
THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING
STORY ROUTES
Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko
8


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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes: Volume 8 [Complete]

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Prologue

The Kingdom of Nevel is the heart of the continent as well as the heart of the economic sphere. Of its proud 1,200 years of existence, historians agree that the nation's major turning point occurred during King Randolf's reign. King Randolf employed talented people, regardless of status and gender, and Nevel advanced in leaps and bounds under his policies.

He discovered numerous geniuses whose names are still found in history books everywhere. Among them, special attention should be given to King Randolf's daughter, the first woman in Nevel to ever receive the title of Duke—Rosemary.

Anecdotes of her countless feats are passed down not only in the Kingdom of Nevel, but in every corner of the globe, and her accomplishments in the medical field are especially notable. If not for her, posterity would not remember Nevel as a medical powerhouse.

First, Rosemary was the one who laid the foundations for the hospitals we use every day. In the past, doctors worked in individual bubbles and rarely collaborated. If not for her groundbreaking proposal of gathering doctors in a single facility to cooperate and coordinate treatment, modern medicine as we know it would not exist.

Furthermore, Rosemary was not satisfied with only reforming her era. Recognizing the need for cultivating a future generation of doctors, she established the very first hospital to serve a second function as a learning institute for new students and research. The school was an extraordinary success, and its doors were open to all regardless of nationality, gender, or wealth. This venture contributed significantly to the advancement of medicine and was an incredibly progressive institute for its time that bore fruit; many young and aspiring doctors from all over the world gathered there.

That historical structure still stands unchanged at the center of the city two hundred years after its founding. Many famous figures who have left their mark on the history of medicine have come from there—the St. Rosemary Hospital, the place where it all began.

—Excerpt from *The History of the Kingdom of Nevel: Medicine*

The Reincarnated Princess Awakens

Sensing the light shining through my eyelids, my drifting consciousness gradually emerged from its slumber. I slowly opened my eyes; the world around me was blurry. I blinked several times, focusing my vision.

I was lying in my bed. The light outside was bright, indicating that it was currently daytime. I felt like I had just woken from a long, long dream.

I tried to sit up, but a pained groan came out instead. *What the heck? My body aches all over. I hurt so much everywhere...and I can't even think of a specific body part to name! Huh?! Seriously, what the hell happened? It huuurts. This is a thousand times worse than the pain I felt the day after I first tried snowboarding... Wait, is this muscle pain?*

"Owww..." I whimpered, eyes teary.

Someone nearby inhaled sharply. I turned toward the sound to see a woman standing next to the bed—she'd knocked over a chair in her haste to stand up.

"Rose! You're awake?!" My mother loomed over me, scrutinizing me closely.

Slow to react, I could only lay there with my eyes wide open.

"Thank the heavens... Oh, I must call the court physician! I need medicine...and also a new bucket..." Her rigid expression softened and she sprang to action, rushing to summon a maid and prepare various other things. When she returned, she poured me a glass of water and turned to face me. "You must be parched. Can you sit up? Let me help you."

I nodded and put my weight on her, using her hand to help me sit up. The once-simple task of leaning against a cushion exhausted me terribly. I tried to take the cup from her grasp, but she judged that it was too precarious and instead held it up for me to drink from.

I could feel the distinct sensation of water trickling through my mouth and down my throat. After rehydrating myself, a soft sigh escaped from my lips.

"Would you like more?" asked my mother.

I shook my head.

“Is there anything you would like to eat?”

I thought for a moment and then shook my head again.

Her eyebrows drooped. “Please eat something small, even if you must force yourself. You haven’t eaten anything in three whole days.”

My eyes went round with surprise. “Three days?!” *I’ve been sleeping for three days?*

She nodded, her expression bitter, and sighed deeply. “Do you know how worried I was? Please stop shortening my life span.”

Upon closer examination, her complexion *was* quite pale. Judging from the faint circles under her eyes, I could tell that she hadn’t been sleeping well.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered in a small voice.

My mother’s expression softened. “I’ll have fruit prepared for you, so please eat after the court physician examines you. And remember to take your medicine after you have some food in you.” Just as she finished speaking, someone knocked on the door. “Seems like they’re here, right on time.”

She bade our guests enter and the door swung open. However, standing there was not a doctor nor a maid, but two nearly identical handsome men with flawless platinum-blond hair and pale-blue eyes.

“Pardon the intrusion,” my father said, impassive as always. Next to him was my older brother, Christoph, who was practically boring a hole in me with his gaze.

My mother grimaced and briskly walked over to the entrance, her heels clacking crisply against the floor. “If you understand that you’re intruding, then please come back later,” she admonished in a high-handed tone and then shut the door on them without hesitation. “Hmph.” She sniffed and turned her attention back to me.

I flinched reflexively, shoulders quivering.

She shot a beautiful, sweet smile at me. “That was not the court physician, nor was it medicine.”

Y-Yeah. I noticed. That was indeed your husband and stepson... Though I managed to quip internally, her intensity was too powerful for me to vocalize my thoughts.

"They may be family, but I can't believe they tried to enter a lady's room, and one that wasn't properly dressed!" She sighed. "Those two have not a thoughtful or considerate bone in their body."

Yeah, tell me about it. Father's dictionary could be updated a million times and "thoughtful" or "considerate" would never get an entry.

Complaints streamed out of my mother's mouth, but then, we heard another knock. She stared at the door, wrinkles creasing her brow. This time she didn't bother verbally answering and merely strode over. She placed her hand on the knob, slowly cracking open the door to reveal my crestfallen brother. In his hands was what looked like a medicinal packet and a tray of sliced fruit. Apparently, he'd pressured a maid into letting him bring the items.

My mother and Chris stood in silence for what felt like minutes. Eventually, she let out a sigh and moved aside.

His face instantly shot up. "May I enter?"

"What else can I do? You brought the medicine that I requested."

Though she appeared disgruntled, she allowed him inside. She tried to close the door once more, but this time, a different pair of figures appeared: the court physician, Dr. Telemann, and standing behind him...my father.

"Your Majesty," she greeted him stiffly.

"I'm escorting our physician, so I have the right to enter as well, correct?"

That's not something you should say with a straight face!

She glowered at him as he walked past her with a brazen expression. I felt bad—Dr. Telemann was stuck between them—but he merely wore a faint smile. *I'd expect nothing less; the wisdom of his age shows. I'm amazed that he's unfazed after seeing father and mother like this.*

"Rose." Chris rushed to my side and set down the tray in a rough fashion, which was rather unlike his usual poised self. He leaned forward, peering at me

closely. “How do you feel? Are you hurting anywhere?”

He looked wearier and more pained than me. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his complexion was far worse than my mother’s. Between the two of us, he looked far more like a sick patient.

I felt sore all over, but that was about it. Though I tried to assure him that I was fine, the anxiety didn’t clear from his face.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” I murmured.

“Don’t be. I’m just grateful that you’re safe...” He squeezed the words out, choking up. A smile spread across his face, though it was a pained one that told a tale of failure. He looked down, hiding his expression, and wrapped his hands around mine. His skin was cold; his fingers trembled slightly.

How much distress have I afflicted upon him? I’ve collapsed and become bedridden numerous times now. What goes through my brother’s head every time I’m exposed to danger? Due to his position, Chris was not permitted to reveal his emotions. Though he wore the mask of a levelheaded crown prince, I knew more than anyone that beneath all that, he was actually a kind worrywart.

“Chris... I’m sorry.” *I’m sorry for making you worry all the time. I’m sorry for putting you through so much suffering.* I placed my other hand on top of his, trying to convey my feelings to him.

His face crumpled and, without another word, he embraced me, pressing my forehead against his shoulder. He held me close as if to confirm that I was truly alive. I quietly returned his hug, gently rubbing his back.

After a while, Chris raised his face, averting his eyes. “I’m sorry you had to see me like this,” he muttered, embarrassed. I just shook my head, pretending not to notice the slight tinge of red around his eyes.

Once we separated, Dr. Telemann, who’d been waiting patiently, came over to examine me. My father and brother showed no intention of stepping outside, so my mother temporarily drove them out of my room.

Thank you, mother. They’re family, but I still don’t feel comfortable with men present during a health examination.

After my checkup was complete, they immediately reentered and listened to the results with my mother. *This should be normal for a family...but for some reason, it feels very surreal.*

According to Dr. Telemann, there were no abnormalities in regards to my condition and I would recover after some quality rest. I asked him if I could also go on walks or do some light exercise for rehabilitation, but he told me to stay in bed for a while—I would need nourishing meals and plenty of sleep before I could think about exercising.

I can't leave bed for a whole week? Sadness...

"Get well soon," Dr. Telemann said before taking his leave.

However, no one else followed him out. My mother prepared water for me to drink with my medicine and portioned fruit for me, so I was fine with her presence. On the other hand, it perplexed me when my father arbitrarily moved a chair next to the bed and leaned back into it, his legs outstretched.

And since we were on the topic, Chris paced here and there, clearly wanting to help but unsure of what would be appropriate—truly, a heartwarming sight. Like a certain other member of royalty, my brother, the perfect prince, was clearly not well-versed in the art of nursing patients.

I stabbed at the fruit my mother had handed me and took a nibble. The tiny morsel had the texture of something in between an apple and a pear. It was on the sour side, but a juicy and delicious flavor spread throughout my mouth with each chew.

Right as I swallowed, my father spoke up. "While you were unconscious, we searched every nook and cranny of the castle, but we found no irregularities. It appears that no animals or humans have been negatively influenced."

"I see. Thank goodness." I had hazy recollections of my dreams. My memories were vague and unclear, but I remembered enough: those two crying boys surely did not want anyone else to get hurt.

"As reported, I've concluded that the demon lord has completely disappeared." My father paused for a moment, his cold, pale-blue eyes fixed on me. "You've accomplished a great service."

I gaped at him, flabbergasted. I couldn't think of a reply—his words were far too outlandish. Like me, my mother and Chris were also petrified in shock.

I forgot how to breathe and a weird cough escaped from my throat. My hacking snapped my mother back to her senses and she hastily rubbed my back. Chris, standing at the opposite side of the bed from her, helpfully took the plate and fork out of my unsteady grip and moved them to the side.

"Please stop spouting bizarre things!" My mother scowled at my father while rubbing my back. "You're unsettling her! She's still recuperating!"

"What do you mean 'bizarre'? I merely complimented her." His face hardly changed, but he seemed a bit miffed somehow. Though his expression was just as brazen as usual, the slight furrow in his brow made him appear offended.

"Why don't you reflect upon your regular speech and conduct? It's astonishing that you would ever praise someone," she replied indignantly.

My brother nodded in agreement. "It makes us suspicious that this is a trap of some sort."

"Indeed," said my mother. "And if you're trying to praise her, then you need to use an appropriate expression. Choose better words. With your attitude, no one would take anything you say at face value."

My father was unperturbed by their criticisms. After a period of silent rumination, he tilted his head to the side with a small "hmm." Then, he stood and drew close to me. I instinctively put up my guard as he placed a large hand on my head.

"Huh?!" I yelped.

Suddenly, he roughly tousled my hair without holding back his strength. Discombobulated, my eyes bounced around my sockets as he patted my head. He watched my consternation with an amused look, and before long, his eyes narrowed in satisfaction. Usually, the corners of his mouth never even twitched, but today, they arched slightly.

"You did well."

This time, I actually stopped breathing. His previous words were already

enough of a surprise, but I'd still managed to endure. After all, he had praised me in the past, though only once. However...this was beyond anything imaginable. He was acting like an ordinary father praising his child—how could I not be blown out of the water?

Silence blanketed the room. There were four whole humans in the room and yet none of us dared to make a peep for several unsettling seconds.

"It's going to rain spears tomorrow," Chris muttered to himself, pale-faced.

My mother's head jerked up and she moved my father's hand away from my hair with a swat. "Don't worry, Rose. Your mother will protect you from snow, spears, or even natural disasters." She combed her fingers through my hair, which was now messy as a bird's nest, fixing it with an affectionate smile.

"You're the one who told me to wear an appropriate expression and choose better words," my father countered.

