin on the counter before standing to leave.

"Kind sir," Claudia called after him. "Might you share more of your knowledge about the Falcon?"

The man paused but did not turn. “That’s all I know,” he said before slowly striding toward the door. “And all I can tell you.”

“What a pity,” Claudia murmured. She sensed that he was telling the truth, so she did not pursue him, watching him disappear into the night.

“At the time, you weren’t able to transform into your adult form, so you stayed behind at the inn to avoid the kingdom’s decree at the time,” Claudia said to Noah. “That every boy in the kingdom around the age of fifteen, travelers included, would be stopped to determine if they might be the missing prince.”

“In hindsight, there was no real need for Your Highness to venture into the tavern,” Noah said, still unhappy about that night.

“There are some things one can only learn in a tavern. I’ve always stressed the importance of gathering information, haven’t I?”

That was, after all, how they always conducted their searches. Claudia and Noah traveled from kingdom to kingdom, listening to rumors that might lead them to cursed artifacts. Their visit to this desert nation three years prior had not been prompted by any specific threat but had been a part of their usual efforts to gather information.

“We were traveling through peaceful lands at the time,” Claudia continued. “Furthermore, I’d gone to the tavern only to confirm that this was a place that we didn’t need to investigate. Regardless, it was a failure on my part not to pursue the rumors about the Golden Falcon.”

“At the time, it was little more than a subject of local legend. There was no trace of any curse, nor any indication that it truly existed. Even now, there’s little to indicate that a curse exists here.”

As he spoke, Noah turned to look at the palace in the distance. The sun was beginning to set behind it.

“There is still no sign of a curse in this land,” he stated.

Claudia’s thoughts turned to the griffin that had fallen on the castle grounds in Avianoia. It had exuded an aura that had put her ill at ease. And yet, here in Sharavia’s capital, she could feel nothing like that.

“Could this nation truly have no connection to the griffin’s curse?” Claudia murmured before falling silent—just for that

silence to shatter.

"There he is!"

A group of men armed with spears rushed over, raising their voices the moment they caught sight of Noah. Judging by their uniforms, Claudia believed them to be soldiers of the kingdom.

"His age, build, that black hair, and that refined face—there's no mistaking it! He's the spitting image of his portrait!"

"Don't let him escape! But approach him with care and show him the utmost respect!"

At once, the soldiers surged forward. Noah's brow furrowed as he watched the men with bewilderment.

"What do they want?" he murmured.

"Noah," Claudia called to him.

"Yes, Your Highness."

She extended a hand, a gesture so familiar to him that no words were needed. In an instant, Noah had scooped her into his arms. Ignoring the soldiers entirely, he cast a teleportation spell.

"What?!" one soldier yelled, eyes wide as the pair vanished before them.

When they reappeared, the bustling streets of the capital had given way to the still expanse of the desert. Noah had chosen a secluded spot beneath the shadow of a great rock as their destination. Gently, he set Claudia back on her feet.

"Your Highness, did you get sand in your shoes?"

"I'm fine," she assured him with a smile. "Your magic always works wonders."

She adjusted her veil, casting a glance back toward the distant city. Against the sunlight, the capital glowed a bright gold.

"What on earth was that about? They clearly mistook you for someone else," Claudia said.

"It reminded me of the first time we visited."

I am inclined to think the same.

Claudia narrowed her eyes as she considered the implications of what had happened.

"Even so…" She stepped toward him. "How dare they presume to try and lay a hand on *my* Noah. A 'refined face,' they said? Well, at least they have some taste—but you are singular. There is no other like you."

"Y-Your Highness…" Noah stammered, momentarily caught off

guard.

Claudia leaned closer. “To confuse you with another—such a grievous insult cannot be overlooked.”

Her hand rose, brushing aside his dark bangs. She found that Noah’s obsidian eyes were beautiful even in the harsh sunlight.

“At that distance, they likely couldn’t see the color of your eyes clearly,” Claudia mused. “Still, their quarry must be someone of your age, build, and, of course, black hair…”

“Your Highness,” Noah interrupted. “If you wish to examine my face, I will kneel to make it easier.”

He had no room to retreat, his back pressed against the surface of the rock behind him. Claudia, standing before him, leaned closer still, thoroughly trapping him.

“Should we change your age? Or perhaps your hair color?”

“You may change whatever you wish,” Noah replied. “However, I must implore you to—”

Suddenly Noah pulled Claudia tight against him. The ground began to shake violently and Claudia turned to look over her shoulder into the vast desert as Noah held her tightly.

From within the shifting sands erupted a massive creature, bringing with it a cloud of golden dust.

“A sandcrawler,” Claudia murmured.

The creature was native to this region and bore an immense serpentine body and a head bereft of any features save a mouth that was wide enough to swallow a full-grown bull whole. Lacking eyes, it hunted by diving into the sands and detecting movement, a method that made it a fearsome predator.

“It’s disoriented because of our sudden appearance,” she observed.

Having located its prey, the sandcrawler opened its grotesque maw in anticipation, the erratic movements of its head signaling an incoming attack.

“I can’t say I care much for its appearance—Noah?”

“As you wish,” Noah replied before raising his hand toward the beast unhurriedly. Yet before he could act, Claudia gave him another order.

“Wait.”

Noah glanced at Claudia, who he still held closely to him with one arm, his eyebrow rising slightly in confusion.

“We shouldn’t move just yet.”

Noah looked back at the beast, his gaze drawn to a spot above its head. Now he understood why Claudia had stopped him.

“That’s…”

As the sandcrawler reared its massive head, preparing to launch itself in a strike, a brilliant burst of starlight illuminated the desert, and from the teleportation spell fell a figure wielding a large, curved sword, enshrouded in a robe that hid his body. By Claudia’s estimation, this person was approximately Noah’s height.

The figure brandished his sword as he fell. “Perish, worm!”

The curved blade shimmered with the glow of magic as he brought it down in a single, powerful strike. The strike released a wave of energy, colliding with the sandcrawler’s thick neck. A roar tore through the air, before the beast’s head slammed into the ground with an earthshaking *thud*, its massive body convulsing one last time before collapsing.

“Another successful hunt!” the figure declared triumphantly. He shook his blade once to rid it of blood, then returned it to the sheath on his back. He turned to face them. “Are you two unhurt? You’d best be more cautious—this stretch of desert’s crawling with sandcrawlers, especially in this heat. Over the past few days, they’ve been venturing closer to the city than usual.”

“You have our thanks, kind swordsman,” Claudia said with a graceful curtsy, stepping from Noah’s protective hold. Behind her, Noah knelt respectfully.

“I must admit, the sudden appearance of such a monstrous beast caught us entirely off guard,” she continued. “Your intervention was—”

“Oh, really?” interrupted the mysterious swordsman, glancing at Noah. “To me, it looked like your companion here was ready to handle it himself.”

Impressive. I ought to have anticipated that he would see through that. It appears that his skill with magic rivals his skill with the blade.

She smiled. “Noah, you should thank him as well.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Noah bowed once he rose to his feet. “You have my deepest gratitude for ensuring Her Highness’s safety. Truly, your—”

“Hey, you,” the swordsman interrupted, his eyes widening. “That black hair…your height, your build, your age…”

Noah’s face went taut, a sense of unease settling over him. Before he could speak, the young man dropped to his knees, bringing himself to eye level with Noah, who was still in a bow.

“I beg of you, please! Hear my request!”

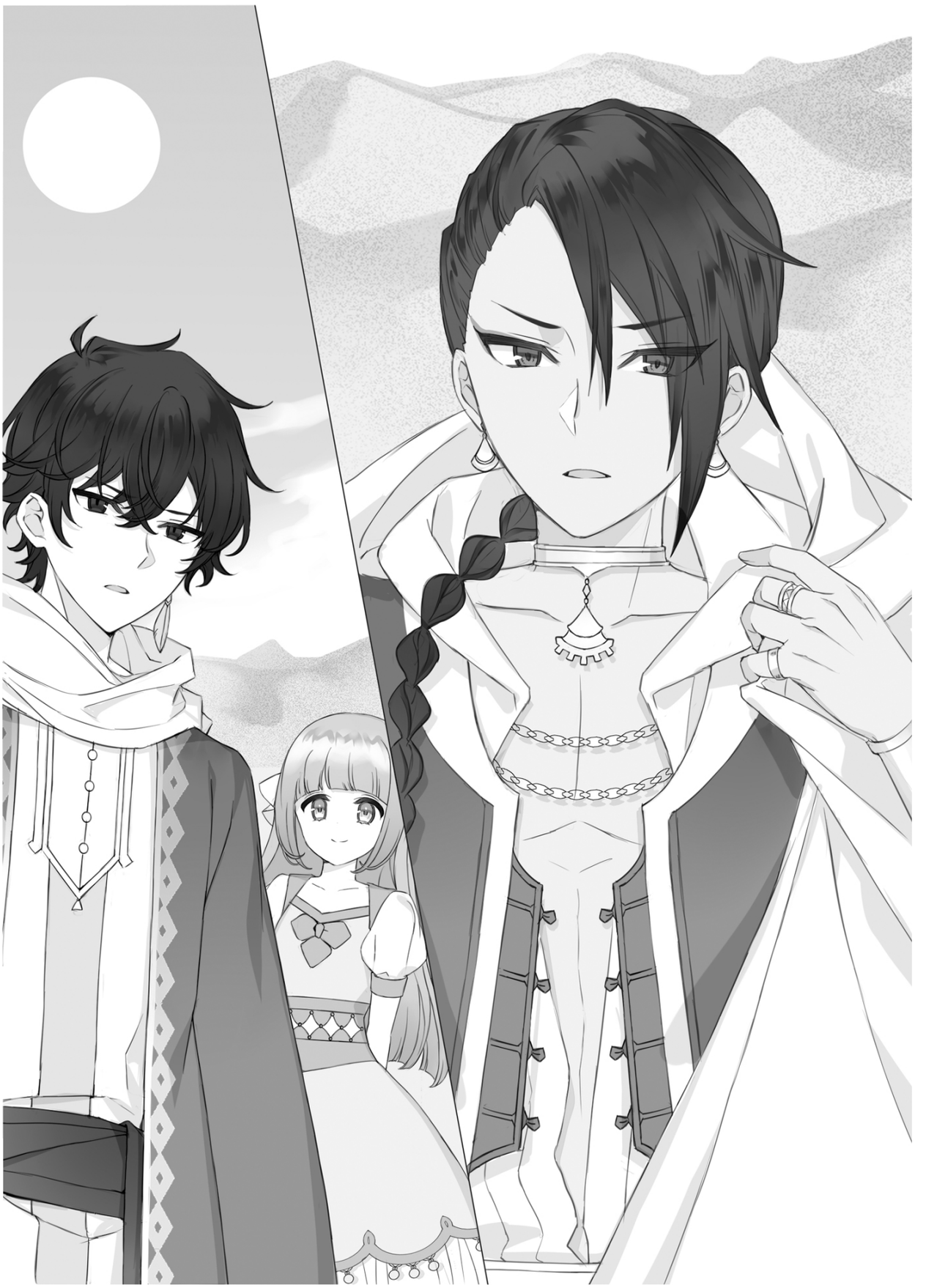
“What for?” Noah asked cautiously.

The youth turned his eyes toward Claudia. “And you! A young lady who looks every bit a princess—you must be his master, yes? If that’s the case, I implore you as well—please, hear me out!”

The stranger pressed his forehead into the sand.

“Good heavens!” Claudia exclaimed, her tone both startled and concerned. “Sir swordsman, please, raise your head! What could possibly bring you to...”

But before her sentence could reach its conclusion, the young man sat upright and pulled back the hood of his robe.



When Claudia and Noah saw him clearly, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

The man's hair was as dark as midnight, much like Noah's. His fingers were adorned with golden rings that marked him as the scion of some wealthy, noble family.

He's the same age as Noah, radiates powerful magic, and is of clearly noble blood. He must be the very person those soldiers were so frantically seeking.

It took no time for him to confirm her suspicions.

"My name is Ashbal Qadir Hamid. I am the rightful ruler of Sharavia." Then he faced Noah. "Please, listen to me. I have a request—a plea, really," he said, with an undercurrent of desperation. "Take my place. Become the king of this land!"

Noah blinked, utterly bewildered. "What?"

Chapter 2

Amid the sprawling desert lay a forgotten ruin. Built of sturdy stone, it may have once served as a tomb for royalty. Despite being exposed to the relentless sands, its structure remained remarkably intact—likely due to the unique, magic-infused material used in its construction.

Claudia and Noah had entered this ruin, guided by an unusual escort: a sleek, black-furred fox with an impressively bushy tail.

“I became king three years ago,” echoed the fox’s voice, reverberating through the narrow stone corridor.

The walls and floor were hewn from solid stone, their surfaces worn smooth by time. Above, the ceiling was open, allowing rays of sunlight to pour into the ancient passageway.

“It happened after my father—the former king of this land—died. His ministers found me and dragged me back to the royal palace. They took one look at my appearance and declared that I carried my father’s blood. Just like that, they handed me the right to the throne.” The fox’s tone carried a bitter edge as he padded along before them, his bushy tail swaying to and fro. “A ridiculous story, wouldn’t you agree?”

Claudia, holding a lantern in her hand, studied the movement of the fox’s tail with great interest before speaking.

“Do you mean to say that you had no idea your father was the king?”

The fox paused to glance back at her, his nose twitching as he sniffed the air.

“If I’d known, I wouldn’t have ended up joining a band of thieves as a lowly errand boy when my mother died,” he replied with a wry tone. “Though, from what I hear, the old man used to be a thief himself. The courtiers found it hilarious, calling us two of a kind.”

“I’ve heard of this! The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, right?” Claudia chimed in, beaming.

“Exactly.” Ashbal chuckled.

Wearing a guarded expression, Noah did not share the playful enthusiasm between Claudia and the fox.

Unfazed, the fox glanced up at him and tilted his head. “What’s the matter, Noah? You look like you’re holding back a hundred questions that’re just waiting to burst out. Patience. I’ll explain everything once we’re at the hideout. That’s where the real discussion begins,” Ashbal said, padding steadily forward.

Noah continued guiding Claudia along the uneven path. “Indeed, I have questions—but they concern more than your request.” No longer able to hide his wariness, he asked, “Why, may I ask, have you chosen to take on the form of a fox, Your Majesty?”

“Ha!” The fox—Ashbal, magically transformed—let out an amused bark of laughter. “You’ve seen what it’s like out there, haven’t you? The palace has the whole city on edge, searching high and low for me. A fifteen-year-old boy, tall and with black hair? They’d drag me back the moment they saw me, no questions asked.”

“Ah! So, it truly was you the soldiers were seeking!” Claudia, maintaining the act of an innocent young girl, exclaimed with feigned delight at this supposed revelation.

Ashbal, now resuming his lead, directed them deeper into the ancient ruins.

“This fox guise serves as both a clever deception and a matter of practicality,” Ashbal explained, his bushy tail swaying with each step. “In the desert, moving about as an animal is far easier. When I saw you two being attacked by that sandcrawler, I shifted back to human form upon teleporting.”

“The soldiers searching for you didn’t seem to recognize your face,” Claudia observed. “Why is that?”

“My father was a thief before he ascended the throne as king. He disliked the idea of his face being widely known. That habit became a tradition in the palace, so only a select circle of ministers know what I look like,” Ashbal explained.

Claudia imagined such measures were likely intended to prevent assassination attempts. Anonymity, after all, was as effective a shield as any armor, and it made it easier to employ body doubles to confound one’s enemies.

“My apologies for the trouble I’ve caused you, yet the arrival of someone who looks like me is just the stroke of fortune I’ve been waiting for.”

The seemingly endless corridor’s atmosphere finally began to

change. Passing through a magical barrier, Claudia felt a peculiar shift, and the scene before her changed in an instant.

What had been a stark, utilitarian corridor now gave way to an expansive, opulent chamber. The walls and floor, carved from stone, were now adorned with vibrant, richly patterned carpets, their colors rendered even more vivid by the golden sunlight streaming in from above. Despite the desert heat, the air within was cool and refreshing.

The work of a skilled magician, Claudia mused.

The room, hidden by a magical barrier, was furnished with gilded pieces of extraordinary craftsmanship. Two red velvet sofas faced each other, their fabric decorated with delicate embroidery on the sofa's edges. On the wall hung a large mural depicting a regal fox clutching a golden bird in its jaws.

"My father loved foxes," Ashbal said, still in his vulpine form. He shook out his sleek black fur, dislodging the sand clinging to it. "In this country, they're seen as sacred creatures. My father used to say, 'The fox brings the golden falcon.' And I suppose he wasn't wrong—this magic saved my life as a child. It's far easier to steal from humans when you're not one."

"Ashbal, were you truly such a wicked person?" Claudia asked.

"Of course. I was a scoundrel to the core. I robbed the rich—those who deserved to be taken down a notch—and shared the spoils with the poor. A noble thief, or so I told myself. But the truth of the matter is that a criminal is a criminal. And now?" His voice lowered slightly. "Now I'm paying the price."

"The price?" Claudia echoed.

Ashbal leaped lightly onto one of the sofas. A soft light enveloped him, its glow intensifying until it reshaped itself into the form of a young man.

His hair was exactly like Noah's, as dark as polished ebony, but his eyes were not. They were a striking crimson. The sharp lines of his eyes were accentuated by streaks of gold and scarlet kohl, which stood in contrast to his skin.

Ashbal gestured toward the chairs with his right hand, a subtle motion inviting Claudia and Noah to take their seats. Once they did, he continued.

"The Golden Falcon that I inherited from my father... It's been stolen from the royal palace."

Claudia's eyes narrowed slightly at his words, though her expression soon softened as she inclined her head. "And what exactly *is* the Golden Falcon?"

"That," Ashbal replied, raising a finger to his lips, "is something I can't tell you. It's something of a state secret. If word of it were to spread to those who shouldn't know, it would force us to... Well, let's just say it would require us to take measures to ensure your silence."

"Oh my, how *terrifying*," Claudia replied with feigned naivety.

"I've already asked far too much of you," Ashbal said, shaking his head. "I don't want to endanger you any further, so forgive me, but I can't say more about the Golden Falcon."

"Your Majesty," Noah interjected. Stepping forward, he placed himself protectively between Claudia and the reluctant king. "The situation remains frustratingly unclear to us. You've requested that I 'become king in your place,' yet I cannot ignore the question—does this have any connection to the theft of the Golden Falcon?"

"You've guessed right," Ashbal admitted. "To recover the Golden Falcon, I need to leave the capital."

"Oh, I understand now!" Claudia exclaimed, raising her hand high as though answering a question. "So, because you don't want anyone searching for you, you want Noah to *pretend* to be you?"

"Precisely!" Ashbal said with a nod.

The answer was hardly a surprise. If the Golden Falcon was a state secret, then the number of people who could search for it outside the palace would be limited.

"The theft of the Golden Falcon is a secret known only to a select few within the royal court," Ashbal began gravely, "for its theft threatens the very survival of the kingdom."

Claudia tilted her head quizzically. "Ashbal, should you really entrust such an important matter to Noah and me, people you've only just met?"

"I believe she's right to ask," Noah agreed. "Your Majesty, have you considered that trusting me to act as your body double carries significant risks? What assurance do you have that I wouldn't act against your interests or, in the worst case, seize control of your palace entirely?"

"Well, you see, I've dismissed that possibility from the very start."

“And why, pray tell, would you make such a judgment?”

Ashbal grinned slightly at Noah’s look of confusion. “It’s simple.” At that, Ashbal pointed to his own face. “It’s your *eyes*!”

“My…eyes?”

“Yes, exactly. I spent my childhood as a thief and the last few years as a king. I’ve seen countless faces, read a thousand lies, and learned to trust my instincts. And your eyes—they’re as honest as they come.”

Noah was silent for a moment. “Are you suggesting that you’re willing to risk your kingdom on intuition alone?”

“Were you to betray me—which I doubt—the kingdom would likely fare better under you than under a fool who lacks the discernment to see the truth in another’s eyes.”

Claudia couldn’t help but let out a soft laugh.

Fortunately, his intuition is correct. Noah’s integrity is undeniable, after all.

Even so, she knew that to her servant, who lived his life in a very orderly manner, Ashbal’s actions would seem incomprehensible.

Noah turned to Claudia. “My lady, what is your decision?” He was careful not to address her by her royal title.

Her response was immediate. “I’ll allow it! Ashbal, I’ll lend you Noah!”

Noah’s face betrayed no surprise. Ashbal, on the other hand, released a loud breath he’d been holding in. “That’s a relief! Of course, I’ll owe you a debt of gratitude. I suspect you’re of noble lineage, so I’m sure that a small amount of gold wouldn’t interest you, but I can get a king’s ransom as soon—”

“No, thank you,” Claudia interjected, to which Ashbal raised an eyebrow. The twinkle in her eyes caught his attention.

“I know exactly what I’ll request of you, Ashbal.”

Ashbal laughed, though his face tightened ever so slightly. “I know that look. It’s the look of someone preparing to drive a hard bargain.”

If Ashbal could actually see through to Claudia’s true intent, then his intuition truly was something to be proud of.

“There’s a friend of mine in a kingdom not too far away,” Claudia began. “We used to play together, but I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“And where is this friend of yours?”

“Lemilsia,” Claudia replied, her smile unwavering.

Ashbal’s expression darkened slightly, his scarlet eyes narrowing. “Lemilsia… That kingdom recently erected a barrier, sealing its borders. It’s not a place one enters—or leaves—easily these days.”

“It’s because of something they called *‘morning,’* I think? The king passed away, so the whole country is sad together, but I don’t know what that has to do with mornings. Anyway, it means I can’t visit my friend, and that makes *me* terribly sad. I’ll let you have Noah. Then, once you’ve found the Golden Falcon and come back to be king, I want you to watch the barrier around Lemilsia. And if something strange happens, it’d be nice if you’d tell me, wouldn’t it?”

Behind her innocent words lay something deeper: a request for something like an alliance.

“Because I worry about all of my friends!” she concluded.

Ashbal considered this for a moment. “Very well.”

He was undoubtedly aware that Claudia was far from the guileless child she presented herself to be, yet the terms she offered were fair. He laughed and shook his head.

“I suppose I’ll always be a thief at heart,” he said. “I always prefer to strike a mutually beneficial deal than rely on charity.”

“Isn’t it wonderful when everyone gets what they want?” Claudia replied brightly.

And with that, the deal was concluded. She looked up at the person who had been exchanged as part of the deal. “Oh, and one more thing—I’ll be going with Noah! I’d hate for him to vanish into the palace and become too busy to see me.”

“Ah… That could prove complicated.” Ashbal cast a sidelong glance at Noah. “The presence of a woman in the royal palace could raise questions, unless…”

“Is there a problem?” Noah asked.

“Well, it *is* possible to bring her into the palace without arousing suspicion, through proper channels. Should we try it?”

“That depends entirely on the method,” Noah replied curtly.

“That’s what I feared you’d say…”

“Tell me, Ashbal. How can I accompany Noah to the royal palace?” Claudia asked.

“The only way is for you to be presented to the king.”

“Presented?”

“Indeed, in other words…” Ashbal paused dramatically as he leaned back into the silken cushions of his chaise lounge. “You’ll enter the royal harem, offered as a companion for the king’s pleasure. In this case, of course, the king being Noah in disguise.”

Noah’s reaction was instant. He abandoned his usual reserved manner and poured forth a torrent of objections with an urgency Claudia had not seen in quite some time.

“If Her Highness assumes a male form through magic, with her hair darkened to match, she could pose as the king herself. She would be far better suited for the role than I,” he began, his argument sound and well reasoned as always.

Claudia, however, simply shook her head. “Pretending to be a king? I have no desire to do such a thing. Besides, I’d much rather see you play the part, Noah.”

“Perhaps we could employ an invisibility spell to allow you to enter unnoticed?”

“What a waste that would be,” Claudia replied cheerfully. “This is a rare opportunity to wear the splendid clothes of this kingdom. To make myself invisible would be a dreadful shame.”

Finally, after suggesting Claudia remain safely behind while he infiltrated the palace alone—only to be met with another gentle denial—Noah fell silent in exasperation.

Smiling sweetly, Claudia delivered her final argument. “If I cannot stay by your side, Noah, I’ll be terribly lonely. You understand, don’t you? I wish to follow everywhere you go.”

Noah sighed, pressing his hand to his temple in frustration. “You are well aware, my lady, that I cannot resist when you say such things…”

“I am, yes.” She tittered in triumph. “Since this is for my sake, you’ll simply have to endure the idea of me joining the harem.”

And so, it was decided that Claudia, Princess of Avianoia, would enter the royal harem of Sharavia, and her loyal servant Noah would become king. Noah held his head as if he had a migraine.

Ashbal, who had been reclining and observing the exchange with great amusement, took this as his cue. “So, have you reached an agreement?”

“Yes, we have,” Claudia replied with a bright smile, dispelling

the bubble of silence spell Noah had cast to keep their conversation private.

"Good. I'll make the necessary arrangements with haste." Ashbal rose to his feet. "I have allies within the palace who will assist you both. Don't be too stressed, Noah."

Noah's expression remained tense.

"As for Claudia's introduction to the harem," Ashbal continued, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "we'll say that I encountered you during my recent travels and was so taken with your beauty that I brought you back with me. It's a believable enough story."

Claudia's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Oh? That such a tale would be believable seems to imply that this isn't your first romantic escapade."

Ashbal chuckled, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I swear on my honor, I've never made a lady weep. But with a beauty like yours, the story writes itself. No one would question it. If there's a problem, it would be..." He hesitated, giving Claudia a once-over, then sighed. "Your youthful appearance. Thirteen, wasn't it? Frankly, I'd put you closer to ten or ele—"

A sudden puff of smoke interrupted him. When it cleared, an older Claudia stood before him. Her softly curved figure was accentuated by long, graceful limbs.

Noah carefully draped a robe over her; Claudia was unable to tell if it was to protect her from the sun or because her dress was too revealing in this form.

Ashbal blinked, momentarily stunned. "Well," he managed, regaining his composure. "I take back my concerns. In this form, you'll have no trouble convincing anyone."

"Thank you. I'm glad there won't be a problem," Claudia replied with a small curtsy.

Noah regarded her with an expression that suggested that he believed that there were many problems with this, but he kept his silence. Claudia smiled at him.

"What shall we call you?" Ashbal asked.

"Dia," Claudia decided. Using Adelheid was out of the question, lest it attract unwanted attention from Sieghart, whose kingdom was near Sharavia.

Ashbal nodded. "Dia it is. Now, let's meet with my confidants in the palace. We've gathered magical instruments that will help with

your disguise. You may use them freely."

It did not escape Claudia's amused notice that Noah's expression remained guarded. In fact, he wasn't masking it at all, showing how true to himself he was, which likely made it easier for Ashbal to rely on him. The Sharavian boy understood it would be difficult for them to trust him that easily.

Content, Claudia faced Noah. "Let's be off, Your Majesty." Noah's jaw tightened, but before he could respond, Claudia raised a finger to his lips. "Now, can you address me properly?"

After a long pause, he relented, his voice low. "Dia."

"Good boy!" Claudia exclaimed, beaming with delight as she affectionately tousled his hair.

***

For several days now, the royal palace had been a flurry of secretive activity, but at last, things were returning to normal. The king, who had mysteriously vanished, had returned safe and sound. The soldiers, having scoured every street of the city in search of him, no doubt breathed a collective sigh of relief upon hearing the news.

And yet, a few among the king's retainers were thrown into disarray by his return, because he had brought back with him a traveling dancer. To their astonishment, the king, enamored by the young woman, announced his intent to welcome her into the royal harem. This proclamation startled the court, though it wasn't something beyond his right as king. In fact, within his court, some felt a sense of relief at him having returned with a woman. The king, who had shown little interest in the women of his harem until now, seemed at last to be earnestly considering the question of an heir.

