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Illustration
KUROYUKI
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Is Reborn as an Oppressed
Princess


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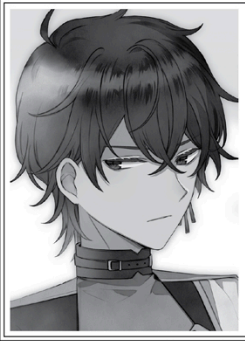


The Legendary Witch Is Reborn as an Oppressed Princess

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“I love you with all that I am.”
Then, with a prayer stilled upon his lips,
Noah leaned down and kissed her.


“Adelheid...you will
be mine, at last.”



Noah

Claudia's servant, of royal blood. He possesses exceptional potential as a conjurer.



Claudia

The Second Princess of Avianoia. Oppressed as a child due to her lack of magical aptitude, she is the reincarnation of the legendary witch, Adelheid.



Volkhard

Avianoia's king and Claudia's father. He is a ruthless man feared by those around him.



Karlheinz

Avianoia's chief conjurer. Second only to the royal family in magical power, he is an ally to Claudia and Noah.



Ehrenfried

The Second Prince of Avianoia. Bookish and mature for his age, he isn't fond of physical activities.



Wilhelm

The Crown Prince of Avianoia. He possesses both strong principles and a fierce competitive streak.



Lewis

The Second Prince of Klingate. His true identity was revealed to be Adelheid's disciple Sewell.



Emilia

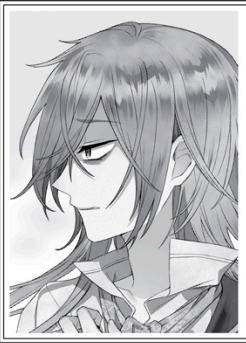
The First Princess of Avianoia. Prone to bouts of selfishness, she is nonetheless a sincere person at heart.

Character Profiles



Fiolina

Previously a student from the Raushneur Academy of Magic. Though she is of royal lineage, she has been removed from her kingdom's line of succession.



Stuart

The First Prince of Klingate. He is pessimistic by nature and gifted in barrier magic.



Ashbal

Sharavia's young king. He bore the curse of the Golden Falcon.



Lauretta

Previously a student from the Raushneur Academy of Magic. She is Fiolina's younger twin sister.



Faraz

A member of the Sharavian court since the reign of Ashbal's father. He appears flippant, but he's highly competent.



Naila

Ashbal's queen consort. She is graceful and exceptionally skilled in the art of the bow.

Anna

Noah's younger sister. Deceased.

Dorothea

Claudia's mother. Deceased.



Sieghart

The Crown Prince of Lemilsia. Having inherited Reinard's talent, he now seeks to possess Claudia.

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Prologue

Princess Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz was a beloved figure in the Kingdom of Avianoia even three years after her death.

The princess had grown to be a lovely child, full of childlike wonder, despite having been raised in a secluded tower on the edge of the kingdom, where she had been exiled to as an infant under the pretext of her lacking magic.

Despite these tragic beginnings, she had eventually awakened to the formidable talent in magic that ran in her family and had come to be known as a prodigious conjurer in her own right.

Claudia was the youngest child of the royal family and had frequently appeared before the people of the kingdom, charming them with her innocent nature. They had watched over her warmly, praying for her continued growth and happiness.

Had she lived, she would have turned sixteen this year.

She was still as beautiful as the day she died. Even though three years had passed since her death, her body remained untouched by decay.

Frozen in time at the tender age of thirteen, she lay in eternal slumber within a midnight-black coffin placed within the royal castle. Her skin was as pale as freshly fallen snow, a clear contrast to the crimson of the mortuary makeup that had been applied to her lips. The vivid red, reminiscent of freshly spilled blood, stood stark against the white lilies that filled her coffin.

Although she looked as if she might wake at any moment, her heart did not sound with beating, which had long since ceased. Her chest did not rise with her breaths, which did not come. Her eyelids remained closed. A thousand nights had passed since she last opened them.

A solemn voice addressed those gathered.

“Ah, it seems we are all assembled.”

That day, the great chapel within the royal palace of Avianoia was host to a gathering of scholars.

They were leading magicians, handpicked from across the known world and each a master of their respective fields. Their expressions were grim as they took their usual seats.

Beyond the chapel door, the kingdom's mage knights stood vigil.

A knight, having compiled the latest reports from the rest, addressed their commander.

"Captain, all scholars have arrived safely and taken their seats. The escort mission is complete."

The young captain nodded.

Those who stood guard at the door consisted of the kingdom's elite mage knights. However, they were stationed here not for battle but for the safe passage of the gathered scholars from far and wide.

The knight continued his report. "As per standard procedure, another unit shall assume the duty of safeguarding the chapel for the duration of the proceedings. Once the deliberations have concluded, the king's debriefing will be overseen by the Royal Guard, under the command of Lord Karlheinz."

"Good work," the captain said. Despite being younger than his subordinates, he spoke with a quiet authority. "Though this is something we do monthly, guarding such high-profile individuals is no small burden. You must all be exhausted. Leave the rest to the next unit and take your well-earned rest."

"Thank you, sir. But what of you, captain?" the knight asked.

"I shall remain to attend to the chapel's security."

His words were met with startled glances.

None among them had shouldered a greater burden during this operation than their captain. It was he who had labored most tirelessly to ensure the success of their mission.

One of the knights protested. "I-If that is the case, allow us to take your place! Captain, surely none deserve rest more than yourself!"

"I appreciate the sentiment, but it is unnecessary."

"Wait! Please reconsider, Captain Noah!"

His subordinates called after him, but Noah's sights were focused

forward as he made his way into the chapel.

The medals on the front of his military attire glinted under the light, each a testament to his distinguished service. They were marks of valor, awarded by the king himself to those who had achieved exceptional merit. For the past two years, Noah had served as the captain of the First Chapter of Mage Knights of Avianoia.

His tall, well-honed frame and impeccable posture only added to his commanding presence. Upon catching sight of him, the knights stationed inside the chapel found themselves unconsciously standing straighter.

As they watched him take his station, one of his subordinates sighed. "What endurance he possesses. Not only is he busy as our captain, but he works harder than any of us, all for the sake of this kingdom."

One of his comrades patted him on the shoulder. "Well, he *is* expected to become the next chief conjurer. All that work ethic—and he's only nineteen! They say Lord Karlheinz himself mentored him from childhood."

"Even so, shouldn't he rest at least a little?"

The knights exchanged worried glances, genuinely concerned for their young leader. Just then, a silver-haired man appeared before them, speaking in an even tone.

"You need not worry yourselves over him."

"Commander Karlheinz!"

At his sudden presence, all knights stood at attention. Karlheinz, whose appearance had scarcely changed in a decade, cast his gaze toward the chapel.

"I will speak to Noah myself. But for now, do as he instructed and rest."

"U-Understood, my lord. Then, with your leave."

With a single nod, Karlheinz dismissed them. His gaze then lifted toward the chapel's second-floor window where his young protégé now stood, and he sighed.

***

Noah stood in the shadows of the chapel's upper gallery and listened to the voices of the assembled scholars below.

"As with last month, today's discussion will focus on the possibility of resurrecting Princess Claudia."

From his vantage point above the congregation, Noah surveyed the gathering. The scholars numbered well over a hundred—far too many to be accommodated in the palace's meeting hall. Thus, this sacred hall, a place of prayer, had been repurposed for the occasion.

"Her Highness's heart has ceased beating. She no longer breathes. Nonetheless, her body remains untouched by decay and is preserved as it was at the age of thirteen."

The elderly head scholar, who presided over the assembly, repeated the same words he had spoken the month before. No progress had been made, for none present had come up with any solution.

"In truth, we cannot even say with certainty whether Her Highness is *truly* deceased."

"If she *is* gone," one scholar murmured, his voice weary, "then the conclusion is simple. No magic exists that can return the dead to life."

Noah watched in silence.

For three long years, Noah's princess had lain within her coffin, lost in slumber.

It was as if her heart and lungs were frozen in time. She no longer called his name, nor did she look at him with her opal-colored eyes or laugh in that soft, delighted way of hers.

And yet, she had promised she would wake.

And so, Noah had remained as he had always been—her unwavering servant.

And he would continue to do so, no matter what might come to pass.

Chapter 1

"Has there been some problem with my conduct?" Noah asked coolly as he sat in the office of Avianoia's commander of the mage knights.

The mantle draped over Noah's shoulders, a privilege granted only to those of his station, felt cumbersome. The medals gleaming upon his chest were but burdensome trinkets. He had never sought such honors, nor had he ever desired them, yet he bore them all the same, for duty was not a matter of desire but of obligation.

From the other side of the desk, Karlheinz released the sigh of a weary man. "Of course there's an issue, you fool."



Karlheinz was not only the commander of the mage knights but also Avianoia's chief conjurer. For Noah, however, he was more than that—Karlheinz had been his master for the past ten years. Since the age of nine, Noah had learned the art of the blade under his tutelage, training to protect his princess.

And two years ago, Karlheinz had also become his superior.

"You are no longer a mere servant, Noah. You are the captain of a chapter of royal knights."

The rise of a nameless orphan, once nothing more than a servant, to the rank of captain in the king's service was a story known across the realm. The only person to whom he could even be compared was Karlheinz himself, who had likewise risen from orphanhood to claim the title of chief conjurer, a tale so famous that it was known even to those outside of the kingdom.

Noah, however, could not have cared less about such things.

"I have fulfilled all my duties without issue," he said.

"If your subordinates are concerned for your well-being, then you are still lacking," Karlheinz countered. "You work without rest, and it weighs on them."

"I recall thinking the same of you when I was a child, Lord Karlheinz."

"Perhaps it seemed that way because you only saw me when I was working with Her Highness. Her orders took priority over all else. There was no one else who could carry them out." Karlheinz leaned back in his chair and looked up at Noah. "I understand why you're restless. Three years have passed since Princess Claudia fell into her slumber."

Three years ago, Claudia had cast herself into a deathlike sleep, a spell that used her own life as a component.

"I must reconstruct this body," she had told Noah before casting the spell.

Claudia's soul had not been hers alone but also that of Adelheid, the legendary witch from five centuries before. Particularly, Adelheid's vast magical power had been too great for the vessel of Claudia Nathalie Breitkreuz's body to contain.

Yet, Claudia needed that magic, for in this world there existed a malevolent type of magic known as a *curse*.

It was the same vile magic that had once driven Adelheid, the greatest witch of her time, to sacrifice her life in a desperate struggle to protect the world.

And now, in the era in which Claudia had been reborn, cursed artifacts bearing that same magic had begun to spread once more into the hands of royal families across the world. Among those involved in this dark tide were Noah's homeland, the Kingdom of Lemilsia, and his cousin, Sieghart.

"Sieghart has been obsessed with me ever since he first laid eyes upon me as a child," she had said. "Right now, he's sealed the borders of his kingdom for his father's funeral rites. But three years from now—when the mourning period ends—he will come for me with everything he has."

She had then smiled sadly at Noah.

"My body cannot withstand the magic I wield. As I am now, I can neither destroy the cursed implements nor stand against Sieghart when he comes for me."

"Then allow me to be the one to do so," Noah interjected. "Your Highness need not burden yourself with such matters. I shall see to them in your stead. So please—"

"I'm sorry, Noah." She shook her head, and Noah knew that there was nothing he could say to change her mind. "There's no one else I can entrust this to. Will you listen to my wish?"

Noah's breath caught. She knew that he couldn't resist her when she spoke like that.

"The spell I will cast will consume my life. With that death, I will unleash the magic necessary to reconstruct this body anew. It is what one might call a false death. I shall die, yes, but it will not be a true death. When the reconstruction is complete, my body shall awaken once more."

She tilted her head, her milk-tea-colored hair spilling over her shoulder.

"Please...wait for me, Noah."

"Your Highness," he said, taken aback.

"If I know you're waiting for me, my dear Noah, I know I will wake again."

And then, just before she fell into her long sleep, she told him her wish: that no matter what should happen, Noah must remain true to himself, and that he must stay the Noah she had always known.

It had been a wish born of guilt that she'd carried from her previous life—guilt for the disciples she had left behind when she had last perished as Adelheid.

She had told no one but Noah the details of this plan.

"You may go, Noah." In his office, Karlheinz sighed, dismissing him with a wave.

Noah gave him a knight's salute. "By your leave, Lord Karlheinz."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the commander's office. The room he was heading to contained wards against teleportation, so he silently walked the crimson-carpeted halls.

Claudia's words ran through his head: *"Stay as my precious Noah. Kind, honest, and stronger than anyone else I know."*

The small chapel at the heart of the royal castle was unlike the grand sanctums meant for ceremonies and festivals. It was a private place of prayer, reserved for the royal family alone, but Noah had been granted special permission to enter.

A red carpet ran from the entrance to the altar at the heart of the chapel, and on top of that altar lay a coffin of the darkest black.

The countless white lilies that filled it reminded him of undisturbed snow, and the body within had skin that was just as pale. The only hint of color was on the lips, painted apple red.

Noah stood before the coffin and called to his motionless liege.

"Princess."

She remained unchanged, as beautiful as the day she had fallen asleep.

Claudia had not stirred in three years.

Noah had seen women like this before as a child—those who had fallen victim to a curse in the distant Kingdom of Klingate, condemned to lie in eternal slumber.

But the situation with Claudia was different.

Her heart did not beat. Her lungs did not take in air. And yet, her body refused to decay.

The sight once again caused Noah to recall the day two years prior when he had knelt before Claudia's father, King Volkhard, and had spoken in protest.

"Her Highness is not truly dead. So why?" Noah had asked, voice shaking with anger. "Why place her in a coffin? Why dress her in this manner? This makes it seem as if she truly is..."

His voice had trailed off. He could not finish that sentence.

The king regarded him with unreadable eyes. Volkhard was a ruthless man, one who would not hesitate to execute his own vassals. Yet he had merely stated, "It was her wish."

"Her Highness's?"

"If she did not wake after one year, she asked that news of her death be spread." He paused, a flicker of sadness crossing his face. "And as her father, how could I refuse?"

Three years ago, Claudia had entrusted her father with her will. She had taken a pen and written down only what she needed to before binding the parchment with her own magic to prove its authenticity.

By the time Karlheinz and the king had read it, she'd already enacted the magic that claimed her life.

Noah, who had known of her plan from the beginning, had steeled himself for any punishment that might follow, yet neither the king nor Karlheinz had ever sought to hold him accountable. Perhaps in that letter Noah had never been allowed to read, Claudia had left behind words in his defense.

Instead, Karlheinz later summoned Noah to his office and told him, "Noah, until Her Highness awakens, you will serve in the capital as a knight."

Noah had tried to refuse. "I must continue as I have. I must seek out the sources of curses and destroy them, as Her Highness had been."

"When such a task presents itself, I shall grant you leave as a special assignment. But beyond that, you would do well to make proper use of the knighthood bestowed upon you by Her Highness."

Karlheinz's voice had been uncharacteristically gentle as he had addressed Noah. "With your abilities, you will swiftly rise to a station befitting your skill. It is only a matter of time before you take my place as chief conjurer—"

"I have no need for such things," Noah cut in. "I am Her Highness's servant. Nothing more, nothing less."

"That will not do," Karlheinz rebuked him, unimpressed. "The power and rank you attain will, in time, serve to better protect Her Highness. You would do well to remember that."

Noah's brow furrowed slightly, but Karlheinz paid him no mind.

"A change in station brings with it new avenues of influence. Trust me—I speak from experience," Karlheinz said.

Noah watched him silently.

Karlheinz had once told him there was something he had failed to protect. This was probably his way of helping to spare him from having that same regret.

And so, Noah made his choice.

"As Her Highness's servant, I have sworn to live a life without shame. If I must do this, then I shall give it my all."

Karlheinz smiled then and said gently, "She was always fond of that part of you."

Before she had fallen into her long slumber, Claudia had exchanged promises with Noah, who in return had promised her that he would remain the Noah she loved and stay true to himself.

To betray that promise would be unthinkable. And so, Noah had devoted himself wholly to his path, remaining true to himself. If knighthood was the means by which he could safeguard Claudia's future, then he would embrace it without hesitation.

As a result of this single-mindedness, he had risen to the rank of captain in one short year, leading the First Chapter of Mage Knights.

"And yet, still you won't awaken," he murmured as he looked down at her in the coffin before him, her resting place for the last three years.

To try and awaken Claudia, King Volkhard had summoned scholars from every corner of the world. Once a month, the greatest

minds of the age gathered, their knowledge pooled in pursuit of her resurrection. Yet, no answer had been found.

Noah reached out silently. His fingertips hovered just above Claudia's pale cheek.

But in that instant, a surge of black light erupted from the coffin, striking his hand with violent force. The impact sent a sharp pain lancing through his fingertip, splitting the nail. Blood welled forth, crimson drops spilling onto one of the lilies that filled the coffin, painting it the same shade as Claudia's lips.

It was a scene that had played out countless times before. This violent rejection only ever occurred when someone attempted to touch her.

Noah could sense that this magic was unmistakably Claudia's.

This rejection was the only proof that Her Highness still yet lived.

Noah closed his eyes and exhaled.

I have already received this week's reports from Lady Fiolina and Lady Lauretta. I must also hear Lord Stuart's findings firsthand. And then I will use the intelligence gathered by Lord Cedric to review the latest missive from His Majesty Ashbal.

After silently listing the things he needed to do, he opened his eyes once more. The purpose of the scholars' monthly gathering was to use their discussions to bring forth new perspectives.

Noah fixed his gaze on Claudia's lifeless body, which he knew in his heart would one day reawaken.

"I will be back tomorrow."

There was no time to dwell in his sorrow. If he was to fulfill Claudia's wishes, he had to press onward.

With a sweep of his hand, he erased the blood that had marred the lilies. Bowing once before her, he turned and departed.

Inside her midnight-black coffin, Claudia lay quietly among the white flowers. Only her lips, crimson as a ripe apple, retained their color. No one would have been able to notice that a single drop of Noah's blood had fallen upon her lips.

***

Claudia felt something calling her, and she slowly opened her eyes.

The air was thick with a sweet fragrance. Looking for the source, she saw that she was lying in a bed of white lilies. Sitting up, she realized she was in a coffin of transparent glass.

She got the sense she'd been asleep for a very, very long time. And as she sought the reason for her awakening, her fingers brushed against her lips.

Noah?

It was here that she felt the faint touch of warm magic still lingering. Yet, even as she brushed her lips with her fingers, she could not discern the source.

She silently took in her surroundings.

She was in a small chapel, still and silent, devoid of any human presence. The only hint of warmth came from the light streaming through the stained glass windows, painting the air in vibrant colors.

I don't know this place.

Her body felt like it was covered in a thin, protective veil. She made to stand, but the motion sent a slight dizziness through her, and her vision distorted.

She had entered into slumber by her own choice. It had been the only way to reconstruct her body, a vessel too fragile to bear the immense magic of Adelheid.

Did the spell work?

She tested her body. She let her fingers glide from her collarbone down to her chest, tracing her curves over the white dress that clung to her body.

Her body was no longer the fragile, delicate frame she had been in when she had chosen to sleep. She had grown taller; her figure had matured. Nonetheless, she recognized the shape.

This is reminiscent of when I would transform into an older form. Then I can surmise I'm about sixteen now. Could it be that I've slept for three years?

If that were the case, then surely she had caused Noah to worry.

Then I will have to praise him for being such a good boy and waiting so patiently. I shall pat his head and tell him I'm sorry.

There was something else she needed to ask him too—that kiss he had left upon her lips before she'd fallen into her slumber.

However, I need a more appropriate outfit first.

The dress she wore, while lovely, was simple. Pinching its hem, she prepared to weave herself a new one—only to falter.

"Something is wrong..."

She released the fabric and lifted her hand toward the light filtering through the stained glass. Her fingers were still slender and pale—almost like a ceramic doll's.

Did the reconstruction fail? Did I lose my magic in exchange for keeping my life? she wondered, but the sound of the chapel doors opening interrupted her thoughts.

At the end of the black carpet that lay between the altar and the door stood a young man.

He was broader than she remembered—and taller. But his face was just as beautiful as the day she entered slumber.

Warmth bloomed in Claudia's chest.

"Noah..."

Her adorable servant.

Yet as she watched him, her joy wavered.

He was frowning.

As she looked into his obsidian eyes, she realized that something was off. For a moment, he seemed like a stranger.

"I've missed you, my Noah," she whispered.

Claudia stepped forward, reaching toward him—only for him to strike away her outstretched hand.

She looked up sharply. His eyes were cold with rejection.



"Don't come any closer," he said.

They were the same words he'd spoken the very first time they met.

Without thinking, Claudia took another step toward him.

"I said stay away."

He'd been suffering back then, ensnared by a curse that threatened to claim his life. His rejection of her had been born of desperation—of fear that she would be drawn into danger alongside him.

"Take another step, and I'll kill you too."

But the way he said these words bore no resemblance to those from the past.

"Noah?"

"Who is this 'Noah'?" he asked. The question lacked a tone of curiosity, asked as though the answer hardly mattered.

And then, lowering his gaze, he called her by a name that did not belong to her in this life.

"You're Adelheid."

Even now, as she looked at him closely, she was sure this young man was Noah.

He spoke again in a detached tone. "So *you're* the reincarnation of the witch who lived five centuries ago."

The way he looked at her now, his brows furrowed in displeasure, wasn't an emotion he'd ever directed at her before.

Claudia forced a smile, careful in how she approached him. "And what is your name?"

He raised an eyebrow. Her composure must've unsettled him. Any ordinary girl her age would have likely been trembling or weeping in fear, but Claudia did neither. She simply waited.

After a beat, the young man finally answered, "Leonhard."

I see.

That was the name Noah had been given at birth. The name he had before she had bestowed the name Noah on him when she had taken him in as her servant. But it was almost as if that moment had never come to pass.

Then this is not the world I knew. This is a world where the boy

Leonhard grew up without ever having met me.

His obsidian eyes, cold and piercing, bore into her.

Her eyes drifted downward. He wore a military uniform adorned with medals. One emblem in particular stood out—the royal crest of Lemilsia.

Claudia was starting to put things together.

This is a world where we never met, and he was able to regain his status as royalty in Lemilsia.

The corners of her lips curved upward in a grin, and she noticed that his eyes widened slightly.

Now, Claudia understood.

In this world, I am his enemy.

***

Removed from the chapel, Claudia now found herself seated in a plush chair.

Across the table from her was the young man who bore Noah's face as he sat with his legs crossed. His expression remained a mask of barely concealed irritation.

Claudia took in her surroundings.

This world is probably an illusion.

That was the conclusion Claudia had reached.

This is a dreamworld that I'm seeing as I sleep—a vision of what might have been, a world that could have existed.

The plush carpet beneath her feet and the lavishly adorned furniture didn't belong to a place she recognized. But, from the glimpses she had caught of the corridors and halls beyond, she could surmise that this was a castle.

"Leonhard," she said softly.

She had decided to call him by that name. After all, *Noah* was the name she had given to the servant who was her sanctuary. This man was not him.

His scowl deepened. "I don't recall giving you permission to address me by my name."

Oh my, how cold.

Her Noah had always spoken calmly, his voice measured and gentle, but this Leonhard was about as unapproachable as a locked door.

"Hmph. To think that the King of Avianoia has been coddling the reincarnation of *Adelheid*," he sneered.

"Oh, so he has? Hmm."

"Why else would you dare act so carelessly in enemy territory?"

Claudia was carefully filing away the information that *this* Noah—no, *Leonhard*—was unknowingly revealing to her.

In this world, my identity as Adelheid's reincarnation is public knowledge. But since when? From birth, perhaps?

In the world she remembered, she had been cast aside the very moment she was born, declared magicless by the then queen consort. She had spent her early years in exile, scorned and mistreated by her uncle's household until she was six and reawakened.

Testing her theory, she offered a deliberately crafted response.

"It appears my father's overprotectiveness is well-known, considering it's reached even your ears."

Leonhard scoffed.

"They say you were never even once allowed beyond the castle walls. He was so thorough in guarding his precious treasure. And yet, here you are, fallen into my hands. How utterly disgraceful."

A trace of mockery laced his words, and Claudia once again felt the stark contrast between this Leonhard and the Noah she'd known.

In this world, I was never cast out...and that changed everything.

Claudia slowly lowered her gaze, allowing her mind to drift back ten years into the past.

In this world, I never found Noah dying in the forest...

She recalled the sight of him, surrounded by the carcasses of fallen griffons he'd slain with his uncontrollable magic. How the curse had eaten away at his body, leaving him racked with pain. Without her there to intervene, what had become of him?

I was born before Noah's parents were killed. If the world had already known of Adelheid's reincarnation at the time, then it's

possible that my very existence changed the course of his fate and perhaps of others as well.

She followed that thread of thought—only to experience a strange sensation, as though her own memories were slipping through her fingers like grains of sand.

"It feels as if my thoughts are being obstructed," she murmured.

She realized too late that she had said it out loud. Leonhard narrowed his eyes.

"There are gaps in my memory," she said with a smile. "Would you be so kind as to tell me what happened to me?"

It was not entirely a lie.

Before she had cast herself into deathlike sleep, she had formed several hypotheses about what she might experience during it. But now, the specifics of those thoughts eluded her, slipping from her grasp whenever she tried to recall them.

But Leonhard did not hesitate before dismissing her plea.

"You have no need to know." His obsidian eyes gleamed with a cold, murky light. "You are a prisoner. You would do well to understand that. I have no intention of granting you the right to ask anything of me."

This world was only a dream.

Perhaps that was why the logic behind its events was inconsistent at best. But she was certain of one thing. If she could not wake herself from this dream, she would never awaken in real life.