"Dear me, you saw something scary. Take your medicine and get some shut-eye," my mother cooed, ignoring my father's objection. She caressed my head as if she were soothing a baby.

Rather than thinking her reaction heartless, I found it understandable. My father's smile was so infrequent that it was a jarring sight. It felt like I'd just witnessed a taboo.

Though we were treating my father quite harshly, he continued operating at his own pace, as per usual. He sat back down in his chair and let out a weary sigh. *Excuse me! We're the ones who should be tired here.*

He then circled back to the topic of the demon lord's demise. As key contributors to that feat, Kanon, Sir Leonhart, all the sorcerers, and I were to be rewarded.

"What did you bestow upon Kanon... I mean, Lady Kanon?" I asked.

She'd worked hard and had been an essential player, so I wanted to give her some sort of gift as well. However, even if we presented her with wondrous treasures on par with those in the tale of Momotaro, she likely wouldn't be able to bring them back with her to Earth. If her reward were treated as a foreign substance, it might interfere with her return, so we needed to be prudent.

As if he'd understood my concerns, my father replied, "Our guest did not request any material items. You should ask her for the details yourself. She will be sent home in ten days—focus on your convalescence until then."

"Huh?!" I knew the day of Kanon's return was fast approaching, but I was shocked to learn that it was so soon. Hearing a concrete number rattled me.

"It's best for her to return as early as possible to reduce the risk of any aberrations."

"Yes... Of course."

That's what's best for Kanon, but I'll feel lonely without her...and sad. My mother tenderly patted my drooping head.

"Also, you and Leonhart will receive nothing from me," my father continued.

"What?"

"You'll both wish for the same thing anyway," he said with a haughty scoff. "I permit you two to do as you wish, so you'd best discuss that with each other quickly."

It was a sloppy and offhand delivery for my so-called reward...but I didn't have time to complain. *Sir Leonhart and I wish for the same thing? Really?* Hope and apprehension were in conflict inside of me: part of me wanted to jump for joy while the other part wanted to flee as a precaution for the worst.

"I'll send him here later, so finish your preparations by then," my father said bluntly.

I nodded absentmindedly.

The Reincarnated Princess's Dear Cat

I'm nervous... I rubbed my stomach and sighed.

After my father and brother had left, my mother had helped me make simple preparations. Unfortunately, I hadn't been permitted to bathe, so I was only able to wipe down my body and change clothes.

I lifted my arm to my nose and sniffed. *I'm pretty sure I don't stink. At least, I don't think I do...but I'm still worried. I'll die if he thinks I reek of sweat.* I shifted around dodgily; my gaze had already made several laps between the clock and the door.

Father said Sir Leonhart would visit me, but he never said when. Ohhh, I should've asked him. I don't know when he'll arrive, so now that I've finished getting dressed, I'm just going to sit around with butterflies in my stomach until he's here.

Calm down. Calm down! I can't be acting like this now. A critical mission lies ahead: I must ascertain how Sir Leonhart feels about me... That's right. I need to be sure of his feelings. I'm practically going to be the one proposing here, gender be damned.

Wait...can I do that? Me? Propose to Sir Leonhart?

No way, heck no! That's impossible. Absolutely not! I'm already close to fainting when I tell him I love him...and I think I have the audacity to propose*? That's absurd! If I mess up, then I'll drop dead from shock then and there.*

But what else am I supposed to do? I could aptly lure Sir Leonhart and covertly get an answer from him... Maybe I can get him to verbally promise to marry me... No, that's ridiculous. I'd need a miracle to bait him to say that. I act shifty when we talk normally, so there's no way in hell I could implement such advanced tactics.

But...I don't want to give up. I shouldn't reach a conclusion before I even try! It's important to first give it my all. Probably. Also, unless I was dreaming or I misheard, Sir Leonhart confessed to me! He said he l-loves me...I think.

So marriage really is a possibility! As long as I steer the conversation in a positive direction... Argh, I just agreed that I don't have the conversational skills for that! If I knew this was going to happen, then I would've studied more! I haven't made my debut into high society yet, but tea parties would've been the perfect training ground to hone my information-gathering skills. I'm finally paying the price for socializing as little as possible.

I should've been more proactive in my past life too. Why didn't I join in on the romance gossip? Back in my old world, I used to read magazines at the beauty parlor to kill time. One of them had a column called "Ways to Get Your Boyfriend to Propose." I should've read it more thoroughly! Welp, it's too late to regret now.

"Uwaaah!" A strange cry spilled out of my lips. I buried my face into my hands. "Nerooo!"

I reached toward the basket next to my bed and then froze. Out of habit, I'd sought after my dear pet to soothe my distressed heart, but his bed was empty. Never again would my precious cat sit curled up in his rattan basket layered with cushions. Never again would he shoot an irritated glance at me out of one eye. My baby, who had blue eyes more beautiful than any gem, was no longer...

"Oh... Right."

My hand limply flopped on top of my blanket. Leaning back against the cushions propped against the headboard, I stared up at the ceiling. I had lost him so abruptly that it didn't feel real.

Even now, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I believed he was wandering around the castle without a care in the world. Surely he would appear out of nowhere once he grew hungry. Or he'd be fast asleep in his basket after I fell asleep and woke up. Escapist thoughts kept rushing through my head.

I'm such a fool. I could comb through the entire world and never find him.

A dry, hollow laugh reverberated through the air. There was no one else inside the room, but I still hid my face behind my hand and closed my eyes, trying to wear a veneer of poise. As a way to avoid facing sadness and loneliness, I tried to reason that it didn't feel real...but try as I might, I could not

hide the deep hole that had been left in my heart.

Suddenly, I heard a muted noise.

I had evidently nodded off without realizing it. *I must get up*, I thought, my mind fuzzy. But I felt comfortable, as if I were soaking in a pleasant bath, and my eyes refused to open.

I was surrounded by soft sheets and pillows that smelled like sunshine. The light that seeped through my thin curtains twinkled faintly through my eyelids. I heard a distant noise that sounded like rustling leaves—not too loud, not too quiet. The sound soothed my soul.

Everything around me lulled me to sleep. I felt as if I were lying inside a cradle, swaddled in a cozy happiness, and I almost dozed off again. However, a hushed voice stopped me.

“Hey now. Don’t move,” chided a low, mellow voice. The tone seemed to harbor a wry smile. This voice whispered, perhaps out of consideration for my sleepy state, but even that quiet noise still prevented me from falling asleep. Not because the sound had disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of my room, but because, even half-awake, I recognized the voice of the person I loved.

“Hmm? Not happy with me? I’m sorry, but please bear with me for a bit longer.” He spoke to someone else gently, as though he were speaking to a little child. “I want to let her rest more.”

I heard his companion let out a small cry of protest. “Meooow.”

“Please, be reasonable. Whoa... Hey, I told you no,” he said, sounding somewhat flustered.

The bed gave a little creak as a light weight landed on it. This little mass on top of the bedding disregarded his orders and moved atop the covers. I felt soft fur brush past my hand that lay on my stomach.

Soon after, I sensed a presence next to my face. I felt a puff of breath graze my cheek, followed by something wet—a tongue, licking my face. It had a rough texture that prickled...but I was well-acquainted with that minor twinge.

My body trembled. *This is a dream,* I desperately tried to convince myself. *Of*

course it is. I'm having a happy dream right now. After all, if I allowed myself to hope and then it all turned out to be an illusion, I knew I would not be able to recover. I would be too overcome with pain and sadness to get back up again.

He let out a troubled sigh. "How enviable you are," he whispered. "What am I to do? You love her very much, huh?"

Encouraged by the love that filled his voice, I cracked my eyes open slightly. A dark furball next to my head filled my blurry vision...and a hand rested on top of its little head—the hand of the person I loved. He smiled broadly, gently caressing the little black bundle of fluff.

"Me too. Looks like we feel the same."

The furball meowed as if in reply.

Staring at me was a sapphire-eyed black cat, irises bluer than the sky and deeper than the ocean. Nero, my dearest, darling pet with beautiful eyes, licked my cheek once more. He let out a lovely meow as if to say, *"Good morning."*

"Nero?" I questioned, timbre shaking.

My eyes and nose burned and I felt a desire to cry well up inside of me. I reached out my arm, wanting to confirm that this was no dream, but right before I touched him, a moment of weakness halted me.

Nero shot me a puzzled look, tilting his head to the side. *"If you're going to pet me, then get on with it,"* he seemed to say. He then stretched his head out and rubbed himself against my palm. My chest tightened at the familiar sensation and I impulsively hugged his little body.

"Nero... Nerooo!" I sobbed, tears running down my eyes.

I didn't have the composure to act calm in front of the man I loved—like a child, I bawled loudly. I peered at Sir Leonhart, vision blurry. He did not appear exasperated by my pathetic display and instead regarded me with a terribly tender smile. His large hand rubbed my back gently so as to not startle me.

Thank the heavens. I don't know how Nero is alive, and I don't know where he's been, but I don't care. My baby is alive. There's nothing more important than that.

The Reincarnated Princess's Beloved

Nero obediently allowed me to hug him while I wailed, but once he deemed that I had calmed down, he immediately slipped out of my arms and returned to his basket. *I can't even call him cold. If anything, I should be thanking him for putting up with me for that long.*

A second wave of joy surged through me as I watched him curl up in his usual spot. *Oh, he really came home to me.* I sniffled, a silly smile pasted on my face.

A large hand reached out and caressed my tear-stained cheeks with rough fingers. Clear, obsidian eyes stared at me from point-blank range. His handsome visage was usually gallant, but right now he wore a smile that dripped sweetly, like honey.

I'd been so thrilled about Nero's return that my current situation had completely slipped my mind. I blinked at him in surprise. For a moment, I truly lost all my comprehensive abilities. However, I quickly remembered that Sir Leonhart had delivered Nero back into my arms and, like dominoes falling, that subsequently triggered all sorts of memories.

I felt my face grow so hot that I thought steam might be billowing out of my ears. *What did I just show him?! And what kind of awful face am I making right now?!* I was covered in tears, sweat, and who knows what else—my face was an absolute mess. The color drained from my skin as soon as I realized...

MMy lifetime crush had witnessed the whole thing.

Wait, my nose... My nose isn't dripping, right?! I don't want him to see me crying or covered in sweat either, but please for the love of all things good...don't let there be snot! Sure, it's all bodily fluids, but there's a clear line between snot and not! And please, please *no drool either!*

I turned away and pulled myself away from Sir Leonhart, pale face and all. I thought I saw his hand quiver for a split second, but I didn't have time to think properly.

"Princess?"

“Please don’t look at me too closely,” I murmured, my voice growing fainter with every word. I looked for something to wipe myself with—*there, a hand towel next to the water bucket*—and cleaned the grime off my face. I couldn’t bear him seeing me in such a dismal state, so I used the towel to cover my eyes.

What do I do now? I’m calming down, but my face still looks terrible. I cried so much that I doubt the swelling will disappear quickly... Wait, am I going to propose to him while looking like a certain red-nosed bread-based hero? Did I just up the difficulty setting? And...I’m pretty sure my chances of success have dropped remarkably.

“Princess...”

I flinched. His low tone and serious countenance signaled that he was about to bring up a subject of great paramount. *My heart isn’t ready. Good or bad, I can’t sit through this conversation. Even if he’s about to say something in my favor... As a lovestruck young maiden, it’s just too onerous to hear whatever it is with a runny nose.*

Thus, I pretended not to notice that Sir Leonhart was trying to broach a topic and opted to initiate a different matter.

“S-Sir Leon, how are your injuries?”

Caught off guard, he paused for a moment. After some hesitation, he raised his left hand. I peeked through the gap under the towel—bandages wrapped around his pointer finger and thumb.

“As you can see, I came out with a few meager scratches. Lady Fuzuki was wounded as well, but the earth sorcerer treated her and she has fully recovered. She won’t be left with any scars either.”

His injuries didn’t look like a mere scratch, but he likely wished to alleviate my worries, so I didn’t press any further.

“Thank the heavens.” I’d been secretly concerned about Kanon as well, so I was glad that he’d updated me on her well-being. My heart had ached at the possibility of her bite wound becoming aggravated or leaving behind a scar.

