
THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING
STORY
ROUTES
Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko
7


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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes: Volume 7 [Complete]

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Prologue

It stinks, It thought.

The stench of iron rust and filth shrouded the air. There was a faint sweet smell mixed in, but the odor was tremendously unpleasant overall—the putrid scent of death.

It furrowed its brows in displeasure and tried to rise. It placed its hands on the stone floor to push itself up, but strength would not come so easily. It crumpled back to the floor. Evidently, the vessel's recovery could not yet keep up.

Lying in a pool of blood, It breathed out and relaxed its body. It waited for its broken bones to coalesce and its shredded nerves and tissue to regenerate. The pain was intense enough for one to go mad, but It absentmindedly stared up at the sky, feeling nothing.

From the gap in the crumbling ceiling, moonlight shone inside. A full moon. The pale moon floated high in the cloudless night sky, bright and beautiful. Even from a place smeared with blood, flesh, and filth, the moon was resplendent evermore.

It unconsciously reached out a hand, but before fully extending, Its arm collapsed once again, lacking enough strength to hold up the weight—the nerves were still not properly connected. It turned Its head to assess, but because almost all of Its fingers were missing, It doubted that It could even properly check for movement. It could not determine whether Its appendages were twitching from an involuntary spasm or out of their own volition.

It was silent, but then, perhaps because It had found Its own unsightly appearance comical, It tried to chuckle. But even Its vocal cords were marred—instead of a proper noise, a dry cough came out instead.

As It wheezed, It thought, *All of this is very me. Die in a cesspool and revive in a cesspool. This repulsive, half-resuscitated body—this disgusting stench that pierces my nose—all of it. How befitting of my soul that's stained with grudges and wrath.* It laughed.

How much time passed like that?

Once Its body finished repairing, It rose. It confirmed that It had full control of Its hands and feet, then left the decaying building.

It did not turn back even once. Not for the ruins that had once been Its base, though only for a short period; not for the corpses of the humans that had come to defeat It; not for the vessel that had contained Its soul just moments ago; not even for the pale moon that It had unconsciously reached out to grab.

It disappeared into the darkness, as if to show that It had no interest in any of these things.

The Reincarnated Princess and Girl Talk

Feeling faint light shining upon me, I forced my heavy eyelids open. Sunlight pierced through the gaps between the curtains, softly illuminating my room. Another morning had come.

I sat up in my bed. My whole body felt sluggish and I had a dull, aching headache. In direct contrast to the refreshing clear skies, I was in poor condition and feeling murky. I had a decent idea why I was in such a state without having to ponder much.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I mumbled. Even my voice sounded somewhat hoarse.

I had no doubt that my complexion must’ve looked horrible as well. I looked down as I vehemently massaged my facial muscles with my hands. Every time sleep had come, and my eyes had begun to drift shut, Sir Leonhart’s voice and expression had flashed through my mind.

“I know that letting someone die in front of you is not an option. But I can’t help but wish that you would. If the cost of saving another is you being harmed, then I’d rather you pretend like you didn’t see anything at all.”

Each time I recalled how pained he’d looked and sounded, my heart felt like it’d break in two. How much had I hurt Sir Leonhart? Instead of locking me up in my room for my reckless behavior, he’d given me free rein, though he’d worried for me. He’d even gone as far as to protect the people I cherished.

I never should’ve made such a compassionate person say those words. And that wasn’t my only sin. I was even more despicable because...hearing him say all of that had made me happy.

“The whole time you were bedridden, I was numb with fear.”

I replayed his low, husky voice in my head. He’d been venting his bitter emotions and had sounded awfully distressed. And yet...my ears had taken that as a passionate declaration of love. As a princess, I was ashamed of my rash behavior, but as a girl, I was selfishly overjoyed by what Sir Leonhart had professed. Indeed, I was ecstatic that he feared losing me.

As I hugged my knees, I buried my face in them and furiously rubbed my head, but the guilt only increased instead of fading away. How long did I stay balled up in bed like that? Then, I heard a soft knock on the door. I sluggishly looked up; the room had become significantly brighter. I had been wallowing in self-loathing for quite a long time.

After I meekly responded, the door opened.

“Good morning, Rose.” My mother stepped into the room. As soon as she laid her eyes on me, a bright smile bloomed across her beautiful visage like a dignified rose. As she drew near, she began to ask, “How are you—” but her feet came to a stop along with her words.

My mother took a long hard look at my face and then knit her shapely brows into a frown. She briskly strode over to me and wrapped my cheeks in her hands. Her soft thumbs gently traced the area around my eyes.

“What terrible circles. You couldn’t sleep?”

“Um...not much.” I couldn’t feign ignorance with obvious shadows lining my eyes, so I answered vaguely instead. My eyes were swimming and I wondered what my mother was thinking.

She gasped sharply. “Could it be... Are you feeling ill?”

“Huh?”

“You’re still not in tip-top shape! I’ll summon the court physician, so wait here patiently.”

“W-Wait! Wait, mother!”

I was befuddled by her unexpected words, but I quickly snapped back to my senses when my solemn-faced mother almost flew out the room. Desperate, I reached out my hand and managed to snag her by the cuff. I almost fell off the bed from the sudden motion, but I barely managed to hold myself up. My mother supported my weight in her hands, yet even then, she seemed like she’d charge through the door at any moment.

“I’m not ill!” I exclaimed.

“Lies! Look at your pallor! And you even have eye bags!”

“I just couldn’t sleep because I was thinking about something!”

“You were thinking about something?” My mother asked, bending her head to the side doubtfully. She was an enchanting beauty, and yet childish, adorable gestures were still very becoming of her, which I found surprising. “Is something worrying you?”

I hesitated for a moment and then nodded. My mother’s eyes widened. Her cheeks dyed crimson and her gaze restlessly roamed the room.

“Mother?”

“I’ve heard...that rather than keeping your worries to yourself, it’s better to share them with someone else.” My mother spoke quietly as she kept her vision averted away from me. “Um...if you don’t find the notion disagreeable, then...”

Her hesitant voice tapered off midsentence, but I could imagine what followed. It was a suggestion lacking confidence, but just imagining how much courage she’d gathered up to put it into words warmed my heart.

“Mother, would you mind lending me your ear for a bit?”

She broke out into a jubilant smile. “Why, of course!”

I peered at this beauty who was smiling broadly and quietly murmured in my heart, *Turns out, she’s quite an endearing person.*

After I finished changing and eating breakfast, I went to my mother’s room to have tea. Seeing that it’d be difficult for me to disclose my concerns if others were around, my mother had thoughtfully cleared out all the people from her room. I brewed tea for us both, and her eyes twinkled as she declared my tea delicious. She was like a lovely young girl.

After savoring the taste of tea for a while, she put down her cup and directed her attention at me. “So, what worries you?”

At a glance, she appeared like a calm, elegant noblewoman, but her eyes were shimmering with keen interest. I knew she wasn’t excited that I was agonizing over something, but thrilled that I was seeking her counsel, so the gleam in her eyes did not bother me at all.

I decided to tell her what's eating me, but I don't know where to start... I dithered for a bit and then slowly opened my mouth.

"Mother, you may know this already...but, um, there is someone I love..."

"Huh?"

"Huh?" I uttered in response to my mother's surprise.

I hadn't expected that there'd be a setback from the very onset. I'd thought that my crush had been divulged to everyone around me, but seeing my mother frozen in great shock proved otherwise.

"Y-You have someone you love? You don't mean as a friend, do you? There's a man that you favor?"

Hearing her restate it all aloud made me embarrassed, so I just gave her a small nod, eyes downcast. My mother paled as if she had just experienced a powerful shock—she staggered back.

"What knave—? I mean...who is it?" She cleared her throat and pushed her face close to mine.

We were the only two people in the room, but I still felt shy about saying his name loudly. I cupped my mouth with my hand and quietly whispered into her ear. "It's the royal guard captain...Sir Leonhart."

My mother's beautiful, upturned eyes were close to mine and I could see them widen as much as they could.

"The...royal guard captain... As in, *the* Captain Orsein?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes," I confirmed. *I guess it's obvious that mother would be baffled. My mother is in her midthirties, so she's closer than I am to Sir Leonhart's age.* With a wry smile, I asked, "Did I surprise you?"

After some hesitation, my mother nodded. She contemplated the new information for a moment and then nodded one more time as if she had come to some understanding.

"I fretted that my precious daughter was tricked by a frivolous, spineless noble boy, but it seems my worries were misplaced. He is dependable and will

faithfully love you, and only you, until the very end."

"N-No, we're not like that yet. It's still something like an unrequited love on my part." I meant to deny our relationship, but I faltered and my wishful thinking mixed in. *Something like a what now? Did I get carried away as soon as he called me important? Oh, how embarrassing.*

"Oh, don't worry about that. There is no man in this world who would not fall for you if you adore them."

Mother, you're too much of a doting parent. I hate to break it to you, but I think the vast majority of men in this world have zero romantic interest in me.

"So, what's wrong? He didn't do something like turn you down, did he?"

He didn't turn me down...if anything...

"He...told me that I was important," I said breathily as if I was letting out a long sigh.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed, her cheeks tinged with a light shade of pink.

"And he said that while I was bedridden, he was numb with fear."

"How passionate."

"But at the same time, he got upset with me. He asked me why I treated myself poorly...and he looked very, very distraught." I hung my head and stared at my clenched hands. They were squeezing hard, causing wrinkles to form in my skirt. The disarrayed fabric was like a reflection of the current feelings I held in my heart. "My rash behavior hurt him so much... And yet, here I am...feeling happy."

I didn't want him to be upset; I didn't want him to suffer. Though I would never wish that pain on someone else, somewhere in the recesses of my heart, I did in fact feel...delighted. He'd become angry for my sake. He was anguished because of me. I rejoiced in how wondrous it was that I had stirred Sir Leonhart's heart.

"I put such a gentle person through much torment, but for a moment I thought... 'If I were to disappear, he would be hurt.' I'm an awful woman."

After speaking about my disgraceful thoughts aloud, I felt like my feelings had

grown heavier rather than lighter. Facing my own foul nature was terrifying. But even so, I knew that if I pretended not to see those dirty emotions and tucked them away, I wouldn't be able to move forward.

A quiet pall settled over the room. I heard a soft sigh spill out of my mother and when I looked up, I was met with her tender gaze. My eyes turned round and in response, the corner of her eyes softened.

"Mother...?"

"I thought this was something akin to a fleeting first love. But I was wrong. You've become a respectable adult in the time that I was not watching over you. Your love is true and good." There was a hint of loneliness in her eyes as they squinted at me. "You know, Rose. Love is not just a beautiful thing. It can be sneaky and selfish. Both sides get hurt in many cases."

My mother's words sounded genuine, likely because she had experienced all of this herself before.

"But, if you wish to stay by his side, then your only choice is to talk with him. The answer to your struggles lies inside of both of you."

She's right. I'll never find the answer if I flip-flop on my own. Only Sir Leonhart himself can decide whether my guile can be forgiven. Even if I'm scared, I should talk to him properly...and properly convey my feelings to him.

"Mother, thank you so much."

"I'm pleased that I could talk to my daughter about love troubles." She lifted her hand and stroked my head. Like a goddess, her gaze was filled with affection, but it suddenly darkened with a forlorn shadow. After a beat, her brows lowered. Almost as if she were sulking, she said, "Don't become a bride too quickly, okay?"

"It's much too soon for that," I humbly replied with a mirthful smile.

A Certain Spy’s Complaints

With a thud, the man’s body fell over. The years of dust that had accumulated on the floor of the deserted house flew up from the impact. Moonlight shone through a crack in the roof, illuminating the swirling particles; it was almost a fantastical sight. I lifted my cloak up and wrapped it around my neck and mouth to shield my throat.

The large figure who’d dropped the man to the ground turned to me. “This appears to be the last one.”

The fallen man sprawled atop the dusty floor did not stir even slightly. His consciousness had been reaped without fail. *As one would expect,* his *combat skills are outstanding...but I wish he’d get things done more quietly,* I grumbled, frowning at the dust filling the air.

The man before me was the former captain of the border defense force: Ernst von Lieber. No, that name belonged to a dead man. The man standing before me went by Bear. I’d given him the name without much thought based on my first impression of him. Though I myself had been dubbed a strange name like “Crow”, I wasn’t taking my displeasure out on him, nor was I trying to drag him down with me...

Probably.

“Mmm... Then let’s pack up and go home,” I said.

At my order, Bear bound the three men passed out on the ground with rope. He forced a cloth between their mouths to prevent them from biting their tongues and then stuffed them into a sack. Bear lifted it and casually tossed it into the horse-drawn cart stopped in front of the worn-down house. The men were all well-built adults, and they were completely knocked out, so the sack must’ve been considerably heavy. However, Bear’s nimble movements made it look like he was picking up a light bag of feathers.

Bear didn’t seem offended that I was just watching him load the cart without even offering to help. “Let’s go,” he urged.

The face peering at me from under his cloak was the same manly countenance, but the air he gave off had changed significantly. His hair—which he'd kept short during his time as captain of the defense force—was now longer and tied simply behind his head; his once well-groomed beard was now shaved, making him appear somewhat youthful. The color of his skin would likely change before long from the severe lack of exposure to sunlight.

On occasions when Bear walked under the sun, he dyed his hair and altered his stride. As soon as he'd become a spy, he'd suggested burning his face, but he had transformed substantially without needing to take such extreme action.

"Yeah," I responded. I climbed into the back of the cart and Bear followed behind. He moved with a lightness that was unimaginable from someone of his large stature, but he was as heavy as he seemed. When he boarded the cart, it creaked loudly under his weight.

I signaled to our colleague, who was sitting at the head of the cart, and after a beat, the horses took off. I glanced at the sacks; they all remained silent. They probably wouldn't awaken for a long while. *Their destination is hell, so let them sleep peacefully for now*.

These three were agents of Lapter who'd been hiding in wait in that dilapidated building. They were a separate unit from the group that had invaded the royal castle a few days ago—these men had abducted and confined a whole family. After interrogating the maid who'd been a key figure in the attempted assassination, we'd learned that her family had been taken hostage in order to threaten her. We had taken custody of her family already. Our current mission was to capture the spies that had managed to slip away.

"'Do not let any of them escape,' he says. How unreasonable..." I griped to no one as I listened to the clattering of wheels atop cobblestone.

Of course 'any of them' referred to not only the three men lying in sacks but every single Lapter agent lurking in Nevel's royal capital. This included the ones who'd been allowed to roam freely under scrutiny, those that had managed to blend in with other civilians for years, *and* the new lot that had been just sent in.

Every last one of them.

“I wish this were some kind of joke.” I brought my knees up, rested my chin on them, and heaved a sigh.

Bear smiled dryly. “I can’t imagine him telling a joke.”

“I heard he tells them to a very select few.”

Though by a few, I mean there’s only one person I actually know of, I added quietly to myself.

Bear’s expression was ineffable as he tried to envision His Majesty telling a joke. After a few seconds of quiet pondering, he repeated, “I can’t imagine it.”

I certainly couldn’t have imagined it either.

“He was completely serious this time though,” I remarked. I recalled the look on my master’s face when he gave us our commands. His face had been as expressionless as always, but his eyes...they’d been different than usual. Had his pale-blue eyes housed a blazing conflagration? Or perhaps a frigid blizzard that’d threatened to glaciate the world? “If I’m not mistaken, he was angry.”

Then again, His Majesty was not the only one who’d been enraged by this incident. The face of a certain pesky rat came to mind. He was certainly hunting down every last mouse in the city with all his power in order to unleash his fury.

On the night when Lapter had attempted to assassinate our guest from another world, Ratte had been exterminating all the agents that were after the princess’s life. He’d had no idea that while he was cleaning up elsewhere, the princess would almost be killed by a completely different person. Well, precisely speaking, the maid’s target had not been the princess. A series of coincidences had led to the princess giving refuge and protection to the girl from another world. No one could have predicted that.

Even so, Ratte had gone on a rampage. On the surface, he’d seemed the same as usual, and he’d completed his work perfectly...but the intensity of his bloodlust was on a different level. It was now to the point where, if a mission called for the target to be captured dead or alive, he would crush the living breath out of every last one without hesitation.

The Ratte I knew was aloof, elusive, and attached to nothing. He appeared friendly, but trusted none and allowed no one close to his heart. He didn’t stay

in one place for long and never got involved too deeply with others. He'd unexpectedly appear and unexpectedly disappear. I never imagined that such a man would ever wholeheartedly support somebody.

"Good grief. What a sinful person..." I uttered, referring to the princess.

Accurately comprehending my unfinished sentence, Bear nodded. "She is loved by many after all."

The corners of his mouth quirked up slightly and I knew he was including himself...and his old friend. There was no end to the number of people who cherished the princess.

Seriously. It's about time they realize just how many people hold her dear. The princess herself, and... I narrowed my eyes at the sacks. *Lapter too. Enough is enough—get it in your heads already. The princess is the greatest treasure of our country and the weakness of many...and at the same time, she is a precious catalyst that must not be touched, or else.*

I directed my squinted eyes down and exhaled slowly, letting out the raging fire that had been building up deep inside of me. When I raised my head, I met Bear's wide-eyed stare.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

After he blinked his hazel eyes a few times, he quietly murmured, "I see... You were angry as well."

"Hah?" I raised a brow at that.

My voice had been considerably harsh, but Bear was far from overwhelmed and paid my growl no attention. "You didn't lose your temper the same way that guy did, so I didn't notice."

"That guy" is probably Ratte. Is he saying that we're the same? It's true that I took a liking to the princess, but I'm not angry because her life was endangered... Really. I unwittingly began mentally soliloquizing. *There's a fiery mass that sits at the bottom of my stomach like a coiled snake that occasionally shows itself and burns my insides... Is this thing what they call wrath or frustration? This feeling... If I lose even the slightest focus, it'll turn into bloodlust.*

Seeing me silently mull over his words, Bear continued speaking, “Isn’t that why you stayed on the sidelines during this mission?”

Because I might’ve killed them.

Embittered that he’d guessed correctly, I looked away. “Oh, shut it,” I whispered so quietly that my voice was drowned out by the sound of wheels bouncing on gravel.

The First Prince’s Determination

“Prince Christoph. It is time.”

I lifted my head from the report I was reading. A senior royal guard was looking at me with an austere expression. I checked my gold pocket watch; it was shortly before the designated time the king had ordered me to his room. I wasn’t enthusiastic about it, but ignoring his orders would bring even more trouble.

At the very least, I’d like to delay my departure until I finish reviewing the reports as my own form of resistance. If I were dealing with Leonhart right now, then my joke would be pardoned, but I don’t think it’d go over well with such an upright knight.

“Very well,” I said after a moment of pause.

I gathered the documents, placed them inside my desk drawer, and locked it. I let out a small sigh and then stood up. While I walked to the king’s room, I organized the information I had just read in my head. I compared the map I had drawn in my mind to the one that’d come with the report.

The investigation had started with the royal capital and then had gradually increased its search perimeter by expanding the circle around the city. So far, not a single anomaly had been reported, but we could not afford to let down our guard. If the demon lord truly had revived, then we didn’t know when, where, or what kind of influence it would have. Missing even the smallest abnormality could be fatal.

With the demon lord’s revival, will its sorcery cause an outbreak of magical beasts? Or will existing animals undergo some sort of mutation? If animals mutate into magical beasts, then surely there will be a sign. And if they turn savage, would that change occur in all species? Would it include pets that people keep, like dogs and cats or livestock? What about mice, birds, and other small creatures? What of insects?

Every question that came to mind needed to be thoroughly explored.

I wasn’t audacious enough to claim that these efforts were to protect the world. In the end, the only thing I cared for was the peace of my precious family, subordinates, and people.

As I contemplated these possibilities, I finally arrived at my destination.

I imagined walking straight past the king’s room as an escape from reality, but my loyal escort faithfully announced my arrival. “Come in,” came a blunt reply. I grudgingly entered the room.

Contrary to my expectations, he wasn’t working at his desk. I felt a weak breeze brush against my cheek—the glass doors that led outside were open. The balcony was drenched in radiant sunbeams and a man most unbefitting of summer stood there.

His platinum-blond hair fluttered in the wind and almost appeared white in the light, like fresh snow reflecting the sun. A cravat was securely wrapped around his neck, and he wore a vest. Though the fabric was a thin one, it was still an extra layer of clothes to his formal wear, and yet somehow, there was not even a drop of sweat on him. His unblemished, porcelain-white skin didn’t even look the slightest bit pink.

With the dazzling contrast of white cumulonimbus clouds against the deep blue sky and lush verdant trees as his backdrop...he looked out of place. Like an illusion—the king, the black bird perched on his left arm, and his immediate surroundings appeared cut off from the pleasant season around them.

The king watched the bird flap its wings powerfully and take off before he languidly began to speak. “Are there any anomalies?” His pale-blue eyes were directed at me.

“At this point, we cannot confirm that there are none. We’re still investigating the land and expanding the search range.”

“What of alerting our subjects?”

“We have spread official notice that an illness causing animals to go berserk has been found.”

Strictly speaking, it wasn’t a lie, since it truly had been discovered in a distant nation. The demon lord was a mere fairy tale to the vast majority of people

these days, so it would be simpler to warn our citizens of a realistic-sounding disease rather than trying to persuade them of the possibility that the demon lord had revived.

“Keep me apprised of each situation.”

The king continued speaking impassively as he returned inside and shut the glass doors. I nodded my head in agreement and our conversation came to an end there. I expected him to return to work at his desk, but he sat down on his sofa instead. Prompted by his gaze, I sat down across from him.

Our knights were sent away to guard outside, so only the king and I were inside the room. A deafening silence filled the space for a brief period.

“I will send a letter to Lapter and Grundt.” He crossed his pointlessly long legs and began speaking without any preamble.

The words came out of his mouth without any hesitation, but I gulped, recognizing the weight of his statement. It was not a secret exchange done behind the scenes, but an official correspondence sent via an emissary. In other words, the letter would be a statement of our nation’s intent to the world, so its contents would hold grave importance.

“What will it contain to Lapter?”

“It will be a written protest of their failed assassination of our first princess.”

Hearing those words, I had trouble breathing for a moment. I had been desperately trying to keep that incident out of my mind. If I didn’t, I would instantly throw my work to the side and rush to Rose’s side. Even after receiving reports that she was safe, my anxiety had not subsided. Until I could see her cheerful appearance before my eyes... Until I could hear her lovely voice call me brother...I would never feel at ease.

However, the truth of my situation was that my status as the crown prince hindered my movements. Considering the worst-case scenario where Rose might be under the influence of the demon lord, I was prohibited from approaching her. *The king went to go see her before anyone else though. What a ridiculous story.*

He had told me of his visit to my sister with that expressionless face of his.

He'd explained himself by saying that 'the one who had longer to live should obviously be kept in reserve.' I had wondered, *Will I be forgiven if I send him flying?* His youthful visage looked like it would vastly outlive me, and yet he had spoken so brazenly.

I recalled that, on the night Rose collapsed, I wanted to run to her side. But the king stopped me. He explained how it was possible that she was now the avatar of the demon lord and instructed me to stay away for my safety. I wasn't convinced.

"If something happens to me, there's still Johan. I want to be by her side. I can't leave Rose alone when she's suffering." I completely lost my composure and pleaded with all my soul. The king listened to me in silence until I finished my case.

The words he returned rendered me speechless.

"You cannot kill that one."

Before I knew it, I was grabbing the king's collar. All I remembered was the ardor that made my blood boil over—the rest was unclear. It was the first time I had ever lost myself in anger.

"I won't forgive you if you lay even one finger on my sister."

If he did anything to my dear sister—my dear Rosemary—I would never forgive him. No matter how low I'd have to stoop, I would send him to the gallows without fail. The voice that had yelled all this was so low and husky that it did not sound like my own. There must have been murder in my eyes, but the king did not lose even an ounce of his poise.

"This is why you cannot."

Surprised by how exasperated he sounded, my grip on his collar loosened and he brushed my hand away. He sighed as he straightened his collar.

"If she kills anyone with her hands, then she will be broken at that moment. If her heart is already destroyed, then keeping her body alive will only prolong her suffering. Rather than preparing yourself to be killed, steel yourself to free her from her nightmare."

I choked on my words and said nothing more because I knew he was right. Rose was a compassionate girl. If she ever took someone's life, she would likely lose her mind. Even if we learned of some way to separate the demon lord from her, she would only blame herself and her heart would shatter.

Though I knew all this...I also knew that I would never be able to kill my beloved Rose. At the very last moment, I would pray that she survive, no matter what the cost. I clenched my fists tightly and pushed down my fury.

"That is our last resort, correct?" I managed to wring out, voice trembling. *"As long as there's even the smallest chance of saving her remaining, please swear that you will continue searching for a different way."*

No matter how inefficient or how illogical it was, as long as there was a path for Rose's survival, I would struggle.

The king's brows furrowed ever so slightly at my hopeful plea. *"That is an obvious request."* The man who normally despised wasting time and effort replied without even the smallest hesitation. I swallowed back the words I was about to say when I saw the determined gleam harbored in his pale-blue eyes.

That night had felt very long. I'd failed to catch a single wink of sleep until dawn broke, and my memory of that day was hazy until the sun set again. I'd been informed that Rose was safe, but relief was still far away for me. I did not need my list of worries to grow.

Our nation had carefully observed Lapter up until now, so if the king was ready to take action regarding our diplomatic relationship with Lapter, then I would fully support him.

"I doubt they will admit to the assassination attempt," I pointed out.

"That is not important."

It was more important that we declared the reason for our hostility toward Lapter to other nations. We would be stating to the world that we were retaliating against their provocation.

"Will you continue to keep our guest a secret?" I asked.

“She was only accidentally involved with the assassin sent after my daughter’s life after all.”

The king intended to conceal the existence of Fuzuki and the demon lord—that was why it was essential for Nevel to take out all of the assassins who couldn’t get within arm’s reach of Rose. In reality, Rose had almost been killed by an assassin aiming for Fuzuki’s life. Our nation’s spies had already captured the ones after Rose’s head.

“Since you’re also sending a letter to Grundt, the letter will be about economic sanctions,” I remarked.

Grundt was Nevel’s neighbor to the east and Lapter’s neighbor to the south. Their domain was one-third the size of ours. Because much of their land bordered the sea, they traded with many nations. They were a kingdom that thrived from commerce.

For Lapter, which did not own any ice-free ports, Grundt essentially played the role of their port. Though sandwiched between two major nations, Grundt could freely do business without favoring either country, but only because those powerhouses were not openly at odds. If compelled to choose one, they would likely choose Nevel. It was not because we had a friendly relationship or mutual trust—if Grundt antagonized us, they would likely be ruined.

If Nevel blockaded the land route that connected Grundt to Vint in the south, trade would come to a standstill. And if they could only turn to sea routes for their business, their expenses would more than double. It was unlikely that we’d implement a hard-line policy like totally blockading trade routes, but it would all be the same to Grundt if we raised tariffs.

“What will you do if Lapter turns to its military strength?”

“They won’t. Summer will end soon, and a long winter is approaching for Lapter. If they start a war, only *their* corpses will pile up.”

Economic sanctions would be enforced, and right when trade began to stagnate, winter would come. Lapter’s land was covered in snow, so their food supplies would not be able to hold out. If they declared war at such a time, they would only be met with food shortages. On top of that, our correspondence would demonstrate that Lapter was at fault. Most nations would likely take a

neutral stance and observe how things played out or else support Nevel.

“My daughter, my people... I will not give up a single one.” The king squinted his eyes and finished his declaration with a sharp gaze. “They will pay for all their crimes in full.”

“As you will.”

The Reincarnated Princess’s Heartbeat

I want to speak with Sir Leonhart.

Though I was determined to do so, he was so preoccupied with his duties as the shrine maiden’s escort and as captain of the royal guard that it was difficult to find the opportunity to see him.

Also...I hope this is just my imagination...but I can’t help but feel that he’s avoiding me. When I saw him from a distance, he averted his eyes. And he even nonchalantly changed direction... My heart was only sensitive to Sir Leonhart, and I felt like it was about to be shattered into pieces. *Maybe my assumption that he viewed me as a woman was just...an all-too-convenient interpretation.*

My confidence fizzled out in no time at all, and my pessimistic self made a return. It was then that...

“Ah!”

By coincidence, I encountered the shrine maiden in the corridor.

As soon as she spotted me, she ran over with a big smile on her face. “Hello!”

“How do you do, Lady Fuzuki?”

Naturally, accompanying the shrine maiden was her guard, Sir Leonhart. *Huh? Doesn’t Sir Leonhart’s complexion look poor? It’s faint, but those look like dark circles under his eyes...*

Our gazes met, and his shoulders trembled for a brief instant, but he quickly collected himself and directed a friendly smile at me, as if nothing had transpired. It felt like he was keeping his distance and warning me not to take another step toward him, which made my heart ache a bit.



I turned away from him and locked eyes with the shrine maiden next. Her hazel eyes were sparkling and she beamed at me, full of desire to tell me something.

“Um...” she began.

“Yes?” *That’s the heroine for you. Seeing her try so hard is admirable and very endearing.* Such thoughts ran through my head as I urged her to continue with a smile.

The shrine maiden clenched her fists as if to squeeze out the courage to put her feelings into words. “If you don’t mind, er...would you like to chat?”

Startled by the sudden proposition, I repeated her words as a question. “Chat?”

She began to panic from my confused reply. “No, well, please feel free to decline if you’re busy—that’s totally fine! I just thought it’d be fun to chat with you if you had the time...”

The shrine maiden’s voice gradually faded to a whisper and her vision lowered in tandem. Hanging her head, she idly twiddled her thumbs. She exuded cuteness like that of a small animal—it roused my protective instinct.

Is it okay for me to witness such a charming cutscene when I’m not even a suitor character? I’m seriously starting to worry about her. Are you sure you want to have a chatting event with me? Are there going to be surcharges? Or perhaps I’ll get a surprise bill later?!

“I’d be delighted. There’s a refreshing wind today, so why don’t we converse in the garden arbor?” I offered a sweet smile, keeping my wandering thoughts in check.

The shrine maiden’s blank eyes went wide and then her expression quickly morphed into a carefree smile. She nodded energetically. “Yes, that’d be great!”

Haah... She’s so cute.

The shrine maiden and I came to a white, octagonal gazebo in one corner of

the vast castle gardens. The weather was beautiful and warm, but the gentle wind was cool and refreshing. I gazed up at the cirrocumulus clouds floating in the blue sky. *Summer will be over before long.*

"'I'm thrilled that I get to talk with you, Princess!"

"Me too. I've always wanted to have a leisurely chat with you, Lady Fuzuki."

"If you don't mind, would you call me Kanon? I want you to call me by my given name."

"Then, why don't you address me by my name as well? If Rosemary is too long, then Mary or Rose will suffice."

"Umm...then, Lady Mary?" the shrine maiden—I mean, Kanon—said in an abashed tone.

I smiled at her and replied, "Yes? Lady Kanon."

Her cheeks reddened and she giggled; a convivial smile spread broadly across her face.

Aaah! She's sooo cuuuute! I wanted to cry, but I bit down on my molars and held it back. *I want to round up all the suitor characters, sit them all down, and together, gush about how darn cute this girl is! Come to think of it, has she met the love interests? She should've met Lutz and Klaus during her summoning ceremony, but other than that, it must be hard for her to encounter the others. We've lost the demon lord sealing stone, so perhaps she'll go back to her world soon... I'd feel lonely with her gone... Regardless of whether the demon lord has been extinguished or freed, Kanon should not have to bear the burden alone from here on out.*

"Say, Lady Kanon."

"Yes?"

"How long will you reside in this nation?" I peered at her and she blinked in surprise. "Please don't misunderstand—I'd be overjoyed if your sojourn here was a long one. But, I don't want you to be put in danger. I'm sure my father would let you return home if you so desired."

Kanon stared at me for a while, then nodded. In a soft voice, she said, "The

king told me that already.”

Apparently, my father had left the magic circle intact so that she could return home if she so desired. As long as Kanon was there, all they had to do was pour magical power into the circle and it would activate.

“If I really can, then it’s probably better if I leave soon... If I stay here too long, then they’re worried that aberrations may appear,” Kanon explained.

“Aberrations?”

“Ummm... I guess it’s kinda like a bunch of puzzle pieces? They carved me out of my original time and place, so I *should* fit back into that space perfectly, but the more I grow, the harder it’ll be to put me back.”

I see. Two or three months of growth can be handled via error calculations, but if she ages too much, it’ll be difficult to plug the jigsaw piece back in that hole.

“But I’m a special case, so I’ll be okay if there are a few aberrations. By the way, if the circle activates by accident for someone besides me, they don’t know where that person will end up. Apparently, if things go wrong, you could even fall in the cracks between dimensions!”

“That’s...quite the horrifying thought.” I imagined getting lost in darkness where I couldn’t tell up from down and a chill ran down my spine.

Kanon gently held her arms. Her brows drooped as she agreed with my assessment. “I know, right?”

“Wandering around alone in the dark for all eternity sounds absolutely dreadful...” I murmured, almost as if I were talking to myself.

“With all due respect, Lady Rosemary.”

“Huh?”

Klaus, who’d been keeping an eye on the perimeter, until now spoke up without warning. His expression was stiff and I wondered if something had happened.

“Please be at ease. Anywhere you go, I will be there with you without fail. I will never let you be alone.”

I fell silent. My eyelids lowered into a half-open state and I examined Klaus's handsome face. I braced myself, thinking that there was more to come, but I only felt staggering lassitude. *I hope you realize that you've completely missed the point here. I'm sorry to burst your bubble when you've got such a cool expression going on there, but we're not talking about that right now.*

"Well, Klaus... I'm glad you feel that way but—"

"Even if you are in the cracks between dimensions, or in hell, I will be by your side. And of course, I will be there when you marry as well."