"This dress is rather thin, don't you think?" Claudia murmured as she rose to her feet, casting a downward glance at the white gown she wore. "So, you'll help me change."

There was a beat of silence before Leonhard uttered, "What?"

"I cannot use magic, you see. And if I don't change soon..."

Ignoring the earlier warning to keep her distance, she stepped closer to Leonhard and moved so that she stood between where he sat and the table.

Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, she leaned down slightly and smiled at him.

"Well, wouldn't it be a shame if *the* Adelheid you went to such lengths to capture were to catch a chill and die?"

This was, of course, a provocation.

Leonhard must have recognized it as such. His reaction was immediate, reaching out without hesitation and grabbing the collar of her dress.

The force of his grip made the fabric strain, as though he might tear it from her entirely—

But he suddenly stopped.

He looked away from her. "You can make use of this room. Change by yourself."

She sighed.

"I suppose I shall have to settle for that. But first—answer me one thing." She reached out, her fingertips brushing against his cheek. "Do you have any allies in this world?"

This time the glare he shot her was laced with something far more dangerous than mere irritation.

"I told you not to approach me."

With a sharp motion, he struck her hand away. Then he pressed his hand lightly against her shoulder, pushing her back.

He watched her coldly as he gave her a final warning.

"Take another step—I will kill you."

When Claudia had first heard those words in whispered agony, Noah had meant them as a warning for her safety. He had been suffering alone, on the brink of death, unwilling to let anyone else share in his misery.

But this Leonhard could not have been more different from her Noah.

He isn't saying it to protect me, but because he truly does not want me. Because the path he has walked has shaped him into this.

Claudia forced herself to smile again. And, again, Leonhard furrowed his brow.

"I shall do as you ask, Leonhard."

"I told you not to speak my name so lightly."

"Oh my. Here I was trying to be a good girl, and I have already broken your first rule."

Claudia let out a soft, teasing laugh, and Leonhard clicked his tongue in irritation as he rose to his feet.

"You have nowhere to run since you can't use magic. If you wish to live, you would do well to behave."

"There's no need to glare at me in such a manner. I do not plan on running away," she said softly. She smiled affectionately. "Not if you tell me that you want me here."

Leonhard's dark eyes burned into her for a long moment. Then, without another word, he turned and strode out of the room.

Claudia waved after him before lowering her hand and stepping toward the window. It was sealed by magic. But even if it hadn't been, the thick ice layered on it suggested she wouldn't have been able to open it anyway.

He said I wasn't able to use magic.

If that was something that was widely known in this world, then it meant her current state was not an anomaly but rather the norm.

In reality, I awakened to my past memories when I was six. But if that never occurred in this world...

She thought back to the information that Leonhard had let slip.

And...if the knowledge that I was Adelheid reborn was widely known...

Meaning she must've never been exiled to the tower in the forest. Instead, she had been raised within the royal palace, cherished despite her lack of magic.

But in exchange, the Claudia of this world never awakened her magic. In the real world, I was nearly killed by my uncle, and the shock of that trauma brought back both my memories of my past life and my magic.

In the world she remembered, she hadn't been able to use magic before then. There had been an odd haze over her thoughts back then, and she couldn't remember why she had been unable to use magic.

Even now, when I try to grasp the reason, my mind gets hazy, as if something is obscuring the truth.

Claudia exhaled lightly against the frozen glass, trying to make out the scenery beyond, but she could see only snow-covered trees in what appeared to be an isolated courtyard. This room, it seemed, had been placed somewhere far removed from the rest of the castle.

She once again found herself lost in her thoughts.

This world's Noah—Leonhard.

The young man who wore her dear servant's face had regarded her with eyes colder than ice.

Where could his cousin Sieghart and his uncle be? I know they tormented him. If his younger sister were still alive, I can't imagine he would have grown into someone who could wear such a cold expression.

She knew that in this world, he viewed her as his enemy; however, she still did not understand why.

From the way he spoke, it sounded as though he had taken me by force from my father's protection. Why does he want me if I have no magic? Was I meant to be a hostage? Or did he simply wish to separate me from Avianoia?

The reason remained unclear.

Claudia let out a quiet sigh.

I don't know how much of this world actually makes sense, considering it exists within my sleeping mind, but if I want to leave, I suspect I will need to regain my magic.

She focused, trying to gather magical energy into her palm. But there was no sign of the energy turning into magic.

I must awaken from this dream soon, or Noah will worry.

Lowering her hand, she rested her forehead against the chilled windowpane.

"My Noah," she whispered.

Her white dress did nothing to shield her from the cold. Hugging her arms around herself, she let her thoughts drift to Noah as he was before she went to sleep.

"If you don't hold me tight, I think I might freeze," she murmured.

It was a quiet plea that would be heard by no one.

For a time after that, Claudia simply stared out the frost-covered window, waiting for someone who would never come.

***

A group of distinguished guests gathered around the golden round table in the reception hall in the royal castle of the Kingdom of Avianoia. It was a veritable *who's who* from the royalty and nobility of various nations. Each one had come forth to provide the information they had gathered, all in pursuit of the same goal: to save the life of a single girl.

"So then, umm, in summary..."

The hesitant voice that broke the silence belonged to Stuart, the crown prince of Klingate, a great kingdom that lay to the west of Avianoia.

He had been the first of this group to meet Claudia and Noah eight years prior. At the time, he had confined himself to his own chambers for years, paralyzed with fear of his own younger brother. But despite this troubled past, he was widely regarded as a master of barrier magic. The deep shadows that had once marred his eyes had mostly faded, and he now held more confidence. Having gained international recognition for his talent, he now worked with various nations on projects that required his magical expertise. However, his voice still held hesitation as he spoke.

"The magic that repels all who attempt to touch Lady Adel... N-No, I mean, Her Highness Princess Claudia's coffin is no mere barrier spell. That much is certain. Rather, it is a f-far more formidable magic imbued with its own will, c-capable of actively striking down those who come close..." As he murmured the last of his words, Stuart spread an assortment of documents across the table. "I, umm, I devised seventy-six possible countermeasures after our last meeting...to withstand its rejection."

"My goodness. Seventy-six? That is impressive," came the astonished voice of Fiolina, a professor at the Raushneur Academy of Magic who conducted research on magic. "Now, let me see..."

She took up the papers and read the key points in her soft, melodic voice. Once she finished, she said, "Before directly attempting any of these on Claudia, we should conduct some preliminary experiments. We'll need other researchers so we can test as many of these methods as possible... Perhaps we should seek the aid of the other professors."

She turned to the young woman sitting beside her who looked nearly identical in appearance and asked, "What do you think, Lauretta?"

"Hmm." Her twin sister, Lauretta, did not lift her attention from the pages set in front of her. Her speech was somewhat stilted, almost as if she were still getting used to speaking aloud. "Some of these methods...might require me to test them. They seem to...require a large amount...of magical energy."

Fiolina hummed in agreement. "And I imagine some of our most talented students would be interested in assisting. I'll speak with them."

"How beneficial that we have allies among the academy's faculty. The sheer number of personnel we can mobilize will prove invaluable," remarked Ehrenfried, Claudia's elder brother. He sat resting his chin on his hands, his expression grim, perhaps due to exhaustion. Now nineteen, his features retained some of the boyish beauty of his youth, but in recent months the stress of sleepless nights had worn his features, lending a hint of harshness.

"I have matters of my own to discuss, but there's something I need to confirm first. Particularly from Cedric and—" His gaze shifted toward the seat farthest from the door. "—King Ashbal."

In the seat farthest from the door sat King Ashbal of Sharavia, the kingdom of sand and gold. For the past three years, his kingdom had flourished, despite being in the heart of the desert, through the masterful management of its water resources. Even as its gold ran dry, Sharavia continued to thrive, its markets teeming with merchants from across the land. Now, all eyes in the room turned to its sovereign.

"We deeply appreciate your presence here on behalf of my sister, despite it being so soon after the birth of your child," Ehrenfried continued.

"Claudia is a dear friend to both me and my wife. If there is any way we can help, we will do so," he said with a nod. "Faraz."

"At once, Your Majesty."

At the king's order, his trusted retainer, Faraz, stepped forward and used his magic to draw a glowing map while Ashbal continued

the explanation.

"This is the current state of the Lemilsian barrier."

This information was the result of the request Claudia had made to Ashbal three years prior.

That was the first year the Kingdom of Lemilsia had closed its borders. In the years prior, Noah's cousin Sieghart had been spreading cursed artifacts to the royal families of various nations. Then, upon the death of his father, he had sealed the kingdom's borders and erected an impenetrable barrier. And for the past three years, Ashbal had been keeping a close eye on the situation.

"The barrier has a very deceptive structure, but we've detected sections where it has been reinforced," Ashbal said. "Cedric, could you tell us why that's happened to these specific locations?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The one who answered was a young man from Lemilsia whom Noah and Claudia had first met while attending the academy.

Lauretta, seated nearby, regarded him with her usual glare that spoke of long-held grievances. It was no secret that Cedric had once treated her harshly during their time at the academy.

Cedric cleared his throat, looking somewhat apologetic, before responding to Ashbal's inquiry.

"It looks like the barrier has been reinforced around the royal castle and other key locations," he explained. "These would be the first places to fall under attack if a war were to break out."

"If that's the case, then the explanation Lemilsia has provided until now—that the closure of its borders is merely for the mourning rites of the previous king—is a blatant falsehood. But before we discuss that further..." Ashbal turned to the figure standing silently against the wall, the only person not seated. "I would like to hear from the man who gathered us all here today. Well, Noah—Claudia's ever-loyal servant—it was you who used your position as captain of the mage knights to officially seek our cooperation. Thanks to that, we're all here now, moving on a grand scale for Claudia's sake."

At this, Noah cast his eyes downward.

"I would not presume to claim such an honor," he said. "All of this is solely due to the deep regard you all bear for Her Highness

Princess Claudia."

Then, raising his head, he let his gaze sweep across the assembled company. There was Prince Ehrenfried, Claudia's older brother, who had at one time viewed her as a burden. There was Prince Stuart of Klingate, who had once blindly worshipped Claudia in her adult form and remained an ally even after learning her true identity as a princess of Avianoia. Fiolina had met her at the academy at the bottom of the sea and had once viewed her as an unattainable symbol of the royal life she herself had been denied. Like Fiolina, Lauretta met Claudia at Raushneur and had even been her roommate there. Although she had at one time rejected Claudia, she now counted herself among her closest friends.

Finally, there was Cedric, who had once dismissed Claudia outright and refused to acknowledge her at all, but their interactions had changed after he'd come to regret his past behavior and had chosen to face Claudia properly.

"This gathering is a testament to the bonds Her Highness has built with you all. I offer my deepest gratitude for your willingness to lend her your strength," Noah said. He placed a hand over his heart in a knight's salute and bowed deeply. Those seated nodded in return.

Ashbal smiled encouragingly at Noah before leaning back in his chair and steering the conversation forward.

"Then, let us continue our efforts for our dear friend Claudia. Prince Ehrenfried, why did you want both me and Cedric to make our reports on Lemilsia's barrier prior to your own?"

"From childhood, Claudia's remarkable magical talents have drawn the attention of scholars across the continent," Ehrenfried replied. "And according to Noah, Lemilsia has set its sights upon her. Is that not so, Noah?"

"It is as you say, Your Highness."

At least, that was what Noah had reported to Prince Ehrenfried, but it wasn't entirely the truth.

Sieghart's obsession with Her Highness stems from having seen her as a child. It was my own vengeance against that kingdom...the vengeance she aided me in pursuing...that led to the catalyst of

Sieghart's fixation.

No matter how prodigious a child Claudia had been, the deeds that she'd accomplished in her youth were beyond what any ordinary girl could have managed. She had only been able to achieve those feats because she was the reincarnation of Adelheid—and therein lay the reason for Sieghart's obsession.

"Before she fell into her slumber, Claudia left a letter to our father," Ehrenfried explained. "In it, she instructed that if she did not awaken, her death should be announced publicly. No doubt, this was to prevent unnecessary conflict once Lemilsia opened its borders after the mourning rites. Would you agree, Noah?"

Noah nodded. He understood the logic behind her decision. If she were believed dead, no one would come to claim her. However, Claudia had made one miscalculation—how deeply she was loved.

She had not foreseen that so many would refuse to let her go. Even now, countless people refused to abandon hope, tirelessly seeking a way to bring her back.

Even if the world officially recognized her as dead, their persistent efforts to revive her would not go unnoticed by Lemilsia. Sooner or later, they would realize there was still a chance to bring her back.

"Well, I have been monitoring Claudia's residual magical energy ever since her body was brought here," Ehrenfried continued. "Three days ago, I noticed a faint fluctuation—"

"Your Highness, excuse me," Noah interrupted, and his feet carried him to the prince before he knew it. "What kind of fluctuation? Please, tell me everything you know."

"W-Wait, don't get ahead of yourself." Ehrenfried raised a hand as though to temper Noah's growing anticipation. "It's nothing that significant. The shift is so slight, I can't even pinpoint what exactly has changed."

And yet, a change was still a change.

As Noah's piercing eyes bore into him, Ehrenfried sighed. "What's more important is finding a way to avoid the worst outcome, which is Lemilsia coming after my sister before she wakes up. We must continue our efforts to revive her, but at the same time, we must also devise a means of diverting Lemilsia's suspicions."

Noah turned. “Prince Stuart.”

“Y-Yes! I... I-I-I shall see to it!”

At the mere sound of his name, Stuart flinched, his entire posture stiffening as he raised a trembling hand. If there was one person he feared conversing with more than he did with foreign royalty, it was Noah. Perhaps that was because they had once crossed blades in the past.

“Three days ago... That was the date of our monthly scholars’ gathering,” Noah said. “Perhaps something they did that day yielded a reaction?”

“Noah...” Ehrenfried adjusted his spectacles, eyeing him warily. “On that day, did you cast any sort of magic upon Claudia?”

Noah started to answer that he had not, but then he hesitated.

“I did not employ magic,” he stated at last. “However, I did make an attempt to ascertain whether it was possible to touch Her Highness.”

Ehrenfried blinked in surprise, momentarily at a loss for words. “Huh?”

Concerned that his statement had been misconstrued, Noah quickly added further explanation.

“I assure you, my intention was never to lay hands upon Her Highness in any unseemly manner. My only goal was to test the nature of her barrier—to confirm that she has not passed into true death.”

Ehrenfried waved his hand dismissively. “I’m not implying anything of the sort, Noah. It’s just that—though I’ve never witnessed it myself—from what I have been told, being repelled by that barrier is violent enough to cause serious injury, is it not?”

“As long as one does not force the issue, the worst result is little more than a fingernail being ripped off.”

“Little more...” Ehrenfried said before sighing in exasperation. Beside him, Stuart gripped his own index finger as if the mere thought pained him. Lauretta and Fiolina winced as well.

Cedric shook his head. “Sheesh! Does your sense of pain turn off when it comes to Claudia? Do basic survival instincts cease to exist in your brain?”

Without missing a beat, Noah responded, “There is nothing I fear more than Her Highness’s death.”

For some reason that he didn’t understand, this only made the others look at him even more strangely.

Clearing his throat, Ehrenfried seemed to have decided it best to let the matter rest.

“A-Anyway, I understand what happened now. Thank you for the information. I shall investigate further to determine what may have prompted this change.”

“Should you require anything of me, you need only call upon me,” Noah replied, inclining his head.

Ehrenfried gave a brief nod before turning to resume his discussion with Stuart. As he listened to their conversation, Noah let his stare drift downward, studying his hand, thinking back to his wound when he’d tried to touch Claudia.

What could have changed that day?

That had not been the first time that he had tried to reach out to touch Claudia’s sleeping form; each time had ended with him shedding blood. There should have been nothing different about this particular attempt.

Noah clenched his hand into a fist. And with those thoughts lingering in the back of his mind, he went back to listening to the meeting.

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“My word, but you’ve grown into a fine, strapping young man, lad!” Faraz exclaimed, happy to see Noah.

“And you, Lord Faraz, remain as insufferable as ever, I see.”

“Ha! Nineteen years old and you’ve still got a tongue sharper than a dagger...”

After the council concerning Claudia’s resurrection had concluded, Noah found himself in the company of Faraz, Ashbal’s trusted retainer, within the chamber reserved for the attendants of honored guests.

Ashbal and Stuart were both occupied, formally dining with

Claudia's father. Stuart had looked rather pale beforehand, yet as a prince of an allied nation, he could hardly refuse the hospitality extended to him.

The alliance between Avianoia and Ashbal's Kingdom of Sharavia had only been forged in the wake of Claudia's magical slumber. Many credited Noah for its formation, just as Ashbal had earlier. Noah believed otherwise—everything had been woven together by Claudia's own hand.

"And here I was thinking you might show a bit of joy at seeing your dear Uncle Faraz again after a year and a half apart."

The man sighed dramatically, clutching his chest as though he suffered a terrible wound. It was true that they had not seen one another in some time, the reason being the shifting circumstances within Ashbal's royal court.

"Are Her Majesty Naila and the prince faring well?"

"The palace is utterly besotted with the little one. Utter chaos, it is—but the pleasant kind."

Because Ashbal had been required to travel for diplomatic matters despite his wife's pregnancy, his most trusted confidant had remained behind at court. As such, while Ashbal himself visited this land on a regular basis, Noah's encounters with Faraz had become a rarity.

With a casual shrug, Faraz leaned his elbow upon the armrest of his chair, propping his chin upon one hand. "His Majesty has grown into a fine human being, you know. Sharavia owes you and your princess a debt of gratitude."

"I am humbled by your words," Noah replied, bowing his head slightly.

Beyond the search for a means to restore Claudia and the clandestine inquiries into the Kingdom of Lemilsia, Noah had also sought Ashbal's aid in dismantling cursed artifacts that had been unearthed in foreign lands.

Alone, he could never have fulfilled all that Claudia had wished for.

"You still regret it, don't you?" Faraz asked softly.

Noah lifted his head at that. "You refer to the matter you spoke of

three years ago, I presume."

"Ha!" Faraz's smirk deepened, though there was a peculiar protectiveness to his expression. "If you know what I'm talking about just from that, then I suppose I was right all along."

Noah frowned slightly, displeased at his own misstep. He knew precisely what Faraz was referring to.

"So, you're in love with your master, are you?" Faraz had asked him.

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

Later, he had warned Noah, "If you keep denying it, you might just end up regretting it someday."

"That is not a concern of mine," Noah had replied.

Of course, Noah hadn't considered a future where Claudia would lie unconscious in a magically induced slumber.

Faraz watched Noah as he silently pondered his own feelings, and then, struck by a sudden realization, Faraz's eyes widened.

"Surely, you didn't go and confess your feelings for her right before she went to sleep?!"

"I did not," Noah replied curtly, swiftly refuting the notion. "I would thank you not to entertain such misguided notions."

And yet...

Before Claudia had closed her eyes to this world, he had placed a kiss upon her lips.

That act had been a transgression—one unbecoming of his status as a mere servant.

He had no intention of justifying himself, though he did regret his youthful ignorance.

And yet, if asked whether he regretted it, the answer would always be no.

She will awaken. I am certain of that. And when she does...

"You don't seem to realize it, lad," Faraz said quietly, his kind eyes watching Noah. "Three years ago, you outright denied loving her. But just now? The only thing you denied was confessing it."

But Faraz's words did not reach Noah's ears, for at that very moment, a sudden commotion burst forth.

The chamber doors flew open, and one of Noah's men swiftly entered, snapping into a formal salute.

"Forgive the intrusion, Captain Noah! Lord Faraz!" he said, his expression taut with urgency. "A message from His Highness Prince Ehrenfried. Following the conclusion of the council, word has arrived from his informants within Lemilsia."

"Speak," Noah commanded.

"Yes, sir! It appears that Lemilsia has been preparing for war!"

Noah's brows drew together as he absorbed the weight of those words.

The knight continued, "If the reports hold true, Lemilsia will soon launch an assault upon the Kingdom of Avianoia."

Chapter 2

Claudia was lost in her thoughts. How did the passage of time within this dream differ from in reality?

If there were dreams in which time flowed differently from that of reality, then there were those in which time moved the same.

But here in the world of sleep, Claudia had no means to know.

I have been here in the dreamworld for a week, she thought.

But then a voice interrupted her musings. "Hey."

Still drowsy, Claudia rubbed her eyes with a murmur and slowly sat up.

She wore only the inner slip meant to be worn beneath a gown—a delicate, sleeveless chemise with thin straps looping over her shoulders. One strap had slipped, baring the smooth curve of her shoulder. She stretched languidly upon the chaise that served as her makeshift bed.

I still cannot wield magic, nor have I found a means to awaken. For the whole week, I have been confined to this castle, and although I can roam its halls, I have not been let outside of its walls.

"Hey."

And yet...

She glanced up at the figure standing above her.

"Adelheid," the figure grumbled, irritated.

The young man who was looking down at her was none other than Leonhard, this world's Noah, who was now clad in a black cloak.

"Why do you persist in invading my chambers?" he demanded.

A soft serenity graced Claudia's face; she was utterly unfazed by his ire.

"Welcome home, Leonhard."

He frowned in displeasure before abruptly propping one boot onto the chaise beside her, his posture deliberately looming. His

voice dropped to a growl.

"Leave. I do not recall granting you permission to enter."

"But you see"—Claudia replied with a carefree smile, fully aware that it would only further anger him—"I am quite incapable of using magic. Without a dear, devoted attendant to tend to me, I cannot even light the fire in my hearth."

Her words did not refer only to her Noah of the waking world.

For the past week, Leonhard has been absent during the day, only returning to the castle at night.

During those hours, she was left alone, abandoned within its empty halls.

While he is away, there is not a soul in this castle. His magic maintains the place, but even so... There's something strange going on here.

After a moment of silence, Leonhard finally replied, "Then I shall place the same enchantment that heats this chamber on the room I have given you." His obsidian eyes narrowed slightly. "Will that satisfy you? If so, take your leave."

"Oh? But at present, it is you who blocks my way." Claudia tittered softly before reaching out to tap the tip of the boot he had so discourteously placed upon the chaise. "Such a naughty little foot—tsk, tsk."

Her deliberately childish reprimand only deepened the furrow in his brow.

"Do not treat me like a child. I am your *elder*."

"My, my!" The assertion was unexpected, and Claudia could not help but laugh. "Me? Younger than you?"

His frown deepened, clearly unable to comprehend why she found the notion so amusing.

"It is hardly incorrect... Adelheid perished at eighteen, and even your current body is sixteen years of age."

She chuckled. "Is that so? Perhaps you are right. After all, you are nineteen now, are you not? But to think that of all people, Noah would... Ah."

Realizing her slip, Claudia pressed her hand to her mouth.

Even knowing full well that he is not my Noah, the name still slips

so easily from my tongue.

The young man who stood before her had walked a different path, shaped by different choices. Though they shared the same face and the same voice, in the end, they were not the same person. The Noah she knew had devoted his life to her. Leonhard had been forced on to another path—one that led him to imprison her within this place.

"Adelheid." His voice cut through her thoughts. "Is this 'Noah' a man you hold dear?"

Oh? What a curious question.

She narrowed her eyes, intrigued.

Perhaps he meant to gauge her reaction, to find a weakness he could exploit. Or perhaps, his interest stemmed from something else entirely.

But she would not allow him to pry secrets from her before Noah himself had heard them. Raising a single finger, she pressed it lightly against her lips.

"My apologies, Leonhard." Tilting her head, she smiled mischievously. "That secret belongs to Noah alone."

With a click of his tongue, Leonhard removed his foot from the chaise.

"Well, then... As you have posed a question to me, it is only fair that I ask you one in return."

"You didn't even answer mine," he scoffed.

"Ah, but surely everyone has a right to withhold answers, hmm?"

Her teasing reply earned her another scowl. Undeterred, she asked, "Where has your cousin gone?"

The air chilled instantly.

A sharp glint flickered in his jet-black eyes, and before Claudia could react, cold steel came to rest against her throat.

"You should choose your words with care," Leonhard said coldly.

Oh my.

Once again, Leonhard had acted in a way that the real Noah would not.

"Do not provoke me lightly, lest I find it necessary to use force to get you to tell me everything you know."

"Oh?"

He was hiding something after all.

Nonetheless, he is not my Noah. No matter how I wheedle him or command him to do so, this boy will not bare his soul to me.

She'd already known this, of course. Yet, it still left a bitter taste in her mouth. Far more so than she had expected. She suddenly realized that she was upset.

"I find myself rather lonely," she murmured at last.

"What?"

Rising gracefully to her feet, Claudia turned toward the window.

"I wish for some fresh air. Open the window for me. It is frozen shut, and I cannot open it myself."

Leonhard hesitated for a moment before grudgingly casting a faint spell. A light traced along the window frame, melting the ice where it touched.

Claudia stepped forward, throwing open the panes to gaze down upon the world below. It was not quite as lofty as the tower in which she had lived with Noah, but it stood at an impressive height.

Noah...

She narrowed her eyes against the stark white of the snow-laden ground far below.

If I am to see you again soon, then a few experiments may be in order.

"Hey," Leonhard growled from behind her. "It'll get cold. You shouldn't leave the window open for long."

Claudia ignored him.

"Surely even you realize that you'll freeze in such attire."

Claudia took a deep breath.

When I was six, I reawakened only when...

"No, wait..." Leonhard must have sensed something. His hand shot forward, reaching to seize her shoulder, but he was too late.

Claudia had already cast herself out the window.

"What are you—?!"

Claudia felt her body float in the air for a brief moment before she plummeted toward the ground with terrifying speed.

It was thanks to falling from my tower that I regained my

memories.

And it was also then that she had gained free use of Adelheid's magic.