“I ran into her by coincidence when I went to see Dr. Telemann. She seems to be doing well. And she’s very worried about you. When she found out I was

coming to visit you, she repeatedly complained that it was unfair." He grinned dryly. "She kept grumbling that I should bring her with me."

My lips curled up into a small smile. Imagining Kanon's energetic smile warmed my heart. *I'd like to see her too. I better focus on recovering as quickly as possible!*

"But, I refused to bring her along...because I have something important to discuss with you."

With a start, my entire body froze, almost turning to stone. He was clearly trying to redirect our conversation back to his original topic.

"Princess." His tone blocked any path for escape, and my inner turmoil became even more chaotic. Before I could ask him to wait, he took my hand. His hold was firm, so I couldn't shake him off, but not tight enough that it hurt. He pulled on my hand and brushed the towel away from my face, exposing my crimson flush.

No! I don't want him to see me like this! Heat gathered in my head and I felt the back of my nose prickle. I didn't want any mucus to leak from my orifices...but neither did I want to have a nosebleed.

I'm pathetic. Why am I always like this? I want to be cute and cool like a fairy tale princess or a heroine of an otome game, so why can't I seem to get it right? Nothing ever goes as I plan.

Feeling my vision grow moist, I hastily lowered my gaze. Sir Leonhart and I sat in silence, avoiding eye contact. A pall of quiet descended upon the room. It felt like an eternity, but perhaps only a few seconds had actually passed before the suffocating mood was broken by Sir Leonhart's stiff voice.

"Do you dislike me?"

"Huh?"

"Or did you become scared?" I timidly lifted my head. Sir Leonhart's expression was as stiff as his voice. "I won't argue that I'm a difficult man. On top of that, my feelings are unreasonably heavy. Perhaps it's inevitable that you would get cold feet."

Difficult? Heavy? I have no idea what he means. If anything, those words describe me.

“Even so, my feelings for you are...” His voice trailed off.

After another long silence, Sir Leonhart looked me straight in the eye. He leaned forward and I reflexively braced myself. I wasn’t rejecting his advances—I was merely startled. But...that was not something he could pick up on without any explanation from me.

His expression contorted, brows sagging and eyes squinting in pain. It was the countenance of a hero courageously forging ahead despite his sorrow. After a moment’s delay, I realized that I’d hurt him. I snapped out of my stupor and hurried to clear the misunderstanding, but Sir Leonhart moved first.

In one fluid motion, he rose to his feet, brought one knee onto my bed, and pinned my hands against the pillow. He placed his other hand on the headboard, effectively fencing me in with his body hovering over me. The bed creaked, and a cushion fell to the floor with a soft thump.

Swept up by an unreal turn of events, I followed his movements with my eyes...which led to me ogling his handsome visage at close proximity. I blinked slowly over and over, but the scene before me remained the same. Quite frankly, my brain was not at all keeping up.

I stared up at Sir Leonhart, my lips slightly parted in a foolish expression. Imposing eyebrows arched over bright eyes; a pair of pretty lips beneath a well-chiseled nose. Sharp cheekbones. A masculine jawline. Though he was nearly thirty, he showed no sign of decline. His beauty was unrivaled by any work of art, but there was nothing feminine about his features.

His appearance fit my preferences to a T, captivating me absolutely. In the meantime, his face drew close to mine. My eyes couldn’t focus—I could feel his breath on me. But right when our lips were on the verge of touching...he stopped.

We stayed like that for a while, frozen in hesitation. I felt a pang of loneliness as our lips remained separated, untouched...

And I, of all people, followed that instinctual longing.

He drew away, but this time, I leaned in. His lips were parted, much like his wide-open eyes...and I closed the distance between us.

The Knight Captain’s Beloved

Smooch.

My lips made a cute sound that was unbefitting a crude man like myself. Eyes round with shock, I gaped at the woman I loved. Her brows, beautiful as a painting, arched over her shapely nose and light-pink flower petal lips. Even if I weren’t hopelessly in love with her, I’d swear that I’d never seen a more beautiful person in my life.

Though her eyes were red from weeping and her platinum-blonde hair was disheveled, that was not enough to detract even a fraction from her beauty. If anything, it gave her a pure and innocent allure.

Her long, downturned eyelashes fluttered, and a pair of gorgeous eyes peeked out from beneath her eyelids. The sight rendered me speechless. Her irises, a blue clearer than the sky on a fine day, were watery, like the surface of a calm lake. It was an impossible miracle that *I* was the one reflected in her gaze.

My mind ceased to function. Dazed, I felt something soft against my lips for a brief moment, so I brought my hand up. That delicate touch from moments ago contrasted sharply with the rough texture of my fingers—these sensations were as different as heaven and earth. I inadvertently gazed at Lady Rosemary’s lips, yearning in their absence.

She watched my reaction, blinked a few times, and then turned crimson all the way to the very tips of her ears. “I-I-I’m... I’m sorry!”

She was lovely, red-faced and flustered, but now was not the time to watch in silence. Her wrists, still in my grasp, were heating up in embarrassment. The feeling of her sweat against my skin was so vivid that I unwittingly gulped. It was a simple response of the living—I wasn’t daydreaming. This feeling was proof that I wasn’t having an indulgent delusion of some sort.

Lady Rosemary, of her own will, had kissed me.

I inhaled sharply. A wave of euphoria surged through my body. But a few

seconds later, a large doubt took root in my mind.

Wasn't she about to reject me? I exposed my vulgar side during our confrontation with the demon lord... Wasn't she put off? Or perhaps she's disgusted by my repulsive behavior and no longer views me as a respectable man. Is it because her first love is almost thirty? Or are my feelings too overbearing? Or...what if she's fed up with me because I'm too jealous? I can think of too many reasons—it's impossible not to worry. Which one is it? All of the above?

But...she kissed me...so perhaps she doesn't despise me. A newfound hope sprouted in my heart and I focused on Lady Rosemary. She tried to escape my grasp but I prevented her by pulling her hands. I leaned in closer, peering into her moist eyes at a hair's breadth distance. She was bright red and appeared as though she might cry at any moment...which stirred my sadistic and protective sides at the same time.

Oh, you poor thing, I thought, as though I wasn't involved. *You poor thing, captured by a man like this.* I slid my hand down from her wrist to her palm, intertwining our fingers one by one until I held her tiny hand.

"Sir Leon."

"Do you hate me?" I whispered. We were close enough to feel each other's breath.

Her azure eyes widened, as if to say that such a notion was unthinkable. This reaction heartened me. Lady Rosemary fervently shook her head back and forth. "How could I ever hate you?!"

"Mm-hmm," I hummed, beyond happy. My face slackened into something unsightly and I gently bumped my forehead against hers.

"S-Sir...Leon." Lady Rosemary's vision restlessly roamed everywhere, embarrassed by how close our faces were.

Goodness. She's so cute... So dear to me. I'll never let go of her. No matter what happens, you are the only one I will never surrender. I stared at her with persistence until she finally conceded and met my gaze. Light glistened off her eyes, sparkling like the water's edge.

I drew close, as if attracted by some unseen force, and kissed her. It was intoxicating to have her soft lips pressed against mine. I moved back and opened my eyes. Lady Rosemary was petrified, eyes as wide as saucers. Her expression was too adorable, and I kissed her red eyes next. Her slim shoulders jolted in surprise like a cat who'd just had its tail yanked. Swept up by my emotions, I embraced her and she stiffened up even more.

"Is it all right...if I don't give up on you?"

She inhaled sharply and then wrapped her slender arms around me. "I'd hate it if you did."

"I see."

She clung to me tightly and I corralled her in my arms, affection welling up in my chest. Desperate to convey my feelings to her, I rubbed my cheek against her head. The dark feelings that had been accumulating in the pit of my stomach had vanished without a trace...despite the fact that I'd been seconds away from drowning in impatience, anxiety, and envy. What a self-interested man I was.

My lips quirked up into a wry smile at my selfishness, but I did not feel too bad about it. No matter what kind of problems I ran into, no matter what walls towered high in my path, I would be fine as long as Lady Rosemary loved me. I would cut through any hardship until I found my way back to her.

But, first...will she allow me to make my pledge?

"Lady Rosemary?" I whispered into her flushed ear.

She quivered slightly and then lifted her head. Her eyes were rosy from crying, and she gave off the adorable impression of a little rabbit. Next, I pressed my lips against her temple. She let out a squeak that made her seem even more like a small animal, and I broke out into a smile. Her reaction was cute, so I kept my lips against her skin as I spoke.

I'm such a hopeless man.

"If you feel that it is too soon for us, please speak honestly. I will wait as long as you wish," I murmured, trying to act like a sensible adult...but only on the surface.

She gawked at me. In her large eyes, I could see that I was wearing an eerily gentle smile. Though I'd been invited by name to visit her, she was still alone in a room with a man. There was nowhere for Lady Rosemary to flee. On top of that, we'd already been quite intimate and had kissed multiple times—it was too late for any waiting. She was a faithful woman, so she'd surely never accept the hand of another man.

If she doesn't run, then I won't chase after her. If she tells me to wait, then I'll wait as long as she wants...as long as she promises her future to me. Completely unaware of the sick thoughts running through my mind, Lady Rosemary stared at me. Her eyes yearned to tell me something.

"Oh?" I tilted my head. I'd been certain that she would choose the path of escape I'd laid out for her. If she nodded and accepted my proposition, I would back down and withdraw...though my offer was valid for only a limited period of time. "Princess?"

She did not reply. Instead, she hung onto me, clinging to my chest, her dainty hands grabbing the front of my shirt. When I laid my hand on top of hers, I realized she was trembling.

"Princess."

"No..." Her voice was as faint as a whisper. She gathered her resolve and then looked up. Her straightforward gaze pierced through me, causing me to flinch disgracefully. "No. I don't want to wait any longer."

"Huh?"

"I'm the one who's been faltering—I'm sorry for being selfish. I'll stop making the excuse that I'm too embarrassed because my face is swollen...so please, don't delay this any longer."

"Your face?" Unable to keep up with her train of thought, I ended up repeating random words I'd picked up.

Her face is...what? What's there to be embarrassed about? Her eyes are a bit swollen; the tips of her ears and her little nose are red. But I see no issue with them. I can only see how adorable and beautiful she is.

"I'm sorry I hurt you for such a nonsensical reason."

“Princess...”

“I love you.”

I thought I would stop breathing. I had lain a shrewd and dishonorable trap, but she completely disregarded it and faced me with clear, unsullied eyes. Her sincere feelings were directed straight at me, and they soon dealt a fatal blow.

“I have loved you for so, so long.”

What a beautiful person. Like a fool, I was enchanted by her. Gleaming hair, jewellike eyes, a perfectly sculpted face... But the most beautiful of all was her soul. No matter how her physical form might change, I had baseless confidence that I would always be able to find her.

After all, there was no other like her in this world.

Mustering up all her courage, she whispered a request like a confession. “If you would, please take me as your bride—”

I stopped her, sealing her words with my lips. She blinked, stupefied. I wanted to take in her surprised eyes at such close proximity, but we were unfortunately too near and I couldn’t focus on her face. So, I brought our dewy lips together again and again, meeting her soft mouth over and over. Though I was reluctant to separate myself from her lips, which were parted ever so slightly in astonishment, I forced myself to pull away.

“My apologies. But let me be the one to say those words.” I scooped up her hands in mine and pressed kisses to the tips of her fingers. Her majestic demeanor from moments ago had completely transformed into the uncertainty of a lost child. “Your Highness Rosemary von Velfalt.”

She straightened her spine, her expression on edge. Like a flower in full bloom, she had matured into a beautiful young lady, but her gaze remained unchanged—straightforward and earnest. How many times had her tender attention saved me? How much relief had she imparted to me? No matter how much she grew, that gaze of hers always chased me.

I could spend my whole life trying and it still wouldn’t be enough time to convey the extent of my feelings...the depth of my love for you.

“Will you please marry me?”

Lady Rosemary sucked in a breath. Her trembling fingers squeezed my hand. Then, her face crumpled. The tears that had built up in the corners of her eyes spilled out, trickling down her cheeks. Her petite body flew into my arms with great force.