Like. I. Said! Why are you assuming that I'd go to dangerous places like dimensional cracks or hell?! I'd never go out of my way to venture to such hazardous locations! Hmm? Hold on...did he just throw something outrageous on there at the end?

"You're going to follow me when I marry?" I asked, the color draining out of my face. *I'm begging you. Tell me I misheard. Or tell me you misspoke. Please.*

As if to ridicule my desperate "*please*", Klaus's lips curled into a radiant smile. "Yes. Please include me in your trousseau."

M-My trousseau got larger again! You're kidding me. An ordinary trousseau is supposed to come with things like furniture or garments. Why are two slots of my trousseau filled with hot guys?! There's definitely something wrong with this!

"The thought alone is enough for me."

"No need to hold back. Everything is yours."

"My heart is full of your goodwill already, so please...keep the rest," I replied, pressing my hand against my forehead.

Then, a lovely, sonorous laugh rang out. I searched for the source and found Kanon watching Klaus and I banter with an amused smile. "The two of you are very close."

"Huh?"

How did you watch us talk and come to that conclusion?! Unlike me, whose face was twitching with indignation, Klaus looked smug, as if to say that her

observation was correct. *That pisses me off. Can I give you a good wallop?*

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. Lady Mary, you seem laid-back, err, right at home? You two seem like good friends."

There's truth in that. I don't feel nervous around Klaus anymore. But I still have mixed feelings about being called Klaus's friend.

"Sir Leonhart, don't you think so too?" With no ill will, Kanon directed the conversation to her escort. Throwing him right under the spotlight.

We were the only four people in this gazebo, so it was natural to include Sir Leonhart in the conversation. It was a fitting decision for a considerate girl like Kanon, and she had surely done it with no ulterior motives.

Sir Leonhart will probably smile and agree, as if it's just a trifling afterthought... Or maybe, he'll give some innocuous comment that won't ruin the mood. I know that's what's proper. But I don't want to hear him say it or see that smile. I don't want to be reminded that he doesn't have even a shred of interest in me.

Though my mind was spiraling, my eyes automatically looked up at Sir Leonhart. I was scared but curious. I didn't want to know...but I still wanted to know. Dictated by those contradictory feelings, my gaze fixed upon him.

"Huh?" A silly noise of surprise escaped from my throat.

Sir Leonhart was focused on me and not on Kanon who had asked him the question. His straightforward eyes were sharp...and hot. I could feel a prickly burning sensation on my skin. I felt vulnerable to his gaze—it felt like it was coiling around me—and goosebumps crept up my spine. The intensity made me shrink back, and when I did, Sir Leonhart's face scrunched up in pain. Then, he raised the corner of his lips slightly and smiled in a self-deprecating manner.

"Yes, that's right... He's a far cry from someone like me who scares her."

No. It's not like that. I wasn't scared. I wanted to refute him, but my mind was disheveled and I couldn't string the words together.

"Lady Fuzuki. It's almost time for your appointment. The head sorceress is

waiting for you," he continued.

"Huh? Eh, oh, yes!"

Rosy-cheeked, Kanon looked back and forth at Sir Leonhart and me and then quickly stood up at his gentle behest. Until they had completely left the area, I couldn't bring myself to rise from my seat.

I wasn't quivering in fear. One look from you is enough to electrify my whole body. My heart is pounding and I'm still burning up. I covered my scarlet face with my hands and let out a deep sigh. *My knees were about to give out... How could I ever tell him something so immodest?!*

The Reincarnated Princess on Attack

After that day, I didn't see Sir Leonhart once. Even though I wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, it was impossible if I couldn't talk to him face-to-face. Also, I hadn't decided how to broach the subject or what to even say.

I wasn't trembling because I was scared. I was just turned on! But how can I tell him that?! Doesn't that make me look like a nympho?! Even if I try to downplay what I was feeling, I'll still sound like a pervert! Absolutely not, rejected! I won't be able to live if Sir Leonhart despises me!

Shame took over and I almost began beating the sofa I was sitting on with my fists, but I just barely managed to hold myself back. I relaxed my clenched hands and trained my gaze toward the edge of the sofa. A black cat was curled up in a rattan basket on top of the cushion seat.

That's right. My beloved pet, Nero, had returned to me.

I peered into the basket and called in a soft voice, "Nero."

He didn't react, but I saw his belly rise and fall in rhythm with his breathing as he slept. His injuries were fully healed, though it seemed like he still wasn't back in perfect shape, so he spent most of his time sleeping. Regardless, I was still overjoyed that he'd come home.

I gently stroked Nero's pretty coat and his body twitched in response. He opened one eye and lifted his head as if moving were tiresome. Perhaps it was because we were indoors, but the color of his iris appeared darker than usual, and I was captivated by it. However, he seemed to lose interest and immediately shut his lid once more. He twisted and turned his body so his back faced me, almost as if telling me that I was annoying him.

He was hurt by a human's hand, so perhaps it can't be helped that he's more vigilant now. I feel lonely...but I'd best give him time to recover. And maybe I accidentally touched where he was injured.

"I'm sorry."

You probably can't rest peacefully if I'm here. I guess I'll go to the library. I

stood up from the sofa and glanced back at Nero again, but he made no movement to look in my direction. I'd told myself that it was inevitable he would feel this way, but I still felt dejected. A forlorn sigh escaped from me. Not only had I been fruitlessly searching for a chance to see Sir Leonhart, but to add insult to injury, my dear Nero also hated me now.

"Lady Rosemary."

I returned to my senses with a start. I wondered what Klaus was thinking of me as I stood there stock-still with my head hanging, but he regarded me with a concerned look.

"I think I'll visit the library. Nero is sleeping, so let's leave quietly," I said, covering up my dismal mood with a smile.

Klaus looked conflicted but remained silent. He sank deep into thought for a while and then raised his head with a resolute expression. Slowly, he began to speak—his suggestion was so unexpected that my eyes became wide saucers and I froze for a few seconds.

Many minutes later, I was standing in front of a certain room inside the castle. I stared at the massive mahogany doors unmoving.

"Lady Rosemary, with haste please," Klaus quietly urged me.

The door my gaze was fixed upon belonged to the office of the royal guard captain. Namely, it was the entrance to Sir Leonhart's workroom. Why was I here? Well, it all started with Klaus's suggestion.

"Let's go visit the captain," he'd said.

According to Klaus, Kanon was training with Miss Irene around now. Though Kanon's powers were not the same magical ones we knew of, the method to channel them resembled our world's magic, so it was decided that the head sorceress, Miss Irene, was qualified to teach her.

Apparently, Sir Leonhart used this time to handle his regular duties that had accumulated. *In other words, there's a very high probability that he's currently inside his office...but Sir Leonhart is devoted to his duties. Wouldn't I just be a disturbance if I strolled in while he's working?*

Because of this, I'd been hesitant to go along with Klaus's suggestion. Though I claimed at first that I didn't want to bother the captain, the truth was that I didn't want him to think me annoying...and Klaus had not been fooled. *"Don't you wish to see him?"* he'd asked simply, giving me nowhere to run. So, I'd steeled myself and agreed.

There was no world where I didn't want to see him. After all, I always wanted to be by Sir Leonhart's side.

Nonetheless, there was no reason that I, a princess, would have any business at the knight captain's office. If someone saw us, I worried it would cause trouble for him, so I'd purposefully chosen an inconspicuous route and had sneakily made my way over. Despite all the trouble I'd taken, when I'd finally arrived, I'd gotten cold feet.

And here we are now.

"Lady Rosemary."

"I-I know."

Klaus's half-open eyes were pushing me as if to say, *"Hurry up!"* and I succumbed to their pressure. I took a deep breath and tentatively knocked on the door.

I waited and waited, but no one replied. I knocked once more, louder this time. But no answer came.

"Perhaps he's elsewhere?" I murmured, half disappointed and half relieved.

Klaus shook his head. "No, he should be here... Perhaps he's taking a nap in the adjoining room. I heard he's been working late into the night recently."

Come to think of it, when I last saw Sir Leonhart, he looked pallid and there were dark circles under his eyes. I'm sure he's sleep-deprived.

"Then even more of a reason not to disturb—"

Klaus cut me off and laid out the plan without any hesitation. "I will stand guard here. If anyone approaches, I will handle them as appropriate, so I should be able to buy you at least thirty minutes." He reached into his breast pocket and took out his pocket watch. Once he'd confirmed the time, he opened the

door and pushed me in.

“Huh? Wait!”

“Please return as soon as you can.”

With that, he shut the massive door in front of my bewildered eyes. Klaus’s adamant demeanor left me gaping in shock. He’d always had a tendency to tune out what I was saying, but I had a feeling he was ignoring my opinion in a different way than usual. I was by no means angry though.

Without a doubt, Klaus had taken action for my sake. He lent me a hand because he couldn’t bear seeing me depressed. How could I resent him? *Thank you...though I wish you’d given me more time to mentally prepare myself.* Though I complained internally, my lips curved into a small smile.

It was the first time I’d entered this office. The interior was coordinated with calm, subdued hues that reflected the preferences of its owner. There was not a single piece of extravagant decoration, only the bare necessities such as a bookshelf, a desk, and a clock. There were two heaps of paper on top of the desk, likely paperwork separated into approved and unapproved stacks. A quill pen and inkwell were left out, perhaps because their owner had intended to return after a short time.

And, next to the bookshelf densely crammed with thick books, there was a door. If Klaus’s conjecture was correct, then Sir Leonhart would be in the connecting room. I carefully looked the nondescript door up and down and gulped audibly. I pushed down my desire to flee and slowly grasped the doorknob.

“Pardon me,” I said in a feeble voice.

I opened the door.

As I did, I made a soft clattering noise because my hands couldn’t stop shaking from the stress. But I heard no response from the room. I stood frozen next to the now open door, unsure of whether it was time to give up or not, but I squeezed out enough courage to look around the room.

The thin curtains were closed, so it was dim inside. A knight’s uniform jacket was barely hanging from the simple, wooden coat rack as if it had been

carelessly tossed there. There was no bed inside the narrow room, only a sofa against the window—with a tall man draped across it.

The option of calling out to him vanished from my mind. I approached, feet unsteady, as if drawn by an unseen force. Sir Leonhart had his hands crossed behind his head instead of resting on a pillow...and he was sleeping.

His long legs were propped on top of the armrest, and his boots were still on. The top two buttons of his shirt were unfastened, leaving the cloth around his chest loose. His sword belt was hanging on the back of the sofa and his sword was nearby, leaning against the wall.

His unkempt black hair cast a shadow over his handsome face. He looked sleep-deprived. The circles under his eyes were darker than the last time I'd seen him. And, if it wasn't just my imagination, his cheeks seemed a bit sunken too.

I drew close to his side, but he didn't even stir, another indication that he was exhausted. I was used to seeing Sir Leonhart composed and orderly, so his lax, slumbering state made my heart race.

"Sir Leon..." I crouched next to him and stared at his face.

Perhaps he reacted to my voice, or perhaps it was just a coincidence, but his quiet breathing was interrupted by a weak grunt. The low hum of his voice was erotic and made me jump in surprise. From his tiny movements, his forehead peeked through his bangs. He was supposedly sleeping, but there were wrinkles clearly etched between his brows.

Is he having a nightmare? His grim expression seems like a far cry from a peaceful repose. If this is how he's been sleeping, then he won't recover from any fatigue...no matter how much he rests. Regardless of how busy Sir Leonhart is, he always looks unruffled, but he's tired enough that even I can tell...and it looks like this is the cause. He's not getting any decent sleep.

It was hard for me to watch his pained face. Wanting to do something for him, I surveyed the space, but there was practically nothing inside this small side room. If I could bring him hot water and a towel, then I could warm the area around his eyes, but that was a fruitless idea since I'd snuck in.

After contemplating what I could do, I slowly stretched out my hand toward Sir Leonhart's eyes. *Please don't wake up*, I repeated over and over inside my mind as I placed my palm over his eyes to warm them.

My palm shuddered with a start when I brushed against his eyelashes and the bridge of his nose. *His eyelashes are quite long...and his nose is tall too! No, no! Stop it right there! I'm not touching him out of selfish desire, okay? This is proper medical treatment! It's treatment, got it? Exactly, I'm just a hot eye mask right now. A nice, steamy, and warm eye mask.* I repeated these words to myself as I desperately tried to chase wicked thoughts out of my head.

I placed my other hand on top, hoping the heat that had gathered in my face would transfer to them. "Pain, pain, fly away."

I hope this eases Sir Leonhart's pain and suffering, even if only a little bit. I'd take on half of his burden if it would lessen his torment. Filled with such wishes, I continued to warm his eyes. How long did I stay motionless like that? Suddenly, I noticed that the creases around his eyebrows were fading. I was properly fulfilling my role as a hot eye mask.

A sigh of relief spilled out of me and I gently removed my hand. *Maybe it's okay to look at his tranquil sleeping face as my reward.* As I peered at his face, muttering excuses to myself, my gaze was met by a pair of slightly open eyes.

Neither of us spoke. I was too startled and my mind went blank. I suspected Sir Leonhart was too groggy since he'd just woken up and was still not fully back to his senses.

Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! I remained still as a rock as I continued to stare at him. Even my facial muscles had abandoned their posts. Only my sweat glands were working as I felt cold droplets sliding down my back. Like a criminal waiting for judgment to be handed to her, I paid close attention to his every move.

Sir Leonhart stared back at me in a daze. His lashes—which I'd just discovered to be surprisingly long—fluttered open and closed a few times.

"U-Um, I..." *I'm sorry for entering your office without permission. I'm sorry for waking you up too. Are you disillusioned by my unladylike behavior?* Plenty of words floated into my mind but I couldn't voice a single one. All that came out

were small groans that made me feel absolutely pathetic. *What should I do? He's going to be disgusted. He's going to be angry. He's going to hate me.*

The more I panicked, the more my mind began to spin out of control. However, though my suspicious conduct should've been apparent to Sir Leonhart, he didn't show any visible reaction. I was confused, but after a few more moments passed, I realized that he was acting strange.

"Sir Leon?"

He languidly extended his arm toward me and his large hand enveloped my cheek. His rugged palm traced the contour of my face as if he were handling a fragile object—lovingly, tenderly, gently. His face contorted into a smile that looked like he might tear up and he sighed in relief.

"I didn't make you cry today."

I'd been flustered by his touch, but his words made my eyes widen and I looked at him quizzically. *When did Sir Leonhart make me cry? I* am *a crybaby and there were times when I'd cried because I felt safe by his side...but that doesn't seem to be what he's referring to.*

"Sir Le—Wah?!" I was about to inquire about the meaning behind his words, but I was cut off midsentence.

His hand, which had been caressing my cheek, wrapped around my head and pulled me close to him. The world shook. The sheer curtains swayed and the light shining through them sparkled as though they were dancing on the water's edge.

I felt his firm chest against my cheek, and through the thin fabric of his shirt, his heat. A pleasant, mellow scent with a mild hint of sweat wafted up my nostrils. Hidden within the fragrance was a slightly sweet and calming aroma. I'd picked up faint whiffs of Sir Leonhart in passing, but now...I was breathing in his smell directly, which threw me into chaos.

My head boiled in an instant. I quickly tried to stand up, but his arms wrapped around my head and my waist prevented me from doing so. *Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why?! Why is Sir Leonhart hugging me?!*

"Hyah?!" A squeal flew out of my mouth.

My head was full of confusion and overheating but I passed my limits when he nestled his head against my cheek. *I can't handle this! This is impossible! I wanted a reward, but I can't graciously accept it if you throw everything at me all at once. I'm going to die from overdosing! If this were a manga, my eyes would be swirling circles.*

I began to think of nonsensical thoughts in response to the shock. My eyes began to tear up, but Sir Leonhart's persistent pursuit did not relent. The hand that was wrapped around my head tucked my disheveled hair behind my ear. I felt his breath against my now-exposed ear.

"Don't go anywhere."

His husky, sleepy voice poured into me and a sweet tingling sensation ran through my entire body. *What's happening? What on earth is going on?* I couldn't fully grasp the situation. But if I knew anything from hanging around Sir Leonhart all year like a pesky fly buzzing about, it was this: those words were not meant for me.

It's dark in here and he's half-asleep, so he must be mistaking me for someone else, right?!



Ah, don't do that. I'm only going to fatally injure myself if I think in that direction. I shook my head, trying to dissolve the negative thoughts that had come with the consternation. The arm constraining my head tightened in response, perhaps because he'd thought I was trying to escape.

"Please, don't leave me."

His hold was almost painful, and it felt like he was clinging to me.

"I won't go anywhere." The words spilled out of me naturally before I even knew it. Even if he was mistaking me for someone else, even if he was half asleep—my desire to provide him solace propelled me to speak. "I will always be by your side."

I rested my cheek against Sir Leonhart's chest. When I returned his embrace, his arms relaxed around me. I stayed still, waiting, until finally, all the strength in his arms disappeared. I heard him breathing peacefully, so I cautiously raised my head. His eyelids were lowered. He really had been talking to me while half awake.

Unlike his sleeping face from earlier, which had been marred with creases, his expression was now very tranquil. I slowly wriggled out of his hold so as to not rouse him, causing Sir Leonhart to let out a small groan. Immediately, I stiffened, but he showed no sign of waking up.

I then headed to the door at a snail's pace, willing my footsteps to not make any noise. Once I got past the door and closed it gently, I leaned against it. I exhaled as deeply as I could, emptying out my lungs completely. All the strength left my body. It felt like I'd just run a marathon, and my heart was pounding. I cradled my scarlet face in my hands and slid down into a crouch.

"I think my heart is going to explode..." The whisper was shameful and husky, so much so that it didn't sound like my own.

I sat there, hugging my knees, until I snapped back to my senses. *This is Sir Leonhart's office. Klaus is standing watch outside, but who knows when someone will drop by? And most importantly, it'll be bad if Sir Leonhart wakes up while I'm still here. I need to flee ASAP.*

Though I knew what I needed to do, I didn't have the strength to stand firmly.

I staggered and tottered like a newborn fawn. Finally, I braced my hand against the wall and managed to pull myself together. *If Klaus sees me in such a pitiful state, then I can't even imagine what he'll say. I need to reclaim my presence of mind.*

I took deep breaths over and over. Once my heart had settled, I pressed my hands against my cheeks to check that the heat had receded. I inhaled and exhaled deeply one more time and then gently tapped on the door from the inside.

The door opened slowly. "It's fine to come out now," urged a hushed whisper. I followed his direction and discreetly exited the room.

"Thank you for keeping watch," I said once I was out.

"Not at all. Did you—"

"Did you complete your business?" was probably what he wanted to ask, but he cut himself off unnaturally when he looked at me...and the smile on his face froze over.

H-He's scary! He's terrifying! A strained "eep" inadvertently leaked out of my throat. That was how frightening Klaus looked. The horror of being stared down with blank, wide-open eyes was beyond description. His bloodcurdling countenance was even more striking because of the vast contrast between the congenial expression he usually wore. *You look like you could kill someone! Why?! Heck, your pupils aren't even dilated!*

"K-Klaus?" I timidly said, but he did not answer.

I heard the hard clink of metal and looked toward the noise. Klaus's sword was at his hip, and he was pushing up on the hilt with his thumb. *H-H-H-H-Hold it right there! I don't know what's going through your head, but stop!*

"Klaus! This is the castle! Castle hallway!" I fervently shook my hands and somehow managed to stop him from drawing his sword. My sentences had come out short and broken, but that didn't matter.

My guard wordlessly watched me panic. After a few seconds, he broke out into a wide smile. Except...his eyes were thin and clearly not smiling at all, making him all the more terrifying.

“I will not forgive any infidel who dares wrong you, no matter who they may be. Lion or wolf—I will dispose of any wild beast that can’t be tamed with reason right this instant.”

His immaculate smile sent chills down my spine and his low voice, which spun words together carefully without faltering, intimidated me. However, my eyes widened when I realized what he was referring to.

“Huh?” I uttered. *The “lion” must be Sir Leonhart. But why would he be an infidel? And when has he ever wronged me?* I stared at Klaus, flabbergasted.

Klaus reached his hand out toward me. “Your hair is disheveled,” he said in an acrid tone as he tidied me up.

When I fully soaked in his words, my head boiled red in an instant. Memories of being embraced surged vividly, and I covered my scarlet face.

“Shall I deal with him after all?” Klaus muttered. His expression was so vicious that I almost wanted to ask if he’d killed a person already.

“Stop that! N-Nothing happened, so please, put away your sword!”

“But...”

“I told you nothing happened,” I repeated firmly.

Klaus sighed. He slid his sword back into its sheath until the hilt clinked. “Very well.”

I thought I heard him click his tongue before that, but I pretended it was just a trick on my ears. If we stayed in the hallway quibbling, someone would spot us, so we quickly fled the scene. On our way back to my room, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

I changed our destination.

I hadn’t seen the Khuer tribe in quite some time, and they all warmly welcomed my visit. While I helped Wolf organize documents, I asked him my question.

“Medicine for insomnia?” He blinked at me several times. “Are you not sleeping well?”

Wolf put his work down and leaned toward me. He held my cheeks between his hands and pressed the skin under my eyes to examine my eyeballs. He had on the face of a doctor.

“It’s not for me,” I clarified. His wildly handsome visage was too close, so I tried to back away in a panic, but my face was trapped so my escape ended in failure.

“Then...who’s it for?” he asked, forcing our eyes to meet.

“Erm...” I hesitated. I shouldn’t have felt guilty, but I couldn’t help but look around.

Sensing something from my shady behavior, Wolf’s eyes squinted suspiciously. Klaus stepped in between us, discerning my discomfort from being stared at point-blank range.

“You’re too close,” Klaus said in a frank tone, scowling.

“An excellent watchdog as always.” Wolf shrugged and smiled sarcastically. “This guy doesn’t seem like he’s got insomnia... Is this for that lady-killer by any chance?” After a moment, Wolf tacked on, “Though he doesn’t seem delicate enough to have trouble sleeping either.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. It would be presumptuous to think “lady-killer” referred to Sir Leonhart, but it was probably the correct assumption. The two had met in the village near Vint’s border...and apparently, my affection for Sir Leonhart had been blatantly obvious to everyone around me.

Wolf looked on at me in silence as I soundlessly turned red-faced. *I’ve been blushing like mad all day long, so you’d think I’d calm down already. It’s pathetic how quickly my emotions show on my face.*

“How drab,” Wolf said, sulking like a child with his arms crossed. “I can’t believe my pure and innocent master has fallen into the clutches of such a battle-hardened lady-killer. I’m worried that he might deceive you and make you cry. I can’t bear to watch.”

“He’s not that kind of person.”

“I wonder about that,” Wolf said. His head was turned away but he didn’t

seem to mean it seriously. When we'd arrived at the disease-ridden village, the two had worked together, so Wolf knew Sir Leonhart was not a bad person. "There are men who treat women nicely, but once they marry, they change suddenly."

"Marry?" His warning flew in one ear and out the other as I focused on the only word I cared for.

Wolf's expression soured. "I'm terribly worried... When you become a bride, perhaps I'll come along in your trousseau," he uttered with a sigh.

Why?! I almost burst out. *Why is my trousseau getting filled with people without my discretion?! Is there another meaning to trousseau that I don't know about? Is it slang or jargon or something?! Maybe it's a popular joke among commoners?*

"Is it a trend to be a part of someone's trousseau lately?" I blurted out.

"Huh? What kind of trend is that?"

That's what I want to know! I cried in my heart. I let out a dry laugh instead. "Yes, of course."

"You're a strange girl." Wolf tilted his head, eyeing me as if I were a mystery. He got up from his seat, went over to the cupboard, and took out a small paper bag. "Mary."

"Huh? Wah!"

He tossed it to me without much warning, but I somehow managed to catch it. The paper bag was lighter than I expected, and I heard a faint rustling noise when I shook it.

"That's a tea blend Lily made. It's reputed to help you sleep better if you drink it before bed."

After a blank pause, I looked back and forth between the bag in my hand and Wolf. He averted his gaze in embarrassment.

"Thank you so much!"

"You should thank Lily later instead."

“Yes!”

Lily loves sweets, so I’ll bake her some cookies when I go thank her. I might as well take the opportunity to bake a lot to give to everyone in the Khuer tribe too... I’ll give some to Sir Leonhart as well to complement the tea.

I was half full of good intentions and half full of ulterior motives...but a little smile crept up my face as I thought of my delightful plans for the near future.

The Knight Captain Caught Between Dreams and Reality

I forced my eyelids up. Light swam through the thin curtains, gently flickering on the all too familiar ceiling of the breakroom. I admired the spectacle for a while in silence.

After some time, I absentmindedly groped around for my watch, but unfortunately, it was not in my near vicinity. It was likely in the inner pocket of my jacket, which I had flung onto the coat hanger. Judging from the brightness of my surroundings, my nap had been less than an hour long. And yet...I felt more well-rested than I had been in days.

I pressed my hand against my forehead and sat up. The constant headache that had been plaguing me as of late was also gone. A short but deep sleep had been quite effective.

“Didn’t have one today.”

Perhaps the biggest factor was that I had slept without having any nightmares. *I feel like I had a very pleasant dream...unlike the nightmares I’ve sadly become accustomed to seeing day after day.*

Perplexed by this feeling, I looked down at my hand, opening and closing it a few times. It had been an awfully realistic dream—an illusion so vivid that I could still feel her touch lingering on my skin. Her soft hair that had grazed against my face, the sweet scent of her nape, and even the heat of her breath...

I slowly clenched my fingers to drive that sensation away. When I brought my fist to my nose, I caught a faint whiff of her fragrance. *I must be at death’s door to think such a thing*. A self-deprecating laugh spilled out of me.

As if she’d ever come here while I was napping. That’s quite the delusion. It’s too absurd a situation; it’s impossible to even have such a misconception. First of all, what reason would she have to come visit me? And even if she did have some reason to come all the way to my office, she is a modest character who’d leave once she discovered me asleep. Listing each counterargument helped my

brain cool off.

“It must’ve been a dream.”

My chest throbbed at my own words. Ostensibly, I wished that it wasn’t just a dream.

I laughed emptily as I scratched the back of my neck. My collar was wide-open and full of wrinkles, making my appearance even more unsightly. *I should be happy that she didn’t see me in such a slovenly state. She views me as a dependable man, so I wouldn’t want her to be disillusioned.*

I flopped back down and let my body sink into the sofa once more. *The real me is no different from any other filthy man. I try to keep up appearances while I’m on duty, but I turn into this mess when I lose even the slightest bit of focus. My clothes are worn out and my hair is a disaster. I probably reek of sweat and male body odor.*

If I were in my right mind, I could never bring myself to hug her when I’m in this wretched state. If she rejected me, then I don’t think I’d recover for a long time... I snorted at how pitiful I was. *I reached out to her because it was a dream...and because it was a dream, she accepted my embrace. Never forget that.*

“I won’t go anywhere.”

My ears recalled her gentle voice that permeated throughout my heart. My breath caught in the back of my throat as if I’d just been stabbed in the chest. Joy welled up inside of me, but it was overshadowed by the shame that mixed in, making me feel nauseous.

Dreams were such a wicked thing. At my own convenience, I had warped someone I treasured, forcing them to say the things I wanted to hear. I was elated from watching a mere puppet show. How comical. I was irate that I had disgraced someone so precious to me, but...

“I will always be by your side.”

But I was still happy. My true feelings, buried deep inside the bottom of my heart, were screaming that I had wanted to hear those words. That wouldn’t change no matter how much I tried to cover them up.

I wanted to hear those words. I want her. I want her so badly that I can't bear it.

I exhaled for as long as I could to push out the air from the pit of my stomach. I relaxed my body and closed my eyes. *Dream or illusion...just once more. I'm fully aware of how pathetic a wish this is. But if I sleep now, please let me see a continuation of that dream.*

As if to ridicule my pleas, someone knocked on the door.

"Captain Orsein, I apologize for interrupting you when you're resting," came my adjutant's voice from outside.

I cracked my eyes open slightly. It seems that it was impermissible for me to have a moment more of self-indulgence.

"Come in."

I breathed out a sigh, along with any lingering emotions, and stood up.

Prince Grouchy Shudders

I signed my name—Nacht von Ersta—in ink, and the letters in my vision blurred. I squinted and put down my quill pen, then grabbed my brow and massaged it. My neck made an unpleasant cracking noise when I turned. I looked up to see light from the setting sun flowing in through the window. Since the morning, I had been working nonstop for six or seven hours, not pausing for lunch. It was no wonder that my body was aching all over.

Assaulted by dull aches, I rubbed my hands against my temporal lobes and stood up from my chair. As I looked around the room, I spotted a serving table near the entrance that had been left by the maids. I approached it and took off the cloth covering it to find a light meal and a pitcher of water. *My brother or father probably ordered someone to bring this. I was too focused on work, so I didn't notice...or perhaps whoever brought this didn't want to interrupt us so they didn't say anything.*

I turned and called out, "Johan."

A golden head behind a mountain of documents stirred. My friend raised his head lethargically. He looked terrible. Disheveled hair; red eyes. A poor-looking complexion as well. His handsome features, which normally sparkled like rays of light, were spoiled by his appalling state.

"Let's take a break. If we keep working, our efficiency will drop," I suggested, pointing to our refreshments.

He contemplated for a bit, but he didn't object. We were probably in agreement that our efficiency would drop. I pushed the serving table next to the sofa and coffee table used for receiving guests. Johan stood from his seat and stretched to loosen up his body. He walked over, arms swaying. I handed him a glass of water.

"If you want tea, then make it yourself or summon a servant. I can't do it."

"I appreciate it, Nacht. Water is enough for me."

Johan accepted the cup and gulped it down in one go. He swallowed audibly

and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Combined with his weary countenance, he looked unduly manly. *What would the young ladies who are enchanted by his sweet smile and princely demeanor think if they saw him like this?* I thought as I eyed Johan.

"What is it?" he asked with a dubious expression, sensing my gaze.

Though he looked tired and languid, it didn't change the fact that he had handsome features. *I'm sure noble ladies would gush about how this appearance is wonderful in its own way too,* I concluded. *An advantage to having a beautiful face.*

"It's nothing."

I offered him a towelette. He looked at me, head cocked to the side, but accepted it. I sat down on the sofa across from Johan and poured water into my own glass as well as more into his. I took a sip—a refreshing citrus fragrance wafted up my nose. There was lemon juice mixed in.

Johan picked up the roast beef and lettuce sandwich on top of the plate before him and bit into it. Though he had taken a large bite, he didn't appear vulgar, which only reaffirmed my beliefs about beauty.

"How are the merchants faring?" I asked once I deemed he'd finished chewing.

Johan drank some water to wash the food down and sighed. "To put it mildly, they're in chaos."

"Of course they are," I replied wearily.

News of Princess Rosemary's attempted assassination had not only had a large effect on her younger brother, Johan, but also on my nation. The Kingdom of Nevel was my nation's ally, and we were indebted to Princess Rosemary herself. Not only had she brought medicine effective against our epidemic, but she had also personally nursed patients herself, which had made her immensely popular with the people of Vint.

It could be said that declaring our support of the Kingdom of Nevel was the will of the people. Thus, we would be joining Nevel's economic sanctions with our own, but limiting trade with Lapter would affect our merchants first and

foremost.

“Though apparently, they’re viewing this as a business opportunity,” Johan remarked. “Merchants truly are an indomitable bunch.” His eyes softened slightly and a smile mixed with amazement and admiration spread across his face.

“If they’re being optimistic about this situation, then our endeavors will be paid off as well,” I replied. I glanced at the stacks on top of our desks and the corner of my lips tugged up.

My father was dealing with documents pertaining to foreign and domestic affairs, as well as having audiences with hopeful dignitaries. The chancellor and my older brother were aiding him. I was examining old documents to see how trade goods with Lapter had been handled in the past. It was too difficult to effectively halt trade of all goods, therefore, we were determining what tariffs to place on what kinds of goods. And then, if trade of certain goods was frozen completely, would we be able to obtain them from another nation?

Naturally, it was an amount of work that a greenhorn like me would not be able to complete on my own. After roughly sorting the information, experts would take over and meet to iron out the details. Johan was assisting me and acting as a mediator for the merchants.

“Oh, that’s right.” Johan stood up as if he’d just remembered something. He took a piece of paper from the pile on his desk and handed it to me. “Here, Nacht. I think this will be a good opportunity to import lumber from the Kingdom of Schner.”

“From Schner?” I questioned, reviewing the document. “But we can produce enough lumber domestically though.”

The Kingdom of Schner was situated north of our nation. It was a country of relentless cold, so they mainly exported lumber and fur. Their goods overlapped with the Kingdom of Lapter, but they traded with different countries, so there was no open dispute between them.

“We’re placing restrictions on logging but we should have plenty to supply our domestic demands. Also Schner’s lumber is expensive.”

“Schner’s lumber is expensive because of how laborious it is to dry their wood,” Johan explained. “But, in return, their quality is excellent.”

“Are you saying we should put high-quality goods on the market at a high price? Hmm.” I nodded in deep thought as I scanned the words with my eyes.

High-quality wood had a different use and clientele from our domestically produced lumber. That being so, there was value in considering his proposal. Lumber imported from Lapter was often used for high-class furniture to answer the demands of the nobility. Trading with Schner would help compensate for that hole.

“Vint has many skilled craftsmen. We could process the wood and sell it as an export. Another advantage of conifers native to Schner is that they excel in terms of strength and durability so they will be easier to work. The material is suitable for furniture and instruments so...”