This is only a dream, shaped by my sleeping mind, but if I die here...I fear I will never wake again.

Still, she had no other choice. She had to try.

Her milk-tea-colored hair whipped wildly in the wind, the hem of her thin gown fluttering as the world blurred around her. She began to close her eyes, but before she could, a hand grasped hers and held it tightly.

"Enough! Cease this madness!" he grunted.

"Leonhard?"

"Have you lost your mind?!" He pulled her into his arms, trying desperately to slow their rapid descent with magic. "Without magic, a fall from this height will—!"

"Thank you for trying to save me," she said softly as they tumbled toward the ground. "But I'm afraid..."

She seized his wrist, leveraging the natural mechanics of the human body to break his grip.

"I did not grant you permission to touch me."

"Wha—?" He froze in shock.

Claudia pushed herself away from him, their bodies separating in midair. Leonhard reached out once more, desperate to reclaim her hand, but his fingers grasped only empty air.

"Damn it!" His breath caught in his throat as he saw a faint smile on Claudia's lips.

Now then...

Let us see how this body responds to the threat of death.

Leonhard cursed again under his breath and began casting another spell, but it was too late.

In mere moments, Claudia would crash into the frozen earth below.

She shut her eyes.

It's no use. There's not even a stirring of my magic. Leonhard won't be able to save me in time. I wonder if this is truly the end.

In her final moments, she thought of Noah. She reached out

toward the sky—when familiar magic suddenly enveloped her, stopping her fall.

She slowly opened her eyes and saw eyes as black as obsidian staring down at her.

Noah?

She realized that she was being cradled in someone's arms.

"Hey...are you all right?" a low voice asked.

No... This isn't Noah. This is...

She opened her eyes fully, blinked, and then looked up at the person holding her.

She was no longer outside. Instead, she found herself within an unfamiliar room, likely transported here by the magic of the young man who now held her.

"Why on earth were you falling from that castle?" the young man asked.

"Sieghart..."

The name escaped her lips in a whisper.

Stunned, Sieghart drew in a sharp breath. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh?" Claudia smiled. "Perhaps you saved me without knowing who I am?"

"It's not like I had the time to ask someone," he said without hesitation. "I was surveilling the castle when I saw you suddenly falling from the sky."

Claudia didn't detect any deception from him.



He gently lowered her onto a nearby chaise. Then, still kneeling on the plush carpet, he looked up and said, “You didn’t answer me before. Are you sure you are all right?”

“I am—thanks to your quick thinking.”

“I see,” he said. He exhaled and glanced downward. “All is good so long as you are unharmed.”

Claudia reached out and softly brushed back his indigo hair—so dark it almost passed for black.

“Thank you, Sieghart.”

His dark eyes widened for a moment in surprise, but they soon narrowed, and his lips curved into a boyish, unguarded grin. “Ha... Ha ha ha!”

He didn’t reject her touch, unlike his cousin Leonhard.

“You treat me as if I were a child,” he said.

“Well, if we go by years since I was born, I’m quite your senior.” She pulled her hand away from his hair and raised a finger to her lips. “I was born over five centuries ago, after all.”

“Then it’s true. You really are...” His eyes, the color of obsidian, fixed on her once again.

Claudia adjusted her rumpled gown and seated herself more properly upon the chaise. They were in a private room in a manor of some sort, and she suspected that this was a hideout being used by the young man kneeling before her.

“You plan to rise against Leonhard, don’t you? This place is one of your bases of operation, I would wager.”

“Before I answer that,” Sieghart said, taking her hand reverently, “I have a question for you, Adelheid.”

Claudia allowed the gesture as she smiled softly. “In this life, my name is Claudia...despite Leonhard’s refusal to call me as such.”

“Well, Claudia...” he began, his grip on her hand tightening ever so slightly. “Do you belong to him?”

She giggled, unable to help herself due to the boyishly earnest question. “No, I do not. I am no one’s but my own. If I must belong to someone, then I suppose I am the princess to a very sweet boy named Noah.”

“Noah?”

"It is the name of someone who does not exist in this world—which is precisely why I must leave here, if only to give his head a good pat."

She knew Sieghart would not understand her, but she still offered him the truth he wished to know.

"I merely wish to leave," she continued. "I am no ally of Leonhard...although I do not count myself among his enemies either."

"You look so terribly sad when you say that," Sieghart said softly.

"That's because I am. Let me ask you something. Leonhard fled from your father's domain when he was nine years old, and yet he rules as king now. Can you tell me how that came to be?"

Sieghart blinked. "I'm surprised. I didn't expect Leonhard to tell you all of that."

Truthfully, Leonhard had said no such thing to her. She smiled and waited for Sieghart to answer her question.

"It's shameful to admit, but as a child, I had no idea my father held him in chains. There were many things I didn't know." Sieghart's voice was heavy, and his eyes were pulled downward as if by a similar weight. "Not only did I not know that my cousin, only a year older than me, was suffering in a cell, I also did not know that he was the rightful heir to the crown... Nor did I know that Anna was not truly my sister, but his."

Anna Marie... My suspicion that Sieghart never learned the truth of their relationship must be correct. I presume the Sieghart of this world would not have known if not for events changing so drastically.

After all, her confrontation with Sieghart during their time at Raushneur Academy had seemed to illustrate his ignorance concerning Anna Marie.

Sieghart frowned as he remembered his past. "I only learned after Anna's death that I had stolen his entire life from him. I was eight. That's when Leonhard returned to the castle. He arrived with a sword in his hand and a man at his side."

That caught Claudia's attention. "A man?" She narrowed her eyes. "And who exactly *was* this man?"

"I do not know. I didn't recognize him. He was young, and he followed Leonhard closely, as though he were his servant. All I know for certain is that he was not one of my father's men."

"And this was right after Anna died..."

Claudia pondered his words.

In terms of the timeline of her own world, this would have been right after Claudia had first met Noah.

This would have been right after we bound ourselves together through a contract and punished my uncle. Afterward, Noah used my magic to go and confront his own uncle.

And Claudia had teleported to Lemilsia to pursue him.

And that is the moment when the Sieghart of that world first saw me. It was then that his obsession with me began to take hold.

Noah had informed Claudia of everything that Sieghart had told him during their duel at the academy. From that report, a certain person came to Claudia's mind.

The chief conjurer of Lemilsia...

Claudia lowered her eyes as she thought over what she knew about him.

In my world, he was the one who supported Sieghart from the shadows and ruled in place of the king while Sieghart attended the academy.

Karlheinz had said at the time, "Reportedly, the chief conjurer of Lemilsia made the decision on behalf of the king."

Piece by piece, the information began to fit together.

Is it possible that the chief conjurer who backed Sieghart in my world is the same man who is now serving Noah in this world?

She slowly closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes again, her gaze fell squarely on Sieghart.

"When Leonhard returned to that castle, did he remove both you and your father?"

"His power was overwhelming," Sieghart admitted quietly. "I was still a child, of course, but even the royal conjurers and my father—none could so much as touch him. I survived only because my father's retainers smuggled me out by teleporting me beyond the castle walls."

He lowered his head, the memories weighing on him.

"Leonhard's blade pierced my father's heart. The man by Leonhard's side didn't have to lift a finger. Leonhard crushed our entire nation's army single-handedly."

"If that was what he truly desired, then I'm sure it was a simple matter," Claudia murmured.

The Noah she knew had a soul that would never waver. He possessed a strength that never faltered even when his birthright as crown prince, his sister, and his dignity had all been stripped away from him as a child.

But the Noah of this world—Leonhard—had chosen a different path.

"And on that day, at only nine years old, Leonhard ascended the throne and became the king of Lemilsia," Sieghart said.

Now it seemed that he lived alone in that castle without a single attendant.

"What does Leonhard desire?" she asked quietly.

Sieghart paused and frowned at the question. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I do not believe his goal was simply to reclaim the throne. If that had been all, then you would not still be alive."

After all, Leonhard knew the consequences of leaving a rival to the throne alive—the previous king had spared Leonhard only to die by his hand.

She pondered the possibilities.

"Could it be that he only wished to put Anna Marie to rest with a proper funeral?"

Sieghart closed his eyes. "No."

"Then there must be another reason. Leonhard became king not as an end but as a means to something else."

On that point, Claudia had no doubt.

Sieghart pressed a hand to his brow and let out a long breath. "I shall tell you all I know. But you must forgive me—I can only offer you what I know, together with my own conjecture."

"Of course," she said warmly. "You're a good boy, Sieghart."

He laughed ruefully before his face turned solemn once more, his eyes meeting Claudia's. "I believe Leonhard desired to possess the

reincarnation of Adelheid."

It was, in truth, not far from what she had already suspected. From the moment she had awakened in this dreamworld, Leonhard had made no attempt to hide what he sought.

"You're Adelheid."

He had spoken with Noah's face and in Noah's voice, yet his gaze and tone could not have been more different.

"So you're the reincarnation of the witch who lived five centuries ago."

She pondered what this could mean.

Sieghart gently probed, "Earlier, you spoke as if you knew of a different world. Should I take that to mean that is where you come from?"

"I am impressed at how quick you are to understand," she said with a pleased smile. "Unfortunately, that is the reason that I know nothing about this world, including myself here."

"I see." Sieghart nodded. He rose to his feet. "I may be able to fill you in on that. When you were born, there was great upheaval in your kingdom. Upon examining your magical capacity, they found it far surpassed that of your father and siblings."

There it was. That was the moment of divergence between her world and this one.

In her world, his father's wife, the queen consort, had interfered with Claudia's magical evaluation to make it seem that she had no magic. The queen consort had branded Claudia "the lacking princess" and made sure everyone knew about it.

My mother—though a beauty and a gifted songstress—was a penniless orphan with no noble blood and certainly no magic. Because of that, the queen consort, Irmela, despised me.

She knew that sort of scorn could compel someone to do terrible things; she recalled having been drawn into Irmela's machinations when she was six.

For that reason, Irmela falsified my magical evaluation and cast me out... However, her actions were likely due to the cursed artifact that had already twisted her mind.

As a result, Claudia had been banished from the castle. She'd

spent her early years confined to a tower, known to all as "the lacking princess."

And that was why I was able to meet Noah in that forest.

She was now certain that none of these events had taken place in this world.

Claudia listened closely as Sieghart continued his account.

"Your very existence, the likes of which has never been seen before, was enough to draw numerous high-ranking conjurers to Avianoia. And when they saw the unique color of your eyes, they concluded that you must be the reincarnation of Adelheid."

It was said that the color of the eyes reflected a person's magical nature. Claudia's eyes, depending on the light, could appear to be any color like the shimmering hues of an opal.

"I'm surprised they were so willing to believe something so fantastical," Claudia remarked.

"I only heard it as a rumor myself, but when your mother first suggested it, apparently many were quite taken aback."

Claudia blinked. "My mother?"

"Hmm? Yes. In time, all came to accept it, of course." Then, as if it were the most unimportant thing, he added, "She was a powerful conjurer herself, after all."

Therefore, this world hadn't diverged *after* her magical evaluation. The point of divergence had occurred before she was even born.

"Sieghart... My mother's name—is it Dorothea?"

"Of course it is. Why? Is something wrong?"

"She was a commoner in my world," Claudia said, calm. "I've been told that she possessed no magic."

Sieghart's eyes widened in surprise. Claudia, meanwhile, quietly pieced together the implications of what she'd just learned.

Neither my uncle, who was my oppressor as a child, nor his daughter, Leonora, possessed any magical ability. Nonetheless, there exists no definitive proof that my mother—an orphan—was truly related to them by blood.

In a world where the nature of a person's magic was reflected in one's eye color, Claudia's mother had possessed pale-golden eyes.

Pale colors indicated an absence of magic. There was nothing unusual about Dorothea's eyes; she had been a commoner, and strong magical gifts were typically only found in noble bloodlines.

Is it possible that I was reborn to a woman who closely resembled me?

The thought brought a smile to Claudia's lips.

I knew that I looked like her and that we had similar ideas about the world, but perhaps that wasn't all. I can presume she must have also resembled me in magical ability.

She summoned faint, distant memories of her mother.

She must have hidden it from others...even going so far as to disguise her eye color.

It was something Claudia had done herself, time and again, after regaining her memories at the age of six.

"Please continue, Sieghart," she said finally.

"Ah. Of course." He nodded. "Since then, the Kingdom of Avianoia has devoted all of its resources to protecting you. Even after your mother passed away from illness, that never changed."

Claudia closed her eyes.

If her mother had truly been a powerful conjurer, then death through illness was unlikely. More plausibly, she had succumbed to something that magic couldn't heal.

"From the moment you were declared Adelheid reborn, your very existence gained special significance—something beyond just magical potential."

"I suppose that's to be expected. I imagine there are nations that still revere Adelheid in this world, yes?"

That would explain her father's choice not to conceal her identity from foreign powers. It was a shrewd diplomatic strategy.

"Every nation sought to ally with your kingdom to foster goodwill. And through those alliances, Avianoia gained substantial power in the international sphere."

"That does sound like my father," Claudia said with a knowing smile, ready to guide the conversation back to the heart of the matter. "Still, I can hardly imagine that Leonhard would want me just for that. Does he truly wish to possess the reincarnation of

Adelheid?”

A pensive expression settled upon Sieghart’s features. “Publicly, he never seemed particularly interested. When he first ascended the throne, the kingdom was still in chaos. My father’s rule had left deep scars, and the coup didn’t help matters.”

“That’s understandable. Leonhard was a mere child at the time. For a nine-year-old to replace the king—especially in that way—it would be nearly impossible to maintain diplomatic relations with other kingdoms.”

“And yet, despite that, Leonhard managed to rule with integrity. Had I been the one to inherit the throne, I doubt I could have restored the kingdom as he did.”

Present-day Lemilsia had achieved a certain degree of stability. Claudia had always known that her adorable Noah possessed the qualities of a king, and this proved it. Had he inherited what was rightfully his in her original world, she did not doubt that he would have been able to stabilize his homeland.

“At the time, I had come to realize that I was living a life stolen from him,” Sieghart said. “I thought it was only proper for him to reclaim Lemilsia in the name of the people—even if it meant I would remain in exile.”

He then lowered his eyes as though he were a defeated man.

“But you were right. His true aim wasn’t to stabilize Lemilsia and rebuild its strength,” he said with a strained voice. Claudia looked down and saw that he was clenching his fists. “Over the next ten years, Leonhard rebuilt the Lemilsian military with a goal to invade Avianoia.”

Claudia closed her eyes as she gathered her thoughts.

“He put his plan in motion three years ago,” Sieghart continued. “He sealed the borders of the kingdom with a powerful barrier—no one was allowed to enter or leave.”

The same as in my world. The only difference is that there, Sieghart was the one who gave the order.

And she was sure that the reason for that difference was the allegiance of the chief conjurer. His choice of ally had changed the course of history.

"The actual invasion occurred about a month ago. Lemilsia emerged victorious, and you fell into Leonhard's hands."

"What of my father? And my brothers?"

"They fought by your side to the end. They gave their lives for you."

Claudia exhaled softly and took a second to compose herself.

Finally, she asked quietly, "And what has Leonhard been doing since taking me?"

"He's been handling both domestic and international affairs with his usual composure. The reactions from other nations have been varied. Some condemn him for seizing Adelheid through force. Others already seek to curry favor. Many fear this could ignite a worldwide war."

"You fear that as well, don't you?" Claudia asked, forcing a smile. "Now that you no longer believe in Leonhard's good intentions, you've abandoned your loyalties and are waiting for an opportunity to remove him to fall into your lap."

"Precisely. And then you fell from the sky." His face twisted into a sardonic grin, present on his face only for a moment before he sat next to Claudia. "According to the information I gathered, Princess Claudia—despite lacking magic herself—was said to be protected by a powerful ward cast by her late mother. Supposedly, the spell activated just before Leonhard seized you."

"My mother cast that...?" Claudia brought her hand to her heart and blinked slowly. "I see... It was a spell that induced a state of false death, yes?"

Claudia had awoken to this world from inside a coffin. She had been laid out like a corpse and surrounded by fragrant lilies as white as snow.

"Precisely so. It sealed away your soul to protect it from anything that would do it harm."

Claudia had used a similar spell in her world.

This vessel that I inhabit could not withstand the full force of Adelheid's power, but it wasn't merely the fragility of a young body. Something else must have helped create that situation...

At thirteen, Claudia had not reached a tenth of the magical

strength Adelheid had possessed at the same age. Time and again, she had fallen asleep after using her magic.

To prevent the destruction of this vessel, I needed to reinforce and rebuild my body by cycling magic through it. To be able to withstand that, I used a spell that put myself into a state of false death. The reason I failed to awaken from it and am now trapped in this dreamworld...

No, the problem went much deeper than that.

It was already strange that Claudia, who was of royal blood full of magical potential, could not endure Adelheid's soul.

In Sharavia, the last nation that Noah and I visited before I cast the sleeping spell on myself, we saw a statue of a goddess.

Even Noah, who had watched over Claudia since she was a child and knew her better than anyone else, admitted the statue bore a striking resemblance to her.

In my world, my mother concealed her powerful magical ability, yet in this world, she cast a powerful ward on me that would activate in an emergency. It even had the same effect as the one I used.

Additionally, there was the fact that the statue had come to Sharavia alongside a cursed artifact that had brought ruin to the royal families of two nations.

"Does the Kingdom of Sharavia still exist in this world?" she asked.

"No. Regrettably, it fell three years ago."

"Hmm..."

Claudia closed her eyes, then she slowly reopened them to look at Sieghart. "There is something I would like you to tell Karlheinz."

"How do you know of my connection to Lord Karlheinz?" he asked, surprised.

"Hee hee! Why? Because you know so much about me, of course." Claudia playfully tilted her head and grinned like a mischievous child. "I need him to search the former royal palace of Sharavia in both the highest tower of the palace and the harem. Ask him to find out whether the statue of a goddess still remains."

"I cannot say whether Lord Karlheinz will grant such a request,"

Sieghart said hesitantly. “Since recovering from injuries that put him on the brink of death, he has been fervently gathering allies for war. He is determined to take you back from Leonhard.”

“All the more reason to give him a different purpose,” Claudia replied. “Tell him that Claudia is begging it of him.”

She did not know the relationship between Claudia and Karlheinz of this world, but she had a feeling that as long as their souls remained the same, it would not be much different.

“Thank you for saving me, Sieghart,” she said, running her hand through her hair as she stood up. “I’m returning to the castle. I imagine we’ll meet again before long.”

“For what reason?” His eyes flew open in shock. “Come with me. I promise that I will keep you safe.”

“That just won’t do. I have no intention of becoming your ally, you see. I only do what I wish to.” Claudia offered him a wicked smirk befitting a witch.

He watched her with a bewildered expression.

“And besides... You ought to leave this place. Immediately.”

The air of the quiet, sparsely furnished room suddenly began to ripple as a large distortion appeared.

“Claudia!” He gasped and reached out for her.

“Go,” she told him firmly. “And do what you must as well.”

A deafening crack tore through the chamber as a part of the wall exploded outward in a violent burst.

Sieghart had swiftly cast a barrier around Claudia just in the nick of time before he vanished from a teleportation spell.

“I’ve found you,” growled a low, familiar voice.

Claudia allowed herself a small smile.

“Oh, so you’ve come to get me. Good boy, Leonhard,” she said as if praising a small child.

Leonhard glared at her with those eyes so familiar to her.

The air crackled with tension, but Claudia ignored it and instead smoothed the strands of her hair that had been tousled by the blast.

“Your tracking skills impress me,” she said. She examined the portion of the wall that had been blown out. “A strong barrier had protected this room...not that one would think so now.”

Leonhard walked over to her and grabbed her by the chin, jerking her face back to him.

"You've met with Sieghart, haven't you?"

Perhaps Leonhard had detected the faint traces of magic left behind by Sieghart's teleportation spell.

"He caught the witch that you so carelessly dropped and made sure she didn't break, that's all," she said with a laugh.

"What did he tell you? I want every detail."

"Hee hee. That's a private matter. Surely you don't think me so boorish as to gossip." Claudia gently touched the hand that held her by the chin. Although Leonhard had been rough, he hadn't put enough strength into his gesture to harm her.

"If you want something from me, Leonhard, you must ask, not command," she teased. "Beg sweetly enough, and perhaps I'll consider it."

He narrowed his eyes. "Sieghart intends to use you to reclaim Lemilsia. Don't let yourself be swayed by convenient falsehoods."

Oh? So that's how he's decided to approach this.

He wasn't completely wrong. And she had no proof that Sieghart wasn't lying to her.

After all, the Sieghart I know is my enemy. Still...I do not believe he was lying to me...

Leonhard released her chin. Just as she was beginning to step back, he suddenly drew her into his arms. His chest lightly pressed against her head.

He sighed. "All you need to do is listen to me..." he murmured in a voice that better resembled a sulking child than a king.

What had come over him?

His words still hold weight. It isn't all that different from how he was speaking to me before.

And yet, the tone of his voice was different.

This isn't an order... It's a plea.

"That's a strange thing to ask for," Claudia said, her forehead still resting against his chest. "You want me to listen to you, yet you tell me nothing."

"Even so... Who would've thought you would throw yourself from

the window?”

Claudia looked up at him happily. “Were you frightened?”

He hesitated a moment before his face scrunched up into a sour expression completely appropriate for a nineteen-year-old.

“What?” he growled. He released her, but his voice still had an edge. “From now on, I’ll have to keep a closer eye on you. Next time you run from me, I’ll strip away your freedom and lock you in a cage.”

“How passionate. One might almost think you were asking me to remain at your side without so much as explaining why,” she teased. “Let me be perfectly clear. If it comes down to it, I’d sooner believe Sieghart—who I know is using me for the sake of reclaiming the throne—than someone who demands my loyalty without telling me why.”

It was, in truth, a petty barb to bring up Sieghart. Who could be trusted was of no real consequence to her. No matter what their ambitions were, no matter what secrets they hid, Claudia would do only what *she* wished.

“I hear you’ve been a bad boy, Leonhard. You’ve killed my father and brothers,” she challenged, and Leonhard frowned. “For now, I shall remain by your side. But keep my room warm, and do not let me be lonely.”

Leonhard clicked his tongue, an unthinkable sound coming from her sweet Noah.

He grabbed her hand and said, “We’re returning to the castle.”

This world is a dream, a deathlike slumber from which I have yet to wake. A world constructed from hypothesis and illusion, shaped by my magic.

As Leonhard’s warmth passed through her skin, Claudia slowly closed her eyes.

And yet, I can sense that someone else’s hand has interfered in this world’s creation.

Even so, she knew this world was built from the memories of the sleeping Claudia in her original world. Of that there could be no doubt.

If that is the case...

Claudia let her thoughts sink deeper into speculation, piecing together the truth.

Then the way to awaken me must exist only in that world.

Wrapped in the glow of Leonhard's magic, Claudia's body vanished without a sound.

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As he stood before Claudia's pitch-black coffin, King Volkhard recalled the letter that she had written him before she slipped into this long slumber.

"To my dearest father: I'm sorry for doing something like this without any warning. The first thing I ask of you is that you please do not blame my dearest Noah, no matter what happens."

Volkhard was father to four children. His firstborn, Crown Prince Wilhelm, and the second prince, Ehrenfried, were his sons with his second queen, Cassandra.

"This was a decision I made of my own will. Noah merely obeyed my orders. I chose this path because it was what I wished to do."

The next to be born was Emilia, a princess from the queen consort.

As king of a nation, it was Volkhard's duty to produce an heir and, ideally, several more children for greater stability. No matter how tedious or meaningless he deemed it, shirking that duty would only invite greater trouble.

"If I do not awaken after a year, then I ask that the kingdom publicly declare the youngest princess dead. In doing so, you will be able to protect the realm."

He had seen many beautiful women in his time, but very few he could bear having remain by his side.

Some would cling to him, desperate to please. Others, the bolder women, came intending to become his wife. However, among them all, only one had shown zero interest in staying with him. Instead, she'd wanted to leave his side of her own volition.

"For I have enemies among other nations who will come with the intention of capturing me."

That woman had been the famed songstress who had borne his youngest daughter—Princess Claudia.

The voice of Chief Conjurer Karlheinz caused Volkhard to raise his head.

"Pardon the interruption, Your Majesty."

The cathedral, situated at the very heart of the royal palace, echoed with even the slightest voice or footfall. The scent of lilies hung cloyingly in the air, though it did not bother Volkhard enough to have them removed.

The carpet, dyed a deep red to obscure any sign of blood, ran in a straight line from the entrance to the altar. Volkhard turned toward his retainer so that his back was now to the coffin.

"Is there news?" he asked.

"There is, Your Majesty. His Highness Ehrenfried has learned that the Kingdom of Lemilsia is preparing for war."

His youngest daughter, Claudia, lay in the coffin behind him.

It had been three years since she fell into that deathlike slumber. Karlheinz's eyes rested quietly upon the sleeping princess.

"It seems that all is proceeding as Princess Claudia wrote in her letter, Your Majesty."

Volkhard narrowed his eyes and turned back toward the coffin.

There, among the cascade of snow-white lilies, Claudia slept. She still appeared just as she had when she was thirteen. Her skin was as pale as the flowers that surrounded her, and only her lips, painted the deep red of a ripe apple, bore any color.

"Claudia's not the only one who warned me," Volkhard murmured, gazing down at her. "Someone else once warned me of the same thing."

"Your Majesty?"

"*She* warned me that in time, a powerful nation would come to seek Claudia—that they would be drawn to the beacon of her magic."

Karlheinz was a man who very rarely showed his emotions on his face, but that statement caused a flicker of unease.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, but who—?"

Another voice interrupted Karlheinz. "Whose words were those?"

Both king and conjurer turned toward the entrance of the cathedral.