“Yes!”

The way her voice quavered, overwrought with emotion... The way she beamed at me, teardrops cascading down her face... I would never forget this moment for the rest of my life.



The Reincarnated Princess In Harmony

It was like a dream.

I've cried so much that my face is starting to sting, I thought in a daze. My younger self used to cry after being told she would never be seen as a romantic interest. I wished I could tell her this: *"You'll shed tears over an impossible love many, many times from now on, but you must persevere. Don't give up. Your efforts won't be for naught. The path you walk will surely lead to Sir Leonhart's side."*

I sobbed and raised my hands to rub my eyes, but I was stopped by a gentle touch.

"You mustn't rub them. The swelling will worsen." Sir Leonhart's expression melted into a smile.

He picked up the hand towel on my bedside table and dipped it into the bucket of water. As I watched him wring the cloth, I felt moved, just as I had been many times in the past. *He's so kind. Sir Leonhart has always treated me with compassion, but the distance between us has changed. It's similar to being treated like a difficult younger sister, but clearly different. From his indulgent gestures and tone, I feel a renewed realization...*

We're lovers now.

No, he's not my lover... He's my fiancé. I'm allowed to stand next to Sir Leonhart and look forward in the same direction. I've obtained a place where we can naturally talk about our future together. It's like a dream.

I lightly placed my hand on my chest and repeated those words to myself once more. I peered up at Sir Leonhart as he turned to me, damp towel in hand. He tilted his head to the side with a puzzled look and gently wiped the tearstains from my face.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

I slowly shook my head. Without another word, I leaned in, nestling my head against his large hands, and closed my eyes. I wanted to savor it—this jubilation

was no illusion—and I snuggled up against his heat.

Sir Leonhart gulped and his hand stiffened. It would've felt wonderful to have his broad hands tenderly caressing me, but he'd frozen with no sign of moving.

Was that a bad move? Am I being annoying? I cracked my eyes open, intending to take a peek at him, but then his hand moved. The damp towel fell to the ground with a wet flop. Startled, my eyes snapped open and Sir Leonhart's face filled my vision.

As we silently peered into each other's eyes, we were close enough that our lips could almost touch. An ineffable, awkward atmosphere filled the room.

Wh-What should I do? I definitely messed up and opened my eyes too soon. I've spent fifteen years hurtling through life without encountering any erotic events...and now I've made a horrendous mistake.

Is it too late to just close my eyes now? Oh, but what if that's the wrong move? Ahhh, whatever, bring it on! I squeezed my eyes shut. *If I'm misunderstanding and Sir Leonhart was only trying to examine my puffy eyes, then I'll probably kick the bucket. I'll instantly die of embarrassment.*

While worries swam through my mind, Sir Leonhart had already distanced himself. "My apologies. That was involuntary." He cleared his throat and pulled back further. He raised his hands in the air, indicating that he wouldn't touch me any more.

"Huh?" I uttered. *What was involuntary?* I raised my head, about to ask, but stopped when I saw the scarlet underneath Sir Leonhart's eyes. He covered his mouth with his hand, averting his gaze.

"I thought you would forgive me no matter how I touched you...and I lost control."

A bolt of electricity ran through me from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. My heart pounded loudly as though I had just finished an all-out sprint. I didn't have the composure to worry about the stench of my sweat.

"If you want to touch me, then go on and touch me as much as you like." I wished to tell him this, but that would be too shameless. I was also an amateur when it came to the workings of love, so I doubted I could handle whatever he

was imagining. My brain would probably short-circuit.

But I don't want us to stay apart.

I grabbed the hem of Sir Leonhart's shirt and tugged. For a moment, I fretted that such a childish attempt would not elicit the reaction I desired, but it seemed to be a groundless fear.

"Princess." He called for me, his tone steeped with restlessness.

Too embarrassed to meet his gaze, I looked away, but he took my cheek in his large hand and gently pointed my face up at him. The corners of his eyes were dyed red and so dazzlingly sexy that I thought I'd go crazy.

"May I kiss you?"

I sucked in my breath, too shy to answer. It took all I had to return a small nod.

He cast his eyes down and gently placed his lips upon mine. It was a simple, lush kiss, but that was enough to make my heart hammer almost painfully in my chest. It certainly wasn't our first time, but I found it hard to breathe. I couldn't imagine a day when I would get used to this sensation. *This man will always make my heart beat wildly.*

My body lost strength from a scant few seconds of touching. I simultaneously felt grateful and apologetic that he was matching my naive pace. *This is probably child's play for an adult like Sir Leonhart. I'm sure he's nowhere near satisfied.*

Drawing my limp body close, he leaned my weight against his frame. He fawned on me, rubbing his cheek against mine. It was a bit ticklish, causing me to quiver slightly.

"Sir Leon?"

"Princess." His voice called for me with such blithe happiness that I blinked in surprise.

"Yes?"

"Princess."

“Yes?”

“Lady Rosemary.”

Though I was perplexed as to why he was calling for me over and over, I responded all the same. He pressed kisses across my skin: cheek, forehead, and the tip of my nose. I had the somewhat disrespectful thought that he was acting like a large, affectionate dog.

I didn’t understand what his intentions were, but his soft touch sent me over the moon. I giggled in delight and opened my eyes. The manly visage next to me slackened. It was different from the provocative smile that he had been wearing moments ago; I was astonished that he could smile so purely like a young boy.

He opened his mouth, all smiles and brimming with joy. “It’s like a dream.” The same words that I had been repeating inside my mind spilled out of Sir Leonhart’s throat.

“Sir Leon?”

“That you’re touching me like this.” He brought my hands up, gripping them firmly and rubbing the backs with his coarse thumbs. “That I am permitted to be so close to you...is a miracle. I feel like I’m dreaming.”

I felt a weight against the side of my head. It thrilled me to hear Sir Leonhart echo how I felt. “I was thinking the same,” I admitted.

“You were?”

“Yes. We’re like-minded.” I broke out into a blissful smile.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes squinted as though he were looking at something radiant. “We’re like-minded? I’m beyond happy.”

He took my chin in his hand and tilted it up. “Hmm?” I wondered what he wanted. My silly expression was reflected in his inky black eyes.

“Then, I wonder if we share this feeling as well.”

“Wh-What feeling?”

He shot me a careless smile and I could feel the passion of his next words directly against my mouth. “I would like one more.”

The heat of his lips against mine made me giddy.

The Knight Captain Reflects

Once again, she did not rebuff me. I took that as a positive sign and enjoyed her soft lips against mine. I changed the angle and kissed her over and over until I felt her fists weakly pounding against my chest. Perhaps it had become difficult for her to breathe.

Though I was reluctant to part, I released her and gave her space to take deep breaths. Once she calmed her ragged breathing, she regarded me with defiant eyes. However, her face was crimson and her eyes teary, so she wasn't frightening, even when glowering at me. If anything, I had the terribly self-centered delusion that she was seducing me.

"Are you okay?" I rubbed her back.

It was quite the shameless question coming from the one who had caused her such distress. She did not reprimand me, but instead nodded. *Positively adorable. It would be understandable if you got upset and blamed me.*

With a brooding countenance, Lady Rosemary vacillated for a while, carefully choosing her next words. Her large eyes blinked numerous times until eventually she said, "Sir Leon... Um, if it's not too much, may I request something?"

"Of course." I smiled, encouraging her to continue.

She quailed at that and lowered her head, almost as though attempting to flee from my gaze. Her hair rippled around her shoulders and her fair nape peeked through. Her small hands clenched tightly around my chest.

"It... It would please me if you would hold back a bit," she whispered, her voice so quiet that I thought it might vanish into the air.

The instant I saw her neck flush before my eyes, I felt vertigo take over. There was no defense for my next action, no matter the angle. Reason lost out to instinct, bringing with it a spark of violence. What I did next was heinous, a deed that should've put me in jail.

Drawn like a moth to a flame, I kissed her crimson nape.

“Migyah?!” Lady Rosemary jumped up and screamed like a cat that’d just had its tail stepped on. “S-S-S-Sir Leon?!” She threw her hands over her neck and turned toward me with teary eyes.

I snapped back to my senses. *Shit.* I instantly paled, but at the same moment, a loud bang came from outside the door, shaking Lady Rosemary.

“What was that?” she murmured blankly. Evidently, the noise had distracted her from the shock of my foolish act.

I let go of her. If we became any more intimate, even I wouldn’t know what I would do next.

“What was that noise?” she asked.

“Likely, a protest of sorts.”

She cocked her head at me but I looked away, a hollow laugh escaping from my throat.

Oblivious to what I could mean, she looked at me with quizzical eyes. “Protest?”

Goodness. You’re so adorable. I hope we can drop this matter. I stood up. “‘I apologize for overstaying my visit. It’s about time for me to go.”

“Oh... Right.”

Seeing her expression become clouded with loneliness made me want to sit back down, but it would not be prudent to leave my subordinate waiting in the hallway any longer. Over time, his temper would only worsen, not abate. I placed my hand over Lady Rosemary’s and whispered into her ear, “I’ll come again.”

Resisting the temptation to stay and gaze at her bashful visage, I left the room. The first thing that greeted me outside was a guard—he stood a short distance away, and his face was pallid. He hung his head, vision focused on his fist pressed against the wall. I shot him a wary look and let out a sigh. The mask of a kind, agreeable young man he normally wore had not just peeled off and fallen away, but had been completely smashed to smithereens.

“Klaus,” I called out to him after a beat.

Head still drooping to the ground, he turned only his face toward me. His eyes, normally the color of spring green, were now a dark, murky pool; an unceasing stream of tears wet his cheeks.

“Do you have no human heart?” he seethed in a low, cursing voice.

I felt a headache coming on. My conversation with Lady Rosemary shouldn’t have been overheard through the closed door, but it was possible that he’d heard the louder sounds we had made. For example...Lady Rosemary’s squeal when I’d committed a certain atrocity.

We had been alone in the room, so if Klaus had heard her adorable cry, then of course he would speculate about what was occurring inside. He likely suspected that I’d put my hands on Lady Rosemary... Though, it wasn’t an unjust suspicion—I *had* done exactly that. There was nothing I could do to get out of this situation.

I felt terribly sorry, not only to Lady Rosemary, but also to all my subordinates. My actions had lacked consideration, especially for Klaus, who wholeheartedly adored his master.

Thus, I didn’t bother making any excuses and simply offered him a candid apology. “Sorry.”

He inhaled sharply, straightening up with a jerk. Klaus then closed the distance between us and grabbed my collar.

“Wait! Hold on a second! Klaus!”

Another knight who had joined the order with Klaus, Dennis, frantically tried to stop the scuffle by jumping between us, but I halted him with a glance.

“Klaus,” I said, meeting his forward-facing stare. He didn’t respond—the contempt harbored in his gaze was all I needed to understand how he felt. I intended to accept all of the complaints and resentment. However, this was a poor choice of location. “Let’s move elsewhere.”

There was more than just a scandal awaiting if we broke out into a brawl here. I also didn’t want to worry my love on the other side of the door. But apparently, my words needed no elaboration—Klaus understood my intention. He gritted his teeth and after a few seconds of heavy silence, he shoved me

away.

“Will my office suffice?” I asked, fixing my disheveled collar.

Klaus roughly wiped his tears with his cuff and nodded, refusing to look me in the eye.

“Dennis. My apologies, but could you keep guard of Her Highness?”

“Yes, sir.” Dennis watched Klaus with concern, but quickly tightened his expression to a dignified one when he noticed my gaze. “Please leave it to me. Not a single ant will get past me.”

I nodded in approval. “I’m counting on you.”

Klaus did not utter a single word on the way to my office, or even when we finally arrived. When I motioned for him to take a seat on the sofa, he obediently sat down. Whatever had gone through his head during the trek here had caused his fervor to abate. His countenance was completely devoid of all emotion, though unceasing tears poured from his downcast eyes.

He seemed to be sorting out his feelings, so I hesitated to initiate conversation. I retrieved the pitcher and cups on my desk, as well as a hand towel. I poured him a glass of water and left it in front of him. When I offered the towel to him, he accepted without lifting his head, but he did not use it to wipe his tears. He merely clutched it in his hands, sitting motionless with his body slouched forward.