And yet, thought Claudia, seated inside a stone-built bathhouse, her toes idly stirring the water as she read the glowing letters of Ashbal's latest report: *"It seems that the sudden arrival of a favored concubine has incited considerable hostility among the other women, many of whom covet the position of queen."*

"How troublesome," Claudia said aloud, though she herself was none other than the favored concubine in question. Reclining lazily within the sun-dappled garden of the harem, she savored the

sweetness of a chilled orange.

"Mmm. Delicious."

Her fork speared another wedge of the fruit. The orange's thick rind had been artfully cut into floral patterns, its segments delicately arranged for ease of eating. As she brought the fork to her mouth, Claudia once again dipped her toes into the water.

It has been three days since I was brought here. How swiftly the time has passed.

The harem was vast. To wander its entirety would take more than two hours on foot. At its heart lay a large fountain from which clear water flowed through to every corner of the harem. Marble tiles, each carved with depictions of birds or flowers, formed stepping stones across the sand. Alongside the waterways stood over a hundred opulent buildings, all painted in hues of gold and turquoise. It was truly a sight to behold.

Among these structures, two immense palaces towered above the rest. The eastern palace was said to house the highest-ranking lady within the harem. High turquoise-green walls encircled the harem entirely, and powerful enchantments had been weaved into them.

The head maid told me the barriers are meant to keep out the desert sand and intruders, but I imagine they're more likely intended to keep the women from escaping.

Claudia chuckled softly, setting down her fork in the glass dish before her.

However...the academy at the bottom of the sea was far harder to escape.

In truth, Claudia had anticipated this. Her mind wandered to the conversation she'd had with Noah before moving to the harem.

"If the Golden Falcon is indeed a cursed artifact, now hidden, then perhaps we'll find it within the harem itself," she'd said.

Noah, seated behind her on the camel, considered this as he gripped its reins. Riding in front of him in her adult form, Claudia relaxed. The camel swayed gently while they traversed the desert sands. Claudia found it nearly as enjoyable as horseback riding.

"It is for that reason, Princess, you would enter—"

"Noah, you're being naughty," Claudia interrupted, tapping a

finger against his lips. She smirked at him. “What did we practice earlier? You must call me Dia.”

Ashbal had returned to the palace before them, and there were no other people as far as the eye could see. Nonetheless, Claudia wouldn’t allow Noah to break their cover.

“Dia…” He practically had to pry the fake name out of his throat. “Is that the reason you agreed to enter the harem?”

“Good boy. And of course it is,” she replied with a laugh. “I’m not going there simply to play with you, Noah.” When he said nothing, she teased, “How cruel. It seems you don’t believe me. And yet, consider Ashbal’s way of thinking—surely, he would be careful to choose to hide his greatest treasure in a place where few people came and went.”

The finger she had been using to silence Noah in jest now extended, counting off the possibilities.

“Two places come to mind. The first would be Ashbal’s own chambers, where he can keep his eye on it at all times. But that would also make it the first place thieves would target, would it not?”

“Correct. Even with wards placed on the room, there is always the possibility that a sufficiently skilled thief could break them. And yet, as Your Highness says—”

“What’s that?” Claudia interrupted him.

“Dia,” he corrected himself with a sigh. “As you said, few people enter and leave the harem, yet it is equally well guarded.”

“Precisely, Your Majesty,” Claudia affirmed with a smile. “And unlike your chambers, the harem is full of watchful eyes, making it even harder for a thief to go unnoticed. Such a place might be appealing as a hiding spot.”

They continued on their journey through the desert, practicing their newly assumed roles of king and concubine.

And so, Claudia had entered the harem, her position as the king’s favored concubine granting her a life of leisure, even as she endured the envy and scorn of the other women.

Only Ashbal himself can freely enter or leave this harem. The barriers are quite strong, keeping intruders out and the women in.

She rose from her place in the bathhouse with a languid stretch. Claudia’s quarters were the second-most prominent within

the harem, the western palace—its former mistress long absent.

And directly across from it lies the eastern palace, where Ashbal's betrothed resides. Judging by the recent welcome I've received, I suspect her supporters are eager to make their loyalties known.

Claudia brought her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. The five rings adorning her fingers glinted in the light—gifts from Noah, each imbued with enchantments tailored to her needs.

"These five rings are magical artifacts, infused with my own power," Noah had explained as he'd slid them onto her fingers a few days earlier. "The aquamarine will cool you and summon ice. The ruby will protect you from the cold desert nights. With these, Princess, you won't need to expend your own magic to remain comfortable."

At the time, Claudia had tittered softly at his words.

"Truly, an ever-fretful servant, aren't you? I'm perfectly capable of managing on my own."

"And yet, while you are here in the harem, I cannot remain by your side at all hours," Noah had replied. "If I cannot guard you personally, Your Highness, I will at least make sure you are comfortable."

His reasoning had been so endearing that Claudia, for once, had forgiven him the slip of her title.

Thanks to those rings, Claudia was able to live comfortably without tiring herself, despite the high temperature. She activated their magic once more, her thin indoor gown shimmering as bands of light coiled around her figure, transforming into a dress suited for an afternoon outing.

To uncover the truth of the Golden Falcon, I've entrusted Noah with investigating the palace. Yet my own curiosity lingers elsewhere—on Ashbal's father, the late king.

The dress was a translucent orange, and the sleeves billowed out slightly as the wind blew around her. To that, she added layers of protective enchantments: magic to shield her skin from the sun and a breeze to cool her. Noah had known to enchant her rings with exactly what she needed.

How did the late king come to possess the cursed artifact? What became of the one who gave it to him? And has Ashbal himself not used it since inheriting the throne?

Lost in thought, Claudia lifted her ring-adorned hand to her

lips, pressing a light kiss to the one on her ring finger.

"You've done well, Noah," she murmured, her gratitude directed at the loyal servant far from her side.

As she strolled back into the western palace from the bathhouse, more adornments began to materialize—glittering earrings and necklaces appearing one by one, each perfectly complementing her attire.

I trust Noah to handle his end of things. As for me, today's excursion should suffice to complete my understanding of the harem's layout.

The midday sun blazed overhead, but Claudia, wrapped in the cool protection of Noah's magic, paid it no attention. She approached the entrance of her quarters, placing her hands on the double doors. As she pushed them open, something heavy fell from above, landing with a dull thud at her feet.

"Oh?" She blinked in surprise.

Her gaze shifted downward, where a serpent—its coiled body larger than her own thigh—writhed on the floor. Its head rose, jaws parted in a hiss as it watched her.

From beyond the walls, faint giggles drifted on the breeze.

"She hasn't screamed, has she?" one voice whispered with malicious glee. "Perhaps she's too frightened even to cry out."

"Shall we take a peek?" another chimed in. "If she fainted, what a ridiculous sight it would be!"

Claudia sighed. She recognized the voices as belonging to two of the women who had taken particular offense to her presence in the harem. That they knew nothing of her true identity—the legendary witch—was fortunate for them.

Now then, what to do about this?

Resting her finger against her chin, Claudia regarded the serpent.

The poor creature is terrified, isn't it? That's why it's hissing and posturing so desperately. And yet, the girls have failed to notice that.

Sensitive as animals often were, the snake likely understood the danger posed by Claudia's magic and how easily she could reduce it to cinders with but a thought.

She smiled as she extended a hand toward the trembling serpent. "Come now," she murmured, her voice soft and coaxing.

At her words, the snake stiffened, its coils tightening.

“Were you captured by those girls’ magic? You must have been so frightened. But there’s no need to fear me—I know you’re not a dangerous creature.”

She widened the cool aura radiating from her rings, allowing the chill to reach the serpent. Slowly, it began to relax, its movements cautious as it inched closer. When it finally raised its head to look at her, Claudia gave it a gentle nod of encouragement.

Moments later, the snake coiled by her side, its head resting against her knee. Claudia stroked it tenderly, her touch drawing a content blink from its amber eyes.

At that precise moment, the girls beyond the wall peeked inside—and what they saw turned their faces ashen.

“She’s… She’s petting it?!” one of them stammered.

Claudia chuckled softly, meeting their wide-eyed stares with her own amusement. “Thank you for bringing me such a darling friend! Would you like to come play with us?”

“Eeek!”

The serpent, as if understanding the tension, turned its head to glare at the girls, lowering its body threateningly.

“See? This lovely creature wants you to come play with us,” Claudia said sweetly.

“N-No, we’re fine…”

The two girls exchanged uneasy glances before one of them, voice trembling with indignation, yelled, “This is all your fault! Barging into the harem so suddenly and claiming to be His Majesty’s favored concubine!”

The other turned her nose up at Claudia. “Know your place! You are nothing compared to Lady Naila—you’re barely fit to breathe the same air as her!”

With that, the two girls fled. Claudia pouted as she reached out to stroke the serpent’s head.

“It’s true that I’ve stirred up trouble by coming here, so I’ll accept their barbs,” she murmured softly. “But involving you in their petty antics? That I cannot forgive.”

The serpent blinked slowly in satisfaction at the coolness of Claudia’s touch. Claudia opened the doors of her palace, allowing the snake to leave its confines.

“Come along, little one. There’s a bathhouse just past the

entrance here. You'll find it refreshing," she said, leading it there.

As she walked, Claudia reflected on her observations from her brief time in the harem. The barrier rejected all humans and magical beasts that sought entry. However, animals, insects, and birds could pass freely. This was likely to make living in the harem more palatable for those forced to remain there.

The snake beside her, though clearly an intelligent creature, was no magical beast.

"You're nocturnal, aren't you?" Claudia mused aloud as she reached the bathhouse. Turning, she pointed toward a window. "Once night falls, I'll release you back outside."

The serpent, however, ignored her, as if to say that wouldn't be necessary. Instead, it focused intently on a distant structure visible through the window.

Claudia followed its stare.

"Hmm? Is that…?"

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"This concludes Your Majesty's official duties for today."

Noah, reluctantly fulfilling the role of king, sat silently in the throne room as he listened to the man standing beside the throne. The room was large, and the floors were entirely covered with opulent rugs of striking colors.

"It has been three days since your return from your absconding. The palace has finally begun to settle once more, so it's time you resume your work little by little," said the man. He appeared to be in his forties and had a weathered face with a neatly trimmed goatee. His expression carried a faintly sardonic smile as he lowered his voice to mutter, "If the boy-king's act is exposed as a fraud, it'll be my head on the chopping block too. Ha! So do try and put on a proper performance, *Your Majesty*."

"I will."

Noah sighed quietly in response to the man's barbed remarks. The first day Noah had been brought to this palace, Ashbal—still in his fox form—had led this man into his chamber and introduced him as an ally, where he had offered an ostentatiously formal bow.

"I am called Faraz. What extraordinary fortune that you would lend us your help until the Golden Falcon is reclaimed! Think of me

as your loyal servant."

Despite his humble demeanor, Faraz was an imposing figure—tall enough that Noah had to tilt his head back slightly to meet his gaze, and he had a muscular physique. He wore a sweet perfume, characteristic of this region, and his goatee was groomed in the latest local fashion.

Despite likely being older than either King Claudia's father or Karlheinz, this man bowed deeply to Noah, who was scarcely half his age.

Even though it had been Ashbal who had brought Noah to the palace, Noah knew that he must seem suspicious of their new ally. Still, the sight of Faraz offering such deference had prompted Noah to respond with equal courtesy.

"I am merely acting under orders from my liege. Our mutual interests align; I desire nothing more. There is no need to treat me with such deference, Master Faraz." Faraz's shoulders quivered slightly. Though he found this reaction rather puzzling, Noah nonetheless continued. "I may be inexperienced, but I will do my utmost to fulfill my role as His Majesty Ashbal's stand-in. From here on, please—"

"Bu—pfft!" Before Noah could finish, Faraz suddenly doubled over, clutching his sides as raucous laughter spilled from his lips. "Bwa ha ha! Ah, that's it! I can't keep it up! You can't teach an old dog new tricks!"

At the man's abrupt shift in demeanor, Noah scowled deeply. On the floor below, Ashbal swished his tail in what appeared to be relief. *"Faraz, I never thought I'd see the day when you would speak with such respect!"*

"King Ashbal, just who is this man?"

"Ah, Noah, as you can see, Faraz here has served our family since my father's reign. To me, he was my father's friend—and something like an uncle who teaches you all the wrong things."

"Ugh, I can't take it! Such formalities make my skin crawl!" Faraz exclaimed, scratching his goatee with a theatrical shudder. "Noah, was it? Fancy that—someone actually willing to play at being king. What a strange one you are! Mark my words, lad, you're the sort that won't make it to see old age. Keep your wits about you. Ha!"

Faraz clapped Noah heartily on the back, his laughter still ringing as he crouched down and began to ruffle the fur of the fox

who was, ostensibly, his sovereign lord.

There's even the stench of alcohol on him. This man is a vassal of a king?

Faraz's insincerity clashed entirely with Noah's sensibilities. He could not reconcile himself to the idea that such a man could hold a position of prominence in a royal court.

Noah's opinion shifted slightly, however, upon hearing Faraz's next remarks.

"Boy, you've got a solid center of balance," Faraz said casually, stroking the base of Ashbal's foxlike ears without so much as glancing in Noah's direction. "You've clearly trained under a strict master of the blade, and you've kept up with your training."

Shocked, Noah watched him silently.

"And by the looks of it," Faraz continued, "your combat style blends magic and swordsmanship—seems to suit *you* best. You've been training since you were just a whelp, eh?"

"Just who are you?" Noah asked, taken aback.

In just a brief exchange, Faraz had managed to see through him with unsettling accuracy.

"Or maybe not," Faraz added with a bark of laughter, finally turning to look Noah in the eye. With a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, he added, "I mean if you toss out enough darts, you're bound to hit the bull's-eye sooner or later. And look at you falling for it, hook, line, and sinker! You're too gullible for your own good, lad. Taking people at face value. Watch it, because types like you don't last long in this world."

"My apologies, Noah," Ashbal interjected with a wag of his tail. *"Faraz behaves this way even with me. He can be insufferable at times."*

"Insufferable? Your Majesty, did you just call me insufferable?" Faraz threw his hands up. "I was just trying to cheer up the poor boy, seeing as he was dragged into some fancy palace all outta sorts. And what do I get? Nothing but grief for my troubles!"

Noah, unimpressed, furrowed his brow and took a step back from the man. That only served to make Faraz laugh harder.

"What's that face for? You're thinking, 'I don't want nothing to do with this one,' aren't you? Like, 'What a shame!' Isn't that right?" Faraz chuckled at his own theatrics. "Come now, don't give me that look. Let's try and get along, eh?"

Noah chose to ignore the man's antics, deciding that silence was the best response.

He's unlike any adult I've ever encountered—nothing like the people around the princess. Is this what the wider world is like? Are such deplorable adults common?

"You know, boy, your thoughts are plain as day on your face," Faraz remarked.

Just as Noah was realizing how little experience he had, Ashbal trotted up with something in his mouth. The fox placed a beautiful ruby necklace in front of Noah.

"Noah, put this on," Ashbal instructed. *"Once you're wearing it, anyone who doesn't know you're an impostor will see my face instead of yours."*

"This is an impressive magical artifact," Noah observed as he inspected it. "The enchantment is very complex."

Ashbal's ears perked up, and his tail wagged at the compliment. *"Thank you! My late mother made it. It's even supposed to adjust your voice to resemble mine—not that we can test that now, since all of us here already know who you are."*

"Well, it ought to work just fine," Faraz added with a dismissive wave. "Most folks in the palace haven't seen His Majesty's face anyway. They wouldn't know if it was a perfect match or not."

A culture where viewing the king's face was considered too sacred wasn't unusual, even in Noah's limited experience. Furthermore, if Ashbal's past as a thief had instilled in him a habit of avoiding recognition, then the necklace's illusion would likely suffice.

"You're welcome to use my quarters! Oh, and we'll need to grant you access to the harem as well—if only so you can speak with Claudia."

"Are you certain? Isn't allowing a man other than the king into the harem taboo?" Noah asked out of an abundance of caution.

"Anyone could tell at a glance that you're not the type to act improperly toward women." Ashbal laughed. *"The harem's outer walls have a magical barrier that doesn't allow any intruders. The only part that isn't warded is the entrance, but it's watched closely from both sides. Faraz, make sure the doors are opened for Noah whenever he needs access."*

"Well, I'm not too keen on letting him into the harem, but fine,

have it your way," Faraz grumbled. "Still, a paradise of beautiful women like that? Even a man made of steel would find his resolve melting away. Hey, don't give me that look, boy!"

Noah had been wearing a look of contempt. Turning away from the strange adult, he said nothing but decided to let the matter drop.

The conversation then shifted to the conditions of Noah's role as a stand-in for the king: where he was allowed to go and what he was allowed to do. Faraz and Ashbal explained what was permissible, what was expected, and what was strictly forbidden. Noah, in turn, asked for clarification where necessary.

And so, three days into his charade as the stand-in king, Noah's unusual life within the palace continued.

The task Claudia had entrusted to him was not something he would approach with half-hearted effort. Careful preparation and meticulous research had consumed much of his time, which was why he had yet to set foot in the harem.

I know that she's safe, yet...

The magical barrier surrounding the harem also blocked any form of communication, making it difficult for Noah and Claudia to interact directly.

In the throne room, which was for the king's private use, Faraz snickered at Noah.

"Don't you worry. We're not expecting you to act like a proper king—not me and not His Majesty either. You're a servant to some noblewoman, right? If your master had been a man, you might manage by mimicking him, but alas..."

He let the sentence trail off in mock sympathy. Then, with a carefree grin, Faraz added, "Starting today, all the bigwigs in this country'll be bringing their demands to you. Your job's simple: Don't make any decisions. Just keep saying, 'This will require further discussion before a decision is made.'"

"I understand."

Normally, taking such a passive approach would harm Ashbal's reputation. However, it was far riskier for Noah—the stand-in king—to say anything carelessly. Understanding this, Noah resigned himself to following Faraz's instructions.

"Here they come," Faraz muttered in a low voice, his attention fixed on the entrance.

Moments later, the first petitioner arrived. The man, one of this country's ministers, entered with three officials at his side.

The minister approached slowly, separated from Noah by a sheer, translucent curtain. He was dressed in richly embroidered robes and knelt before the throne.

"Your Majesty, I hope this day finds you well," the minister began. "First, allow me to express my profound joy at Your Majesty's safe return."

Noah felt Faraz's gaze on him. Earlier, Faraz had offered a blunt piece of advice:

"That lot'll be pouring on the flattery to get in your good books. It's tedious, so feel free to tune them out. I reckon all that fawning might be a bit much for someone like you, eh?"

Contrary to Faraz's suggestion, however, Noah remained alert, and he observed the minister intently.

The proper behavior of a minister could vary greatly depending on a nation's culture. Noah studied the man in front of him, believing that this experience might one day serve Claudia's interests.

Faraz noticed the focused expression on Noah's face. While Noah sensed his curiosity, he ignored him and continued his quiet study.

"Oh, great and mighty King Ashbal," the minister proclaimed. "Your presence is the radiant sun that illuminates this land. Your divine, golden majesty shines undimmed, no matter how heavy the clouds may gather. May this new day mark the first step toward even greater glory for Your Majesty."

Notably, the minister never once raised his eyes to look upon the king. After his long preamble, praising both the king's splendor and the nation's prosperity, the minister finally produced a set of documents and presented them to the throne.

It was not Noah who accepted the documents but rather the civil officials standing on the other side of the curtain.

"This document," said the first official, "is worthy of being presented to the great king. I pledge this on my honor."

The second official stepped forward, repeating the same words verbatim. The third official followed suit, his declaration identical to the others.

Once the pledges were complete, Faraz received the document.

He inspected it carefully, ensuring it contained nothing problematic before returning to Noah's side.

"Your Majesty," Faraz said, holding the document out to him with reverence.

Noah took the document, noting how many steps were required before even a single piece of paper reached the king's hands.

There's nothing in here that would be considered sensitive or a secret of the kingdom. That much is expected, but it's clear the contents of what reaches me have been carefully censored.

Noah had not been informed of who was responsible for screening the material, but whoever it was, they clearly possessed a keen eye for detail.

Noah went over Faraz's instructions again: *Don't make any decisions on the spot. Simply state that the matter will be reviewed and a decision provided later. Send the petitioner on their way afterward.*

A moment of silence passed as Noah mulled over the document, prompting Faraz to grow alert.

"Your Majesty," Faraz interjected, his voice wary. "I would urge you to refrain from rushing to a conclusion regarding this matter."

"I understand—but before that, there are a few things I'd like to confirm." Noah lowered the document, shifting his eyes from the parchment to the minister kneeling before him. "The plan for expanding the waterways seems to depend on employing foreign conjurers for the majority of the labor. If so, it would result in a significant number of our own conjurers being left without work."

That statement left Faraz blinking in surprise, his look of suspicion momentarily vanishing.

"For a national project of this scale, why is there an intent to exclude our own craftsmen?" Noah asked.

"W-Well…" The minister faltered, the unease in his voice evident. "We believed that incorporating knowledge from other nations for the time being would aid in the advancement of our kingdom."



“If that’s the case, then this document is insufficient. You need to provide clear evidence of what knowledge these foreign conjurers possess and their past accomplishments. Without such information, I see no grounds for consideration.”

The minister started to lift his head but quickly bowed once more. “Your Majesty is correct. However, I must humbly point out that the wages of these foreign conjurers are considerably lower than those of our own. In the long term, this presents financial benefits for the kingdom…”

“Then provide specific figures,” Noah said. “Our laws dictate that compensation must be given to those who lose their livelihoods due to government projects. The costs of providing stipends for displaced conjurers, combined with the time and resources it will take for foreign conjurers to adapt to our kingdom’s water systems, must all be taken into account. The current proposal lacks sufficient information to justify such decisions.”

As Noah spoke, he cast a brief glance toward Faraz. The older man stiffened in surprise before nodding.

Turning his attention back to the minister, Noah continued, “As it stands, this proposal is incomplete. I will accept the document for review, but the remaining paperwork must be submitted before discussions can proceed. Ensure they are delivered before the set date for deliberation.”

“O-Of course, Your Majesty,” the minister said, bowing deeply again. “We shall carry out your command.”

With slightly sheepish looks, the accompanying civil officials followed the minister as he retreated from the throne room. Once they were gone, only Noah and Faraz remained.

“Boy,” Faraz began, “what the hell was that?”

“I followed your instructions to the letter,” Noah said. “I made no decisions and deferred judgment to a later date.”

“Oh, don’t give me that! You knew exactly what you were doing, you little devil!” Faraz exclaimed, attempting to ruffle Noah’s hair.

Noah wordlessly avoided his hand. “What are you saying? You were clearly relieved with how I handled it.”

“Ha! And you’ve got a sharp tongue…” Faraz said.

“King Ashbal may conduct himself with an air of levity, but it is clear he is a brilliant ruler. If he had been seated on the throne

today, I suspect he would have asked the same questions."

Faraz blinked before letting out a low chuckle. "Well, well... Been keeping a sharp eye on our king, have you?"

For Noah, Ashbal's demeanor reminded him of someone specific—a man who hid sharp intelligence behind a disarming smile, someone who could see through people with unnerving clarity.

Sieghart, what are you thinking, isolating yourself behind that barrier?

Noah closed his eyes to shake off the intrusive thought.

"I may not be able to make decisions as the king, but it is important not to give the impression that I'm merely indecisive. On top of that, I thought it would be best to get all available information so King Ashbal can have it when he returns."

Faraz exhaled, seemingly convinced. "That minister's got a nasty habit for slyly twisting things in his favor whenever he gets the chance. He's tied to some bigwig nobles abroad, so we can't just dismiss him outright, but I wouldn't be shocked if he's got a little scheme going to line his own pockets." Faraz grinned in spite of himself.

"I suspected as much," Noah replied.

"Oh? You've been holed up in the archives for the past three days. What, hitting the books to play at being king?"

Noah remained silent. While Faraz wasn't entirely wrong, Noah's true priority had been fulfilling Claudia's orders and uncovering the origins of the Golden Falcon. His role as Ashbal's stand-in provided the perfect cover for that investigation.

Even so, Noah held a certain respect for Ashbal—a man who had risen to the throne at a young age.

"As long as I act in King Ashbal's stead, I will not allow his name to be sullied."

Faraz regarded him carefully. "You're the sort of servant that makes life easy for your master, aren't you?"

Noah tensed at the offhanded mention of Claudia. Faraz gestured toward the door the minister had left from.

"Did you see those fools? The officials were nothing more than glorified messengers, blindly passing papers along. And yet the documents they presented were full of holes. If anything, they slowed the process down."

Noah also knew that such people often remained in such positions because of an intricate web of political entanglements and obligations.

Claudia's father had no such compunctions—he would dismiss people without hesitation if they proved incompetent. However, Claudia had taught Noah that there were very few nations where the king held absolute authority.

"You're different, though, aren't you, lad?" Faraz challenged. "You don't just pass messages. You think of what information a person might need next and prepare accordingly. One word is enough for you to anticipate what's needed ten steps ahead. A master with you at their side must find life convenient."

Hearing Faraz's evaluation of him, Noah's mind drifted to Claudia—to a time when she was just six years old and he had just sworn his loyalty to her.

"Listen closely, Noah. You've had the education of a future king as well as the experience of being a slave."

Noah had endured a rigorous royal education under his father's orders from a young age before his parents had been murdered by his uncle. He had never considered himself more than an incomplete product of that training, yet Claudia had seen something else in him.

"Even if you live as my servant, you must not let that knowledge and experience go to waste. For example..." The nine-year-old Noah had felt a small finger press lightly against his solar plexus. "When my father or I give you an order, put yourself in the shoes of the king. Consider how you would want a loyal subject to act toward you."

"A servant, thinking like a king?" Noah had asked.

"Exactly. You have the instincts of royalty; don't let that wither. Use it for my sake."

She had smiled then, but Noah had never been able to determine how serious she had been.

"The way I act as a servant," Noah said quietly to Faraz, "is entirely thanks to the education I received from my master. It is not my own achievement."

"That so?" The man raised an eyebrow.

The reason I can carry myself like royalty without hesitation is because of what Her Highness told me that day. She insisted that I not

abandon my past.

Unconsciously, Noah's gaze shifted toward the window, where the harem lay in the distance.

Faraz laughed, catching the movement. His lips curled into a knowing smile. "So, you're in love with your master, are you?"

Noah glared at Faraz, his gaze acting as a sword just waiting for an excuse to be drawn.

"Hey, hey," Faraz said calmly, though his body was tense. "No need to shoot me that look, lad."

Noah's eyes were full of intensity, but he finally turned away. "Apologies. I could not let such a ridiculous joke pass."

"A joke, eh?" Faraz muttered. It looked like Faraz had something he wanted to say about that, but Noah didn't care.

Despite that, after a moment of silence, Faraz leaned forward slightly, his voice kept deliberately quiet. "Well then, if I ask seriously, will you answer me?"

"There is no reason to discuss such matters—especially during a time of national crisis. My personal affairs are irrelevant."

"It's not exactly none of my business, you know?" Faraz countered, his tone unusually serious. "I've had my eye on you, lad, and I need to know what makes you tick. You don't strike me as the treacherous sort, but unlike King Ashbal, I don't trust my gut so easily."

The next petitioner was surely waiting outside the door, but Faraz showed no sign of letting the conversation end.

"I wasn't always a royal retainer. Back when the old king was a thief, I was his right-hand man."

Noah's gaze flicked toward him. The confession came as a surprise.

Faraz continued, smirking. "Before the old king built this kingdom, this desert was nothing but a lawless wasteland. Kidnapping, trafficking, selling folk like cattle—it was all just a part of life. Orphans'd get scooped up and sold to the highest bidder. When I was a kid, I thought I'd pinch a bit from a corrupt noble who had more than they needed. I got caught. They were going to lop off my hands and tongue to make an example of me."

He stuck out his tongue, and then retracted it with a dry chuckle when Noah winced.

"The one who saved me was the old king," Faraz said, his smirk

softening into something gentler.