There stood a young man, approaching them while looking boldly at Volkhard in a way that was hardly appropriate of a vassal looking deferentially at his liege.

"So, you have come, Noah," Volkhard said to the young man.

Claudia's knight bore obsidian eyes, within which flickered the embers of a still-burning flame.

"Noah—mind your tongue. You are in the presence of your king."

"It matters not. Let him speak freely," Volkhard interjected, waving off Karlheinz's reproach. He carefully studied Noah. "So then, the war draws near. Have you completed your preparations?"

"Whatever the hour, whatever the order, I stand ready to obey."

"Ha. It would seem my daughter trained her servant quite thoroughly." The irony of it struck him once more, and he voiced it plainly. "A strange fate. You resemble that woman far too well."

"Surely, you're not referring to—" Karlheinz began.

"I shall answer your question from before," Volkhard interrupted him. "The woman who spoke those same words as Claudia..." He turned to look at Noah before continuing. "It was her mother, Dorothea."

From beside him, Karlheinz audibly drew in a breath.

Noah, choosing his words with care, asked quietly, "Why would Her Majesty—Princess Claudia's late mother—have said such a thing?"

"She knew many things," Volkhard said. "It was why she confessed her own secret in order to approach me—that she was herself a princess of a fallen kingdom."

The memories became clearer as he spoke them aloud, as if emerging from a fog.

That woman...

Now that he was speaking of it, he found it strange—perplexing, even—that he had never shared any of this with Karlheinz before.

Did she cast a spell on me? One that sealed my memories?

Volkhard closed his eyes and gave a faint, self-deprecating laugh. "She told me that her daughter would be the reincarnation of the

witch Adelheid. And then she proposed a contract."

That was why he had taken a woman of unknown birth—a "commoner"—as his final consort.

Chapter 3

Dorothea had appeared before Volkhard seventeen years ago, draped in a gown fashioned of countless layers of sheer silk.

"Shall I sing for you, Your Majesty?"

It had been during a festival, when the kingdom was adorned in splendid decoration, and travelers from distant lands flooded its streets.

She was beautiful. Not merely in the symmetry of her face, but also the way her smooth, light brown hair tumbled into a series of soft waves. She stood tall, with a graceful bearing, porcelain skin, and a smile that seemed designed to charm.

Still, Volkhard had regarded the woman in the same way he did with anything that he found boring and frivolous. He assumed that she could not be much older than him, being nineteen at the time. He would later learn that she was, in fact, a year younger.

"I have no need of it," he replied curtly.

"Oh, how disappointing. I've been singing since I was a child, and I daresay I'm rather good at it."

"More importantly..." He pointed at Dorothea, sitting on the railing of the balcony outside his chambers, which were on the top floor of the royal castle's highest tower. "By whose leave, and by what means, have you entered my private chambers?"

The woman laughed, delightfully yet delicately. The city sprawled behind her like a tapestry.

"I'm Dorothea. I've recently returned to this kingdom after some time away."

"I did not ask for your name, nor do I remember granting you permission to speak so freely."

Despite that, the way she spoke to him was the least troubling thing about her presence. Volkhard took in her appearance.

"You are concealing the true color of your eyes," he stated calmly.

“They are not as pale as you make them appear. You possess magic—strong magic. That alone is enough for me to deem you a threat to this kingdom.”

“My, my. You’re the first person to have noticed the alteration,” she said, pleased.

Volkhard couldn’t shake the feeling that they were having two completely different conversations. The way she showed her surprise on her face and spoke with an unguarded tone displayed an almost childlike lack of guile.

Volkhard sighed. Her openness made his posturing feel foolish.

“I already have enough musicians.” He paused a moment before continuing. “I also have enough consorts and mistresses.”

“Lies are unbecoming, Your Majesty.”

Despite his clear dismissal, she slipped from the railing, landing lightly upon the balcony floor.

“I know you need someone like me. Someone powerful, someone with overwhelming magical strength,” she said.

He watched silently as she approached him.

“Even if your kingdom is in a time of peace, you know that your kingdom is constantly under the threat of war. You’ve even placed your chief conjurer at the border as a deterrent, leaving the capital vulnerable. And your forces—they’re not what they once were, are they? I’m sure that you want to strengthen them,” she challenged, though she bore an innocent smile. “And if that strength could come from your own offspring, wouldn’t that be most convenient?”

There was no seduction in her words, no charm in the way she walked toward him. Despite her beauty, she was not trying to seduce him.

“If that were the case,” she continued, “then the peace of this beloved kingdom you’ve worked so hard to protect would be secure.”

He frowned at that.

There were moments when the unfathomable depths of the woman before him would suddenly surface, and in those fleeting instants, she appeared like an enchanting, otherworldly witch.

“You care more for this kingdom than you’d like to admit. Your retainers, your people... I understand that feeling quite well.” She

tilted her head, her long hair draping over her shoulder. “I loved my own people as well, but my homeland lies in ruin now. I cherished them deeply.”

Something in her words didn’t quite sit right.

“Ah, but your coldness toward your wives and children is a bit of a shame, isn’t it?” she mused. “Still—your willingness to elevate a promising orphan to chief conjurer of your kingdom... I must say, you’ve a keen eye for talent.”

She had done her research, even on Karlheinz.

“What is it that you want?” he asked.

The woman laughed softly and then placed her hand on her stomach.

“I want to give birth to the reincarnation of Adelheid.”

The more he heard, the more bizarre it became; nothing she said made any sense.

“You speak of the witch who died five hundred years ago?”

She smiled. “I knew it! I just *knew* you’d understand right away!”

“I understand *nothing*, and I’ve no interest in continuing to indulge your nonsense.”

She carried on, completely ignoring his remarks. “The child I will bear will be a girl, and she will carry the soul of Adelheid reborn. It has already been decided.”

She blinked, and her eyes changed color from a pale gold to an iridescent opal, full of the potential to reflect every shade light might conjure.

“I will do anything necessary to bring this child into the world and let her grow up strong and healthy. For that to happen, I need to provide her with a cradle that will keep her safe.”

“I’ll warn you now,” Volkhard said. “My queen consort possesses a severe temperament. I cannot guarantee that your child, were she born within this palace, would be safe.”

“I know,” the woman replied softly. “But there are few places that can protect her from a threat far greater than a jealous queen.”

Hearing that, something clicked into place in Volkhard’s mind.

“Then there are those who will seek this ‘Adelheid reborn’?” he asked.

The corners of the woman's lips curved upward.

"A terrifying and mighty nation. They will be drawn to her magic like a beacon."

He contemplated this new information.

"As it stands now, you are the only king I have considered who I believe could act as her protector...and a king it must be. Were I to choose anyone of lesser status, no matter how strong their magic or how good of a father they might be, they would never be able to stand against an entire kingdom."

It seemed, without his knowledge or consent, he'd been under some sort of evaluation. Not only that—he'd been judged suitable.

"That said, Your Majesty, if you should refuse, I shall just take this same proposal to another king elsewhere," she said cheerfully.

"Is that meant to be some kind of threat? If I refuse, you'll take this 'Adelheid reborn' to be born into another kingdom's royal family?"

"Tee hee! And if that kingdom happens to be your enemy, imagine what a nuisance she might become." Her smile reminded him of a cherub. All the while, she'd openly admitted that she was, indeed, threatening him.

In return, he asked her what he believed to be a perfectly reasonable question.

"Then tell me this: Why are you so certain that your daughter, not yet even conceived, will be the reincarnation of Adelheid?"

She answered his question clearly with an answer he never would have predicted.

"Well, that's because I'm..."

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And so, Dorothea came to reside in the royal palace as King Volkhard's third consort.

Of course, he could hardly announce her origins as she had relayed them. A convenient narrative was needed—one that claimed the king had been taken with a wandering songstress and, despite her being an orphan, he had chosen to take her as his consort.

"As expected, the queen consort is in a fit of distress. It's become quite the nuisance. Matters would be somewhat less troublesome if we could announce that you are of noble blood," Volkhard remarked.

"We cannot. Though I truly am sorry for upsetting Lady Irmela..."

Even after becoming a royal consort, Dorothea had shown no desire for the luxuries of court. Instead, she asked to live in the forest outside the capital. In response, Volkhard had ordered a tower be built there for her to reside in. She now sat on a windowsill within that tower, which was still under construction by court conjurers.

"It is better to turn our tale into a commonplace story," she said. "If my location becomes known, then they'll find our daughter far more easily."

She reached down to rub her belly.

Dorothea had told him about how she'd been on the run for many years. Those who sought the reincarnation of Adelheid had been hunting her relentlessly, determined to capture her.

For that reason, she had hidden her magical power since childhood, living as an orphan. Even when another orphan had claimed to be her brother to get at the food she had earned through her singing, she had used that lie as an extra layer of protection to hide from her pursuers.

"It's incredible how much time and effort you've put into fleeing."

"Because I knew what would happen if I didn't," she said with a gentle laugh. "I'd done the calculations, you see."

But Dorothea had never shared the details of those calculations.

"I've considered many different futures," she said, eyes distant. "A world in which I publicly declare my identity and proclaim that my child shall bear Adelheid's soul. Another, where I say nothing at all, and the truth is revealed only through the color of her eyes when she is born..."

Volkhard raised an eyebrow at that last bit of information.

"But I believe neither of those futures is the best path to take," she continued, her hand lying on her still-flat belly. "The path with the greatest chance of success is a world where she is kept hidden even after she is born. I know if *that man* finds me, then he will find Adelheid as well. The only thing I can do is hide her until she's

strong enough to protect herself."

To Volkhard's ears, such a conclusion seemed premature at best.

"I fail to see the use in hiding," he said, but he did not press any further, for he sensed her desperation, and he knew that Dorothea had imagined these scenarios in her head countless times.

Dorothea tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Before she is born, I shall cast a spell on you and the child."

"What for?"

"To keep you from taking too much interest in her at first. That way, *he* won't notice either."

"That is absurd. Did you not seek me out precisely because you wanted a powerful conjurer to protect your daughter?"

"Yes...but only once she's older. While she is still an infant—too young to control her magic—it's safer for her to be forgotten than for her to stand out under your protection."

He realized that in her calculations, the pursuers would defeat him and seize their daughter.

"I will cast a spell on Adelheid too—one that delays the return of her past-life memories."

This woman...

As he watched her solemnly shift her gaze to her feet as she discussed their daughter's future, a realization struck Volkhard.

She intends to die after our daughter is born.

He opened his mouth to speak—but he found no words. After all, what was the point? Dorothea lived for one purpose alone: to bring forth the reincarnation of Adelheid.

In any case, it was not his place to question it. This marriage was no more than a contract. Both parties had agreed upon it for mutual benefit.

"The trigger to dissolve the spell," Dorothea continued, "will be the magic of the one who pursues her. The moment they interfere with the kingdom's barrier, Adelheid will remember who she was."

She gave him a gentle smile before adding, "And at the same time, Volkhard, you'll remember too. All the memories that will have been tucked away in the corner of your mind will return. And that's when you will bring her back to your side."

As though placing the final seal on their pact, Dorothea told him one more thing.

"As for me...you'll forget about me entirely."

Volkhard clicked his tongue. "Do as you will. But first, choose a name."

"A name?"

"Yes, for our daughter—in this lifetime."

Dorothea's eyes, gleaming like opals, widened.

"Her name..." she whispered.

"No fool would give her the name 'Adelheid' if we mean to keep her hidden."

"But... I... Do I have the right to give her a name?" She looked to her feet again. "Even though I'm a terrible mother who will put this child through so much pain..."

Volkhard neither denied nor affirmed her words. "The only person who can judge that has yet to be born in this world."

After a moment, Dorothea spoke hesitantly, almost as if she were afraid to even voice the name she'd chosen.

"Claudia."

"Hmm..." Volkhard committed the name to memory.

"In my homeland, it means 'something that is lacking.'"

"And why give her such a name?"

"As long as Claudia is not fully Adelheid, then she is like an apple with a bite taken out—not completely whole. And maybe an apple like that will be easier to hide than a perfectly shaped one..."



Volkhard let out a breath, once again struck by her desperation.

"As I've said before: I still find this ruse to be of questionable value."

"I know...but there's no better way to—" Suddenly, her eyes widened. "That's it."

"Dorothea?"

"How could I not have seen it before? If she is not Adelheid, but the *lacking* princess," Dorothea said before lowering her voice to a whisper. "In that case, she might be able to hide from the man who hunts her..."

Then she voiced *his* name.

"Leonhard."

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Noah stood motionless within the cathedral, silently turning over the king's words in his mind.

Leonhard.

A cold sweat beaded along the back of his neck and trailed down his skin.

It was a name he'd discarded long ago. Yet, no matter how dearly he cherished the name *Noah*, bestowed upon him by Claudia herself, he would never forget the one he had been given at birth.

The name given to me by my father...

Someone bearing that same name had been the one to pursue Claudia's mother.

Noah mulled over the implications of that fact.

Seated in one of the pews, Volkhard stared at Claudia's coffin and continued, "Anything further is hazy. I can't say what methods that woman used, nor how she spent her days before the child was born."

There was frustration in his voice, but it didn't come from something as simple as hatred or dislike.

"Dorothea must have cast a spell on me and Claudia. The memories she sealed have been returning in a predetermined order...triggered by whatever conditions she set."

"I believe I understand now," Karlheinz said, breaking his long silence. His face didn't betray his emotions. "For six years after Princess Claudia's birth, Your Majesty showed no interest in her. Then, ten years ago, you suddenly ordered an inspection of the tower where she resided."

Noah remembered that day well. He'd made his pact with Claudia —the day she used magic for the very first time.

"At the time," Karlheinz continued, "you told us it was due to the state of foreign affairs, but even at the time, that seemed..."

"It was a flimsy excuse, I'll admit," Volkhard said. "But it seems that woman had planned for my memory to come back in stages all along."

Most likely, even Volkhard himself couldn't have explained why he had so suddenly become concerned about Claudia's well-being.

Both he and Karlheinz turned to the third person in the room.

"Noah," Volkhard prodded.

Noah closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I believe it was around that same time that Her Highness began to recover the memories of her past life as Adelheid."

Karlheinz pressed a hand to his forehead, a grimace settling over his face. It was an expression that Noah knew well.

"And why have you kept something like that a secret until now?"

"Let it be, Karlheinz," Volkhard interjected. "No doubt Claudia forbade him to speak of it."

"Even so—"

"My memories of Claudia being the reincarnation of Adelheid were sealed until now. Everything has unfolded exactly as Dorothea intended."

Noah had always been fully prepared to accept whatever punishment might come from his silence. His first duty was to follow Claudia's command.

However, now that the king's memory had returned, secrecy no longer seemed prudent.

If His Majesty has recovered his memory, something must have triggered it.

And whatever that trigger was, there was a high chance it meant

Claudia was in danger.

"Your Majesty," he said, "if I may have your permission to speak."

"Go on."

Noah knelt on the red carpet that ran the length of the sanctuary.

"According to Her Highness's mother, the key to restoring both your memories would be interference in the kingdom's barriers by the one pursuing her—the man called Leonhard."

But the pact was not all that had happened that day. There had been one more event that had happened at the time—an event that was very important to Noah.

"The name given to me by my father was also Leonhard."

At this, Volkhard frowned. Karlheinz drew in a breath and looked down upon Noah, who continued his confession without raising his head.

"Until now, I have relied on Her Highness's mercy and remained here by your side under false pretenses."

Of course, both of them had likely known. Volkhard and Karlheinz were not men so easily deceived. For reasons of their own, they had permitted Noah's continued presence within Avianoia.

And yet...

Noah lowered his head even further, baring the back of his neck to the men before him, as if to say that they might take his head, if they so willed it.

"I am a member of the royal family of Lemilsia, cousin to the current king, Sieghart, who now seeks to bring war upon this kingdom."

He had never forgotten the events of ten years ago—or so he had believed.

When he looked back now, he realized just how many gaps existed in his memory.

"I fled here from my homeland, coming to Avianoia by teleportation."

Noah felt his heartbeat begin to pulse in his chest.

"I came here on the very same day... I now believe that it was

the very same moment that Her Highness regained her memories.”

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“Leonhard?”

In the dreamworld, where she was still searching for a way to awaken, Claudia called the name of the young man who held her captive.

“Hey, Leonhard, are you listening?”

She was met only with silence.

“Leonhard?”

Perched without the slightest thought of decorum atop his desk, Claudia attempted for a third time to gain his attention, but Leonhard, seated beside her, continued to work in silence, eyes never lifting from the documents before him.

“Really now,” she said, puffing out one cheek in a clear show of protest. “That simply won’t do. When someone calls your name, it’s only proper to answer.”

He didn’t so much as glance up at the rebuke.

“If you persist in ignoring me...” She turned her gaze toward the clerks posted near the entrance of the study. “I may simply ask one of your retainers to escort me outside.”

“Adelheid.”

The irritation in Leonhard’s voice was enough to make the clerks stiffen.

Claudia stretched her legs and gave them a disarming smile.

“Forgive him. He can be rather frightening, I know. But don’t worry, I’ll accept any scolding on your behalf.”

“Do not seduce my staff,” Leonhard snapped.

His voice was curt, his mood plainly soured. Claudia looked down at him from her seat.

“My, but I’m doing no such thing. I’m merely enjoying myself. I sit on desks in short dresses, stretching my legs, because I wish to, nothing more.”

He scowled at her.

“If you find it improper, you could always send me back to my

chambers," she added, tapping his side lightly with her bare toe, having kicked off her slippers some time ago. "It's your fault, really. You insist on keeping me by your side every hour of the day."

"I have little choice. You've made it clear that I can't take my eyes off you for a moment."

Ever since Claudia had thrown herself from the castle window a few days prior, she had been placed under strict surveillance. Her bedchamber had been relocated beside his, and during the day, she was made to remain in his office under guard.

And all the while, he barely acknowledged her presence. Claudia could hardly bear the tedium.

This isn't just because I spoke with Sieghart—there's something more to it.

She was more convinced than ever that Leonhard, despite all outward differences, was indeed the same person as Noah.

The same soul. The same spirit. The same boy—only raised along a different path. A little warped, perhaps, but fundamentally unchanged.

Take, for example, the white fur mantle draped gently over her shoulders. Leonhard had conjured it himself for her. Even when his voice was cold and his words dismissive, he still thought to take care of her needs.

If I think of him as Noah in his rebellious phase, then even his overbearing behavior is endearing. Still, being with him all the time is rather inconvenient.

She had tasked Sieghart and Karlheinz with a certain investigation some days ago, and by now, they should have had results. But as long as Leonhard's eyes were upon her, there was no chance for her to meet with them.

If I only could use magic, even a little bit, then I could perhaps create a chance to slip away.

Yet Claudia's magic remained utterly unresponsive. And so, despite knowing it would likely be in vain, she had continued to pester him.

"Leonhard, I'm dreadfully bored. If you won't amuse me, I should very much like to return to my room for a nap."

"No. I will not grant you permission."

Feigning dejection, she pouted. "Even when I asked so sweetly?"

Leonhard furrowed his brow ever so slightly. See—at his core, he was still the same as her Noah.

Leonhard let out an audible sigh.

My, my. That was quite exaggerated.

His obsidian eyes looked up at her, still seated atop the desk.

Then, to her surprise, Leonhard said something completely unexpected.

"Please. Stay by my side."

Claudia's eyes widened in shock.

Leonhard looked away, clearly uncomfortable, and muttered as if to justify himself, "You said if I beg you, you'd listen to me, right?"

"Tee hee!" She couldn't help the delighted laughter that slipped from her lips. "Still not good enough. You forgot the 'sweetly' part."

"Silence. If you continue to misbehave, I'll put you to sleep with magic."

The clerks exchanged uncertain glances, unsure whether to be alarmed or amused.

But Claudia knew that she needed to come up with a plan to slip from his watchful gaze soon.

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"Honestly, Leonhard," Claudia murmured. "Must you really insist on following me into my bath?"

"I have not entered the bathing chamber itself." He came off rather defensive.

Several hours had passed since the events of the afternoon. Now, submerged in a grand bathing chamber filled to the brim with steaming, milky-white water, Claudia stretched her limbs in lazy contentment.

The bath was slightly hot—just enough to warm her chilled body—and spacious enough to hold five.

A folding screen stood at the entrance, separating the interior from prying eyes.

"No peeking, mind you."

"As if I would do such a thing."

Leonhard stood beyond the screen, arms crossed, facing away from her. His sense of propriety was just like her beloved Noah's.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" she asked. Letting the water ripple with a gentle splash, Claudia rested her chin upon the bath's edge. "I came from another world. Similar yet different from this one."

Leonhard twitched slightly, as if he'd nearly turned his head toward her on instinct, but he caught himself. He didn't so much as glance her way, though his shoulder shifted unmistakably. Claudia smiled quietly, turning to the edge of the bath and curling her previously outstretched legs under her. The way she leaned her upper body out of the bath made her look like a mermaid.

"And so, I know what you were like up to age nine. What you experienced, and what you held dear," she said—just to see how he would react.

His response when I asked about his past has been bothering me. Is it possible...?

"Would you like to hear more?" she inquired, resting her chin on her folded arms.

"What use would it be?" His voice came back to her, low and bitter. "There's nothing left of that person. If it's all gone, what meaning is there in knowing?"

"But even ashes can be a source of warmth," she replied gently.

"Adelheid," he said. Perhaps he sensed that she had realized something, for his voice had gained an edge.

"I won't answer if you call me that," Claudia said cheerily, smiling as always. "I'm not Adelheid. Just like how you wouldn't respond if I called you Noah."

"So, Noah was the name I bore in your world?"

"I gave it to you myself. It means 'peaceful.' A sweet little name."

She found herself wondering if her own name, Claudia, carried a meaning too?

Now that I think about it, my homeland in my past life...

She reached for one of the glass bottles arranged beside the bath, thoughts drifting. "What is it you wish for, Leonhard?"

She was met only with silence.

"If you're honest with me, maybe I'll grant it."

She poured soap into her palm, rubbing it between her hands until it lathered into soft bubbles.

"If you won't tell me..."

She blew the bubbles from her hands toward the screen.

"I might just escape for real and vanish from your sight."

"It's pointless," he said. There was no sign of provocation in his words; he had said it as if it were just an undeniable fact. "I can trace Adelheid's magic. No matter where you go, I will find you right away. Even now, with it sealed, I can sense it."

"Oh?"

He was right. Her magic had been sealed—according to Sieghart, it was a spell cast by her mother, Dorothea, one that also plunged her into a deathlike slumber.

But something doesn't add up, Claudia thought while she played with the bubbles between her fingers. *In this world, the fact that I am the reincarnation of Adelheid is no secret. If the goal of sealing my magic was to hide me, why proclaim it to the world?*

Of course, it was hard to say how logical this dreamlike world truly was.

Perhaps it followed the same fragmented logic as real dreams did—but it didn't seem that way to Claudia.

The spell from my mother activated only after Leonhard's invasion succeeded and Avianoia was defeated...

Perhaps she could test her conclusions by asking Leonhard about something he would know.

"In this world, was I born unable to use magic?"

"That's common knowledge, isn't it? Up until about ten years ago, people seriously wondered whether you were even truly the reincarnation of Adelheid."

Therefore, the reason I fell into a deathlike state in this world wasn't to seal away my magic.

That meant the true purpose of her mother's spell was unclear.

If I was publicly known as Adelheid, then she wasn't trying to keep my existence hidden. If so, then the reason she sealed my

magic wasn't to keep me from Leonhard—and yet her magic still forced me into a deathlike state after his capture of me.

What exactly had her mother been afraid of, and how had she intended to protect her?

I can't let myself get distracted by new information. After all, this may very well be a world where my mother failed.

While Claudia lingered in the bath, deep in thought, Leonhard spoke from beyond the screen.

"No matter how much you think it over, you'll never find a way to escape me."

"Even though it's been sealed, Adelheid's magic still calls to you like a beacon, doesn't it?"

"Put a cloth over something, and its shape doesn't change."

She'd heard a similar metaphor somewhere before.

"A perfectly round apple, and one with a bite taken out," she murmured.

What was the difference between Claudia from her original world and the one here?

Mother's choices and actions—they led me to be raised as the reincarnation of Adelheid, unable to use magic, and now I've been apprehended by the conquering Leonhard...

But that wasn't the full picture.

My dear Noah...

With a loud splash, Claudia rose from the bath.

"Hey! At least give a warning if you're getting out...!"

"Leonhard..." Droplets slid down her bare skin as she walked past the folding screen. Claudia reached out a wet hand and placed it on Leonhard's back through his clothes.

"Who broke the curse your uncle placed on you?"

Claudia's Noah had suffered under a binding curse.

And even now, the Noah of her world hadn't broken free of it. Claudia had forcibly overwritten it with a stronger familiar-bond.

If I hadn't, he would've died. Additionally, the contract I placed upon him still remains to this day...

Because he had wished it to be so.

"If you had tried to run from your uncle or defy him, the curse

would've made you suffer and die. It should have been right here." She traced along his back, resting her palm over where his heart should be. "Isn't that right, Leonhard?"

He stood frozen and silent.

"Forgive me," she said finally. As she slowly withdrew her hand, her face held not only compassion but also veiled distress for him. "You can't answer that, can you?"

Then, in a lighter tone, she asked, "Would you hand me a towel? In this world, I have to dry myself off. It's truly such a bother."

"Don't tell me you had me do that too—in your world?"

She giggled. "That's a secret."

Leonhard clicked his tongue, but he did toss her a soft, fluffy towel as asked. She easily caught it and buried her face in it with a pleased sigh.

But as she began to dress, something odd struck her.

My lips feel warm.

It was the same sensation she'd felt when she awoke in the coffin in this world.