I took a seat across from him and waited while he composed himself.

“I adored her greatly,” Klaus murmured after a long period of silence. He didn’t specify who, but only one person came to mind. I did not interject and patiently waited for Klaus to continue. “But it was not love.”

His gaze remained fixed on the ground and he spoke more to himself than to me...as though he was trying to convince himself that what he was saying was true.

The Personal Guard Vents

“It wasn’t love,” I repeated to myself again and again.

“Klaus.” The captain’s gaze and tone were filled with concern; I couldn’t sense any malice from him. I didn’t detect even a hint of condescending superiority, but I felt absolutely awful anyway.

Irritated by the dampness of my cheeks, I roughly wiped them. *Why do I feel so terrible?* I raised my head and stared at the man sitting across from me. Leonhart von Orsein had not only an excellent appearance and peerage, but was also a man blessed with exceptional skills.

All of this irritated me greatly.

However, he did not rest on his laurels, nor was he satisfied with his natural-born talent. He trained hard without any arrogance; he also possessed the integrity and sincerity to care for those in a lower position. In short, he was an unpleasant man who had an excessive amount of prestige...but that was only my individual perception of him.

If anyone inquired as to whether he was too lacking to be entrusted with Lady Rosemary, then “no” would be my answer. Not a soul would object to calling him the most distinguished man in the nation, and there were no issues with his personality. Furthermore, he cherished Lady Rosemary very much. I’d heard that he had reclaimed her from the menacing demon lord’s grasp without once balking.

Unlike me, who merely crawled along the ground until the incident was resolved, I thought, smiling derisively at myself. *I bragged that I would do anything for her sake, but I couldn’t do a thing when the moment actually came. I have no right to interject. I hate how much I understand that.*

And yet, why did this feel so excruciating? Feelings of sadness and loss filled my heart, so intense that I thought they might bore holes in my chest. I clutched at my breast and cocked my head to the side, confused by the sharp aching. *How strange. My beloved master’s longstanding first love has finally come to*

fruition. I should be congratulating her; there's no reason for me to grieve.

For years, I had been by Lady Rosemary's side, watching her wholeheartedly yearn for the captain. Even now, I could close my eyes and easily recall the first time I'd met her.

As a young girl, she was as lovely as the angels drawn on church walls, but also extremely intelligent and mature. An innocent smile from her would make anyone kneel and scramble to fulfill her request, but she was noble-minded and never used her appearance as a weapon. She was knowledgeable and a fast thinker; she had the diligence to read books and ask teachers for lessons when she had the time. Her younger brother adored her greatly, but she did not spoil him rotten and instead had the rectitude to harden her heart and distance herself. And, because of her straightforward nature, she was clumsy, tackling everything head-on and sometimes hurting herself.

Everything about her was venerable and beautiful. Soon after I was assigned as her personal guard, I came to admire her. She was humble, and though I could tell she disliked it whenever I showered her with praise, it never occurred to me to hold myself back.

In the corner of my mind, I thought it absurd that I was upsetting my master. However, she was kind to even commoners—not to mention lower nobility—and knowing that I was the only one who could bring out her disgruntled expression made it difficult to resist the temptation.

"Klaus."

Sometimes she would wear an exasperated expression. Sometimes, an angry one. Yet every time she called my name, I would be filled with electrifying happiness.

"Klaus."

When she grew a bit older, Lady Rosemary had called my name, her voice thick with worry. Looking back, I'd made so many mistakes that I wished I could send myself flying...but over time, I became someone she could depend on. Though she seemed like a sheltered young lady, she was a woman of action and had a tendency to think she had to solve every problem alone. I couldn't count how many times my heart had nearly stopped whenever she'd recklessly rushed

into a situation.

Such an independent person had come to rely on me to some extent. I was more delighted and proud of that fact than even my own growth or promotions.

“Klaus.”

After Lady Rosemary had returned from her long trip, she’d matured into a stunning young lady. Like an unyielding flower bud opening, she’d blossomed brilliantly without losing any of her original splendor.

Learning about the outside world had changed her in a positive way. Her stubborn and fastidious sides had lessened; she’d become stronger and more flexible. She’d softened up and learned to depend on other people. And, she’d also grown more expressive, which only accentuated her beauty. She especially made heads turn when she smiled with overflowing joy.

I silently squeezed my hand clutching my chest, digging nails into skin.

No. Before my mind could catch up to my emotions, a voice from the bottom of my heart screamed for me to stop. *Don’t realize why!* it yelled.

Lady Rosemary.

Lady Rosemary.

I have adored you ever since you were a child...but please be at ease. I do not hold such insolent feelings for you. I respect you more than anyone. I treasure you more than anyone. As long as I can stay by your side and protect you, I do not ask for anything else. As long as you are happy...as long as you are healthy and laughing...then I could wish for nothing more.

“Klaus.”

A soft, muffled grunt escaped from my throat. I covered my face with my hands, wanting to erase that beautiful smile from under my eyelids. Liquid spilled from my eyes, dribbling through the cracks between my fingers. The back of my eye sockets felt hot and a dull aching pain throbbed in my head. I felt a sob, a cry like the roar of a beast, creeping up my throat.

“It wasn’t love.” I hoarsely repeated the words like a curse.

Whatever this is... I must not have this feeling. Not one shred of it is necessary for Lady Rosemary's glorious future. Before I realize what this is, I must kill it. Not for anyone else's sake, but for my own. I must not anguish, for I wish to continue standing by her side.

I do not need these emotions.

"Love is... It must not be love." The feelings I'd been trying to suppress flowed out of me, as if I were coughing up blood.

Without saying a word, the captain watched me lament, my head hanging down. How long did we stay there like that? Eventually, I regained some of my composure, though I was still crying nonstop like a fool. With hesitance, the captain began to speak.

"Take this as sarcasm if you'd like," he began. He seemed to have difficulty forming the words, and he paused for a moment. "If...in the extremely unlikely event that someone were to ever snatch the princess away from me, I thought *you* would have been the most likely suspect."

"Huh?"

I had been distracted by the captain's face—it was twisted with much displeasure as he said the words "snatch the princess away"—but the statement that followed was even more shocking.

The wheels in my befuddled mind slowly turned. *That must be sarcasm. It's too distasteful to tell me that after discovering his love to be mutual. And...he hated thinking that my master would ever choose someone else, so much so that he changed his wording from "if" to "in the extremely unlikely event." His pettiness and arrogance is slipping into view!*

Is Leonhart von Orsein actually a man more faulty and humanlike than I thought all this time?

"The princess unwinds in front of you, and only you. She acts closest to herself around you," he continued, albeit with great reluctance. The captain's eyes dropped to his feet as he murmured almost to himself. "If you were her companion, she would not try to keep up appearances. She would pout and get angry... She'd surely even let you see her sneeze or yawn."

He didn’t seem to be acting, and I believed him to be revealing his true feelings. I didn’t even feel any animosity when he quietly added, “I’m envious.”

I didn’t get the impression he was saying all this because he was the victor, nor was he ridiculing me... I understood that this man, the sole love of Lady Rosemary, truly thought such things from the bottom of his heart.

So then...I was not a worthless existence to Lady Rosemary. She cherished me in a different way than she did the captain. Reaching that conclusion made my heart lighten. *It is my greatest reward.*

I wiped my damp cheeks with the hand towel the captain had handed me earlier. My tears had finally stopped.

“Exactly right. I’ve been by her side since forever. I’ve seen plenty of facets to Lady Rosemary that you have not.”

He shook with a jolt, his expression darkening solemnly.

The captain really is a petty man. He was not looking down on me from a far and lofty place—no, he was on the same level, my equal, sitting obediently under the same person’s thumb. Now that I understood all this, I started to realize what I had missed before.

“And she calls you ‘Klaus’ without any titles or formalities,” said the captain.

For a beat, I stared at him in silence.



“Captain—when she’s around you, she feels nervous and worries too much, but she relaxes around me and sometimes even nods off.”

“You...” The wrinkles between his brows became deeper and deeper. “Quite the personality you have there.”

“All thanks to you,” I retorted with a pleasant grin.

The captain sat there quietly for a few seconds and then let out a long sigh. *Serves you right,* I crowed inside my mind. I didn’t feel like stopping there, so I pressed on. “Oh. I will resign from the royal guard when Lady Rosemary weds you, so please, ensure the County of Orsein employs me.”

“Absolutely not.”

The captain’s flagrant indignance brought me satisfaction. His harsh reaction was much more preferable than if he had warmly said, *“We will welcome you.”* And, it was even better than if he had behaved as though I had no chance of becoming his rival or obstacle.

“Would you rather I ask Lady Rosemary directly?”

His expression soured even further, and I reveled in amusement.

The Reincarnated Princess's Younger Brother

I had spent three days unconscious. And, after I'd awakened, another five days had passed. Since I hadn't received clearance from the court physician, I'd once again been bedridden the whole time. Though, by now. I figured it was about time I was allowed to do some light exercise. I expected I would be able to take a short stroll around the garden tomorrow or perhaps the day after.

While my life was inching along at a slow pace, the state of the world changed rapidly. The king of Lapter, the nation to Nevel's northeast and our enemy, had passed away. The cause of his death? Illness. I heard he had collapsed during an evening party, drawing his last breath there.

I recalled their king being almost fifty years old; apparently, his internal organs had long been afflicted with some disease. His Majesty Barnabas von Merkel had been a gourmand and heavy drinker. Rumors whispered that he'd neglected his health, which had ultimately ruined his body.

The first in line to succeed him was his eldest son, the crown prince. However, the crown prince had been born sickly and was still quite young. He had no experience with politics, and the Kingdom of Lapter was currently in chaos, so he'd judged that he did not have the power to properly govern. So, he'd relinquished his right to the throne.

In his stead, kingship passed to the deceased's younger brother—His Majesty Emil von Merkel. The commoners, who had feared they would face starvation due to the economic sanctions, welcomed their new ruler with open arms. Most believed that the old king had died because he had gorged himself in excess.

When the new king was crowned, he immediately began purging part of the nobility. Any noble (and any accompanying family) who'd instigated the previous king—or had any hand in corruption—had titles stripped and wealth confiscated. Furthermore, the new king had sent a messenger to the Kingdom

of Nevel declaring that all fault was with Lapter. He'd even offered an apology.

This had all happened during the week when I'd first collapsed—it would be strange *not* to be shocked by the quick turn of events. Talk of reparations between the two nations would be put on hold until later in the future, but it was still quite a tempestuous development.

It's as if this was planned out beforehand... No, I should stop thinking about it. I shook my head, trying to push the dangerous speculation out of my mind. Suddenly, I froze, picking up a noise from afar.

I quizzically looked toward the racket. *Are those footsteps?* It sounded like someone was loudly running down the hall toward my room. *The maids and knights working in the castle are trained in etiquette, so they rarely run anywhere...not unless there's an emergency.*

While I unwittingly froze at the sound, the expressions of my waiting maids stiffened. The room was charged with nerves...and the footsteps stopped right in front of my door. Klaus was away for the moment, but a different guard should've been stationed there. We heard him speak to someone in a distressed tone, and then, there came a knock. One of the maids opened the door. After a short exchange with the knight, she turned back at me.

"Lady Rosemary. His Highness Johan is here to see you."

"Huh?" I tilted my head to the side, slow to digest her words. *Hm? Hmmm? Did I mishear? She said Johan...but that can't be right. He should be in the Kingdom of Vint right now. I didn't hear any word that he'd be returning; I didn't get a single letter either.* Questions and doubts filled my mind, but then a nostalgic voice rang from outside.

"Sister, it's me."

I blinked before answering. "Johan?"

The door opened wider and a person hurtled toward me. "Sister!"

Wavy golden hair—deep ocean eyes framed by long lashes. His gorgeous beauty that resembled our mother had remained unchanged from when he was young, but his cheeks were sharper and his neck had firmed up, giving him a masculine charm.