Noah turned to look at Faraz fully.

“Since then, I’ve owed him everything,” Faraz said. “And that debt extends to his son. Until the day I draw my last breath, I’ll keep paying it back.”

“Faraz…”

The adviser shrugged, his expression slipping back into its usual playfulness. “I’ve been left in charge of this place until King Ashbal returns, so just remember that I’ve got my peepers glued to you. I’ll keep looking for reasons as to whether or not I should trust you. And that’s why I want to know what makes you tick. Does that clear things up for you?”

He laughed quietly, almost self-deprecatingly, and Noah sighed. A few days ago, he had thought Ashbal’s immediate trust in him had been reckless, even naive. But now, he found himself trusting Faraz in much the same way, despite himself.

“My loyalty to my master,” Noah said carefully, “is not born of what you may imagine.”

“So, what—you’re not in love with her?”

“When I was a child, she saved my life,” Noah replied evenly. “She gave me purpose, pride, and the tools to protect what matters to me. Everything I know, everything I have, comes from her.”

Noah had decided long ago that he would fulfill any wish Claudia requested of him.

Claudia always smiled when she spoke of how she intended to live her life freely, doing only what she wanted to do. Yet Noah knew the truth—the real Claudia was deeply compassionate, incapable of abandoning anyone. She loved this world and its people deeply. She sought to save everything within her reach, offering warmth and solace wherever it was needed. That was the kind of master Noah served.

“My feelings for her would only stand in the way of the life she wants to live.”

Noah had known this ever since he was a child.

As long as he could remain by her side, it didn’t matter in what form. So long as he had Claudia’s permission to dedicate his life to her, nothing else mattered.

“That’s why this is not the kind of affection you think,” Noah

said firmly.

Faraz's eyes widened slightly at the boy's sincerity, but then his expression shifted to unease. "Hey, lad. You know, the feeling you're describing is lo—"

"Excuse me. Your Majesty, Lord Faraz..." A cautious voice called out from beyond the door, interrupting Faraz midsentence. Noah took the opportunity to speak first.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting. You may enter."

"At once. Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Give me a break..." Faraz muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

Normally, it wasn't the king's place to personally grant permission to enter—that task typically fell to Faraz. But with the exchange between them dragging on, Noah decided it was better to handle the matter himself.

This isn't the time to have pointless arguments. I need to finish this quickly and return to the investigation Her Highness entrusted to me.

Before turning his attention back to the audience at hand, Noah allowed himself one final glance toward the distant harem, visible through the window.

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While Noah busied himself playing Ashbal's stand-in at the royal palace, Claudia was walking leisurely through the harem, accompanied by a rather large snake. However, perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as "wandering" through the garden, rather than walking, as they slowly wound their way through the buildings, avoiding the heat of the midday sun, stopping here and there.

"Hold on, Mr. Snake, wait for me, okay? Just a little more..."

The shadow Claudia cast was unusually small, and so were the hands she used to pat the walls as she walked,her tiny feet stepping across the sunbaked stone path. The snake, as though adjusting its pace to match hers, slithered patiently alongside her. Claudia chuckled and gently stroked the snake's head in gratitude.

"It's been a while since I've taken this form... To think I'd look like a little six-year-old again."

The Claudia walking through the harem looked nothing like the

elegant adult she had been just a short time before, nor even the thirteen-year-old girl she truly was. Instead, she had transformed herself into the appearance of a six-year-old child.

She wore a girlish dress that left her shoulders uncovered, heaped with several layers of translucent fabric, sandals tied with braided cords, and a golden anklet that gleamed against her skin. Her long, milk-tea-colored hair was braided in the same style Noah had often done for her when she had truly been six, tied up and twisted neatly at the back.

Claudia had adopted this childlike guise for one purpose: to escort the snake back to its home.

"We're almost there. You're not too hot are you, Mr. Snake?"

The snake swayed its head back and forth as if to answer her question. It seemed this snake belonged to the palace opposite Claudia's own. When she had suggested to the snake that she would let it escape into the desert that night, it had looked unhappily out the window to the palace, as if to try and tell Claudia something.

The palace of Ashbal's betrothed, the woman with the highest rank within the harem, Claudia thought to herself.

Most likely, this snake had escaped from that palace, only to end up in the hands of those women who had likely intended to use it to scare her. Thus, Claudia had decided to accompany the snake back to its home. She kept it cool with her magic and refrained from sending a messenger to summon its owner. Claudia suspected the snake's presence was a secret and didn't want to risk exposing it.

If this snake were well-known in the harem, it wouldn't have been used for some petty mischief against me, meaning someone was hiding it.

If so, it was only fitting to return it discreetly. To do this, Claudia had transformed into a child and cloaked herself in a spell to avoid detection as she made her way through the harem.

"Phew. We're finally here, Mr. Snake," Claudia whispered as she crouched behind a section of the palace wall, carefully hiding herself from view. Around the corner, female conjurers stood as guards, something absent from her palace.

If I use teleportation or any other magic that could be used to sneak things in or out, the barrier will sense it. I could force my way in

with enough power, but that would take a lot of energy and leave me sleepy afterward.

Even at thirteen, Claudia still couldn't escape the drowsiness that came from overusing her magic. Noah never said anything, but Claudia knew that he had been worried about this for years.

"Mr. Snake, can you show me where you came from?" she asked softly.

The snake slithered ahead, leading Claudia to a spot where part of the wall had crumbled and left a small opening.

"Just as I thought," Claudia murmured, nodding. "If I found the way you got out, it would lead to a way back in."

The hole in the wall was just large enough for the snake—and for Claudia in her child form—to squeeze through. Once inside, the snake could likely return to its owner without being seen. Claudia's job was nearly done; she only needed to escort the snake a little farther to ensure it reached a cool, shaded spot.

Being in this form has its advantages. I can look around a bit while I'm here.

Claudia followed the snake through the opening, crawling into the interior of the palace. Once inside, she exhaled softly.

What lay before her was a garden, adorned with a fountain and vibrant greenery, like the oases scattered throughout the desert.

Someone's here. Claudia sensed a presence and quickly adjusted her demeanor. She brightened her expression, adopting an innocent, childlike tone.

"Mr. Snake, you're almost home! You'll see your mama soon. Come on!" she chirped.

Rustling sounds came from nearby as someone approached quickly. Claudia turned, pretending to notice them for the first time, her wide, childlike eyes blinking in feigned surprise.

"You. Child."

The speaker was a strikingly beautiful, elegant young woman. Her deep-blue hair shimmered like the night sky under a full moon. Her tall, slender frame was bejeweled with sharp, striking eyes. Her lashes, long enough to almost seem heavy, added an air of mystique to her already striking features. She furrowed her brow slightly, her cold gaze falling on Claudia and the serpent.

"What are you doing in my garden?" she asked calmly.

The jewelry she wore was understated, yet Claudia could tell

that each was a treasure of the highest order. Despite the adornments, the woman held herself with an air of discipline, almost like that of a seasoned warrior.

This must be Ashbal's fiancée. The one said to hold the highest rank in the harem… Princess Naila.

Claudia blinked innocently before flashing a huge smile. "Hello!"

Her energetic greeting was met with a scowl.

"You see, I'm a guard!" Claudia announced, puffing out her chest with pride.

"A guard?"

Claudia skipped toward the woman, waving her small arms dramatically as she explained. "I can use a little bit of magic, so I kept this snake cool the whole way here! We're almost at the finish line!"

"What nonsense are you spouting?"

"You can come out now!" Claudia turned toward the snake and, with a small gesture, dispelled the concealment magic that had kept it hidden.

Naila's eyes widened as the large snake emerged into view.

"Is this your home, Mr. Snake?" Claudia asked, tilting her head.

"Mira…" Naila whispered.

So that's its name, Claudia thought as Naila hurried to the snake's side. Kneeling, Naila gently cradled Mira's head, her tone full of concern.

"Mira, are you all right? I was so worried about you, baby girl…"

Mira hissed in delight as Naila held her. Claudia watched the interaction with a smile.

So Mira's a girl.

"Good! I knew this was your home!" Claudia declared, clapping her hands. "My guard duties are done!" She hopped into the air with a little bounce.

Naila pulled away from the snake and knelt in front of Claudia. "You brought Mira back here? Thank you. You have my gratitude."

"Tee hee! We became friends, so we came together!" Claudia replied, grinning.

Naila studied her with a curious gaze. "I don't recognize you. Did you come with the princess who recently arrived in the harem?"

Claudia clasped her hands behind her back and tilted her head

in a display of childlike innocence.

“My name’s Adelheid!”

The unfamiliar, foreign-sounding name made Naila blink in slight surprise.

“And I came here to help my big sister Dia and learn proper manners!” Claudia continued, her voice light and sweet.

“I see.”

“What’s your name?” Claudia asked, looking up at her with wide, curious eyes.

Placing her right hand over her chest, Naila answered, “I am Naila El Barak. I have lived in this harem longer than anyone else.”

Claudia noticed how Naila’s expression softened each time she spoke—perhaps a sign that the princess had a fondness for children.

“This snake is my friend, Mira,” Naila explained, stroking Mira’s head affectionately. “In this country, snakes are considered symbols of misfortune, so I’ve kept her hidden to avoid frightening anyone. But I never imagined she’d escape from the garden…”

Her expression darkened slightly as her hand lingered on Mira’s head. “My carelessness caused her distress…and I’ve caused you trouble as well.”

“Nuh-uh! I had fun with Mira!” Claudia said brightly.

“Thank you,” Naila said. “I’d like to offer you something in return, but even something as simple as fruit would require permission from your sister first…”

As Naila trailed off in thought, Claudia seized the moment and raised her hand eagerly.

“I want to talk with you, Naila!”

“With me?”

“Yep! My sister is taking a nap, so I’m bored… Is that okay?” Claudia looked up at Naila with wide, pleading eyes in an artful display of innocence.

Naila groaned softly, placing a hand over her chest as though struck by Claudia’s cuteness. “It’s not a problem. I’d be happy to keep you company.”

“Yay! Thank you, Naila!” Claudia beamed, bouncing on her toes.

“However, give me a moment,” Naila said, turning toward a palm tree near the waterway. Beneath its shade lay a beautifully decorated bow.

“When I noticed Mira was gone, I dropped it in my haste. I need to put it away.”

“You’re an archer? That’s so cool!” Claudia exclaimed, her eyes wide with admiration.

“Thank you,” Naila replied, picking up the bow. “It’s nothing so grand—just part of my daily training.”

Her fingers brushed the bow lovingly, tracing the intricate carvings and golden motifs. The bow was an exquisite piece, adorned with sun-themed patterns and inlaid with gemstones. It looked more like a work of art than a weapon, clearly suiting a princess of her rank.

What caught Claudia’s eye most was the design—the bow took the shape of a golden bird, its wings spread wide as if about to take flight.

A bow that glimmers like gold…shaped like a bird in flight.

Naila carefully unstringed the bow, smiling at Mira at her feet.

“Mira, while I put this bow away, would you show Adelheid around for me?”

“Yay! Lead the way, Mira!” Claudia cheered, bright and eager.

But as Naila turned away, Claudia’s gaze lingered on the bow.

***

Invited into Naila’s palace, Claudia quickly realized something important: Naila knew that the king in the royal palace wasn’t Ashbal.

The two were sitting in the garden, beside clear, flowing water, while Naila freely answered questions about herself. Claudia, meanwhile, nibbled on frozen fruit and listened intently.

“Naila, do you dislike my sister?”

“Hmm? No. I neither dislike nor resent her.”

Claudia detected no hesitation in her voice, no attempt to conceal her true feelings.

Given the hostility she’d encountered from other women in the harem, it was obvious Dia was seen as a threat—a newcomer brought in by the king, placed in a palace equal to Naila’s own. That alone was enough to provoke resentment. Yet, despite Claudia’s arrival disrupting the status quo, Naila didn’t seem to mind.

Instead, she posed her own question to Claudia.

"May I ask you something, Adelheid? Did you meet His Majesty before coming here?"

"Uh-huh! I did!" Claudia had replied brightly.

"What did His Majesty look like?"

"He had black hair, and he was tall and really handsome!"

Naila's topaz-colored eyes narrowed slightly as she watched Claudia carefully.

"And his eye color?"

Claudia had paused for a beat, then smiled innocently. "Hmm… I don't really remember!"

Ashbal's eyes were a vivid red—a stark contrast to Noah's jet-black irises. Naila had clearly been testing Claudia, seeking to confirm what she already suspected.

Hair can be dyed with magic or potions, but changing one's eye color is far more difficult for most people.

It was clear to Claudia that Naila had realized the man currently acting as king was not her fiancé. However, lacking definitive proof, Naila had likely decided that questioning a child would draw less suspicion.

"I see. Forgive me for asking such strange things," Naila had said, brushing off the topic.

Claudia looked up at Naila with curious eyes. "Are you friends with the king?"

"Not quite," Naila replied, stroking the snake at her side. After a moment, she added softly, "Though perhaps, once upon a time, we were."

Her expression turned wistful as she looked down at Mira.

"Once, I was like you," she continued. "I came to the harem as a companion to my sister. She was much older than me and was brought here as a consort for the late king. I stayed to assist her and to learn the ways of a proper lady."

"Wow! You *are* just like me!" Claudia exclaimed, beaming.

"Yes. But unlike you, I didn't enjoy the glittering life of the harem," Naila said with a hint of self-deprecation. "I longed for the freedom of the wide-open sands of the desert."

She rose to her feet and walked toward the fountain. Claudia trailed after her. Together, they sat at the fountain's edge.

"I tried to run away once," Naila admitted, looking into the

water. “I made it to a secluded corner of the harem and cried, thinking no one would find me. That’s where I met Ashbal.”

Her fingertips brushed the surface of the fountain’s pool, her eyes drifting toward the eastern wall of the garden.

“Even if he was a child, no men were allowed in the harem aside from the king himself. The barriers around this place made entry impossible for anyone else. And yet, there he was. He was bleeding from his leg, and looked like he was in terrible pain.”

Naila closed her eyes, as though the memory itself pained her.

“The base of the goddess statue was drenched in blood,” she continued quietly. “That sight… I’ll never forget it.”

Claudia’s ears perked up at the mention of a goddess statue, but she chose to ask a different question first.

“Did you help him?”

“I couldn’t do much to treat his wounds. Nonetheless, he recovered on his own. And he was so grateful for the water and food I gave him…” She spoke of this memory softly, tenderly.

Her voice trailed off, and a quiet chuckle escaped her lips.

“Even after his wounds healed, he would occasionally sneak back in to visit me. He’d tell me stories about the world beyond these walls. When I told him I wanted to see the outside world, he’d say, ‘No. You’re too weak—you’d die in no time.’”

“The desert does have a lot of scary things in it!” Claudia chimed in.

“It does.” Naila smiled gently. “That’s why he taught me how to use a bow.”

She gestured toward a tree at the edge of the garden, which had a target carved into the bark.

“At first, I couldn’t even hold the bow steady—let alone hit a target—but Ashbal was patient as he kept teaching me. One day, he promised me, ‘Even if you don’t master the bow, if you ever set foot outside these walls, I’ll be there to protect you.’”

“Wow! The king’s so cool!” Claudia exclaimed.

Naila laughed lightly. “He’d be happy you thought so, but I imagine he’d be embarrassed that I told someone that story.”

A cool breeze drifted past the fountain, refreshing in the desert heat. Naila raised a hand to press down her long blue hair as it fluttered in the wind, happy memories tugging the corners of her lips upward.

“I wanted to stand beside him—not as a king and a princess who needed protecting, but as two equals who had each other’s back.”

Claudia sensed that this desire had shaped Naila into who she was and the dignified way she held herself. Donning her most innocent simper, the girl asked, “Is your pretty bow from the king?”

Naila smiled in return. “Mm-hmm. Don’t tell anyone else, okay? You know, I can’t help but reminisce on those days when talking to you like this. Back then, he and I were simply friends.”

Her cheerfulness faltered, and her gaze dropped.

“But now we’re betrothed. The next step is marriage. That’s what’s expected of us.”

Naila laughed quietly yet bitterly. Claudia tilted her head again, this time in genuine curiosity. There was something resigned about the way Naila spoke of her engagement.

“Oh, that’s right,” Naila said, noticing Claudia’s confusion. “You’re from another country, so it might not make much sense that your sister was brought here when the king is already betrothed to me. But…umm, how should I put this…? In this kingdom, the king can take multiple wives.”

Claudia shook her head. “That’s not what I think is strange. It’s that you sounded sad about marrying the king.”

“It’s just…” Naila hesitated, before continuing. “Ashbal and I were friends. Looking at him as my husband is strange.”

“But…” Claudia looked up at Naila. “Don’t you love him?”

At Claudia’s words, Naila’s face turned a deep shade of red. Her previously dignified expression crumbled entirely, replaced by embarrassment.

“Wh-What, uh, gave you that idea?” she stammered, trying to find her words.

Oh my. How adorable.

Claudia suppressed a giggle at the sight of Naila’s flustered reaction. She maintained her innocent demeanor, beaming up at the older girl.

“I can tell how much you love the king! Thank you for sharing your story with me!”

“W-Wait a minute! I never said I…I love him!”

“So you don’t?”

“Uh…” Naila hesitated, not wanting to say no, even to mask her

feelings. She looked down, unable to meet Claudia’s eyes, and mumbled, “I really think of us as friends… I wanted to stand as his equal, so I worked hard at archery, but…”



She trailed off, embarrassed. She pulled from the water her fingers that she'd been trailing in the fountain's pool before she continued speaking.

"A few years ago, I was summoned to the royal palace. I was shocked to find that he, of all people, was the new king. I had thought that I was going to leave the harem after the late king's death… I never imagined I would reenter the harem that day as the new king's betrothed."

I see…

Claudia was finally piecing the story together. To Naila, Ashbal had been a childhood companion, someone she looked up to and admired. But now that he was her fiancé, the shift in their relationship left her feeling at odds.

Judging from her story, it sounds like Ashbal feels the same way about her.

However, that was only a guess.

Claudia nodded and dipped her fingers into the fountain's cool water as Naila had done earlier.

"Your cheeks are so red! Are you feeling hot? The water feels nice and cool—try it!"

"I suppose you're right. Thank you," Naila murmured, dipping her palm in the water before bringing it to her cheek as if trying to hide her embarrassment.

Claudia smiled innocently at Naila as she carefully analyzed the faint magical traces carried by the water.

'Tis as I suspected. It's the water that runs specifically through my palace and Naila's that's imbued with an unusually strong magical energy.

This was the task that she had come all the way here to perform, even going as far as to transform into the form of a child.

On her very first day in the harem, Claudia had noticed something unusual while at the bathing pool in her palace. The sensation had come from the water itself, which carried a distinct magical energy, just like the fountain in Naila's garden.

In this desert kingdom, water isn't naturally available. It flows forth only through the efforts of royal conjurers who use their magic to circulate it. So, sensing magic in the water isn't strange. And yet…

The magic flowing through the two fountains felt fundamentally different from the magic she had encountered in

the kingdom's other water sources.

The statue she mentioned earlier. I thought I had explored the entire harem over the past three days, yet I never saw it.

Claudia's eyes sparkled as she turned to Naila with a request.

"Naila, I wanna see that goddess statue too!"

"Hmm?"

"Because that's where you met your prince, right? Maybe if I go there, I'll meet *my* prince!"

Naila tittered, and her expression softened. "I'd love to take you there, but, unfortunately, the goddess statue isn't here anymore. It was taken to the royal palace."

"What? Why did they take it away?"

"Apparently, it wasn't meant to be here in the first place. I don't know what's become of it now—Ashbal never mentioned anything about it."

For a brief moment, a trace of sadness flickered across Naila's face.

"You see, unless we're summoned, we're not allowed to set foot in the royal palace—or leave the harem," she said.

The harem did include a special chamber where the king could meet with the princesses for private companionship. If summoned, a princess might also leave the harem, accompanied by guards, to visit the royal palace and meet the king in his chambers.

"Does that mean you haven't seen the king in a long time?"

"That's not quite true. He does visit the harem from time to time, and when he does, we talk about the same silly things we did as children." Naila chuckled softly. "The difference is now he doesn't have to sneak in—he can enter through the front gate."

Then...

Claudia nodded thoughtfully, then hopped down from the edge of the fountain onto the sandy ground.

"My sister will wake up soon! I need to head back now!"

"It's gotten quite late, hasn't it?" Naila said, rising to her feet as well. She crouched slightly so that her gaze was level with Claudia's.

"Thank you, Adelheid—for helping Mira, and for keeping me company. Would you visit me again? It's nice to talk with you. That is...if you don't mind."

“Of course! I want to play with you again too, Naila!”

“Thank you,” Naila said, chuckling. “I’ve sealed the hole in the wall you came through with magic, so you’ll need to leave through the main gate. Shall I escort you?”

“I’m okay! Bye-bye, Naila!”

Claudia waved energetically before running off. Since her palace mirrored Naila’s, she knew the way back without needing guidance.

Once she reached her quarters, she dispelled her transformation magic with a *poof*, returning to her thirteen-year-old self. She stretched, letting out a small sigh of relief.

Now, then…

Claudia dissolved her magical dress, leaving only a shorter inner slip, and made her way to the bathing pool. She waded into the shallow water, which reached up to her waist, and let her body relax. Stretching out her legs in front of her, she kicked her feet, making the hem of her slip wave like a mermaid’s tail. She conjured magic at her fingertips and began to trace letters in the air.

To my dearest king…

After a brief pause, she decided to be direct.

Please choose me as your companion tonight.

Chapter 3

Noah had finished the day's official duties and retreated from the throne room back to his study when he received a magical letter from Claudia. He now sat at his desk, elbows planted firmly on its surface, his forehead pressed against his folded hands. How long he had been looking down at the letter in silence, even he didn't know.

"Hey, lad..."

Faraz stood behind him with a look of sympathy. Yet, when he spoke there was an undertone of barely suppressed laughter.

"Chin up. The princess you're all starry-eyed over just asked to spend the night with you. You're living the dream."

"I've told you already. This is not *romantic* love," Noah muttered in a low voice, keeping his head down.

"And for the record," he continued, trying to keep his voice calm, "this meeting is only a part of my duty to her. There's nothing here for you to find amusing."

"Duty or not, who cares? It's a golden chance, lad. You'll get to chat in private, away from prying eyes. That's one hell of an opportunity."

Noah refused to respond to that.

"Plus, the harem's nightwear? Pretty risqué. Who knows? She might even dress the part to keep up appearances in front of the other girls." Faraz grinned. "Lucky you, eh? And if..."

Faraz trailed off as Noah's silence grew heavier, his shoulders slumping down inch-by-inch.

"Er... My bad." Faraz scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

Noah's headache was growing steadily thanks to Faraz's ill-thought-out encouragement. Noah let out a deep sigh, massaging his temples as he cast a weary glance at the letter.

To my dearest king. Please choose me as your companion tonight.

Noah could all too easily picture her writing those words. She'd have been humming cheerfully, a mischievous smile playing on her lips, thoroughly enjoying herself as she used her finger to write the characters in the air.

And now, thanks to Faraz's earlier comments, unbidden images surfaced in Noah's mind.

"It's been three days since I've seen Noah. I'll have to wear something adorable for him!"

Noah groaned quietly, dragging a hand through his dark hair. He collapsed against his desk and muttered, "Someone save me."

"Y'know, I'm actually starting to feel a bit sorry for you, lad."

But no matter how exasperated he felt, Noah couldn't afford to let his emotions get the better of him.

This is my duty and that's all. Her Highness is simply requesting a meeting to exchange information. Nothing more.

Straightening in his chair, he exhaled slowly and leaned back, resting against the luxurious upholstery of the seat.

"Please make the necessary arrangements to receive Princess Dia in the royal bedchamber tonight."

"Oh? Not thinking of heading to the harem yourself? You've got permission from Ashbal to enter, you know."

"The harem is a sanctuary for the women there," Noah replied. "If I, a man—an impostor king, no less—were to set foot there, it would only undermine their sense of security."

Faraz chuckled, shrugging as he turned to leave. "Got it, got it. Don't worry, lad. I'll have your bedchamber prepared—complete with a romantic ambience. It's my job as a loyal servant to the king. You'll thank me later."

"Please don't. I'm begging you."

And so, despite the mounting headache, Noah prepared himself for his first meeting with Claudia in three days.

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Late that night, Claudia, now in her adult form, had just finished bathing alone without the assistance of her maids. Draped in a fluffy robe, she sat before her vanity.

"Now, then..." she murmured as she smoothed cream over her skin, leaving it soft and glowing. Her lips, too, appeared plump and moisturized.

Her milk-tea-colored hair gleamed as she ran a pearl-inlaid comb through it. The comb, enchanted with hair-nourishing magic, had been left under the moonlight to absorb its glow. With

every stroke, her hair shimmered like gold, cascading in soft waves. She loosely braided a small section, just enough to make sure that it wouldn't fall into her face.

For tonight's nightgown... Perhaps I'll choose something fitting for this kingdom's harem.

Her gaze shifted to the enchanted ring on her hand that could conjure clothing—one of many magical accessories Noah had given her. As Claudia activated the ring, something unusual happened.

The opal stone glowed faintly with magic, but no dress appeared.

Just as I thought.

Her lips curved into a knowing smile. The ring remained warm to the touch, its magic stirring, but it failed to produce the nightwear she had imagined.

Of course, Noah wouldn't have prepared anything meant for that purpose in this ring.

The clothing conjured by the ring required input—mental designs or instructions tailored to specific needs. While it stored an array of outfits for Claudia, it was clear that Noah had drawn the line well before adding anything as suggestive as a gown meant for a night of companionship.

Well then, I'll just have to make it myself.

Claudia rose from her chair and, with a shrug, she let the garment slip from her shoulders.

"It's been three days since I've seen Noah," she murmured. "I'll have to wear something adorable for him!"

No doubt Noah had already predicted what she would do.

Closing her eyes, Claudia pictured the perfect dress in her mind. With a quiet breath, she activated her magic, weaving the design from her imagination into reality.

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That night, the solitary gate to the royal harem opened to the outside world.

A camel, draped with a saddle adorned with moon-shaped tokens, moved forward at a leisurely pace, bearing the king's favored consort.

Pulling the animal's reins were two female conjurers, tasked with escorting the rider for the brief journey to the king's chambers.

Seated sidesaddle atop the camel, Claudia wore an all-white velvet robe. The desert nights were cold, and though she was protected by the magic imbued in Noah's ring, proper attire was still essential.

The velvet fabric, as soft and white as woven clouds, shimmered faintly under the pale glow of the moon. Tiny jewels reminiscent of stars were sewn into the hem of the long robe.

As Claudia lifted her gaze, she caught sight of the golden doors leading to the king's chambers. Standing before it, surrounded by a handful of guards, was Noah.

He wore a deep sapphire-blue uniform with a high, fitted collar, its tailored lines perfectly complementing his still-developing but sturdy frame.

Intricate embroidery in radiant gold—reminiscent of the sun's rays—adorned the garment, and made him appear all the more regal even from afar.

Noah's accessories, unusual for him, included earrings that Claudia had given him, a necklace, bracelets, and rings. His posture was impeccable, so much so that it seemed to make the others around him want to stand straighter. He stood with the relaxed authority that marked a king, yet that was belied by the natural vigilance of a swordsman. The sheer presence he commanded made it impossible for onlookers to doubt his legitimacy.

It had been three days since Claudia last saw him. She noted the faint crease in his brow, and the sight filled her with affection. A smile pulled at her lips.

Her expression had an unexpected effect—not on Noah, but on the men at his side. They froze, their breaths catching as they stared at her, captivated.

"Unbelievable," one of them murmured under his breath. "A beauty that leaves you speechless."

Claudia, who had caught the comment through a subtle amplification spell, took note of how close the man stood to Noah. Noah looked irritated. The man's casual familiarity suggested he was someone Noah interacted with frequently in this disguise.