Like I'm wearing lipstick... I can see it... Bright red, like blood...

Droplets from her wet hair slid down her neck and collarbone. When she touched her lips, she felt a faint pulse of energy.

Is this Noah's magic?

She ran a finger across her lips and closed her eyes.

Something's happening in my original world, and he's the key to that change.

Slowly opening her eyes, Claudia reached toward her captor in this world once more.

"Leonhard."

"What now...?"

His obsidian eyes flew wide open at that moment, as Claudia had just placed a kiss on the back of his hand.

Leonhard staggered and dropped to his knees. Through that touch, her magic had flowed into him—interfering with his magic.

"What're you...? Your magic..."

"Again, please forgive me."

Now that even a little of her magic had returned, disturbing

Leonhard's own was simple.

Adjusting the strap of her black nightdress with her fingers, Claudia knelt beside him. "I'm going to borrow some of your magic."

Now that she had successfully sealed his movements, she took back the magic she had once released into him—and even some extra.

"Wait!"

"Indeed, I'll be waiting for you. Come and find me, Leonhard."

He grunted as he struggled to move.

And with that, Claudia's teleportation spell burst into a brilliant light.

***

Noah remained kneeling in the royal audience chamber, head bowed low before the king of Avianoia. He was now nearing the end of his account of a past that he had long buried.

"Leonhard," the king began. "To atone for your father's sins, you will serve under me until your death."

Ashamed of what he was going to confess, Noah had asked to speak somewhere other than the sanctuary where Claudia slept. Now, he knelt before the king's throne as Volkhard gazed down upon him.

To Noah's surprise, Volkhard had ordered him to tell him everything, not just give him the details that concerned Claudia. And so, Noah had begun from the beginning.

"My uncle poured all the hatred he had for his brother into me."

Noah's uncle had been tormented by his older brother, Noah's father, from the time they were children. Eventually, his uncle had murdered his tormentor and taken the throne of Lemilsia for himself.

He then enslaved Noah with the warning, "If you disobey me, I'll kill your sister Anna. Do you understand?"

Thus, Noah had been allowed to live, but only as a slave for his uncle to take out his rage upon. In exchange for sparing his newborn sister, Noah had surrendered himself to his uncle's fury.

"Try to escape, and the chains in which I've bound your heart will

kill you in agony," his uncle had warned him.

"As my sister got older," Noah continued, "she came to resemble my mother more and more, and my uncle began to raise her as his own daughter. But everything changed that day..."

That day, it had been Noah's prison guards who had been beating him, saying that they didn't like the look in his eyes. In their frenzy, one of them had let a secret slip.

"If anyone should've had to die, it should've been you, you filthy slave! Not Princess Anna Marie!"

Noah's eyes had flown open.

"In that moment, I lost even the reason to endure my suffering," he explained. "I reached for the sky, blindly—without knowing why—and cast a spell."

"A teleportation spell?"

"Looking back on it, isn't it strange?" Noah mused. After Claudia had saved him and given him a new purpose in life, Noah had believed that there was no reason to dwell on the past.

He still believed that to be true, and yet he couldn't deny that there were important holes in his memory that he needed to understand.

"As a child who had been raised in prison, I shouldn't have known how to cast such a spell."

However, he had appeared in the forest moments later.

Until now, he hadn't even questioned how it had happened. He now suspected that magic had been used to cloud his mind, and that spell's thoroughness vexed him.

"I had collapsed in extreme pain. It must have been around then that Princess Claudia began to recover memories of her former life."

After that, Claudia had begun to wander the forest and come upon him.

So many strange events had occurred to bring him to Claudia's side—too many to be a coincidence.

"You said that Lady Dorothea had told you that the trigger to dissolve her spell would be the magic of the one who pursued her. And the name she gave for the pursuer was Leonhard," he said, finally lifting his gaze to meet Volkhard's. "I believe now that the

pursuer Lady Dorothea spoke of...was me."

Volkhard watched him silently, his expression remaining unchanged.

"Noah," Karlheinz finally said, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "When you're before His Majesty, you must choose your words more carefully. What you just said could be interpreted as admitting you're a threat to the princess."

"As long as Lady Dorothea's true intentions remain unclear, I believe it is only right to allow for that possibility to be considered," Noah responded.

Karlheinz frowned in a way all too familiar to Noah.

Even though Noah was sure that Karlheinz had grasped his meaning, he decided to say it plainly.

"Our highest priority must be the safety and peace of Her Highness, both in body and mind. If my presence endangers her, then I have no right to exist."

Still, he had no intention of running away or abandoning his duty.

"And yet, Your Majesty," he continued, "I will not turn a blind eye to the others who threaten her safety. Whoever sent me into this kingdom as a child did so with a purpose. It was no mere accident that I arrived at Her Highness's side."

"That much is clear," Volkhard said with a snort. "I suspect Dorothea's revulsion of this Leonhard is likely related. This pursuer likely intended to use you as a puppet in some scheme."

"Then, that plan has already failed," Noah stated bluntly.

He lived freely and on his own terms. On the day he was teleported into the forest, Noah had chosen the way he wanted to live, not the way he wanted it to end, just as Claudia had told him.

"Whatever their intentions may have been, I believe the one who sought to control me has since replaced me with another."

"Your cousin Sieghart, I presume?" Volkhard asked.

Noah nodded solemnly. "It's possible that Lady Dorothea foresaw a future in which I wasn't replaced—a world where I, and not Sieghart, became the puppet."

Volkhard went quiet—perhaps because his thoughts had turned to his former consort—but he didn't reject Noah's theory.

"Karlheinz," Noah said, "if there was someone who was manipulating Sieghart and held real power in Lemilsia, then—"

"Then we must remember that kingdom once placed its chief conjurer as Prince Sieghart's guardian," Karlheinz finished.

Six years earlier, when they had attended the Raushneur Academy under the sea, Noah and Claudia had heard reports about Lemilsia's political affairs. Sieghart had even used magic to take on the appearance of a boy in his late teens so that he could attend the academy under the alias of Lucas. He was to graduate early.

According to the report that Noah had heard, it had been Lemilsia's chief conjurer who had forced him to do so. The chief conjurer had been acting as regent in place of the ailing king and wanted Sieghart to return home.

"They are enemies of Princess Claudia," Noah murmured. If even one thing had been different, Noah could have easily been one of them. That thought filled him with disgust.

Noah knew that if Volkhard decided to strike him down where he knelt, it would be just. Even knowing that, still kneeling on the red carpet, he bowed deeply toward the throne.

"Please, Your Majesty. Entrust me with the task of eliminating them. And when all is done, you may decide my fate as you see fit. If it is death I deserve—as one tied by blood to the royal family of Lemilsia—then so be it."

Still towering over Noah, Volkhard was unmoved. "Right now, the immediate threats are Claudia's continued sleep and the Lemilsian invasion—and I suspect both can be traced to a single root."

"Yes, I believe so, Your Majesty," Noah said, still bowing his head.

Even now, Volkhard had not fully regained his lost memories. It was likely that Claudia's continued sleep was the result of the spell cast on her by Dorothea long ago. In fact, Claudia's body being unable to withstand Adelheid's magic might have had something to do with that spell as well.

It makes no sense for a vessel chosen to receive such a soul to be unfit to contain its power. That is...unless her body was never meant to contain that soul. It is possible that Lady Dorothea altered her fate after birth.

Perhaps it had all been done to hide her from pursuers.

Or perhaps Lady Dorothea's spell failed in some way...

Noah lowered his head and shut his eyes. "If we assume those who are seeking to claim Adelheid are involved in both the reason for Her Highness remaining asleep and the invasion from Lemilsia, then my path is clear. I must—"

Just as he was about to propose a plan of action, a violent tremor shook the throne room.

Karlheinz turned, already assuming a defensive posture. "Your Majesty."

Volkhard looked at the ceiling toward the unseen barrier that enclosed the capital like a great dome, now under assault. "Well, well. They've arrived sooner than expected."

Karlheinz stepped before his king protectively, then turned to his future successor. "Noah."

"The chapel hasn't been disturbed," Noah reported. "I wove a cloaking spell into the barrier there. It should keep the princess hidden from them."

Noah had used an additional protective barrier to fortify the sanctuary where Claudia lay. Even if intruders breached the castle, they would not find her easily.

Karlheinz turned back to the king. "That strike was a warning—an intimidation tactic, meant to prompt surrender."

"Indeed. They couldn't possibly believe that would have shattered the barrier."

Meanwhile, Noah's thoughts churned.

This magic... There's no doubt who it belongs to...

Noah recognized the magic that had attacked the barrier. Make no mistake—it was Sieghart's.

Beneath that, however, there was something else. Something more subtle and familiar, a second presence tangled with the first.

This isn't just Sieghart. Someone else is with him—someone whose magic I recognize.

The realization made his skin crawl. The chief conjurer of Lemilsia must have been someone whom Noah had met before.

But who?

Among the people Noah had interacted with in Lemilsia, none besides Sieghart were still alive. Moreover, there were few people whose magical signature he would've known so clearly.

Suddenly, a single name rose unbidden in Noah's mind.

Anna.

His younger sister—dead these many years.

Anna is gone. It cannot be. And yet...

Noah suddenly remembered what his uncle had said to him when he had pleaded to see Anna's body to mourn her. He had laughed and said that he had given the order for his conjurers to toss her remains somewhere in the capital.

I learned Anna had died the same day I met Her Highness, and my life changed forever.

But Noah now asked himself, *Was that truly the only thing that changed?*

He thought back to the events that had followed the encounter that had changed his fate. And now, a new possibility dawned in his mind.

"If I may, Your Majesty," he said quietly.

What had struck the capital's barrier was something like a wedge, meant to slowly widen a gap and forcibly tear the shield apart.

As Karlheinz had said, it had been a warning shot: a show of power to demand surrender before the real invasion began.

But even if battle broke out, it would still take about an hour before the barrier truly gave out.

"I am well aware that I am unworthy of your trust, and that I deserve punishment. However, if you will permit it, I would humbly request one final selfish act." Noah bowed deeply once more. "I will give everything to eliminate Her Highness's enemies. For that purpose, and for this battle alone, may I—"

"Karlheinz," Volkhard said, cutting off Noah's plea. "We'll test it now. A bit earlier than planned."

"Your Majesty, are you certain?"

"I intended to do this from the start. The timing has simply come sooner than we thought."

Noah didn't understand, but as he stood there, puzzled, Volkhard

called his name.

"Noah."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

To Noah's surprise, what came next were not words of condemnation.

"You shall command the army during this assault. Meet the enemy, and repel them."

Noah instinctively raised his head despite knowing it was disrespectful to do so.

Volkhard leaned against the armrest of the throne, watching him with what almost looked like amusement.

"I said I entrust everything to you. If needed, you may place Karlheinz under your command as well."

"If I may, Your Majesty," Noah began. "This battle will decide the future of Avianoia. To entrust it to someone like me—"

"I granted you the right to remain at Claudia's side, and with that came the weight of duty. I am now commanding you to fulfill that duty, that is all."

There were countless other uses for a prince of an enemy nation.

That Noah had entered the kingdom under a false identity was enough to brand him a traitor and a threat to national security. Volkhard's treatment of him was, by any measure, extraordinarily generous.

"Or perhaps, you mean to suggest I must join the front lines myself?" Volkhard chuckled.

Noah let out his breath. "I would never ask that of you, Your Majesty." Then, rising quietly to his feet, he offered a proper bow once more. "Even Your Majesty's entire army is more than I deserve. The knights should remain under Lord Karlheinz's command."

At that point, Noah stood up straight. He was serious. "What I ask instead is this: Grant me authority over the princes and the visiting dignitaries from abroad."

Volkhard did not stifle the bellowing laugh that escaped his lips.

It was a bold request—one that exceeded any ordinary knight's station—but Volkhard decided to allow it.

"Go."

"As Your Majesty commands."

Noah immediately began weaving a teleportation spell, searching for the coordinates he needed.

First, I'll ensure Her Highness's safety. And then...

His heart beat steadily in his chest.

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After watching Noah disappear, Volkhard crossed one leg over the other.

"Now then, Karlheinz," he said, grinning at his chief conjurer. "The woman who changed your fate was Dorothea, wasn't it?"

"I am honored Your Majesty remembers such trifling stories about someone as lowly as I am."

Karlheinz's expression didn't change. Meanwhile, a multitude of glowing letters danced across the palm of his hand. The symbols scattered suddenly in all directions as his orders were relayed to the waiting mage knights throughout the kingdom.

"If what Dorothea said is to be believed, then I am fated to die in this attack," Volkhard said, his tone even. "As are both of my sons."

She had erased even that from his memory.

"Lady Dorothea truly was a magnificent conjurer," Karlheinz replied.

"Hmph. She ensured the knowledge was erased, yet she left it buried in my subconscious."

Despite a hint of irritation, Volkhard watched the light that Karlheinz summoned.

"Looking back, Your Majesty's decisions ten years ago were remarkably odd," Karlheinz commented while continuing to issue orders to the other conjurers. "You withdrew troops from the borders despite the unrest there and focused on consolidating your forces. It was almost as if you were preparing for this assault."

"It appears that Dorothea's words guided my actions. I wasn't too picky about the means, so long as she ensured that she left behind a powerful and loyal conjurer."

His mind drifted back to the obsidian eyes he had first seen in

this very castle ten years prior.

"I had even allowed a mysterious child named Noah to remain at my daughter's side."

Whether that, too, had been part of Dorothea's plan, Volkhard could no longer say.

The king closed his eyes.

"There is one vital difference between the future that Dorothea feared and the present we now face—in that world, Leonhard was not Claudia's knight."

As he opened his eyes, he rose from the throne.

"The connections that Noah carefully built since Claudia fell into her long sleep have all gathered here, Karlheinz."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"In that other world where I die, it seems you survive. If by some chance you do so here as well—handle things as you see fit."

"You jest." Karlheinz sighed so deeply that his behavior bordered on insolence. He finished sending his orders and stepped forward to begin walking alongside Volkhard. "Such remarks would most certainly displease Her Highness."

In surprisingly high spirits for such a solemn moment, Volkhard laughed heartily.

Karlheinz glanced at him with exasperation as the king quietly spoke to his final consort.

Watch closely, Dorothea. See what form the future you feared will take.

Chapter 4

"Prince Sieghart," a soldier said.

Crowned now as the new king of Lemilsia, Sieghart stood at the edge of a jagged mountain cliff, his attention focused on the glowing barrier that enshrouded the enemy capital.

"The preparations for our advance into Avianoia are complete."

"Very well," he said.

The splendor of Avianoia's capital was plainly visible from this great height. Built of stone and red brick, the city stretched out in careful symmetry, every detail as finely wrought as sculpture.

The more I look at it, the more beautiful it seems.

And yet, beneath that beauty lay meticulous planning. The city's design optimized the efficiency of defensive magic.

It was the first time in the three years since he'd begun the ritual mourning period for his father that Sieghart had seen another kingdom. Even setting aside the novelty of it, there was much a king could learn from studying Avianoia's city design.

The entire capital functions as a great magic circle, bolstering the strength of the barrier surrounding it. Cities built upon such principles are not rare, but the efficacy with which this one has been realized... There may be no equal in the world.

The sun, now on the verge of setting, bathed the city in golden light.

At its center rose a towering white castle, which was heavily fortified with additional layered barriers. It was, without a doubt, the beating heart of the kingdom.

Adelheid sleeps within that castle.

Sieghart pressed a clenched fist against his chest.

"Adelheid...you will be mine at last."

In his mind burned an image he could never forget.

In the midst of the chaos engulfing the castle where he had spent

his childhood, while his father's broken voice screamed in madness, Sieghart had laid eyes upon her. She had stood in the garden atop the castle. She had been beautiful, and he had yearned for her ever since.

My witch...

A sharp pang seized his skull, and he winced.

The reincarnation of Adelheid will be mine. I will have her. I must...

A bright voice startled him out of his reverie. "Sieghart."

He turned around.

Standing there, dressed in robes and wearing their usual smile, was the chief conjurer. "At long last, our ambitions bear fruit. The final preparations for war are complete. And yet, why do you stand here? What do you see?"

"I was just—"

"I hardly think it possible," the conjurer said with a tilt of the head, "but you aren't hesitating, are you?"

The pain in his head worsened, throbbing deeply. "Of course not. I've wanted to claim Adelheid since I was a child—"

"Exactly. Now then, come." The conjurer tugged on Sieghart's sleeve. "With a single word from you, the war begins, and your wish shall be granted! Does this not please you?"

"Then deliver this order once more to every soldier." Sieghart gripped the left breast of his uniform over his heart. "No matter their status—be they commoner or royalty—those who do not raise their arms against us are not to be harmed. We have one goal. We cannot afford any distractions."

"Of course! You're absolutely right, Sieghart. Our nation, Lemilsia, desires Adelheid alone. So long as we obtain her, nothing else matters." The conjurer nodded fervently, their arms spread wide.

"Yes. Adelheid is our only objective."

Even as he said it aloud, Sieghart couldn't ignore the contradictions tugging at his thoughts.

This is war. It won't end with taking one woman. The consequences will ripple across the world, such as how we should treat Avianoia, the shifts in international alliances, and the countless

other political repercussions... All of this matters, and yet...

Suppressing each thought in turn, Sieghart doubled down on his words.

"I will claim Adelheid—no matter what it takes."

His chief conjurer smiled. "Sieghart, right now, you're as powerful as any in the world! Of course, it seems the people of Avianoia are doing their best to hold their defenses... Even as we speak..." They formed a circle with their fingers, peeking through it at the royal capital. "It appears Avianoia's chief conjurer is deploying his forces throughout the city. And that barrier of theirs is formidable—perhaps the most powerful ever recorded!"

"It's fine. I recognized the structure from the analysis that the scouts brought back. It's the same barrier used at the Raushneur Academy of Magic, meaning Klingate's crown prince is responsible for it."

Until six years ago, Sieghart had studied within the protective confines of one of those barriers. He had a good grasp of its magical patterns and weak points.

With lips curled into a smirk, Lemilsia's chief conjurer presented a question as a teacher does to a student.

"The inside of the barrier is apparently cloaked with illusion magic. It's hard to see where the enemy is concentrating their forces. What do you intend to do?"

"Avianoia's troops are largely composed of highly skilled conjurers. As I am now, I can detect concentrations of magical energy across the barrier without difficulty," Sieghart answered, narrowing his eyes as he took in the castle and its barrier. "I will find where Adelheid sleeps—and where Leonhard is too."

The conjurer laughed in delight at their student's answer. "Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant. Tonight, without fail, Adelheid shall be yours."

"Yes. I shall take their capital, drive Leonhard away, and claim her."

"And should anyone rise to stop you... Well, they must be eliminated, mustn't they?"

Sieghart shot a glare downward at the conjurer. "There's no need

for indiscriminate violence. Enemy soldiers or civilians, it matters not; if they can be neutralized and captured, that will suffice."

The conjurer's peach-colored eyes met Sieghart's with the same intensity. "Come now! That's far too soft, Sieghart. Hesitate over your methods, and you risk losing what you are trying to protect."

There was something behind those words—something that made Sieghart grimace.

However, the conjurer smiled again and lightly tapped him near the waist. "Sieghart, you spent three years in mourning after your father's death, closing your kingdom's borders and preparing for this moment. All of it was for her."

His words came out shaky. "That's right. I...did it...all for her."

"Then go. Go and claim your precious witch."

Sieghart issued his command to the mage knights positioned throughout the mountain range.

"Break the barrier."

His voice, carried on waves of magic, would no doubt reach each and every knight clearly. Fully aware of that, he gave the next order.

"Strike with thunder. Begin the war."

"And now, by command of our glorious king!" cried the chief conjurer with a cackle.

At the signal, the conjurers raised their voices in unison. A single incantation rippled across the ranks, chanted in harmony. The air grew thick with sound—a guttural hum, low and resonant, like something crawling deep beneath the earth.

So be it.

A vast fog of blackened magic, churning like mist and shadow, began to encircle the capital below.

At last, my lifelong wish shall be fulfilled.

Above the capital, the clouds had gathered thick and dark, now streaked with furious violet lightning.

I've always wanted her. Yes, I... I...

The chorus of spellcasters swelled, their incantations gaining in intensity.

This... This is what I've wished for...

Then, with a thunderous roar that shook the earth, a torrent of

lightning came crashing down upon the city.

The barrier shielding the capital glimmered, resisting the assault—but then it shattered all the same, reduced to shards of light that scattered like broken glass.

"Your Majesty! The barrier has fallen!" one of the soldiers cried out, but neither Sieghart nor the chief conjurer paused the advance.

Cloak billowing, the chief conjurer of Lemilsia grinned at him. "It's not over yet, Sieghart."

"Yeah. I know."

What they had destroyed was only the first layer of the capital's defenses, merely the outer shell.

Sieghart raised his voice clearly for all to hear. *"Commence teleportation."*

The words, carried by magic, echoed through the field—loud enough for the enemy to hear. That, of course, was by design.

It was a false command.

Sieghart's order doubled as a chant, triggering a pre-cast illusion spell inside the first barrier.

"Avianoia's defenses are weakest at the western gate. Push forward from there, and have the elite units circle around to the south," he instructed.

With those words, luminous forms began to move according to his command. But in truth, those forms weren't the mage knights—they were decoys.

Avianoia's troops will split their forces to intercept the simulacra created by the chief conjurer.

The forces that appeared to teleport into the first barrier surrounding the capital were nothing but conjurations. Empty husks.

But our real goal...

A watery scrying mirror shimmered before him, showing the inner capital.

He watched as the simulacra moved and fought like true soldiers. They unleashed flame and lightning spells alike.

As stone buildings were torn apart, Avianoian citizens screamed and fled. Their conjurers could be heard shouting over the chaos.

"Protect the citizens by His Majesty's orders!"

"Karlheinz is with us! Drive the Lemilsian soldiers back!"

Had they still not realized? The simulacra were nothing more than a diversion.

While they still hold the enemy's attention...

Sieghart gave the signal to the chief conjurer.

Using the simulacra as a distraction, the real troops that had been secretly teleported in began chanting the same spell as before.

Come now, shatter! he thought.

Overhead, the storm clouds flashed violet.

Shatter the great magic circle etched by the very city itself!

Another massive bolt of lightning struck the city with a deafening clap.

Screams rang out—civilians or soldiers, it was no longer possible to tell. The spell unleashed by the conjurers gouged the central boulevard apart, its surrounding structures collapsing in a shower of dust.

"Well done, Sieghart. One more strike and we'll bring down the barrier protecting the royal castle," his chief conjurer said.

"Yeah," he answered hesitantly.

But what of the civilians in those buildings? Were there innocents who couldn't escape?

Don't think about it.

Wincing from the stabbing pain in his head, Sieghart steeled himself.

"While the conjurers prepare a third volley, I'll send the elite troops to the castle," he said.

"Now hold on," the chief conjurer said with a raised brow. "That's a bit too direct. We have a plan, right? Cripple the city. Scatter their forces. Stay the course."

"But— Nghh!" Even as Sieghart tried to argue, pain lanced through him. He dropped to one knee.

"What's wrong? You look pale."

"I-I'm fine."

"Hesitation will get your men killed. If you're incapable, I'll take command until—"

"No need. I can...still fight," Sieghart said through gritted teeth.

He dug his fingers into the earth. “First, teleport the citizens out. Once the buildings are empty, we’ll destroy them. That will still throw their troops into disarray.”

“Come now. Do you really think we have time for that?”

“I’ll do it myself.”

“Honestly...” The chief conjurer sighed with a shrug of their slender shoulders. “Then hurry. At your level, it should be child’s play to locate areas with few signs of life.”

“Yeah...”

“As we speak, the final phase of the barrier breach is underway. If you don’t give them a show to watch, their troops will spot the real strike force and tear them apart.”

Sieghart turned back to the scrying mirror and surveyed the city.

Our troops are moving just as planned. They’ve already teleported into the weak point left behind when the circle was disrupted.

If they could pierce that single point, the castle’s barrier would fall. And then, they’d be one step away.

“Leonhard is with Adelheid,” Sieghart murmured.

“Then we must hurry and free the princess from her coffin. Come now, Sieghart!”

With his skull still feeling like it was going to split in two, Sieghart sought out the next building to destroy.

But he sensed that something was off.

“Wait,” he said, furrowing his brow. “There’s something strange about the buildings on the boulevard we leveled in the last barrage.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I’m not picking up any life signatures.”

At that, the chief conjurer frowned. “Perhaps everyone inside perished? No, that couldn’t be...”

“I’m calling the soldiers back. We’ll retreat for now—”

Just as Sieghart said that, he suddenly thought he could hear a beautiful song faintly in the wind.

This magic...

Instantly, Sieghart cried out a command that doubled as an incantation.

"All units, raise your barriers—now!"

"Your Majesty?!"

But it was too late for nearly half of the conjurers stationed around the castle.

"What is this beautiful song...?"

"Ahhh... Ahhh, no! My mind feels like it's melting!"

Through the scrying mirror, the melody, laced with magic, sounded like nothing more than an ordinary song, but the soldiers who were hearing it directly collapsed one by one, enraptured.

The Avianoians let us break through the barrier! They drew in our forces precisely where they wanted them.

It had all been calculated from the start.

"I can see it... Beautiful paradise! This voice... It must be that of a goddess!"

Two women appeared in the water mirror before them.

"Sieghart, is this the woman you once seduced?" the chief conjurer asked, watching the scene from beside him.

"Hardly," Sieghart replied. Despite the panic he was feeling, he managed a thin smile. "She was just a classmate."

"Now then," said one of the two figures reflected in the scrying mirror. She radiated a gentle, graceful allure in her soft, tender voice. *"I wonder, are you nearby, Lucas? My darling Lucas..."*

"Fiolina," Sieghart murmured.