Johan recounted the characteristics of Schner conifers and their uses without referencing a book. The amount of knowledge he displayed would amaze even seasoned merchants, and I wouldn’t have expected anything less from him.

I listened to Johan quietly with my chin resting on my hand as I leaned against an armrest. A wry smile escaped me and he suddenly stopped talking.

He looked at me in wonder with his head slightly tilted to the side. “Did I say something funny?”

“No. I just felt apologetic for making you put your brilliant intellect to use here instead of your own country.”

Originally, Johan was supposed to have returned to Nevel long ago. However, after his old friend Lord Giaster’s funeral ended and he finished bidding farewell to his close friends, right before he was about to leave, the aforementioned report arrived. It proclaimed that there had been a failed assassination attempt on the first princess of Nevel and that they would take action against the main perpetrator, the Kingdom of Lapter.

To prevent the information from leaking, the second prince of Nevel, Johan, had not known of the incident until the announcement had arrived. Johan adored his elder sister to a great extent, so I had thought he would go on a

rampage. Yet, contrary to my expectations, Johan hadn't cried or shouted. He hadn't taken his anger out on anyone. Instead, he'd been eerily calm.

Everyone around him thought the shock had been so great that he couldn't react. They'd worried for him. My father had even said to give him time alone...but I had seen Johan's profile at a close distance when he'd heard the news. And I rebuffed the conception that he was a man capable of such commendable behavior.

He was not grieving. He was not in shock and unable to recover. The inside of his heart was most likely seething with furious rage. He held only pure, murderous intent toward the ones who dared try to harm his beloved sister.

"It will only benefit Nevel if our alliance flourishes. Please use my intellect as much as you'd like. I can't do much, but let me help in whatever little way I can," said Johan. He lifted the corner of his mouth.

It was a beautiful, textbook smile. But when I saw it, cold sweat began dripping down my back. Johan wasn't lying, so to speak. He certainly thought Vint's prosperity would be a joyous result. But that wasn't his greatest wish. He desired to leverage the economic sanctions to cut Lapter off from the rest of the world. Slowly, steadily, he hoped for that country to decline. I could see right through his subdued desire.

"I'll eliminate..."

That's what Johan had muttered when he'd heard of the princess's attempted assassination, his face totally devoid of expression. At that moment, my friend who I had supposedly known for many years seemed like a completely unknown creature. What would he eliminate? I would surely never ask him that question, not once in my whole life.

A Certain Princess Sighs

Men and women dressed to the nines danced in tune to the orchestra's performance. The women were adorned with accessories made of excessively large jewels. This was the latest fashion trend of the year, but the gaudy sheen made the gems seem laughably tawdry. They reflected the light shining from the ceiling chandelier, hurting my eyes.

In the refreshment area, delightful and brightly colored sweets were beautifully piled up on a tower. The spacious tables were crammed full of cakes which were, sadly, barely touched. The same held true for the dishes that had been made with luxurious ingredients, sparing no expense.

Gentlemen drank their fill of wine while ladies constricted by corsets were absorbed in chatter. And for the ladies not socializing, they still wouldn't touch the feast before them because women who ate at balls were viewed as immodest. The food presented tonight had the same fate as always: discarded in the bin.

As I surveyed the hall with cold eyes, raucous laughter reached my ears.

"The lot from Nevel are cowardly as always."

Inside the bustling venue, there was one group that was particularly noisy, and in the center of that crowd stood my father—the king of Lapter, His Majesty Barnabas von Merkel. At every party, the king imbibed enough wine to bathe in and today was no different. His face was already red and his feet were unsteady. He guffawed boisterously, waited upon by a woman who was not his wife, and was surrounded by treacherous subjects scrupulously reading his mood.

This was the picture-perfect painting of a foolish ruler, and I no longer felt indignation about his behavior.

"That bunch doesn't have the grit to wage war."

"They must fear our dauntless and courageous king."

"Their king is extremely beautiful. Surely he's never held anything heavier

than a pen?”

Drawn in by a woman’s vulgar titter, the crowd burst into roaring cachinnation. Our king, extolled as dauntless and courageous, laughed so hard that it seemed he might choke, and his belly, which had begun to protrude noticeably after he entered his forties, bounced along with him.

He boasted that he had been hailed as a master swordsman in the past, but I wondered how much of that was true. Perhaps the origin of the story came from his lack of losses against sons of nobility and peers his age. After all, the king was a merry person who didn’t notice when people showed him deference.

“Hello there. Are you enjoying yourself, Julia?”

Hearing my name, I raised my head. Standing before me was a beautiful gentleman. His long black hair was tied at his nape and his violet eyes gave off an amiable impression. Though my uncle was celebrating his thirty-eighth year as a bachelor, he appeared shockingly young. The two brothers were only ten years apart, but unlike the king, my uncle showed no signs of aging, even though he was nearing forty.

“Good evening, Your Highness, the Prince,” I said with a curtsy.

“Don’t be so distant. Call me uncle like you used to.” He smiled dryly.

I didn’t wish to state any acceptance or refusal, so I just replied with a smile that could be interpreted either way. My uncle understood my intention, but his grin only widened.

“It doesn’t suit a beautiful princess like yourself to be a wallflower. I see that the young men who wish to speak with you have been strongly dissuaded all night.”

I’m well aware. I know what they want; I’ve been fleeing from them so they can’t ask. I hope they fight amongst themselves and leave me out of it.

“Oh my, you flatter me.” I covered my mouth with a fan and smiled with only my eyes.

The music playing in the hall changed during our meaningless chitchat. My uncle pompously offered his hand to me like an actor in a play.

“I’m sorry to the other men for cutting ahead in line, but could I have this dance?”

“With pleasure.” I stifled a sigh and placed my hand atop his.

He led me in the dance effortlessly, with unrivaled stability. Handling women was his forte and some called him high society’s number one lady-killer. Noblewomen watched us, enraptured.

My uncle grinned and opened his mouth. “Julia, your dress is wonderful today. The plain...no, *modest* color and design... It made me wonder if a widow had wandered into the hall.”

As soon as there was no one else nearby, he began to spout such debasement. Though he had rephrased my attire to be modest instead of plain, the rest of his remarks were awful, making his efforts pointless. My dress was deep green and patterned with lusterless silver threads and light gray lace, so it was accurate to call it plain. However, it was tailored from my late grandmother’s dress, so it should’ve been fairly high-quality.

“Your Highness...the women admiring you with passionate eyes will overhear.”

“No one could eavesdrop on conversation in this revelry. And I don’t mind if they do. Those kinds of women only see what they wish to see and hear what they wish to hear. After a night’s rest, they’ll conclude that they misheard.”

Quite the callous statement, though not entirely off the mark. Those women wish for a humble royal prince who has status, money, and a phenomenal reputation...not a wicked man with a dual personality who wears a smile as he reproaches his niece.

“It’ll stab you in the back one day,” I told him.

“Preposterous. I merely offer them a dream.”

“Your mouth is quite eloquent. Why don’t you rectify your irresponsible personality before it ruins your good looks?”

The smile pasted on my uncle’s face disappeared for a moment. “Even though this irresponsible personality of mine is protecting my life?” The corners of his

mouth lifted cynically, but it was replaced with his normal smile in the blink of an eye. Before I could say anything else, he pulled me close by the waist. As we spun, he whispered in my ear. “What fortune you possess to have been born a *princess*.”

In our nation, competent brothers and sons were not allies but hindrances that threatened your own succession position. If my uncle had ever displayed his excellence, if he’d settled down with a family, if he’d been blessed with children, well...he might have also been removed from our world. Similarly, if I had been a prince instead of an expendable princess—or if my older brother, the crown prince, were not sickly and meek—then the king would surely have killed us without mercy, even though we were his own flesh and blood.

How ironic. We survived *precisely* because the crown made light of our existences.

“But still...” I took a deep breath and looked my uncle straight in the eye. “It’s about time to wake up.”

My uncle stared at me wordlessly. The shadow cast over his face made his violet eyes seem black, reminiscent of bottomless darkness. A long silence fell between us. Soon, the music ended and I took a step away from him.

If we part ways here, who knows when I can speak to him next? I desperately searched for a way to invite him for a walk so we could continue conversing. Yet, the moment I looked up during my rumination, I realized my blunder.

Curses.

I accidentally looked past my uncle’s shoulder and made eye contact with the king, who was standing far away. He returned my gaze, summoning me over. I wanted to avoid wasting time on idle chatter with the king and his followers. However, he had already caught hold of me with his eyes.

I felt lethargy akin to resignation and released my uncle’s hand. The moment the king opened his mouth to call my name, my body swayed and I staggered to the side.

“Julia! Are you okay?” My uncle caught me, inspecting me with worried eyes. Before I could even utter any surprise, he continued speaking. “You must be

tired. You should retire to your room."

What a brazen lie when you're the one who tripped me. He had used my dress as a cover and skillfully hooked my feet. Not a single person around us noticed.

"Brother, Julia seems unwell. She should rest. I will escort her to her room—please, excuse me as well."

"Y-Yes..." slurred the king. "I'll leave her to you."

No one protested against my uncle's declaration. I leaned against him, pretending like he was supporting me, and we successfully slipped out of the hall. The farther we walked away from the venue, the fewer people there were. My uncle's personal knight stayed a ways away, so the two of us were the only ones in the deserted corridor.

"That was a wonderful banquet," he remarked, still smiling.

"Yes. It was like a dream."

Extravagant clothing and jewels; lavish food created to be thrown away. It had been a worthwhile time for me to understand that it was a congregation of people who were blind to reality. Unlike war, the effects of economic sanctions did appear immediately. Its influence would not reach the royalty and nobility residing in the royal capital until much further in the future.

Until the land before them has changed, those people will continue averting their eyes. It will be far too late once the effects appear here in the center of the nation. I wanted to click my tongue, but I bit my lip to stop myself.

Seeing me like that, my uncle shrugged his shoulders. *"Good grief,"* I could hear him say. "Such ardor does not fit you."

"This is not ardor. Surely you already know?"

I was not vexed out of patriotism or by a sense of righteousness. No, it was simply ludicrous that I was being dragged down to destruction by fools. The only similarity my uncle and I shared was our selfish pragmatism, so he must've known how I felt.

When we arrived at my room, my uncle stepped away from me. Having little intention of leaving, he strode over to the sofa. He flopped down with a

roughness that did not befit his elegant appearance, crossed his legs, and then irritably scratched at the back of his head.

“Do you plan to stay in a lady’s room at this time of night?” I asked.

“The only rumor that will arise is how kind of an uncle I am for looking after my ailing niece. Don’t worry. I only take voluptuous beauties as my partners, so no one will think anything more.”

“On the occasion that you are stabbed and pass away, I would like to throw a grand celebration all around the country.” I closed my fan with a snap, sighed, and took a seat across from him.

“I don’t care for politics. As long as I have money to enjoy myself as I please and freedom to do so, I don’t need anything else. Status, fame, a spouse—I don’t need such things. They will only impede my peaceful life.”

It’s not that you don’t care. You persuaded yourself not to. That *is why you don’t have a spouse. If you had a son, he’d only be seen as a threat. Uncle has given up on many things that I’m probably not aware of.*

From time to time, my uncle’s eyes looked as empty as a tree hollow. He was a prince, a flower of high society, and my sarcastic uncle, but I thought his true expression to be that of an old man weary from life.

“Then will you seek asylum in another nation?” I asked calmly. It wasn’t criticism.

One side of my uncle’s lips quirked up in self-derision. “We’ve made Nevel our enemy. Who would shelter royalty from a country predicted to decline?”

Our king did not comprehend this, but the center of this world was not our nation, but Nevel, and not just geographically. Nevel was a powerful nation whose economic power and military strength was unmatched by any other.

If it were just a contest of military might, then at the moment, we could still hold our own. However, war was no longer necessary in this world. Now that the unruly Skelluts were gone, the whole continent had changed and taken pacifism as an ideal. Swords were no longer crucial—now was the age of gold and commodities.

“If you understand, then please stop throwing a tantrum and whining.” I said. A different sort of battle was happening behind the scenes even now. Most of it had been concessions on Nevel’s part to maintain the peace on the surface. But this time was different. “We’ve laid our hands on their greatest treasure—a figure that every one of their luminaries is obsessed with. If we don’t settle this dispute, Nevel will never withdraw. There are only two paths left for us: be destroyed or offer them the head of the culprit.”

I had no intention of going down with the rest. My uncle stared back wordlessly at my cold eyes. After a long stretch of silence, he cast his gaze down and let out a long sigh.

“Goodness... Such foolishness,” he said, voice thick with loathing. He sank deep into the sofa, looking up at the ceiling with his hands folded across his stomach. “The chancellor and general are, as always, probably being kept far away. If they were here, perhaps they could prevent the king from reckless behavior.”

“The king clings to the existence of the demon lord. No matter what those two propose, he will not listen.”

Lapter’s bearing as a strong nation was in large part due to the power of his aides. Even the king understood that much, which was why he was more inclined to heed their advice...to an extent anyway. However, circumstances were different when intel pertained to the demon lord. No matter how much his aides admonished him, the king would not bend. In the end, the king found their constant badgering unpleasant and pushed them away.

“What nonsense. Even if we do get our hands on the demon lord, it will be power beyond our control,” my uncle spat out bitterly.

My eyes widened slightly. The demon lord was well-known in our world, but for the vast majority of people, he was just a villain in a fairy tale. A boogeyman to lull children to sleep at night. Destruction at his hand was no longer a historical tale of our distant past, but merely a made-up story.

For some reason, in Lapter, the demon lord was not the villain, but a being who saved the lives of those about to pass. That was the only difference. Only a slim few believed that the demon lord truly existed—our king and young

children. However, my uncle did not deny the existence of the demon lord. In fact, on top of affirming his existence, it sounded as if my uncle viewed the demon lord as unwanted.

My uncle furrowed his brows and looked up at me. My doubts were likely apparent on my face because, after thinking for a few seconds, he murmured, “Oh,” as if he’d just remembered something. “Come to think of it, you don’t know because you’re a princess. There’s an old legend that’s passed down to only the men of Lapter royalty.”

“Is...it okay for me to hear about this?”

“A legend may be a bombastic name for it. It sounds like a delusion where the truth is obscured. Let’s keep this story between the two of us,” he said in a lighthearted tone.

“Delusion?” I questioned.

“That’s right. It’s believed that Lapter royalty are the descendants of the demon lord—a very outrageous delusion.”

I was dumbfounded, and a silly “huh?” leaked out of my mouth. Calling it unexpected was an understatement. The conversation took off in a direction I never would’ve imagined in my wildest fantasies.

Long ago, our ancestor and chief of our clan collapsed due to sickness. Knowing that the disease was incurable, and that he had not much longer to live, he turned to god. It was unknown what methods he used exactly, but somehow, he became the demon lord’s avatar.

Having obtained a healthy body and mighty power, the chief eradicated the other surrounding clans and founded the Kingdom of Lapter. Unfortunately, before he could unite the world as one under his rule, he was sealed away. But his child became the king of the next era and dreamed of reviving the demon lord...at least, that was how the legend went.

That was the simplified version of the tale that my uncle had just conveyed. As I finished absorbing this new information, I hung my head and massaged my temples. “Please, give me a moment.”

It was no metaphor to say that I had a headache. Even if I went along with the

story and assumed the demon lord truly existed, there were too many questionable aspects of the story.

My uncle watched me process the tale, and a strained smile spread across his face. He seemed to agree with my turmoil. “I told you it was a delusion. I suspect that hopeful wishes were mixed in with the story as it was handed down to each generation, and now, there’s no record of the original telling.”

“Indeed.” I sounded exhausted, but as unbecoming as it was, I did not feel the need to hide it at the moment.

Our ancestor was able to retain their ego as the demon lord’s vessel...and it’s possible that his descendants, meaning Lapter’s royalty, also have that power. I’m sure the king is thinking something along these lines. If he can control the demon’s tremendous might, then he will have the world in the palm of his hands.

“What do you think after hearing that? Do we need the demon lord?”

“It is not needed,” I replied immediately.

My uncle gave me a satisfied nod.

“Even if that legend is true, there’s no evidence that the demon lord can be controlled. It will only bring ruin if we obtain it,” I continued.

“I concur. If Nevel will safekeep such a dangerous item for us, then let them watch over it forever.”

The two of us were rationalists and shared the same opinion. It was a majestic and heroic tale, but it came with few tangible benefits, so there was little reason to pursue such a fable. A weapon that we did not understand or know how to wield would be worth less than garbage.

“Now then, let’s end the small talk here and move on to something more significant,” my uncle said.

“Yes. We don’t have much time left. We must resolve this before our people freeze and starve to death.”

A nation was nothing without its people. I was not saying that out of love or compassion—if our people starved to death, then the nation would soon perish

as well. Even if nobles managed to survive, it would mean nothing, for there would be no working humans left.

“If we want to trade in his head for our lives...we will need to gather more allies.” My uncle leaned on the back of the sofa and brushed his bangs back. The emptiness that had haunted his eyes earlier was nowhere to be seen. “I’d like to talk to the chancellor and general, but if I approach them imprudently, the king will be wary.”

Though our king was a simplistic buffoon, he was not negligent of those who may threaten his authority. My uncle was first in line when it came to possible victims, so he knew this very well.

“I will contact them,” I stated. “His Excellency’s daughter is my acquaintance.”

“Then I’ll leave the chancellor to you. I will go see Duke Ittenbach. He’s stubborn but sensible. Depending on how negotiations go, I can win him over.”

When I heard Duke Ittenbach’s name, the face of that cantankerous old man floated into my mind and I knit my brows. “Please stop traversing such dangerous bridges.”

“Are you worried about me?”

He knew well of my concern, but he still bothered to crack jokes. I glowered at him. “Yes, I’m worried about myself. After all, *Your Highness*, your thoughtless actions are linked to my ruin.”

My words implied that I did not want to head down the path to family suicide, but my uncle merely shrugged. “I value my life as well. But we won’t make it in time if we don’t act with some foolhardiness.”

“Even so, if you fall here, it will spell the end for our nation. You must act with caution—”

“Then shall I deal you a hand that you can use for your negotiation?”

A man’s voice cut through our conversation. I looked toward the source. The glass door leading to the balcony was ajar, and someone was leaning against the wall next to it. His dark cloak covered his head, and I couldn’t see his face, but from his build and voice I speculated he was a young man.

I didn't feel anyone else's presence until now. He's probably a spy or an assassin. He rudely interrupted our conversation, so he's likely not one of the agents my uncle has raised. But if we're his targets, then he had no reason to speak out. Perhaps he's a spy of a noble who can sense our impending doom? No...they would come looking for us themselves after sounding us out. Perhaps this person is...

"Are you an agent of Nevel?" my uncle asked, his level tone showing not a hint of unrest, as if this situation was ordinary. He'd reached the same conclusion as I had. "I've been waiting to hear from Nevel, but I have mixed feelings about how easily you infiltrated our nation. It seems like our castle's security is rather sloppy."

My uncle's brows sagged and he forced a troubled smile. He peered at the calm mystery man as he mulled over the situation. Then, as if he'd thought of something, his expression brightened. "That's right! I heard the king was furious because one of his outstanding soldiers betrayed him. He was especially irate because he'd taken a liking to this particular agent and had given him a crucial position... Could that possibly be you?"

The ostensible spy said nothing in response. Nevertheless, we could see his mouth curve into a faint arc from underneath his cloak.

"I see. Then it's only natural you'd know the layout of this castle and the position of the soldiers."

If uncle's hypothesis is true, then this man is very dangerous. However, we can't harm our only connection to Nevel. And I'm sure he's already handed over all of Lapter's information to them. Nothing will change, even if we neutralize him here; the situation would only worsen. Our only path to survival is to comply with his demands.

"His Majesty, the king of Nevel, is a magnificent ruler," my uncle continued.

After all, their king was practically holding a blade against our throat and telling us to beg for our lives in return for help. He was very different from their purehearted princess who didn't seem capable of being underhanded.

"If you don't need any assistance, then... Well, I've heard the king of Nevel is a person of character, but that doesn't mean his personality is a good one. At the

very least, I'll quietly and obediently return home." The man's tone was carefree, like we were just making small talk. "Your people have committed no wrong, and it would pain her heart, but our offer will come only once. If you refuse, then that's the end of it."

The man was being vague about who he was referring to, but my uncle and I were probably thinking of the same person: the Kingdom of Nevel's precious girl that must not be touched lest you wished to incur their wrath. The one called their *greatest treasure*.

"It's up to you—resist demise or choose to fall with the rest. Personally, I'd be thrilled if your nation was wiped clean off the map." The man sounded horrified as he threw those words out, but a smile played on his lips, making him all the more eerie. This person standing before my eyes was terrifying like an unidentified monster.

"I'd like to resist demise," my uncle conceded bitterly. "Will you lend us your help?"

The man nodded in approval.

The Personal Guard's Apprehension

My footsteps resounded through the corridor as I came to a stop in front of a certain room. I set my eyes on the massive mahogany door and let out a small sigh to rid myself of any irritation. I rapped on the door three times with the back of my index and middle fingers.

"It's Klaus."

Once I had permission to enter, I turned the doorknob. Inside the sparsely decorated room was the captain—he sat behind his desk, which was stacked high with documents. The pronounced fatigue that had marked his face over the last week had faded. Even the dark circles under his eyes were fainter, and his complexion was improved.

I should have been happy that my superior's health was better...but there was a part of me that just couldn't feel that way. Merely thinking about what had happened in this room the other day—while I hadn't been watching—made my blood boil. And because Lady Rosemary wouldn't tell me no matter how much I pressed, my suspicions were running even wilder.

I was on the verge of grabbing him by the shoulders to ask him myself—what did he do to my precious master?

"What's with that face?" the captain asked with furrowed brows.

I was probably making a ghastly expression. "I was born with this face," I asserted in a high-handed manner.

The captain looked exasperated. "Is that so?"

Without another word, I handed him my report and he immediately began reviewing it. I stayed in place in case it was inadequate and I needed to revise it on the spot.

Having nothing to do, I rudely bored a hole in the captain's face with my stare. I didn't enjoy scrutinizing a man's visage, but it was one that Lady Rosemary adored, so I was curious. His pure black eyes followed the writing; his long lashes cast a thin shadow over them. The black hair that hung over his

handsome forehead was stiff and stuck out a bit. Imposing brows arched above the bridge of his nose, and his shapely lips were drawn tight together.

Perhaps because he was expressionless, his appearance seemed elegant like a sculpture. It was aggravating how I couldn't find a single flaw, making me want to search even harder. *Surely, there must be one or two things I can win at. Please, let there be something.*

"Klaus," the captain spoke without looking up from the papers. I continued observing him with a scowl. "Your gaze is irksome."

Unruffled, he'd implicitly told me to stop staring. I would have felt better if he'd just shown me his discomposed and unsightly side.

"I'm sorry. Your complexion seems better." I didn't feel sorry in the slightest, but I could still manage a verbal apology. Then, as if it were just an afterthought, I added, "Did something good happen?"

Suddenly, I heard the sound of something being crushed. Before I could even search for the source of the noise, I saw the paper in the captain's hands full of creases. The cause had been him crumpling up my report.

I gave up twelve whole minutes of supreme bliss to write that document instead of serving at Lady Rosemary's side! What have you done?!

"Captain."

I called out to him to protest his treatment of my hard work, but he seemed distracted. He stared at the palm of his free hand, opening and closing it repeatedly as if to recall some sensation. *He's incomprehensible. Yes, he's incomprehensible...and yet, why does seeing that gesture vex me so?*

"Captain!" I yelled louder than before.

He gasped and snapped back to his senses. "Klaus."

After a long pall of silence, the captain raised his face. He regained his composure, but I saw his eyes waver for an instant, and I could tell there was something inside troubling him. Though he had taken up his post as knight captain at a young age, he was someone who didn't lose his composure, no matter what the emergency. It was unthinkable that such a person would be so

visibly shaken.

“The other day, were you... No, was *she*...” His hesitance stopped him from continuing.

However, I understood his question. *He wants to know whether Lady Rosemary visited this room. I don’t know what on earth took place between the two of them, but he looks like he wants to confirm whether it was reality or not. That means the captain didn’t notice Lady Rosemary here while he was asleep... No, if that were the case, then it’s strange he’s even asking me about her. Which means...something happened while he was half asleep and couldn’t discern dreams from reality.*

Cut the bullshit! You caused her to have such a lovely expression while you were half asleep?! And what the hell did you do?! Lady Rosemary is inexperienced, but I doubt a bit of physical touch would shake the captain.

A detestable image came to mind and I automatically clenched my fist hard. I gnashed the back of my teeth, producing an unpleasant sound. *I want to knock him over, tie him up, and hand him over to the authorities. He’s a criminal who should be punished for lèse-majesté.*

However, I knew my beloved master did not wish for that. At the time, Lady Rosemary had not seemed even the slightest bit dismayed. She had been embarrassed, but at the same time...elated.

I just don’t understand... Why this *man?*

Casting my eyes down, I released all my feelings of futility and frustration with one long sigh. I wanted to yell, *“How would I know?!”* but I kept my emotions in check and told him the truth.

“I brought her here the other day.”

The captain’s almond eyes opened wide.

“I was standing outside on guard, so I don’t know much more than that.”

No immediate reply came. Befuddled, he stared down at his palm once again. After a while he began mumbling to himself, grasping his fist tightly. “So that...wasn’t...a dream?”

In one beat, his clean-cut features were instantly dyed red. I was astonished. I had never seen the captain blush before, and I couldn't find a retort.

"I...did that!" He covered his scarlet face with one hand and slumped over on the desk. His fist landed on the wood with a stupendous bang, but he was writhing in shame, not pain, as he groaned.

Just moments ago, I had wished to see his discomposed and unsightly side, but seeing this much made me feel upset instead. His display was so distasteful that I didn't even feel nasty enough to wish to show it to Lady Rosemary. To be honest, I was revolted.

"Captain... What did you do?" I asked in a low voice.

"Well..." the captain replied after a long silence, averting his eyes.

His attitude, voice, everything was a foolish declaration that he had done something he felt guilty of. *As I thought—he must be punished.* No matter how many times I asked, the captain did not confess. In return, he wore a strained smile as he listened to me lash out.

"I will never forgive you if you do something to her that she hates," I declared, glaring.

The captain's eyes widened imperceptibly. Then they narrowed, and his vision lowered as he receded into careful deliberation. "You're right... If that time comes, don't hold back and do what you must." His voice was unexpectedly steadfast. The strained smile that had plastered his face was gone and replaced with a grave expression. "If I try to bring her any harm, I want you to slay me without hesitation."

His words were wildly beyond my imagination, and a dumbfounded, "Yes...sir," escaped my lips. "What on earth are..."

I wanted to cut him down a notch for making such a tasteless joke, but when I saw his serious countenance, I knew he was not lying or joking. I wanted to say something, but nothing came to mind. A cold stillness filled the room.

The captain's harsh expression softened and he exhaled. "Sorry. It was a joke."

His bitter smile indicated that the discussion was over and he returned his attention to the documents. He tried to smooth out the wrinkled paper—the captain I was accustomed to had returned.

Another knight came in, and our conversation ended on an ambiguous note. *Even if I bring it up again, he'll just dodge the subject. I don't have definite proof of that...but I just feel like it would go that way.*

After my report was approved, I exited the room. Though my bothersome task had ended and I could finally return to Lady Rosemary, my mood did not improve. An inexpressible unease lurked inside my mind.

The Reincarnated Princess's Hobby

Today's weather was clear and sunny. There was a cool, mild wind, a reminder that autumn was slowly approaching. *The ocean waves must've calmed by now, and I bet it feels great at the harbor.* But no matter how much I yearned to be there, I still did not have permission to leave the castle, so I was left to my imagination.

It was a shame, but I knew I had no other choice. While I had been confined indoors, the state of the world had changed drastically. The Kingdom of Nevel had sent the Kingdom of Lapter a statement of protest and had even imposed economic sanctions on them. Our ally, the Kingdom of Vint, had also declared that they would support us. Most nations were carefully observing the situation, but the small Kingdom of Grundt (which was stuck between Nevel and Lapter) displayed signs that it would be siding with Nevel, albeit reluctantly.

Though war had not broken out, the world was in a state of instability. And since I was the cause of it all, I couldn't exactly walk around outside on a whim. I'd doubted my ears when I'd first heard that the reason behind this dissent was due to a failed assassination attempt on the first princess of Nevel.

When on earth did I become such a bigwig? Lapter and I have been butting heads at every turn, but they're definitely sick of me by now. Also, I was probably used as a pretext to attack them directly. I understood that, but it was still hard for me to sit still. Though only in name, I still found it strenuous to be the main instigator.

This is too big a burden for a coward like me to bear. I wish we'd hurry up and reconcile already...but unfortunately, I don't take part in politics, so it's not my place to speak out. A single sigh escaped from my lips.

I continued to brood in melancholy for a while longer, but then I decided it was time to stop moping. I shook my head and pushed aside my concerns. *Nothing good will come from worrying about how useless I am. It's bad for my mental health too. I need a distraction, which means...it's time to make sweets!*

I want to bake cookies for Lily and the others, so this is the perfect opportunity

to switch gears. I'll borrow the kitchen in the sorcerer's quarters, and if Lutz and Teo are available, then I can invite them to join me. It'll be more fun to make them together as a group than work on it alone. My mood improved just thinking about how fun it'd be.

"Oh, I know," I muttered, clapping my hands as if I'd just thought of something.

I'll invite Kanon too. She'll help turn my mood around, and I want to introduce her to Lutz and Teo properly. They're acquainted already but only by face. And maybe I can use this opportunity to get closer to her.

Clinging to little aspirations, I went to see Kanon, but her brows drooped apologetically when I proposed the activity.

"I'm sorry."

Shot down. Kanon rejected me with a hard no, hanging her head. *Ouch.*

"This is really...really honest to goodness such a let down for me, but I have a prior engagement."

Disappointment painted her face. *Such a naive and honest girl would not be capable of making such a dramatic expression for politeness's sake, so it seems like she truly does feel bad. It's a relief that she doesn't hate me.*

"You went out of your way to invite me too... I'm really sorry," Kanon continued, becoming more and more dejected.

I quickly shook my head. "Please don't apologize. It's only natural that you prioritize your appointment with someone else." Though I smiled and told her not to let it bother her, Kanon's expression did not fade. Her glum frown made me work up the courage to hesitantly ask, "May I invite you again some other time?"

Her face instantly lit up. "Please do!"

Yep, Kanon looks the cutest with a smile.

I wonder who Kanon had to meet. It would be welcome news if she made a close friend in this world. Father didn't ask for something unreasonable, did he? She was summoned to this world and hasn't uttered a single word of complaint,

she studies under Miss Irene, and she works earnestly to help us. We better not be demanding anything more of her.

If push comes to shove...I'll be Kanon's shield! Though I clenched my fist with empty determination, I did not think I could hold my own against my father. When I started feeling a dull, aching pain in my stomach, a voice called out to me from behind.

"Princess? Are you unwell?" The question came from a young man with virile features, who had hair and eyes colored copper-red.

It was my friend that I had not seen in quite some time—Teo. He'd grown a whole head taller than me, so he leaned down to peer at my face. Seeing me holding my stomach, his shapely brows furrowed.

"Does your stomach hurt? Should I walk you to your room?"

"I-I'm fine." I had a feeling he'd sweep me off the floor and carry me away at any moment, so I shook my head fervently. "I feel very good today. I was just a bit peckish."

I tried to show him how energetic I was with a smile and hand waving, but Teo's doubt did not vanish. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he sighed instead and took off his robe.

"Teo?"

He wrapped the robe—proof that he was a sorcerer—around my waist and tied its sleeves at my stomach. He was acting like a caring father.

"It may be a bit difficult to move, but please, bear with it. It's not good for women to be cold." Teo regarded me with a dry smile.

I was flabbergasted. *Who is this high-spec hunk? Instead of scolding me for acting recklessly when I don't feel well, he took his robe off to give me and still conveys his concern in full... What shojo manga did you come from, sir? That's some high-quality boyfriend material right here!*

Teo showing off his stats as a hot guy threw me for a loop, but I immediately got a hold of myself with a little gasp. "You can't give this to me. Your robe is very important. I'm going to make sweets now; it'll get dirty."

“I can wash it if it gets dirty. More importantly, let’s hurry up and get started.”

Teo stopped me from undoing the knot and rolled up his sleeves. It didn’t seem like he’d take his robe back, even at my insistence, so I kept it for the time being.

“Priiincess, I brought what you asked for. Is this good enough?” Lutz entered the kitchen with a small box in hand.

“Yes, thank you.”

I took the box from him and opened it. The fragrant smell of tea filled the room. *Tea cookies are actually one of my favorite flavors. But I’m sure there are people who won’t fancy the taste, so I should refrain from baking too many.*

“So we’re making cookies today... What’s that?” Lutz’s gaze dropped from my face to my waist. When he saw Teo’s robe tied around my waist, he wrinkled his forehead.

“Teo lent it to me to keep my stomach warm. But, as I thought, I shouldn’t treat such an important item with such disrespect.” I began undoing the knot once again.

“That’s unfair! Use mine too!”

“Huh?”

Lutz pulled off his robe and wrapped it around my waist on top of Teo’s. Once I was nicely wrapped up, the corner of his eyes softened with satisfaction.



I’m really touched that you two care for me so much... I really am, but...

“Your concern makes me happy...but this is a bit heavy.”

Sorcerer robes were made from durable cloth. I could manage with one...but the *two* robes wrapped around my waist were indubitably too cumbersome. I was a delicate girl—it felt like I was under a movement speed debuff.