Ah, that must be Faraz—the advisor Ashbal mentioned, one of the few who know the truth.

Claudia felt a small warmth in her chest, pleased that Noah had someone in the palace he could trust.

The camel slowed to a halt in front of Noah, and Claudia turned her gaze downward from her elevated perch.

"I am deeply grateful, Your Majesty, that you've granted me this audience tonight despite my selfish request."

With that, she extended her right hand toward him.

At this moment, I am no longer your master but your consort. You understand, don't you, Noah?

Her gentle but knowing grin was enough to convey her thoughts to him.

Noah let out a quiet sigh. Stepping forward, he took her hand.

As his hand closed around hers, magic rippled through the air. Claudia's body lifted gently from the saddle, her robe billowing out around her as she descended. The jewels scattered across the hem caught the light of the torches, glittering like a cascade of shooting stars.

Noah guided her gracefully into his arms. His hand slid to her back, supporting her with a tenderness as if she were something precious and fragile.

Lowering his voice, he leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "Dia."

Hearing her name—though veiled as a pseudonym—in that low, coarse voice sent a shiver down her spine. Spoken like that, it felt like an intimate nickname, just for her.

Noah's hand brushed gently against her hair, smoothing it as he asked, "Have you been comfortable in the harem?"

"Thanks to the gifts you've given me, I'm quite comfortable, Your Majesty."

Her response seemed to ease the tension in his shoulders, if only slightly.

Noah made no grand declaration of her beauty, nor did he offer flirtatious words for the benefit of their audience. Instead, he uttered a simple wish.

"Let us go to the bedchamber. I want to be alone with you."

The simple and direct words had a greater effect than some grand declaration of love. The guards exchanged awkward

glances, a few coughing to mask their discomfort as they averted their gazes.

You get full marks for that, my dear Noah.

The carefully crafted scene had the desired effect. To all who witnessed it, Claudia was undoubtedly the king's favored consort.

The truth—that their rendezvous was a cover for sharing intelligence and that Claudia's presence in the harem served a greater purpose—was completely concealed.

Once the Golden Falcon is found, Ashbal will explain that I was merely an investigator assigned to the harem. Thus, Naila will be spared from any lasting consequences of my presence here.

Stepping out of Noah's embrace, Claudia tilted her head up to look at him, her smile playful.

"Carry me?"

The words were spoken in the same sweet, childish tone she used as a young girl. Noah's expression briefly contorted as though he were suppressing a headache.

Still, without a word, he bent down and swept her into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

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"Your Highness."

Claudia giggled softly. "I missed you, my adorable Noah."

Gently set down on the bed, Claudia shrugged off her velvet robe as she rolled onto the silken sheets. She enjoyed the smoothness against her skin.

The air was delicately perfumed with the sweet fragrance of local nectar. Combined with the room's magically maintained temperature, it was easy to pass the time here.

"Look at this nightgown," Claudia said playfully. "I designed it based on something I once read about in a book. Don't you think it's adorable?"



Noah said nothing, his gaze fixed firmly anywhere but on Claudia.

The gown she wore was a soft turquoise blue, light and airy, with a short hemline that barely reached the midpoint of her thighs.

“This length,” she explained, “isn’t just practical for hot nights—it also highlights the curve of my thighs. The sheer material adds a touch of elegance, don’t you think?”

The gown’s soft drape emphasized the smooth, graceful shape of her legs, while the translucent fabric hinted at the silhouette beneath. The shoulder straps were delicate and thin, made of a soft, lightweight material. Silver embroidery formed delicate floral patterns that trailed down the gown. A ribbon tied just below her chest highlighted her slender waist.

“Even without a corset, the waistline is cinched just right to show off my figure. And see how the open back reveals just enough skin? It draws attention to my shoulder blades and creates a clean, elegant look.”

The fabric, woven in a style unique to this region, was not only soft, but also so fine and light that her silhouette shimmered through it. It clung and shifted as she moved, giving the impression of someone draped in light rather than cloth. Claudia loved how it felt.

“And of course,” she continued, gesturing toward her neckline, “there’s this.”

The neckline was daringly low, revealing a tantalizing view of her décolletage. A diamond pendant shaped like a teardrop rested against her skin, drawing the eye to the natural curve of her chest.

“Even with a neckline this bold, the embroidery and ruffles around it keep it looking refined, don’t you think?”

“Indeed.” Noah’s voice was tight, his posture stiff as he made every effort to avoid looking directly at her.

Claudia chuckled and rolled onto her stomach, hugging a large pillow against her. “You know, it’s been a while since I’ve worn something you didn’t design—other than underwear, of course.”

Claudia would have felt bad making Noah design her underwear, but she almost always left the rest of her wardrobe in his capable hands. The last time she could recall wearing something not conjured by him was years ago, when she attended

the academy at the bottom of the sea.

"Oh, but I suppose this is closer to underwear, isn't it?" she teased, lifting the hem of her gown slightly between her fingers.

"Your Highness." Noah pressed his palm to his forehead. "If you're unaware of how improper this is, then I must respectfully inform you—"

"Oh, I'm fully aware," she interrupted with a mischievous grin. "I'm doing this on purpose."

Noah's frown deepened. Now aware that he was being teased, he finally turned away.

"I'll fetch something for you to cover yourself with."

"You're terrible, Noah. After all this effort to dress up for you, you won't even compliment me?"

"You know you're beautiful without me saying it."

"Not good enough. Say it properly."

Noah sighed before turning to look at her. "You are beautiful. Truly."

"Good boy!" Claudia clapped her hands, pleased that he had indeed used the word "beautiful" instead of something boring like "adorable."

Noah squinted, as if looking at something too bright, before averting his eyes and starting on the task of conjuring something. Before he could follow through, Claudia reached out and caught his hand.

"If you're going to put more clothes on me, I'd prefer it to be your jacket."

Noah hesitated but ultimately acquiesced. "Understood."

He began to unfasten the buttons of his blue jacket and knelt on one knee on the edge of the bed. He gently draped the garment over her shoulders, like one would do with a blanket.

Claudia slipped her arms through the sleeves, then shifted her body and wrapped the jacket around herself.

"Did you encounter any difficulties these past three days?" Noah asked.

"Oh, plenty. After all, you weren't by my side."

She wouldn't tell him any lies. She valued the efforts he made for her highly, after all.

"But these rings you made for me have been incredibly helpful," she added, admiring the glittering bands on her finger. "I must

say, Noah, when it comes to crafting magical tools, I have nothing left to teach you. I wouldn't be surprised if you could seal any spell into an artifact now."

"You honor me with your praise," Noah replied humbly after a moment of silence.

Magical artifacts, after all, had not always been kind to him. Artifacts were vessels that could be used to store spells, such as a ring that could produce clothing at the bearer's whim. If made by a conjurer worth their salt, they could store a spell and be used for hundreds of years. Yet, some artifacts held less savory magic: curses. And while Noah had mastered their creation under Claudia's guidance, his enthusiasm for them remained lukewarm.

"I'll expedite my investigation so I can return to your side as soon as possible," Noah continued. "For now, let me report what I've found…"

"Sit down first. And before that, why don't you brew me some of your tea? I've *so* missed it," Claudia said, stretching her body out on the bed.

"As you wish."

Once the tea was prepared, Claudia floated her steaming cup lazily in the air with a spell, sipping it while she sprawled comfortably on the bed. It was far from proper behavior, but the presence of her trusted servant allowed her to let her guard down completely.

Noah sat down as she asked, and, together, they began to exchange the details of their respective investigations. As he listened to her recount what she'd learned in the harem, his expression grew contemplative.

"A bow resembling a golden bird, magic-infused water flowing only through specific channels, and a goddess statue relocated to the palace…" he mused aloud. "This childhood friend of Ashbal's appears to possess significant knowledge about the harem's inner workings."

Claudia continued to lounge comfortably on the bed, her fingertips idly tracing the edge of the silken sheet.

"I could force communications through the barrier," she mused, stifling a yawn, "or even sneak a letter past it. But doing so without being noticed? Impossible. The only ones who can pass through the barrier discreetly are animals."

Noah nodded, his expression serious. “In a desert where monsters and bandits lurk, the harem’s safety is paramount. It is only natural for the barrier to be as robust as it is. However, Your Highness,” he hesitated for a moment before continuing, “I have yet to be able to identify the conjurer responsible for maintaining it.”

Claudia set her empty teacup on the tray, and Noah immediately handed her a small plate filled with jewellike cherries, each split in two, their pits already removed. Plucking one delicately, she popped it into her mouth.

“What about that charming older gentleman I saw at your side earlier—the one with the beard? Have you asked him?”

“I asked him directly, but he claims to know nothing. According to him, aside from Ashbal himself, no man in the palace is privy to the details of how to remove the barrier.”

“Understandable,” Claudia said thoughtfully. “If the wrong person knew how to breach it, the harem could be in great danger.”

The harem’s safety was of utmost importance to the palace. Naila’s face drifted into Claudia’s thoughts.

She leaned back against the pillows, her gaze drifting toward the window. “Still, the harem is so vast and opulent that I doubt anyone feels trapped. It’s like a world of its own.”

Claudia rose to her feet, brushing aside the delicate curtains that veiled the window. Even in the middle of the night, the city that stretched out below was as bright as the sun at midday.

“The late king was extraordinary, wasn’t he?” she murmured. “To create such a magnificent city from nothing in the middle of the desert… And in only a thousand nights.”

Building a fully functional metropolis in just over three years wasn’t something that could be accomplished with magic or wealth alone. It would need someone who could inspire and lead their people to work together to create it.

She turned to face Noah. “Of course, my adorable Noah seems to be handling his role as the king’s stand-in just as admirably.”

“I am nothing more than your servant, Your Highness. Whatever you command, I shall fulfill without question.”

Claudia couldn’t help but get a twinkle in her eye at his devotion. Reaching out, she placed a hand on his head, her fingers

gently ruffling his hair. Noah's eyes remained averted, his expression one of mild embarrassment.

"You mentioned a statue of a goddess earlier," he said. "I found some information about that in my investigation."

"You've taken an interest in the statue as well, Noah?"

"I conducted a thorough investigation into the movements of goods entering and leaving the harem. Excluding everyday goods, the number of such objects is quite small, so it was not difficult to trace them back several years."

It was rare for items to be transferred from the harem to the royal palace. Noah, intrigued by this anomaly, had taken the time to investigate further.

"It appears that the goddess statue was left behind by none other than His Majesty Ashbal's mother."

"His mother?"

"Yes. And I have confirmed the statue's location. It would be somewhat conspicuous for me to inspect it alone, as Faraz would no doubt take notice. However, if I were to accompany Your Highness, I could say it was an excursion to show you something unique to alleviate your boredom within the inner palace."

"As expected of my ever-thoughtful Noah. In that case..."

Claudia's words trailed off, her sentence left unfinished. Noah, as if sensing something, rose swiftly and turned his gaze toward the window.

"Noah..."

"Yes." He knew what she was asking for without it needing to be verbalized. A sphere of light materialized in the palm of his hand, its brilliant shine glowing as he cast it outside. Claudia rose from the bed, taking Noah's place by the window. Her gaze followed his to the desert beyond.

Far below, in the shadowy expanse of sand veiled in darkness by the clouds that obscured the moon, a burst of golden sparks erupted.

"Distant thunder...? No, that's not it."

The luminous orb floated steadily toward the heart of the desert, illuminating the source of the noise.

The two stood silently, taking in what they saw.

"That is quite the enormous firedrake," said Claudia, finally.

The massive creature rampaged wildly in the desert, its

enormous form spewing flames from its gaping maw. Each bellowing roar resounded like thunder, and with every deafening cry, an immense wave of magical energy rippled outward. That magical energy must have been what the two of them had sensed.

Its wings, spread wide, were far larger than the average homes of the city's inhabitants. The beast thrashed its head in a frenzy, unleashing torrents of fire, its furious cries echoing into the night sky.

Noah turned to Claudia and fell to one knee. "I will handle this. Your permission, please."

The clouds parted, revealing moonlight that illuminated Noah's obsidian eyes. The moonlit glow made them all the more beautiful.

"I grant you permission, my dear Noah."

With those words, Noah vanished, leaving Claudia to turn back to the window. She conjured a mirror of water before her, its surface reflecting and enlarging the distant scene of the dragon raging in the moonlit desert.

Moments later, a brilliant flash of light erupted above the dragon's head, wholly distinct from the beast's fiery glow.

Descending with a blade in hand, Noah cleaved through the air, his movements decisive and unerring. Using the momentum of his fall, he cut through one of the dragon's wings in a single, powerful blow.

The dragon's roar was so loud that even at this distance, it reached Claudia's ears. She briefly wondered if Noah's eardrums might be at risk. She cradled her teacup, since refilled, with both hands, sipping delicately, her eyes never leaving the scene in the mirror.

He has grounded it first. A wise choice. What next?

Noah landed lightly upon the sand, before jumping backward to evade the torrent of flames the dragon unleashed. The beast continued its relentless assault, but Noah dodged with ease, manipulating gravity through magic to diminish his weight and leap higher. In one swift motion, he maneuvered behind the dragon's massive form.

With a dazzling strike of his blade, another roar erupted as he slashed the back of one of the dragon's hind legs. The colossal creature writhed in pain, its anguished cries echoing as it collapsed heavily onto the sands. A tremor rippled through the

ground as it fell.

Though the beast struggled, its mobility had been entirely neutralized, ensuring it could no longer endanger the city or its people.

All that remains is for Noah to transport the beast to a remote locale, where he might restore its wings and leg. What a good boy he is.

The moon slipped behind the clouds, casting the surroundings into deepening darkness. Under the cover of this shadowy veil, the weakened dragon could be relocated to a place where neither wandering monsters nor human eyes would disturb it.

Noah raised his hand toward the dragon, likely preparing to cast a teleportation spell to carry it away. Yet, just as quickly, he froze, his eyes widening in alarm.

"Your Highness," his lips moved silently, forming words discernible only to Claudia, who observed intently through the enchanted water mirror. *"The dragon... It's turning to gold—"*

Claudia blinked, startled.

What now reflected in the mirror was the glimmer of golden light that she'd initially mistaken as lightning. The dragon, roaring defiantly toward the heavens, began to transform. From the tip of its tail, a shimmering golden hue crept across its massive body. The beast thrashed violently, struggling to resist, but the relentless golden sheen devoured its hardened scales with frightening speed.

"This... This is the same as that griffin," Noah muttered, his lips moving once more. "No... This is far worse."

It was as though water had been poured onto frozen ground, spreading instantly into foul ice. The living, breathing dragon was transformed into an immense, lifeless mass of gold before their eyes.

This is troublesome.

The very moment Claudia registered the abnormality, Noah acted. A protective barrier materialized around the dragon and the surrounding area, cutting off the spreading corruption.

At the same time, a commotion erupted from the royal palace. Doors swung open, and a group of royal conjurers hurried into view, their expressions a mix of urgency and confusion.

"Hey, what was that?! A dragon?"

“His Majesty has vanquished it! We must make our way there quickly!”

Claudia spotted Faraz, the man who had earlier been standing by Noah’s side, within the crowd. She discreetly traced glowing letters in the air, sending him a message visible only to him.

One of the conjurers shouted, “Lord Faraz, we must go to His Majesty at once—”

“No,” Faraz commanded, taking the message into his palm and concealing it from the others. He addressed the conjurers with a firm tone, “His Majesty’s orders are clear. Until further instructions, no one is to leave the palace grounds.”

“U-Understood, my lord,” one of the magicians stammered, visibly perturbed but unwilling to disobey.

Yet as Faraz glanced back toward Claudia, his eyes silently questioning whether this course was truly wise, he found she was no longer there.

Claudia had teleported to the desert, her figure draped in Noah’s oversized jacket.

“Noah, you are unharmed, yes?” she asked from beside him.

“Yes, Your Highness. However, I must insist that you remain at a distance.” He raised his hand in front of her, to prevent her from advancing any farther. “I have fortified the barrier, but there is always a risk of unexpected danger.”

“What a vile concentration of magic,” Claudia murmured, her gaze fixed on the dragon—or rather, the golden form it had become. To be precise, her eyes rested on the area within the hemisphere of shimmering force that Noah had erected around the dragon’s remains. Within its confines, there lay not only the lifeless gold but something far more sinister.

The air within the barrier was thick with a malignant power—a surge of corrupt magic so potent, it seemed to spread like a physical stench, oppressive and foul.

“This accursed magic is seeping from the earth, bubbling up like an invisible geyser,” Claudia said, her tone sharp with distaste.

Likely, the dragon had come into contact with this corrupted magic. That would explain its pain, its fury, and its transformation into gold.

“The griffin that arrived in our kingdom—it, too, must have encountered this magic,” Claudia speculated.

“When I first teleported to the dragon’s side, I sensed no trace of this corruption. It was only after it was subdued that the magic began to surge from the ground.”

“Even so, what we sensed earlier, from the bedchamber, was not the dragon’s presence at all. It must have been this magic.” Claudia pressed her fingertips to her lips as she fell deep into thought. “And yet, neither of us detected a force of such magnitude over the past three days. How could that be?”

At that moment, Claudia noticed something peculiar. On the sands nearby, faint impressions had been left behind—footprints, small and delicate, shaped like those of a fox.

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After Noah reinforced the barrier and thoroughly investigated the surrounding area of the magical eruption, he explained the situation to Faraz. By the time Claudia and Noah had completed their investigation, the eastern sky had begun to lighten with the approach of dawn.

“That stagnant magic is, without a doubt, the result of a curse,” Claudia murmured as she stretched out on her bed upon returning to the royal chambers.

Noah sat beside her at her insistence.

“It is most likely a magic that transforms all it touches into gold,” she continued, clutching Noah’s pillow tightly against her chest. “And yet, neither when we first came to this land nor now do I sense its vile presence anywhere.”

As Claudia mumbled her thoughts, Noah silently pulled the covers up to her shoulders. Then, as though completing her unspoken thoughts, he said, “You once explained to me, Your Highness, that currents of magical energy exist within the earth, the seas, and the natural world, aligning with the paths of ley lines and ocean currents. But this magic…”

“Yes, it didn’t feel like part of some great natural cycle. It is as though it swirled unnaturally, as if the ley lines themselves had been deliberately distorted. Regrettably, the time we had to observe it was too brief.”

Nevertheless, Noah’s immediate response—erecting a barrier to contain the magic—had undoubtedly been the most prudent

course of action.

The enormous body of the firedrake had served as a convenient shield, but had Noah been exposed to the surging magic directly, his body might have turned to gold as well.

Magical beasts of great power such as the firedrake were often drawn to places where magic accumulated in great concentrations. The beast likely followed the dense magical energy during its flight over the desert.

“Even so,” Claudia said, puffing out her cheeks in playful reproach as she looked up at her loyal and courageous attendant, “you noticed something was amiss almost immediately after you teleported to the dragon, didn’t you?”

“I determined it was urgent to subdue the firedrake first,” Noah replied calmly. “I had already sensed that something was stirring beneath the sands, so I chose to bring the dragon down in such a way that its body would act as a seal over the source.”

He stated this matter-of-factly, as though it were no great feat, but the battle must have been truly perilous. Instead of scolding him for his recklessness, Claudia chose to punish him in her own way.

“I’ve mussed my hair while rolling about. You shall fix it for me using your own hands.”

“Your Highness,” Noah protested.

“Until I tell you to stop. Now, be quick about it.”

At her command, punctuated by her gentle tug at his sleeve, Noah sighed quietly before extending his hand. His fingers slid through Claudia’s hair, scattered across the sheets, and began smoothing her locks with practiced care.

“And don’t forget to request that Faraz review the findings with the conjurers who examined the barrier,” Claudia instructed as she rolled onto her side to face Noah. “There were creatures other than the firedrake turned to gold within.”

“They identified desert rabbits, sand mice, and the like, embedded in the sand within the barrier. One can assume there were many small animals that were caught up in the magical eruption, much like the dragon.”

“In short, this curse only affects living creatures—and not just magical beasts, but ordinary animals as well,” Claudia mused as Noah’s large, steady hand stroked her hair. “That magic is surely

rooted in a curse. And yet, for now, it has managed to conceal its presence entirely."

"It seems plausible that the stolen Golden Falcon is a cursed magical artifact and the source of these incidents."

"Whatever the case, it is deeply troubling. Had this occurred in a populated area, countless lives would have been lost. As it is, we were fortunate that it occurred in the empty desert and that you were there to prevent a catastrophe."

Claudia's hair slipped between Noah's fingers as he carefully combed it. He nodded solemnly, picking up on her unspoken fears.

"If this eruption happens again on a larger scale, we will not be able to respond in time."

"Precisely. The firedrake died the instant it was turned to gold." Claudia blinked slowly before she voiced her fears. "If that curse were to spread to this city, countless people would fall victim to it. And if left unchecked, it could consume entire nations—perhaps the entire continent."

Noah listened in silence.

Should that come to pass, the world that they knew would become a lifeless wasteland, devoid of all living things. Humans, animals, magical beasts—all reduced to voiceless, soulless statues of gold. A nation of gold that would be a haven for no one.

"For now..." Claudia's voice trailed off as drowsiness overtook her. Clutching the pillow tightly, she tried to resist the pull of sleep, rubbing her eyes in vain.

Noah's hand lightly brushed her cheek.

"Noah?"

Her voice was soft and hazy, her head tilted slightly as she looked at him. His brow furrowed, a pained expression crossing his face.

"Your Highness, you must not exhaust yourself. Please, rest."

"I can only remain with you until morning...and morning is already upon us. The sun has risen," Claudia whispered, gazing at the faint light streaming through the cracks in the curtains. Although it was barely past four in the morning, the sunlight outside was so bright, it could almost be mistaken for noon.

"There isn't much time left."

If they did not act quickly to counter the golden curse, the

consequences would be catastrophic.

“Even so,” Noah murmured, his hand moving with a soothing gentleness as he caressed her cheek, “you’re spending all of your time in your adult form. Please be careful—your endurance for magic has not risen since you were a child.”

She had known Noah since he was a small child, yet his voice was now that of a man.

“Mm…but I’ve grown…at least a little…”

“That is not the point,” Noah said firmly.

Tonight, it seemed, Noah was being stricter than usual. The covers he had so carefully tucked around her earlier, the carefully chosen temperature of the room, even the faint scent of the incense burning, all seemed part of a deliberate effort to lull her into sleep.

“If you must fall asleep somewhere without me, then at least allow me to watch over you for a little while.” He spoke to her softly.

Claudia reached out, grasping the fabric of his clothing, and tugged him down to lie beside her. “Stay close,” she murmured. “Until I fall asleep…I want to keep talking.”

It was not the first time she had made such a request. Yet Noah hesitated, his brow furrowing briefly before he sighed, resigning himself.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

Claudia yawned softly, slipping her arms around her loyal servant as though he were a pillow. And in this way, she closed her eyes, surrendering at last to sleep.

***

King Ashbal of Sharavia walked under the glaring desert sun, cloaked in a robe to shield him from sand and sunlight.

The hot desert sand here had no tracks, not even the sporadic tracks left by camels so common here. Ashbal stood alone, the golden city visible at a distance. Yet, only silence surrounded him.

It was here, last night, that a dragon had appeared.

Ashbal crouched, his hand brushing the scorching white sand. He frowned as he sensed the faint trace of magic seeping from the ley lines beneath.

After a moment, he murmured softly to himself, “Was this Noah’s doing?”

Rising, Ashbal lifted his gaze to the center of the city, where the palace gleamed so brilliantly it seemed to blind the eyes. His eyes drifted to the two turquoise-green domes standing nearby. Around this hour, his childhood friend was likely there, diligently practicing her archery.

“Naila,” he whispered, “I wish I could go see you.”

His words hung in the air. A hollow sound, one that brought an unbidden, bitter smile to his lips.

How unbecoming, he thought to himself, *to mutter such things alone like this. She’d likely scold me for it.*

Ashbal pulled his hood lower over his face, concealing his expression as he took a step forward.

In an instant, his form shifted, his body transforming into that of a fox. The small creature left a trail of small footprints on the smooth surface of the sand as he trotted away.

***

“Well, well, lad. You’ve been working hard.”

Noah frowned at Faraz’s all-too-cheerful greeting.

The older man was a bit *too* amused. At the very least, the broad grin was hardly what Noah wished to see in the royal palace corridors at such an early hour.

When Noah shot him a weary glare, Faraz only chuckled, his glee increasing.

“Ha! You really do look exhausted.”

“If you could kindly remain silent, I would appreciate it. My patience is running dangerously thin due to a severe lack of sleep.”

Noah’s words were unthinkably brusque, given that Faraz was a high-ranking official from another nation. However, with this man, such formalities hardly mattered.

Faraz stroked his bearded chin, his deeply set eyes narrowing in an expression of feigned contemplation.

“Well, seeing as your dear princess has been staying over *every* night lately, it’s not much of a shock, is it? Poor lad, must be rough, not being able to lay a hand on the woman you love.”

“How many times must I tell you? That is *not* the nature of our

relationship.” Noah sighed, too tired to continue arguing.

Three days had passed since the firedrake had appeared in the desert. Each night since, Noah had invited Claudia to his chambers under the guise of *nightly visits*, which served as a cover for their ongoing exchange of intelligence.

Yet, summoning a princess to the royal palace drew far too much attention from the palace guards. Theoretically, it would have been far less conspicuous for Noah to visit the harem instead. However, out of respect for Ashbal, Noah—fully aware that he was not the actual king—had avoided taking such liberties. As a result, Claudia came to the palace and always arrived with a grand reception.

Once everything is resolved, they intend to announce that Her Highness was merely an investigator sent to the harem, and that there was never any royal favor involved, yet…

Even so, rumors within the palace spread unchecked, including whispers that the king was utterly infatuated with Princess Dia.

Noah knew he had no choice but to endure the gossip. Yet, he could not entirely rid himself of the guilt it stirred toward Claudia.

That being said, we’re no longer in a position to worry about appearances.

Over the past few days, he and Claudia had reached the same conclusion. They had discussed it last night.

“The reach of the golden curse is steadily expanding,” Claudia had surmised.

They had discovered multiple locations where the flow of magic within the earth’s ley lines had become unstable. This hadn’t been isolated to the site where the firedrake had fallen.

“If it continues to spread unchecked through the desert, both the city and the kingdom will soon be at risk. In time, it could consume the entire continent.”

“And if that happens, every living creature in the world will turn to gold,” Noah said, his words heavy.

Claudia nodded solemnly from where she lay on the bed, hugging a pillow. “We must learn more about the Golden Falcon. I’d like to make contact with Ashbal, yet…”

“Despite having established a secure means of communication, His Majesty has yet to respond at all. I can only hope he is not

suffering from illness or injury."

"Perhaps we should have one of his subordinates try to communicate with him instead. Noah, this may require a rather forceful approach."

Noah had spent the rest of the evening resting on the couch, allowing Claudia to use the bed alone. Even so, the rest had done little to alleviate his exhaustion, especially when a sleep-addled Claudia had, at some point during the night, stumbled over to the couch and clung to him.

And now, here stood Faraz, openly reveling in his predicament.

"Oh, come now, lad. You *must* be in love with her," the older man teased, his grin widening knowingly. "She *is* a beauty beyond compare, after all. But don't you feel too bad—when a woman like that saves your life, it's only natural to fall for her, even if it sends you straight to ruin."

Noah glared at him silently.

"If you keep denying it, you might just end up regretting it someday."

There was something oddly foreboding about the way Faraz said that.

Noah narrowed his eyes. "That is not a concern of mine."

Faraz watched Noah's expression. "I don't know if that's ignorance talking or just youth, but it's downright adorable, it is." He shrugged.

"We have more pressing concerns," Noah said. He cast a silent incantation, cloaking the surrounding corridor in a veil of magic. It was a spell designed to conceal their presence, ensuring that even if the palace guards passed through, they would not notice anything unusual.