She had been a classmate of his back when he had been studying under an alias. It appeared she had become a formidable magician in her own right.

"Sister, don't."

And there's Lauretta...

Fiolina's twin sister wore a slightly sulky expression as she clung to her sister's arm, eyes scanning for the enemy who wasn't actually there.

"I'll never let him near you again...ever."

A loud laugh escaped Sieghart. "I suppose I deserve that."

Fewer than half the Lemilsian conjurers remained untouched by the sisters' song.

"I know your magic inside and out," Sieghart murmured to

himself. “If you wish to avoid injury, I suggest you retreat.”

“Fiolina!” Lauretta exclaimed as a detached unit emerged from behind the sisters, wielding spells meant to separate them.

So, they’ve chosen to fight. I’d hoped that I wouldn’t have to kill them...

Beside him, the chief conjurer offered Sieghart a serene smile.

Ignoring the splitting headache that warped his vision, Sieghart channeled his magic into the soldiers bound to him by magical contract.

“Take them down, along with the barri—”

The two sisters, now standing back-to-back to shield one another, opened their eyes wide in surprise.

A moment later, a flash of light engulfed the scrying mirror, followed by muffled cries of pain from Sieghart’s soldiers. His magical connection to them was abruptly severed.

“I made it...” came a muffled voice through the mirror.

“Prince Stuart!” Fiolina exclaimed.

The figure who stumbled into view had long silver hair tied back. A lean young man, slight for his height, he quickly looked away from Fiolina and Lauretta as if flustered. His movements were just as unsteady as his demeanor.

“Ah. The crown prince of Klingate, no doubt,” the chief conjurer remarked, amused. “He’s a skilled practitioner of barrier magic. Sieghart, I believe he’s sealed your forces inside a barrier.”

“So it would seem.”

In the scrying mirror, the reflection showed his soldiers pounding their fists against the invisible walls of a magical cage. It was of the same make as the barriers that encased the royal capital and the castle—a structure so strong that neither breaking it from within nor breaching it from outside seemed a possibility.

Sieghart exhaled quietly, resigning himself to the turn of events. “The soldiers fighting in the city were decoys. The troops led by Karlheinz were nothing but bait.”

“Ha. While we used simulacra as decoys, they used real soldiers for theirs! How clever,” said the chief conjurer with a chuckle, though the amusement didn’t reach their eyes. “The main force of their

army isn't under the command of Karlheinz, which means..."

Sieghart immediately understood the implication.

Leonhard.

His eyes fell closed for a heartbeat before snapping open with determination.

"I will leave the army to you," he said, turning to the conjurer. "Will you take command?"

"Of course I will," they replied without hesitation, tilting their head with mild curiosity. "But what are you going to do?"

"If they're using their main force as bait, then I must be prepared to do the same."

Sieghart's body had been entirely remade over the past three years.

"It's time I proved that the strength I've gained rivals even Adelheid's greatest disciple," he said.

The conjurer said nothing, merely watching as Sieghart cast a transportation spell with no incantation. The magic took form around him, swirling with light.

"I can tear open a hole in that barrier—at least wide enough for one man," Sieghart said.

"Then go. See it done."

I will claim Adelheid.

He silently repeated his vow like a mantra.

Otherwise, I—

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Noah slowly pushed open the doors of the chapel once more. A red carpet spread across the floor leading to a coffin. There, his princess slept unchanging, just as beautiful as she had been three years ago.

The conversation he'd had moments earlier with Ehrenfried, Claudia's second-eldest brother, echoed in his mind.

"Claudia is the reincarnation of Adelheid," the second prince had murmured, deep in thought. "It's such a preposterous idea that I

can’t wrap my mind around it. Yet, I can’t imagine you or Father would lie about something like this...”

“Prince Ehrenfried, I understand how difficult it might be to believe, but—” Noah had begun.

“But you don’t have time to convince me of it now. I understand.” Ehrenfried had chosen to set aside his disbelief, at least for now, and move forward based on the information Noah provided. “First of all, Lady Dorothea’s magic—erasing another’s memory and gradually restoring it according to certain conditions—is absurdly advanced.”

“However, that magic’s construction is why I believe that there must be some vital information hidden in the memories that His Majesty just recovered.”

At that same time, the other members of the royal family had been preparing to confront the invading Lemilsian forces. Joining them were foreign dignitaries, such as King Ashbal, who had answered Noah’s plea and rallied for Claudia and her kingdom.

“According to Lady Dorothea...Her Highness is *incomplete*.”

“Not a whole apple, but a bitten one—if she’s missing a piece, she can remain hidden, right?” Ehrenfried mused. He pressed his hand to his forehead, as if nursing a headache. “Three years ago, Claudia chose to fall into slumber, so she could remake her body into a vessel capable of wielding Adelheid’s power. Is that correct?”

“It is. However, I believe that Her Highness becoming a perfect vessel for Adelheid was precisely what Lady Dorothea wanted to avoid.”

“And that was because she feared that, as Claudia grew closer to Adelheid’s form, she would become vulnerable to the pursuers, correct?”

“Yes, and now I wonder if the magic that Lady Dorothea cast is actively preventing Her Highness from waking.”

Noah guided Ehrenfried’s reasoning step by step, never speaking out of turn, waiting patiently for the prince to reach his own conclusion.

But Ehrenfried’s expression only grew more tense.

“This is bad, Noah.”

“How do you mean?”

The prince bowed his head and clenched both fists tightly. “If what you’re saying is true, I fear the only way to wake Claudia is by restoring what she lacks.”

“What does she lack...?”

“She needs an infusion of her own magic...and a lot of it. It’s the only way.”

The words struck Noah like a blow to the chest.

Ehrenfried continued, his voice growing more desperate. “Such a thing is easier said than done. We can’t get her magic, nor can we return it to her. Claudia herself is the only one who possesses that magic, and she’s in a deep slumber.”

“But—” Noah had wanted to object, but he stopped himself.

“It’s hopeless. There’s nothing we can do...” Ehrenfried trembled. “I’m so sorry, Claudia...”

Noah knelt before him, quietly bowing his head in gratitude. “Prince Ehrenfried...”

“Yes...?”

“Your words have given me peace.”

“P-Peace? What are you talking about? I just said there’s no way to wake Claudia...”

“Your words have made it clear to me what I must do. Thanks to you, I am finally certain.” Noah rose to his feet, his eyes locked on Ehrenfried’s. “I will go to her now. It’s time I brought Her Highness back.”

And so, Noah had returned to this chapel where Claudia lay asleep.

Step by step, he moved toward her.

He closed his eyes just once, allowing his thoughts to coalesce.

Soon, Lemilsia’s forces will come to break the barrier.

Sieghart must have already realized that the royal capital itself served as a magic circle.

Most likely, he intends to shatter the array by destroying the city’s streets.

He would then send his elite troops against the castle’s gates to breach the final ward.

He would have to. His Majesty designed the capital so that no enemy could march on this kingdom without first shattering the defensive array.

King Volkhard had never neglected preparations for war—precisely because Dorothea had concealed within him a subconscious awareness of the threat to come. Over the course of nearly ten years, he had brought together the finest minds of the realm—chief among them Karlheinz—to refine and ready the nation's magical defenses.

How much of this lies within Lady Dorothea's design?

Noah stopped and knelt beside Claudia's coffin.

The day I learned Anna was dead, the same day I escaped from the prison and collapsed in the forest, Her Highness saved my life.

Even now, her body lay as if untouched by time—her skin white as snow. She was dressed in white and lay in a bed of white lilies; only her lips, painted for death, bore any color—a vivid red.

That day changed everything. She taught me what it meant to choose how I lived.

Noah knew he would never forget that day.

But that wasn't all that changed.

He looked down at his liege's body as his mind raced.

I made a pact that day. Not the cursed slave contract forced upon me by my uncle, but a new contract—one forged with Her Highness herself.

In pain and torment, crawling through the forest, he remembered seeing Claudia smile down at him as she told him, "Choose a way to live, not a trivial way to end."

In her small hand, she had held a dagger conjured from magic. Without hesitation, she'd raised it high and plunged it into her own left breast for Noah. Magical energy burst forth. Blood poured out. The sight had been almost unbearable, but moments later, the crimson that soaked the blade began to gleam with golden light.

"I'll slice through these ugly chains, but I need you to endure the pain for just a bit. You mustn't flail no matter how scary it might get."

With that, she had taken his chin in her small hand, had forced

his head up, and then drove the golden dagger into his chest.

His heart had slammed hard in his chest. A searing pain had torn through him, followed by a rush of feverishly hot magical power. However, the curse pulsing through his body had fought back, lashing out violently against Claudia's magic. She had giggled at the curse's defiance, her smile shining brightly on him.

"Oh my. Will you defy me, then? Alas, I can't do what must be done with my cuwwent body, so I have no choice but to obawite your slave contwact," she had said as a young girl, lacking the motor skills to properly enunciate her words.

"Overwrite...?"

Despite her childish lisp, to Noah, she had seemed like an adult woman soothing an infant.

"Don't wowwy. I'll undo the collar wight away."

"Ngh...!!!"

And just like that, the curse eating away at him had vanished.

He also remembered their conversation from later that night.

"Is there a new slave contract between you and me?"

"Not quite. The magic is that of an acowyte contract, and it's much stronger."

"Acolyte... For a while now, I've felt some kind of huge, powerful magic swirling inside me... Here."

Noah had pressed his hand against the left side of his chest, feeling the power now rooted in his heart.

"This is your magic, isn't it?"

"Indeed," she had answered with a gentle smile. He had wondered later if that had been the same smile that Adelheid had worn when speaking with her disciples. "Any acowyte of mine can use my magic."

Noah thought back to what Ehrenfried had shared during the meeting with the foreign dignitaries.

He said that he detected a faint fluctuation in Her Highness's magical energy beginning three days ago.

Noah had stood over the coffin and had extended a hand over

Claudia's still body after having spoken with Ehrenfried.

That day, I reached into Her Highness's coffin for the first time in a long while. Even though the barrier's rejection nearly tore off my nails, I made sure not a single drop of blood fell.

And yet, perhaps he had failed.

She is completely clad in white, but if the blood had fallen on her lips...then it would be possible that I'd never noticed.

Ashamed of his own carelessness, Noah reached forward again, slower this time.

Her Highness's magic has been flowing through me ever since that day ten years ago.

The translucent veil over the coffin began to glow thanks to Noah's presence.

At this point, it feels as natural to me as my own magic.

To him, the presence of Claudia's magic coursing through his veins had long been the norm.

It was designed to feel that way.

Just how far ahead had Dorothea foreseen the future?

Her spell manipulates thoughts and memories. For a long time, it has obscured the truth, but Her Highness's magic has certainly been "lacking" ever since that day.

That is to say—since the day Claudia regained the memories of her previous life, her magic had been incomplete.

When we forged the acolyte contract, she gave me a piece of her magic.

A fragment, like one might offer a cut of apple to a stray animal. She had given it to him without thought to herself.

He reached toward her. "Your Highness..."

A sharp snap rang out.

Noah's hand had touched the barrier that sealed the coffin, which hissed in protest, crackling like lightning caught in thunderclouds, trying to throw him back.

"We are all waiting for you..."

Pain lanced through his fingers as he resisted the ward's rejection.

His nail split. Blood dripped onto Claudia's cheek.

It felt as though something had crushed the nerves in his arm—pain raced from his fingertips to his shoulder in a flash.

He forced his face to remain still, but sweat broke across his brow. His palm burned with heat, while an aching cold crept through his chest.

"Princess..." His voice was hoarse as he spoke the title he had used for her in childhood. "My princess."

The moment the words left his lips, his vision filled with light.

In the next instant, darkness fell. Shadows consumed everything, reducing the world to an empty void.

A magical dimension...?

Both Claudia's coffin and Claudia's body were gone.

However, in the corner of his vision, a figure glowed faintly. Hair the color of milk tea caught the dim light.

"You're Her Highness's—"

"Tee hee."

The woman who turned to face him bore an uncanny resemblance to the girl he'd known for so long.

"That's right. I'm Claudia's mother. And in a former life, I was the mother of Adelheid as well."

He did not doubt her. "Lady Dorothea..."

It was just as King Volkhard had told him and Karlheinz.

When asked how she knew that she was to give birth to the reincarnation of the great witch Adelheid, she had told him that she had been the one to give birth to her in a previous life, five hundred years ago.

Her hair, the same soft color as Claudia's, was elegantly tied. She wore a gown made of numerous layers of sheer, delicate fabric. In the darkness, she conjured a chair and sat down, a twinkle in her eye.

"Five hundred years ago, I was torn away from Adelheid. I never once had the chance to be a mother to her."

Noah said nothing.

In all the stories that Claudia had shared of her past life, she had rarely spoken of any blood relatives. She more frequently spoke of her former apprentices, whom she remembered with fondness.

Perhaps that meant she had no memories of family.

"Adelheid died for the world, trading her life for its future. My great—but dearly loved—daughter."

Placing a hand upon her chest, Dorothea's face softened into a tender expression. The likeness to Claudia was striking.

"When I was reborn and learned that I might bear her again, I swore to myself...this time, I would protect her."

They truly are two of a kind.

Even their eyes—so beautiful, and strong enough to pin down any who stood against her.

"I will not hand her over. Not to you, Leonhard."

Opal-colored eyes—just like Claudia's—bore a hole straight through him.

"Ten years ago, I was teleported out of prison with someone's help," Noah said hesitantly.

"Yes. And without that help, you would have died, tormented and broken," she replied, as if she had witnessed it herself.

"I believe that the one responsible is the chief conjurer of Lemilsia. However, I doubt it was their intention to send me to the forest that surrounded the tower where Her Highness was being kept."

She laughed. "Oh? And why is that?"

"Sending a child who knew nothing would be useless. If they truly intended to use me to claim Her Highness, they would've needed to have trained and educated me first."

Like what was being done with Sieghart now.

"I believe my destination was distorted by a spell you left behind."

Dorothea listened to him silently.

"It was my passing across the barrier that triggered the return of Her Highness's and His Majesty's memories. But not only that..." Noah touched the base of his neck, where the cursed collar had once been. "I believe you anticipated that Her Highness would give me her magic. That she would save me."

The curse had tried to resist Claudia when she had first attempted to destroy it.

And so she had overwritten it with her own contract instead.

But could the magical artifact used by his uncle truly have been powerful enough to defy Claudia?

Even as a six-year-old child, Claudia had recovered the memories of Adelheid. She had known her magic well.

"The man who pursues Claudia..." Dorothea chuckled bitterly. "His magic can steal Adelheid's soul."

"That's possible?"

"The technique only works on someone who possesses the exact same magical signature as Adelheid," she explained. She possessed the air of an expert.

"And that's why you took a piece of Her Highness's magic?" Noah asked. "And it was to that end that you placed me in her path?"

"If a child bound by a slave contract were to appear, she would save them no matter the cost—even if she had to use the acolyte contract that existed five hundred years ago."

She knew the scope of Adelheid's magical knowledge. She knew her daughter's nature and the choices she would make.

"That's simply who she is. That's why she gave her life for the sake of the world."

Within the dark, spell-woven space, Claudia's coffin shimmered into view once more.

"To lose Adelheid... To lose Claudia again... To let her be taken and killed..."

Dorothea sank to the ground beside the coffin and gently touched her daughter's cheek, which Noah himself could not touch.

"Wouldn't it be better for her to rest like this, untouched by anyone? Just a long afternoon nap, safe inside this coffin?"

"I cannot agree with that."

Noah's answer was firm. Dorothea narrowed her eyes in displeasure.

"A dangerous man is hunting my child. Do you think I would leave her defenseless? A mother's duty is to protect her child from harm."

"But it is not the path Her Highness would choose."

Even if the path she *would* choose would lead her into danger.

"I understand what must be done," Noah said. "I will now return the magic Her Highness entrusted to me."

Dorothea looked down at her sleeping daughter. “No, you mustn’t. Did you not hear what I said? If she becomes whole again, her soul can be stolen.”

“I must. If I do not return her magic, then she will never awaken again.”

Glowering, she stood and turned to Noah. “Then you must destroy Lemilsia first so that they can never take her. This world must be safe before I’ll allow her to wake.”

Noah was stunned into silence for a short time. At last, meeting the force of a mother’s love head-on, he said, “Her Highness would never desire such a thing.”

“What did you just say?”

Dorothea’s iridescent eyes, which shifted color with the light, flickered faintly.

“If she were the type of person who wished to hide away while the others fought for her, then she would never have sacrificed her life for this world.”

“But...”

“She would want to know who’s targeting her and why. She would want to understand Sieghart’s reasons. And then, she would want to make her own decision.”

Claudia had told Noah this many times. Noah knew better than anyone what Claudia truly desired.

“She only does what she wishes to do.”

“You mustn’t return her magic to her,” Dorothea murmured, her voice now fainter than before. “If she becomes Adelheid, her soul will be taken. That’s worse than any sleep, worse than any death.”

“Lady Dorothea,” Noah said, kneeling slowly before her. “She will not become Adelheid.”

She raised an eyebrow at his words.

“The magic she gave me has merged with my magic within my body,” he said, laying a hand upon his heart in the formal gesture of one addressing a noble lady. “She and I were bound in an acolyte’s contract. I do carry her magic within me, but it is no longer identical to that of Adelheid’s.”

Dorothea’s eyes widened in realization.

"Judging by your reaction, I'd guess that my theory isn't too far off."

"But... Whether or not it will succeed...I cannot say."

"I am her servant. My only purpose in life is to do as she wishes. Know that I will do anything to make sure that this succeeds."

Perhaps Dorothea heard the steely resolve in Noah's voice as he said that. Her eyes widened slightly.

"Everything I do is for her."

Dorothea exhaled a small breath at last.

"I see. Then, I suppose she no longer needs my protection," she said with a smile that was the spitting image of Claudia's own.

There was sorrow in her voice, but also relief.

"Forgive me, Leonhard. In all the futures I foresaw, you were always the greatest threat."

All of them worlds where I never met Her Highness...

Worlds Noah didn't even want to imagine. Yet, Dorothea had witnessed them countless times.

"That's why I wanted you to grow at Claudia's side. Not just for her sake, but for yours."

Noah's eyes widened at the admission.

"Don't get me wrong. I did it for my daughter. Because of my plans, she was separated from Volkhard and grew up all alone in that tower..."

Dorothea had likely foreseen the hardships Claudia would face, but maybe she believed that there was no better alternative available to her.

"Lemilsia is invading, yes? You know, I swore that this time I was going to give her a happy life..." Dorothea said, stroking her sleeping daughter's hair. "But in the end, I couldn't protect her."

Noah had tried to remain silent, but he could no longer restrain himself.

"Thanks to the years of preparation that you gave us, our kingdom now stands ready to repel their attack. We have gathered allies from across many nations."

Those opal eyes blinked in surprise.

"Because of the spells you cast and the plans you laid, Her

Highness has remained beyond their reach, allowing her to sleep peacefully. Though I must admit, I've long harbored frustration, wondering whether there could've been a safer way..." He rose, gaze fixed on the sleeping form of his liege. "But it was because of your plans that I was brought to her side, and that is a debt I will repay by protecting her for all eternity."

Dorothea blinked slowly before she smiled. "Thank you, Leonhard."

"My name is Noah. And I am here as a symbol of Her Highness's peace."

"I see... Noah..." She stroked Claudia's hair one more time. "Naptime is nearly over, my beloved Adelheid... Rather, Claudia. My sweet girl."



Dorothea then spoke to Claudia in a way very familiar to Noah.

"There, there. What a good girl...and now, goodbye." Her hand withdrew, hesitantly. Still watching her beloved daughter, Dorothea asked, "Will you give my thanks to Volkhard? And also... Tell him I'm sorry."

"As you wish."

"And tell Karlheinz, 'Make sure you keep warm at night.'"

Dorothea rose to her feet, still wearing Claudia's smile. "One more thing, Noah... Protect her, won't you?"

A sound like shattering glass pierced the darkness.

And then—in the blink of an eye—Noah was standing once more beside the coffin, back in the chapel, just as he had been before. The only difference was that now the barrier that had separated Claudia from the world was gone without a trace.

"As you command, Lady Dorothea," Noah answered quietly.

He once again knelt before the coffin and slowly reached out to touch Claudia's cheek.

His fingertips brushed her cold-as-ice skin.

Noah closed his eyes.

From the wound left by the broken barrier, a single drop of crimson blood slid down his hand.

To defile Claudia's skin was something that, under any other circumstance, would have been unthinkable. Even so, with the blood-slick pad of his thumb, he touched her lips.

"Princess..."

The vivid rouge applied as part of her makeup darkened with the color of his blood.

"I will now return to you what you once gave to me."

He opened his eyes, recalling the sight of Claudia's magic as he'd once seen it, ten years prior. Through the channel of his blood, he poured the magic back into her.

"So, please—"

The magic began to flow into her.

And his breath caught.

Claudia's body was suddenly wrapped in light. Reflexively, Noah raised his arm to shield his eyes.

In an instant, golden brilliance filled the coffin, spilling until it drowned out the world. When the light finally faded, a figure lay where it had once been—a woman, a form he had seen her transform into so many times before.

"Your Highness."

This was not the Claudia who had lain here moments ago, frozen in time at thirteen.

Her figure had grown taller; her body now had graceful curves. She appeared sixteen years old—as though the time halted by her suspended state had suddenly caught up with her.

And yet...

Noah quickly reached out to her and gently raised her into his arms. However, the smile he had thought he would see was not there, nor did she open her eyes.

Her white form lay limp in his arms.

Knowing full well the impropriety, he pressed his fingers to her neck.

There was no warmth in her veins. No pulse beneath the skin.

Her heart... It isn't beating.

Dorothea's words from just moments before echoed in his mind.

"Whether or not it will succeed...I cannot say."

"Princess..."

At that moment, a deafening impact, like a tremor shaking the earth, rang out, accompanied by the sound of a magical barrier shattering.

Lemilsia...

As he continued to hold Claudia's body close, Noah looked up toward the ceiling of the chapel.

Claudia did not awaken. Her lips alone stood out vividly, still slick with Noah's blood.

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"Here is Lord Karlheinz's report, Claudia," Sieghart said.

Having teleported to his hideout after catching Leonhard off guard, Claudia took the sheet of paper Sieghart proffered to her.

"Thank you."

Her hair was still damp from her recent bath. Wearing the jacket Sieghart had conjured over her nightdress, Claudia sat on a chaise lounge and read through the report.

"Still, I didn't expect you to be able to use magic. Much less that you'd find my hideout so easily and teleport straight in."

"Tee hee! With just a little bit of my magic back, something like this is trivial."

"Trivial, you say..."

Rather than respond, Claudia merely smiled, her eyes scanning the final lines of the report.

There, written in Karlheinz's familiar hand, was the following:

"We have found the statue you described in the ruins of the desert kingdom—Sharavia."

So, the statue of the goddess exists in this world as well, she thought.

The statue she had ordered Karlheinz to locate was the one she had seen just before entering her enchanted sleep, in the kingdom ruled by King Ashbal.

Noah had discovered it first, reporting that it bore a resemblance to Claudia.

Noah surmised that it might have been modeled after my mother, Dorothea.

And indeed, the statue *was* of someone connected to Claudia. Unfortunately, Noah's conjecture had been slightly off the mark.

That statue was modeled after Adelheid.

They had also learned that the statue had been brought to the Sharavian royal palace by the same person who brought with her a cursed artifact.

The one responsible for these curses has set their sights upon me, just as I suspected.

She had suspected it for some time. But when she laid eyes on that statue, her suspicion had become certainty. She hadn't told Noah. She hadn't wanted him to act rashly while she was in her slumber.

It seems that it's no different here than in the other world.

Whether that statue was intended to function as a wanted poster or a declaration of war...it's of little consequence.

Claudia gently folded the report and rose to her feet.

Either way, I must soon wake up and ask them myself.

With that, she fed the parchment to the fireplace flames.

"Leonhard refuses to call me Claudia," she told Sieghart.

He looked confused at the sudden change in topic.

"I always thought it was some sort of petty defiance—or disinterest. But thinking on it now, even you, Sieghart, called me Adelheid—and you hardly seem the stubborn type."

"Well... It's just that..."

"It's all right. I believe I understand now..." Claudia smiled softly. "In this world, I was named *Adelheid*, wasn't I?"

"You were, Claudia."

There was care in the way he answered, and Claudia nodded, quietly satisfied.

Then the name Claudia was something my mother gave me...

There was a reason she believed this.

In this era, in lands like Avianoia and beyond, Claudia means "bright."

But to Claudia, the reincarnation of Adelheid, it carried a different meaning.

In the land I lived in five hundred years ago, it meant "something that is lacking."

The fact that her mother in this life had chosen that name which, in her homeland of old, had such a meaning... Could it truly be a coincidence?

And if my mother was also a reincarnation from five hundred years prior?

The meticulous plans that were laid to protect Claudia weren't something that could be explained by her mother being a brilliant conjurer alone.

If my mother was the reincarnation of my mother from five hundred years ago, and she knew she was going to give birth to me once again...

Then maybe the name Claudia was always meant to mean

"lacking."

Perhaps it was a message to those who pursued me... A message that said, "This is Claudia, who is not quite Adelheid."

Claudia gently brought a finger to her lips.

I had thought the faint warmth I felt there was Noah's magic.

When she awoke, and again when she regained a small portion of her magic, she had sensed that warmth.

Now, Claudia realized its true nature.

It isn't just his. It's a blend of both of our magic...

Like how one cannot perceive the heat of their own body, what was always there had gone unnoticed. She had mistaken it as foreign—when in truth, it was shared.