“Lutz, don’t give the princess a hard time,” Teo chided.

“But it’s not fair if you’re the only one who gets to! I went to retrieve stuff for us so first come, first served doesn’t apply here.”

Teo looked down, scratched his cheek, and sighed. “Fine... Let’s settle this with rock paper scissors.”

The two started their duel and tied fifteen times in a row. It was quite a heated battle. On their sixteenth bout, Teo won, forcing Lutz to retrieve his robe.

“All right. Shall we begin?” I said.

Feeling somewhat lighter, I rolled up my sleeves as well. *I’m aiming for a large batch, so we’d better start. Let’s make the majority plain or nut-flavored, and I’ll bake a modest amount of orange peel, tea, and cinnamon-flavored ones too.*

I don’t have any chocolate, so I’ll have to give up on chocolate chip or cocoa cookies. I want to try making coffee-flavored ones too, and I have the beans to do so, but I’d better refrain. I used instant coffee in my previous life, and I’m not sure if I can reproduce the taste well with ground beans.

When we started cooking, Teo displayed magnificent skill as usual. I didn’t need to give him specific instructions; he anticipated what I wanted as if he were reading my thoughts. As a result of his efforts, we finished much faster than planned.

Thinking we could rest while the cookies cooled, I reached out for the coffee that I had set aside. Every once in a while, I wanted to drink a pleasant brew instead of tea, so I’d procured some beans from Lord Julius.

“I...barely did anything,” Lutz mumbled, sulking like a child.

Sometimes he acted as our fridge to rest the dough when we made cookies, but there were too many this time, so we used the actual ice room. Chilling all the dough evenly for a whole hour sounded like an arduous task.

“You helped cut the cookies,” I said in consolation.

“I wanted to use my magic to help like Teo did!”

Watching Lutz clumsily and gingerly cut cookies was a smile-inducing sight though. Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem content with that role. I stared at the coffee, contemplating, and then I suddenly recalled a certain dessert. I confirmed that we had enough milk, sugar, and eggs before suggesting it to Lutz.

“Then, will you help me make ice cream again?”

“Of course I will!” His gloomy visage brightened up instantly.

As appropriate for a suitor character in *Hidden World*, Lutz had grown up to become a strapping and beautiful young man, but when his face lit up like this, he looked like a child. Perhaps melancholy and the like suited his frigid countenance in the game, but as his friend, I much preferred his innocent smile.

The way Lutz is now...I’m sure he could build a good relationship with Kanon. They both seem fond of sweets, so it’d be nice if we could have a tea party with the four of us, including me and Teo. When I give Sir Leonhart the tea to help him sleep better, I’ll also give some cookies to Kanon and ask her when she’s available... Preferably, I’ll do that today.

While I planned out my next move, I made ice cream with Lutz’s help and I had Teo prepare hot water. Then, using the beans that I had ground up in advance and a cloth, I carefully filtered the water over the coffee to make a strong brew. Finally, I placed the ice cream in deep bowls in front of them and gradually poured the coffee over it.

Tah-dah! Faux Affogato complete!

“Won’t it melt?” Lutz asked.

“Yes. That’s why you’d better try it quickly,” I urged.

He hurriedly picked up a spoon and dug in. Teo marveled at it with great

interest and then took a bite.

“It’s delicious,” he said. Evidently, today’s dessert suited his palate. He always consumed the cookies and madeleines with gusto, but his eyes were twinkling even brighter than Lutz’s now. “It has a very pleasant fragrance. The combination of bitter coffee and sweet ice cream is exquisite. I think I’d like this even more if it were heavier on the coffee.”

“This is too bitter for me. It’s good...but I’d prefer it sweeter,” Lutz remarked.

Their different tastes were blatantly obvious. With a wry smile, I added more coffee to Teo’s bowl and ice cream to Lutz’s. Now that the sweetness was to his liking, Lutz also ate with great zeal. I made a portion for myself and sat across from them.

Teo’s eyes met mine. “Princess, you have magic hands.”

“I do?” My eyes went wide. They’re *the ones who have magic hands. They can cook even if they don’t have fire or ice nearby. It’s a marvelous power.*

“I get what you mean. No matter what she puts her hands on, it always turns out delectable,” Lutz chimed in his agreement, spoon in hand.

My hands were very average and had not a single special ability lying within them, but their words filled my heart with joy.

“I’m happy you like it that much. I’ll make something different next time.”

Lutz’s eyes narrowed with delight. His gaze was mature, unlike the innocent smile from before. “Yeah. You should always be like this, always smiling.”

“We’ll do whatever we can to help,” Teo added.

I was about to tell them that their assistance would be very welcome, but I swallowed my words. There was a solemn glint in their eyes and I sensed they were referring to something completely different.

Did my attempted assassination worry them? I wanted to inquire what lay behind their words, but the conversation had already veered to desserts and I missed my chance to bring up the subject.

The Reincarnated Princess Disconcerted

After I parted ways with Teo and Lutz, I immediately went to visit the Khuer tribe.

I peeked into the room, which was being used to store medicinal documents. As luck would have it, my target—Lily—was there. Papers in hand, she and Wolf were speaking with serious expressions. But when she noticed my presence, her eyes grew round and began twinkling happily. She shoved the papers at Wolf and rushed over to me.

“Lady Mary!”

“Hello, Lily. I’m sorry for interrupting you while you’re working.”

“You’re not interrupting! We were just about to take a break.”

Her smile was so bright that I didn’t know how to respond. After all, she had clearly been engrossed in work until I’d walked in.

“I’ll brew a pot of tea, so please, take a seat!”

“Oh, you don’t have to. I’ll be going—urk.” Before I could finish saying “*soon*,” Lily’s expression turned crestfallen, and in my weakness, a silly noise slipped out. *Who could be ruthless to that face?* “Well, I’d like to chat for a bit if you have time.”

“Absolutely!” Her smile returned and I followed her into the study.

Wolf smiled dryly. “If you don’t have any urgent business to attend to, then take all the time you want.” I sat down in the chair he offered me. He moved the stack of books on the table to a different desk and wiped down the surface with a cloth.

“I baked some cookies,” I said. “Please share them with everyone.”

“Thanks. I adore your cooking, so I couldn’t be happier.” I handed over a box crammed full of cookies, and Wolf lifted it to his face. “They smell great.” The corner of his eyes softened. He then noticed the paper bag I had placed off to the side. “Is that for someone else?”

He didn't mean much by asking that, but I overreacted and flinched. Wolf's eyes narrowed suspiciously and a teasing smirk crept across his face. "Ah, I see—you're going to give those to that lady-killer." When I clammed up, an exasperated sigh escaped from his lips. "You're so easy to read."

"I-I'll be giving them to other people too."

The bag contained a small box full of cookies and Lily's homemade tea blend. I had enough for Sir Leonhart, Kanon, and my older brother. However, Chris was terribly busy, so if I couldn't see him, I'd eat his portion myself.

I'd originally intended to give Klaus a box as thanks for taking care of me, but...well, I had a hunch that he would leave the cookies untouched for eternity and use the box as decoration instead. So, I handed him the cookies without packaging them... He still told me they would become his family heirlooms, so I made him eat the cookies then and there. If I didn't, I knew the knight's quarters would become chaotic.

What should I do about Michael's cookies? I have those with me as well, but I don't see him often. I suppose I'll just entrust them to Wolf—he'll most likely deliver them to Michael.

Just as I thought that, the door opened.

Lily entered holding a tray with cups, and beside her was the person I'd just been thinking about: Michael. He was carrying a teapot and some little plates, so I surmised that they'd bumped into each other and he'd offered to help. When he saw me, a gentle smile spread across his face.

"Hello, Princess."

In the long while that I hadn't seen him, he'd become right at home with the Khuer tribe.

"Michael, thank you for helping me. Would you like to join us for tea?" Lily asked.

"Yes, thank you," he replied.

There were no traces left of the boy who'd been averse to social interaction—the person conversing with Lily was now a handsome young man. The way he

nonchalantly assisted Lily as she poured the tea was splendid as well.

Since he's a suitor character in a dating sim for girls, I'd expect nothing less. Michael's potential as a love interest is impressive. The demon lord from Hidden World *was a sexy character with an alluring sort of charm, but Michael is the soothing type—kind, with a gentle smile. A petite beauty like Lily paired with a tall, slim, and handsome young man makes a perfect picture. It looks like a CG out of an otome game.*

"Hey, ugly, your smirk is creepy," said a voice from behind me.

I hastily covered my face with my hands. *Crap. I hope I wasn't making an expression improper for a noblewoman.* Palms still on my head, I hesitantly turned around to see Rolf shooting me an exasperated look.

"Wow, you've gotten even uglier."

Ohhh, how vexing. I had no retort since I was fully aware of the unsightly expression I'd just been making. I gnashed my teeth, but then an unexpected ally came to my aid.

"You're not referring to the princess, are you?" Michael asked, head tilted to the side. It was less of a question and more a statement of disbelief.

Caught on the wrong foot, Rolf's eyes widened, then he averted his gaze in shame. *Oh? I've never seen him act like that before.*

"No, um..." Rolf mumbled.

"Rolf, is it possible that your eyesight is poor?" Michael inquired. There was no ill will present in his tone, which made his remark even harder to endure.

Wolf stepped in to save his fellow tribesman while suppressing a laugh. "M-Michael, let him off with that."

Next to Wolf, Lily's shoulders were shaking slightly as she tried to hold back her own laughter. *Looks like Rolf is weak against Michael. Come to think of it, when he saw Michael using healing magic, the boy was beaming at him with respect.*

"Sorry," Rolf apologized quietly, head turned away from me.

I got to see something amusing, so I'll let you off the hook this time.

After I had tea with the Khuer tribe, I went to Kanon's room, but she wasn't there. It was unfortunate, but I'd have to try again tomorrow. And, if I still couldn't find her, then I'd have to eat the cookies myself. I reluctantly returned to my room, but on the way back, I stopped midstride.

"Oh?" I uttered.

I peered ahead, down the long hallway, and saw the people I'd been searching for—they were turning toward the corridor that led to the courtyard. I couldn't see their faces clearly from afar, but there weren't many other petite girls escorted by tall knights within the castle. Furthermore, I was certain that the girl was wearing Kanon's sailor-style school uniform. I also had a strange sense of confidence that I would never mistake Sir Leonhart for anyone else.

Thank goodness. I can hand things over before the cookies go bad.

I turned the corner in pursuit, but because I was too far behind, I lost sight of them on the way. *I know the courtyard is large...but who would've thought it'd be so hard to find someone...*

"I wonder where they went?"

"Shall I search for them?" Klaus asked.

"Please do."

With my knight's assistance, we combed the vicinity for Kanon and Sir Leonhart. They were nowhere in sight among the beds of blooming dahlias and still-budding autumn flowers. The gazebo standing on slightly elevated ground was empty as well.

I proceeded onward as I surveyed the area. The neatly pruned trees were like a maze that hindered my vision and path. But then, in the distance, I heard what I thought was quiet murmuring. I continued toward the source of the noise and finally saw them.

Just as I'd thought, it was Sir Leonhart and Kanon. However, for some reason, their faces were grave. Dissuaded by the serious atmosphere, I stopped in my tracks.

I'm too far away to hear what they're saying, but it looks like they're

discussing something important. I don't think it would bode well if I overheard them by accident. Maybe I should come again some other time...or maybe if I wait, they'll be finished soon. I stared at my feet as I deliberated, ultimately deciding that it would be best to leave. But when I looked back up at the two...

I froze.

Kanon was hugging Sir Leonhart. They were closely snuggled together, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. *Am I dreaming? Did I fall asleep while standing?* I blinked over and over, desperately clinging to absurd ideas. But no matter how much I hoped, I did not wake up from a nightmare.

After all, this was reality... A cruel, undeniable reality.



The moment I understood that this was no daydream, my head plunged into chaos. Internally, I screamed, *Wh...Wh-Wh-Wh-Whyyy?!*

There is no why. The answer is obvious, someone said calmly inside my mind.

I shook my head, trying to fling away those thoughts. *It must be a mistake or something. Maybe I saw it incorrectly.*

I reexamined the girl. Her soft, chiffon-beige hair swayed by her shoulders. Large, double-lidded, and unclouded hazel eyes; a small and modest nose; dainty lips the color of pale-pink flower petals. Her adorable facial features could rouse anyone's protective instincts, and they were offset by a full chest and a slender waist which formed feminine curves. It was the same lovely girl that we had recently summoned to this world...and it was impossible for two beauties like Kanon to exist.

Next, I turned my gaze toward the man. His strong body was hardened by training and covered by the black royal guard uniform. Dark almond eyes peeked out from beneath his stiff black hair. Imposing brows and a tall nose—these clean-cut features made him appear more manly than beautiful. His age did not abate his charm but enhanced the masculine sex appeal he exuded. I loved him greatly and would never mistake him for someone else. He was none other than Sir Leonhart.

I confirmed their identities, thoroughly crushing my own means of escaping the truth. *So... Basically... Kanon and Sir Leonhart are embracing each other right before my eyes. That's all it comes down to. Kanon—the heroine—didn't choose any of the countless suitor characters, but for some reason, she chose Sir Leonhart, a side character...? And...Sir Leonhart didn't choose me, but Kanon.*

I inhaled sharply, clogging the back of my throat. My heart pulsed with an unpleasantly loud noise. I wasn't cold, but my body shivered uncontrollably. *Why? Why? Why? Why? Where did I go wrong?*

"Lady—" I heard Klaus begin to call from behind me.

Whipping around, I covered his mouth with my hands before he could finish. The paper bag I'd been holding fell to the ground. Fearing that they'd heard the sound of it landing and might come to examine the noise, I fled, dragging Klaus

along with me.

I don't want to be here for another second.

I moved down the hall, almost running. Klaus looked like he had something to say, but followed me without opposition. From where he'd been standing, the trees had likely obstructed his view of Sir Leonhart and Kanon. Klaus seemed confused, but I was grateful that he didn't ask me any questions.

My head was empty as I moved my legs, but my body instinctively carried me back to my room. When I arrived, I stood still before my door, calming my ragged breathing.

"Lady Rosemary," Klaus called tentatively from behind me.

From his uncharacteristically quiet voice, I knew I was worrying him. My throat was close to spasming so I wrenched open my mouth and took multiple deep breaths. I swallowed the shock that had welled up inside of me and clenched my stomach.

"I'm sorry, Klaus. I must've surprised you when I took off like that." I turned my head and smiled at him. My tone sounded forcibly cheerful and did not suit the situation, making my pleasantry fall flat.

He blinked at me, caught off guard. His blank expression quickly crumpled and contorted as if he'd just sipped something terribly bitter. *I messed up. I've made him worry even more.* Though I knew this, there was nothing I could do. Feebly whining was not an option for me.

"There's something I wish to ruminate over. Could you please give me a bit of alone time?"

"But—"

I could hear persistence rising up within Klaus, so I cut him off firmly. "Please."

After a few moments of hesitant silence, he cast his eyes down and let out a small sigh. "As you wish," he said bitterly. "I will stand right outside your door, so please call for me immediately if anything happens." His words made it clear that this was the most he'd compromise.

I nodded. In place of the bright expression that I'd pasted on, the corner of my lips tugged up into an unbecoming smile. "Thank you."

With that, I entered my room and closed the door. I tottered to my bed, feet unsteady, and collapsed onto it. It creaked quietly, but my weight was nothing that the expensive piece of furniture couldn't handle.

I rested my cheeks against the comfortable sheets and closed my eyes. Though I wanted to fall asleep without thinking of anything more, the scene I'd just witnessed replayed endlessly in my mind.

Kanon had her arms around Sir Leonhart's waist. I was too scared to properly check where his hands were. I don't think they were wrapped around her back...but honestly, I can't say that with confidence. It's likely that I just saw it that way because I wished it to be so.

What kind of expression was he making? I think Sir Leonhart was surprised and Kanon was grim... Maybe there was an accident or some kind of trouble? With that optimistic hope in sight, I energetically sat up.

Perhaps Kanon tripped and he just caught her! Yeah! That's very possible. Something probably happened while I wasn't watching them. It's not necessarily true that they were hugging out of love. I clenched my fists enthusiastically. *Besides, Sir Leonhart doesn't seem like he...loves...Kanon...*

"Don't go anywhere." The words I'd heard Sir Leonhart say the other day came to mind—those specific words had spilled out of him while he'd been napping.

I was so flustered by how tightly he'd held me in his arms that I didn't think about his words too deeply, but "don't go anywhere" implies that whoever it is might leave him. I know that's not something he'd say to me *when all I ever do is loiter around by his side. If he mistook me for someone else though...then who were those words for?*

"Please, don't leave me."

If Sir Leonhart tried to court someone, there aren't many who could elude him—I'm not the only one crazy about the knight captain. I'm sure if he wanted a particular person, they would hold his hand...as long as they didn't have an

important reason not to. Like, for example, if they were someone from another world...

"I...see." An idea fell into my lap and everything clicked inside my head. I absentmindedly gazed out the window and murmured, "My love...is unrequited."

The voice that came out of me was frightfully level and not my own. It was completely devoid of feeling, leaving only a hollow ringing in my ears.

The Reincarnated Princess's Nightmares

When I came to, I was standing in the dark. Before me was a vast expanse of pure black. No matter how hard I strained my eyes, I couldn't see anything. My depth perception felt off, so I groped around in front of me, but my fingers only flailed in the air. There was nothing within one meter. I sluggishly reached around but found only empty space—the same void.

I was completely surrounded by darkness.

Why was I even here? I had no idea how I'd ended up in this place. My mind was foggy and I struggled to recall what had led me to this inky blackness. *What was I doing again? Wasn't I sleeping on my bed?* When I retraced my memories, the image of a man and woman nestling close together in the courtyard resurfaced.

Oh, right. My love is unrequited.

Though I remembered what had brought me to this state, it still lacked realism. It felt as if I was observing a hazy scene through theater curtains...like it wasn't *my* heart that'd been broken. My emotions couldn't keep up. However, my body had taken the blow and broken down, sending me into a deep repose.

Before, when I'd been in my room, I thought I'd heard noise coming from outside... But, getting up to see what was happening had felt like a bother, so I'd covered my head with my blanket and continued to sleep. After that moment, my memories suddenly ceased.

Did I wander off while sleeping? No one's ever mentioned that I have symptoms of sleepwalking. I've never woken up in the morning in an unknown place either. Perhaps there are cases where people can suddenly develop somnambulism...? I stood there, pondering for a while, but I knew I couldn't stay in this place forever. *I don't think I've left the castle walls, so I should return to my room first.*

But then, my gaze inadvertently dropped to the ground. There was something by my feet—a black, shadowy mass. I examined it closely. It was too dark to

clearly make out, but it looked quite large and thick...perhaps about the size I'd be if I crouched down.

While I was preoccupied by the thing on the floor, I heard a creak. A door nearby cracked open slightly, swinging unsteadily. From the gap, a thin beam of light shone through, faintly illuminating the room. Now that the darkness had somewhat receded, I could barely make out my surroundings.

I looked around the undecorated room and then down at my feet to ascertain the identity of the mysterious lump. When I did, the wind was knocked out of me. My eyes widened and I struggled to breathe.

"Eek!" A raspy cry escaped from my lips.

Hair belonging to a small and pale head was splayed out on the floor. The head was connected to dainty shoulders by a slender neck, and the figure's small hand was limply stretched out.

The lump was a human.

They lay still without even the slightest twitch, their stomach dyed crimson red. There was so much blood everywhere that I could tell at a single glance—their wound was fatal.

It's a person. Someone is dead? The shock was too much for me and my legs wobbled. I almost screamed out of fear and unease, but I covered my mouth with my palms. Then, I realized I was holding something in my right hand.

I didn't recall going to bed with anything. It was strange, but this whole time, I hadn't noticed that I was grasping something. I brought the object to eye level. The short and cylindrical thing felt damp in my hand, and it was dripping something onto the floor. From under the dark liquid, part of the object glinted in the dim light.

"What...is this?"

In my hand was a sharp blade, spattered with a black liquid... No, it wasn't black. It was red. A dark crimson liquid streamed down the knife onto my hand.

"No!"

I flung the knife away from me. It landed on the ground, causing ripples in the

pool of blood. My heart thrashed so violently in my chest that I thought it might break. I took many small, quick breaths, but I felt like I was suffocating, and my head ached like it was splitting in two.

Did I... Did I do this? Did I murder someone? No! That's impossible! I cradled my muddled head in my arms, backing away slowly. *Besides, I don't remember doing this, nor do I have a reason to do such a thing. I must be misunderstanding the situation.*

I didn't do this. I would never.

I repeated these words to myself over and over, taking another step away. Though I wanted to avert my gaze, I couldn't stop staring at the corpse lying on the floor—it was as if my eyes were sewn to it. The body was thin and petite. A girl around my age. Her frail, slender legs were sprawled out under her navy-blue pleated skirt.

Wait... No... This can't be. I knew those clothes very well. In this world, I'd never seen anyone else except her in that attire. *No... No. No. No! Impossible!* I repeated this over and over, practically in prayer, as I inched closer to the body. My throat made a raspy noise, and I felt like my lungs weren't working properly.

With a trembling hand, I brushed the girl's hair away from her pale face. There was no sign of life in her hollow, wide-open eyes. Her blue lips were parted ever so slightly and her cheeks were ghostly white. She looked nothing like the healthy beauty that I was familiar with, but there was no way I could mistake her for someone else.

She was the shrine maiden from another world. The corpse lying on the ground, fated to never speak another word again, was without a doubt...Kanon.

"I don't believe this."

Instead of screaming, piddling sounds spilled out of me, faint enough that they'd vanish in the air. The fear that had overwhelmed me felt distant, and I was struck by an unrealistic sense of despair.

Did I kill Kanon? Why...would I? I have no reason to do such a thing. I desperately tried to reject the notion.

"Really?" A voice asked. "*Do you really have no reason at all? Do you truly*

have no clue why?” The question continuously echoed in my mind.

Did I honestly not resent her at all?

“Who’s there?!”

The door flew open and someone entered the room. The voice was one I knew very well...and one I wanted to hear the least right now. He kneeled beside Kanon and hugged her delicate body. As he clung to her corpse, he looked at me. His jet-black eyes were dyed with despair.

“Princess... Did you...do this?”

“No!” I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t make a sound.

Someone’s voice reverberated inside my head. *“You can’t say no. You killed her.”*

No... No... I didn’t! I would never do such a thing! Kanon is my important—

“Friend? She stole the man you loved for many years, and you still call her your friend?”

E...Even still... She’s precious to me. I would never hurt her!

“Be honest. You don’t want to give up, right? No matter how much you try to hide it with pretty words, the desire churning inside you won’t disappear.”

I... I’m not...

“Follow your desires. Steal. Kill. Everything will be as you desire.”

Stop!

“Hrk!”

The moment I screamed, my eyes shot open. In my pitch-black room, the only thing I could hear was my own ragged breathing. My body was frozen with terror, and I was too afraid to even check my surroundings. I pressed my trembling hand against the bed and slowly sat up. My skin was completely drenched in sweat, and my nightwear stuck to me uncomfortably.

It was not yet dawn, and the area around me was dim. After my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I could vaguely make out where I was—inside my familiar bedroom. No one else was here; there was no corpse crumpled at my

feet.

It...was a dream. As soon as I understood this, my entire body went limp. I hugged myself, trying to calm the shivering.

"It's fine... I'm fine. Just a nightmare," I repeated, my voice husky and shaky as I tried to persuade myself.

I don't want to kill Kanon. I don't detest her. I don't resent her.

"You don't want to give up, right?" The words flashed through the back of my head.

It felt that someone had seen through the innermost depths of my heart. Though I knew that my love would be unrequited, a part of me still couldn't accept it because...I still loved Sir Leonhart. My affection for him had not waned even slightly. This was true despite the fact that I'd intended to let go of him when the time came.

Then... Could it be? Did those other words reflect how I truly feel? Do I want to disregard Sir Leonhart's feelings and steal him away from Kanon? Even if that would mean hurting him? Even if...it meant murdering Kanon?

It had been too vivid to wave off as a mere dream. I recalled the gruesome scene once again. Her delicate body collapsed in a pool of blood. Her empty eyes. I wasn't cold, but a shudder ran down my back. My body quivered hard. I frantically shook my head back and forth, trying to rid myself of the fear.

It doesn't matter what awful emotions lie within me; as long as I stay rational and control myself, I can avoid the worst possible outcome. I can't become fainthearted—I'm the only one who can choose what path I will take. As soon as I tried to convince myself of that, I remembered the voice from my dream.

"Follow your desires. Steal."

"Come to think of it... What was that?"

It felt out of place to call those whispers the voice of my heart. They didn't sound familiar, but at the same time...they did. I wasn't sure about the gender or age of the voice either. It was indistinct—a grating and jarring noise—like a cacophony of numerous voices overlapping simultaneously.

“Surely not.”

Words representing the symbol of destruction, the existence that was called a calamity of this world, came to mind. It was the worst possible speculation.

If that *is inside of me, then...*

“No...”

Dazed, I stared ahead with vacant eyes. A black cat watched me from the darkness.

The Knight Captain’s Anguish

At the edge of the courtyard, our guest from another world clung to me. It was a place where few people traversed, but who knew when someone might pass by? Although the cause of my current situation was partially my own fault, the highly undesirable predicament gave me a headache.

“Lady Fuzuki,” I said, feeling troubled. *“Please release me,”* I asked with my eyes.

She glowered up at me. “Sir Leonhart, please stay still!”

Request denied, I suppose. I stifled a sigh and gazed up at the sky. *How did we end up like this?*

I fled from present reality and recalled the series of events that had led us here.

It all started with a nightmare. Not a figurative nightmare to describe a tragedy, but a real one that came during sleep. Everyone saw terrible things while dreaming every now and then. I was not a child, and I wouldn’t cry because of a mere bad dream—my mental strength wasn’t weak enough that I’d be worn out from a night or two of continuous nightmares...

Until recently, that was what I’d thought.

Evidently, I *was* a man of weakness. I was a hopeless human, one that became unable to rest when his dreams were about making his beloved cry. When I was asleep, I always made her shed tears. I saw myself killing the men surrounding her. She would try to run away in fear, but I would pin her down and hurt her. Every night tears would quietly stream down her face. She would bawl but never condemn me; her eyes, hollow and filled with great despair, were a fountain of endless teardrops.

It was abnormal to have such similar dreams night after night, but I couldn’t conclusively say I wasn’t being haunted by regular nightmares. She and I always appeared in my dreams. Occasionally, others would have a part to play, but they were always real people from the castle, and I had no memory of any

unknown beings intervening.

I had no evidence—not the slightest justification—that would suggest an outside force was tampering with me. It was quite possible that this was not an aberrant phenomenon, but the workings of my mind.

Are these the terrible desires that sleep in the deep depths of my heart? Or is there some unfathomable power at play? Distressed, I decided to casually bring up my hypothesis to Lady Fuzuki. If the demon lord had possessed me, then it needed to be promptly dealt with...before my rationality was lost and I reached out to *her* once more.

Thinking that, I asked Lady Fuzuki for her time. I was an inarticulate man, so after failing to come up with a good idea about how to explain my dilemma, I blundered. “Is it possible that the demon lord resides inside of me?” I asked simply.

Her affable smile became a stern frown in an instant, and she responded aggressively, “Is there a reason why you’re asking?” I avoided giving her a clear answer. Irritated by my vague response, she hugged me to check. According to her, since she was the demon lord’s natural enemy, if I showed any disgust or strong rejection of her touch, it was possible that I was possessed. *What a sloppy methodology.* However, since she’d told me that, I couldn’t escape or push her away.

That was how we’d ended up like this. I stood straight as a board, unable to lift a finger until this scenery of hell (Lady Fuzuki clinging to me) was complete.

Her gaze was trained on me closely so she would not overlook a single twitch of my muscles. Her large hazel eyes did not have an ounce of innocence typical of girls her age; they were sharp like a soldier interrogating a suspicious character.

“How is this?” she asked. “Do you feel unpleasant?”

I wouldn’t go as far as to call it unpleasant...but I certainly wasn’t happy. Perhaps my sentiments were questionable for that of a healthy adult man, but I honestly felt nothing...and if I were to be even more honest, I wanted her to let go of me as quickly as possible.

“Not particularly,” I replied with a wry smile.

To me, Lady Fuzuki is like a child rather than a woman. She’s clinging to me the way my younger brothers or the neighborhood children do. In our nation, a fifteen-year-old girl is an adult—they have made their debut in high society as a fine young lady. I’m sure Lady Fuzuki’s appearance is charming to men. However, her innocent expressions and childlike behavior are jarring, and they prevent me from seeing her as a romantic partner.

We also have a large age difference. I froze as soon as I thought that. *She... That person...is around the same age as Lady Fuzuki. In fact, she’s one year younger.* I almost screamed from the self-hatred that welled up inside of me.

What did I do to a girl not even fifteen years old? Not only have I ravaged her in my dreams, but I had the gall to mistake her for an illusion and stretch out my hand. I trapped her in my arms so she couldn’t escape, and the words I uttered were a spell of my true feelings. I see other girls her age as children, so why do I regard her this way? When did I start recognizing her as a woman and not a child?

I had watched her grow since she was young—that little, persistent princess. She was terrible at depending on others. She would clumsily take everything upon herself, and though I’d thought that trait was adorable, I had only ever felt the desire to protect her. I treasured her greatly, and I wanted her to become happier than anyone else, just like a father or older brother would.

Even once her affection for me had become clear, I’d figured that her feelings stemmed from admiration. They were the same as a little girl begging to become her father’s wife: heartwarming and fleeting. I’d thought they would disappear in a few years. Thus, I always reminded myself to never give her the wrong idea.

The princess was intelligent, lovely, and purehearted to the core. A faithful, promising young man her age belonged by her side. But...*she* had been the one to break down the wall that I had erected between us.

“Don’t turn me down yet.”

She’d desperately uttered these pleading words while holding back tears...and they‘d struck me. She had, in fact, noticed—I had decided that her

affections were childish love and had taken a step away from her. And yet, it'd been commendable and heartbreaking to see how she'd implored me to wait instead of criticizing my actions. I almost wished she'd screamed, "*Don't look down on me!*" and slapped me instead.

By then, she'd already become the most important girl in the world to me. Though what I'd felt hadn't been love, she'd been so very dear to me. Upon seeing her dispirited face, all I'd been able to think about was how to make her smile.

I want her to be happy. I don't want her to face even the smallest injury. My love had been nothing noble or unconditional, but... *As long as she kept smiling, I was overjoyed.*

When did my feelings transform into something so unsightly? It made me nauseous.

If it was possible that the demon lord had possessed me, even if only by the slightest chance, I should have immediately reported it to His Majesty. Though I knew this, I hesitated—not out of loyalty, and not because I didn't want to bother him with such a negligible prospect. I also wasn't making light of the possibility that this was all in my imagination.

No, the reason I didn't want to report it was much uglier: I was a coward. I feared that His Majesty would take away my right to court Princess Rosemary.

I pray that this is all just in my head...but in my foolishness, I've already lost the right to marry her. I am unqualified to stand by the side of someone altruistic and beautiful like her.

A muted thud pulled me out of the recesses of my mind and back to reality. Something had fallen to the ground.

Lady Fuzuki had heard the noise as well—she turned her head toward the source. She'd finally released me, and a sigh of relief leaked out of my mouth. I, too, looked in the direction of the sound. She searched around the area until she finally stopped on the other side of a garden tree. Ostensibly, she'd found something. She crouched down and picked up a paper bag.

It would be a bit detrimental if someone had witnessed the hug between Lady

Fuzuki and me. I couldn't tell them the truth, but I couldn't let them keep whatever misconceptions they'd formed. After all, there was someone I did not want to misunderstand.

"What's this?" Lady Fuzuki was about to inspect the bag's contents, but I stopped her.

"May I take a look?" I asked.

I could not let anything happen to our guest. The bag didn't seem like it held anything dangerous, but I remained vigilant on the off chance that it did. I took it from her hands and opened it.

My nose was hit by the sugary fragrance of baked goods.

"Baked...sweets? They're cookies. Did a maid drop these?" I wondered.

"Cookies," Lady Fuzuki repeated. A few seconds later, her eyes went wide. "Cookies, you say?! L-Let me see!"

She snatched the bag out of my hands and peered inside. Immediately, she blanched. Lady Fuzuki was on the brink of crying, and she began muttering things like "It's a misunderstanding," and "She's going to hate me." Her face was white as a sheet, but five seconds in the future, I would be even paler.

The Summoned Shrine Maiden's Impatience

Inside the paper bag were tasty-looking cookies baked to a gorgeous golden-brown. When I saw them, the first thing that came to mind was the image of a cute, beautiful girl—a princess far lovelier than any princess from a certain "magic kingdom" back in my world.

"Kanon, I'm going to bake some cookies—if you'd like, would you care to join me?"

When she'd invited me, I'd wanted to accept instantly, but unfortunately, I'd needed to decline because of a previous engagement. I'd really, really wanted to join her. *Why did I promise to meet Sir Leonhart during such an incredible event?* He took good care of me, so I hadn't wanted to flake on him...but I had felt some resentment, just a tiny bit... *Please keep that a secret.*

Though I'd rejected her, she hadn't looked hurt, but had instead smiled at me, telling me not to worry about it. *She's so compassionate. If I'm not just in over my head, then these cookies are probably for me and Sir Leonhart.*

Oh my gosh... What scene did I just show such a kind girl?!