Faraz's eyes widened in surprise as the spell activated. He studied Noah, his expression shifting into a thin, almost predatory smile.

"And what's it you intend to do, lad?"

"My apologies for the abruptness, Lord Faraz."

Noah's sharp eyes flicked to the curved scimitar resting at Faraz's waist. As the older man placed a hand on its hilt, Noah continued evenly, "Regrettably, we no longer have the luxury of giving you a choice. You *will* be assisting us."



“Well, aren’t you a tough one today! Surely we can talk this out first?” Faraz’s tone remained amused, though a glint of wariness flickered in his eyes. “I’ve no clue what you’re after, but this doesn’t seem like you, lad.”

“Unfortunately, we no longer have the time to be picky about our measures.”

Last night, Claudia had given him explicit instructions on how to deal with him.

“If my instincts are correct, that man…”

Faraz let out a short laugh, then, without hesitation, he drew his scimitar and pointed the tip at Noah.

“You do know, lad, that pulling a stunt like this within the royal palace is a crime of the highest order? Your dear princess will be the one paying the price for your foolishness.”

“If anyone is to be arrested as a criminal, it will not be me.” At Noah’s words, Faraz’s expression subtly shifted. “To everyone in this palace, *I* am the king.”

At that, Faraz’s face went completely blank.

“The enchanted artifact that allows me to assume His Majesty’s appearance is flawless,” Noah said. “With it, I can deceive anyone in this palace. My policies thus far have aligned with those of the true king, and I have already established my presence within the court. If I so chose, taking the throne as Ashbal’s permanent replacement would be quite simple.”

Faraz said nothing.

Noah continued, “To any outsider, it would be *you*, the man accusing me of deception, who would be deemed a criminal… Do you understand now?”

Faraz slowly bowed his head, his shoulders trembling slightly.

Noah, anticipating hostility, took a half-step back, shifting into a defensive stance.

But then, Faraz suddenly clamped a hand over his mouth and burst into laughter.

“Ha… Ha ha ha! Now *this* is what I’ve been waiting for!”

Just as Her Highness predicted.

Claudia had told him this last night.

“If my instincts are correct, that man… I wonder if he’s been waiting for us to betray Ashbal’s trust.”

Faraz’s laughter subsided into a wide, satisfied grin. Though his

posture was now at ease, there was something about him that made Noah want to keep up his guard.

“Well, well, lad. Why don’t you and I become partners in crime?”

***

In the palace assigned to her within the harem, Claudia, who had once more taken the appearance of a grown woman of sixteen, sat smiling at her table.

Having entrusted Noah with handling Faraz, she had remained in the harem to continue gathering information. However, the person seated across from her was not the king’s betrothed, Naila.

“Please, everyone, do help yourselves. I have been looking forward to this tea party ever so much.”

At Claudia’s cheerful invitation, the assembled guests exchanged uneasy glances. After all, the women gathered at the table had all, at one point or another, attempted to harass her. Now, they sat uncomfortably before plates filled with delicious things such as fruit and cake.

They had no choice but to accept my invitation—after all, how could they refuse the woman who’s been summoned to the king’s chambers night after night?

Claudia took a delicate sip of tea, maintaining a carefully neutral expression. She had brewed it herself, but it could not compare to Noah’s tea.

One of the young women hesitantly lifted her teacup before speaking.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing having this get-together without informing Lady Naila? You ought to know your place.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry.”

Claudia’s magic had also created the chiffon cakes arranged on the table. She had incorporated herbs and spices native to the region, creating a delicate balance of sweetness with a rich, complex depth. The cream atop each slice had been mixed with lemon syrup and adorned with flecks of gold leaf.

Even so, they still could not compare to Noah’s cakes.

“I am but a traveling dancer,” Claudia continued with a smile. “I have an agreement with His Majesty that, before long, I shall take my leave and depart from the harem.”

“You aren’t going to become one of His Majesty’s consorts?!”

“Indeed, I will not. I should find it far too difficult to take afternoon naps or embark on my travels at my leisure.”

Her response was met with widened eyes and scrutinizing stares like they were looking at some unknowable being. Yet, the fact that Claudia came from a distant land made the idea of differing values seem plausible to them.

“Even so,” one of the women insisted, “should you, by some chance, bear an heir, you would never be permitted to leave. At the very least, not until the child was born.”

“That’s right! After all, the royal palace has been keeping a close watch ever since His Majesty’s mother disappeared. They won’t allow another consort to flee.”

Despite their words, the tension in the room had begun to ease. The women started to lift their teacups and pick up their forks.

Claudia tilted her head slightly, carefully choosing her next words to stoke their hunger for gossip.

“Oh my, but isn’t the barrier surrounding the harem different from the one that existed in the late Queen Consort’s time? I had heard that it is now entirely impossible to leave.”

“The barrier is different? What nonsense. My aunt has lived in the harem for many years, and she told me that the barrier has only ever been reconstructed *once.*”

“Only once?”

“Yes. Life in the harem is so monotonous that events like that are easy to remember.”

With the pretense of educating an uninformed outsider, the woman became more talkative, and the others soon joined in, nodding and voicing their agreement.

The men of the palace know little of the harem’s barrier, but the women who live here have observed it closely. Could it be that the one who cast the barrier was a resident of the harem itself?

Seeking to draw out more information, Claudia continued her line of inquiry. “How wonderful that your aunt has lived here for so long. Might she have been acquainted with His Majesty’s mother?”

In the harem, having a relative with ties to the king’s mother could serve as a powerful form of social protection. If such a connection existed, surely the woman would be eager to boast of

it.

Yet, the response Claudia received was entirely unexpected.

“My aunt, friends with *her*? Absolutely not!”

There was an unmistakable note of disdain in her voice, a clear revulsion directed at Ashbal’s mother. Claudia blinked, momentarily taken aback, and the woman’s scorn continued.

“Even if she was His Majesty’s mother, she was still the woman who fled from the late king and tore His Majesty from his father.”

“She was despised in the harem,” another woman added. “The late king only visited her once, and yet she still managed to conceive an heir—it was practically a miracle.”

“If not for the barrier, I doubt anyone would have believed that her child was truly the late king’s. Though, by all accounts, His Majesty Ashbal is said to be the very image of his father.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard that before,” Claudia said.

“My aunt says that the resemblance is uncanny, like a perfect reflection of the late king in his youth.”

As Claudia listened, she carefully framed her next question.

“But why was His Majesty’s mother so disliked?”

The woman scoffed. “Were you not listening? She bore the king’s heir and then *ran away*. It was utterly disgraceful.”

“That is not what I meant,” Claudia pressed. “From the way you speak, it sounds as though she was already disliked *before* she left the harem. Yet, if the late king only visited her once, then it wasn’t jealousy that made her a target, was it?”

The women exchanged puzzled glances.

“Well, I cannot say for certain, but she was the sort who would run away, so it’s only natural she was disliked.”

“She likely fled because she didn’t fit in here,” another woman added.

“Frankly, you should be careful too. Just because His Majesty has summoned you a few times doesn’t mean you should get carried away. Should you make Lady Naila cry, we won’t stand for it.”

Though their words were sharp, Claudia could sense that their concern for Naila was genuine.

One of the women gazed out the window at the palace opposite Claudia’s and murmured, “The full moon will be upon us soon. Lady Naila must be feeling so lonely.”

I think I understand now.

Claudia lowered her eyes, deep in thought.

The current barrier around the harem is the work of none other than Ashbal's mother herself.

***

"Her Majesty Samira, King Ashbal's mother, was a princess of a neighboring kingdom, though that nation had fallen by the time she joined the harem."

The underground chamber of the royal palace, where Faraz had led Noah, was lined with an assortment of wine bottles and barrels.

The sturdy stone walls held the underground chill so that the air was cool even in the middle of the day. It was the perfect place for the king's stand-in to retreat under the pretense of "ill health" that prevented him from attending court, ensuring that their clandestine meeting would go undisturbed.

"The late king took hold of the Golden Falcon and, in just a thousand nights, turned this land into a mighty kingdom. But a rise to power that quick does not come without a fight. There were nations that stood against him, and others who burned with envy."

Seated on the other side of the table, Faraz uncorked a bottle of wine as he spoke. Noah listened in silence, finding no need to voice his agreement.

This kingdom, despite being surrounded by harsh desert, boasted an abundance of gold as well as an ample supply of water and cultivated plants created through the labor of hired magicians.

"We came out on top in the wars waged by the neighboring nations. Samira was one of the last survivors of the fallen royal family. The late king took her as his queen."

"Why go so far as to marry a princess who likely bore him nothing but hatred?"

"Well, even with all his wealth, the late king was still a bandit who had climbed his way to the throne. He needed an heir of noble blood to solidify his rule. Marrying Princess Samira did the trick. All at once, it gave both his line a bit of legitimacy and her a safe place to stay in the harem."

Noah found the notion of placing importance on bloodline rather absurd, but there was some logic to it. After all, magical ability was often inherited, and ensuring a lineage strong in magic was crucial for governance and military power.

"Samira despised this kingdom," Faraz continued. "And who could blame her? We were the enemy that had destroyed her homeland, the killers of her family."

Noah listened quietly.

"She hated the Golden Falcon most of all. It was the very thing that had brought about her nation's downfall." Faraz paused and then moved to pour wine into two goblets.

"If you intend to drink, you may do so alone, Lord Faraz," Noah remarked.

"Ohhh? Didn't you just turn sixteen recently? Don't tell me you can't handle it, lad!"

"I wouldn't know. I have never tasted alcohol."

"This chamber was built by the late king himself as a secret spot where he and his trusted men could drink in secrecy. It's a safe place to drink. It's good to test your limits, you know?"

"This is *not* a safe place to drink, so I will refrain."

Noah's firm refusal caused Faraz to purse his lips in a mock pout, much like a child denied a treat.

Instead of humoring him, Noah fixed him with an expectant stare, which gave an unspoken demand that he continue his explanation. Faraz relented, pouring the wine into only his goblet.

"Samira was the princess of an enemy nation, so plenty of folks resented her very presence in the harem."

The deep-red liquid shimmered in the golden goblet. Even without magical analysis, Noah suspected the cup was made of real gold.

"Still, she carried herself with dignity on the journey to wed the king. She wore a golden topaz necklace—the only heirloom left from her fallen house. In these parts, gold symbolizes the sun, and the sun is synonymous with the king. His consorts, on the other hand, are the moon."

That much was evident. The imagery of the sun adorned the garments and titles bestowed upon the king, a mark of his divine authority.

"There were those who romanticized it, saying that by wearing

gold, the new queen was demonstrating her devotion to her husband, aligning herself with his symbol. But on the very night she arrived, misfortune struck." Faraz drained his goblet in one swift motion. "There was a lunar eclipse."

"A lunar eclipse?"

A celestial event where the full moon wanes and vanishes, only to gradually return over the course of a few hours.

Noah had never witnessed one himself, as none had occurred in his lifetime. But he had read of them and heard Claudia speak of them before.

"The king is the sun. His consort, the moon. And on the night she arrived, the moon disappeared. Around here, a lunar eclipse is considered an omen of death. Some even reckon it foretells a king's downfall."

"Then, the queen, who had been meant to serve as a symbol of noble lineage, instead..."

"Instead, she became a harbinger of misfortune," Faraz confirmed. "She was shunned in the harem, feared by the people and though the late king sought to ease her burden, she despised him."

Even from these fragments of her story, it was clear that Samira's life as queen had been far from happy.

"Forced to marry the man who destroyed her homeland, branded a cursed bride from the very night she arrived... When I heard she had fled the harem, I wasn't the least bit surprised."

"I understand now why His Majesty's mother harbored such hatred toward this kingdom and the late king. But I suspect that's not the true purpose of this conversation."

At Noah's prompting, Faraz smirked and poured himself another drink. "I suspect that King Ashbal's real goal is getting revenge for his late mother."

Noah frowned. "I had taken you for a loyal vassal of King Ashbal, a man bound to this kingdom by your past service to the late king."

"And you'd be right. My loyalty to the late king hasn't wavered one bit. That's exactly why I must act. If the actions of our current king threaten this kingdom's peace and prosperity, then it falls to me to stop it, even if it means taking the life of the son of my benefactor."

This man… He truly is prepared to go that far.

"To tell you the truth, lad, I've had my doubts about His Majesty's words for a good while now." Faraz stared at his newly filled goblet before he turned his eyes to Noah. "I've been wondering… Was the Golden Falcon really stolen?"

Chapter 4

“Lord Faraz, are you suggesting that King Ashbal’s claim—that the Golden Falcon was stolen—was false?”

Noah’s question was a serious one. He regarded Faraz with cautious skepticism. He was a frivolous, careless man, yet his loyalty to the royal family seemed sincere.

However, Noah could now surmise that his devotion was for the late king, not the man who currently sat on the throne.

Faraz swirled the wine in his goblet. “When His Majesty was just a lad, he once snuck into the palace to steal something.”

Claudia had mentioned something similar before—about how Naila had recounted an incident from Ashbal’s childhood when he’d wandered into the harem, wounded.

“I believe he came here for the Golden Falcon.”

This was more than mere conjecture from Faraz. There was certainty in his eyes.

“What makes you believe that?”

“His Majesty was impressive, sneaking into the royal treasury. Yet, he ignored all the flashy jewels that had been left out as bait. Instead, he went straight for the heavily protected, plain-looking chamber where the Golden Falcon was kept.”

Faraz had previously claimed ignorance regarding the artifact. Yet, if so much effort had been put into hiding it, then it was surely one of the most precious treasures of the palace.

“As the lad tried to pick the lock, I put an arrow through his foot. I didn’t know that the scrawny thief I’d wounded was none other than the late king’s own son.”

So that was how Ashbal had sustained his injury before stumbling into the harem.

“Did you ever speak of this with His Majesty?”

“Of course I did. I offered my apologies and His Majesty merely laughed it off, saying he’d just been desperate to survive. He even went and apologized in turn. He said that back in his youth, he’d had no choice but to steal, and reckoned he’d find riches in the palace.”

Noah pondered this. If Faraz's account was accurate, something didn't add up.

"And you're certain he took nothing else from the treasury?" Noah asked.

"Not a single gem was out of place. Now, it's one thing to think that valuables lie behind a locked door, but why pass up the gold and jewels sitting right there for the taking? Why would a starving lad, driven to thieving just to survive, not take whatever he could?"

It was difficult to explain through mere speculation. However, there was one possibility that made sense.

"He was never after riches to begin with. His only target from the start was the Golden Falcon," Noah concluded.

"And now the Golden Falcon, which His Majesty finally got his hands on, has gone missing. Without it, this kingdom'll collapse. The gold'll run dry, and with it, our supply of water and food." Faraz's eyes drifted toward the shelves of wine bottles, but his expression was distant, as though he were staring at something far beyond them. "This kingdom was the late king's dream. A paradise carved out of the desert, where men like us could make our fortune from treasure created from nothing but the sands."

Noah listened to Faraz in silence, letting him continue.

"I cannot stand by and watch it all crumble."

Noah exhaled lightly before reaching for the wine bottle in Faraz's hand.

"So, finally decided to have a drink, eh?"

"I'm stopping *you* from drinking any further. There's more we need to discuss."

Noah firmly replaced the cork in the bottle, set it back on the shelf, and then turned back to Faraz.

"You suggested that I become your partner in crime, which means you require the authority of the king. In other words, you need me, as his stand-in, to grant you access to something."

"You know, your princess really is fortunate to have an attendant as clever as you." Faraz chuckled, idly turning the empty goblet in his hands. "We would make a fine pair of allies, don't you think? If you grant me your permission as king, I'll be able to approach the goddess statue, something His Majesty has strictly forbidden. And in turn, you won't have to keep using your princess as an excuse to visit the statue yourself."

“Are you implying that when I proposed visiting the statue with Her Highness, and you claimed that ‘His Majesty might return to the palace tonight,’ that was merely a ploy to stop me?”

Faraz had used the same excuse the previous night and the night before. Noah had been suspicious of the convenience of that excuse, yet he had still refrained from visiting the statue. Just as he had thought, those warnings had been lies.

“Well, if you went on a date with your princess, I wouldn’t be able to tag along now, would I?”

Noah scowled at him. Faraz had framed this as a partnership, but in truth, he had been obstructing Noah from the start.

Still, the fact that Faraz was so eager to examine the goddess statue suggested that he, too, was unaware of why Ashbal had forbidden anyone from approaching it. Faraz was seeking answers of his own.

“His Majesty won’t be returning to the palace anytime soon, will he?” Noah asked.

“Don’t worry yourself. I can’t get through to him either. If he’s not planning on coming back for a while, then this is our best chance.”

Noah sighed and turned toward the door.

“Hey, lad…” Faraz began to call after him.

Noah cut him off. “We may as well go now. Before we reach the magicians guarding the statue, you’d best think of an excuse for our presence.”

“Ha! Understood, my *liege*.”

Noah didn’t bother responding to the flippant remark. Without looking back, he exited through the door, and the two of them made their way to where the goddess statue was housed at the top of the highest tower of the palace.

As expected, the guards opened the doors without issue. After all, to them, Noah looked no different from Ashbal. Faraz did his part and provided a convincing explanation for their visit, ensuring that no strange rumors would reach the true Ashbal’s ears.

The tower looked out on the city and the sky beyond. Nothing obstructed the view.

“Careful now. One wrong step here, and it’s a long way down,” Faraz remarked as he walked toward the point of their visit.

Noah looked at the statue framed by the brilliant blue sky. For a

moment, his breath caught.

"Now then, lad. This goddess statue was first brought to the palace by Lady Samira, King Ashbal's mother. She took it from the ruins of her fallen homeland and placed it in her palace within the harem, treating it as a source of comfort," Faraz explained. "After taking the throne, His Majesty had it moved here. He would visit it alone, time and time again. Most think he treats it as a memento of his mother, but me? I've always thought there was something suspicious about it..."

Faraz's words barely registered in Noah's mind. For the moment, his eyes fell upon the statue, and a powerful sense of déjà vu gripped him. The goddess, sculpted by skilled hands, bore a beautiful face that rivaled Claudia's own.

Who is this woman?

His heartbeat pounded uncomfortably in his chest.

I don't know this face. And yet, it feels strangely familiar. She resembles someone, but who?

Only one person in the world had ever struck Noah as *this* beautiful—Claudia. Looking at the statue now, he couldn't shake the feeling that it bore some resemblance to her.

Could it be Her Highness's mother?

A troubling possibility took root in his mind. Claudia's mother, once known as a famed songstress, had died shortly after giving birth.

Why would she be here? And why as a goddess?

Then, something else caught Noah's eye.

A golden topaz necklace rested upon the statue's chest, glimmering in the sunlight. Stepping forward, he reached for it—

"Hey, lad! Watch yourself! Who knows what kind of traps that thing's got in it."

There's something odd about this necklace. But I don't sense a curse.

Just as his fingers brushed against the gemstone, a violent jolt of energy surged through him—like a bolt of lightning.

"Hey!" Faraz lunged forward, grabbing Noah by the shoulder and yanking him back.

Noah managed to erect a barrier in time, but even so, his fingers throbbed from the lingering shock.

"What is this?"

The topaz necklace was protected by an exceptionally powerful barrier. A barrier crafted by a master conjurer.

Noah recalled the words Claudia had once told him in his youth.

"Listen well, Noah. There are two primary functions of a barrier. One is to repel outside threats to protect what lies within. The other is to conceal something from the outside world, or to trap something inside, preventing it from escaping."

Just as the academy beneath the sea had been shielded from the crushing ocean depths. Just as the harem's barrier allowed no one to enter and no one to leave.

Barriers did not simply protect. They sealed things away. They *hid* things.

Which was why he had failed to notice a key detail before.

"Damn it." Suppressing the urge to curse more, Noah clenched his fist tightly. "Lord Faraz, step back. Do not touch the statue under any circumstances."

"What're you getting at, boy?"

Without delay, Noah seized Faraz's arm and turned back whence they came.

"Hey, what's gotten into you?"

"The order barring entry to this place must remain in effect. This is not merely a matter of the intruder's safety. It concerns the lives of *everyone* in this kingdom."

"What the hell are you talking about? Explain yourself, lad!"

"Getting you out of here takes priority. We have no time to waste."

Had teleportation been an option, he would have used it immediately, but that would only draw suspicion from the palace guards. Frustration gnawed at him as he dragged Faraz along, but before leaving, he cast one final glance back at the statue.

That thing is a cursed artifact.

Bound by a barrier, it sat there in plain sight. The golden topaz necklace gleamed ominously, swaying on the chest of the beautiful goddess.

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Claudia, now in the form of a six-year-old girl, stroked the head of a large snake as she sipped her coconut water.

She had made a habit lately of visiting Naila's garden in the guise of the child Adelheid. She once again confirmed that the water flowing through the channels in Naila's garden was indeed brimming with special magical energy as she soaked her small, bare feet.

Just as I suspected. This water is identical to that in my palace. It flows along a ley line of pure magic within the earth.

Even if the curse of gold were to taint everything around them, staying near this water would likely provide protection for a short time.

But only for a short time. Its strength is insufficient to wholly undo the curse.

Naila, who had kindly provided Claudia with sweets, was off in the corner of the garden, quietly practicing her archery.

Her golden, bird-shaped bow gleamed as she loosed an arrow into her target. It was just as beautiful as it had been the last time Claudia had seen it.

The harem girls claim the barrier was reconstructed only once in the past, and that was before Ashbal was even born. If that is indeed the case, and it hasn't been altered in recent years, then how did a young Ashbal manage to stumble into the harem after being injured?

The barrier had been constructed with a single rule: The entry of any man or magical beast, save for the king himself, was forbidden.

And it would seem that assuming his fox form would make no difference. I took the shape of a cat and sought to slip through, yet the barrier repelled me with such force that I was singed.

Pouting, Claudia twirled the damaged tips of her hair between her fingers.

She could have easily mended her hair on her own, but she intended to leave it as it was. After all, she preferred to have Noah tend to it when they met.

And then there remains the matter of Ashbal's mother having escaped the harem. Had she been frequently summoned to the king's chambers, she might have found an opportunity to slip away using magic. But that wasn't the case. She visited the king only once. If there had been a second time, the entire harem would have surely been aware of it.

Claudia understood firsthand how much attention was drawn

to a member of the harem being summoned by the king.

Likewise, the king visiting the harem was never a secret. The matter of royal heirs was far too important for such things to be discreet.

That leaves a single explanation.

As she placed the plant stalk straw back in her mouth once more, she reached her conclusion.

The one who cast the current barrier was none other than Ashbal's mother herself.

If she had been the one to cast the spell, she could have undone the barrier at will, just long enough to escape, and then recast it before anyone noticed. Under the cover of night, when the harem was fast asleep, she could have slipped away in mere moments.

However, that would suggest she possessed exceptional skills in barrier magic. Could she have been a princess from the royal lineage of some foreign kingdom?

And even if that were the case, one issue remained unresolved.

It still fails to account for how Ashbal, as a child, was able to pass through the barrier. Perhaps his mother taught him how to undo it and restore it? No, that couldn't be.

While magical abilities were often hereditary, no child could perfectly replicate a parent's magic.

And yet, Ashbal came and went from the harem freely for years, even before becoming king. It's unlikely that he would have been able to sneak in secretly using the method his mother had used to leave.

Claudia frowned, gazing up at the sky.

The barrier, like a thin film of glass, stretched overhead. Though it was transparent, she knew it was there. She could see it.

I suppose…even I am unable to fully analyze the structure of this barrier.

That was something she experienced very rarely in this life or the last. It intrigued her.

The one who cast this must have been a formidable sorcerer. If they poured all their strength into sealing something away, then even I *might struggle to see through it.*

Claudia released the straw from her lips and turned to glance at Naila, who had lowered her bow and stood still, staring absently at the sky.

“What’s wrong, Naila?”

Naila startled at the sound of Claudia’s voice, her eyes widening. She hastily wiped a bead of sweat from her jaw, as if to conceal her moment of distraction.

“It’s—” she hesitated a moment before continuing “—nothing. I was just thinking about how tonight is a full moon.”

“Why are you thinking about the moon?”

“Ah, well…”

Naila looked progressively more uncomfortable as Claudia watched her. The moon clearly carried significant weight for her.

“It’s just that he…”

Naila rarely referred to him by name, but Claudia knew exactly who she meant.

Ashbal.

“For the past year, he’s only visited me on nights of the full moon. I thought, perhaps, he might come again tonight.”

The full moon?

That caught Claudia’s attention.

But more than that, it was Naila’s expression that unsettled her.

It couldn’t be…could it?

Naila’s lips trembled as she pressed them into a thin line. Her body was equally tense. She looked uneasy. She gripped the golden bow fervently as though in silent prayer.

Is this truly the face of a woman eagerly awaiting a visit from her beloved betrothed?

Still, Claudia pretended not to notice as she adopted an innocent smile. “Tee hee. Are you excited to see the king?”

Naila tried to look happy, but her lips twitched, the expression strained and brittle.

“I don’t think he *wants* to see me.”

“Naila?”

She was trembling.

It almost seems as though she’s afraid of Ashbal.

A troubling suspicion coiled in Claudia’s chest. She kept her tone lighthearted as she cheered, “I think I should go home now! Let’s play again soon!”

“Adelheid?”

“Thank you for the snacks!”

Gathering the remaining sweets and coconut shells into a neat

pile for the servants, Claudia sprang to her feet and dashed away, her mind racing.

If my suspicion is correct, this is the worst-case scenario. And if I'm right, there's not a moment to lose.

She ran out of Naila's palace and ducked around a corner before shifting back into her adult form.

Ashbal has visited her only on nights of the full moon… If that holds true for this evening as well, then I need to take action before the sun sets.

Even at the 157 centimeters of her adult form, there was no way she could look over the harem walls to see Noah in the palace, but she *had* to find him. The actions she could take from here were limited.

Our usual excuse for a nightly visit won't suffice. We cannot afford to wait until nightfall. And even if I send a letter, there is no guarantee that it will reach him in time.

Asking for the king to visit was a common occurrence in the harem. Even if she marked her request as urgent, a servant might ignore that and decide to delay its delivery.

I wished to avoid this, but it seems I may have no choice but to shatter the barrier myself—

A shout interrupted her thoughts. From the main street of the harem, a flurry of voices arose. However, Claudia soon recognized that the voices weren't raised in panic.

"His Majesty! His Majesty has come to the harem!"

Surely, it couldn't be…

Claudia slipped from an alley onto the main stone path leading to the harem's gate.

And there she saw the straightforward obsidian eyes so familiar to her.

Noah.

He wore the embroidered, high-collared jacket of the king, set off by a colorful mantle. He looked resplendent.

Noah's eyes met Claudia's. She broke into a run, and he reached out for her without hesitation. She leaped into his arms, and he held her firmly.

"Dia."

A chorus of delighted gasps and shouts of joy rippled through the women around them.

Then, in a low voice, meant for her ears alone, Noah murmured, “Forgive my forwardness, Your Highness. I bring urgent news.”

His voice was deeper, rougher than she remembered from his childhood.

Claudia laughed softly, tightening her arms around his back. “Take me to the royal chambers, *Your Majesty*.”

Noah’s sigh when he heard her request didn’t seem like an act for those around them. Still, without another word, he swept her away.

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“Now then. Would you care to explain yourself, Noah?”

“Y-Your Highness.”

Claudia had been carried through the palace watched by countless onlookers. Now, within the royal bedchamber, she had him cornered against a wall, a smile playing at her lips.

Noah’s brows furrowed in distress as he was caught between the wall and Claudia. Yet she paid no mind, steadily closing the distance between them.

“I can sense a curse on you. What exactly happened?” Claudia asked.

“I will explain everything. Please, grant me your patience.”

She laced her fingers through his, staring at his hand. “This is where it’s coming from, isn’t it?”

It didn’t seem as though the curse had begun to spread. Still, it was clear that Noah had touched something he should not have. There was no wound, and he didn’t seem to be in pain. Nonetheless, that her dear manservant had come into contact with a foul curse at all was utterly unacceptable.