Ah. I see now.

Claudia recalled the nature of the contract she had forged with Noah when she was only six years old.

I left a part of my magic with him that day. It mixed with his...and turned into something this warm.

Elation bloomed into her face, which drew Sieghart's curious gaze.

"What is it, Claudia?"

"I think I've just realized there may have been a seal on my memory."

"A seal...?"

"I've begun to remember things I had forgotten, and come to understand things I never knew... Perhaps something is happening in the other world... I wonder... I wonder if, perhaps, my father and Noah are remembering things too..."

This was likely a matter of little importance to Sieghart, yet he still asked her earnestly.

"Would that be because of your mother's magic?"

"I'm sure of it. She cast it to protect me," she said as she watched the fire crackling in the hearth. "To protect me from the one who secretly controls Leonhard from the shadows... The chief conjurer of Lemilsia."

Sieghart inhaled sharply, then spoke, carefully choosing his words. "So, you suspect it too?"

“In the world I came from, it wasn’t Leonhard who was being used. It was you, Sieghart.”

“Well, that’s quite the thing to hear...” He gave a strained smile and rubbed his forehead. “So Lemilsia is being used by the chief conjurer...? Then perhaps my father was being used... Leonhard’s uncle, that is,” Sieghart said.

“I heard that both of your fathers were deeply at odds with each other. I wonder... Perhaps even that was orchestrated all along.”

“Damn it!” Sieghart cursed. She could see the frustration etched on his face. “Why us?! Why the obsession with our family?!”

“I don’t think it’s an obsession,” Claudia said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

A theory had begun to form in her mind.

“Perhaps...they had no other choice.”

“Claudia...?”

She turned to him with a thoughtful expression. “Have you ever wondered why the royal family of Lemilsia tends to possess such powerful magic?”

That caught Sieghart off guard. The question was so basic that even a child could answer it.

“Because a conjurer’s magical strength is greatly influenced by lineage. We, the royal house of Lemilsia, descend from Reinard.”

“Reinard...”

It was a nostalgic name for Claudia.

“The Legendary Witch Adelheid’s first disciple,” she continued. “He possessed a dazzling charisma, strong leadership, and extremely powerful magic...and eyes the color of obsidian.”

One’s eye color reflected the nature of one’s magic. Eyes like black obsidian, deep and consuming, were the mark of dark magic.

“In truth... You resemble Reinard more than Noah does.”

“Surely you jest.”

“I’m sure that, like Sewell, he would’ve waited for me... Waited for me to return to this world.”

When she was eight, Claudia had encountered Sewell, another one of her former disciples. For five hundred years, he had desperately clung to life, hoping to one day see her again. He’d

wormed his way into the royal family of a distant kingdom under the assumed name Lewis as he searched for her reincarnation.

"But for some reason, Reinard can't act directly. Instead, he controls those of his blood as if they were extensions of himself."

"Then the man who has taken the title of chief conjurer..."

"Is none other than Reinard," Claudia murmured, suddenly feeling a great sadness. "My disciple. I suspect it is he, your ancestor, who is behind this."

It was, as yet, no more than a theory. Nonetheless, Claudia couldn't shake the sense that she was drawing close to the truth. She felt it in her bones.

Still... I have a bad feeling about this. If Reinard is the one orchestrating this, then Leonhard...

A sharp surge of magical energy pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Claudia, stand back," Sieghart said.

"No, I'll be fine."

She had known he would come.

There was a crackling sound, like lightning coiling through clouds. A figure appeared and immediately grabbed Claudia roughly by the shoulders, pulling her close.

"Adelheid!" the figure exclaimed.

"My! You came quickly, Leonhard," Claudia said, softly tittering.

Leonhard's eyes bore into hers, cold as steel.

"I'm surprised you were able to move around so soon after recovering," she teased.

"Come. I will no longer allow you to move about freely."

The grip that Leonhard had on her shoulder was strong enough that Claudia would never have been able to break free of it without her magic.

But before she could respond, a voice stopped them.

"Let go of Claudia."

Leonhard flinched at that name.

"Who's pulling your strings, Leonhard?" Sieghart continued to press him.

"Shut your mouth," Leonhard answered, finally turning to him. His eyes were wells of bottomless darkness as he looked at Sieghart.

“Do not think that I have let you be all this time because I could not find you.”

“I know perfectly well that you have let me live,” Sieghart said. “And I do not deny that you are the rightful heir. I did not wish to oppose you.” He stepped toward Leonhard, facing him without fear. “But I cannot ignore your actions any longer. Tell me: What are your orders for after you take Claudia with you?”

“I do this under *my own* will,” Leonhard said coldly.

Claudia heard no hesitation in his voice.

And yet...

She frowned as she looked up at his profile.

If I focus, I can sense Reinard’s magic.

It was subtly mixed into the magic of his descendant, but she could sense it clearly now.

She reached out and gently brushed her hand against Leonhard’s cheek. “Leonhard.”

The touch made him tense, his brows knitting together in a scowl.

“Don’t touch me, Adelheid. And I thought I told you that I never gave you permission to call me by that name.”

The air grew sharper still, charged with magic, until even the surface of their skin began to prick.

“Very well, then...*Reinard*.”

Leonhard seized the hand she’d placed on his cheek.

“Claudia!” Sieghart shouted in a panic.

“It’s all right, Sieghart,” she replied calmly.

Now, both of her arms were in Leonhard’s grip. Still smiling, she continued, “If you would claim that is not your name, then deny it. Refute it. Say it is not so. Tell me I must not call you Reinard.”

He should have been able to reject that name just as he had rejected the name “Noah.”

“I...”

“That is,” she added with a faint smirk, “if the one controlling you isn’t wanting to hear Adelheid say that name one more time...”

Staring into Leonhard’s eyes, she laughed softly. “But it seems you cannot, can you?”

As if trying to shake something off, Leonhard pulled her closer.

"This isn't of your own will, is it?" she challenged.

"You're wrong. I... This is..."

"You can't disobey." She looked tenderly upon the man who shared the same soul as her dear Noah. "You've been bound by Reinard's spell. No... There's more."

Leonhard grunted as if straining against a heavy weight.

"So... Please. Tell me why you cannot resist him. I will be returning to my world soon," she pleaded, but she knew it would likely be impossible for him to answer.

"No! I won't let you go...!"

It was a childish refusal. He said nothing more to negotiate, neither making further threats nor forcing her into submission.

Claudia glimpsed the torment in him—some deep, writhing anguish he couldn't voice.

"Forgive me. You did ask sweetly, but I can't grant that request."

"Do you...think I'll *let* you leave?" Leonhard panted. "Besides...there's no way...for you to leave this world..."

"There's no way in this world, no. But I've begun to understand there's another way."

She told him the answer her mother had left behind in her name.

"If the me in the real world becomes whole once again, that will be enough. When I was a child, you see, I left a portion of my magic with Noah. He only has to return it to me, and I will be whole again."

"Even if you understand that... What of it?" His grip on her wrists tightened, cruel and desperate.

Sieghart moved to intervene, but Claudia shot him a glance, telling him to stay back.

"There's no way to *tell* that to those in your original world," Leonhard growled. "You'll be trapped here...*forever*."

"There's no need to tell them."

Leonhard's eyes widened in surprise. He was at a loss for words for a moment.

"What...?"

"Because *my* Noah is there," she said, voice brimming with confidence. A smile pulled the corners of her lips outward. "If I've

reached this answer, then I have no doubt he will too."

"Don't be ridiculous."

A deep fury flickered in his obsidian-colored eyes, but Claudia stood firm.

"Noah would never betray the trust I have in him. *Never.*"

Leonhard drew a sharp breath. His grip on Claudia loosened—just slightly.

I know... This isn't the true world. It's only a dream.

More precisely, this was probably a vision influenced by her mother's magic.

Even so...

Claudia smiled at Sieghart, who had continuously tried to protect her. "Forgive me, Sieghart. I've dragged you into this mess with Reinard."

"Claudia..."

In the true world, the Sieghart she knew was likely suffering the same fate as the Leonhard in this one.

"But I'll take care of everything. That is why I must return to my world."

"You speak as if that were possible..." Leonhard's voice was rough, as though scraped raw from within.

"I only do what I wish to," Claudia replied. That was something the legendary Adelheid had decided for herself when she had awoken as Claudia. "And Noah—he only ever does what *I* wish for. All I have to do is ask."

"Lies. The world...doesn't work that way...!" Leonhard said through clenched teeth, as if each word pained him. "You don't know...how weak I am. How powerless I've always been...unable to protect anything. You know nothi—"

"No. I believe with all my heart that my wish will reach Noah," she said, cutting him off. "And he will grant it with the strength he—no, *you*—gained through tireless effort and unbreakable hope."

"What are you saying...?"

Leonhard's strength drained from his hands.

In turn, Claudia lifted hers and touched his cheek.

"Don't you dare underestimate my Noah." Then, her features

softening, she said, “Don’t you dare underestimate yourself.”

***

“Your Highness.”

Amid the trembling din that seemed to shake the chapel’s very foundations, Noah drew Claudia’s sleeping form into his arms and whispered softly.

“There is something I vowed I would tell you when you finally awoke.”

Her body was limp and cold as ice, even as he held her close. The chill brought to mind a long past cold winter’s day when Claudia had clung to him while laughing and had told him, “You’re so warm.”

With the hand not supporting her, Noah slowly combed his fingers through her hair, that familiar soft brown color.

“I have long regretted the words I left unspoken.”

He had once been able to touch it every day. But for the past three years, nearly a thousand days, even that had been forbidden to him.

“So...” he continued. “I shall hesitate no longer.”

He brushed his hand against her cheek as he watched her.

“Your Highness...” he began.

No, that isn’t right.

As a boy, he had mimicked the manner of the adults around him. He had wanted to grow up quickly—to gain the strength to stand by Claudia’s side and lighten the burdens that she had always carried alone. The burdens of a woman who had once chosen to give her life for the sake of the world were heavy, indeed.

“Lady Adelheid... *Dia.*”

He had called her by many names during their long travels to fight against the encroaching darkness.

For her part, Claudia had called him by other names too. “Leonhard,” of course, and she had even once, mischievously, called him “Your Majesty” when he had taken the place of Ashbal. That particular memory made him squirm even now.

But most importantly, she was his...

“Princess,” he said with reverence. “My one and only princess.”

He pressed his forehead lightly against hers and closed his eyes.

He held a fierce possessiveness toward Claudia. Perhaps it was arrogance to think that he had the right to desire to live and die by her side. Regardless, that unshakable desire now compelled him to ask her a question he had once asked her before.

“Do you really think a dog can live properly if he loses his owner to death?”

He opened his eyes and caressed her cheek once more.

“Please awaken soon. I miss the feel of your hand on my head, Princess.”

With his thumb, he gently traced the curve of her lips. It was a touch no mere retainer should ever put upon their liege. Yet even knowing this, Noah chose to do so.

“I will do all that is in my power to bring you back.”

He trailed his fingers along her chin, tracing the outline of her face, and spoke words that no magic could undo.

“I love you with all that I am.”

Then, with a prayer stilled upon his lips, Noah leaned down and kissed her.

***

“Nghhh... Agh!” Leonhard clutched his head in pain and fell to his knees at Claudia’s feet.

“You’re a good boy, Leonhard,” Claudia said, still in the world of dreams.

“I...” He gasped, his voice caught by something.

“Noah is calling for me now,” she said gently. “I must go to him.”

Claudia could feel Noah’s warmth beating in her chest. It was a gentle, yet powerful, guiding heartbeat, and she knew without a doubt it was a gift from him.

“You can’t,” Leonhard managed to say.

The world around them began to twist and buckle. Darkness swallowed all, their surroundings included.

Everything is fading away.

Only Leonhard and Claudia remained.

"I won't let you go anywhere."

Leonhard's voice was raw with pain, yet he strained forward, seizing her ankle with desperate fingers.

"Stay here—with me."

She watched him with pity.

"You are... You are *my* witch...!" he growled.

Claudia knelt and touched his trembling hand. "I'm sorry, but I cannot grant that wish." She firmly took his hand in hers. "But I will bring you with me."

Leonhard jolted at her words, and for a moment, something other than anguish flashed across his face.

"All this around us is not real. It is an illusion my mother left behind. But you..." She smiled. "You truly are my adorable Noah."

Perhaps this world was merely one of the countless futures that could have happened.

"You really are a good boy, aren't you, Leonhard?"

"Adelheid..."

A soft laugh escaped her. "There, there." At peace, she stroked his hair. "I will not leave you incomplete. Come with me."

Leonhard lifted his face and, once more, reached out his hand to her.

Yet rather than grasping her fingers, he drew Claudia into his arms and pressed his lips against the curve of her neck.

Ah... The dream is ending.

Claudia closed her eyes, softly and slowly.

A moment later, she felt the world tip and turn, and after that strange sensation of inversion, she opened her eyes to a brilliant light.

Claudia realized she was cradled in someone's arms.

As she blinked slowly, her blurred vision slowly came into focus. Gazing down upon her were eyes of a deep, obsidian hue.

"Do you know me?" asked the man.

The answer was obvious.



She knew well that his black hair, untamed at the ends, would feel soft to the touch. She had seen his adult form many times through magic, yet now, he seemed even stronger than she remembered. He had grown into a man. His sharp features were fashioned in a way that hid his emotions.

Thus, without waiting to be asked, Claudia spoke the words she had long wished to say.

"I love you too, my Noah."

Lifting her gaze to meet those wide, astonished eyes, she slowly smiled and repeated the words she had said so many times in their youth.

"Hold me?"

Noah's arms tightened around her shortly before he pressed a deep kiss to her lips.

Chapter 5

Noah's magic flowed into her with each lingering kiss.

Every brush of his lips fills me with warmth.

She knew these kisses were meant to heal her, and yet Noah cradled the back of her head, drawing her closer and deepening his embrace in a way that suggested it was more than that.

When they paused to breathe between kisses, he would whisper, "Princess."

His voice trembled with unspoken feelings that he must have been holding on to during his long days of waiting.

"Yes," she murmured, stroking his hair. "I am *your* princess."

As she touched him, she took stock of her own body. Unlike in the dreamworld, there was no sense of wrongness about it. Her body had been that of a thirteen-year-old when she had entered her enchanted slumber, but it had grown into the body of a sixteen-year-old. She knew this body well from both her dream and her years of using it as a disguise.

She found it curious. She should not have grown while she was suspended in that deathlike state, yet it seemed to have aged all at once the moment she awoke.

She brushed the thought aside. For the moment, she wished to focus on Noah.

"You have been such a good boy, waiting for so long. I, too, longed to see you again," she said, stroking his black hair as a reward for his faithfulness.

"All this time," Noah whispered hoarsely between kisses, "I have awaited you."

"Noah..."

Pressing a final brush against her lips, Noah drew back and watched her with his dark eyes. He took her hand in his and lifted it with grace. He was ready to lay his feelings bare.

“For all these years, I have ached to touch you like this.”

He pressed a kiss, not to her lips, but to her wrist. This one was not meant to pour magic into her, but given for another, deeper reason.

His words made her heart ache.

My precious Noah.

Claudia, overcome with tenderness, wrapped her arms around him and pressed her forehead against his.

Their hair brushed together as she dropped a kiss onto the tip of his nose.

“Noah.”

“Please, let me hear your voice a little more.”

Such a request from Noah was rare.

Claudia finally realized the depths of his yearning for her, and she was elated.

She answered him with the tender affection one might show a beloved puppy.

“You have been such a good boy. Truly, you have, my dear Noah.”

“More,” he murmured.

She had left him alone for too long. He was sulking. Once, he would never have allowed himself to voice such selfish desires, but now he spoke them aloud without hesitation.

“I still have not had enough of you.”

A fond laugh escaped Claudia’s lips at his adorable behavior.

Leaning closer, she brought her lips to his ear. “My Noah.”

He jolted at the sensation. Her warm breath, mingled with the lightest touch of her lips, grazed his ear.

“Do you feel it?” she asked.

Her hand slid to rest over Noah’s heart, where his pulse thundered wildly beneath her palm. Her voice came out as a whisper.

“Just as our magic once mixed inside of you. So too has your magic remained in me, always.”

“Princess...”

“I shall return it to you. In return...” With her other hand, Claudia tilted his chin upward, guiding him to look into her eyes once more.

“Give me more.”

At her command, Noah did not hesitate.

With each gentle kiss, Claudia could feel Noah’s magic flowing into her. And with it, something warm and deeper still.

And something more...

Memories also began to surface—of the things Noah had experienced in her absence.

The memories must be embedded in the magic Noah is returning to me.

She closed her eyes and allowed the visions to unfold in her mind, as he continued to kiss her.

It truly has been three years since I went to sleep. In that time, Noah has risen to be named the next chief conjurer of the kingdom, and all the while, he sought a way to awaken me.

Perhaps the dream she had seen was flowing into Noah as well.

Proof of it came when Noah, trepidatious, pulled back slightly.

“My magic that lingered in you...” he said.

“Hmm... Are you referring to Leonhard?” she murmured, winding her arms around his neck and tilting her head playfully.

“I must beg your pardon,” Noah said, his voice quiet. “It seems I have behaved most disrespectfully toward you.”

“Oh my. That boy was also my precious Noah. I never thought it disrespectful.”

She felt a ripple of relief, knowing that she had been able to keep the promise she had made within the dream.

She laughed and decided to tease him a bit. “No need to fret. Even when you kept watch over my bath, you were nothing but a gentleman.”

“I...cannot entirely vouch for that,” came his strangled reply.

“Oh? Is that so?”

Her words, meant only to tease, were met with an unexpected admission.

“After all, ever since I first laid eyes upon your grown form some ten years ago, I have never once been able to tear my gaze away.”

“Oh?”

She made as if to peer into his face more closely, but Noah

silenced her with another kiss.

"More importantly," he said after a moment.

"Hmm?"

Noah frowned. "Your suspicions were correct."

The playful air that had hung between them until now shifted sharply. She heard a rumble somewhere in the distance.

"Lemilsia's chief conjurer is none other than its first king, Reinard. His soul lingers here in the realm of the living, bound by his obsession even after death—but that isn't all."

It seemed that the things Leonhard of the dreamworld had seen now dwelled within Noah.

"Our enemies are not only Reinard and Sieghart—"

Noah's words cut off. Both of them sensed the approach of a formidable presence at the same time.

They're coming.

Yet before Claudia could so much as stir, Noah swept her into his arms.

She wound her arms about his neck. "Noah, if you mean to teleport me away..."

"I won't."

The unexpected answer made her tilt her head in surprise.

Carrying her up the steps toward the altar, Noah continued, "It is because I knew you would want to stay that I chose to wake you now, rather than after all was ended."

She laughed as he conjured a chair and carefully lowered her onto it.

"You truly are my good boy."

"I am honored by your praise."

Kneeling before her, Noah laid his hand upon the hem of her white funerary gown and wove a familiar spell into the fabric.

Before her eyes, the soft material transformed, turning a vivid crimson.

"My mother's greatest fear was that Reinard's magic would one day steal me away," Claudia said softly. "But it seems we need not fear that any longer."

"We cannot say so with certainty. We must remain vigilant."

Her feet, bare only moments before, were now clad in shoes matched perfectly to her crimson gown. Both felt soft against her skin, as all of Noah's creations did.

Yet after this, it is not myself that I must worry about.

The approaching presence drew ever nearer.

"Noah, I have something to tell you. It is for your ears only." Drawing him closer, she brought her lips near to his ear.

Yet it was for one moment and one moment alone, as she drew back immediately after.

"Can you do it?" she asked.

Noah blinked at her as she smiled down at him.

"Of course," he said as he rose to his feet at her side. She stood, graceful in a gown the color of blood and ripe apples.

"Then, my dear Noah... Show me just how beautiful a hound you have grown up to be."

"As you command, my lady," Noah answered.

All of a sudden, they felt something touch the chapel's protective barrier. Something was attacking it from outside.

Noah conjured a sword into his hand.

The barrier began to crack at the chapel's entrance. It was buckling beneath a force like a surge of fury.

Dark magic. A magic befitting a conjurer with eyes the color of obsidian.

For a moment, a silence like gently falling snow enveloped the chapel.

Then a series of cracks echoed through the chamber.

Fragments of the barrier rained down, glittering like shards of crystal as they fell. Though beautiful to behold, they bore a sinister aura, and each hit the floor with an unpleasant crash, the shock of it reverberating through Claudia's body.

Within the rain of shards, a young man opened the chapel's door and stepped inside.

It's been long indeed since I last breathed in the air of a battlefield.

Claudia rested one hand lightly upon the arm of her opulent chair, fixing her gaze upon the intruder.

Noah's barrier was preserving the sanctity of this room. Outside these walls, the air was already choked with the same foulness that once filled the air of this kingdom five hundred years ago.

But unlike the wars of that distant past, this enemy was no faceless soldier.

"So...you have finally awakened." Noah stood glaring at the intruder, but the newcomer's obsidian eyes were fixed solely upon Claudia.

"I've come to fetch you, Adelheid."

"Sieghart..." The name slipped from Claudia's lips as she stared at the intruder.

In that moment, she recalled the dream she had left behind. The scene of awakening in the coffin flashed before her eyes, and then so did the boy she had met there.

The Leonhard of that world had regarded her with silent fury and a terrible will to dominate her. And now, Sieghart's eyes—burning exactly as Leonhard's had—pierced straight through her.

This world's Sieghart so closely resembles the Leonhard of my dreams. Yet more than that...

Beneath the madness, Claudia sensed a presence she knew all too well.

This magic belonged to Reinard—her first apprentice, one who had risen to become king after her death.

She narrowed her eyes and saw a smirk twist Sieghart's face.

"The magic you were once missing has been restored," he said. "What truly wonderful news."



He extended his hand toward her and roared with a cackle.

"Now, at last, I can claim you!!!"

From his outstretched fingers, a multitude of shadowy hands burst forth, swarming toward Claudia.

They were horrid things that flew through the air and slithered across the floor and walls. Each one stretched hungrily toward her, reaching for her throat, seeking to seize and devour her, both body and soul.

This is the magic designed to steal my soul.

Yet Claudia did not move. She glanced toward Noah, giving him a signal not to interfere.

Each shadowy hand that touched Claudia's skin erupted with a pop, bursting apart into nothingness.

The first word to break through all the other sounds was an utterly confused "What?" from Sieghart. He frowned as he stared up at Claudia, who sat calmly atop the altar.

"Just as my mother warned," Claudia said coolly. "A magic designed to control the magic of Adelheid within me."

"Your vessel should be full," Sieghart muttered. "Yet why...? Why can I not...?"

Her lips curled upward. "Indeed. As you can see, I am filled to the brim. But that magic will not work on me." She firmly pressed her hand against her chest. "For within me, my magic has mixed with Noah's."

Sieghart's eyes widened in shock. Then his face twisted in fury as he let out a guttural scream.

"Leonhard!!!"

Having received Claudia's permission to act, Noah silently stepped forward. He maintained his composure, even as he stood before the enemy of his liege.

Claudia smiled as she watched him draw his sword and assume a loose stance, ready to shift at a moment's notice for whatever the situation required of him.

He really has grown into such a beautiful young man.

While he was still the same boy she had always known, Noah now carried himself with a composed detachment that reminded her

of the Leonhard she had met in her dream.

A crooked smirk appeared upon Sieghart's face. "I had hoped never to see you again, Leonhard."

Noah said nothing.

Sieghart's eyes, the same color as Noah's, narrowed in amusement.

The young man who stood before them bore little resemblance to the boy Claudia remembered from the Raushneur Academy of Magic. That boy had seemed to shine like the sun.

"Stand down," Sieghart ordered. Magic surrounded his right hand as he conjured a sword. "I will claim Adelheid for myself!"

He paced forward within reach of Noah, who took the opportunity to knock Sieghart's blade aside with his own. Sieghart sidestepped as Noah's blade slashed through the air where he had stood. There was not a single wasted motion in Noah's follow-up strike.

Sieghart let out an excited peal of laughter as their swords clashed, sparks darting outward with each blow. Once, twice, they exchanged strikes again, each echoing through the chapel.

"Just like six years ago! Isn't that right, Leonhard?!" Sieghart cried.

They were both so familiar to her, but Claudia could see that both men *had* changed since then. They weren't merely taller. They had grown in other ways too.

Now they both wield sword and sorcery equally as their preferred method of battle.

Both were masters of dark magic. Claudia remembered well a lesson she had given Noah when he was still nine years old.

"Noah, the magic you wield is offensive by nature," she had explained.

The color of one's eyes reflected their magical affinity. Those with obsidian eyes were bearers of dark magic.

"Your strength will lie in your power to attack, not in versatility. In return, you will no doubt find it difficult to shape or change spells quickly."

"What should I do, then?" he had asked her.

"It's simple. Keep your magic in a single, fixed form from the start

of battle without trying to alter it. For instance, you could forge a sword from your magic and fight with that."

Noah had not been the first to hear those words; five hundred years ago, Claudia had given the same advice to another conjurer who had stood by her side.

"What do you think, Reinard?" she had asked at the time.

"Yes, using a blade in this manner greatly improves my efficiency," her first disciple had answered with a genuinely pleased smile. "I never doubted the instruction of our great witch."

Claudia did not doubt that Reinard had passed that same knowledge down to Sieghart.

Sieghart's longsword surged at Noah's throat, yet Noah did not so much as flinch. Instead, he aimed his own counter: a precise thrust at Sieghart's eye.

Steel clashed with steel. Sparks of magic burst forth with every parried blow, encircling the two in a small storm of energy. Sieghart sent a stream of flames toward Noah, only for it to be intercepted in midair by the jaws of an icy serpent. A seamless interplay of sword and sorcery unfolded in front of Claudia's attentive stare.