He had grown even taller since I'd last seen him in Vint. By now, he was probably around 180 centimeters. He was still slender, but his firm body was laden with well-trained muscles. Perhaps a part of that impression was caused by the navy-blue coat he wore, but...he seemed all grown-up. My younger brother was at the age where he was growing from a boy into a young man—in the short time we'd been apart, he had matured so much.

While I was still in shock, Johan briskly walked over to my bed, took my hand, and brought it to his face. This beautiful young man, who looked like a prince on a white horse out of a fairy tale, shot me a frenetic look.

"Sister. Y-Y-You're getting...m-m-marr—"

My little brother bugged out like a faulty computer program. The way he stuttered reminded me of a clucking rooster. He paused to inhale and exhale deeply a few times. His complexion looked terrible, and he was gasping for breath.

I have no idea what's going on. What was Johan trying to say? What was he trying to do? In the first place, I couldn't comprehend what he was even doing here, and my confusion only grew.

He seems to have something important he wants to discuss, so I won't interrupt him.

I quietly waited for Johan to calm down, but then another knock came from the door. I answered it, and this time, Klaus replied.

"I've brought a letter from His Highness Johan."

The actual person made it here before the letter, y'know... I wanted to heave a sigh, but I managed to hold myself back

"Just in time."

"Huh...? What?"

The voices from outside sounded perplexed, but I left the explanation of the situation to Klaus's colleague. I didn't have the composure to do it myself right now.

The maids were cowering near the door. I wanted to give them an excuse to

leave, so I requested they give us a moment before serving us tea. I watched them go, relief coloring their faces, and then faced Johan.

He was preoccupied with mumbling indecipherably to himself, so I examined him closely. His hair was disheveled and a bit dusty. He smelled sweaty too—I gathered he'd pushed himself quite hard to return home. He was still in his traveling clothes, so he'd clearly come straight to me as soon as he'd arrived.

I'm delighted to see you, but you could've dusted yourself off and rested first before coming to my room. Also, don't you need to report to father before visiting me? There's a lot I could comment on here...but I guess I'll just leave it.

"Johan."

A strained noise spilled out of my lips.

I raised my hand to his drooping head and caressed his golden locks. Shocked, he peered up at me. I smiled at him and said, "Welcome home."

His eyes widened and he chewed on his lips, resisting some urge. He sank into silence for a moment and then finally, with some pause, he whispered in a husky tone, "I'm home... I'm back."

He wrapped his hands around one of mine and raised his eyes to me. Grim resolve filled his face, and after a few seconds, his hesitant gaze wandered the room. Once he'd gathered his courage, he took a deep breath.

"Sister."

"Yes?"

"I-I-Is it..." he began, relapsing into stuttering like a nervous bird. He must've really not wanted to vocalize whatever he was about to ask because his voice tapered to a hush. He peered into my eyes, his appearance reminiscent of a soggy dog wet from the rain. "Is it true that you're g-going to m-ma... Is it true you have a fiancé now?"

"Yes." I replied immediately with a smile, though I didn't mention that it wasn't official yet.

As if he had been struck by lightning, Johan jumped up and turned to stone.

The Second Prince in Discord

I dearly hoped that my sister would deny any engagement, but a smile bloomed across her face. She gave me a small nod, looking happier than I had ever seen her before. Her soft gaze, sweet voice, her supple arched lips—her whole being was brimming with joy.

How could I tell her, *“Don’t get married!”* when she appeared so elated?

I forced my entreaty down, bitterness settling in the pit of my stomach. But even so...I could not bear to congratulate her. I didn’t want to say it. I could only remain there, clenching my fist with my eyes cast down.

I’d recently received a letter from my father, the king, detailing that my sister and Leonhart would soon be engaged. Immediately, I’d decided to return to Nevel. In fact, I’d declared that I would leave the very day the message arrived—all had tried to stop me except for my good friend Nacht, who’d pushed me forward with an exasperated look.

Right away, I’d collected what I needed and rushed to Nevel with so much drive that it’d felt like I was tumbling home. I’d taken nearly no breaks, spurring my horse at such a speed that I’d even shaken off my guards. And so, I’d returned to my dear sister, but in the end, I was unable to change anything. I couldn’t find a single word to offer her.

Realizing my odd appearance, my sister called out my name in a concerned tone. “Johan?”

At that, I returned to my senses and hurriedly raised my head.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?” she asked, her countenance clouding over.

“N-No! It’s nothing!” I forced myself to grin and shake my head, but my hasty smile was evidently too awkward, and the worry did not clear from her face.

I don’t want to cause you any distress. I don’t want to make you sad. Why can’t things ever go well for me?

My sister clenched her dainty, alabaster hand, hesitating over something. Then, determined to tell me something, she opened her mouth. I stiffened.

“Joha—” Before she could finish, a knock interrupted her. It was too soon for the sent-away maids to return. Seeming curious about the identity of this person, she answered, “Yes? Who is it?”

“Rose, it’s me. I heard Johan has returned.”

I had been separated from *him* even longer than I had been away from my sister, so I wasn’t confident I could recognize his voice. However, there was only one person who would call us “Rose” and “Johan” in that manner.

“He’s here. Please come in.”

“Pardon me.”

A beautiful, fair-skinned young man with flawless platinum-blond hair and sky-blue eyes entered the room. Although there were traces of the same features I remembered on his handsome visage, he was much taller and his build had become more muscular. Above all, his face had shed its childish naivete and was now awash with calm dignity.

His eyes, adorned with long lashes, went round when he saw me. He blinked multiple times and then his expression softened. “It’s been a long while, Johan. You’ve become so dashing... I hardly recognize you.” With utmost sincerity, he spoke words that held more parental affection than I’d ever received from actual parents.

An involuntary bitter smile formed on my face. “As usual, you act like an old geezer, Chris.”

My older brother seemed to take no offense to the joke, and instead smiled benevolently. His appearance was gallant, dispelling the awkward atmosphere that had filled the room moments ago. From the bottom of my heart, I felt grateful for him.

Then, realizing he didn’t bring his guard, I tilted my head to the side. Though honestly, it was more preferable that he’d come alone—I didn’t want to see *that man’s* face today.

Noticing my stare, my brother said, “I left him in my office,” answering my unsaid question without hesitation. “He was reluctant, but once I asked if he intended to interrupt a private reunion between siblings...his expression soured but he held his tongue.”

I was taken aback by how amused my brother sounded. My sister also appeared shocked by how informal the crown prince—known for impeccable conduct—was behaving. Her large doe eyes fluttered opened and closed.

“Rose. Since we’re all finally together again, why don’t we have tea in the courtyard today?”

“Huh? Oh, okay,” she replied automatically, stumbling over her words a little. But then a small “ah” escaped her throat as she remembered something. “But I still don’t have permission from the doctor to go outside...”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve already received his blessing. It will be fine as long as you don’t stay out for too long.” He picked up the lap blanket next to the bed and reached out to my sister.

“Huh? Ch-Chris?” she yelped.

He placed his hands under her back and knees and lifted her up. Her face flushed with surprise and embarrassment.

My brother’s brows furrowed as he peered at her in his arms. “You’re so light. Are you eating properly?”

“Yes, I am... But that’s not the point! Please put me down!” she cried out.

Her distressed tone snapped me out of my daze and I stopped acting as a bystander. “Chris, your tomfoolery has gone too far. Please hand her over.” As I stuck out my arms, my teary sister and exasperated brother both focused on me.

“If you’re jealous then just say so,” he muttered.

“I *am* jealous, so please let me take over,” I admitted immediately.

A broad smile spread across his face. “Next time.”

There definitely won’t be a next time... I glared at him spitefully, but Chris showed no intention of relinquishing her to me. I breathed out my irritation in a

sigh.

“Chris! I can walk on my own!” pleaded my sister.

“I can’t allow that. Isn’t the doctor still forbidding unnecessary movement?”

“Then why don’t we have tea in my room?!”

“It’s not good for your health to stay shut inside all the time. It’ll ruin your mood. Also, the doctor did say it’s better if you get some sunlight.”

My brother easily dismissed all of my sister’s objections. His reasoning was logical, so she found it difficult to protest. And the whole time she wavered about what to say, his legs continued moving. With my sister still in his arms, he deftly opened the door. The knights stationed outside ogled at them in surprise.

Of course they would, I thought with a tired sigh. *The crown prince is known to be a textbook prize pupil. It’s inevitable to be shocked when he suddenly behaves eccentrically.*

They stared at him as though they were watching a rare creature, but my brother remained unperturbed.

Incidentally, my sister had reached the limit of her abashment and was covering her scarlet face with her hands while trying to curl up into a ball. *She’s so cute... I mean, how pitiful.*

Chris glanced at the guards. “We’re going to the courtyard. We’ll be back in one hour.”

“U-Understood,” one replied with an overawed nod.

The knight next to him was my sister’s personal guard... *If I remember correctly, his name is Klaus.* The acrimonious look on his face brought back memories. *He’s a Rosemary supremacist and his expression screams that he doesn’t care about other people. How nostalgic. I’m in no position to say this, but he hasn’t changed a bit.*

“Arrange for tea to be brought to the gazebo,” I ordered a different knight since Klaus would likely follow us. Once I confirmed that one of them had assented, I followed my brother.

Outside, the weather was clear. The sunbeams were warm, and the gentle

breeze felt pleasant. My sister, who had been sulking about being carried through the whole castle by my brother, seemed to have forgotten her ire and was now in a great mood.

"It's a wonderful autumn day," she murmured, squinting up.

I remembered that she wasn't one to hold a grudge in general. Even when she was annoyed, if I apologized with tears in my eyes, she would readily forgive me. She never stayed angry for long, and I'd hardly ever seen her in a foul mood. Even now, she gazed with twinkling eyes at the tea and sweets the maids had brought. *She truly is an adorable one.*

My sister had the status and power to obtain every fine delicacy imaginable, as many dresses she could want, and all the rare gems she could think of, but she was as humble as always. She stabbed her fork into a tart decorated with juicy, vibrant fruits, and her countenance cheered that she was the happiest person in the world.

I inadvertently watched her bring the silver fork and cake to her little mouth. She chewed thoroughly, savoring it slowly, and then closed her eyes in ecstasy. *Indeed. So cute. I could watch her forever.*

"I could watch you forever," someone else said, vocalizing my inner thoughts.

Chris's eyes also appeared ecstatic. His gaze was not directed at the sweets...but at my sister, who was relishing small bites of cake. *We may be brothers, but we're only half-related and our age is separated by many years—how is it that our thoughts are in sync?*

I respected my older brother, but I also found this situation a bit unpleasant. However, the choice to avert my gaze away from my lovely sister did not exist.

Feeling our eyes on her, Rose's brows sagged with discomfort. "Um... It's hard to eat if you both stare at me so hard."

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Chris without looking away. "You're just so adorable."

My sister tilted her head to the side. "Ador—?" The meaning of his saccharine words seemed lost on her.

Chris had always been one to dote on her, but he had shown his affection with actions, not words. He hadn't ever been someone to spout sugar-sweet compliments. I understood how my befuddled sister felt.

"Do you want to eat my share?" Chris pushed the cake on his own plate toward her.

Her eyes sparkled with delight for a split second, but then she shut them and shook her head, trying to banish some inclination. "I will refrain, but thank you for thinking of me."

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

The words caught in her throat. Her gaze roamed aimlessly and her empty left hand stealthily rubbed her stomach, which I could see from where I sat.

"Because...it's not healthy to eat too many sweets."

My sister was probably fretting that she would gain weight. I wanted to ask her what on earth she was so worried about—she was skinny enough that I could snap her if I tried just a bit. But, I held my tongue. In the past, I had been scolded by an older woman who'd informed me that it was uncouth for men to comment upon a lady's appearance. She'd said that there were times when being subjective was more important than being objective.

"I see." My brother docilely pulled the plate back and became crestfallen. "I want to watch you eat forever—it's unfortunate that it torments you."

Red-faced, she pressed her hand against her chest and uttered, "Hnngh." She put down her fork and then cleared her throat, trying to gloss over her embarrassment. "Chris... What's going on with you today?"

"Hmm?"

"Well... You seem different than normal."

Chris smiled wryly. "Am I acting strange?"

She immediately tried to evade his question. "Oh, uh, I wouldn't go as far as to say that."