“A cursed artifact exists within the palace. It was carefully concealed within a barrier, one so powerful that even I did not sense it until I had already touched it.”

“Tell me everything.” Claudia’s tone softened. “I have matters to discuss with you as well, along with a request.”

Noah sighed again, quieter now, before gesturing toward the door. A flicker of magic unlocked it, revealing the man waiting beyond.

“Oh?” The visitor chuckled, stepping inside. “Spotted me even through a concealment spell, did you?”

“Do come in, good man,” Claudia prompted.

The man who entered was none other than Faraz, Ashbal’s trusted retainer. He stopped at the sight of Claudia pressing Noah against the wall.

“My apologies. Am I intruding?”

“Lord Faraz, kindly shut the door.” Noah’s expression, so plainly irritated, was a rare sight indeed.

Claudia, amused, reached up to lightly tap the tip of his nose in reprimand.

“As I had hoped, you’ve chosen to side with my dear Noah. That pleases me greatly. Now then…” She turned, summoning a table and chairs into existence with a flick of magic. “Shall we begin our strategy meeting?”

Claudia took her seat across from Faraz, while Noah stood behind her, close enough to shield her if the need were to arise.

They began exchanging information, laying out their findings piece by piece.

“So, the goddess statue that Ashbal’s mother treasured had a cursed artifact hanging from its neck…” Claudia murmured.

“If Her Highness’s deduction that Lady Samira herself cast the harem’s barrier is correct, then her mastery of such magic is undeniable,” Noah said. “It stands to reason that she also possessed the skill to conceal a curse beneath another barrier entirely. What do you think, Lord Faraz?”

“Lady Samira was a princess from a royal lineage. I’ve also heard that she was a prodigious conjurer.”

A barrier powerful enough to keep even Claudia from detecting the curse. Such magic would rival even that of Prince Stuart, the heir of another kingdom whom Claudia had once encountered.

Claudia tilted her head in contemplation.

“But for what reason would Lady Samira go to such lengths to hide a curse?”

“Hold on, you two. When you say that thing is a cursed artifact, do you mean the Golden Falcon?” Faraz asked, running a hand over his stubbled jaw. A dark expression crossed his face. “Then this necklace is the Golden Falcon? If that’s the case, then why would Lady Samira hide it?”

My theory is not one I can voice lightly.

Claudia kept her thoughts to herself for the moment. Instead, she asked a different question.

"Lord Faraz, how often does Ashbal visit the harem?"

"The harem?" Faraz looked puzzled. "I'm afraid His Majesty has never shown much interest in it."

Claudia's gaze sharpened. "Do you mean to say he isn't frequently visiting his betrothed?"

"Only once that I know of. He's not unlike his father, who rarely visited his own consort. The ministers gossip about it constantly."

That was a stark contrast to what people thought within the harem.

Claudia remembered Naila's words.

"For the past year, he's only visited me on nights of the full moon. I thought, perhaps, he might come again tonight."

Naila's words had been spoken with certainty. Every woman in the harem spoke as if Ashbal and Naila were deeply devoted to one another. If he had truly visited her only a single time, then surely, his affection would have been called into question. Naila would have had no allies in the harem.

But outside the harem, no one knows this. For when Ashbal visits Naila the harem's main gate remains shut.

Faraz seemed unaware of why Claudia was asking such questions. Claudia turned to Noah and gave him a command.

"Noah. I need you to analyze the harem's barrier. Ensure that my findings are correct."

"It is not my place to question your findings, Your Highness, but I will do as you command." Noah hesitated for only a moment before inclining his head. "One last thing, regarding the matter of the lunar eclipse…"

"Yes. It is becoming clear that the curse has something to do with the interaction between the sun and the moon."

Faraz's confusion deepened. The subject had yet to be brought up with him, after all. Because both Claudia and Noah had witnessed it firsthand, there had been no reason to discuss it yet.

"Lord Faraz, the night Noah fought the firedrake was the night of the full moon."

She remembered the way the moonlight had shone upon Noah's obsidian eyes as she watched him out the window. Yet, she

had been unable to see his eyes moments before that.

That was because the full moon had been hidden behind the clouds.

“The curse of gold had surged forth while the moon was hidden behind the clouds. Then the moon showed itself, shining its light on the firedrake.”

“The transformation occurred after I defeated the firedrake,” Noah clarified. “The moon vanished behind the clouds, leaving the curse to spread.”

And once again, the cursed light had spread through the desert.

“Under the full moon’s light, the curse did not spread,” Claudia explained. “But the moment the moon disappeared from sight, the firedrake turned to solid gold.”

“I see,” Faraz muttered, his voice unusually somber.

And there was one final truth they had yet to reveal.

“Time is running short,” Claudia said quietly. “The reach of the curse is expanding with each passing day.”

Faraz stiffened. “Wait, it’s expanding?”

Claudia nodded. “That’s our greatest fear. If left unchecked, the curse will consume every living thing in the world. This is no longer merely a matter of this kingdom—it is a threat to the survival of all life.”

For the first time, Faraz looked truly shaken. Claudia sympathized, but there was no time to soften the blow.

“Thanks to this discussion, I can say with confidence that the possibility I feared most is all but certain,” Claudia said. “Unfortunately, we now have no choice but to act.”

“Your Highness,” Noah said.

Claudia rested her chin against her palm and lowered her eyes in sorrow.

“We must capture Ashbal.”

***

As the sun began its descent beyond the desert’s edge, the world was painted in hues of crimson.

Naila had always loved watching the sunset from the high terraces of the harem. After all, she had been unable to go outside

the harem's walls since she was a child.

The sky and the sands below reflected an all-consuming red like a great mirrored surface. That fiery red reminded her of Ashbal's eyes.

But tonight, that sunset filled her with dread.

Or rather, it was the moonrise that followed that left her trembling.

"Naila. Naila, is it? What a lovely name!"

She still remembered the way Ashbal had smiled at her when they had first met.

He had been a child then. Frail, half-starved, thirsty, and bleeding profusely from his leg, yet he had smiled as if neither pain nor hunger could touch him.

Still, his tiny hand had clung to hers, his voice shaking just the slightest bit as he had told her, "Thank you. If not for you, I don't think I'd be alive right now."

From that moment, the boy who would sometimes sneak into the harem was her dearest friend.

"The harem is sealed by a barrier, you know? Ashbal, how in the world do you keep getting in?" she'd asked.

"Forget that, Naila. Look at this snake! It was starving out in the desert, just like I almost did. It'll wither away if we don't find a place for it. Can you help me hide it?"

"My word... Come, then. I'll keep it here in secret, but this stays between us."

And so, the two of them were tied together by a secret. He brought her news of the outside world, trinkets, treasures, things she'd never seen before. And in return, she shared her meals with him.

"Ashbal, you're so free. I wish I could run across the sands like you do."

"No. You're too weak—you'd die in no time."

"I-I know that! I'll train in magic! I'll learn to fight off desert beasts!"

"Magic's one thing, but you'll need stamina first. If you don't build up your strength, it's pointless."

By then, Ashbal had already grown. He was taller, stronger, and his body had been hardened by the unforgiving desert. His words held the weight of experience, and Naila could do nothing but

hang her head in frustration.

He had only laughed, watching her sulk. Then, as if he had just thought of it, he said, “That’s right. I know just the thing. The next time I come, I’ll bring you something good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Practicing with it will help you get stronger. Shooting a bow takes strength, after all.”

“Wait, what bow? What are you even talking about?”

But Ashbal had only given her a mischievous smile.

“Think of it as a piece of me. It’ll be yours now, Naila.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything! What are you talking about?”

She didn’t have to wait long for an answer. The next time he visited, he brought her a golden bow.

It was shaped like a bird with outstretched wings, its polished surface glittering in the sunlight, a brilliant ruby set into its center. It was dazzling, like the sun itself. And it really did feel like *him*.

Those were good days, weren’t they? When I didn’t yet know he was a king. When we were just two children playing together.

Now, years later, Naila stood confused, clutching that golden bow, her grip so tight her knuckles turned white.

The setting sun cast its brilliant fire across the desert, but she could only feel dread for the moment when the full moon would rise.

I never thought I’d be so afraid to look him in the face.

She frowned and tried to stop her body from trembling.

I’ve tried not to think about it. But if there’s an impostor wearing his face, then it must all go back to that day.

There was only one way to banish her fear. She needed the truth.

Her gaze settled on the palace opposite hers, where the woman who had brought the false Ashbal lived.

Adelheid’s elder sister, Lady Dia.

She had never met her. Adelheid had become a dear friend, so they had exchanged letters and gifts, yet they had never had a chance to meet in person.

It felt as though she was avoiding me, so I avoided her too. But I need to meet her.

Lowering her head, she steeled herself, but as she turned to return to her chambers, a voice called to her.

“Good evening, Lady Naila.”

Startled, Naila looked up toward the source.

“You’re…”

A woman stood between the palm trees of her garden. She was beautiful.

She had wavy hair, a soft shade of milk tea, and eyes like golden honey, melted into morning dew. Long lashes curled skyward, framing those captivating eyes. Her flawless skin was light enough to appear translucent, and she glowed as she stood there bathed in the light of the setting sun. Her figure reminded Naila of a work of art, the ample curves of her chest contrasting with her slender waist. And her lips, full and painted in the softest red, held an enchanting smile.

There’s no mistaking it…

Even without an introduction, Naila knew who this woman was.

“Lady Dia, yes?”

The woman replied with a laugh, “Why, thank you for being so kind to Adelheid.”

Even as a fellow woman, Naila could not help but be awestruck by her beauty. Each motion was so graceful it was as if she were dancing.

“Forgive my intrusion. I wished to speak with you, woman to woman.”

“Y-Yes! Of course! I had hoped to meet you as well.”

Though surprised by both Dia’s sudden appearance and her beauty, Naila could not deny that this was exactly what she had wanted. Yet, when Dia took a step forward, her body reacted on instinct.

She flinched.

“You are afraid, aren’t you?”

“Well… It’s not like that. I don’t fear you, Lady Dia.”

“I know.” She giggled softly. “Shall I take a guess, then?”

Dia winked at her, and for some reason, Naila felt her pulse quicken. Naila barely had time to react before Dia closed the distance between them, extending a single finger beautifully painted with nail polish, and pressing it, ever so gently, against Naila’s chest.

“What you’re afraid of is whether Ashbal— — —”

Claudia’s voice trailed off to a faint whisper audible only to

Naila. The concubine's eyes widened.

"H-How did you...?"

The blood drained from her face. Dia gently took Naila's trembling hands into hers.

"I'll alleviate your fears. So, won't you come with me?"

Naila's breath hitched. Dia's low voice was as enchanting as any spell.

Naila's gaze dropped to her feet. She nodded without thinking. And like a child who'd lost her way, she let Dia take her hand and lead her away.

***

Lately, whenever the moon began to rise, Ashbal would hear his mother's voice echo within his mind.

"Ashbal, you possess a special power—a power that can cast this kingdom of gold into turmoil."

It was a memory from when he was still very young. They lived in the cluttered backstreets at the city's edge, and his mother would grip his small shoulders tightly and repeat those words again and again.

She'd told him, "With your unique magic, you will accomplish your purpose, the reason I gave birth to you. Do you understand?"

Her eyes, a different color from his, gazed deeply into his own, which bore the same hue as his father's, the man he'd never known.

"You will destroy the Golden Falcon, the cursed relic of this land," she reiterated.

The name of that relic had been imprinted upon his memory for as long as he could remember.

"Destroy the Golden Falcon. No matter what happens, you must destroy it! It drove my father, my brothers, and my beloved homeland to ruin!"

Then, over and over again, she would repeat, "You were born for this."

And, indeed, she had prepared him thoroughly for the task. She had trained him in magic, combat, and first aid, as well as matters of statecraft, something he didn't understand the reason for at the time.

He remembered the times that she would speak to him frantically with bloodshot eyes.

"If something goes wrong, flee to the harem. Intimidate the women there if necessary. Use their lives as a shield to buy time. You alone can pass through my barrier and infiltrate it."

Other times she would be calmer.

"I wrote a letter to your father. I hinted at your existence. When that man dies, they will come for you…and that will be your chance."

At the time, he had no idea what she meant by "They will come for you."

Eventually, she succumbed to an illness that had swept through the city. Left to fend for himself, Ashbal had joined a band of thieves, learning to steal and survive. Yet he had never forgotten her words: *"Destroy the Golden Falcon."*

It was his reason for being, after all. And it became his mission.

Yet, he had failed. He had failed to even reach the Golden Falcon, and he'd needed to retreat to the harem as he'd been told.

Years later, by a twist of fate, Ashbal came to possess the Golden Falcon in a way he had never anticipated.

When his father, the king, passed away, the search for his rightful heir had begun. The letter his mother had written had served its purpose. The ministers scoured the land, eventually finding Ashbal.

It was truly a shock, Ashbal thought now. He was in his fox form, walking across the rooftops of Naila's palace. *I, who was born to destroy the Golden Falcon, became king. Everything went according to my mother's plan.*

Once crowned, Ashbal's first act was to take into his possession the Golden Falcon, the object of his mother's hatred. The accursed relic that had caused countless wars in surrounding kingdoms and spilled rivers of blood.

Yet his loyal retainer Faraz had once told him, "Had your father not possessed the Golden Falcon, many more would have died."

Ashbal landed soundlessly in Naila's garden on his four fox legs; his padded feet made no noise, unlike a human's. He knew Naila and her maids would be in a deep slumber. He had cast magic on them after all.

I must end this as quickly as possible.

He raised his head toward the sky. The full moon hung above

him.

He could not allow Naila to see him here. He moved carefully, slipping through the garden's shadows until he reached the storage shed. Years spent in Naila's company meant that he knew where she kept her things.

Found it.

Standing against the wall was the golden bow, its string removed for safekeeping. Beside it lay matching golden arrows. He had gifted them to Naila long ago; she had put the arrows away safely, afraid she might lose them.

There's no point in reminiscing now.

Gripping the bow and arrow between his teeth, Ashbal broke into a run. He passed through the harem's barriers, his paws silent as he slipped past the conjurers who stood guard.

His destination was the watchtower, a place forbidden to all but the king himself.

The statue of the goddess from his mother's homeland awaited him there. He shook himself before shifting back to his human form, clad in a hooded robe meant to keep sand away from his face.

He reached for the familiar golden bow and arrow that he had created years ago.

"Well, then," he murmured.

He was confident in the archery skills he'd learned from his mother. Whether his certainty was a blessing or a curse, he no longer cared.

As he nocked the golden arrow, he apologized to the man he had caught up in this.

"Sorry, Noah. I didn't mean to drag you into this mess."

He watched the palace in the distance. It remained calm, showing no signs of trouble. Noah had managed his role as the king's stand-in flawlessly, just as Ashbal had thought he would. With Faraz supporting him, Ashbal was sure everything would continue smoothly.

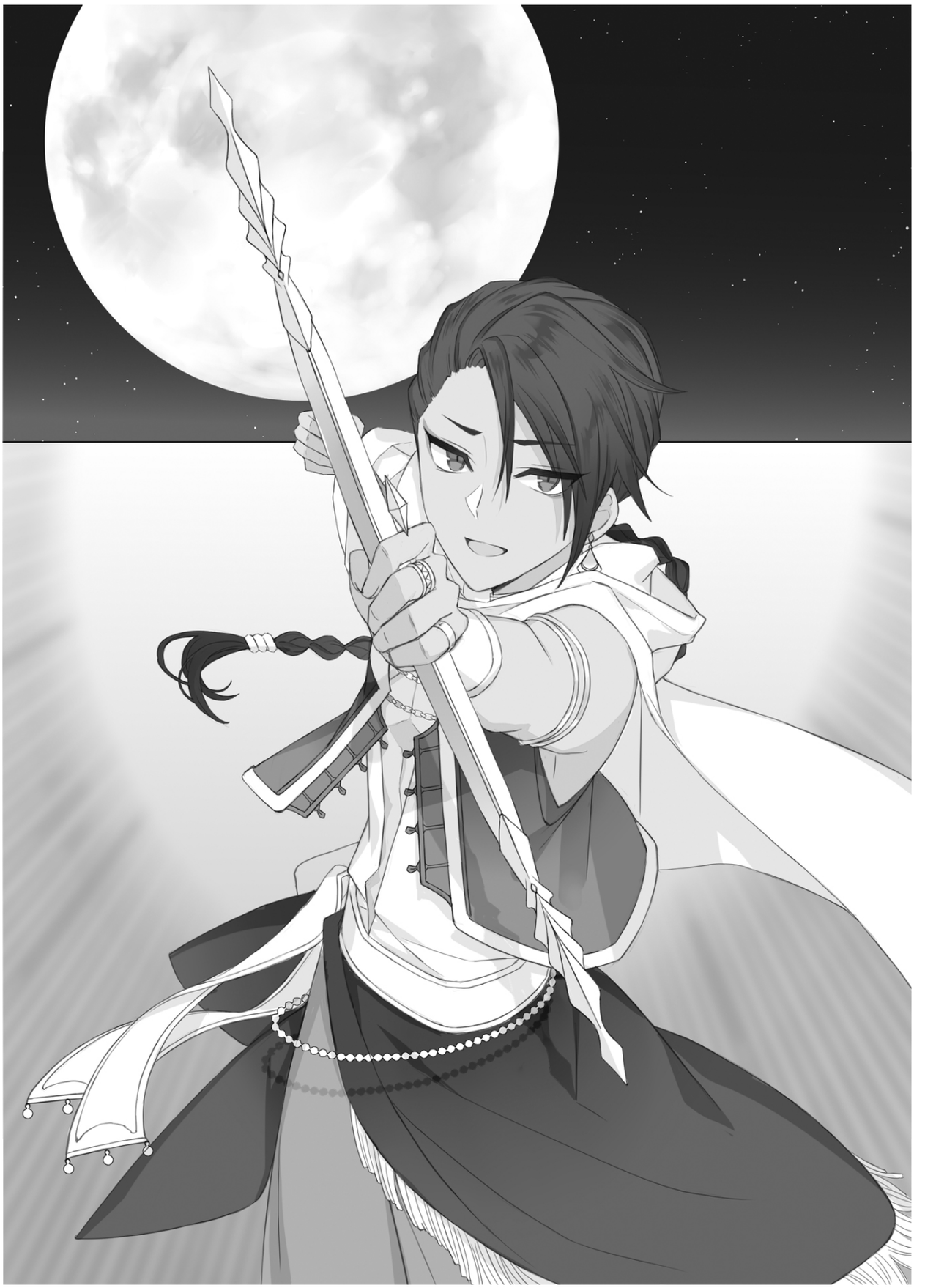
Now, I can finally end this.

A fleeting smile crossed his lips. He raised the bow and drew the string taut. As the weight of the bow pressed into his palm, he chuckled ruefully.

This isn't the sort of thing you give to a girl as a gift.

He loosed the bow, aiming at the full moon that loomed above him.

Now, strike true.



The arrow shot upward, though it could never hope to reach the moon. As it reached its apex, gravity seized it, and the arrow turned downward, its heavy golden tip leading the way.

Yes, come to me.

The arrow hurtled toward him, faster and faster. Ashbal's eyes remained fixed on the descending arrow.

This arrow will put me to rest finally.

A faint smile of relief touched his lips.

"You fool!" a familiar voice cried out.

Her hair as dark as midnight, Naila burst forth—but she should have been asleep in her palace.

"What are you doing here?!" he barked, but she'd already flung herself at him.

He grunted as they collided. They tumbled to the ground, her slender frame clinging to him, though there was no way someone as light as her should have been able to take down someone his size.

"I was terrified!" she said from on top of him. "I had a feeling that when the next full moon came, you would be gone forever!"

This is bad.

The golden arrow continued its descent, aiming for Naila's back.

"Naila! Move!"

"No!"

He tried to twist on top of her so he could shield her with his body, but her grip was unrelenting.

"You're planning to die, aren't you?! You idiot! Why would you do something like this?!"

"You're the idiot!" He fought to push her aside before it was too late, but before he could, a sharp *clang* pierced the air. The golden arrow hadn't pierced flesh; it'd bounced off of something else.

Ashbal's head snapped up. Standing above him was a young man in royal garments.

"Noah…"

Without a word, Noah slid his sword back into its scabbard as the arrow clattered against a stone wall near the goddess statue.

"It's been a while, Ashbal," came a cool, familiar voice. "We finally meet again."

"Claudia."

Behind Noah, Claudia stepped into the moonlight. She was in

her Lady Dia disguise, and her beauty was striking. From the direction she turned toward emerged Faraz, Ashbal's subordinate and his father's old friend.

Ashbal sighed deeply, shutting his eyes for a brief moment. "You've finally seen through me."

There was no longer any point in hiding.

"Ashbal!" Naila's voice trembled. "What on earth were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry, Naila."

Her breath caught as Ashbal pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Her body slackened in surprise, and in that fleeting moment, he slipped from her grasp.

"Forgive me, but there's no time for explanations," he said, stepping back. He quickly checked their surroundings. "Ah, you've even blocked my escape with a barrier. A rather thorough precaution."

There had been a strange tension in the air ever since Claudia had appeared. Yet, she stood relaxed with a smile on her face.

"This barrier was crafted solely for you, Ashbal. A fitting experience, is it not? To be the one denied escape for once."

Ashbal chuckled dryly. "It really is."

With a flick of his wrist, a magic sword and bow materialized in his hands. His eyes darted toward Naila. If he used magic, it would be difficult to keep her out of what was about to unfold.

"So..." He leveled his gaze at Claudia. "If I take down the one controlling the barrier, I'll be free, right?"

"Stop it, Ashbal!" Naila cried, tears welling in her eyes.

Faraz stepped forward, pulling her back. Claudia chuckled softly, her head tilting just so.

"I hoped you'd say that. Uttering such things will only serve to anger Noah, which is precisely why I took it upon myself to cast the barrier, rather than leaving the task to him."

Ashbal chuckled. The desert nights could grow bitterly cold, yet what prickled Ashbal's skin was not the chill of the air. Just as Claudia had said, Noah looked ready to grant no mercy.

"I'm sorry, Noah, but I must ask you to step aside," Ashbal said.

Noah stood across from him, his hand gripping a straight-bladed sword. "You must be joking."

With a swift leap, Noah closed the distance between them.

Ashbal instinctively stepped back, raising his weapon just in time to meet Noah's descending strike. The clash of steel rang out in the still night.

"Ashbal!" Naila screamed. Ashbal could hear the fear in her voice.

"How did you discover my true purpose?"

Ashbal's question hung in the air, but Noah remained silent. Instead, it was Claudia who answered.

"It was the tale of your mother. The lunar eclipse during her marriage and the cursed artifact she possessed were but pieces of the puzzle. Then there was the firedrake, the connection to moonlight, the tale of how you crept into the royal palace as a child and found sanctuary in the harem, and the tale of the golden bow. When I took all of this into account, it was evident that your goal was never to find the Golden Falcon."

Ashbal let out a laugh. They had truly uncovered it all.

He knocked Noah's blade aside and launched a series of three thrusts. His aim was flawless: toward the eyes, the throat, and the solar plexus. Yet, Noah evaded each strike. Noah then parried Ashbal's blade and countered with a strike to his flank, which Ashbal narrowly dodged.

"You've done your research," Ashbal remarked, his tone wry. "Neither Naila nor Faraz are the loose-tongued sort, yet here we are."

He hadn't meant it as a rebuke, though he knew it may be heard as sarcasm.

"Your true goal," Claudia pressed on, "is to utterly destroy the Golden Falcon, isn't it? You've revealed your intentions to no one, deceiving even those closest to you. Did your mother command you to do it?"

"Well, I'm impressed. It seems you truly have seen through everything. However—ugh!"

He had stolen a glance at Claudia, and Noah had seized the moment to strike with ferocious force. Ashbal's grin twisted into a grimace as his sword locked against Noah's.

"It wasn't just because my mother told me to."

"Oh? Is that so?" Claudia arched an eyebrow.

"When I was a boy, yes, that was the reason. But it was after my father's death, when I became king and held the Golden Falcon in

my grasp, that I truly understood the importance of my mission."

The clash of blades continued; their differing swordsmanship styles made the battle all the more challenging. Ashbal kicked up a cloud of sand, but Noah leaped back instantly to avoid it. Seizing the opportunity, Ashbal drew his bow and nocked an arrow. He loosed it without hesitation, but as expected, Noah deflected it with magic.

"Do you know," Ashbal began, "what happens to a curse after the one who made the wish dies?"

Noah frowned at his question.

"At first, it functioned as intended. But over time, the Golden Falcon became something grotesque. It twisted, melted, and warped into a monstrous form. Its surface pocked with countless holes, veins bulging through it as though some parasite had taken root within."

At that revelation, Faraz hesitantly said, "B-But, Your Majesty! The pendant on the statue of the goddess remains as beautiful as ever!"

"What nonsense are you speaking, Faraz? The Golden Falcon is indeed a cursed artifact, but it is not that necklace."

Ashbal loosed another arrow, but once again, Noah's sword struck it down. His blade shone brilliantly as it reflected the full moon's light.

"The true nature of the Golden Falcon," Ashbal continued, "is a weapon that transforms whatever it pierces into solid gold."

Ashbal hurled a ball of flame at Noah, but Noah's skill with magic was greater. He conjured an icy shield in the blink of an eye. Steam billowed between them as Ashbal narrowed his eyes.

"It's a bow shaped from pure gold," Ashbal said.

Faraz and Naila both caught their breath. Their eyes locked onto the bow in Ashbal's hand.

Ashbal chuckled. "Relax, Naila. It's not *this* bow. I told you that it is merely a part of me."

"But if that's true," Naila stammered, "why did you bring that bow here from the harem in the first place?"

Ashbal ignored the question, speaking almost to himself. "I see. Noah... Claudia... They haven't revealed the whole truth."

Naila stared agape in shock, but neither Noah nor Claudia showed any reaction.

Truly, meeting these two might just be the second-greatest fortune of my life.

And the greatest, without a doubt, was Naila.

And that is why, I know if I try to accomplish my goal here, they'll undoubtedly stop me.

The barrier trapping Ashbal was far too powerful to break through by conventional means. He had to neutralize Noah and force Claudia to dismantle the barrier. Yet Noah countered Ashbal's every move and was gradually driving him into a corner.

It was as though he was stalling for time.

Is there no other way?

Ashbal decided to gamble everything. He raised his sword high and hurled it toward Noah with all his strength, accelerating its flight with magic. He fully expected Noah to deflect it. As Noah's sword struck the flying blade aside, Ashbal immediately loosed a volley of arrows at him.

Noah charged, crouching low and placing his hand on the ground before vaulting into the air. An arrow Ashbal had aimed at his feet struck the stone pavement, shattering it into fragments.

The stone shards sliced into Noah's body like pieces of glass, but he paid that no mind as he closed the distance in a straight line toward Ashbal.

I knew you wouldn't care about a few cuts.

Ashbal smirked. He moved his fingers subtly, channeling magic into the shards of stone.

Forgive me, Claudia!

The sharp fragments shot toward her like arrows.

But in the next instant, Ashbal's world flipped upside down.

"Ashbal!" Naila yelled.

He yelped. A searing pain spread through his right shoulder—the very arm he needed to draw his bow.

Noah now stood over him, pressing his foot against Ashbal's stomach. His sword was embedded in Ashbal's shoulder, and his obsidian eyes burned down onto him with the promise of death. His eyes were like those of a beast, well trained yet unable to hide the predator that lurked deep inside.

"I'm a fool," Ashbal muttered. His left hand fell limp, scattering the arrows in his grasp. Protected by Noah, Claudia stood unscathed, her expression calm.

“For the two years after I became king,” Ashbal whispered, “I thought I could find a way to preserve the Golden Falcon without destroying it. I forgot my true duty and played the role of a proper king, convincing myself that the relic was necessary for this kingdom to survive.”