Since these cookies were on the ground here...she probably saw us. She definitely witnessed the moment I hugged the guy she loves. This is the wooorst... In her eyes, I'm a nasty girl who's pining after her beloved and trying to take off with him! Nooo! I do *think Sir Leonhart is super handsome, but I'm not trying to do anything like that!*

"Lady Fuzuki?" Sir Leonhart asked, puzzled. I slowly raised my head. Seeing my terrible complexion, concern filled his face. "Is something the matter?"

Explaining is going to be a huge pain... But things'll just get more complicated if I don't say anything.

"These cookies probably belong to Lady Rosemary."

"Huh?" A flabbergasted noise escaped from his shapely lips. His clean-cut

features quickly turned pale, just like my own.

“She told me she was going to bake cookies today... I think she came to share some with us.”

“So... So, you’re saying...” Sir Leonhart managed to wring out huskily. He feared the end of that sentence and stopped himself.

“She might’ve seen us just now,” I said, completing it for him.

It was an abominable theory for both me and Sir Leonhart. *Of all the people who could’ve witnessed me hugging Sir Leonhart, she was the one person who we definitely didn’t want to see. O God, did I commit a grave sin in my previous life?*

I gloomily looked up toward the heavens. The sky was perfectly clear, and it was the same color as the one in my world...but this blue expanse was not connected to my town. I thought back on all the extraordinary events that had led to this moment.

I’d always thought that transferring to another world happened only in light novels, so I never imagined it would happen to me. My appearance and grades were both average, and I had a typical personality. My reflexes were even worse than a normal person’s. *There’s no way someone like me would be summoned to another world. This must be some kind of mistake.*

Unlike in a light novel, I didn’t fall from a high place or get hit by a truck—I just suddenly came to consciousness in an unknown place. I was subsequently surrounded by many attractive people...unrealistic belles and Adonises who were more stunning than actors or actresses, even foreign ones that I’d seen in movies; their beauty was closer to a painting or a sculpture.

They sparkled so brightly—I thought that looking at them directly might blind me. *Aren’t they too high up on the hotness scale?* Yet, there was no room in my mind to feel overjoyed at being surrounded by such dreamboats. In fact, my worry only increased, and I wanted to cry. In a light novel, a prince would have smiled at me to reassure me (this is what I hoped as I tried to escape reality), but no one helped me.

Well, apparently, while I was talking to the king, there was a beautiful young

prince standing behind him. But forget about smiling—he stayed expressionless and silent the whole time! After all that, the only person who smiled warmly at me was Sir Leonhart, so of course my heart skipped a beat for him.

Though he was also a handsome person, I wasn't scared of him because of his gentle expression. Maybe it was because he was an adult, but he was excellent at anticipating and paying attention to my needs without letting me catch on. However, he was just as good at drawing a line between us. I understood that he was kind to me because of his job, not out of any personal feelings, so I did not misunderstand.

In a world where I had no one to rely on, where I felt like I was being crushed by nerves and unease, the one who saved me was not a knight...nor was it the king or a prince.

"You must've been so scared. You don't have to hold it back anymore. Let it all out."

The one who smiled and murmured those words was a princess...one who looked like she'd come out of a picture book. It was my fault that the demon lord's seal had broken, but she didn't attack me. Instead, she wiped my tears with her soft, fair hand. *"It's not your fault,"* she soothed, embracing me as I cried and gently patting my back to console me. Plus, she smelled super-duper good.

I had encountered many wonderful men since coming to this world, but the most extraordinary person of all...was the princess. She was slender and soft, and she gave off a pleasant fragrance. She appeared to be a lovely, ephemeral beauty, but she was cooler than anyone else.

To me, she was the most remarkable prince of them all. *I absolutely do* not *want the person I adore to view me as her enemy!*

Back in present reality, I clenched my fists and looked forward, determination renewed. The knight captain was frozen and pale-faced from the overwhelming shock. I grabbed his arms and shook him with all my strength.

"Sir Leonhart! This is no time to freeze up! If we don't chase after her and explain, she'll misunderstand!"

He looked up with a start, then almost took off then and there. His poise was marvelous, like that of a wild animal. But just before he ran away, he remembered me and stopped himself. His face seeped impatience as he looked between me and the hallway. Seemingly, he swallowed all his feelings down with a big gulp.

“Lady Fuzuki, I will escort you back to your room first.”

It was praiseworthy how he didn’t forgo his duties even though he wanted to race to Lady Rosemary. I knew that I shouldn’t cause him trouble, that I should obediently listen, but I shook my head.

“No. Please take me with you.”

I want to explain myself too. It’s not fair if only Sir Leonhart gets to go!

His brows furrowed in distress, but he sighed, quickly throwing in the towel. We didn’t have time to argue right now. “Let’s go,” he said, turning on his heel.

Lady Rosemary was already out of sight. We searched our nearby vicinity, but she was nowhere to be found. In the end, we went to her room and found her personal knight standing in front of her door.

I think his name is...Klaus? I remembered him as someone with a pleasant smile, but he currently looked like a withering flower with his head down. His despondent, lifeless state resembled a large dog that had been scolded by its owner. However, when he noticed Sir Leonhart and me, he immediately straightened up.

“Klaus.”

“Hello, Captain. Can I help you with anything?” Klaus feigned his usual demeanor, but his expression was stiffer than when he was with Lady Rosemary.

“No... Well, is Lady Rosemary inside her room?” Sir Leonhart inquired, tone evasive.

Klaus regarded him with a quizzical look. “Yes. She is.”

“If possible, I’d like to speak with her.”

“You would?” Klaus thought for a moment, and then a light bulb went off in

his head. His green, droopy eyes narrowed and he stared at Sir Leonhart and me. His gaze would not overlook even the smallest thing out of place.

“Captain... Did you do something to Lady Rosemary?” It was less a question and more a statement.

Sir Leonhart’s shoulders quivered ever so slightly, and of course, Klaus did not miss it. I could feel danger radiating from his eyes and the feeling only intensified when he moved his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“So *you* are the cause,” Klaus spat, his voice low and filled with loathing.

I couldn’t bear the tense atmosphere, so I stepped between the two. “E-Excuse me. It’s a misunderstanding! It’s not Sir Leonhart’s fault—it’s mine! I want to explain to her what happened!”

“Please be quiet.” His sharp gaze pierced through me.

I slowly drew back and a pitiful “eep” leaked out of me. *He’s super scary!*

“It’s true. I’m the one who hurt the princess,” Sir Leonhart admitted firmly. “My careless actions have made her suffer.”

His face and tone were clearly filled with regret, but Klaus was unmoved and his gaze only hardened. I heard the sword hanging his hip clink and a chill ran down my spine.

“You can punch me as much as you like later. I don’t care if you cut off my head... So please, let me speak to her even if only for a short while.” Sir Leonhart squeezed his fists and looked Klaus square in the eyes. “I...don’t want to lose the princess.”

He sounded like he was begging, and his tone was heartrending. I blushed hearing his voice at my side—these were his genuine feelings dedicated to one person. Because his words were undecorated, his emotions were clearly conveyed; we could tell how much Lady Rosemary meant to him.

A lengthy silence descended upon us. Finally, Klaus sighed bitterly. His green eyes looked down for a moment, and then he returned his gaze to Sir Leonhart.

“I must ask that you leave.” The bite in his eyes was gone, but he rejected us all the same. I was about to flare up, but he silenced me with a single glance

before continuing. “Lady Rosemary is currently resting.”

Oh, so he was warning me to be quiet so I wouldn’t wake her up.

“If you wish to speak with her, then please come back once she’s composed herself.”

This was the most Klaus would compromise with us. Sir Leonhart also understood Klaus’s intentions, and his shoulders sagged.

Klaus scowled at Sir Leonhart. “Please don’t forget what you promised,” he added spitefully.

Sir Leonhart gave him a strained smile and nodded. *I imagine that, in a few days, his handsome face will be covered with bruises.* I could only shrug my shoulders in resignation.

The Knight Captain's Soliloquy

"Captain Orsein, is something inadequate?" a timid voice asked, snapping me back to my senses.

A young knight stood in front of my desk. If I remembered correctly, he had joined the royal guard two years ago. *That's right. I'm in the middle of reviewing his report. When I fell silent with a stern expression, he must've become uneasy.* I glanced at the young man—he was standing stiff at attention—and then returned my focus to the papers in my hand.

"No. There are no issues."

Though I was currently rebuking myself for getting lost in my thoughts during work, I picked up my pen without letting anything show on my face. I then signed the document and returned it to him. The young knight's rigid expression eased in relief. I watched him exit my office and close the door behind him.

How I behaved in front of that young knight was unacceptable. I'm perturbed enough that my face is frightening the young bunch.

I massaged the skin between my brow with my thumbs. The dull pain I'd been feeling since the morning had barely faded, and I leaned back into my chair to stare up at the ceiling. I didn't need to think twice about why I was so worn-out. *It's pathetic. I'm letting my personal affairs distract me from my duties, but I can't seem to control myself.*

"Princess..." Unwittingly, I called for her; my voice was low and terribly rasp. *I sound like a starved beast growling.* I scoffed, and one side of my lips quirked up.

One week had passed since the courtyard incident, and I had not seen the princess a single time since then. Klaus had told me to wait until she calmed herself, but I lacked patience in this matter, so I'd visited her the very next day. Though Klaus had appeared exasperated, he'd announced my arrival and

waited for permission to let me in.

However, she'd refused to see me.

Subsequently, I paid her room a visit every single day, but Klaus never nodded in approval. In the beginning, he had regarded me with frigid eyes, believing that I deserved this treatment, but with each passing day, more and more worry clouded his face. Of course, his concern was not for me being rejected daily, but for the princess's heart as she continued to spurn me.

At first, I'd accepted her decision, thinking that she didn't want to see me until she'd composed herself. But after a few days had passed, I worried that her body might be in poor condition. However, according to Klaus, she was not bedridden. Instead, she'd brought a large amount of books to her room and now spent her time absorbed in reading. She seemed to be researching something with great zeal, so I did not want to interrupt her.

It can't be helped that she's busy. I'll wait a few more days—once I've calmed down, I'll ask for her time.

Unfortunately, my legs ignored my decision and carried me to the princess's room every day...though I knew that the knight captain visiting Her Royal Highness on a daily basis would be a nuisance. My pretense of being a sensible adult had flown out the window long ago.

Though my consciousness had sunk deep into the recesses of my mind, a knock pulled me back to reality. I sighed and straightened my back.

After I granted him permission, my adjutant entered the room. "Pardon me."

He held out a stack of documents that he had procured from various places, but then froze. After examining my countenance for a few seconds, he frowned.

"You look remarkably tired."

"Is it that easy to tell?"

He gave me a firm nod and I replied with a dry smile. My adjutant was a gentle and considerate man, so if he commented on my haggard appearance, then there was no doubt that I looked terrible.

“Let’s take a break. I shall brew tea,” he offered. He left the papers on the edge of my desk and moved to leave.

“No, I’m fine.”

“If you overwork, your efficiency will fall.” He lectured me sincerely, his face sullen. “Luckily we’re not bogged down with work. You must remember that resting occasionally is part of work too.”

I lifted my hand in surrender and then stood up. “Okay, but I don’t need any tea. I’ll go patrol as a change of pace, so let me enjoy a stroll.”

“Very well. At your leisure.” A content smile spread across his face.

Chased out of my own office, I wandered around the castle with no destination in mind... No, that was false. I had no destination in mind, but I did have an objective: I hoped to catch a glimpse of the princess. Though, at the end of my meandering, my disgraceful wish was not fulfilled.

Before I knew it, my feet had taken me outside and deep into the garden. From there, I admired the magnificent royal castle. I caught my gaze lingering on a certain room’s balcony, positioned high in the air. My headache returned.

I’m acting like... No. I am *a criminal. I came here just because I want to glimpse her, regardless of how far away she is. That’s sickening behavior...even for me.* Ashamed, I scratched the back of my head. *I should hurry up and return to work.* I was about to turn on my heel, but then something caught my eye from the balcony’s shadows.

I inhaled sharply.

An alabaster hand rested upon the dull, cream-colored railing. Her other hand held down a violet shawl, preventing it from slipping off her slender shoulders. A gentle breeze whimsically played with her platinum-blond hair, which seemed spun from sunlight itself. Her head was down, and shadows obscured her face, so I couldn’t see her expression.

Even so, my chest heated up. *After so long, I’m finally seeing you again.* I automatically called out to her.

“Princess.”

She was so far away that if raised two fingers and peered through them, her entire visage would fit in that space. I doubted my voice could reach her even if I yelled, so there was no way she could've heard me when I whispered.

And yet...she raised her head. Her vision swam aimlessly until it finally landed on me. Her eyes, which were clearer than any sunny sky, widened.

Our gazes intertwined. I forgot to breathe and involuntarily took a step forward. The princess's delicate shoulders shook and she let go of the railing. Her expression crumpled. She turned around, disappearing from sight.

"Ah..."

I reached out my hand as if to chase her, though the rest of me remained motionless. *She ran away. I've been...rejected.* Once that understanding had slowly permeated throughout my mind, a sharp pain pierced my chest. The rhythm of my pounding heart rang noisily in my ears. My breathing became shallow, and an unpleasant stream of sweat ran down my back.

Arm still extended, I clenched my hand. I had visited her and been rejected numerous times over this past week, and it had taken a toll on my emotions.

Awake or asleep, she was all I could think about.

What if she doesn't want me to wait until she's calmed down? What if she's not meeting with me because she's busy? What if...she doesn't want to see me ever again? What should I do if she's given up on a deplorable man like me and decided to venture down a new path?

It was already a miracle that a beautiful, charming woman had eyes for me. Of course, her affections could only last for so long. Miracles are miracles because they do not happen twice. She may never look at me directly ever again.

My whole body blanched and my legs wobbled. Was the world shaking...or was it me? My head was in too much turmoil to tell. I felt nauseous.

I love the way her shoulders jump when I call her name. I love how her blue eyes melt with joy the moment they find me. The way her soft cheeks become tinted with a faint rouge is endearing. I adore the way her eyes sparkle when she says my name with her lovely, flower petal lips.

It suddenly dawned on me: I might now be deprived of all the small gestures I'd taken for granted as *mine*, and...

They might be given to someone else.

That's right. And I agree—a man around her age suited her better. This is exactly what that would mean. Her gaze, her voice, her fair and slender hands, her soft lips...will all belong to another man. Her smile will not be for me; she will give herself to someone else, and they will pledge their futures to each other.

The moment I imagined even a snippet of that scene, an intense rage took control of my whole body. My blood boiled—a seething wrath incinerated my insides. Though the heat was so fierce that I thought I might lose my sanity, my mind remained freezing cold. I never knew I was capable of such violent emotions.

"Hah..."

A laugh inappropriate to my situation leaked out of me. It was a hollow and terribly savage laugh. *I'm unworthy? Who was I to say that? I once preached that our age difference was too large and our positions too different, but in the end, I never had any intention of letting the princess go.*

My only merit is my swordsmanship, and yet an uncouth man like me put on the airs of a gentleman. In this world, there is no fear greater to me than losing her. In that case, no matter what methods I must resort to, I will *win her hand.*

Before I lose her... Before she's snatched away from me.

I felt disgusted by my avarice, but even more than that, I felt refreshed. *I will no longer hesitate.*

"My apologies, Princess," I murmured. "I will not let go of you."

My quiet whisper was swept away by the wind and disappeared without reaching anyone's ears.

The Former Assassin Sighs

The earth pushed up by needle ice made a rhythmic crunch with each step I took. An icy wind caressed my cheek and agitated the withered leaves on the sides of the road, swirling them into the air.

The short autumn that had come to the Kingdom of Lapter was already coated in signs of winter. In less than a month, this area would be buried in snow. I pulled my cloak up higher on my neck to ward off the cold air. When I exhaled, I could see the faint white of my breath condensing.

I was in Fuchs, a town on the western frontier of Lapter. I had stayed in this town for a brief period about a year ago. Of course, that was before I'd become Ratte, Nevel's spy—I'd just been working as a nameless Lapter assassin. Back then, the town had been alive since it was a pit stop for caravans and peddlers coming and going between Nevel and Lapter.

Fuchs was now silent.

However, it was not a peaceful quiet characteristic of the countryside. The town had been enveloped by a desolate, gloomy atmosphere; the streets were sparse with people, even on the marketplace's main road. The few who did walk around seemed lifeless.

There were hardly any young men in town. Perhaps they had left for other places to work, or maybe they had migrated to another country before winter arrived in full. Either way, their future was bleak.

Even so, life was still much better for people in *this* part of the nation. I had heard that towns in the north were rioting. Fortunately, before the dissension could grow, the guards had arrived to suppress the uprising...but that would only be a temporary measure. If the food shortage continued, an even greater insurrection would occur—the sparks of rebellion would spread throughout Lapter.

"One bag of wheat is ten silver coins?! What kind of joke is this?!"

I heard a shrill, grating yelling as I walked through the marketplace. In front of

a store, I saw a young lady arguing with a middle-aged woman who seemed to be the shopkeeper.

"It's not a joke. I barely managed to get this, so if you don't like the price, then go buy it somewhere else." The middle-aged woman furrowed her brows in displeasure and tried to shoo her customer away.

"This is a problem *because* no one else is selling wheat!" argued the younger lady, refusing to back down. "C'mon, can't you give me a small discount? Ten silver coins is a whole week of my husband's wages! We won't be able to eat like this. If you lower the price for me, then I'll advertise your store in the neighborhood. Please!"

"It don't matter what you say—no means no. Goods are getting bought up everywhere and who knows when I'll be able to stock up next. My livelihood's at stake here too."

Their quarrel continued, but I began walking again, having lost interest. Everyone else who had stopped to watch for a moment also scattered as if nothing had happened. Undoubtedly, they were all accustomed to this sort of spectacle.

The effects of the Kingdom of Nevel's economic sanctions were already appearing. There were limitations on importing and exporting, but Lapter's domestic reserve had not been exhausted immediately. Normally, the amount of goods in circulation would gradually peter out; this time, however, provisions were disappearing rapidly. This was because a group of merchants was buying up the supply. So, as items became harder to find in markets, the unease among citizens grew.

Goods had become significantly more expensive, but as long as there were people who were willing to pay, other merchants would eventually emulate the inflated pricing. It would then become a chain reaction, and the supply would dwindle at an even faster rate. Even if everyone understood this vicious cycle, there was no way to stop it now—it was already commonplace for items to be sold at many times the standard market price.

If we wait and see what happens, they'll probably self-destruct on their own. Personally, I'd be delighted if that happened. If I could watch them steadily

perish and rot, like a disease slowly whittling away at someone's body, I'm sure I'd feel great.

When I imagined that, the corners of my lips naturally curved up. But my joy quickly disappeared with a sigh. Unfortunately, my master was not fond of senseless killing. *We're dealing with Nevel's enemy...and their king is the mastermind behind her assassination attempt. But, I'm sure her heart would ache if she knew about Lapter's current state. I want them to suffer for as long as possible, but when I consider the princess's feelings, I have no choice but to give up on that notion.*

"It's truly a shame," I muttered to no one in particular.

Though I fancied my master's good-natured disposition, I found it a tad regrettable that I could not leverage my experience as a former assassin. *If the princess wished for it, I'd gladly chop the king into little pieces and feed him to livestock. It wouldn't be hard to incite unrest throughout the land and turn this nation into a sea of flames. Leading a rebel army to attack the castle sounds like it'd be quite amusing.*

If I suggested those ideas to the princess, she'd likely pale and shake her head fervently. When I imagined her desperately trying to stop me while trembling, my mood lightened up. It was much more fun to think of that than fantasize about massacring those people over and over again.

At the end of the day, I had taken a liking to my master's naivety. Though she'd acquired a sharp knife, she chose not to wield or flaunt it—it was precisely because she kept the blade sheathed that she could keep a tight hold on my reins.

The princess did not understand a sliver of her own value and underestimated her skills greatly. She considered herself an average person without anything special besides her status, but she was far from normal. In the face of power and wealth, the fact that she had the mental strength to retain her sanity without the slightest corruption was already special enough. Her worth was not in her royal blood or appearance—it lay within her.

Like a lotus that could bloom in mud or mire, the way she flourished with dignity, regardless of the environment, was more stunning than anything. It was

very unlike me...but I could restrain myself. I understood her beauty. It would surely feel wonderful if I let my emotions drive me to destroy everything, and if I could remove anything that might hinder me, I'd be appeased. But, at the same time, I would harm the most important thing—the princess's heart.

"Phew." I exhaled, releasing all the irritation that had built up in the pit of my stomach. At some point, I'd realized that I didn't mind having less control over my freedom...and before I knew it, there was nowhere else for me to go.

Finally, I reached an inn slightly removed from the center of town. I went up to the second floor and entered the room at the end of the hall. The gentleman sitting on the chair inside gave me a light wave.

"Hey."

He was a handsome man whose appearance clashed with this desolate, backwater town. His gentle violet eyes narrowed in a smile. Though he wore a plain black coat, a white shirt, and gray trousers, the noble aura he exuded could not be suppressed.

His name was Emil von Merkel—the king of Lapter's biological younger brother.

He was not someone who should be roaming about aimlessly in an unstable time. Then again, it wasn't as if he was much safer locked away inside his residence at the royal capital.

Despite knowing the pressing situation that Lapter was in, the king had failed to take any countermeasures. There was a growing number of high-ranking nobles who had abandoned the current king—these nobles wished for the royal prince to take the throne. Though the king had little interest in the masses and politics, he was more obsessed with his position than anyone, so he ostracized and plotted to eliminate his brilliant younger brother at every opportunity.

If such a man knew what the nobles were planning, he would likely execute his blood-related brother for a random reason. Yet, it was impossible for the royal prince to withdraw now that he had come so far. He only had two paths: force the current king to abdicate or be executed as a traitor.

Feeling an irresponsible sense of pity for the man, I pulled a piece of paper from my breast pocket. “Here’s what you requested.”

“Thank you.” He smiled and accepted it. The paper had been folded into four—he opened the letter and read it, eyes hardening as he scanned the words. However, he only lost composure for a brief moment and quickly hid his negativity with a fishy smile.

“It’s a weak trump card. Please overcome the rest of the problem with your own skills,” I placidly told him.

“Weak? This?” The royal prince questioned, his tone mixed with amazement and wonder.

He was about to visit the margrave. Not on official business of course, but as a friend for an informal sojourn. The margrave was the cornerstone for the nation’s military affairs, so his cooperation was essential to the prince’s plan, but coming all the way out here multiple times was too onerous.

So, I’d presented him with a weak trump card: information.

The intel I’d provided was that the margrave had discovered a new ore deposit in the mountains. Decades ago, this region had been known for its copper mines, but recently, mining had produced little. It was believed that the mines would be completely abandoned within a few years. However, the margrave had unearthed new gold and silver mines. It was not a particularly vast quantity, but it would still amount to a hefty sum of money.

With those funds, the margrave would be able to stock up on enough supplies to get the people in his land through the winter. I was not sure whether the margrave was thinking of helping the worried citizens hurt by economic sanctions...but regardless, he had not yet made a formal report to the king about the mines.

If he disclosed his findings to the nation, the margrave would be taxed and subsequently make less profit. Furthermore, the region containing the mines was located in close proximity to the royal family’s territory. He likely feared that if he played his hand poorly, the king could press false charges against him and seize ownership of the mines. As long as the margrave did not desire to meet his doom, it was quite probable that the royal prince could win him over

as an ally.

“If negotiations break down even after all this, you can ridicule me for my incompetence.” The prince folded the paper back into four and tucked it into his breast pocket. A hollow laugh escaped from his lips. Then, he stared at me.

Finding his pointed gaze prickly even through my cloak, I asked harshly, “What is it?”

“Nothing... I merely felt envious. I’m perpetually short on talented individuals, you see.”

“Is this a solicitation?”

“If I could, I’d pay you whatever you requested,” the royal prince said, though I could tell from his tone and expression that he had already given up on that endeavor. He knew I would never assent nor would I entertain any verbal jousting.

“Regrettably, I’m already sold.”

“Of course.” The royal prince let out a weary sigh. As if to admonish himself, he repeated his words once more. “Ooof course.”

The Reincarnated Princess's Capture

I instantly woke up when I heard the thump of something falling. Straightened up from where I'd been slumped over, I peered around. My eyes gradually focused, reflecting my familiar room in my vision. I looked to my feet—an open book had fallen, and it was the likely source of the sound.

I must've nodded off while reading. I massaged my aching head and picked up the book. As I gave the cover a light pat to dust it off, my movements were laughably slow.

It would be misleading for me to say that I hadn't been sleeping much recently. Strictly speaking, I feared slumber. I was scared of having disturbing nightmares, but what terrified me even more was the thought that those dreams might become reality without my knowledge.

Every night I had nightmares filled with frightfully realistic people and things. And every time I woke up, I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart that what I'd just witnessed had not truly occurred. But...I felt such terror. The dreams were so lifelike.

If a day comes where I don't wake up... If my body moves without any regard for my will... If I take someone's life...then...

Such ridiculous thoughts spun through my head as I stared silently at the stand next to my bed. Feeling my gaze, a black ball curled up in a rattan basket looked up.

Unreadable eyes like glass marbles returned my stare. His eyes used to be azure like a calm lake shore, but now they had become the gloomy ocean deep. Was that change a trick of the light? Was it just my imagination? Or was it something else...? I was too scared to ascertain the cause. Nero was still the shape of my beloved cat...but why did I feel like I was facing an unknown life-form?

Too afraid that the uncertainty inside of me would take a definitive shape, I couldn't bring myself to call his name. Our gazes locked frozen, like beasts

glaring at each other, but suddenly, my cat lost interest and looked away, curling back up in his bed.

I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. When I leaned back into the sofa and shut my eyes, my headache worsened. There were so many things I needed to think about, but my mind was sluggish from lack of sleep.

Is the demon lord inside of me? It doesn't feel like it. But I have nightmares every time I fall asleep and my dear pet's distant behavior exacerbates my unease. What if the demon lord is inside Nero?

Nero used to be a friendly and energetic cat, but now he spent the majority of the day sleeping. When he did move around, he never approached me. His eyes always looked like they were observing another life form, and they now seemed so different from my adorable cat.

But what if Nero is acting this way because he's wary of the demon lord inside of me? It's also possible that the demon lord's revival caused some sort of transformation in him. I was full of uncertain speculation—the more I brooded, the more my unease grew.

"I just don't know," a quiet voice spilled out of me.

To suppress the anxiety welling up inside of me, I had frantically gathered information. All the books related to the demon lord were inside my father's study, so I instead pored through every volume I could find on magic and the supernatural.

I recalled what Miss Irene had previously said—though the people in this world had gradually lost the ability to use magic, they still might hold a minuscule amount of magical power inside of them. And according to our records, the demon lord had the ability to amplify that power inside of its vessel.

With those two points in mind, if the demon lord had possessed me, then my magic power should have increased. Approaching things from another angle...if I could use magic, then that would be proof that the demon lord was inside of me.

Thinking this, I tried various things, but it was all a dead-end. I couldn't use

magic, and the physical changes that occurred when magic was activated did not occur in me. I contemplated asking Miss Irene, Lutz, or Teo to teach me, but I immediately crossed that idea out—if the demon lord really had possessed me, then it would be too risky to make contact with sorcerers.

I should speak to father. I'm scared of meeting him face-to-face, so it would be best to ask for instructions via a letter handed off to a trustworthy person. Though I understood this, I was too petrified. I knew what I needed to do...but my body did not want to move.

I stopped zoning out at the ceiling and buried my head in my knees, curling up on the sofa. In documents on the past and in *Hidden World*, the demon lord controlled corpses. If it left the vessel, then naturally, death would reclaim the body. In the game, when the demon lord was defeated, Michael's body disappeared like dust. What about a living vessel? What in the world would happen to me after the demon lord was defeated?

A muted sniffle escaped from my lips. I hugged myself tightly, my body trembling violently. *I doubt I will come out unscathed if we try to confine and exterminate the demon lord. Even if I could survive with its regenerative abilities, who knows what would happen once it's expelled?*

I don't want to die. The primitive fear of all living beings welled up inside of me. Obligations as royalty... Responsibility to protect my people... I tried to act brave by thinking commendable things, but I couldn't act on them. I simply trembled in fear. I wanted to cling to someone and cry, and it devastated me that there was no hand to grasp.

"Sir Leon..."

No. Though he was someone I should no longer depend on, he was still always the first person to come to mind. *Sir Leonhart has Kanon now. There's no room for me to step in between them. I have to give up on him.*

It was time for me to fulfill my promise from long ago and let him go. And yet, I didn't want that ultimatum to be forced onto me. I continually declined to meet Sir Leonhart...even though he visited me day after day because he was concerned that I'd secluded myself. I worried that Kanon would misunderstand his intentions if he kept this up, but I wished that she would let me hold this

sway over him for a little while longer. After all, this would be the final time.

When I had coincidentally seen Sir Leonhart in the garden, I'd realized my feelings once again: *I haven't given up on Sir Leonhart at all. I'm still hopelessly in love with him. Someone please teach me how to bring my affections to an end.*

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door. I raised my head and turned to the entrance. *Who is it? I asked Klaus to turn away any guests for a while... Perhaps it's my father or mother? If so, I'd feel bad for making Klaus refuse the king and queen.*

I sighed and slowly stood up. My body felt dizzy from just that much movement. With unsteady legs, I tottered to the door.

"Klaus?" I said, brushing the door with the tip of my fingers.

However, no answer came. I was met with only silence. I waited a few seconds and then tilted my head, confused. Deciding I had imagined the sound, I was about to turn on my heel.

"Princess."

A familiar sound reached my ears. His low voice was gravelly from nerves, but it belonged to the person I loved. Dumbfounded, I froze, my eyes glued to the door. I almost thought I'd misheard...but I quickly refuted that idea.

I would never mistake his voice for anything else.

As I wondered what he thought of my silence, he continued speaking through the door. "It's Leonhart. I apologize for my impudent behavior."

I returned to my senses and quickly pulled my hand away from the door, staggering several steps backward. A simple question came to mind: *why?* Sir Leonhart had visited me numerous times, but he'd never addressed me directly, probably respecting that I'd spurned his request.

"I will accept any punishment afterward. Please, open the door."

My mind in chaos, I stood wordlessly. I clenched my trembling fingers in front of my chest. And yet, his plea rang through the door once more.

"I want to speak with you."

I don't want to hear what you have to say.

Weakly, I shook my head, though he could not see my rejection with the door between us. I covered my ears with my hands and slowly backed away.

A lengthy pall of silence descended upon us. We were at an impasse—a wooden slab was stuck between us as we both waited for the other to make the first move. How long did we stay there like that?

I heard a muted sigh. *He's probably going to leave now.* I felt relieved, but at the same time, lonely. However, I had no right to feel lonely, after all, —I was the one pushing him away.

However, my expectations were betrayed. Sir Leonhart did not depart.

"Please, open the door for a mere moment. If you let me see you for a few trifling seconds, I will withdraw for today."

His compromise was tempting...but I hesitated. *I fear that if I see him from up close, I will be even more unwilling to give up on him.*

"Please, Princess..." he begged again. His timbre was weak beyond belief, and the heartrending entreaty made my mind waver.

I found it unbearable to think that I was troubling him. Though he did not love me romantically, I knew that he still cherished me greatly, and that brought me a small satisfaction. *I can't turn him away forever. He's the captain of the royal guard and the royal family's shield. He shouldn't be spending all his time and energy on a little girl like me.*

Eyes downcast, I breathed deeply a few times. I pressed my palm against my chest to calm my nervous, racing heart and then inhaled once more. *It'll be for just a moment,* I reasoned. *I'll see him through the crack of my door for a few seconds.*

I unlocked the door. Then, placing my hand on the doorknob, I pulled the door open about twenty centimeters.

When I peeked outside. Sir Leonhart's handsome visage was much closer than I'd anticipated. It surprised me, and I leaned back slightly, almost shutting the door, but I managed to stop myself.

He blinked. Then, his eyes softened with relief. The man I loved was beaming at me, and yet...I sensed something was off. His smile was so gentle and kind that I wouldn't have believed his nickname was "The Black Lion." I couldn't quite put my finger on what was so different about him.

I was so distracted that I didn't immediately realize he'd grabbed my arm.

"Huh?" A foolish noise escaped from my throat. I stared at my captured limb.

His hand was thrust through the crevice of the door, gripping me tightly. I stood there, frozen in shock. Then, I heard a dull thud. I looked toward the noise to see that the tip of his boot was jammed in the gap like a doorstop, preventing the door from closing.

I broke out in cold sweat. Though I tried to yank my trembling hand away, I was no match for his strength. He held my arm firm enough that I couldn't escape, but not hard enough that it hurt. I timidly raised my head. His other hand was now on this side of the door.

Sir Leonhart's dark eyes narrowed and I could only helplessly watch as his shapely lips curved into an arc. His grin was beautiful and terrifying at the same time, like a beast cornering its prey.

"I caught you."

The Reincarnated Princess's First Love

The door opened slowly and Sir Leonhart slipped through the gap. His large physique towered over me at point-blank range, and I shivered out of instinctive fear. Past his shoulders, I watched the door close with a thump—my escape route had been neatly blocked off.

I stood silent, rigid as a board. Sir Leonhart's brows furrowed, and the smile disappeared from his face. He released my wrist and raised his hand to my face, enveloping my cheek with his large palm. His thumb gently rubbed the area around my eyes.

"You look pale...and terribly drawn." His touch was full of tender loving care, but my body stiffened. He gently caressed my cheek, and his eyes squinted with sorrow. "Was it my fault?"

I was at a loss for a moment, but then I shook my head. "No!" I blurted out.