"No, Chris is acting strange today," I answered in her stead, not mincing my words. "You didn't used to be so clingy."

“J-Johan,” my sister said in a fluster.

My brother chuckled loudly, clutching his stomach. My sister and I were flabbergasted at the sight. Then, as though we’d agreed to it beforehand, she and I exchanged a look.

Chris was genuinely acting strange. The knights and maids who stood at a distance gawked at him, eyes round as saucers. They couldn’t hear our conversation, but they had surely never seen the crown prince laugh heartily while holding his stomach. Our onlookers looked like they were wondering if they were dreaming. Personally, I wished they would decide this truly was one and forget what they’d seen.

After laughing for some time, my brother wiped a tear from his eye. “I’m just doing the things I’ve always wanted to do. Though, my behavior must look strange on the outside.”

“Things you’ve always wanted to do?” I parroted and then shot him a sullen glare.

Chris disregarded my enmity, responding with an aloof smile. “Even if it was just a pretense, I wanted to be a dependable older brother for you both, but I quit. When I thought about how Rose would marry and leave, I couldn’t control myself any longer,” he said honestly.

My sister’s eyes rounded and even I took a great deal of psychological shock.

“I feel lonely knowing that you will be gone soon.”

“Chris...” she said.

“I’m lonely, Rose.” He was not attacking her or scolding her—he was only an older brother wistful of their future parting. She returned his gaze, eyes moist.

Seeing them like that made me feel relieved. *Oh. It’s okay for me to admit it.*

“Sister,” I called out to her. She turned toward me. “I feel lonely as well.”

I didn’t want to trouble her, nor did I want to interfere with her happiness. I didn’t desire for her to remain unwed for her whole life either. If possible, I wished to have the right to protect her forever, but I knew that was impossible since I was her blood-related brother.

If there was a man who would love her, protect her for eternity, and make her happy, then that would be best. However, even though I understood that in my mind, my heart could not obey.

As a child, Rosemary had been the only one there for me. No one had cared much for me, handling me with great caution like they would a tumor. But she had faced me head-to-head. Sometimes she'd scolded me; other times she'd pampered me. She had always supported my needs... She was my one and only beloved.

The world I'd lived in was narrow, and I'd probably depended on my sister for much. After I'd left to study abroad in our neighboring nation, though I interacted with all kinds of people, she had remained special to me. Thinking of her had helped me get through the hard times...and she was the one who I'd wished to share my happiness with.

But now, my dear sister was to leave and go somewhere I could not reach her.

How could I not feel lonely? How could I not be upset? And yet, I figured I could not express those feelings to her. I had restrained myself, thinking that I mustn't hold her back from becoming happy. I did not want to thoughtlessly do something that might hurt her.

But Chris had stated his feelings without hesitation...and my sister had accepted them. Surely, I would also be allowed to convey how I felt. These emotions were too large for me to handle; I wanted her to accept even a small fragment of them. Was that too much to wish for?

"I'm...lonely." I looked down, squeezing my fist on top of my lap.

An ivory hand reached over and rested on mine. My beloved sister smiled at me, tears welling up in the corner of her eyes. "Thank you, Johan."

"S-Sister..."

"I'm glad you hold me so dear that you're reluctant to part from me." She blushed, trying to hide her embarrassment, and added, "Though, marriage is still far off in the future."

I see. She accepted my feelings. If I can impart my emotions without making her sad, then that's enough for me. I leaned over, pressing my forehead into her

petite shoulder. Her soft hand patted my head and I basked in that simple joy.

“Let me join in too.” Our brother got up from his seat and hugged us from behind.

“Oh, Chris,” my sister whispered with a quiet laugh. Her body gently thrumming against me felt pleasant.

“Regardless of whether you marry or how old you become, the fact that we are siblings won’t change. You must tell me first if anything ever happens. I promise I’ll come running straight to you.”

She nodded slightly. “Okay,” she agreed, her tone hoarse and wrought with emotion.

“We will always be your allies,” he continued.

She nodded again.

I examined her with a fleeting glimpse. The smile she wore on her graceful visage was no less jubilant than when she spoke about her engagement to Sir Leonhart.

Content, I closed my eyes once more.

The Reincarnated Princess's Wish

It was almost time for Kanon to return to Earth. Now that I was finally released from being trapped in bed all day, I could roam about as I pleased, but I didn't have the time to leisurely deepen our friendship.

Well, at the very least, I'd like to make memories with her, I thought. Suddenly, an idea hit me: I could guide her around the royal capital!

I asked Dr. Telemann if that would be allowed in my current condition, but he looked at me with a pained expression. "Your strength has weakened because you've spent so long in convalescence," he said, obliquely rejecting my request.

It was a logical reason, so I couldn't hound him on the subject. Furthermore, a recovering princess and the nation's savior sightseeing together would require a large number of accompanying personnel. That would be a real headache—it would place a burden on not only the castle's royal guards, but also the royal knights that protected the town...and perhaps even the commoners. Definitely a disaster in the making.

And, after giving it more thought, I don't know the capital well enough to give someone a tour. Alas.

Right around when I was brooding over what I could do with Kanon, I received a letter from Lord Julius. It started with a standard greeting, and he inquired about my health. But, when I read a certain sentence around the middle of the second page, my eyes widened. Simultaneously surprised and delighted, an idea came to mind.

"This is it!" I exclaimed.

There's nothing more suitable than this for making memories with Kanon. All right! Fired up, I began to make arrangements to contact Lord Julius and confirm Kanon's availability. Understanding that speed was of the essence, he immediately coordinated with my plans and paid the castle a visit two days later.

"Lady Mary. It's been too long. What an honor it is to see you again." Lord

Julius was as gentlemanly as always—he naturally took my hand and kissed the back of it. Kanon, who was watching us, blushed.

Yep, isn't Lord Julius cool? I feel you.

"How does your health fare?" he asked.

"As you can see, I'm fit as a fiddle now," I replied. "I do appreciate your concern."

"That is wonderful news. When he heard you were bedridden, my nephew worried so much that he almost collapsed."

"Uncle."

"He would drift about the halls with a ghastly complexion—"

"Uncle!"

Accompanying Lord Julius was George, who was now glaring at his uncle, a crimson flush flooding his face.

"It sounds like you were very concerned for me," I said.

"Oh, um, well... Yes," George stammered. For some reason, his blush deepened even more.

I'm happy to hear he was worried about me...so why is he reacting like this? I guess boys his age tend to get embarrassed easily. Is he at the age where he tries to act churlish?

"Thank you," I told him.

He paused for a moment, and his eyes narrowed in abashment. "I'm glad that you're doing well."

George had matured into a beautiful young noble man. He possessed Emma's delicate facial features, and though he was slender, he had a well-balanced physique that brimmed with grace. I'd heard he was quite popular in high society—the object of admiration for many unmarried noble ladies.

His behavior sort of reminds me of a motorcycle-stealing hoodlum in a certain song from the 1980s... I don't think that suits his image though, so I wish he'd quit it with the outlaw act.

“I have someone I’d like you two to meet.” I placed my hand on Kanon’s back, then turned toward Lord Julius and George. “This is Lady Kanon Fuzuki. She’s from a distant nation and is a very precious friend of mine.”

“Precious friend?” Kanon whispered, as though she were digesting my words. She broke out into a broad smile.

Huh? What’s with that reaction? She’s too friggin’ adorable!

Wanting to share the urge that had welled up inside of me, I looked at the two men nearby, using my eyes to try and transmit the feeling of drowning in cuteness. Lord Julius wore an amused smile and nodded, but George didn’t seem to get the message—he cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“Lady Kanon, this is Lord Julius zu Eigel and Lord George zu Eigel. I’ve been good friends with them since I was young.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Fuzuki Kanon!” she said with a bow.

Their eyes widened. She had learned the etiquette of this world, but our customs weren’t so ingrained that she could perform them spur of the moment. *It’s a Japanese person’s instinct to bow when meeting new people—quite a difficult habit to drop.*

The two bewildered men, quickly reaching some realization, returned her greeting. “It’s a pleasure,” they said. They’d likely recalled that I’d mentioned she was from a distant nation.

“So you’re from a foreign country?” Lord Julius asked, beaming with curiosity. “I’m a merchant of sorts, so I’ve traveled to many nations. Perhaps I’ve even visited your homeland. May I ask where you were born?”

“Huh?” Kanon shot me an unsure look. “My country is very far away, so I doubt you’ve heard of it.”

“Don’t worry. Lord Julius isn’t a gentleman who would push a subject that a lady clearly does not wish to discuss.” I threw a glance at him, pressuring him to agree. “Right?”

He smiled wryly, brought his hand to his chest, and bowed in an exaggerated, joking motion. “Of course, my lady.”

Ohhh, how pompous...but still so handsome. I gazed at him, impressed in spite of myself.

In a dour mood, George sighed. “Uncle, didn’t we come to give Lady Mary something?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Lord Julius struck his palm with his fist like he’d just remembered—he then turned behind him to the attendant, who was standing with a leather bag in hand. Lord Julius took the bag from him and held it up to me. “This is the item I described in my letter. A foreign traveler shared some with me, though regrettably, I could only obtain a small amount.”

“Please don’t be sorry. This is wonderful!” I took the little bag, which was about the length of two fists. It was much heavier than its size led on. *I’ve wanted to find this since I was a child... The fact that it reaches me now, at this moment, is like a small miracle.*

“You fulfilled the promise we made long ago. Thank you so much.” I peered up at Lord Julius, cradling the bag lovingly against my chest.

He smiled and shook his head. “No, Lady Mary. Not only did you wish for this in a different form, but it only fell into my hands by chance. I haven’t even established a trade route for it yet. It’s far too soon for any gratitude.”

I plan to use this to make sweets, so I’m actually grateful it’s been processed into powder already. However, I decided to keep those thoughts to myself; it would be tactless to admit that to a gentleman who’d aimed to flawlessly grant my wish. “I will look forward to when you can secure consistent inventory.”

“Yes, leave it to me,” he said in a reliable tone, which elicited a smile out of me.

“I plan to use this powder at once to make sweets with Lady Kanon. Would you two care to try our final product?”

The idea of a girl-only day making sweets and having a tea party with Kanon sounds wonderful...but since they came all the way here with the ingredient I need, I’d feel guilty sending them home empty-handed.

I wasn’t sure if they’d gleaned my inner voice, but they both firmly refused.

“Quite the tempting offer,” said Lord Julius, “but we have business to attend to in the afternoon, so we must be going now.”

“That’s a pity.”

“Next time, I will prepare the item you wish for, so please, invite me again.”

“Yes, of course.” *I’ll be able to try making something else then.*

My elation was interrupted when a voice called out to me.

“Excuse me, Lady Mary.”

I turned toward the voice and met George’s serious gaze. He seemed nervous; his handsome features were slightly tense.

“May I borrow you for a moment? Just for a bit?”

“Yes, I have time now.” I nodded, though I was perplexed and did not have a clue as to what he wished to speak about.

Lord Julius returned to their carriage first and Kanon went ahead to the kitchen to wait for me. Out of consideration for the fact that I was soon to be engaged, George and I moved to the courtyard instead of speaking inside a room. George was silent and in deep thought while we strolled through the garden.

The Affection of the Marquis's Son

A gentle breeze blew through the air, and gold danced in the corner of my eyes. I turned, my gaze chasing after it. I thought it was an off-season butterfly, but it was the hair of the girl walking beside me.

With every step she took, her wavy, platinum-blonde hair would catch the sunrays and sparkle. Her blue eyes also gleamed strikingly under daylight, and her light-pink lips shone gorgeously against her fair, clear skin. Her dress—made of dark-red cloth patterned with flowers and garnished with black lace—gave off a mature impression that suited her well.

It pained me how well I understood why people called her "Nevel's greatest treasure" or "the living gem." My first love, whom I had not seen in a very long time, had grown into a dazzlingly beautiful young woman. She had always been a pretty flower high out of my reach...but it felt like she was even more distant now.

"Lord George?" a lovely voice called my name, pulling me out of the recesses of my thoughts.