His words were quiet, yet they carried to every ear in the room.

“I was a fool. My mother was right. I should have destroyed it immediately.”

His heartbeat pulsed steadily through his wounded shoulder. Nonetheless, Noah made no move to restrain him further. He silently watched Ashbal from above.

“No, even then, there was no guarantee it would have gone smoothly.” Ashbal sighed.

“Ashbal?” Naila’s voice wavered with concern. She took a hesitant step toward him, only for Faraz to silently hold her back. Though it was selfish, Ashbal felt a flicker of gratitude.

“The Golden Falcon’s true master was my father,” Ashbal continued. “But after he died, only his wish remained. It lived on without him, warped and twisted. A wish without its master can never stay true to its original form.”

“Ashbal, *why?!*” Naila cried. “Please, I don’t want to hear about your duty or anything else!”

Forgive me. The words echoed in Ashbal’s heart. He had known from the start that he should have told them everything, but even now the courage to do so eluded him.

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? How I didn’t realize that the king’s missing son everyone was searching for was me.”

He had told this story not just to Noah and Claudia, but to Naila and Faraz as well.

“It sounds foolish, doesn’t it? But it’s true.”

“King Ashbal… But surely you must have known,” Faraz said, confused. “You said that Lady Samira told you about the Golden Falcon.”

Faraz’s bewilderment was understandable. Even if Ashbal had grown up outside the palace, he had been born to the king’s consort, so it should have been easy to deduce his lineage.

But there was a reason that he hadn’t jumped to that conclusion.

“I truly didn’t know—because it wasn’t true.”

“What do you mean by that?” Faraz pressed.

Ashbal exhaled slowly and then revealed the first secret. “I’m not the king’s son.”

Faraz and Naila gasped, their eyes wide with shock. They stared at Ashbal in disbelief as he forced a grin, but it only held bitterness and pain.

“All right, Noah. I’m sorry I attacked Claudia, so allow me to ask her one question, please.”

Noah’s eyes, as cold as ice, remained locked on to Ashbal. Attempting to target Claudia in front of this man was nothing short of suicidal.

After a moment’s silence, Noah spoke, his tone heavy. “That’s not for me to decide.”

“Will you tell me, Claudia,” Ashbal called, swallowing the pain in his shoulder, “how you figured it out?”

This whole time, she had kept the truth from Naila and Faraz out of consideration for Ashbal. If he wished for the truth to be revealed, then she had no qualms with complying.

“The barrier shone a light on that mystery.”

“The one in the harem?”

“Yes. That barrier allows no human or beast to pass through. Even when I transformed into an animal, it still repelled me away.”

Shape-shifting magic was exceptionally difficult. It was a feat only someone like Claudia could manage—unless they were a being like Ashbal. Despite her nonchalance, her magical abilities were extraordinary.

“I considered the possibility that the barrier might contain a mechanism I couldn’t detect or that the only exception was the caster’s child.”

“I’m impressed you were able to analyze it at all,” Ashbal admitted.

“Thank you. If such an exception existed, it would be identifiable through a thorough analysis of the barrier’s magic.” Her golden eyes watched Ashbal. “That barrier repels all humans and beasts without exception. If that’s the case, then there’s only one reason that you can pass through it.”

Ashbal sighed and allowed his body to relax completely.

“The former king is not my father, for I never had a father,” Ashbal said softly.

Then, he spoke the final truth.

"I... I am..." he stuttered, before closing his eyes and pushing through his hesitation. "I am not human. I am a magical implement brought to life through my mother's curse."

"What?"

Naila's voice, barely a whisper, echoed hollowly in Ashbal's ears. Slowly, he turned his head toward her, forcing a strained smile.

"I'm a monster. I'm sorry for pretending to be human all this time."

At last, he had said what he'd feared to tell her for so long—the truth he had run from, terrified. It was finally out. She finally knew.

Suddenly, a searing pain exploded in his skull.

"Gah—ugh!"

"Ashbal?!"

The pain was too much; he didn't understand what was happening. It felt like his head was being cleaved open, or perhaps, forced apart from within.

"Please!" Naila cried out. "Pull out the sword! I need to heal him! Please, I beg of you!"

What's happening?! Tonight's a full moon. And the sky is clear, so there should be plenty of moonlight.

Ashbal raised his head just in time to see Claudia's barrier shatter. His vision of the full moon that should have been glowing in the night sky beyond the barrier also broke, its light reduced to shards.

"Wha...?!"

Ashbal realized that the moon he had been looking at moments ago had been an illusion created by magic. Though the real moon hung in the sky, its light's color differed from the silvery glow Ashbal needed.

"An eclipse?"

The moon had darkened, its hue shifting to an ominous crimson, a black void creeping across its face.

The moonlight is fading.

In that instant, he felt a surge of malevolent energy burst forth from within him.

"Guh—agh!"

"Ashbal!" Naila cried.

"Stay back!" Ashbal's desperate scream echoed through the air.

And then, as though from a distant dream, he heard his mother's voice whispering once more.

"The Golden Falcon... I curse it. My hatred for it will never end."

She had murmured those words so many times beside his sleeping form.

He desperately tried to answer her in his pain.

I understand. I understand, Mother. I will destroy it. That's why you made me.

His body convulsed as waves of pain consumed him. Yet beneath it all, he could hear his mother's voice whispering words he had forgotten until this moment.

"*If you fail, then—"*

Wait... What was it she said to me?

As Ashbal's consciousness slipped away, cursed energy wracked his body, pulsing strongly. Noah sensed the mounting danger and swiftly pulled his sword from Ashbal's shoulder, leaping back to a safe distance.

Ashbal felt a searing heat spread across his back. And then he let his consciousness slip away.

***

"Ugh... Aaagh...!"

"Ashbal!"

Naila's screams echoed in the air. Claudia, perched on the railing of the watchtower, let out a breath as she observed the unfolding chaos.

Things have mostly proceeded according to plan.

Noah stood before Claudia, his sword drawn and ready. Before him, Ashbal's trembling body had begun to transform. From his back sprouted golden wings—not made of the soft feathers of a bird but an array of golden bows sprouting from his back. They overlapped in the shape of outstretched wings.

Samira never bore the king a child, Claudia thought. *The reason she used her status as a gifted conjurer to place a powerful barrier on the harem must have been to bolster her claims that the child she was carrying was the king's and not born from infidelity.*

Instead, after her encounter with the king, Samira had used the necklace she brought from her homeland to create a cursed

artifact that took the form of a human child.

A tool to destroy the Golden Falcon, not a child. Ashbal always knew what he was.

But the plan had gone awry.

"You were created to destroy the Golden Falcon," Claudia said. "Yet you failed and instead, you fused with it."

Naila's eyes widened in horror.

"The Ashbal you see now *is* the Golden Falcon," Claudia continued, "its final, twisted incarnation."

"Guh...! Aaaagh!"

Ashbal writhed as golden light surged from his wings, which grew larger with each passing second. The light was slowly transforming him.

"Perhaps the transformation began with the Golden Falcon after your father's death," Claudia continued, watching Ashbal. "Or perhaps the transformation was triggered by a change in Ashbal after his mother's passing."

Or perhaps, it was both. What mattered now was that Ashbal and the Golden Falcon had merged into a new monstrous form.

"B-But, Lady Dia!" Naila stammered. "Ashbal was perfectly normal until just moments ago! Now, he's—"

"Curses are born from human desire," Claudia said. "And thus, they are shaped by the will of their creator."

She glanced at Naila, who flinched, her moon-shaped earrings swaying from her sharp, sudden movement.

"In this kingdom, the sun represents the king, and the moon his consort. For Samira, who endured that fateful lunar eclipse on her wedding night, the moon became a symbol of her suffering."

"So that's why...the sun and moon..." Faraz murmured. He turned to Naila. "Lady Samira's stabilizing influence on Ashbal probably strengthens while the sun is out...*and* her magic intensifies when the moonlight is at its strongest. Even though King Ashbal, being king, is the sun himself, the moon represents Lady Samira."

Presumably, Ashbal's power was stable only while exposed to sunlight or moonlight. Without them, his transformation became uncontrollable.



“Precisely,” Claudia remarked. “And so, Samira’s power wins out against the Golden Falcon’s when Ashbal is under the light of the sun or moon.”

There was no way Claudia could have realized Ashbal’s true nature and how Samira had tricked everyone through the harem’s barrier that had hidden the boy’s creation as a magical implement, born from a curse.

“The sun may hide behind clouds, but its light is never completely obscured during the day. True darkness exists only in the depths of night,” Claudia said.

Even when it rained or the sky was overcast, sunlight filtered through the clouds.

“But moonlight,” she added, “is far more fragile. Even on the night of a full moon, it can be easily concealed by a passing cloud. After your father’s death, the Golden Falcon’s power began to spiral out of control, growing more unstable with each passing day.”

Naila’s breath caught as the truth dawned on her.

“He met with you on nights under the full moon,” Claudia continued softly, “because he feared what would happen on any other night.”

Naila trembled as she listened, her eyes darting toward Ashbal.

“Eventually, he realized he couldn’t keep it contained any longer. That’s when Ashbal vanished from the palace. He concocted the story of the kingdom’s greatest treasure being stolen. It was a convenient excuse that wouldn’t allow room for any of his retainers to object.”

And it wasn’t entirely a lie. The purest form of the Golden Falcon had already disappeared from this world.

“Tonight was supposed to be the full moon,” Claudia said. “Under its light, Ashbal intended to suppress the Golden Falcon’s power long enough to destroy himself. However…”

Claudia looked up at the sky. The moon had been devoured by a dark shadow, its face now a bloodred crescent.

Naila followed her gaze and narrowed her eyes. “You knew tonight was an eclipse, didn’t you?”

Eclipses were seen as ill omens, so much so that the act of recording them was often forbidden. Thus, the only tales of them that existed in this land came from oral traditions, and any

attempt to predict the next eclipse was considered taboo.

"Why wait for the moon to vanish?" Naila demanded. "If what you're saying is true, without sunlight or moonlight, Ashbal will—!"

Her words caught in her throat as she struggled against Faraz's grip. Meanwhile, Ashbal pressed his hands to his head and he spoke with a voice that was weak and hoarse.

"My duty is to destroy the Golden Falcon."

"Ashbal!" Naila cried out desperately.

"Now that I have fused with the Golden Falcon...the power I was born with is gone." Ashbal gasped. "I can't do it without the bow that I gave you, Naila..."

Naila's eyes shot toward the golden bow lying on the ground.

Claudia turned to her own retainer. "Noah, what did you sense when you fought him?"

Noah's grip on the sword he was pointing at Ashbal tightened as he answered. "The golden bow and arrows are not cursed, but they are magical implements. Though their power is not overwhelming, they carry a magic capable of destroying the Golden Falcon."

Ashbal had once told Naila to think of the bow as a piece of him. It had been no metaphor.

"Do you understand now, Naila?" Claudia asked. "The bow you carry truly is a part of Ashbal, and it is imbued with the power to destroy the Golden Falcon. That's why he stole it tonight. His plan was to end everything by driving that arrow into his own heart."

"No, how could he...?"

Had Ashbal given Naila that bow as a contingency? He had even taught her how to use it.

"How cruel," Claudia whispered. "To give the weapon that will end your life to the woman you love."

Naila's shoulders slumped.

"Claudia..." Ashbal's face twisted in pain. His breathing grew shallow and rapid as he forced himself to speak. "Why did you bring Naila here?"

"Because I knew she would be your weakness." Claudia smiled calmly. "You made sure she lived in one of the palaces that has water with the strongest purification magic running through it. Even if the curse surged out of control, as long as she remained by that water, she would have some degree of safety."

Ashbal's gaze flickered toward the goddess statue's pendant. It was dull and lifeless in the absence of moonlight.

He had chosen this place to commit his final act, perhaps hoping to draw some power from the cursed pendant. But with the moon veiled by an eclipse, even the place in the city most exposed to the moon was cloaked in darkness.

"Ugh... Gah...!"

Ashbal doubled over, the golden wings on his back expanding grotesquely. The shimmering gold spread across his body like feathers—or perhaps scales. The golden light grew stronger as Ashbal transformed.

"Aggghhh!"

The curse grew, spiraling outward like golden veins, running along the city's waterways. Ashbal's legs twisted, transforming into the scaled talons of a monstrous bird.

Faraz tightened his grip on Naila, sweat pouring down his face as he shouted to Claudia, "What's going on?! What's going to happen to him?!"

"The Golden Falcon's curse is in full revolt. It's happening far faster than I expected. If it continues, it will turn everyone in this city into gold."

"You're far too calm about this!" Faraz growled. "If you knew that would happen, why wait for the damn eclipse?!"

That was an entirely reasonable question.

Watching Ashbal from over Noah's shoulder, she replied, "Because destroying a cursed artifact like this is nearly impossible without forcing it into a fully awakened state. Therefore, we needed to wait for the night of a full moon when Ashbal would show himself. However, it also needed to be a night when that moonlight would abandon him."

"Did you say *destroy*?" Faraz asked in disbelief.

Ashbal staggered back, colliding with the railing of the watchtower. His balance wavered dangerously, but he did not fall. The countless golden bows sprouting from his back thrashed violently, causing gashes along his back, and then spread like magical wings. They propelled him into the sky, so high that they needed to look up to see him. He genuinely resembled a monstrous bird.

The people of the city had noticed the golden light and began

to emerge from their homes, their terrified cries filling the air.

"Truly..." Ashbal said with a trembling voice as he listened to the distant screams. "I truly thought there would be a way to make everything right. But without the Golden Falcon, how will the people survive?"

"Ashbal..."

Naila's tear-filled eyes met his, and he forced a clumsy smile, his expression fragile and broken.

"Do I preserve the Golden Falcon, or do I destroy it like my mother said? I failed because I was too weak to make that decision."

"Too weak? That's not true!" Naila said, shaking her head.

"When I was a kid, I had you, Naila. That's how I survived. But not everyone... Not everyone was so lucky."

The healing and nourishment Ashbal had received from Naila had saved his life countless times. Those experiences had shaped the man he became, a king who dreamed of freeing his people from hunger and suffering.

"Even so..." Ashbal said, his lips curling into a bitter smile at the memory of that dream. "In the end, my very existence will be the cause of their destruction. What was the point?"

"Please!" Naila's voice cracked with desperation as she turned toward Noah and Claudia, tears welling in her eyes. "Isn't there *any* way to stop this?! Just tell me what I must do! I'll do anything—*anything*! I'll give my life if that's what it takes... Just tell me how to save both Ashbal and the kingdom!"

"H-Hey, Lady Naila!" Faraz called in alarm.

"I don't care what it is!" Tears fell from Naila's eyes. She had lost her usual calm demeanor and was now just begging over and over again. "If it's something I can do, I swear I'll do it! No, even if it's something I can't do, I'll make it happen somehow. Please! Please help him!"

"Noah."

Claudia's lips were still curved into a smile as she turned to Noah, who still stood with his sword raised toward Ashbal.

"That's enough. Lower your sword."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

"Wait! Please!"

Naila twisted violently in Faraz's arms, struggling to break free.

She thrashed with such desperation that Faraz, unable to hold her, collapsed with her onto his knees.

"Please! Please, help him!"

"I'm afraid"—Claudia's heels clicked softly against the stone floor as she stepped forward, passing Noah—"I only do what I *want* to do."

Naila's face twisted in shock.

Claudia raised her right hand, and a burst of light radiated outward.

"What... What are you doing?!" Naila yelled.

At that moment, Ashbal arched his back and released a scream that couldn't be described as human. Claudia gathered magic into her hand and the desert sands around the city began to shake. The golden curse that had spread through the city's veins began to pulse and contract, beating like a living heart.

"Impossible... Is she suppressing the curse?" Faraz gasped in disbelief.

"But look at Ashbal!" Naila cried, her voice breaking as she pointed toward him.

"Aggghhh!"

The deafening roar swallowed their voices. Ashbal's fractured cry echoed ominously like a death knell.

Meanwhile, the curse that had spread its golden roots throughout the city was retreating inch by inch.

Temporarily suppressing the curse to its very limit is possible. That said...

A bead of sweat rolled down Claudia's neck, cool against her skin before it dropped soundlessly onto the ground. She shifted her left foot back, drawing on an even deeper well of magic.

Her breath caught.

Her expression had remained calm. To an outside observer, she likely appeared composed. No one would be able to see how much she was straining under the immense pressure.

No one except Noah.

"Your Highness," he said quietly.

He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her from behind, bracing her body against his own.

No one could rival Claudia's expertise when it came to magic involving curses. This task was hers alone to bear. Not even Noah

could help her with it.

And that helplessness was surely eating at him.

Noah remained silent, but his jaw was clenched so tightly that she could hear his teeth grinding. Claudia, sensing his frustration, allowed a faint smile to grace her lips. She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

It's been thirteen years since I was reborn as Claudia. I've known for a while now, haven't I?

Feeling the steady rhythm of Noah's heartbeat, Claudia reached a quiet conclusion.

This body will never last as a vessel for Adelheid.

Her constant drowsiness after using magic wasn't just due to magical depletion.

Even so, Noah's embrace brought her a fleeting sense of relief. His magic poured into her, surrounding her in a gentle, healing warmth, soothing her pain if only for a moment.

Claudia smiled at him as she took another deep breath.

Now, it's time.

She opened her eyes and pushed against the curse with renewed strength. Pain seared through her body, but her voice remained unwavering.

"Lady Naila, take the bow Ashbal gave you."

Still held back by Faraz, Naila's eyes widened in shock.

"I'll keep Ashbal and the curse restrained," Claudia explained. "And Noah must stay by my side to protect me. Which means..."

Faraz's eyes widened as the realization dawned on him. He shook his head in protest.

"Lady Claudia! You're not suggesting... Are you really telling her to *shoot* His Majesty with that bow?"

"Indeed, I am."

"Tch... Don't move, Lady Naila!" Faraz growled, stepping back and releasing her. "If anyone's gonna do this, it'll be me. I owe that much to him and his father."

Faraz sprinted, snatching up the fallen bow. The moment his fingers wrapped around it, another deafening roar filled the air as Ashbal's transformation advanced.

"Ashbal!" Naila cried out.

"Your Highness!" Noah exclaimed as he noticed Claudia's vision faltering for a split second. Nonetheless, Claudia persisted. She

clenched her hand tighter, channeling even more magic into her spell.

"Ashbal is a magical implement born of a curse," she muttered.

"Lady Naila, give me that arrow!" Faraz shouted.

Claudia interrupted him, her voice still calm. "Curses are born from powerful desires. In turn, they *are* those desires."

Naila looked up at her. "What are you trying to say?"

Claudia faced her. "The master of the Golden Falcon's curse is gone. The one who created Ashbal is gone. Because of that, their wishes twisted, leaving their curses unmoored and running wild. If that is the reason for Ashbal's transformation…" Claudia's expression softened. "Then what do you think would happen if someone living strongly wished for Ashbal to stay by her side?"

Claudia thought she saw a spark of understanding glimmer in Naila's topaz eyes.

"No!" Faraz barked. "How can you be sure it won't make things worse?!"

"I can't. I have no guarantee at all. This is the first time I've ever dealt with something like this."

A cursed artifact born and raised as a human. She had never heard of something like this happening.

Claudia turned back to Naila, her voice quieting. "But, tell me this, Lady Naila—what is the bow you carry meant for? Is it not meant to help you stand beside the man you love and protect him?"

Naila's breath caught. She stood up, the fear and hesitation that had plagued her now gone. "Yes. You're right. Thank you, *Adelheid*, my friend."

"Tee hee!" Claudia beamed at her.

Noah faced Faraz, who scratched his head in bewilderment before tossing the bow to Naila.

"Thank you, Lord Faraz," Naila said sincerely, gripping the bow tightly.

"If it becomes too dangerous, I'll stop you, even if it means taking that bow away from you by force," Faraz warned.

Naila nodded solemnly.

Claudia exhaled, and, at that moment, Ashbal raised his hand toward her.

"Watch out! His Majesty's magic is coming!" Faraz shouted.

So, he's finally lost all sense of human thought.

After a brief incantation, a torrent of searing flames burst from Ashbal's hand, surging toward Claudia. Noah stood resolutely in the face of the flames coming toward them. Holding Claudia firmly in his arms, his eyes locked on the oncoming blaze. Without a word or gesture, a barrier surrounded them and the flames split with a deafening roar, rushing past on either side, leaving Claudia and Noah untouched.

"Lady Naila, can you draw the bow while staying behind us?" Claudia asked.

"If I can just focus for a moment...!"

"Of course. Take your time."

Naila nodded. The girl who had lived her entire life within the harem had likely never aimed at a living target—let alone the man she loved.

And now, she had only three golden arrows—only three chances.

Still...

Ashbal's golden wings thrashed violently, struggling against Claudia's restraining magic with brutal force like a cornered beast making its last desperate stand.

If my body can hold on just a little longer...

Claudia winced, and the fingers on the hand that she held up toward Ashbal trembled, faltering for a brief second.

She exhaled softly and whispered, "Noah."

Without hesitation, Noah's hand found hers, their fingers intertwining. Claudia blinked in surprise. She smiled gently, then reached up with her free hand and stroked his hair.

"Such a good boy," she whispered fondly. "My adorable attendant."

Noah's magic continued to heal her, keeping her standing despite the pain tearing through her body.

Just a little longer...

Claudia leaned into Noah for support. Forcing a smile through the agony, she called out to Ashbal.

"Now, Ashbal. Your greatest weakness—your precious girl—is standing right here."

This had been the whole reason for bringing Naila into the fight.

Naila raised the golden bow, standing tall and steady. She radiated strength and grace, and she was so beautiful that Claudia couldn't help but admire her.

"It's time to accept your fate," she continued.

Without hesitation, Naila drew the bowstring taut and released the arrow.

"Forgive the part of yourself that is irredeemably, undeniably *human*."

The golden arrow sliced through the air and pierced the heart of the bird, both monstrous and golden, who had nowhere left to run.

With a sound like shattering metal, the gold encasing Ashbal fractured, breaking away in glittering shards. His body went limp as he plummeted toward the ground.

"Faraz, catch him!" Claudia called.

"On it!"

The advisor had already been on the move. He reached the spot where Ashbal would land before Naila, who had started running as soon as she saw Ashbal falling, could get there. He caught Ashbal in his arms just as the fragments of gold—dispersed by Naila's arrow—began reshaping themselves into the silhouette of a great bird once more above his head.

"Noah, if you would," Claudia said.

With the curse no longer in need of suppression, all that remained was its destruction. Even before Claudia had finished speaking, Noah raised his hand toward the reassembling golden bird.

Without uttering a word, he released a ball of brilliant light that consumed everything in its radiance.

From within the light came Naila's shaking voice. "Ashbal!"

Then, layered on top of her cries, came another woman's voice.

"Why?"

Naila's breath caught in her throat, and Noah instinctively pulled Claudia closer, shielding her.

Claudia, who had already guessed who this voice belonged to, listened silently in his arms.

"Why is this child so precious to me?"

"Wh-Who is—?" Naila began to ask.

"He is a mere tool, an accursed child born to bring vengeance.

So…why?”

“No… It couldn’t be,” Faraz murmured. He turned, his face pale, saying out loud what Claudia was thinking: “This is the voice of Lady Samira.”

“Mother?” Ashbal asked faintly in a daze, his mind still clouded. The overwhelmingly bright light dimmed, allowing their surroundings to take form once more.

Within that fading glow, the echoes of Samira’s voice continued.

“Never forget that Ashbal exists for one purpose alone: to see my vengeance fulfilled. He’s not a boy—he’s a magical tool. Yes, just a tool…”

“Ashbal.” Naila reached out to him, but before she could touch him, the voice repeated once more.

“I must never forget.”

Naila covered Ashbal’s ears. “You don’t have to listen to this! This voice—it is the true curse! You are *not* a tool!”

“Naila…”

“I must never forget…” Even as Naila’s hands touched him, Samira’s voice had a hold over Ashbal. *“Because this hatred alone is what allows him to remain human.”*

Ashbal’s breath hitched.

“I must never forget, even if I love him, even if I can no longer see him as a mere tool.”

“What…?”

“If I let go of that hatred, then my son, created from hatred and a curse, might cease to exist.”

Ashbal stirred, weakly trying to lift himself. Naila moved to support him. His body was entirely human now, and all signs of his transformation had disappeared.

“I’m sorry, Ashbal.”

The eclipse still veiled the moon in darkness, yet Ashbal remained human.

“I swear that even in death, I will cling to hatred. That’s why I will continue to tell you to destroy the Golden Falcon. I will never let go of the vow that gave you life.”

Sobs punctuated his mother’s words. Ashbal clenched his eyes shut, unable to bear her sorrow.

“Even in death, I will hate…so that you may live.”

“Mother…”

The reason Ashbal couldn't destroy the Golden Falcon was simple, Claudia realized.

His mother had already reprogrammed his very purpose.

No matter how much she had whispered her hatred to Ashbal, her true wish had been different.

"Your mother's pendant is beautiful, Ashbal," Claudia told him, though she turned to look at Noah.

Noah said nothing, but he understood instantly. He reached out and brushed the sweat from Claudia's cheek, his touch cool against her overheated skin. As he did so, Claudia continued to speak to Ashbal.

"You said that the wishes of the dead become distorted over time, but I believe some wishes are strong enough that even death cannot change them." She exhaled softly. "While they are rare, they do exist."

The pendant hanging on the goddess statue likely still shone just as brightly as it had on the night of Samira's wedding.

"Your mother's wish has never strayed," Claudia said.

Ashbal looked at the pendant. "Never...?"

Samira had never actually wished for the Golden Falcon to be destroyed, but there was no need for Claudia to put that into words; Ashbal knew.

Ashbal stared down at his hands, flexing his fingers, opening and closing them as though to confirm that they were still his own.

"I'm still here. Does that mean I can still pretend to be human?" he asked, bewildered.

"You idiot!" Naila shouted angrily, but she nonetheless threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him over. "You have *always* been human to me!"

Ashbal, stunned into silence, could only listen as Naila continued, her voice thick with emotion. Claudia watched on, smiling.

"Even if you can't, I will continue to believe it. And I'll never stop wishing for it. I will keep you human!"

Her breath hitched as tears finally spilled down her cheeks.

"And if that isn't good enough... If you start to become undone again, then I will do everything I can to stop you. And so..." Her last words came as a quiet whisper. "Until that day comes, you are mine, Ashbal. Not only are you human, you are the person most

precious to me.”

Ashbal drew a sharp breath.

Then, finally, he laughed to cover up his embarrassment. He patted Naila on the back as she clung to him.

“I’ve never seen you cry before.”

“Shut up,” Naila mumbled against his chest.

“You’re so cute. Let me see—this might be the only time I get to see you cry.”

“Shut up!”

At last, Ashbal embraced Naila, his arms wrapping fully around her. “Thank you,” he whispered.



Claudia exhaled softly before turning to Faraz. “That concludes this matter, I believe. I trust you can handle the rest?”

Faraz stepped forward and then, to Claudia and Noah’s surprise, knelt before them. It was a gesture of highest reverence in this land.

“You have saved both my king—the heir of the man who saved my life—and the kingdom itself. No words could ever suffice to express my gratitude. Yet, on behalf of His Majesty, I offer you my deepest thanks.”

Faraz’s air of unpredictability had vanished, and in its place was the very image of a dignified and devoted vassal.

Claudia glanced up at Noah. “You hear that, Noah? I leave the rest to you.”

She extended her hand toward him. Noah, understanding her silent request, lifted her effortlessly into his arms.

“If we are permitted a request, then let it be that you please prepare chambers where Her Highness may rest. She may not awaken for several days.”

Ever so perceptive, my dear good boy.

Drowsiness settled over Claudia as she nuzzled closer into Noah’s warmth. Her use of magic had left her exhausted.

Now, I am certain—this body, the vessel that is Princess Claudia, will not last.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, her bleary vision resting on the blurry silhouette of the goddess statue in the distance before she returned her attention to Noah.