It's not Sir Leonhart's fault. It's my fault for falling in unrequited love and getting hurt after a heartbreak. The problem is my *emotions; none of this is his fault and I won't blame Kanon either.*

"Sir Leonhart, my condition is unrelated to you." I wanted to reassure him, but he stiffened for reasons unknown to me. His rough palm on my cheek twitched and then froze. "Um, I've bothered you in many ways up until now, but don't—"

I was about to tell him not to fuss over me any longer, but his chill voice spoke over me. "Princess. You dropped something in the garden last week, correct?"

Sir Leonhart always waited for me to finish speaking in silence—it was very unlike him to cut me off. I vacantly blinked at him, unsure of what he was getting at, but he did not wait for me to understand.

"Did you see Lady Fuzuki and me...and have a misunderstanding?"

"Misunderstanding?" I parroted with uncertainty. He took my hand in his and pulled me close. In my confusion, I knew my eyes were bouncing around in my sockets.

“Yes. A misunderstanding. For example, that Lady Fuzuki and I share special feelings for each—”

“W-Wait.” My brain was malfunctioning. I couldn’t keep up with the words he was throwing at me. *What did I drop? Did he find out I was peeping on them? What’s the misunderstanding?* Answerless questions rapidly piled up one after the other. I felt like my head was about to explode.

I faced Sir Leonhart and thrust out my palm. “Please...wait a moment,” I managed to wring out in a husky voice. When I looked up, his clean-cut features were contorted with distress. It pained me to look at him directly, so I glanced away, casting my eyes down.

Why would Sir Leonhart say all that in the first place? I thought for sure he wanted me to give up and that was his way of rejecting me. But this conversation is going in a completely different direction... It’s baffling.

What did I misunderstand? Did I jump the gun thinking that Sir Leonhart and Kanon were already lovers? I hastily extinguished my revived hope. *I can’t depend on him right now. He is a compassionate person who worried that I was holing myself up in my room.*

He’s not here because he loves me. He doesn’t care for me romantically.

Don’t get the wrong idea. Even if he doesn’t love Kanon, that doesn’t mean he’s decided to love me. That’s a completely different story. And I shouldn’t keep clinging onto the possibility that it’ll happen—I shouldn’t continue tormenting him. Using his pity to tie him down will only make him suffer... I’ve known this for a long time.

The situation is different now. I’m no longer a childish princess who is one-sidedly pining after a knight. I am now an adult princess whose desires hold weight. In fact, I could easily disregard Sir Leonhart’s feelings and make him mine. So, this is as far as I can hold onto my affection for him. It’s time for me to release him from my clutch. Even if Kanon weren’t here... Even if the demon lord isn’t possessing me... The day has come when I should give up on Sir Leonhart.

“It’s okay now,” I said, head still hanging.

“Princess?” he questioned.

I shook his hand off mine, detaching myself from the worry saturating his voice. I looked up to see his bewildered countenance; he looked like a traveler who had lost sight of his guide.

I smiled at him, praying that I didn't appear stiff. "I apologize for clinging to you for such a long time."

Sir Leonhart gasped, a dry rush of air filled his lungs.

"In the past, I promised that when I became an adult, I would let you turn me down."

"Princess!" Sir Leonhart shouted as if to drown out my words. His expression turned frantic.

I'm fine now. I've received enough kindness from him. And I've been gifted with many memories already. I'm satisfied. From now on, no matter what difficulties await me, I can persevere. I can proceed while defending this love.

It was almost laughable—my love for him had lasted a mere ten years, but to me, it was a love that would endure a lifetime.

"Let's end this distasteful relationship between us." *Not that there was ever anything between us,* I added to myself, smiling. I looked up, trying to hold back the tears welling up in my eyes. "Thank you for—"

Before I could finish saying "*everything,*" I was interrupted. Sir Leonhart vigorously pulled my arms and drew me close. He held me by the waist as though he were about to sweep me off my feet. Suddenly, my face bumped into something solid. An expanse of dark-blue that was almost black filled my vision —the sturdy cloth of the royal guard uniform.

After a beat, it hit me...

Sir Leonhart was embracing me.

I inadvertently inhaled. There was a fragrance mixed in with air...the same scent that I'd smelled when he'd hugged me while half asleep. It was a calming and slightly sweet aroma, but it was more potent than before due to his hotter body temperature. The faint hint of sweat sent my mind spinning.

Why? Why is Sir Leonhart holding me so tightly?

In a daze, I tried to call his name. “Sir Le—”

However, his arms wrapped around me tighter, telling me without words not to say anything. He clutched me so hard it hurt. I couldn’t move a muscle.

“You...are such a cruel person.”

My face was pressed against his chest so I could feel the vibrations from his throat. My ears filled with the timbre of his voice, which was trembling so violently that I wondered if he was crying.

“I won’t allow you to say you don’t need me anymore.”

“Sir...Leon?”

Our bodies fit perfectly together. Suddenly, he separated from me by a fist-sized distance. Slipping his hand between us, he grasped my chin. He forced my head up—not violently—but with enough strength that I couldn’t resist.

A shadow fell over my face; a gasp escaped from my lips.

“I won’t let anything end.”

My mouth was slightly agape as he descended upon me, enveloping my lips with his own.



Blank.

My mind was blank.

I couldn’t process what was happening.

I blinked placidly a few times, but the scene before my eyes didn’t change. Sir Leonhart’s face was so close to mine that I couldn’t focus on it.

His mouth...overlapped my own. Slightly rough, but soft nonetheless... The feeling of his lips...

Erm... What does this mean? Our mouths are touching...so this is a kiss, right? But Sir Leonhart wouldn’t have any reason to kiss me. Then...what is this? If it’s not a kiss...then what does it mean?

I thought and thought until my head was spinning in circles. I peered at his long lashes, unable to comprehend a single thing. We stayed like that for only a few seconds.

Our lips made a soft, wet noise before they separated. Sir Leonhart opened his eyes. Our gazes connected at close range. His stare was so passionate that I felt like I was burning—in those eyes, I saw his earnest emotions. Reverent, almost prayerlike.

“Wh-Why?” My voice was so husky and quiet that it would’ve been difficult to hear at even our close proximity...but my words reached Sir Leonhart.

His handsome face twisted into a tearful smile. “Why?” he repeated. His tone was so awfully pained... It sounded as if he were reproaching me and mocking himself.

I had unknowingly reached out a hand, and he took hold of it. He guided my hand up to his face and affectionately nuzzled his cheek against my palm.

“The answer is obvious.” He brushed his lips against my palm; the air he exhaled was as hot as his words. He knitted his brows together and painfully squeezed out his voice.

“Because I love you.”

Those black eyes that I adored, deep as the night sky, were fixed upon me.

“I love you more than anything. There’s no other reason.”

It felt like all the noise in the world besides him had vanished. Doubt, suspicion—all those negative emotions evaporated from my mind in an instant.

His words, offered so sincerely...filled up my heart.

Oh. It’s because he loves me. That’s why he kissed me.

I gradually wrapped my head around what had happened. Sir Leonhart kissed my hands all over, tracing his lips from my palm to my fingertips, beseeching me to understand his love.

“Princess. Princess... Lady Rosemary.”

He called for me with his low, husky voice, but I was too stupefied to react. So, he brought his hands up to me this time. He wrapped my cheeks with both of his hands and directed my attention up like before.

His thumbs gently pressed my lips, opening them.

He’s going to kiss me again.

I gasped and snapped back to my senses. Reflexively, I shoved my hand in between our faces.

“Princess.”

I couldn’t see his face with my hand obstructing the view, but I could hear the impatience in his voice.

“W-Wait... Please, give me a moment,” I said, my face burning. I had a feeling my whole body was scarlet, not just my ears and neck. I was in such turmoil that tears wet my eyes.

He loves me. Did Sir Leonhart just say he loves me*?*

That’s ridiculous. I mean...this is me *we’re talking about here. I rush headfirst into everything, I have a pessimistic personality, there’s nothing princesslike about me, and I have a childish figure. Nothing about me has changed from when I bawled to Sir Leonhart that I loved him as a child. And...he’s now saying he’s fallen in love with me? He chose* me*, not the adorable Kanon.*

Is this a miracle?

My body trembled for a different reason than before. Bemusement and elation surged through me. For so long, I had convinced myself that my love was forever unrequited. And now, I couldn't handle the sudden waves of joy.

"Ah..." Mentally, I was in such turmoil that I'd even forgotten how to speak. My voice shook and nothing sensible came out of me.

As soon as I relaxed, my knees almost gave out. After all, just moments before, I had decided to give up on Sir Leonhart. I'd thought my heart had been broken...and I'd almost let go of the love that I had nurtured for more than ten years. I couldn't abruptly digest that it was in fact, the opposite of my assumptions.

My chest was full and it was hard to breathe. Every time he called for me, every time he touched me, my heart tightened. I felt like I was going to die from happiness.

"Lady Rosemary."

Sir Leonhart touched my hand that was blocking his face. He lightly grasped my wrist and moved it away. I was sure that my face looked awful—I was blotchy-red and a sloppy mess... Not a sight to behold. There were all kinds of liquids seeping out of me. Even a blazing love that had lasted a hundred years would instantly freeze over if they saw me in this state.

I looked down to escape his gaze, but...he likely took that gesture as a rejection. His grip on my wrist stiffened and his fingers dug into me.

"What... What should I do?" Sir Leonhart's voice sounded very rigid.

"Huh?"

I felt his fingertips cool rapidly around my wrist, perhaps from nerves. Startled by the drastic change, I raised my head, completely forgetting that I was trying to hide my unsightly countenance.

"I'll prepare anything you want. As long as you desire it, I will do anything for you." The color faded from Sir Leonhart's handsome face.

His expression was so grievous that I thought, *This is the face people make when they're standing in the depths of despair.*

“So...”

“Sir Leon?”

“So, please...please love me once more,” he uttered, his face a crumpled mess.

His sorrow pierced right through my chest. I felt somewhat happy upon hearing his deep-seated attachment, but then I felt so guilty that I wanted to kick the bucket.

How could I make the one I love say that? I want his life to be filled with more joy than anyone in this world, but here I am, tormenting him. Please don’t speak with such agony...as if you’re breathing your last breath.

I love you. I truly love you too.

Though my answer was clear in my mind, I couldn’t put it into words. My brain was functioning but refusing to execute any task. My tear ducts released a slow trickle like a broken faucet, and my legs were wobbly—I could barely stay on my feet.

During such an important moment, why couldn’t a single thing go the way I wanted? I felt unbearably frustrated.

“Y...you,” I sputtered.

Oh, come on. Tongue and language center, you can do it!

Vision blurry from tears, I looked up at Sir Leonhart. I stared into his clear, black eyes and told him what I wanted to convey the most.

“I...lof you.”

Botched it! I fumbled over my words during the most critical moment. What the hell is lof*? Am I trying to act like a three-year-old baby?!*

The tension that had filled the room dissipated, replaced by an idiotic atmosphere. Sir Leonhart’s sharp eyes went round.

That’s cute! Yes, he looks very cute, but I hope he forgets that goof-up.

I thought my skin couldn’t get any redder, but it flushed an even deeper shade of crimson. *I think my veins are going to rupture.* I wanted to cover my

face with my hands and squeal, but my wrists were restrained by Sir Leonhart, so I couldn't. *Someone, anyone, please bury me in a hole. Or lightly hit me so I forget this ever happened.*

I wished that he would at least laugh off my faux pas, but he didn't even smile. He gazed at me, waiting for more. So, I steeled myself. *I feel pathetic enough to evaporate, but I have to try one more time. This time...I* will *say it right.*

Slowly, I opened my mouth.

"I...love you. I've always loved you...no, I love you even now."

Sir Leonhart, who had been waiting with bated breath, pursed his lips. The hope and dread he'd been vacillating between was clear in his eyes.

Yes. I adore this man.

"My love for you remains ever unchanged."

The moment those words left my lips, Sir Leonhart pulled me into his arms.



The Knight Captain’s First Love

Her body felt so slender and frail in my arms. I feared I might break her if I treated her too roughly, and I knew I could easily crush her bones if I used all my might. Even so, I barely managed to curb my strength.

If allowed, I would embrace her with all the force I could muster. I...almost lost her. I want to confirm that she’s real. That she’s still here.

“Sir Leon.”

She called my name with that lovely voice of hers, affirming that this was not a dream, and I thought back on how I’d ended up with her in my embrace.

I’d forced my way into the princess’s room, hoping to dispel any misunderstandings she might’ve gathered, but she remained obstinate. Though I wished to profess my love while practically clinging to her, she didn’t even let me finish my words. Her voice, expression, and attitude... She rebuffed me with all her being.

“Let’s end this distasteful relationship between us.”

Her words felt like a knife wound through my heart. The immense shock stole away my body’s heat. *No. No!* I screamed inside my head like a child throwing a tantrum.

But a fleeting smile crept across her face and I knew she had already made her decision. She would not even give me the time to search for the words to stop her. Her lovely, flower petal lips began to utter my death sentence...so I pulled her delicate body close, desperate to silence her.

I forced her face into my chest, physically preventing her from speaking. My heart was beating so violently that I thought it might crack in two. An unpleasant trickle of sweat rolled down the back of my neck.

Why? Why does she want this to end? At the same time these doubts began to arise, a terrible premonition flashed through my mind. *Perhaps the princess no longer loves me.* It was an awfully frightening thought to accept.

It's just as I feared. Resignation welled up inside of me, clashing with passionate cries of refusal. My internal strife lasted for only a moment, and the resignation quickly disappeared, swallowed up by my fervor.

I won't accept it. I won't allow it. I was a defective thing who couldn't love...but you continued to pour your affections into me. You *are the one who taught me what love is and how to desire that you'd only have eyes for me. How could I give up now just because you told me it's over?*

I bit at her lovely lips, stealing the breath away from her cold words. Her blue eyes widened, and I shut my own to run away from her gaze, instead fiercely seeking out her touch. I felt guilty for trampling on the precious flower that I had protected with tender care...but that emotion was outweighed by overwhelming joy.

It was only a childish kiss, but the sensation shook my brain with a violent pleasure that I had never experienced before. How much had I wished for this? How badly had I yearned for this moment? Now that our lips were touching, I finally understood. Like a traveler who had just found water in the desert, my parched heart cried out in delight.

When I released her, the princess stood frozen with shock. I was relieved that there was no disgust visible on her countenance, but she soon questioned my actions. *"Why?"* she whispered. Savage emotions reared up in my mind once more.

I didn't want to hurt her, but at the same time, I wanted to leave my mark on her innocent heart. Her soul was too pure, too beautiful. Someone disgraceful like me would be condemned for being by her side, but if so, I wished to drag her down to the depths with me.

Though I knew that she was not someone that a deplorable man like me should vie for, it was far too late to stop myself now. Reason had surrendered to instinct long ago.

I begged the princess with my words...with my touch. But I was met only with rejection. I sensed that our separation was imminent and I couldn't even breathe. The dread almost made me shiver in fear.

Do all people in the world repeatedly undergo such emotions? I've only

experienced this loss once in my life, and it feels like I've been fatally wounded.

It hurts. I can't breathe. I feel like I'm drowning.

I'll do anything, so please...love me. I clung to her pitifully. *I know the princess is too kind to push me away. What a dastardly man I am for taking advantage of her.* I mocked myself, but I had no intention of changing my mind. *I'll use whatever methods I have available. If there's something I can do, then of course, I will do it.*

There is nothing in this world more terrifying than losing her. Don't distance yourself. Don't run away. Please don't leave me behind. If you intend to take another's hand, then I wish you would put an end to my pathetic life right now. My mind was brimming with dark thoughts, but a hushed voice pulled me out of that pitch-black bog.

"Y...you."

She sounded unsteady, as if she might disappear, but her straightforward gaze captured me. Her eyes, blue like a clear lake's surface, were moist with tears. Her body trembled and her knees seemed like they'd give out at any moment. Her beautiful brows were knit together, seemingly frustrated that her body was not moving the way she wanted. I didn't know what she was trying to convey, but I could tell she was desperately trying to form words for me.

Her dainty lips fluttered as if they were imbibing the air. She pursed her lips shut and then opened her mouth again. Her enchanting voice finally escaped her throat.

"I...lof you."

There was a lisp to her sweet voice, but it wove a miraculous string of words together. For a split second, I truly thought I might've gone mad. *Did I lose my mind and hallucinate something pleasant for myself?* I was petrified, but before my eyes, the princess's face flushed a deep crimson. The way she quivered, eyes teary in shame for fumbling over her words, was adorable like a baby rabbit.

Perhaps it would've been more proper to pretend that I hadn't heard her...but I couldn't. It was impossible for me to act as if her confession had not

occurred. With my eyes, I pleaded for her to say it once more. She succumbed to my persistence and repeated herself.

“I...love you. I’ve always loved you...no, I love you even now.”

Her blue eyes were tinged with exasperation, chiding herself for being hopeless, but more than that, they were melting with overflowing love.

“My love for you remains ever unchanged.”

The princess smiled, and I had no doubt that she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Back in the present, I was lost in the sensation of her soft body returning my embrace—it made my chest feel tight. The fact that the princess was quietly nestled against my chest brought me inexorable bliss. She felt even more precious in my arms because I had been on the brink of losing her.

When I rubbed my cheek against her head, she squirmed a little, finding it ticklish, but she did not try to push me away. She just accepted my touch. I could finally have my fill of feeling my beloved against my skin.

I buried my face into her nape and smelled the faint fragrance of flowers. It was a mild yet distinct aroma—sweet and gentle. I had never fancied the perfume that noblewomen doused themselves in. When I smelled that sickly-sweet odor—akin to overripe fruit on the verge of rotting—for an extended period, I always felt sick. No matter what type of perfume or how heavily a woman wore it, I had never been seduced by its scent.

But the princess’s fragrance had me feeling drunker than if I’d guzzled the highest quality alcohol. My eyes narrowed in ecstasy and I inhaled deeply. How happy would I be if my lungs could be forever filled with her fragrance?

I ran my fingers through her soft, platinum-blond hair, enjoying its sensation. Everything about her was lovely and pleasant to feel. Her fair fingers. Her dainty nails, perfectly sculpted like the scales of a mermaid. Her delicate neck and smooth cheeks. And above all, nothing could match the euphoria I felt the moment I touched her blush-peach lips.

If I ask...will she let me taste her once again?

“Princess.” My tone was laughably saccharine for a man like me. Like a whining dog snuggling up against its master’s legs, I sounded pitiful begging for her lips. As I deliberated on how to cajole my compassionate princess to bend, my expression became like that of an obedient, faithful hound. If anyone saw my face right now, they would deem me a man unworthy of her.

She did not respond to my plea, perhaps sensing my scheme. When I called for her again, I was met with further silence. Terrified that she was upset about how I’d gotten carried away, I timidly stole a glance at her visage.

The princess was nodding off against my chest. She suddenly lost consciousness, and I felt her become heavier in my arms. There were dark circles around her eyes, and I watched her begin to breathe peacefully in slumber. *She must’ve anguished so much... The relief likely put her to sleep.*

I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh. *Should I be happy that she’s this relaxed around me? Or should I languish that she lacks awareness about being alone with me, a grown man?*

Despite my conflicted emotions, I swept the princess up in my arms. I gently carried her to the bed, laid her down, and covered her with a blanket. I caressed her cheek, my finger delicately brushing aside strands of hair that shrouded her eyes.

She’s so dear to me... I find it hard to leave.

I gazed at her sleeping visage, my eyes drawn to her slightly open and plump lips. I placed my hand on her pillow and leaned over, about to capture her mouth once more with my own...but I managed to stop myself.

I don’t want to disregard the princess’s feelings.

Some might criticize me for controlling myself now, only *after* I’d already forcibly stolen a kiss, but my desire to cherish her won out. Still, I couldn’t bear to just turn away, so I pressed my lips gently against her shapely forehead. *Surely this much affection is permissible,* I thought, making a one-sided decision.

When I parted from her, I turned on my heel and reached for the doorknob. However, before I could even graze a finger against it, someone opened it from the outside. Peeking through the thin gap of the door was the face of my

subordinate—the princess's personal knight. He was usually a man who wore a pleasant smile, but he was currently devoid of all emotion. The pupils of his spring-green eyes were dilated, the black noticeably apparent.

"Klaus."

He's livid. I didn't know how much of our conversation he'd overheard, but he'd certainly picked up the noises we'd been making inside. I'd committed a variety of misdemeanors...so many that it was distressing to think about.

Klaus had allowed me to enter by virtue of his concern and grief as he witnessed the princess's condition wane with each passing day, so it was only natural that he was furious with me. *I wonder if he'll let me off if I voluntarily take several blows,* I thought in the recesses of my mind.

"Captain." His eyes were mirthless, but the corners of his mouth were tugged up into the shape of a thin smile. "What did you do to my master? I'll kill you," he threatened in a low voice.

I smiled dryly in reply and walked into the corridor. What took precedence right now was not quelling Klaus's wrath or defending my life—it was ensuring the princess slept soundly.

I slowly shut the door and raised my hands in surrender. "I will accept whatever complaints you may have later."

The First Prince in Agony

My patience is at its limit. I proceeded down the corridor, mentally unloading my feelings. I tried to control my actions and expressions to hide the irritation that lurked in the depths of my gut, but I could tell from the complexion of the maids jumping out of my path that I was not restraining myself well.

“Prince Christoph. May I inquire where we are heading?” asked the bewildered guard following behind me.

I didn’t even have the composure to reply. Once I reached my destination, I asked the knight to announce my presence.

“Come in,” was the immediate and succinct reply.

At his urging, I stepped inside the room—the king’s office. He raised his head. Our eyes met over the mound of documents piled up on his desk.

I didn’t bother with any formalities and abruptly got straight to the point. “How long do you intend to neglect her?”

A public official in the midst of taking notes gawked at me in surprise, however, the king was expressionless as usual. He waved his hand, directing the official to leave. The official politely expressed his farewell and hurried out of the room.

I followed suit, using my eyes to order my knight outside. There was a brief period of silence as I waited for him to make his way out and close the door.

The king returned his vision to the papers in front of him. Watching him trace the words with those merciless eyes of his only amplified my irritation.

“Your Majesty,” I said, not bothering to hide the hostility in my timbre.

However, he picked up his quill pen and signed the paper as if he hadn’t heard me. After tossing it onto the pile of approved documents, he put down the quill. He leaned back against the seat of his chair, causing a hollow creak to resound throughout the room. The king laced his hands together on top of his stomach and then finally directed his gaze at me.

“So? What business brought you here?” he asked, even though he unequivocally knew why I was there.

I scowled at his flawless, well-sculpted face and bit my lip. One week ago, I’d received a report that my younger sister, Rose, had been behaving strangely. Since then, she’d been cooped up inside her room. She had gone to the library once, but that was all. She’d even stopped going to the greenhouse, a place she used to frequent almost every day.

Is she ill? Did something disagreeable happen? I brooded over these questions, but I concluded that neither of those were possibilities. Rose was a girl who prioritized other people’s feelings above her own. Even if she’d experienced something painful, she would pretend nothing was wrong, not shut herself away. If it were a problem that affected only her, she would put on a brave front and smile so no one would suspect a thing.

If she was secluding herself in her room, then clearly, something was abnormal. Was she burdened with an issue so large that she couldn’t keep up any appearances? Surely the king had long realized this, yet he’d done nothing.

After a moment I said, “If you’re not going to take action, then fine. I will do something at my own discretion.”

“I don’t recall permitting you to meet her face-to-face.” His pale blue eyes and dispassionate voice did not change. I wondered if the exasperation and scorn I sensed from him was a result of my persecution complex. But it did not matter whether it was my imagination or not.

“You have no intention of giving me permission.” I scoffed. Even though I was crown prince, my attitude toward the king was blasphemous, but I wasn’t interested in formalities right now. Terribly violent urges were swirling in the pit of my stomach. If I didn’t expel them, I might go mad.

“You’re quick to become a fool when it comes to that one.”

“I won’t deny that. But it is because of her existence that I wish to be a wise crown prince.” For better or for worse, my younger brother and sister made me human. “Johan and I are motivated by her. And I won’t let anyone snatch her away from me.”

A hush fell over the room. Then, the king's chair creaked and a sigh escaped from his thin lips.

"I don't need you to declare such a thing to understand. *That one* is indispensable to many people, not just the two of you. Furthermore, all of them are pivotal figures for this country." The king lowered his eyes. "It's quite a delicate situation."

"Then, why?" I asked impatiently. *If you understand that much, then why are you just leaving her be?*

After a moment of pause, his eyes opened, capturing my attention. "It is not that I am refraining from taking action. I *cannot* take action. That is the correct option right now."

Unable to grasp the meaning behind his words, I waited mutely for him to continue.

"She has shut herself away to isolate herself. I imagine she's doing so to protect herself from others. Or perhaps...it's the opposite."

"The opposite?" I repeated.

The opposite of protecting herself from others? In other words, Rose is trying to protect someone from herself? That's ridiculous. She's not someone who can hurt other people. After all, she's a girl who prioritizes others. Even if she were to become emotional over something, I doubt the option of choosing harm exists inside of her.

Rose is only human, so she must feel negative emotions, but considering her disposition, I just can't associate her with violence. This is a matter that precedes whether she can control herself with reason. Unless ordered to, the possibility of her hurting someone else is zero.

When I reached that conclusion, a dreadful premonition came over me. There was an existence that could ignore her will and force her to hurt others...

The demon lord.

The moment those words came to mind, I broke out in an unpleasant sweat.

"When she came into contact with our guest from another world, I observed

no change in her behavior," said the king. "There were no abnormalities afterward either, so I'm surprised she's showing symptoms now."

"That's right. I heard there were no issues when Fuzuki touched her. Does that mean she is afflicted with a different problem?" Those standing at the top must always assume the worst. As crown prince, I shouldn't have been deluded by wishful thinking, but I desperately clung to alternate possibilities.

"No. It means our hypothesis was incorrect—contact with our guest will not necessarily reveal the demon lord's presence." The king forced me to face reality, and beneath his words, I could hear him say, *"You already understand this."*

Out loud, he continued his explanation. "Our guest has been studying how to control her powers under the head sorceress, but in the end, her abilities only resemble magic in form. We still do not have a complete understanding of its mechanisms."

Though we could injure the demon lord's vessel with swords or magic, we did not have the ability to completely destroy it. Fuzuki was our trump card, but her latent talents had not bloomed yet...and what if she did not have enough power to eradicate the demon lord?

"I've already considered using a new seal or other methods...but it would not be wise for us to take action. In our present situation, *that one* is practically being held hostage." The king's voice was bitter, and deep wrinkles creased the skin between his brows.

It was a jarring difference from his normal expressionless visage, and he'd recounted the situation with a sense of urgency. Uneasiness consumed me; it was like watching the ground crumble away around my feet. I felt like I might keel over, but I kept my anxiety in check—even if I averted my eyes, the situation would not improve. My precious little sister had been taken hostage... I didn't have time to lament.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked, concealing my emotions.

The king blinked, looking like he wanted to state his surprise. He peered at my face, trying to read my heart, then heaved a sigh.

“Behave yourself and do your work.” I knew his words implied that there was nothing I could do. “You are included among those *that one* wishes to protect. If you approach her imprudently, you will only torment her.”

I wanted to snap at him and tell him not to speak as if he knew everything, but I couldn’t. The king’s expression was unexpectedly gentle. However, immediately after, as if it had been a trick of the light, it was replaced by his usual levelheaded demeanor.

“If I conclude that her mental strength is at its limit, then we will alter course to terminate and seal it. You must steel yourself.”

I clenched my fist, constraining my impulses. I didn’t agree, but I couldn’t argue either. I had no alternative, so I knew there would be no point in shouting, *“I won’t allow it!”* There was nothing I could do at this moment.

I don’t have time to waste here. I need to find a way to save Rose.

I stated my intention to leave and turned on my heel. Right before I shut the door, I heard the king murmur to himself: “Then again, I can’t imagine that my happy-go-lucky daughter would be swallowed up by darkness.”

It grated me to hear him act fatherly, but I concurred. She was gentle and warm; she was my sun. Darkness did not suit that girl.

A Certain Spy’s Apprehension

I raised my arm so my bird could land and then removed the paper fastened to its leg. At a glance, the writing on the scrap resembled wriggling earthworms, no more than a child’s scribbles. However, in the hands of one who could read its pattern, it became a coded sentence with meaning.

My trusty partner who shared my name, Crow, was clever—the likelihood of it being caught by a human was extremely low, but assurances were always best taken. Incidentally, this was a report from Ratte, my colleague currently planted in the neighboring nation, Lapter. His handwriting looked even more childlike due to the irritation and disarray evident in his scrawlings.

“It’s filthy,” I unintentionally grumbled.

He’d put minimal effort into following the rules, giving me just barely enough to decipher the pattern. It was extraordinarily annoying, but if I complained to him, he’d just laugh it off and say, *“All that matters is that you could read it, right?”* I knew it’d be best to not mention it.

It would be asinine of me to expend my time and mental energy on something that would offer little return. Furthermore, Ratte was a hazard that needed to be handled with extreme care right now. Currently, his eyes were set on his prey—the Kingdom of Lapter—so he was relatively docile, but I didn’t know when his true character might reveal itself.

By nature, he was an untamable beast. Even when he worked under someone, he would never bend his knee. If he didn’t take a fancy to his employer, he would betray them at the drop of a hat. Ultimately, he only obeyed his own desires. However, for the first time in his life, he had sought to serve someone...and if those chains—the princess—that he’d willingly bound himself with disappeared, it would surely be impossible for him to contain himself.

“If he saw how she is behaving now, things would go south very quickly.” I waited beneath the dark, nighttime sky, keeping my eyes on the window to the princess’s unlit room.

For the past few days, she had secluded herself in her room, carrying some burden alone. Her expression was uncharacteristically dark, and I wondered what Ratte would do if he saw her brooding like this. I didn't even want to imagine it.

No, that's not limited to him. Many people were bewildered because the princess would not leave her abode. As if the sun had suddenly disappeared, their condition deteriorated. And His Majesty, The King, who always conducted himself with composure, was no exception.

"Don't take your eyes off of that one*."*

I'd wondered why he had recalled me with little notice...but it was to assign me a mission—monitor the princess. Though his visage seemed to be expressionless as usual when he gave his command, I noticed something was ever so slightly different. Within his placid expression, there was a hint of grief.

Rather than being shocked that he could feel humane emotions such as worrying for his daughter, I was unsettled. *Something is happening to the princess...something dire enough to cause His Majesty concern.*

The princess's surroundings were always boisterous and far from tranquil. She had met countless dangers, and I often suspected she was purposefully poking her nose into trouble. But even so, His Majesty would only ever watch over her. The fact that he was acting this way filled me with apprehension.

Hey, Princess. What are you doing? What are you thinking? You're not planning on doing something reckless like fighting the demon lord alone, right?

"Prioritize that one's *life."* His Majesty's order flashed through my mind.

"I don't need to be told that," I muttered, peering up at the sky. My unheard voice melted into the darkness.

The Reincarnated Princess Snaps Back

When I came to, it was pitch-black. Dazed and muddled, I rubbed my head as I sat up. *I feel like I just slept for ages. What time is it? Considering how dark it is inside my room, it must be the middle of the night...*

Hold on, what was I doing before this?

I recalled my memories like I was putting together pieces of a puzzle. *I hid in my room and read every single volume I could lay my hands on...and then...and then...* My hand slipped off my forehead and my fingertips brushed against my lips. Suddenly, all the memories rushed back to me at once.

His heat, his touch, his voice against my lips...the strength of his arms wrapped around me and his scent.

“Because I love you.”

When I remembered his earnest confession, my face instantly heated up. A strangled noise escaped from my throat.

H-Huh? What? H-H-H-He told me he loved me, right?! Sir Leonhart definitely said he loved me*, right?!* I held my hands against my cheeks—they felt hot enough to be steaming—and desperately tried to uncloud my recollection of that moment.

He told me he loves me. Yeah. That wasn’t my imagination. His voice was somewhat husky and sexy, but it was still clear enough. I didn’t mishear. He didn’t say dove or glove—he definitely said love*!*

“Lady Rosemary.”

That’s right. He said my name multiple times; it’s not a misunderstanding. Yeah. That’s me, I’m Rosemary. I’m certain. He didn’t mistake me for someone else. Surely not.

I nodded to myself again and again, for some reason monologuing to myself in broken words. After counting up the facts with a serious expression, I let out a sigh and my face broke out into a silly smile.

He loves me.

Sir Leonhart.

Loves.

Me.

"Heh heh heh." A giggle bubbled out of me and euphoria welled up in my chest. I was so, so happy. I felt like I was losing my mind.

Perhaps I was already one or two screws loose...too many to be considered sane at least. I was so over the moon that a strange laugh unconsciously leaked out of my lips. My facial muscles were lax and I couldn't stop grinning. I was in such terrible shape that I definitely didn't want anyone to see me like this—especially *not* Sir Leonhart. He'd finally fallen for me after all, and I didn't want him to become disillusioned.

After I savored that happiness for a long moment, I whispered, "I'm not dreaming, right?"

Right as I calmed down, I heard a small sound, almost as if it had been waiting for me to calm down. A reserved knock on my door made my shoulders jolt. I pressed my hand against my racing heart and responded.

"Yes?"

However there was no reply from the other side.

I wonder who it is. Feeling suspicious, I got out of bed. *Come to think of it, what happened to Klaus? Even if he already changed shifts, another knight should be standing in front of my door.*

I tilted my head, puzzled, and drew near the door. I placed my hand on the knob but abruptly stopped myself. Bearing my situation and the time in mind, I decided it would be imprudent to open the door.

"Who is it?" I asked warily.

After a short pause, my late-night visitor answered. "It's Leonhart."