Sieghart has improved remarkably.

As she observed every movement of the battle, Claudia's thoughts turned within her head.

He has grown far beyond where he was as a child...and even far beyond what he was capable of when he was masquerading as "Lucas." He is on a different level entirely than the version of him that I met in my dreams.

Sieghart's father, the former king of Lemilsia, had passed away three years prior, just before Claudia had cast the sleeping spell upon herself. In the years that followed, Lemilsia had cut itself off from the rest of the world under the pretense of conducting a rite of mourning.

Something must have happened to Sieghart in those three years. It's the only explanation.

Sieghart's movements so closely resembled Reinard that Claudia couldn't help but recall the memories of her past life.

It's less like he resembles Reinard and more like he is *him.*

However, I never got that feeling when watching Leonhard in the dreamworld.

Sieghart shared more of Reinard's soul than Leonhard did. Whether that was because his soul more closely resembled Reinard's, or whether it was a result of those three years in mourning, Claudia could not say.

Flames erupted from the chapel's floor, forcing the two combatants apart—but not for long. Sieghart pressed forward, driving the flames toward Noah.

The flames were more than just an attack. They served as cover for Sieghart, hiding him from Noah's eyes.

Even so, Noah has also grown over the past three years.

"You lack haste," Noah said calmly as he lowered his center of gravity and then launched forward with a lunge.

Even Claudia was struck by the speed with which he cast his barrier and the skill with which he maneuvered his sword.

"Leonhard!!!" Sieghart cried in rage.

This Noah will lose to no one.

Noah knocked Sieghart's sword from his grip, and it flew across the room at a terrifying speed.

However, Sieghart didn't so much as glance at it. Instead, he raised a hand toward Noah, beginning the motion to cast a barrier...but he was too late.

"Khh...!" he grunted as he realized his efforts would be in vain.

Noah's blade came down for the head of his cousin, but he suddenly stopped and leaped backward as if something had screamed at him to get away.

"What did you do?" Noah asked, voice wary.

With a sharp clatter, the sword Noah had been holding slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor.

"Ha ha..." A ragged laugh spilled from Sieghart's lips. "Ha...ha ha ha!"

Noah clutched his throat instinctively, dropping to one knee. Claudia watched as a dark mist rose around him.

"You recognize this spell, don't you?" Sieghart said.

"Sieg...hart..." Noah choked out.

“It’s the curse that tormented you as a child...” Sieghart said quietly. Noah could only clutch at his throat as Sieghart, under the control of their ancestor Reinard, looked down at him. “This is a spell of domination, stronger than even your slave contract.”

A pitch-black sigil appeared around Sieghart’s throat, wrapping around it like a collar.

Noah’s breath hissed between clenched teeth as he grasped at his own throat. Sieghart summoned another sword to his hand as he looked down upon his cousin.

“We cannot resist it—not with this body that carries Reinard’s blood. There is no escape.” Turning from the writhing figure of Noah, Sieghart looked once more toward Claudia. “Now then, Adelheid... I wish to ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Oh my,” Claudia said with a smile that did not reach her eyes. “I remember now. Reinard *would* sometimes say such things in jest.”

“Ha ha! What an unkind thing to say. You knew full well that it was serious,” Sieghart said as a bead of sweat traced down his temple. “I have but one wish, Adelheid.”

“Very well. I shall listen. Please continue.”

“I desire only to make you mine.”

Claudia was the very witch who had shattered the psyche of Sieghart’s father. And yet, within the depths of those obsidian eyes, she could see a fervent longing burning for her. Meanwhile, he saw Noah, who was writhing at his feet, as an obstacle to be cast aside.

“That day ten years ago, when I looked up and saw you in the garden, I thought you more beautiful than anything I had ever known.”

Claudia slowly closed her eyes. “Curses are born from wishes, fervently made.”

“Adelheid?” Sword still in hand, a bewildered Sieghart stared at Claudia.

“And a wish is nothing more than desire. Foul magic of this world takes a wish born from desire and twists it into a curse. Was it for the cultivation of magic—magic that would one day bind us—that Reinard scattered cursed artifacts across the land?” Claudia asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

“Who’s to say?” Sieghart tore his gaze from Claudia, fixing it on Noah. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

He leveled his blade once more at Noah, who held a fiercely burning light in his eyes despite his labored breathing.

“This is the end, Leonhard. I shall remove you and claim Adelheid for my own.”

“You...shall never...possess her,” Noah rasped, drawing breath with difficulty, forcing out his words one by one.

“You overestimate yourself, Leonhard.” Sieghart’s voice carried an edge of frustration, which was uncharacteristic of him. “Struggle all you like—it will amount to nothing. Reinard’s curse holds us in its grasp and will never let us go.”

Noah did not answer him.

“No matter how many times you try... Even if you try, again and again, you will never escape it,” Sieghart said quietly, as if to himself. This pensive state did not last, as he soon forced a hollow smile and addressed Noah again. “You can no longer protect Adelheid. That place at her side shall at last belong to me.”

He spoke with no expectation of a reply. Instead of a conversation, this was a lecture for his cousin.

“Forgive me. Just give in, Leonhard. Accept it.”

“You...!” Noah rasped, bowing his head low and exhaling his breath. “You know nothing of Her Highness.”

Silence fell across the chapel. Sieghart tightened the grip on his sword.

“Do you presume that merely standing by her side earlier means you understand her? And what of it? Whatever I lack, I will make up for in the coming decades—no, centuries—that we shall share. I shall come to know all there is to know about Adelheid.”

“You will never be capable of that,” Noah countered.

“How dare you!”

Then, quite unexpectedly, Noah, still gasping shallow breaths, allowed himself a faint smile. “Do you truly see Her Highness as a princess who exists merely to be protected by me?”

Sieghart’s eyes narrowed, but he had no response.

“My liege is a woman full of compassion. I continue to protect

her, only because she allows it...” Sweat dripped from Noah’s chin, falling silently onto the crimson carpet. “But if she so wished, she could eliminate any threat by her own hand.”

“No... That can’t be true...” Wide-eyed, Sieghart turned back to Claudia.

“Especially now,” Noah continued, “that she has awakened from that long slumber, finally reclaiming both soul and body, now complete with her magic.”

“Adelheid, what have you...?!”

“Thank you for stalling him, Noah. You truly are my good boy,” Claudia said, beaming at him as she ignored Sieghart’s outburst.

“It is only to be expected of someone in your service,” Noah said.

“Thanks to you, I was able to conduct a thorough analysis of Reinard’s curse and how it is composed.”

She slowly raised a hand toward the two of them.

“I’ll give you a proper reward later. A little penance from a wicked master, who ordered you not to resist even when a curse was cast on you.”

“I require no reward,” Noah replied, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “Instead, show me.”

The faint boldness in his voice might have been a lingering echo of Leonhard from the dreamworld. Or perhaps, unconsciously, it was a display meant for Sieghart, to show him that it was Noah alone, Claudia’s beloved hound, who could speak in such a way to her.

“Show me your full power—without the limitations of your imperfect vessel.”

After a moment of silence, Claudia laughed. As she began to cast her spell, she knew that she would never again need to put herself in a magical sleep.

“I shall grant your wish, my dearest Noah.”

“A-Adelheid!!!” Sieghart yelled in alarm.

In an instant, white lilies burst forth across the floor, blooming in every direction. The air grew thick with their cloying sweetness, and the chapel was soon bathed in purest white, like a snowfield under a moonlit night.



A single petal brushed against Noah's skin.

Then, petal by petal, the lilies darkened, as if dyed in black. Soon, her loyal servant was surrounded by a field of black flowers.

"I hereby break the curse of domination."

The words weren't meant for Noah.

The black mist that had once clung to his throat had vanished, and Noah stood.

Sieghart's face twisted. "Why you, Leonhard?!" There was a fury in his rasping voice. "Everything I've ever wanted has belonged to you. The rightful throne, the place as Anna Marie's elder brother, the ability to command magic at the highest level..."

Noah didn't react, not even to his sister's name.

"Even Adelheid is yours. Everything falls into your hands alone!"

"Sieghart," Claudia murmured, plucking a black lily from the nearby bloom and lifting it gently to her lips. "Just as I thought, you are under Reinard's control, aren't you?"

"What are you...?"

The lily in Claudia's hand was the same color as the eyes that stared up at her.

"You were never truly this kind of boy, were you?"

Sieghart looked taken aback.

From what Sieghart had once told her in her dream, Claudia could piece together the truth.

"You never truly desired the throne. And I know you must have grieved when you learned that it was Noah who was Anna Marie's true brother."

"What are you talking about...?"

"You're the kind of boy who would step aside for Leonhard but would also steel himself to stand as his enemy if you needed to for the sake of the people. The true Sieghart is wise and noble."

For the first time, Sieghart seemed to be truly looking at Claudia. "Enough, Adelheid..."

"Reinard has taken that from you. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say he has overwritten your true self and replaced your thoughts with his own."

"Enough!!!" he cried as he clutched his head.

The surrounding black lilies seemed to billow as his shout echoed within the chapel.

"You desire me only at Reinard's behest," Claudia said.

"You're wrong," he insisted.

Noah caught Claudia's eye. She gave him a subtle nod before she looked back at Sieghart and continued, "I'm not. Deep down, you've already realized it, haven't you?"

Sieghart's eyes widened.

"You're fully aware that, even if you defeat Noah and claim me, the world that follows will not be shaped by your will. Reinard would strip everything from you, this time complete—"

"Hold your tongue!"

As he shouted, he let out a burst of flame directed at Claudia.

Raising the black lily in her hand as though it were a staff, she held it between herself and the flames. Though the flames seemed certain to consume it, the flower withstood it with ease. Its magic had dispelled the fire.

"It seems you are not yet ready to listen." With a faint trace of disappointment in her voice, Claudia turned to her waiting servant. "Noah."

"At the ready."

Noah began summoning his magic. Sieghart tensed, raising his sword defensively toward his cousin, but when the object materialized, he furrowed his brow in suspicion. Noah's conjured weapon, a small dagger, was clearly unfit for any serious combat against Sieghart's sword.

"What could you possibly intend to do with that?" Sieghart asked.

"Sieghart, I actually agree with you," Noah said calmly in his deep voice. When his cousin was too confused to respond, Noah continued. "I should have been in your place. I should have been the one sitting on that throne, bound by Reinard's curse, never allowed to do as I wished."

"Say no more."

"You've never felt whole, have you? You've always felt a hole within you that you desperately wished to fill," Noah said before touching his throat with his free hand. "You believed that you could

fill that hole by claiming Adelheid. You could not help but fight."

"Don't you *dare* say another word!!!"

Claudia had intently listened to Noah, thinking, *I'm sure that Leonhard felt the same...*

The dream she had seen must have been the convergence of several futures once glimpsed by her mother's magic. The boy she had met there had always resembled a starving beast, desperate to satiate some need, restrained only by the thin veneer of reason.

"That's why I must sever what binds you," Noah said.

Sieghart gaped in shock as Noah pointed the gleaming dagger in his hand not at Sieghart but at his own chest.

"What are you planning to do?" Sieghart asked, wary.

"There is no need to dirty the princess's hands with this."

Noah had seen this magic only once—ten years ago—but Claudia knew that he could easily recreate it. She offered him no aid.

My role is to bind Sieghart's movements, if only for a moment, she thought. Beyond that, she knew she needed to trust her servant.

"Bear with it a moment," Noah said quietly, "and I shall cut those wretched chains."

He plunged the dagger into his left breast.

A wave of magic, mixed between his and Claudia's, swelled and broke forth.

Drops of crimson blood fell on the surrounding black lilies. The blood shimmered faintly with a golden light, and the blade of the dagger in Noah's grasp began to shine with that same hue.

The structure of the curse's spell formula is clear to me.

It was information that Claudia had been able to gain through Noah allowing himself to suffer earlier.

Her magic was connected to Noah's through their acolyte contract. And through it, Noah would understand what she understood.

Ten years ago, I could not break the curse that afflicted Noah. That is why the contract between us came to be.

It was all Claudia, newly awakened, could do at the time.

But now, Claudia knew that exploiting Reinard's curse had been a

part of her mother's plans too. Her mother had known what choice her daughter would make when confronted with the young, suffering Noah.

Reinard, your curse upon Noah was the very thing that I will use to unravel your plans.

Claudia smiled at the irony. "Try not to flail, no matter how scary it might get, Sieghart."

Noah drew the dagger from his chest, and the blade began to change. Wreathed in golden blood, it grew into a longsword. He turned it toward Sieghart.

"Leonhard!!!"

Sieghart's fury broke through Claudia's restraints, and the men's blades clashed once more.

Although their swords and spells collided with violent force, the rhythm of their duel resembled a form of dance. Noah's movements were precise and pure as he pressed Sieghart back.

By contrast, Sieghart displayed no such control.

His strikes were heavy with rage, his technique driven more by emotion than discipline. Claudia remembered how, as a boy, his swordplay had been far more refined.

The power that Reinard granted him is hindering him.

It was not that Sieghart lacked strength. His blows were heavy, nearly feral in their ferocity. More than once his blade came close to tearing through Noah's guard. Nonetheless, Noah adapted with ease, turning Sieghart's fury to his advantage.

When Sieghart's sword came crashing down, Noah caught it on his blade, steel grinding against steel. As Sieghart pressed forward, Noah shifted his sword's angle into a parry, their swords glancing apart before the next strike began.

Shifting his balance, Noah deflected a blow aimed at his shoulder and immediately thrust his sword forward again, aiming for Sieghart's face.

Dodging by a hair's breadth, Sieghart retaliated, trying to stab Noah's throat, but with a deft motion, Noah knocked the attack aside in a single arc, leaped back, and widened the distance.

"I *will* have her," Sieghart growled, more to himself than to Noah.

“I have been preparing for this for so long.”

“I told you once already,” Noah said coldly, raising his sword above him. “You should abandon the foolish notion of ‘having’ her.”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!!!”

Enraged, Sieghart rushed forward, closing the distance at once. A black light danced along his blade, threatening to lose control. The dark magic’s instability reminded Claudia of the moments before a curse collapsed. It was pure malevolence that harmed everything in its path, and as such, it surged toward Noah.

“My liege is mine alone.”

“If only I had been you...!!!”

Letting out a breath, Noah slipped past Sieghart’s blade. Then, rather than countering with his sword, he drove his fist hard into Sieghart’s solar plexus.

Sieghart gasped before bringing his hand to his mouth. He sank to his knees upon the sanctuary floor. It was now Noah who held the advantage and lowered the tip of his golden blade as he stood over his cousin.

“It’s remarkable you’ve been able to survive in this state. Did Reinard’s curse weaken your body?”

Sieghart offered no reply, only shallow, labored breaths as his gaze dropped to the floor.

“During the three-year mourning rite, he must have done something to you. Perhaps he conscripted you in a ritual designed to eventually take your body for his own.”

Claudia, too, had reached much the same conclusion.

Eight years earlier, under the pretense of a betrothal meeting, she had traveled to a distant country, and there, encountered a former disciple. That disciple had been preparing vessels, young girls put into deep sleep, for the day he might house Claudia’s soul within one of them.

The “vessel” Sewell prepared for me was also born from cursed artifacts. And the one who bestowed that on Sewell was, without question, Reinard.

He was using his own descendants for the same purpose: as vessels.

It was difficult for her to imagine such cruelty coming from Reinard. But five centuries had passed. Who could say what that could do to a man's soul?

"Damn...it..." Sieghart, still breathing heavily, pressed his forehead against the chapel floor.

Noah watched calmly as a black mist once again began to rise at Sieghart's throat.

"What you bear is no different from the slave contract forced on me. You die if you try to escape. And that's why you cling to Her Highness, pretending she gives your life meaning."

"What do you know...?" Sieghart's voice, barely above a whisper, trembled with pain. "All I'm allowed to want is Adelheid. That's the only reason I have to keep living..."

Noah did not respond. He stood silently holding his sword, still shining gold with his blood.

"This is punishment for my sins of being born to a disgrace of a father, stealing the crown from you, and living as if I deserved it," Sieghart said, his fingernails digging deep into the red carpet beneath him. "But most of all, it is punishment for my cardinal sin of failing to protect Anna. I have no path to atonement."

This was truly a solemn confession.

As I thought, this boy's true nature is the same as the Sieghart I met in my dream.

He had let that nature show through when she had first met him at the magic academy, where he had taken the guise of Lucas, a boy who smiled as brightly as the sun.

"Noah," Claudia said gently.

"As you will it."

Still gripping his sword, Noah stepped forward to stand before Sieghart.

Surely, even now, Sieghart had enough strength to resist. And yet, he made no move to do so.

"Perhaps it would be best if you just killed me," he said. "My life is utterly meaningless. I do not wish to continue living as a body that has been planted with Reinard's desire for Adelheid."

Sieghart slowly raised his head to meet Noah's eyes with his own.

On Sieghart's face was a resigned smile.

"If I'm to spend the rest of my life tormented, unable to choose how I live, then I would rather have it end here by your hand."

In Claudia's mind, the image of the Noah from ten years ago arose unbidden.

Perhaps Noah, too, remembered. She could now see a faint trace of anger in his eyes.

"How foolish you are," he said.

"What...?" his cousin murmured.

Was it Sieghart before him that Noah found so infuriating? Or was it the reflection of his own younger self? Claudia wondered this as she listened, for the words he spoke now echoed her own from long ago.

"Do you truly believe you've made some noble choice, choosing the terms of your end?"

"Leonhard..."

"If you must choose," Noah said, raising his glowing sword, "then do not choose something so trivial. Choose a way to live."

And with that, he plunged the blade into Sieghart's left breast.

Black lightning surged from the point of impact, wild and terrible, but the golden light flowing through the sword flared brighter, overpowering the darkness.

Without so much as blinking, Sieghart stared at the sword. "This blade... Is it really breaking Reinard's...?"

Noah slowly closed his eyes. He parted his lips gently, drew in a quiet breath, and uttered a single, brief incantation.

"Demolish."

Claudia's vision filled with a bright light.

The black lilies that blanketed the floor now rippled as if caught in the heart of a storm. A wind stirred, whipping at Claudia's crimson dress and Noah's uniform alike.

Then the chapel stood still, bathed in a quiet light.

"Sieghart..." came Noah's murmur as he watched the radiant blade he'd driven into Sieghart slowly dissolve.

Like petals shedding from a wilting flower, the sword crumbled bit by bit, without leaving a single wound on Sieghart's body.

“I forced you to bear the fate that should have been mine.”
“Leon...hard...”
“I don’t expect forgiveness for that.”



“Noah, do not speak as if your standing by my side is some kind of sin,” Claudia said. Noah remained facing away from her. “My mother chose you for my sake. And if we must speak of fault, then it is mine. I left Reinard behind in the first place and drew you and Sieghart into this.”

“Princess,” Noah said, finally turning to her. “This is the way I have chosen to live. Regardless of whether someone planned it or not, I am here now because I want to be.”

“Noah...”

“Before I came to you, I knew nothing but suffering and wished only for death.” He turned to Sieghart. “I am living proof that death is not something you should choose.”

The serpentlike sigils that had been entwined around Sieghart’s neck had vanished.

“At the very least, I have severed the collar and chains that had bound you,” Noah said to his cousin.

Sieghart laughed faintly yet bitterly. “Heh... I forgot that you’re a year older than me. If not for the hatred shared by our fathers, then perhaps we would have grown to be as close as brothers... Maybe Anna would be with us too.”

The strength seemed to drain from his body.

“Anna... I...” he murmured, before he collapsed to the floor with a dull thud.

“He’s fallen unconscious. The strain must have been immense,” Noah said.

“Then we must let him rest,” Claudia said quietly.

The conjured lilies slowly faded from the chapel. Smiling, Claudia rose from her seat.

“Prepare a teleportation spell, will you? We must move—”

The chapel shook with a great tremor, and Noah shifted into an on-guard stance.

Claudia, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear, turned her attention toward the great doors at the end of the aisle.

“Otherwise, we might be caught in a battle with Reinard,” Claudia finished.

There, at the end of the crimson carpet, stood a figure clad in a

robe.

"So, you have finally awakened, Adelheid."

The robed figure appeared at first glance to be a tall, broad-shouldered man.

"Reinard."

"Ha ha!" the figure exclaimed gleefully. His long black hair had been tied back, and his smile still held that air of command and sensuality that she remembered. There was no mistaking it; before Claudia stood her first disciple.

And yet...

Just one look was enough for her to see the truth: This figure was only an illusion conjured by Reinard.

"I've waited so long to hear you speak my name," the phantom Reinard said with a mocking grin.

The illusion shimmered, and within it, a much smaller figure appeared, overlapping with his form.

"The forces of Avianoia will soon fall to my army."

Although they spoke using Reinard's voice and mannerisms, the person standing before them was shorter than the sixteen-year-old Claudia. Their slender limbs and delicate frame exuded a fragile beauty.

"Now...come to me."

Reinard's vessel had long blonde hair and beautiful pink eyes. On this person's face was a cherubic smile meant for Claudia.

"I've come to take you home, Adelheid."

Noah clenched his fists. "Anna..."

Reinard extended the hand of Noah's sister, thought to have died ten years past, toward Claudia.

"I let you out of my sight for five hundred years, and look at you now. It seems you've gone and picked up some nasty manners," Claudia coldly said as she descended the steps of the altar. "To think you'd use the corpse of your adorable descendant to preserve a soul that should be long dead."

Her voice was pitched lower than usual, and the air of the chapel seemed rife with tension. Aware of how unbecoming it was, Claudia nonetheless continued her reproach.

“Just when did you become so ill-mannered, Reinard?”

The vessel’s face softened with what looked like something akin to bliss, as though joy was surging through, unable to be contained.

“Ah ha ha! Even after five centuries, you truly are the same. I somehow find comfort in that.”

“You, on the other hand, have changed quite thoroughly. I’d have much preferred it if you had just been someone pretending to be Reinard. That would have been far easier to stomach than this reunion.”

Noah silently positioned himself in front of Claudia, sword at the ready. “Princess, please stand back.”

“I will do no such thing, Noah.” She gently placed a hand on his back.

Reinard frowned, clearly displeased by the gesture.

“You need not be here for this,” she said to her dear servant.

As a child, Noah’s sole source of solace had been his sister. He had even gone so far as to sell himself into slavery to shield her from harm. The only time he had ever fled from Claudia’s side had been to lay her body to rest.

“This is my fight to settle, and mine alone,” Claudia said softly. “So please, no matter what soul it holds, you mustn’t raise your blade against Anna’s body—”

“Even if that were the real Anna...” Noah said, interrupting her. Claudia’s head shot up in surprise as she watched his profile. “If she stood as your enemy, I would not hesitate to fulfill my duty.”

“Noah...”

“Let’s end this together.”

In his obsidian eyes burned the same beautiful, unyielding will he had carried since childhood.

“I represent your *peace*, Princess. If it means I can protect the quiet days where you can finally rest, then I will do anything.”

Claudia beamed, true joy radiating from the very depths of her heart.

“Thank you, Noah.” Instead of standing behind him to be shielded, she stepped forward to stand at his side. “Well then, I do hope you understand now, Reinard.”

“A mere child, no more than a descendant who happens to carry my blood,” came the reply. Anna’s delicate face twisted with scorn, as if she were glaring at something vile. “Yet you would presume to interfere with my return?”

“What a dreadful thing to say. And where, I wonder, did you learn to act like that?” Claudia said. She conjured a staff into her hand as she watched Reinard. “In this life, I have resolved to do only what I wish to do. And right now, I simply wish to enjoy a long-overdue reunion with my dear servant.”

A beautiful staff, shaped from snow and ice, took form in her hand. Still resting her right hand gently on Noah’s back, Claudia reached out with her left to grasp the staff.

“Even if you’ve come to take me back, I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. I won’t have you disturbing my afternoon nap with Noah.”

“Ha! Ha ha!”

Reinard’s laughter was slowly swallowed up by the rumble of the kingdom-shaking tremors that still rattled through the chapel.

To be continued...



Afterword

My name is Touko Amekawa, and thank you so much for reading volume 5 of *The Legendary Witch*!

Following directly from the events of volume 4, this fifth volume is packed with developments that lead us toward the story's climax! While writing this volume, I often looked back at everything that has happened since volume one. In this installment, Noah is nineteen and Claudia is sixteen, meaning ten years have passed since the two first met. Their real ages have finally caught up with the adult appearances they often took on through magic when they were children!

This series began in volume 1 as a tale about a witch, then took on various motifs from there: *Sleeping Beauty* in volume 2, *The Little Mermaid* in volume 3, and *One Thousand and One Nights* in volume 4. (The wonderful idea of using a series of central motifs in each volume came from my editor. Thank you!)

For volume 5, the motif is *Snow White*. Please take a look at the breathtaking cover illustration by Kuroyuki-sensei! From the moment I first saw the rough sketch, I was completely captivated by its striking composition and beautiful setting. The image of a sleeping Claudia and Noah carrying flowers with his back turned to the reader left a deep impression on me!

At the same time, I loved one of the other illustration proposals so much that we were able to include it as the title page color illustration. Thank you so much to Kuroyuki-sensei for making that possible! From the cover to the color illustrations to the monochrome illustrations of the interior, even down to the character designs, every illustration is filled with such charm. I treasure each one!

I also want to thank Nae Serizawa-sensei, whose manga adaptation continues to be an inspiration to me. And to my editor,

who once again provided such thoughtful guidance, and to the proofreading team—thank you all very much!

The story will reach its conclusion in the next and final volume: volume 6. I would be honored if you would follow this journey, which began with a witch and her servant, to its end. I hope we'll meet again!











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by Touko Amekawa

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