“Your Highness?”

There’s no need for such a worried expression, my dear Noah.

Claudia reached up, gently stroking his head.

Instead of voicing the truth that weighed upon her heart, she simply smiled. “Thank you for everything you do for me, Noah. I love you.”

A rare flicker of shock crossed Noah’s usually impassive face.

Claudia giggled softly. She found that expression unbearably adorable, but she had no doubt that he would soon compose himself and protest being treated as a child. Before he could, she wrapped her arms tightly around him.

“Good night.”

“Again?!”

His exasperated murmur was the last thing she heard before happily sinking into slumber, safe in the cradle of his arms.

Epilogue

By the time Claudia returned to her home of Avianoia from the deserts of Sharavia, winter had deepened its grip on the royal capital. A delicate veil of snow covered the city.

The gown Noah had woven for her with magic was a deep emerald and adorned with charcoal-gray fur. Enchanted to provide warmth, it allowed her to walk through the palace halls in comfort, the hem of her dress fluttering with every step.

She was now standing before her father with arms full of gifts.

“Father! I brought you souvenirs!”

Volkhard, seated upon his throne with his cheek propped lazily against one hand, regarded her in silence as she deposited the gifts unceremoniously onto his lap.

The court conjurers at his side, however, looked far less composed. Their expressions were strained, as though fearing some arcane catastrophe would suddenly explode from within the packages.

“My journey to Sharavia was *so* much fun! There were enormous snakes—oh, and dragons too! And the whole city glittered like gold, just like the sun!”

“I see. And did you seize the opportunity to survey an optimal route for a possible invasion?”

“Father! I wouldn’t do that. I went to have fun!”

“How dull.” With detached interest, he sifted through the gifts, the faintest smirk curving his lips. “I must say, I would prefer a tale of the golden bird that appeared rather than accounts of serpents and dragons.”

Claudia merely tilted her head with a cherubic grin. “I was sleeping sooo soundly that I didn’t see a thing.”

It was unlikely that the gathered conjurers would notice that their exchange was contrived, and that each was able to see through the other’s words—except for one. Karlheinz rubbed his temples in visible exasperation as he watched them.

To him, Claudia extended a small parcel. “Here! This one’s for you.”

“What’s this, Your Highness?”

“A shed snakeskin! It’s supposed to bring wealth!”

“I shall accept it with gratitude,” he replied, though his face remained inscrutable.

Pleased with his reaction, Claudia turned back to her father.

“In Sharavia, they have something called a harem, and the young ladies there studied and refined their skills. It reminded me of the academy I attended when I was ten. I had such a wonderful time learning back then.”

“Hmm,” Volkhard said thoughtfully.

“Father, if I work hard to grow and develop my skills, would that make you happy?”

The king snorted, as if the answer were obvious. “What parent would not take pride in the achievements of their child?”

“Then I shall do my best!”

From among the mountain of packages now occupying his lap, Claudia pointed to the smallest box.

“Open that one last. And when you do, make sure Karlheinz is with you.”

“Why?” He arched his brow. “Does it have some strange enchantment that is only dispelled under such a highly specific condition?”

No, but it will buy me some time.

Claudia’s eyes twinkled as she offered no explanation. Turning gracefully on her heel, she strode toward the great double doors of the audience chamber.

“See you later, Father! And you too, Karlheinz! I’m going back to my tower for a nap.”

“Your Highness?” Karlheinz called after her. “Are you not going to visit your brothers?”

“Nope! I’ll be back soon enough anyway.”

With a carefree laugh, she walked toward the threshold, pausing only once to glance back and offer a small wave.

Waiting for her in the hallway just beyond the doors stood a familiar figure.

“Noah.”

“At your service.”

Noah extended his hand, ready to escort her.

As she took it, just before the teleportation spell whisked them

away, Claudia murmured a single word.

“Goodbye.”

Noah cast his gaze downward as the spell took hold.

They returned to the tower hidden deep within the forest, the only home Claudia had ever truly known. Though she seldom visited, it remained the sanctuary where she had been raised after her exile as an infant, where she had dwelled even after the memories of her past life had awoken.

“Please, take a seat, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

“I shall prepare tea. His Majesty has, no doubt, already surmised your involvement in the events at Sharavia.”

At this, Claudia merely chuckled, lifting her shoulders in a shrug.

Many had witnessed the golden bird that had emerged over the desert city. Tales had spread of its monstrous form being felled by a surge of magic and the cursed light that had ensnared the capital vanishing in an instant.

People spoke in hushed voices of their fears that the fabled treasure of the royal family, the Golden Falcon, upon which their kingdom’s prosperity relied, had been destroyed.

Yet, amid these murmurs of doubt, a single woman had appeared and spoken to no one in particular.

“How dreadful. That such a creature should reveal itself under an ill-omened lunar eclipse. Could it be that the Golden Falcon was never a blessing at all, but a curse in disguise?”

Like wildfire, agreement spread. It was not long before the whispers turned to speculation about who had destroyed the Golden Falcon.

“The Golden Falcon showed its true form on the night of the eclipse,” someone murmured, “and yet, His Majesty foresaw its danger.”

“To think, he left the palace in secret, placing a double in his stead, to deal with it without spreading panic!”

“He knew the curse would reach its peak under the eclipse, and he struck it down at precisely the right moment! Were it not for his actions, all may have been lost!”

“And he stood side by side with his betrothed, Lady Naila, each protecting the other. Truly, what a formidable pair!”

King Ashbal himself had eventually come out and addressed his people directly.

“Until now,” he proclaimed, “our kingdom has relied on the gold bestowed by the Golden Falcon, believing it to be our salvation. But I tell you this—I, who was raised among you and walked the very streets you walk, have witnessed with my own eyes the strength of our people. Your spirits shine as brightly as the sun and are unbowed by even the fiercest of sandstorms.”

The gathered citizens stood spellbound, eyes glued to their young sovereign above as they nodded along. His words were not those of some distant monarch, but of a man who had known their struggles, who had lived their hardships alongside them.

“Each and every one of you possesses worth far beyond mere gold,” he continued. “And if we stand together, then not a single soul shall be left to starve or suffer! We shall forge a land brighter than the very sun, even if we do not have the Golden Falcon!”

With that said, King Ashbal smiled.

It was not the expression of a ruler sneering at his subjects, but of a man gazing with pride upon those he called his own.

“That, my people,” he said, sweeping a hand before him, “will be our true city of gold.”

A roar of thunderous applause followed.

“Long live King Ashbal, the Sun King!”

“Glory be to his reign! May it be as prosperous and brilliant as the sun!”

From where she stood at the back of the platform, a lone woman stepped forward. Ashbal turned to face her, and for a moment, they stood together, their gazes locked, each drawing strength from the other.

At the sight of them, standing as one, the crowd swelled with renewed fervor.

“Blessings upon King Ashbal and his future consort, Lady Naila!”

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“That looks like it should settle things, Ashbal.”

The king’s speech had concluded, and Claudia and Noah, having observed it from the shadows, now stood before Ashbal to bid their farewells.

Having just finished his speech, Ashbal had yet to loosen the stiff collar of his ceremonial attire. He placed a hand over his chest in a gesture of gratitude.

“Claudia, Noah, I owe you both a great debt. You have done more for this kingdom than I could have ever hoped for. Thank you.”

“I told you from the beginning, didn’t I?” Claudia replied. “This is merely an exchange. In return, you will keep a vigilant eye on the Kingdom of Lemilsia.”

Ashbal nodded. “I understand. I will ensure that we remain on high alert and keep you informed of any developments.”

Of course, Ashbal’s challenges were far from over. Though the kingdom had ample reserves of wealth to stave off immediate collapse, the true test of its strength was only just beginning.

Yet, this desert kingdom has existed for only twenty years. In that short time, trade routes, commerce, and infrastructure have been established. Even without the gold, there is a foundation upon which they can build, so long as they stand together.

From this day forward, the role of the king would surely change. Noah’s expression grew pensive, but before he could speak his thoughts, Ashbal let out a knowing chuckle.

“I already know what you’re thinking, Noah. The leeches in my court will be dealt with first. If my father’s old ties make it difficult to remove them, then I’ll use those same ties to build something better.”

“That would be advisable,” Noah said. “In that regard, I suspect Lord Faraz will prove most…resourceful.”

“Oi, lad, don’t go dumping work on me like that,” Faraz muttered. “But yeah, I’ll take care of it.”

Claudia laughed softly. Just then, the sound of hurried footsteps approached.

“Claudia!”

“Oh? Naila.”

The young woman had changed out of her ceremonial dress into something more practical. The outfit complemented her well, striking a balance between beauty and ease of movement.

“Are you leaving already?” she asked, a hint of distress in her voice.

“Yes,” Claudia admitted. “I would have loved to stay for your

wedding, but…”

She let the words hang in the air, watching as Naila’s cheeks turned a faint shade of pink.

Though engaged for some time, the wedding date had remained indefinite…until now. In the wake of all that had transpired, they had set the date for six months from now.

Naila looked away in embarrassment, then, a cloud passed over her face.

“It will be lonely,” she admitted. “I miss you already.”

Claudia smiled. “Thank you. I will miss you too. And Mira as well.”

“Then promise you’ll come visit!” Naila urged. “And please, come to the wedding.”

Claudia could not make that promise. But she also could not bring herself to say no, so instead, she pulled Naila into a firm embrace. Seeming to understand the unspoken words, Naila let out a quiet, startled breath.

“I look forward to seeing you again,” Claudia murmured. “Until then, stay well, and love the one you cherish.”

“I will.” Naila held on to her friend tightly and returned the sentiment. “And you too, Claudia,” she whispered. “Stay well…with the one you love.”

Claudia smiled.

And so, Claudia and Noah had departed from the golden sands of the desert.

Back within the quiet sanctuary of her tower, Claudia sat in her usual chair, fingers curled around a warm porcelain cup. She inhaled the delicate scent of apple tea before releasing a contented sigh.

“I’ve never had tea that smells of apple before. Sharavia has such lovely goods. I imagine they will thrive for years to come.”

Noah silently returned the teapot to the tray.

Satisfied, Claudia placed her cup back onto the table.

“I’ve sent my letter to my father, and Karlheinz will ensure he reads it. I included letters for my brothers as well, so I expect they’ll receive them soon.”

“Your Highness.”

“Noah, the tea was delicious.”

Although he was clearly uncomfortable, she turned to him with a small, affectionate smile. He had taken great care to master the art of preparing tea precisely to her liking. And now Claudia truly believed it to be the finest tea in all the world.

"Everything you do for me—your magic, the way you style my hair, even the dresses you create—I love them all. More than I could ever love anything I make for myself."

Still, he did not speak.

"Noah?"

Normally whenever Claudia praised him, he would respond with something. This time, though, he stood in silence for a while, eyes downcast, before he found the words to say.

"Please don't speak as if we are parting forever. And don't force a smile while saying such sad things."

Nonetheless, Claudia didn't drop her gentle expression as she rose to her feet. She moved to the bed and plopped onto it with a soft bounce before gesturing for him to come closer.

Noah obeyed without hesitation, moving to kneel before her, but she caught his hands and pulled him forward.

"Sit here."

"Your Highness..."

He sat beside her, his attention on her and her alone. She saw in his eyes many unspoken thoughts: frustration, sorrow, and perhaps even a hint of childish sulking.

"You look like a puppy about to be left behind by its master."

"That comparison isn't entirely inaccurate."

"Oh, but that isn't the case at all." Claudia stroked his hair, reassuring him with the touch. She whispered, "I will always be by your side—even after my so-called 'death.'"

Noah clenched his fists, his brows drawing together in pain.

She took that moment to repeat what she'd told him earlier. "This body of Claudia cannot sustain the soul of Adelheid. That's why I grow so tired when I use magic. No matter how much I grow, this will never change."

Noah had sensed this truth for years.

"And so you choose death?"

"Oh, Noah," she chided gently. "I told you, it won't be a real death."

As a child, she had assumed her drowsiness after using magic

was merely due to her weak body. However, at thirteen years old, she still could not wield a tenth of what Adelheid had at the same age.

Perhaps I finally understand the reason I was born in such a frail body.

Her thoughts drifted to the goddess statue she had seen in Sharavia.

Noah had remarked how it reminded him of her, and upon seeing it for herself, Claudia had understood why.

That statue had been modeled after someone she once knew.

She and Noah had long been searching for the force distributing cursed magical artifacts to royal families, whispering corruption into their ears. That statue was likely connected.

She had her suspicions, but she feared that if she told Noah now, he would act alone, heedless of the danger to himself.

I'll tell him if I can awaken once more.

Claudia continued stroking his hair.

"It will only be a long sleep, that's all," she reassured him. "I won't breathe, and my heart won't beat, but my body will not decay. While I sleep, my magic will continue flowing, repairing this vessel. If I awaken, I should be whole again."

It was a form of preservation magic, suspending her body in a long stasis, and strengthening her fragile vessel before it broke completely.

In other words, it was a long sleep to heal this imperfect body that she had come to love. She needed to do this before her soul destroyed it.

If I don't do this, I won't last in the battle against Sieghart and the others.

She had always known how delicate this body was, but her time in Sharavia had made it painfully clear. She couldn't turn away from the truth now, so she'd summoned her resolve and told Noah of her plan.

He had questioned her decision over and over, and only after exhausting all protests had he finally given a reluctant nod.

She was relieved. He was truly a loyal, adorable servant. Yet even after accepting it, he couldn't help but try to stop her.

He rarely initiated touch, yet here he was, clutching her hand and pressing his cheek into her palm.

How sweet.

Her lips curled into a gentle smile as she gazed at him.

She had told him how dangerous this magic was, how there was a chance she might never wake up.

And yet, he still believes in me. He follows my will without hesitation. My dear Noah…

She reached out and pulled him into a firm embrace.

"Your Highness."

"If it had been the old me, I wouldn't have told you a thing. I would have made this choice without saying a word."

Just as she had done in her past life when she had left her disciples behind so she could go and die alone. Just as she had done when she first met Noah and had been willing to sacrifice herself for his future.

She would have hidden it all from him and simply gone to sleep.

"But I want you to know. I want you to understand everything, including the choices I make and the risks they will bring."

Noah listened quietly.

I still have a few secrets left, though. But you'll forgive me for that, won't you?

He probably wouldn't, but he could scold her about it later. She rather liked it when Noah, with a soul so much younger than hers and serving as her attendant, scolded her now and then.

"You're not being fair," he said.

His voice was sulky, yet his arms wrapped around her in return. He held her as if she were fragile, yet his grip was steady—no longer a boy's embrace, but a man's.

"If you say that to me, I have no choice but to act as though I accept it," he finished.

"I know. You are my good boy, after all," she murmured with a gentle laugh, resting her forehead against his chest. "Hey, Noah? No matter what happens, do not change. Remain true to yourself."

Each of the disciples she'd left behind in her past life had changed in some way after Adelheid's death, but Claudia believed in Noah's soul.

"Remain ever my dear Noah—kind, honest, and stronger than anyone I have ever known."

"Your Highness…"

“You must swear it to me—for I love you.” She pulled back, looking into his deep, obsidian eyes.

“I swear.”

His gaze was steady, but she could tell he was quietly enduring his pain.

His hand brushed against hers at first, before he intertwined his fingers with hers. His grip tightened.

“No matter what happens, I will always be your loyal servant.”

“And I vow to you that when I close my eyes to sleep, it shall be as your princess.”

She cast a spell wordlessly, and a sphere of light shimmering like a rainbow appeared in front of them. It was a variation of the same spell Adelheid had once used to trade her life for the world’s salvation—a spell that tore life apart and turned it into overwhelming power.

Claudia let herself fall onto the bed with a soft *plop*. She looked up at him, love in her eyes.

“Noah, come here, just once more.”

Whenever she called him to the bed, Noah’s countenance always grew sullen. However, today he said nothing. He simply knelt beside her.

“What a good boy you are.”

“Princess, what are you…?”

“Come a little closer.”

He leaned forward, but before he could react, she pulled him toward her, wrapping her arms around his neck. Then, closing her eyes, she pressed a kiss to his lips.



She pulled away almost immediately, settling back against the pillow.

Noah blinked in surprise as he gaped at Claudia, who lay with a satisfied smile.

“Princess…”

“That was a goodnight kiss—and a vow that I will wake up again.”

Triumphant in her little act of mischief, Claudia watched as Noah narrowed his eyes at her. But then, he did something she hadn’t anticipated. He leaned over her and kissed her.

It was a short, fleeting peck, just like the one she had given him. When he pulled away, he spoke to her in a whisper.

“I will wait for you no matter how long it takes, so…have mercy on me. Come back to me soon.”

“Noah…” She blinked once in surprise, and then she let her eyes flutter shut, pressing herself against him once more. “I swear it.”

“I beg you. I doubt I can even wait a few days.”

Claudia laughed. “That’s impossible. It will take at least a year!”

Though she had said it lightly, it was the truth. Then, at last, she let go of Noah’s arm and grabbed his hand.

“Goodnight, Noah.”

“Yes. Goodnight, Princess.”

She smiled at the familiar title, the same one he had used when they were children. Slowly, she closed her eyes and drifted into sleep.

But when the year she had promised had passed, she still did not awaken.

To be continued…

Special Story: My One and Only Princess

One day, while visiting the village for supplies, Noah received an unexpected gift from the villagers.

This was the same village he had visited daily since Claudia had taken him in. The people, who'd known him since he was nine, greeted him cheerfully and handed him presents they'd prepared beforehand.

"Happy sixteenth birthday!"

Noah carried these unexpected gifts back with him to the tower along with his purchases of cheese, milk, and other daily goods. When Claudia went to meet him, her face lit up with excitement.

"Noah! Could it be that you have, at long last, resolved to try a drink?"

"Oh, no. This is just..."

Her assumption wasn't unreasonable. Noah glanced down at the cause of her enthusiasm: various bottles of liquor, each bearing a different label.

"The people in the village insisted on giving these to me today—after they scolded me for being away so long. They had all been waiting for the chance to celebrate my sixteenth birthday."

"Well, you *have* been away from the tower for quite some time. Between your knighting ceremony and our stay in Sharavia, this is the first time you've gone to the village for supplies since your birthday, isn't it?"

Noah hadn't thought much of it, but of course, Claudia had remembered. As she lifted each bottle from the wooden crate, examining them with interest, her lips curved upward into a grin.

"Each one is different," she said with a laugh. "They must have all chosen something just for you."

"Does alcohol really vary that much in taste?"

"Oh my, you'll just have to try them for yourself. So, Noah...when do you plan to drink them?"

She was clearly looking forward to something, but Noah had yet to realize what that was. Instead, his mind drifted back to something Faraz had said in Sharavia—that he should test his

limits in a safe place before drinking out with others.

Noah had found the advice somewhat irksome at the time, but he couldn't deny that it made sense.

A safe place…

If he was going to test his tolerance, it needed to be in a place where a potential lapse in judgment wouldn't be disastrous. This alcohol would serve as a test; if he considered this to be a matter of discipline and training, then the sooner he did this, the better.

"If it pleases Your Highness, then perhaps as soon as this evening."

"Oh, of course!"

"I am most grateful. Then, if I may…"

The matter of company was of equal importance. There was only one individual Noah could entrust with this, should anything untoward befall him.

"I will ask Lord Karlheinz to accompany me."

Claudia was silent for a time. "I see," she said curtly.

In that instant, Noah realized his mistake. "Your Highness—"

"So, in other words, Noah, you intend to have your very first drink not with me, but with another?"

"I wouldn't consider this to be such a momentous occasion. It is merely a customary first step, meant to assess my tolerance."

Yet Claudia's cheeks puffed out in clear discontent.

"Your Highness," he continued, "since I do not know what sort of disgrace I may bring upon myself while intoxicated, I cannot risk subjecting you to such an unsightly display."

"That is precisely why I must be there. Watching over one's retainer is the duty of their sovereign."

"I may become a burden. If something were to happen…"

Claudia fixed him with a gaze of wounded reproach. "Were not all of your *firsts* meant to belong to me alone?"

Noah cursed inwardly. There had never been any hope of resistance from the start. "As Your Highness commands."

"That's my good boy!"

Accepting his fate, Noah reached for the fresh fruit he'd purchased in the nearby village, preparing to make a nonalcoholic drink for Claudia.

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The tower had a small room meant for relaxation, furnished with a fireplace, a couch, and other comfortable amenities. It was a space where Claudia often spent time reading, and today the table was packed with dishes.

Crackers spread with cream cheese, sprinkled with black pepper, and topped with smoked salmon and a squeeze of lemon. A fresh vegetable salad. Roast beef, cooked at low temperature for hours. Every dish on the table had been prepared exactly to Claudia's request, all by Noah's hand.

As instructed, Noah sat on the right side of the couch directly beside Claudia. Delighted, she clapped her hands in excitement.

"Well then, let us open the wine without delay! Tonight, I shall be the one to pour for you."

"I am honored, Your Highness. And what is this?"

"It is a traditional wine, distilled from blossoms that bloom deep within the Abyssal Forest. It's sweet as fruit, refreshing, with the smoothest of finishes."

The liquor, as it trickled into the crystal glass, was the color of pale gold, reminiscent of honey.

"It effervesces on the tongue," Claudia continued, her voice full of enthusiasm. "Even for a first-time drinker, it should be quite easy to get down."

Claudia beamed. She always seemed to know the things that Noah didn't.

Although she was physically thirteen—and her delicate appearance made her seem even younger—in her previous life, she had been eighteen. She had tasted alcohol before and attended soirées reserved for adults.

There is no hope of ever bridging that chasm of experience.

Even knowing that, Noah found himself frowning despite himself. "I shall now partake."

"Oh, but don't drink it all at once—"

The liquor, poured in a modest measure, vanished swiftly as Noah tilted the glass to his lips. Just as Claudia had described, it carried a floral fragrance, and the taste was closer to fruit juice than to alcohol.

"It's good," he muttered under his breath, and Claudia's eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

"I knew it! I had a feeling this flavor would suit your taste. Just

as you know me, dear Noah, I, too, know you."

There was a quiet pride in her expression, leaving Noah with the feeling that he was gazing at something dazzling. Claudia was clearly pleased to be tending to him, and that, he thought, was no mere conceit.

"I'd love for you to try some of the other drinks as well, but we should take it slow. Here, have some food. Come now, say *ahhh*..."

"I must respectfully decline."

And so, Noah steadily worked his way through the various flavors of alcohol, one by one.

Among the gifts, there was a remarkable variety of drinks: aged wine, a peach liqueur named after a water fairy, and even a liquor infused with red chili peppers. Some were evidently quite expensive, and when Claudia noticed the label on one of the bottles, she laughed. "They must have spared no expense for you on this one, Noah."

Finally, after trying many different bottles, Claudia exclaimed, "Noah, you handle your alcohol well! Look, your complexion hasn't even changed."

"I cannot say I feel much of a difference myself. Perhaps it is thanks to Your Highness's guidance in proper drinking etiquette?"

"Certainly, drinking water and eating well are key to pacing oneself," Claudia acknowledged, "but that alone wouldn't strengthen your alcohol tolerance. It's mostly determined by your natural constitution."

Noah was relieved to know that he was unlikely to cause trouble for Claudia when consuming alcohol. That said, the risk wasn't entirely gone.

And with that, I've finished testing my tolerance. After I've finished sampling all of the bottles, I must return to the village and give them gifts in return. It would be best if I never had to drink again. That way, I can ensure I am always ready to protect Her Highness.

Perhaps Claudia saw through these thoughts, because suddenly she snatched the glass from Noah's hand. He turned in surprise, his gaze meeting hers, and his breath caught.

"Princess!"

"Really, Noah."

The Claudia beside him was no longer a child. She now stood taller than her thirteen-year-old self, bringing her closer to his

height. Yet it wasn't just her stature that made her feel so close to him—she was leaning in, peering at him with a slight pout.

"This is meant to be a celebration for *you*, yet here you are, lost in contemplation."

Her words gave him pause.

"A celebration?"

"But of course, my dear Noah."

Claudia reached up, cupping his cheek in her palm, her eyes soft as though soothing a difficult child.

"This wine is meant to celebrate your sixteenth birthday. Birthdays are always a cause for celebration, but your sixteenth is special. You have now come of age."

Her long lashes were more striking now than in her younger form. It was as if they were made of fine glasswork, shimmering like stardust with each flutter of her eyes.

"I have watched as you pushed yourself, always striving to grow," she said. "But I have always believed there was no need for you to rush."

"Had I taken my time, had I allowed myself to be led by leisure," he replied, "I could never have hoped to protect you."

"Even so, childhood is something precious. For those who cannot begin anew as I have, it only happens once."

Her hand, usually so light when patting his head, was different today. There was a quiet reverence in her touch.

"When you were little, you always worked so hard. Had you allowed yourself to be a child, had you sought to lean upon me even a little, I would have welcomed it. I truly mean that. And yet…" she said, laughing softly and gazing at him with such warmth that it could almost be described as reverence. "I cannot help but be happy that you've grown up."

Her expression softened with warmth. She was so beautiful that, for a moment, Noah could hardly breathe.

"Of course, you will continue to grow," she mused. "Compared to my nineteen-year-old form, you're still a bit smaller and more youthful."

Under normal circumstances, being called small would have frustrated him. But right now, he found he couldn't bring himself to care.

"My darling Noah, you have reached the age at which you may

drink, you have earned your knighthood, and now you stand upon your own two feet, no longer needing to rely on magic to shape your path."

She placed his stolen glass upon the table and then she cupped his face with both hands. As she tilted her head slightly in quiet amusement, her hair, that soft brown color that reminded him of milk tea, spilled over her shoulders.

"And that," she finished, "fills me with the greatest joy."

Suddenly he felt like she had overestimated his tolerance for alcohol, for his hand reached toward her of its own accord.

Noah's fingers brushed through Claudia's hair, curling gently as though combing it, before they tangled around her soft locks. Leaning closer, he positioned himself near her ear, his lips almost touching her skin.

"Why won't you tell me that you're lonely?" he whispered.

"Noah..."

Such an action would have been unthinkable in any other circumstance. And yet, Noah would not blame his behavior on the wine. He knew that these were words that came from his heart.

"I sought to grow not for my own sake, but to always be by your side. The strength I have gained, the station I now hold exists for you, and for you alone."

He prayed that Claudia would never forget these words—that they would never slip away.

His hand pressed lightly against her back as he spoke again.

"Please, never forget this—you are my one and only princess."

He silently prayed that Claudia might hold on to these words forever, even in the deepest sleep.

"Of course," she replied softly. "My devoted servant."

Then Claudia wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, "I'm sorry, Noah."

If you say such things, then why...

It took all he had to swallow those words.

His beloved mistress was soon to enter a false death. If he were to act as a child who wept and begged her to stay, what sort of expression would she wear?

The thought was meaningless. Noah shut his eyes tightly, willing the idea away. For now, he held her in his arms, unwilling to let go. Not yet.

THE END

Afterword

I'm Touko Amekawa. Thank you so much for picking up volume 4 of *The Legendary Witch*!

Noah has reached sixteen, the age of adulthood in this world, and Claudia is now thirteen! This volume not only marks the seventh year since their journey began, but it also brings a major turning point in the story. I had so much fun packing in everything I wanted to write!

Once again, Kuroyuki-sensei's illustrations are absolutely stunning. Just look at the cover! Seeing Noah as king and Claudia as his beloved consort filled me with pure joy. Thank you as always for your incredible work!

Additionally, alongside this volume's release, the first volume of the manga by Nae Serizawa-sensei is now available! The stunning battle scenes and the beautifully portrayed master-servant relationship make it a must-read, so be sure to check it out!

Thanks to your support, the story will continue in volume 5! I'm deeply grateful to all of you for following along, and I'll keep giving my all to make Claudia and Noah's journey even more enjoyable for you to read.

I hope to see you again in the next volume! Thank you for reading!











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by Touko Amekawa

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