I cracked open the door like it was a conditioned reflex. Through the opening, a handsome face peered at me. Overjoyed, my lips began curling up into a

smile, but I stopped midway when I noticed his rigid expression. I ended up with a half-baked smirk instead.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

I had contemplated what kind of face I should make or what we would talk about the next time we met...but those blissful worries quickly flew out of my mind. That was how grim Sir Leonhart’s countenance was.

“Your Highness. There is something I wish to speak with you about.”

His voice was as stiff as his face. His tone and the way he addressed me differed compared to when he’d bared his feelings to me. Thrown off by the sudden change, I felt like the ground was crumbling around me. The elation that had filled me faded into dejection.

“Sir...Leon?” I questioned. *What happened? Did something cataclysmic occur while I was locked up in my room?* “What do you wish to discuss?”

I tightened my expression and admonished myself. *Now is not the time to get carried away with glee.*

There was a brief lull in our conversation, and then he opened his mouth. “It’s been decided that I will marry Lady Kanon Fuzuki,” he informed me in a low voice.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Huh?” a foolish noise spilled out of me.

Marry? Marry Kanon? Who and who? I froze, eyes round.

Sir Leonhart gazed at me for a moment before continuing. “I have received permission from His Majesty, The King. We plan to hold our ceremony in the spring of next year.”

Kanon has decided to remain in this world? If things follow Hidden World, *does that mean she’ll be adopted by a viscount and then marry him? Or...will Sir Leonhart concede his right to succeed Count Orsein to his younger brother so that he will no longer be fettered by the shackles of needing a noble countess as a wife?* My mind became crowded with information that I didn’t want to think about.

That’s not what I want to know right now. Why? Why?! Didn’t you tell me you

loved me? You were so frantic to prove to me how much you desired me. Why are you talking about marrying someone else?

Questions piled up in my head, but I couldn't put them into words. I clenched my trembling hand and looked up at Sir Leonhart. There was nothing amusing about this topic, but why did I feel like smiling?

"You're...lying, right?" I asked hoarsely.

I was met only with silence.

"Didn't... Didn't you say you love me?" I sputtered, desperately trying to form words.

Sir Leonhart only regarded me with a sympathetic gaze. The warm and gentle light was gone from his black eyes; he peered at me through a frigid, hollow darkness.

"I never said I loved you romantically," he stated coldly. I inhaled sharply and froze. He continued, throwing cruel words at me like he was sprinkling salt on my wounds. "Are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

So that happiness was a mere dream? Would...my beloved speak like this? A lethal dose of poison had been pumped into me, enough to halt my breath. My pulse had truly stopped for a few tenths of a second. That was how much power his words held over me.

I took a deep breath and exhaled. Then, I bit my lip and forced strength into my legs. If it were me from a few days ago, I would've likely bawled without care for shame or my reputation. I would've cried with all my heart, indifferent to whether I passed away right there.

But now, I would not weep. No way. Why would I shed tears when there was nothing to grieve about? I inhaled deeply once more and pointed my gaze at the person before me. I scrutinized the thing that had taken the form of my dearest love.

"Who...are you?"

His dark, almond eyes widened. He appeared surprised, but he remained composed nonetheless. In a hushed tone, he asked, "Did you forget who I am?"

“You are not Sir Leonhart. He would never say that.”

The thing wearing Sir Leonhart’s face heaved a sigh, eyes cold. “Are you implying that I am not myself if I do not love you?”

His words pierced right through me and the pain of it made my breath catch. But I immediately shook my head, clearing my mind of any distractions.

“Even if I dreamed that he confessed to me... Even if Sir Leonhart...does not love...me... I can still say with confidence that you are not Sir Leonhart.” I paused and glared at the thing in front of me. “I know how much he cherishes me.”

Our ages were far enough apart that I could be his child, but even if he had meant to convey his parental affection for me, or even if he had been confused, he’d always devoted himself to me with sincerity. A kind person like him would never harm me with such awful words. I was conceited enough to be aware of how precious I was to him. That was why there was no reason for me to cry or feel hurt.

“Cease your act as my loved one. You don’t resemble him at all. The real Sir Leonhart is five hundred billion times cooler than you.” Though tears were almost welling up in my eyes, I managed to speak in a scathing tone. “Come again after you’ve studied up more!”

The moment I shouted, the thing’s form distorted. The space that I had thought to be my room blended together like the inside of a pot being churned, and everything disappeared into darkness.

Oh. This is a dream. As soon as I understood, my consciousness rapidly surfaced.

The Sorcerers' Unrest

In a certain corner of the castle, there was a single room. I—Lutz Eilenberg—was watching a scene unfold before my eyes with dejected feelings.

It was an empty room barren of any furniture or other miscellaneous items littering the floor. Despite its vast space, the air was stifling because it was a chamber that lacked any windows. Inside this curious room was something even more peculiar—a large pattern drawn on the surface of the marble floor.

It was a combination of geometric shapes and an ancient script. Though it closely resembled the magic circle that had summoned our guest from another world, its use was for something else entirely.

It was a technique left by our predecessors that would seal this world's calamity—the demon lord.

"Lutz." Teo, who stood next to me, lightly jabbed my side with his elbow. "Your expression is awful."

I turned my gaze upon him; he wore a bitter smile and looked quite awful himself. I was about to reply with, *"So is yours,"* but I stopped. After all, he didn't need to hear it from me to know that.

Recently, Teo had been making this sort of face. It had shocked us to learn that the demon lord's seal had been broken, but that wasn't the cause for our despondency. What Teo and I were most concerned about was that the princess had been in the vicinity when the seal had been dissolved.

Though we'd received reports that she had shown no abnormalities, we did not feel any peace of mind. We wanted to ascertain her good health with our own eyes, but due to our standing as sorcerers, we were not permitted to approach her. As the days passed by without being able to see her, our melancholy only grew.

Usually, *I* was the one to be bogged down by dark feelings while Teo, as caring as he was, would be there to accept my venting, whether I noticed or not. However, even he could not hold his composure right now. The amount of time

we spent brooding and on edge had increased.

And now we were tasked with preparing the sealing ceremony. It was impossible not to be agitated.

Our master stood at the edge of the magic circle, discussing something with Michael. She turned toward us and my shoulders unwittingly flinched.

“Lutz. Teo. Come here,” she called, sounding and appearing as if everything was normal.

“Yes, ma’am,” Teo replied in a stiff tone and stepped forward.

I meant to follow him, but my legs felt terribly heavy. I was petrified, and it seemed as if my feet were sewn to the ground. Teo looked back at me with concerned eyes.

It’ll amount to nothing if I throw a tantrum like a child. I understood that the magic circle’s completion was crucial now that the demon lord had likely been released. Nevertheless, I couldn’t do it. Though I understood why we needed this ceremony, I couldn’t convince myself to act. My legs became paralyzed just imagining that the magic circle might be used on someone dear to me.

“Lutz,” my master calmly called for me once again. She was not criticizing my behavior, nor was she trying to soothe me. Her voice was even. “Come here,” she repeated.

I raised my head and forced my heavy legs forward. I felt ashamed of how long it took me to cross a distance of only a few steps. However, no one reproached me. No one heckled me. Not Teo, not Michael...and not even my strict master. They all waited for me to sluggishly trudge over.

“Please look.” My master directed our gazes downward with her eyes. “This technique is not directly related to sealing.”

She pointed to a section of ancient characters in the magic circle. I was astonished by what I saw.

Meticulously calculated and intricately interwoven, there was a formula...one that could not be composed in a mere one or two years. It had been completed with many lifetimes’ worth of research that had been passed down for

numerous generations. I couldn't think of a single thing to add to it.

"Then, what is it for?" I asked.

"Its purpose is to protect the vessel."

I doubted my ears. Her words seemed to contradict our goal to seal the demon lord.

"We can interpret this method as a way to bind the demon lord to its vessel, but I suspect it's something else. After leading the demon lord to this magic circle, the vessel would only be in the way. However, the researchers before us did not exclude this portion in their formula. No one who has inherited this knowledge has deemed this step unnecessary. Why do you think that is?"

My master locked eyes with me. Though she had spoken to me in the form of a question, she already knew the answer. I looked down at the magic circle once more. It was an inorganic structure, but from it, I could sense that it had been entrusted to us.

I get it. Just like how I don't want to lose the princess, all the people who researched this technique also had someone they did not wish to lose... I thought this was created out of fear and resentment for the demon lord, but that's not true. It's filled with an earnest desire to reclaim and protect the people dear to them.

"There are still many uncertainties regarding the sealing ritual as well as the demon lord. We have no conclusive evidence that the vessel can be recovered safely," my master said, not trying to conceal the harsh reality of the situation.

This time, I listened without hanging my head. "Even so..." I squeezed my fists. *I won't give up. I can't give up!* "The possibility isn't zero."

The corner of her lips quirked up ever so slightly as if to say, "*Well said."* However, her smile disappeared in the blink of an eye, almost like it had just been an illusion.

"Then you know what you must do now," she said, her tone placid as always.

I nodded, tightening my expression. From my place next to him, I saw the doubt in Teo's visage disappear as well.

The Reincarnated Princess Despairs

When my eyes snapped open, my surroundings were pitch-black yet again. Even after waking up from a dream, there was only darkness, and I feared I was stuck in an infinite loop. Goosebumps crawled across my skin. However, when my eyes gradually adjusted to the dark and I could make out the layout of my room, the familiar sight made me relax.

This isn't the same unknown void as before. I know this... It's the darkness of night. I let out a sigh of relief. Though I'd spoken assertively in my dream, I'd actually been quite scared. I was not a heroine with special powers like Kanon, and I didn't have any unique abilities like the protagonists of manga and anime.

Forget saving the world—I don't even have the strength to protect myself. Opposing an unidentified being is reckless, even for me. If I make the wrong move, it's quite possible that I'll be squashed with one measly finger... I shuddered at the thought.

"It was just a dream. Thank the heavens." *And in more ways than one. I managed to hold my own against whatever that* thing *was, and I didn't actually get rejected by Sir Leonhart.*

Anyway... Was that the demon lord? I guess...I really am possessed? I placed my hand on my paltry chest. *Then, perhaps there's a reason he's only reaching out to me through dreams. If his influence is limited because my magic powers are scarce, then maybe there's a countermeasure I can take.*

My mind felt clear after getting some rest. The pessimistic thoughts that had plagued my mind earlier were now replaced with my usual optimism. *Yeah, that's right! That's how I've always been. I may be weak without any special powers, but I'll always struggle with all I've got! I won't give up on my love or life without a fight!*

Now that I've made up my mind, there's tons for me to do. First, I need to summarize my findings. I propped myself up in bed with my hand. My whole body felt lethargic as a result of neglecting my health for a whole week, but the sluggishness was further proof that this was indeed reality, which gladdened

me.

“It’s cold...”

The night air pricked my skin. I rubbed my arms and looked around before spotting my shawl folded on top of the sofa. Lowering my feet to the tapestry carpet, I went to fetch it, but the moment I least expected it, a voice echoed inside my head.

“What did I need to study up on?”

I grunted and quickly paled. The unsettling sensation of someone directly touching my nerves swept through my body.

“I thought someone with a sheltered upbringing like yourself would be like a fragile butterfly...but you’re more brazen than expected.”

The voice was like a turbulent cacophony of several people simultaneously speaking. It sounded crackly like it was coming through a radio...and it was the same voice I’d heard in my dream. However, this was no dream. My mind and sense of touch were clear, not fuzzy like they’d been while sleeping. But that only made the situation all the more eerie and frightening.

It felt like the darkness around me had thickened somehow. The air was stifling, and it was difficult to breathe. Along with a cold wave, something crept up my feet. A chill streamed down my spine and I held back a scream.

I wanted to flee, but then I noticed something odd...

My body wouldn’t move.

I was petrified—not out of fear—but because my body literally wouldn’t obey my will. Similarly, I couldn’t utter a word, and the back of my throat felt like it was blocked. I desperately moved my mouth, but only dry air came out.

“To think, I can’t even control a single little girl in this feeble vessel.”

Really? That’s what you’re saying when I can’t move a muscle? I clicked my tongue to show my annoyance. I wanted to scream, *“If you don’t like my body, then get out!”* but I couldn’t. I settled for grinding my teeth in frustration. Suddenly, my body began to move on its own. I was forced to stand, strung up like a puppet dangling from piano wire.

“You have practically no magic, and your weak body lacks any strength. Despite all that, your unbreakable will is extremely troublesome. You are difficult to use.” From wherever the calm voice was speaking, I also heard a sigh.

I felt an indescribable terror at having my body manipulated by someone else, and it was even more horrifying because I was fully cognizant. My heart was hammering. At this rate, I would be powerless, even if I was forced to break the window and jump. *My life is in the palm of someone else’s hand...* The dread made me quiver uncontrollably.

Slowly, my legs began to move. It was terrifying not knowing where they would take me...but I was also scared to find out. One step, then another. I couldn’t move my neck, but I felt something wriggle by my feet. A scream welled up and disappeared in the back of my throat. I closed my eyes in a futile act of defiance.

But then, I heard the loud shattering of glass. Reflexively, I opened my eyes to see clear shards flying through the air and the curtain swaying. A large, shadowy silhouette tumbled into the room.

No longer blocked by the curtain, moonlight shone through the window. Whoever had leaped inside pushed themself off the carpet littered with glass fragments—their dark cloak fluttered in their wake. When they broke into a run, their hood fell off, revealing a mess of black hair.

“Crow!” I wished I could call out.

He swiftly closed the distance between us and swung his knife down on something. However, the edge only sliced through air without even grazing his target. An agile black mass matched Crow’s movements. It jumped away, but Crow tracked it and made a throwing motion. Two hidden knives whizzed through the air and embedded in the wall.

Crow grunted and went still for a moment before he made his next move. It seemed like he was resisting the urge to fall onto his knees, but perhaps that was just my imagination...

No, it’s not. When I saw Crow fight in the past, he was so fast that my eyes couldn’t keep up. Now, his movements are slightly quicker than the average person’s but much too slow for him. Also, he looks like he’s in pain; I can hear

him panting intermittently.

"You're a tenacious one. Don't resist the urge to sleep—pass out already." The voice in my head sounded as if it were ridiculing Crow.

Sleep...? Does it have power over others besides me? Is that why no one has rushed in...even though the glass shattered quite loudly?

"Urgh." With a pained grunt, Crow collapsed to the ground. He hunched over as though gravity were crushing him, his hand pressed against his forehead. An excruciating moan escaped from his thin lips.

"You've done enough already! Run!" I wanted to scream, but I was helpless. I could only stand still, brimming with frustration, and watch.

However, Crow did not stay down. He bent low like a coiled spring, and in an explosive movement, he propelled himself off the ground with his hand. He charged at the black mass, swinging at it multiple times with his knife, but it dodged every single attack.

"Persistent," the voice drawled in a bored tone.

My legs began to move once again. Disregarding my will, they ran while my torso made strange and bewildering motions. It was as if I were being operated by a clumsy puppet master. My bones and muscles cried out in pain.

Still silent, whoever was controlling my body forced me to dance until I was in front of Crow. His eyes widened in surprise, but I could only protectively pull the black mass into my arms. Crow's knife stopped just before it stabbed my face.

He fell to his knees, breathing ragged. The knife in his hand clattered to the ground.

"I was unsure of how to use you, but evidently, you make a fine shield."

As the voice rang through my head, the lump in my arms stirred. I should've been holding something foreign, but I felt very comfortable hugging it. Its fluffy coat felt just like a certain pet I loved dearly.

I was afraid to confirm my hypothesis, but I lowered my gaze anyway. He had a small body covered in glossy black fur. His blue, gemlike eyes were now dark

and closer to gray...but I would never mistake him for someone else. He was my cute, adorable, and precious boy.

"Nero!"

Allowing me to speak at only this moment was in terribly bad taste. I wanted to disparage my controller, but I was muted once more. Round eyes peered up at me and then narrowed into crescent moons as it watched my face contort in distress. Cats were supposed to have fewer facial muscles, but the thing smirked unpleasantly.

"Despair truly is more comforting to see."

Nero. Nero. Nero. My precious cat. Oh, you were supposed to be my precious cat, but I mistook you for someone else. I didn't notice that the soul residing in your body had changed. No... I had my suspicions, but I continued to look the other way. I clung to false peace and pretended not to see how unusual my beloved cat was behaving.

I could even identify when the shift occurred—the day the stone broke. That moment, when you used your tiny body to face my assailant and protect me, you were already...

I didn't want to cry, but my vision became watery. My eyes burned and I struggled to breathe. *No, please no. Nero... Don't let it be true. I don't want us to part like this. Absolutely not.* Large teardrops rained onto the black cat's face. Wet with my tears, he looked at me as if *I* were the mysterious creature.

"You cry for a mere cat? How incomprehensible."

"Nero is not just a 'mere' cat," I wanted to retort, but I could not speak. I felt like I was getting crushed by my sorrow and guilt. The black cat observed me, eyes thin and head tilted to the side.

"If this is how you react when an animal dies, then how much will you despair when you lose a close human?"

My silent sobbing ceased immediately when I heard those words. The shallow breaths I'd been taking to chase away my urge to cry came to a stop with one final sharp inhale.

Evidently, I would not be allowed a moment to despair.

My hand reached for the knife that Crow had dropped. I desperately tried to resist, but my body would not listen to me. My fingers wrapped around the handle and slowly raised it. Crow remained hunched over on the floor where he heaved in pain—it was taking him everything he had to stay conscious. If I brought down the knife on his exposed nape, then even someone as weak as me could take his life.

Imagining myself pointing the blade at Crow made me shudder. After a delay, my fingers also began to shake, bones rattling loudly. However, my right hand refused to let go of the knife. I turned toward Crow instead.

No... I won't...let you!

"I suppose not... It'd be too boring like this." The voice spoke as if it had just thought of an idea. For some reason, I was allowed to lower the knife. I didn't digest what was happening, but the black cat continued to speak to itself. *"It's too early to break you."*

Having lost interest in Crow, I was instead led away from him. I stepped over to the door, black cat in my left hand and the knife in my right. *Where are we going?* I was uneasy, but it also gave me peace of mind that I was moving away from Crow.

My body pushed against the door to open it. There were two knights collapsed in the corridor. They didn't appear to be injured, so they were likely only asleep. I felt somewhat relieved that Klaus wasn't on watch tonight. If he ever fell asleep while on duty, he might kill himself upon waking.

The castle was blanketed by an unsettling silence. *I wonder how many people have noticed this anomaly? Are there any others besides Crow who can retain their consciousness? Of course, there aren't many people who'd be awake at night in the first place.*

I proceeded down the hall, my footsteps making silly smacking noises. I was barefoot, and the marble floor chilled my skin, gradually stealing the heat away from my body. My nightwear was thin so I could hardly expect it would protect me against the cold. *Oh yeah...I never did get to pick up my shawl.*

The only heat I could feel came from the fur ball in my arms. He was warm. And yet...the thing inside of him was not my darling cat. It was like a bad joke. Tears welled up in my eyes again, but I managed to control myself.

I don't have time to cry. I need to think of a way to ensure I don't harm anyone. Mourning and regret can come later. Though I desperately tried to convince myself of this, my anguish would not disappear.

Then, I heard something behind me.

Unable to turn around, I couldn't check the source of the noise. The sound was distant and not too loud. If the castle had not been so quiet, then I likely wouldn't have heard anything.

It sounds like something is being dragged across the ground... No, is it someone shuffling their feet? Also noticing the noise, the black cat raised his head. He placed a forepaw on my shoulder and peered behind me. Out of the very corner of my eye, I could see his ears twitch.

After a moment, his exasperated voice rang in my head. *"What is that?"*

Ask me all you want, but I can't turn around to check. What do you want me to do? Though I am *curious about something that this mysterious being can't comprehend.* As I thought that, my body rotated to the right.

Having my vision suddenly shifted by someone else disorientated me. The corridor now stretched out before my eyes. A dim orange glow diffused from the evenly spaced lamps, but it was dark by my feet. I had an uncanny feeling that something lurked within that hazy darkness.

In the distance, I could make out the knights passed out in front of my room. I strained my eyes hard, and...

Something was sliding along the floor.

I inhaled sharply. If I'd had control over my vocal cords, I surely would've screamed. On top of the pitch-black floor, something crawled toward me. I froze. It felt like I was in the scene of a cheap horror flick. I wanted to run, but my feet still wouldn't move. Since I was too scared to watch whatever it was drawing closer to me, I squeezed my eyes shut in a meager act of rebellion.

“...ma...ry...”

Was that a husky voice? And one I know very well...

Timidly, I cracked open my eyes, focusing on the thing that was crawling along the dimly lit floor. I could only stand frozen and quiet, but my lips formed a surprised O.

The thing crawling on the ground was not an unknown monster, nor was it a specter that appeared in school ghost stories. It was a human. Brown, evenly cut hair—droopy green eyes. Though he had a slender build, his body was well-trained. He was not wearing his usual royal guard uniform, but a simple white shirt with black trousers, and he gripped his sheathed sword tightly in his left hand.

This handsome knight, who was popular with women and usually wore a pleasant smile, advanced with a frantic expression...while crawling along the floor. I completely forgot my predicament and gaped at him. How could I not? The thing I’d thought to be a Japanese urban legend like Teke **ke turned out to be...Klaus. This had the potential to be a touching moment, but his initial impression was just too shocking.

“Lady...Rosemary! I will...save you immediately.”

He thrust his arm against the ground, trying to stand up. However, he appeared to lack full control over his body, so he staggered like a newborn foal.

Klaus’s brains are... I mean, he’s a physical kind of guy, so he seems like he’d have low resistance to magic. That’s just how I imagine him, but I have a feeling I’m not too far off. He’s probably in considerable pain right now.

“How unsightly,” the black cat sneered.

Yeah, he does *look uncool, but at the same time...he looks very cool. This is all very typical of him, and I’m feeling some energy rush back to me. It inspires me to think, “I won’t lose either!”*

Klaus took a step forward but immediately collapsed to the floor. My body didn’t wait for him to draw near—I turned around and began walking once more. The distance between us widened in an instant. I heard him call my name over and over, and I could only respond in my heart.

I'm fine. I won't give up.

We continued down the frigid corridor. Klaus's voice steadily faded away until I couldn't hear him any longer. *Where are we going?* I peered around with just my eyes. I recognized this path, and I had a sinking feeling about our destination. My familiarity with my surroundings only made me more anxious.

Though I'd been born and raised in the castle, the areas where I could freely venture were limited. There were still many places that I'd never entered, and yet, I knew where we were...which could only mean that our destination was somewhere I frequented in my daily life.

The realization made me want to flee from reality, but as if I were being mocked, I was forced to continue down the familiar route from my room to the greenhouse...

We were heading to the sorcerers' quarters.

No... Lutz, Teo, Michael, and Miss Irene's faces flashed through my mind. Then I remembered the contents of the old books and the setting of *Welcome to the Hidden World*. *The demon lord is currently possessing a powerless vessel...and he sounds dissatisfied with Nero's body. What if he's after a sorcerer who has ample amounts of magic power?*

I shuddered. *I don't want my friends' bodies to be controlled, and we can't have the demon lord getting his hands on a sorcerer either. I mean, Nero probably doesn't have much magic, but look how powerful the demon lord is already. We have multiple exceptional sorcerers gathered here. If he were to obtain one of them, then...*

Calm down, I repeated to myself, inhaling sharply. *Nothing will come from panicking. And besides, I doubt the demon lord can simply swap vessels right now. If there were no limitations on how often he could switch bodies, then the world would've been destroyed long ago. The question is, where is he taking me and what's his goal?*

My mind spun as my feet carried me forward. Finally, we reached the sorcerers' residence. Entry into this area was restricted so there were knights on guard...except they were all fast asleep, just like the ones posted to my room.

We passed the unconscious guards leaning against the wall and advanced farther inside. Somewhere along the way, we diverged from the path to the greenhouse, which I had taken on an almost daily basis. Ahead were the sorcerers' sleeping quarters and the research facilities...as well as the magic circle that could return the shrine maiden—Kanon—back to Earth.

Regardless of which location was the demon lord's objective, I didn't feel optimistic. *What should I do? What's the best thing I can do right now?* I desperately racked my brains for a plan, but nothing plausible came to mind. My irritation only grew.

I can't do anything if my body won't listen. I tried to force my fingers to move, but they remained stiff and disobedient. I could breathe and move my eyeballs, but that was all. I couldn't even scream.

Hold on. I managed to speak a little bit earlier—I said Nero's name once. Why? I thought the demon lord allowed it as a sick form of amusement...but maybe not. It's probably got nothing to do with my willpower. Does that mean his hold over me temporarily weakened?

I spoke after he dragged me over as a shield from Crow's onslaught. Maybe it took too much power to put the whole castle to sleep, control my body, and force Crow down. Thinking back, I was surprised at how the demon lord could do so much in such a little vessel.

Maybe he's already at his limit? If he has to divide his strength any further, then his influence elsewhere will weaken. If my conjecture is right...then my chance will definitely come. I just have to make sure I don't miss it.

Just as I was secretly readying myself for the opportunity, I saw the black cat's ears twitch in the corner of my vision. For a moment, I feared that he'd heard my thoughts, but he paid me no heed. His ears perked up and swiveled to the side, resembling a wary cat trying to pick up distant sounds.

A chill crept around my legs, and stinging, icy air coated my bare feet. They'd been sufficiently numbed from being exposed to the cool night, but now they felt hot rather than just painful. Then...I lurched. My body, which was supposed to be clumsy and slow, suddenly leaped backward to avoid something. The frigid air where I had just been standing froze into a lump of solid ice.

“Princess, sorry!” a familiar voice yelled.

Before I could even feel surprised to hear him, my body reacted once more—there was cold air chasing after my footsteps. What looked like dense fog followed after me, hardening in the blink of an eye wherever I traversed. However, my body was much nimbler than normal and dodged every single attack.

“Dammit!”

Lutz appeared from around the corner. He clicked his tongue and glared in my direction, deep wrinkles creasing his brow. I realized a beat too slowly that the clumps of ice were Lutz’s magic. It was different from when he’d helped me create ice cream through much trial and error—right now, he was using a spell to defeat an enemy, and it shook me that *I* was the target of his attack.

My good friend had identified me as an enemy, and that realization dealt a good bit of mental damage. *Now isn’t the time to feel grief-stricken.* I knew from Lutz’s pained expression that he wasn’t attacking because he hated me. He was painstakingly adjusting his magic to be as weak as he could afford, and he clearly had no intention of doing anything more than capturing me.

“A sorcerer? How careless of you to come to me on your own.”

The discordant voices echoed through my head. Lutz seemed to have heard it too, judging by his frown. His eyes narrowed and he let out a low growl.

“Quiet, you monster!” he yelled, glaring straight at me.

I doubted for a few seconds whether our eyes had truly met. Then, I blanched when I realized that there was a grave misunderstanding: Lutz thought the demon lord had possessed me. *Of course.*

I was wandering around with hollow eyes and bare feet; anyone would pin me as a threat. Plus, nobody would expect that the demon lord could choose a vessel that wasn’t human. After all, nothing like this had ever been recorded in history. *Crap. What should I do? I have to tell him somehow.*

“That person is important to me. I’m taking her back.”

A low, mocking chuckle echoed through our minds. *“How do you plan on*

doing that? I'm not a simple one to stop. Though perhaps I'll stop...if I pierce through here."

The knife in my right hand lightly tapped my heart. The moment Lutz saw that, the air around him completely changed. His indigo eyes, which were usually tranquil like the night sky, became filled with rage and gleamed silver. His thin lips wordlessly mouthed, *"I'll kill you."*

Lutz thrust his hands in front of him—a thick mist enveloped the ground around me in all directions. The air began to crackle loudly, freezing around the edges. I leaped up before the mist could reach me, but having predicted my reaction, the trajectory of the spell immediately changed. A pillar of ice formed by my feet...but it failed to catch me.

I kicked off the ice and jumped aside. I was astonished by my own body's agility; my movements were much smoother than earlier. Then, I remembered: *maybe I can speak now if he's putting this much effort into manipulating me!*

"Lu—"

I was interrupted before I could finish...and not because of magic—it was a much more physical obstruction. A sudden weight knocked the wind out of me from behind. An arm wrapped around my stomach as someone tried to tackle me to the ground.

"I caught you!" yelled a lovely voice.

I glanced down to confirm that the hands on my abdomen were indeed a young girl's. *Is this...Kanon?!* I wanted to turn around, but I still had no control over my body besides my vocal cords.

"Get out of Lady Mary!"

The voice in my mind tutted. *"It seems the nuisances have increased."*

With a twitch, my hand holding the knife suddenly moved.

"Kanon, run!"

My torso turned and my gaze met large, wide-open hazel eyes.

The Reincarnated Princess's Battle

My hand raised the knife over my head, ignoring my orders to stop. Kanon froze, surprise coloring her face, unable to dodge. Imagining the blade cutting through her soft flesh made me shut my eyes... But no matter how long I waited, I didn't feel any impact.

I timidly took a peek through cracked eyelids. The first thing I saw was my favorite pair of eyes that were as deep as the night sky.

"Princess." His low voice made my ears shudder.

Sir Leonhart stood behind Kanon—his outstretched arm had caught the knife. *He came for me. He stopped me.* I felt a surge of relief that almost made the tension in my body dissipate. If I wasn't careful, I knew I'd break out in tears.

"Lady Fuzuki, stand back."

"Huh? Eeek!"

Eyes still locked with mine, Sir Leonhart grabbed Kanon by the collar. He didn't go as far as to fling her away, but he forcibly moved her body behind his own. Startled, Kanon let out a small shriek and stumbled back. Though his action was understandable during an emergency like this, I still fretted and wished he'd treated her a bit more gently.

Lutz ran toward us and stopped to help Kanon stay on her feet. While Sir Leonhart's attention was on her, I was made to pull the knife from his hand. I worried that I'd cut him, but he appeared uninjured.

My body retreated a few steps to distance myself from Sir Leonhart. Adjusting my grip around the knife, I pointed it at him.

Just like Klaus, he was not dressed in his knight uniform, but in a gray shirt and black trousers. Considering his disheveled hair and half-buttoned shirt, I could tell that he'd hurried over here.

There was also something strange about the color of his shirt. I hadn't immediately noticed because of its dark hue...but there was a dark red stain

near his cuff. I paled, fearing that I'd hurt him. My eyes focused on his hand, hoping to pinpoint his injury, and then widened.

"Your...nails..."

It took Sir Leonhart a beat to digest my words. He then frowned, brows drooping. His left thumbnail was missing. The flesh where the fingernail had been torn off was raw and covered in dried blood. He seemed to wish to apologize for appearing before me in an unsightly manner.

His complexion was quite awful and his legs were a bit unsteady. *Is the sleeping magic affecting him just like Klaus and the other knights?* And then, the realization hit me.

"Did you do that to yourself?"

The demon lord's magic was powerful enough to keep Klaus grounded and force Crow to his knees. The majority of the castle residents were fast asleep, unable to resist...and yet, how had Sir Leonhart shrugged off such an overwhelming force?

He was different from Lutz, who had high resistance to magic attacks, and Kanon, who was an outlier. It would take more than physical prowess to resist this sort of spell. To keep sleep at bay, he would need strong mental fortitude...and a strong stimulus. Like, for example, a pain so intense that he couldn't sleep.

"This is nothing of consequence," he said lightly.

"That can't—" I choked on my words before I could finish.

Ripping off your own fingernail was not an easy thing to do. And yet, Sir Leonhart simply replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "I still have nineteen more."

That's not the point! You've got it all wrong... Was the person I fell in love with always this inscrutable? My mind was in turmoil, but no one was about to wait for me to regain my composure.

Sir Leonhart placed his hand on the sword hanging from his belt. He undid the metal fittings, removed the entire scabbard, and then wrapped a cord around the handle and the scabbard so that the sword would not come unsheathed. To

check that it was secure, he waved the sword lightly.

He blinked slowly and looked straight at me. “Compared to the pain I’d feel from losing you, this is like being stung by a mosquito.”

His sudden declaration made me stop breathing for a moment. Sir Leonhart pointed the tip of his sword at me. His sharp eyes glared at not my heart, but the black cat in my hand. *Did he notice? I haven’t even said anything yet.*

“How sickening,” rang a voice deep in our heads.

“It seems that we agree,” Sir Leonhart replied in an equally fierce tone. He took a step forward and said, “I’m taking her back.”

His movements were keen and nimble—it was incredible that he could move like this while under a sleep debuff. In the blink of an eye, he closed the distance between us and thrust his sword at the black cat. He was only a few centimeters short of reaching, but I parried his stab.

“Urgh,” I uttered. The shock of our weapons colliding sent tingles up my arm.

Sir Leonhart was holding himself back, but a single strike was enough to make me lose feeling in my fingers. It was mystifying that I hadn’t dropped the knife yet. He didn’t stop there though—mercilessly, he continued his attack. This time, I sidestepped his blows instead of blocking them head-on. The demon lord understood that my feeble body, no matter how reinforced it was, would lose in a battle of strength, so it opted to fall back instead.

But Sir Leonhart predicted this and swept at my feet to trip me. My body somehow dodged and fixed its stance upon landing. The demon lord let out a tut.

“Sleep peacefully,” he said in an irritated tone.

Sir Leonhart swayed. Just like Crow, his body pitched forward as if something unseen were pushing down from above. Nonetheless, he did not yield. He took a step and planted his feet firmly into the ground. He opened his mouth wide, bit his left hand’s pointer finger, and vigorously pulled his head back to rip his nail off with a sickening snap.

I was paralyzed, amazed by what I’d just witnessed. Sir Leonhart’s shoulders

heaved with every breath and he spat out the freshly removed fingernail. The white scrap landed with a quiet *tump* in a nook of the corridor.

"Make me."

A dry laugh spilled out of his throat and the corners of his lips curved up into a smile. He must've been in excruciating pain, but his eyes twinkled with belligerence. Blood spilled from the tip of his left hand and dripped to the ground.

I went pale at the sight. I wanted to look away from his grievous wounds, but I knew I had to watch. *He's injuring himself for my sake. The pain and suffering he's undergoing... It's all my fault. How can I avert my eyes?* I bit my lip and for a moment my detached consciousness seemed to return to my body.

Feeling the throbbing clearly from my lip, I tried reclaiming my fingers. Though I still couldn't move them as I pleased, I felt a slight twitch. *I think I can manage a little bit of movement... That's it! The demon lord is using his powers on Sir Leonhart, so his command over me is falling apart. I still don't have enough control to run away...but maybe I can do something to help. I need to concentrate so I don't let any chances slip by.*

My stomach tightened. I braced my feet firmly.

"It seems that it would be best to crush you right here."

The voice in my head descended an octave, sounding full of intimidating bloodlust. I wasn't even the target, but a chill crawled up my spine nonetheless.

Sir Leonhart did not flinch or falter in the slightest. "Go ahead and try," he spat, sending the demon lord a provoking smile.

He gripped the handle of his sword with both hands, placing his bloody left hand on top of his right hand. In a flash, he kicked off the ground and lunged at me. He swung his sword diagonally down, but I deflected it with my knife. My hand went numb and my movements stopped for a moment. He did not wait for me to recover and followed with a horizontal slash. My body twisted, evading his strike.

I retreated momentarily and then moved in close for my own assault. I lunged at his neck with my knife, but he dodged with minimal movement. Making up

for my lack of skill, I repeatedly sliced at him.

Neck, eyes, heart—I aimed to inflict a fatal wound, but all of my attacks met air. Irked, the black cat dug his claws into my arm, and at that moment, Sir Leonhart's body swayed. *The demon lord must've bolstered the spell on him!*

Sir Leonhart's face crumpled in pain and my knife thrust at his heart.

Instantly, I grunted and put all the strength I could muster into defying the demon lord's control. All of my efforts probably only bought a few tenths of a second...but that was all Sir Leonhart needed to slip his sword in front of his chest to fend off the blow.

I could only breathe easy for a moment—my hand immediately attacked once more. The blade grazed his neck, and a tuft of black hair drifted to the ground, leaving behind a red line on his skin. Little by little, my unwilling blows were beginning to land.

I blanched. *Sir Leonhart's body must be under a considerable burden. It won't be good if this fight drags out...but what can I do? I can only influence my body ever so slightly. I can't even let go of the knife. The demon lord is actively manipulating my arms and legs for battle, so my will has little effect there. It took everything I had to stop myself for a fraction of a second.*

Even though I can use my eyes and mouth, I don't think I'm talking myself out of this predicament. Maybe if I inflict pain on myself like Sir Leonhart did, I can regain some control. I bit my lip earlier but barely felt it. What if I try something more intense?

I licked my lips with my tongue. *That's it! If my lips don't hurt enough, then what about biting my tongue?* I cowered just from the idea. *I don't like pain. I'm just a weak little girl. Adversity, pain, fear...I hate all of them. I'm scared of the mere thought of biting myself...but look at Sir Leonhart!*

While I'd been getting cold feet, he was taking more and more injuries. Now, on top of his two missing fingernails, he was covered in cuts. Yet...he continued fighting for me.

Sir Leonhart retreated, shoulders heaving heavily. He noticed my stare and our eyes met. Then, he smiled gently, as though he'd forgotten that he was in

the midst of battle. There was not a trace of pain or suffering in his assuring gaze...only tender care for my well-being.

I made up my mind—I didn't have the resolve to hurt myself. It was quite the opposite. How could I harm myself when Sir Leonhart was desperately trying to protect me? The negative thoughts evaporated and my mind cleared.

Sleep magic and magic to manipulate a body might not be dispelled the same way. I'd be a fool to go through such pain for nothing. Think more constructively. I exhaled, working myself up.

What if I stop my hand for a split second like I did earlier? If I get the timing right, maybe Sir Leonhart can knock the knife out of my hand. Or, I could stop my feet and throw off my attack... But I might hinder him instead. My athletic abilities are a fatal flaw; it'd be hard for me to match his movements.

The fight continued while I tried to cook up a plan. My body leaped back to dodge Sir Leonhart's downward slash and the moment it did, an idea flashed into my mind.

Now! I forced my will into my leg which had gracefully jumped away. I threw off my balance—my body swayed to the side. *I just have to take advantage of the fact that my reflexes suck. Leave it to me! I'm great at falling!*

"Whoa!"

Unfortunately, ruining my form was not enough to bring me down. The black cat nearly slipped out of my hold, but he hooked his front claws onto me and climbed to my shoulder. *If that wasn't enough...then one more time!*

Suddenly, I heard the shrill sound of shearing wind.

"Urgh." A pained cry echoed through my head.

Sir Leonhart slipped the tip of his sword under the cat's collar and yanked him off my shoulder, raising him high in the air.

"Lady Fuzuki!" he called in a sharp tone.

"Hweh?!" she cried out in confusion.

"Catch!"

The black cat went sailing through the air.

“Huuuh?!”

Kanon, who had been hiding at the edge of the corridor to avoid getting mixed up in the action, rushed forward in a panic. She stuck out her palms face up, trying to eyeball where the black cat would fall. Her stride was unsteady, and if this had been a manga, her eyes would've been spinning in circles.

Oh hey, Kanon is about as coordinated as I am. I watched in suspense as she practically dove for the cat.

"Oomph! Ack?!"

However, the nimble creature did not placidly settle in her arms. Instead, he landed on her face then kicked off her forehead and tried to escape.

"Not so fast!" Lutz yelled stridently. He lunged with both hands, grabbed the black cat's hindlegs, and enveloped them in ice. Then, he quickly foisted the unbalanced cat onto Kanon. She squeezed the black furball tightly, determined not to let him escape this time.

He let out a high-pitched mewl. *"Stop! Let me go!"*

The voice that echoed in our minds was thick with impatience. It seemed that Kanon's abilities were affecting him, just as we'd hoped.

"I won't let go!"

The black cat wriggled frantically in her arms, trying to slip out of her hold, but she hugged him close. Lutz used his magic to support her endeavors, encasing the cat's forelimbs in ice as well and effectively sealing his movements.

"Tsk!" the voice screamed in distress.

The black cat glowered in my direction. I'd been standing straight as a board, but now my legs began to move against my will once more, though my movements were remarkably slower than before. Naturally, before I could even reach my controller in Kanon's arms, I was captured.

Sir Leonhart forced the knife in my hand onto the floor, stepped on it with the sole of his shoe, and restrained both of my hands with one of his own.

"Curses... My strength is fading!"

The air around the black cat shone. Perhaps it was a visual effect of Kanon's

power, or maybe they were fragments of the demon lord's soul. Regardless of what it was, his power was undeniably dwindling. The fact that I was gradually regaining control of my body was additional proof of that.

"Let go!" Legs sealed, the cat resorted to biting Kanon's arm through her clothes.

"Ow!" Kanon's face scrunched up in pain and a small red circle slowly bloomed across her shirt. The wound seemed painful, and I couldn't bear to look.

"Kano—"

"I won't...let go!" she bravely yelled over me. Though her eyes were moist with tears, she refused to release the cat. She leaned forward, fencing him in with her whole body. "Lady Mary risked her life to save me! This time, it's my turn to do the same for her!"

Touched by her frantic cry, I choked up a little. *I didn't know that's how she felt.* Kanon was battered and afraid, but she held her ground. Her courage almost made tears well up in my eyes.

Greatly weakened, the black cat trained its gray eyes on me and scowled. *"Every last one of you is so persistent... How much is this woman even worth?"*

There was more than hatred in his piercing gaze—contained within was a complex mixture of all sorts of emotions. I could only wordlessly stare back. Sir Leonhart pulled me close by the shoulders. When I looked up, his almond eyes, the color of night, were filled with rage.

"She's more important to me than the entire world," he declared.

Kanon was flustered for a moment but then she quickly chimed in. "M-Me too!"

Lutz looked abashed as he said in a small voice, "The same goes for us."

"Why are *you* so obsessed with the princess?" Sir Leonhart asked the demon lord.

The black cat's ears twitched.

"Yeah. You even ignored me, a sorcerer," Lutz said with a bitter expression.

I thought it was risky for Lutz to approach the demon lord...but maybe he had a trap set up in another room. I found it odd that Teo wasn't close by... Maybe Teo, Miss Irene, and Michael were all getting ready elsewhere.

"I don't want to be sealed while I'm feeding on bait," the black cat weakly spat out.

Then what is *his plan? I was convinced he wanted to obtain a sorcerer's body as a new vessel. But if that's not his goal, then what is he trying to achieve? The only areas in this section of the castle are the sorcerers' lodgings, research facilities, and their library... There's also the greenhouse and the room containing Kanon's summoning circle.*

"Guh... Gaaah!"

Hearing the cat's pained scream pulled me out of my thoughts. This was not the time to get lost in speculation. Though his breathing was becoming more and more feeble, he glared at me with a sharp gleam in his eyes.

What exactly did he hate so much? Was it me? Or was he focused on something beyond me? Whatever it was, his gaze was intense and scorching.

"So this is where I disappear?" he lamented. *"Such a disgraceful way to go... Is this my end?"*

The little cat shed no tears, but his voice was so full of deep-seated resentment that it sounded as if he were crying bitterly. It was hard to stomach, watching him writhe in pain. Though I knew it was not Nero who was suffering, I couldn't stand it.

Before I knew it, my mouth was moving on its own. "You can rest now."

The black cat peered at me as if I were some kind of enigmatic creature. But the edge quickly returned to his round eyes.

"I can't stand watching you fall apart."

"Silence! You're just an ignorant little girl. Don't speak as if you understand me!" he snarled, hissing at me threateningly.

It felt as though I'd incurred the wrath of a dragon, and yet...for some reason, I did not feel afraid of him. Was it because his powers had been drained? Or

was it because he resembled an angry child putting up a front? My vision did not stray from the weakening black cat.

Gradually, the bite behind his angry roar abated. *“Stop it! Don’t look at me like that! Don’t look at me!”* the black cat screamed remarkably loudly.

The sparkling lights surrounding Nero’s body burst and an inky haze rose up in its place. A dark miasma floated above Kanon’s head and rapidly shrunk. However, before it completely disappeared, it mustered all its strength and dove toward me.

“Princess!”

Sir Leonhart moved in front of me and swung his sword, cutting the haze right down the center. The particles dispersed into tiny shimmering lights that melted into the air. When I saw the darkness completely disappear, it felt like the taut strings holding me up had been cut—I lost all the strength in my body.

“Princess! Lady Rosemary!”

The last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was Sir Leonhart’s panicked voice.

The Reincarnated Princess Dreams a Story

When I came to, I was standing in a dim place.

Huh? What happened to me? My memories were fuzzy and I couldn't remember a thing.

My mind and legs felt shaky. I peered at my surroundings; cloudy darkness stretched out all around me. I was in the middle of what seemed like an infinite space. *Where is this?* Though I was perplexed, I didn't find the situation terrifying or odd.

I decided that moving around would be better than standing in place, so I began to walk. My bare feet slapped lightly against the ground as I proceeded forward... Well, I had no landmarks to guide me or a destination in mind, so I had no way to ascertain whether I was truly heading forward.

No matter how far I traveled, the murky scenery around me remained the same. *Is it possible I'm just going around in circles?* Right as I started feeling anxious, I heard a small noise.

I strained my ears and headed toward it. I was unsure how far away it was or what direction I was going, but I sensed that I was getting closer. After all, this place was so peaceful—I couldn't hear even bugs chirping or leaves rustling, so it was easy to pick up the quietest sounds.

The noise was difficult to describe. It sounded like the glooping of a viscous liquid being spilled—something akin to a thick quagmire that you couldn't pull your feet out of. Many people might have found this noise unpleasant, so it was odd that I was actively seeking it out instead of shirking away.

I didn't know how long my trek lasted, but I eventually saw something in the distance. Even after I drew close to it, I still could not determine what that something was. The blackish lump looked like a shoe that'd been tossed in the corner of the street...except it squirmed, so it couldn't have been abandoned footwear.

Puzzled, I moved closer, examining the lump so I could finally perceive its

form. The moment I did, I forgot to breathe. I was too surprised to even scream.

It looked like a clump of mud. It was not pure-black, but a muddy dark brown, like the hue someone might create by mixing all the colors of a paint set. Its outline was indistinct, constantly twisting and turning. Each time it undulated, a piece of it broke off and fell away. It didn't have any limbs, nor any visible organs like a mouth, nose, or ears.

But I still judged it to be a living creature, and not just because it was moving. Deep inside two hollow cavities, there were appendages that shone like eyes. A chill ran down my spine.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What the hell is this?! What the fuck?! I froze in place while I faced off against the inexplicable creature. I screamed internally, my head in turmoil, but no one responded.

I kept my eyes fixed on the thing as I slowly inched back. However, I didn't turn tail and flee because I'd suddenly recalled a TV program I'd seen in my past life about how to deal with a wild bear encounter—they'd advised against frantic movements. Though, this thing was certainly no bear...nor did it resemble one in any way, shape, or form.

But no matter how much time passed, it did not make any attempt to attack me. It merely wriggled in place.

It's not reacting at all. Maybe it hasn't even noticed me? Or maybe it's harmless? I gingerly stepped toward it for observational purposes. Its jiggly silhouette reminded me of something. *I feel like I've seen it before...or it looks like something...kinda sorta?*

"Oh!"

I tapped my hand against my palm when it came to me. *It's a liquid me**l slime! Or perhaps a bubble **ime! Wow, it's a live-action version.* I'd come up with the comparison myself, but I suddenly felt a bit perturbed. *If someone made a live-action version of that adorable character and it turned into this weird creature, I'd be grossed out.* Mentally, I prostrated myself before a certain famous video game company.

Steeling myself, I edged closer to the thing and boldly said, "Hey."

It made no response and merely continued wobbling. I timidly held my hand over it and tried saying random things such as “metalie” or “bubblie,” but it did nothing. Puzzled, I turned toward where it looked like the creature was staring. When I did, a rectangular screen appeared in the dim space.

It looked like I was watching an old movie projector. The colors were faded, and I heard an occasional indistinct noise here and there, but the images were too blurry to make out. The creature next to me appeared to be watching this old movie-like projection. Its eyes followed the moving images on the screen, shaking from time to time... At least, that was what it looked like to me.

After some hesitation, I sat down next to the creature and we started watching together. I heard a faint hum in the background as the movie played.

The scene began with verdant, thick greens being pushed to the side as we entered a forest. Unlike the average movie, this was not shot from a third-person point of view—we were borrowing someone’s eyes for a first-person point of view.

Someone spoke in a language I’d never heard before, but somehow, I vaguely understood. *“Big brother,”* someone said. The perspective turned around. The source of the voice was a young boy around ten years old holding a wooden basket. He appeared uneasy. It was daytime, but the dense forest was dark, so perhaps he was scared of wandering around.

The person whose perspective we were following said something that meant, *“Can’t be helped,”* and offered a hand to the boy. He grasped it, face softening with relief. Based on the angle we were viewing from, “our” height was around the same as the other boy’s.

Perhaps they’re brothers only a year apart?



According to the movie, the two boys had gone to the forest on the outskirts of town to gather medicinal herbs for their mother. Youths were forbidden from entering this forest—known as the Waylaid Woods—because once every few years a child would vanish, spirited away into the dark trees and never to be seen again.

The younger brother worried that they might anger the gods, but the older brother assured him that gods did not exist. *"Disappearances are just the doings of beasts,"* the older brother insisted in a mature tone. He urged for them to quickly gather the necessary herbs before they encountered any wild animals. The two began to search, but they couldn't find any herbs near the entrance of the forest.

Slowly, they ventured deeper.

Time passed quickly as they desperately foraged. Before they knew it, the sun began to set. Orange rays shone into the dim forest, and the shadows grew longer and longer. Dusk—the hour of disasters—approached.

The older brother decided that it would be too dangerous to stay any longer, so he called out for his little brother. The pair reconvened and oriented themselves to return home where their mother waited.

But then, something strange happened.

Suddenly, the ground around the younger brother began to shine. Lights weaved around the tree roots, drawing a pattern on the damp soil. It was composed of complex shapes and letters—to my (Rosemary's) eyes, it looked like a magic circle.

The younger brother froze in confusion. The older one yelled and extended his arm, but before he could pull his brother out of the circle, the light intensified and enveloped the younger boy. Desperate to grab his younger brother's hand, the older brother was subsequently engulfed in the torrent of light. He lost consciousness.

The movie went black and silent for a while.

When the older brother opened his eyes, they were no longer inside the forest but on top of a stone floor surrounded by white walls and pillars. The

arched ceiling was decorated with metal light fixtures hanging at regular increments, and the windows were fitted with wooden latticework that cast beautiful shadows across the space.

The western-style building was unlike anything the brothers had ever seen before. And, drawn on top of the white floor where the two bewildered boys sat, there was a magic circle—the exact same one from the forest.

What came next were hard, thudding footsteps accompanied by the voice of an adult man. He looked to be a high-strung man in the prime of his life, and his garb was simply structured—a cloth that had holes for his arms and head, cinched with a piece of fabric at the waist.

That looks like something out of ancient Rome... What's it called again? A toon...? Erm, a tunic? Those buildings resemble the ones in my current world, but the clothes are different. I guess this must be a different country or time period.

Well, let's put that aside. Not to say that the time and place aren't important, but something else is more pressing: those two boys were summoned against their will and it looks like something critical is going to happen in their future.

The man's language sounded different from the boys', but I could still understand him. *Is it because I'm dreaming? Hey, maybe I have an unknown, game-breaking ability that people who reincarnate usually get!*

"Something extra came along," said the man. He thought for a bit and then muttered, *"I can think of several uses."*

Apparently, their target had been only the younger brother. After rudely inspecting the frightened boy, a content smile spread across the man's face. *"What a magnificent amount of magical power."* However, when he ran his gaze across the older brother, his brows furrowed.

According to the man, the older brother barely had any magic. Still, since he was a human from another world, he should've had a special ability. Just like Kanon, the two boys also possessed unique gifts. However, I doubted that was a blessing for them. The man wasn't looking at the young boys as if they were human. I had a bad feeling...and unfortunately, my premonition was on the nose.

The country the two boys had been summoned to was in the midst of war. They were dragged in without having any say and used as tools to bolster the army. They were hostages for each other and they had no way to return home—all they could do was obey and throw themselves into battle.

The younger brother could use more than powerful magic; he also had the mysterious ability to strengthen animals. The warhorses he poured his energy into were faster and had more stamina than regular ones.

On the other hand, the older brother's talents remained unknown. Unlike his sibling, he was not placed on the front lines but locked up inside. However, his days were far from peaceful. In the name of discovering his ability, they treated him like a lab rat—they experimented on him in appalling ways such as forcing him to use magic until exhaustion or purposefully injuring him.

I wanted to avert my eyes from the terrible acts he had to endure. Just watching wore out my heart. But the older brother did not try to escape. He was tenacious and pushed on, dreaming of the day he would return to his mother together with his younger brother.

But the world was... No, *humans* were cruel to him. One day, the older brother was taken to a different place than the usual research facility. They led him to a large, dim room built of sturdy stone. He assumed that they were going to make him use magic until he ran out of vitality again. However, on this day, they brought someone in front of him.

It was another boy who he'd never seen before. This new face was pale, emaciated, and covered in wounds. The weak boy trembled in fear, but his sunken eyes twinkled with hope. He spoke to the high-strung man standing next to the older brother.

"If I kill him...will you really return me to my original world?" the boy asked with a serious expression.

The older man smiled and nodded magnanimously. He remained silent, but that abhorrent grin wordlessly implied, *"If you wish to survive, then show your power. Perhaps you will finally awaken if your life is on the verge of death."*

Not knowing what else to do, the older brother ran around the room, fleeing from the other young boy. He must've hated the idea of hurting someone else,

but his opponent did not care and rushed at him, sword in hand and firing off magic. Over time, the older brother's body gradually became covered in wounds.

Steeling himself for death, the older brother launched his own counterattack, which unfortunately was fatal for his opponent.

At the end of their duel, the older brother fell to his knees, about to keel over. He was injured all over, but the other boy lay facedown, covered in even deeper wounds. The light faded from the weak boy's sunken eyes; their color became dull. The older brother knew that his opponent had already passed away.

Then, there was a break in the movie. *Did he faint?* I wondered. When the older brother awoke, he was still on the floor, but this time, the view seemed somehow...different. Right next to him was the corpse of a young boy. The older brother dubiously craned his neck.

The neglected body on the ground had a different appearance from the boy we'd slain. The corpse's clothes, build, and hair color were all different—someone else had fallen on the floor.

As I watched this play out on the screen, I suddenly realized that I had seen the prone person before. A small scream escaped my lips.

The corpse looked identical to someone the older brother hadn't seen since he'd been summoned to this world: it was his counterpart, his younger brother.

However, the older brother was shaken for a different reason than I was. *"Why am I over there?"* he asked nonsensically. His voice shook in confusion. *"My body... Huh? This isn't my body. I'm right over there."*

His fragmented words were the clue I needed to finally understand what had happened. *That's not the younger brother's body on the floor... It's the body of the older brother...the one whose eyes I've been watching through. However, the older brother looks exactly the same as the younger, so the brothers aren't one year apart, but twins. Furthermore, it seems that the older brother's consciousness has entered someone else's body.*

The new body was brimming with an abnormal amount of magic, which agitated and confused the older brother. In contrast to his panic, the high-

strung man was overjoyed. The result of his repulsive experiment made him ecstatic, and he began raving nonsensically.

“He can take over other people’s bodies and amplify their magic... The older twin’s special ability will be our trump card to winning this war. This is a tremendous power—an extremely rare one.”

The man suddenly thought of an idea and he hurried out of the room, leaving the older brother behind. The boy remained on the floor, too shocked to stand. It was like he was having a terrible nightmare, one that he couldn’t wake up from...and one that would only get worse.

I heard footsteps sprinting to the room and then the door was wildly flung open. The younger twin, who the older one hadn’t been allowed to meet for so long, hurtled into the room. Following behind him was the same man.

The younger twin instantly rushed over to his older twin’s lifeless body. He shook the empty husk to no avail and despair colored his face. *“Brother. Brother!”* he cried, tears streaming down his face.

The bewildered older brother uttered his twin’s name but trembled when his brother regarded him with eyes that gleamed with intense hatred.

At that moment, the man’s lips curled up into an amused smile. He quickly wiped the smirk off his face and pointed at the older brother, now in a new body.

“He’s the one who killed your brother,” spat the man.

I was speechless. *How can a human be so wicked?*

“I’ll kill you!” the younger twin screamed.

At that point, no matter what the older twin said, nothing would reach his younger brother’s ears. After all, how could he believe a bloodstained stranger who stood before the fresh corpse of his brother claiming, *“I didn’t kill him”* or *“I’m your brother”*?

The younger brother attacked, murder in his eyes. The older brother desperately tried to flee. It was kill or be killed, but both options led to despair. In spite of his efforts, the older brother was soon cornered by the younger

brother's powerful magic. He'd avoided fatal injuries up to this point, but he was still covered in grave wounds, and now, there was nowhere for him to run.

Wanting to speak properly with his twin, the older brother used a weak spell. He simply wanted to use the least amount of power to create a window of opportunity to do something. But his amplified powers easily reaped his younger brother's life. It ended quickly, as if he'd merely broken a doll. His twin crumbled to the ground.

Two bodies now lay on the cold stone floor. Then, the older brother blacked out once more, and the screen went black. After a moment, his eyes opened to the man's raucous laughter.

Again, the view had changed. It appeared for a moment like the older brother had returned to his old body...but it was different. The older twin's corpse, fallen in the corner... The remains of the nameless boy he'd possessed earlier... Both told a gruesome tale

The older twin's consciousness had once again migrated...to the body of his younger brother.

The boy screamed. He let fury take control and wrought only waste to everything in his line of sight. The delighted man who'd uttered, *"I've obtained a splendid monster,"* was the first to go. The older brother chopped him up and burned him to a crisp, incinerating him so that not even ashes remained.

The next victims were the residents of the mansion, then all who lived within the man's territory, and all the citizens of that country soon followed. The boy devoured everything around him, but his wrath did not subside. As if answering to his rage, animals transformed into magical beasts and slaughtered his enemies.

His rampage continued with no end in sight. He killed the humans who banded together to defeat their new menace, which only bred more hate and perpetuated the cycle of violence. Even when his body became worn out and fell apart, the boy would always wake up in a new one and the fighting would continue.

It was the same when he was sealed away. Eventually, the boy would reawaken and the killing would begin anew. It was an irredeemable scene of

carnage, as though he were eternally roaming the depths of hell.

I couldn't speak. This wasn't a history that could be expressed with words like "how pitiful" or "that's terrible." Any consolation for the despair the boy had faced would become a cheap cliché.

He'd been torn away from his world and his mother. His dignity had been snatched away. He'd lost his brother, the only person in the world who'd supported him. The true form of the one we called "demon lord" was the grief of a young boy who'd been deprived of everything. Someone like me could offer no words to counter the sorrow.

I couldn't brush off the fact that innocent people had died...but this was not a simple situation. There was no clear line that separated the perpetrators from the victims in this story. If all the humans in this world viewed the demon lord as evil, then to the demon lord, this very world itself was evil.

The screen suddenly went white, and I heard a murmur. A quiet voice repeatedly called out to his mother and brother, crying that he wanted to go home.

That's it. The demon lord didn't want a sorcerer's body...he wanted the magic circle. He must've wished to return to his world. But that circle probably isn't connected to his homeland. And even if he did manage to get back somehow, there wouldn't be anyone still alive who might know him... Even so, he wished to go home. He yearned for his homeland just as much as he despised this world.

"...my."

The voice did not come from the projection. The discordant voice, filled with white noise, came from the demon lord.

I turned my attention to him. The liquid me**l slime...er, the mass that was apparently the demon lord, quivered. I heard a faint scraping noise, and after a moment, the white screen switched to something else.

It no longer displayed fragmented, faded moments of the past, but something much more vivid. Projected was a spacious room and a high ceiling. I recognized the cushions piled up against a rattan frame.

The blank screen went white, signifying a light sleep, and then when he

cracked his eyes open, a white hand reached in. The slender fingers and fair skin likely belonged to a girl. Her hand appeared large, but the contrast between the size of the room and the crib made it apparent that it was not the hand that was large, but the viewer's body that was small.

The gentle palm softly patted his head. He looked up and the hand's owner filled his vision.

"Huh?" I uttered foolishly.

A young girl was on the screen. She had soft, wavy platinum-blond hair and alabaster skin. Her light pink lips were smiling and her blue eyes were brimming with affection. I knew her... No, that was an understatement. I could meet her this instant if I had a mirror.

"That's...me?" I questioned.

My face was displayed on the screen. *I don't remember making a slovenly face like that...though I can imagine it happening. I probably shower Nero with love the same way grandparents dote on their first grandchild.*

"...my," the cacophonous voice mumbled.

"Huh?" Eyes still glued to the screen, I listened carefully to the husky voice.

"Mom...my," the demon lord called out to the screen where I was displayed.

Did he just call me mommy? My mind went blank.

"Mo...m."

The muddy lump extended part of his body, likely a hand trying to touch the screen. Though he was slowly degrading as parts of him dripped away, he desperately reached out like a lost child searching for his mother.

My body moved impulsively before I could think. I lifted the pile of slime and hugged it. It became disfigured, melting in my arms, but though it steadily shrunk, it stayed in my embrace. I gently rubbed my cheek against it.

Is this pity? Or guilt? I don't know, but I can't help myself. I mean, what is he feeling when he calls for me like this? We only spent a short while together, and I don't resemble his mother in appearance or age...but he was so starved for love that he saw her in me. How could I treat him coldly?

“Mommy. Mommy. It hurts. It’s painful... Mommy,” he repeated over and over, stretching out for me. The whimpering that he had kept bottled up for centuries spilled out. I slowly caressed his mushy head.

“Yes. You did a wonderful job enduring.” I smiled at his wide-open eye hollows. “Pain, pain, fly away.”

I kissed him above his eyes where I thought his forehead was. A murky liquid began oozing out of the demon lord’s eye sockets.

“Mom...my. Mommy. Waaah! Ohhh!” he cried. With each bellow, his body rippled.

“It’s time for the pain and hurt to end.” I rocked him back and forth like a baby and sang him a poor rendition of a lullaby.

My memories were too hazy, so the lyrics were nonsense and I wasn’t in tune either. But despite my poor singing, his wailing slowly calmed. When his crying ceased completely, his eyes squinted sleepily. But...he continued to fall apart; black mud dribbled off him with no sign of stopping. *At this rate, isn’t he going to disappear?* I fretted.

The viscous goo that had filled my arms moments ago was already small enough to fit in both hands. I carefully scooped up the rest of him, trying not to spill anymore, but he nonetheless trickled through the gaps of my fingers.

No! He’s going to melt completely. Maybe I can gather the bits that fell on the ground and put him back together. While I earnestly contemplated such a foolish endeavor, the hollow eyelike cavities broke off from the muddy mass.

Huh? H-His eyes! His eeeyes! I gawked at the grotesque sight in shock. The two lumps that’d detached from the main body floated in the air. They emitted a faint light and languidly flew around me like fireflies.

“Mommy.”

“Mommy.”

This time, it wasn’t the discordant white noise, but the voices of two young boys. They hadn’t been two eyes, but two individual...somethings. They peacefully orbited around me and a picture flashed through my mind.

“Are you two possibly—?” I stopped myself from finishing. Instead, I beckoned them to me with my hands stretched out. The two lights obediently landed on my palms and I gently pressed my cheek against them. “If you can choose where you’re reborn, then come to where I am. I’ll love you until you’re sick and tired of me.”

The two lights seemed to flicker happily and then melded into the air.



Her Majesty, The Queen Worries

I lifted the wet cloth from my daughter's forehead and soaked it in the pail on top of the table. *The water's become lukewarm...*

"Replace it." I handed the pail to a nearby maid.

"Understood," she replied. She hesitated for a moment. I could tell she had something she wished to say, so with my gaze, I pressed her to go on. "Your Majesty, The Queen, with all due respect...please allow me to care for Her Highness so you may rest."

"It's not yet time for bed."

Outside the window, the sun sat high in the sky. It wasn't even time for afternoon tea.

When I pointed that out, the maid faltered. "You look unwell," she said, tone distraught

I didn't need to hear that from anyone else to understand. Three days had already passed since my daughter had faced terrible adversity. It was only natural that I could not sleep. But, I had no intention of resting. I was too worried about my daughter's poor condition to do anything else, let alone sleep comfortably in peace.

"I'm still fine," I replied.

Though my maid was unconvinced, she left the room without another word. I returned to my daughter's side and sat down. Brushing aside the hair on her cheek, I gazed at her sleeping visage. There was no sign of life on her pale face... It made me anxious to see her motionless as a doll.

If she remains like this, she will slip through my hands and go somewhere far away. It felt like someone was physically squeezing my heart. *I've left her to her own devices for fourteen years; what am I saying now? I gave birth to her and left her in the hands of my servants. I'm an irresponsible parent—I have no right to restrict her actions now.*

My daughter, Rosemary, had always been a clever girl, ever since she was young. She was extremely knowledgeable and resourceful for a sheltered girl who'd hardly ever left the castle. When she encountered an issue, she'd think about it on her own until she reached the very best conclusion. On top of that, she was decisive and proactive—she could overcome any obstacle with her own strength.

Before I'd realized it, my little girl had matured into an independent young woman who no longer needed her parents.

Her growth filled me with pride, but at the same time...it was concerning. It was as if Rosemary felt that she had to resolve everything alone. She would often act rashly without hesitation, and she'd already been in danger multiple times, in places I wasn't watching. When I heard her life was at risk, my heart had nearly stopped.

Now was no different. While most castle residents had been fast asleep, myself included, my daughter had faced off against and defeated the demon lord. She must've been terrified to fight the one called the "calamity of the world" in that tiny body of hers. And she must've gone through much hardship too.

She was not even an adult yet—she was at an age where she should still be loved and protected. *It's all my fault.* She went through untold suffering because I'd neglected my duties as her mother. I could regret every day for the rest of my life and it wouldn't be enough.

"Rose..."

She did not respond. Her quiet breathing sounded like it'd disappear at any moment; listening to it made my regrets pile up even higher.

I should've come to see her earlier. I felt like she'd rejected me; I'd feared that she hated me. I shouldn't have run away but chased after her instead. I should've chatted with her more. I should've conveyed my love to her properly.

"Rose." I called her name like a prayer.

I'm not the only one; many people are worried about you. Though His Majesty, The King and His Highness, The Crown Prince are both working assiduously from

dawn ’til dusk, they hold you in their hearts all the while. You are beloved to the servants as well—all of them are in low spirits.

The man you love is agonizing as well.

“I’m begging you. Please come back to us.”

I’ll call out to you as many times as it takes. I’ll say your name enough times to make up for these past fourteen years.

“Everyone is waiting for you.”

I stayed there, praying for who knows how long. When it was time for the maid to return, I was about to stand up, but then...

“Ow...”

A small groan. I hadn’t misheard—it was my beloved daughter’s voice.

I watched my daughter, who’d been lying on death’s doorstep, open her eyes.

For the first time in my life, I thanked God.