"Yes?" My shoulders jerked excessively and I looked at Lady Mary. She smiled at me, her countenance tinged with unease. I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself in it.

Why am I always like this? I want to show her my most handsome and attractive sides, but when I'm in front of her, I'm always at my worst. I felt my face get hot and I lowered my gaze, which only caused the concern on Lady Mary's visage to grow. *Oh, what am I to do now?*

I had met countless people while working with my uncle, while learning the duties of a marquis from the head of the family (my father), and while at social gatherings. I'd been introduced to men and women of all ages and from all walks of life. I had talked to them, and at times, almost crossed a few dangerous bridges. But I'd always overcome those difficulties with the knowledge and conversational skills that my uncle and father had drilled into me.

None of those experiences were of use to me now. I was always like this—in front of Lady Mary, I always became the world's most pathetic man. I constantly feared that she would say something indicating she was weary of my presence. If she ever implied, even in a roundabout manner, that she wished to go home, I don't think I'd be able to recover.

Even now, if the smallest sigh spilled from her dainty lips, it would afflict a fatal wound upon me. However, contrary to my expectations, Lady Mary did not say that she wished to leave. She did not even urge me to spit out my business. She merely began to speak, as though the awkward silence did not exist.

"My younger brother returned home the other day."

"Y-Yes. I heard His Highness Johan finished his studies in the Kingdom of Vint and returned to Nevel. I was surprised by the suddenness."

Lady Mary nodded happily. "Rightly so. He pushed himself considerably to return; he's being restricted to his office for the time being." She smiled mischievously. "He'll be able to keep my company after he's finished handling his remaining work."

I also smiled, taken in by her jubilance. *That's right. I didn't fall for her beautiful appearance—I was attracted by how she treats others with thoughtfulness and kindness as easily as she breathes.*

"Johan is acquainted with many merchants, so he's knowledgeable about other nations. I can't wait to hear all the stories he has to tell."

Her bottomless curiosity was charming too. Even when the topic was something that would bore other noble ladies, her eyes twinkled and she listened enthusiastically.

"Well, Lady Mary, you've always been interested in the cultures of other nations, ever since we were children."

"Yes, extremely."

"I was always astonished by the depth of your knowledge."

"I was merely presenting the information I read from books. I'm fairly

ignorant of the ways of the world.”

I knew that she adored books more than dresses or jewels. She was well-learned, but never arrogant.

Lady Mary peered at something in the distance. “To tell the truth, I want to go see all those places with my own eyes. I don’t want to experience them through someone else—I’d like to experience them in person, unembellished.”

And she truly was the embodiment of proactivity. Her straightforward gaze had remained unchanged from childhood. That dazzling resplendence made me squint.

Sensing my stare fixed upon her, she smiled bitterly. “That remark was improper. I’m unfit to be a princess.” She shrugged jokingly. “Please keep it a secret.”

Though she had a pure and honest nature, she did not lose sight of her own position. She understood that if she acted as she pleased, she would affect her surroundings, which was why she belied her feelings with a smile. *Every time I learn of your strengths and weaknesses, my feelings become unbearable.*

I came to a halt. “It’s because you’re like that...that I...” I murmured so quietly that my voice disappeared into the wind.

“Huh?” She stopped as well, prompting me to repeat my words.

I saw myself reflected in her clear blue eyes—I wanted this moment to last forever. Harboring such an impossible wish in my heart, I opened my mouth.

“It’s behavior unfit for a princess...but I always found you radiant.”

“Huh?” Caught off guard, Lady Mary’s eyes went round.

“You’re more than just beautiful and cute. You are incredibly knowledgeable and compassionate. To my younger self, you were like a goddess.”

“Um, uh, huuuh?!”

Her pale skin gradually turned rosy. She must’ve been sick of hearing flowery compliments, but she still became shy from my clumsy words; her innocence was lovely.

My eyes narrowed and the corners of my lips quirked up slightly. As though I were unveiling a treasured secret, I whispered tenderly, “You were my first love.”

Lady Mary froze, her eyes wide as saucers from surprise. She remained still for a brief moment, and then her whole face became dyed in scarlet. Her reaction startled me—there must’ve been numerous men who had kneeled before her, begging for her love, and I’d only managed to confess under the pretense of reminiscence.

I was overjoyed that she hadn’t merely laughed off my failure of a confession. From somewhere in the corner of my heart, the skinny and timid boy I’d once been smiled broadly. *I’m happy I loved Lady Mary,* he said.

“I heard you’re engaged now,” I continued.

Lady Mary, blushing madly and still as stone, blinked. I’d abruptly altered the course of the conversation and in all likelihood, she was having trouble keeping up. “Yes,” she replied, confused.

I smiled blithely, doing my best to conceal any pain I felt—I certainly did not want to let my expression crumble. “Congratulations.”

Lady Mary’s countenance softened. She could’ve scolded me, assuming I’d been teasing her, but she did not reproach me. I sensed her relief when she understood that this was, in the end, a story of the past.

“Thank you,” she said with a bashful smile.

My heart ached just a bit...just the slightest twinge, but above all, I felt proud. “I wish you happiness.”

I was glad. I’d put an end to these feelings without thoughtlessly hurting the one I loved just when she’d reached the height of her happiness.

I boarded the carriage and sat down with a word. My uncle, who sat in front of me, glanced in my direction but immediately pointed his gaze out the window again. Without a care for the silence that had settled between us, the carriage took off.

Listening to the wheels bounce on the cobblestone, I absentmindedly recalled what had occurred moments ago. I had managed to convey my affections to my longtime love, albeit in past tense.

She didn't take it as a joke, but it also concluded without burdening her with the weight of my feelings. I didn't stutter, and I even congratulated her. I'd say I did well...for me anyway. I nodded and looked out the window. The sky was clear and refreshing, just like my feelings.

I heard a quiet, strangled grunt, and a raindrop hit the back of my hand that rested on my lap. There was not a cloud in the sky, and I was under a roof, but rain poured incessantly, wetting my hand without any sign of ceasing.

Why? Stop. I couldn't hold out until the very end... I don't want the finale to be miserable like this. I want to become a man who will make her feel proud that she was my first love... Acting like this just won't do.

I lifted my hands to hide my face, but the torrent of droplets continued to fall.

My uncle, who'd remained quiet until now, said in a gentle tone, "I can more or less imagine what's going through your head."

I stole a glance at him through the cracks of my fingers. His vision was still fixed outside the window. Averting his gaze was his way of being thoughtful—a considerate gesture to protect his pitiful nephew's dignity.

"George, you're a dashing young man." Contrary to his kind and tranquil appearance, my uncle was actually a harsh person, but his current voice was filled with a tenderness that felt unlike him. "I don't care what others may say—I'm proud you're my nephew."

I bit my lip, holding back my desire to weep. *"Normally, you'd criticize me mercilessly—don't be kind during moments like this!"* I wanted to retort. *It makes me want to cry even harder. I don't want to humiliate myself any more than I already have.*

"Though," he added with a teasing smile, "you're a tad unattractive right now."

I scowled at him, tears trickling down my cheeks. "Shut up."

“Cry as much as you like and properly move past this. That way, the time you spent thinking about Lady Mary will not be wasted. Instead, the affection you once harbored will become nourishment for your future self.”

I gave him a tiny nod in reply, eyes cast down. The aching in my chest was still too vivid for me to imagine a time when it would become a past memory. Her expressions, gestures, and words that I loved were seared into my mind—they were still my present, but one day...

A white handkerchief suddenly obscured my vision, which had been looking a little ways into the future. Over that piece of cloth, my uncle gently tapped my head, trying to soothe me.

“Cheer up, young man.”

“You sound like an old geezer.” I brushed his hand away and wiped my tears. The dull throbbing of my head oddly made me feel a bit better.

The Reincarnated Princess's Friend

He surprised me... I held my cheeks, which were still hot from earlier, and exhaled. *I'm not used to hearing compliments that I'm beautiful or cute. And on top of that, he even made doubly sure I'd be flustered by telling me I was his first love. I'm devoted to Sir Leonhart, so I have no immunity against romantic events. That was way too much stimulation for me!*

I recalled how lovely George used to be as a child. He was far cuter than me—a girl who only knew how to rush ahead in a straight line like a wild boar—and yet somehow, he saw me as a romantic interest... It was a bit embarrassing.

Back then, I didn't have the poise to consider how others perceived me...but maybe Sir Leonhart also thought my behavior was cute at one point. The idea of that made me feel extremely embarrassed... *Well, whatever the case, I'm going to tie the knot with Sir Leonhart!* I shook my head, trying to cast off my thoughts.

Klaus, who was waiting behind me, called out, "Lady Rosemary."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I question whether you should be making such expressions in a location as public as this," he remarked. His countenance was more worried than exasperated.

"Urk," I groaned. *My face must've been quite slovenly for Klaus to admonish me. He's right though—pulling silly faces in the middle of the garden will make me stand out a lot.* "You're right. I should refrain from mannerisms that will cast doubt upon my dignity as a princess. I will be more careful."

Though I'd just experienced quite the shock, I reigned in my expression. I coughed and pulled myself together.

The wrinkles creasing Klaus's brow deepend. "No, that's not what I was implying. Let sleeping lions lie, or else you will go through needless trouble." He flicked his eyes toward the castle.

I followed his gaze but there was not a soul standing near the window of the

second floor corridors. I tilted my head to the side, puzzled at the expression he'd used. *Sleeping lions? Not dogs?* In the end, Klaus did not elaborate any further, and I headed to the kitchen where Kanon was waiting.

We didn't want our dresses to get dirty, so Kanon and I changed into clothes that were easier to work in. She wore a wine-red dress with a white apron—just like Little Red Riding Hood. I'd also prepared a pair of caramel colored high-laced boots for her and specified that the side of her hair be braided. *I did a great job. Yep. She's adorable—a perfect score in cuteness!*

"Now then, shall we begin cooking?" I asked.

"Yes!" she replied energetically.

A smile spread across my face. "Lady Kanon, please sift this." I handed her the potato starch and a sieve.

"Got it!"

She dusted a flat, shallow ceramic tray with the potato starch. While I had her doing that, I prepped some ingredients that I had readied the day prior. On the table, I placed a bowl covered with a damp cloth and a bottle of candied chestnuts.

"I'm done. What should I do next?" Kanon asked as she wiped her hands.

I beckoned her over. "Please come here."

I lifted the cloth off the bowl, revealing beans crushed into a paste. Seeing the white bean paste, Kanon blinked. She appeared to be deliberating over whether this was the same white bean paste from her memories.

"Take a good amount of this in your hand—about this much—put a chestnut inside, and then make it into a ball." I wrapped a chestnut with white bean paste, rolled it into the proper size, and then placed it on a plate as an example.

"Just leave it to me!" she exclaimed in a reliable tone.

I entrusted her with the task and then picked up the leather bag Lord Julius had given me as a gift. Inside was a certain white substance, one of my heart's greatest desires: glutinous rice. It had already been processed and ground into a

fine powder, so it was actually closer to a refined rice flour.

There are no nations that eat rice as a staple on Nevel's continent, so perhaps this was transported from a very distant island country. I guess whoever brought it thought that glutinous rice was unlikely to permeate a culture that doesn't have a rice-centered diet. After all, there are a lot of people who like daifuku or dango even if they don't eat glutinous rice sweets such as botamochi.

I poured the rice flour and sugar into a bowl, added a bit of water, and mixed it together. Once I saw that the solids had dissolved, I transferred the mixture into a saucepan. I lit the fire and slowly stirred everything.

The liquid gradually solidified and I worked hard to knead it. It was labor that required a lot of strength; my arms trembled with exertion. I kept an eye on the heat level and continued to stir vigorously until the mixture became a translucent lump. Taken aback by my frantic expression, Kanon offered to take over, but I refused.

Somehow, I managed to keep up the mixing until it was ready and then moved the sticky blob to the tray that Kanon had covered with potato starch. I divided it with a wooden spatula and used a small portion to wrap a bean paste ball that Kanon had diligently made.

"And done!"

Kanon stared at the white lump rolling on top of my palm with round eyes. "This is..." She froze, dumbfounded by the little dessert.

I beamed at her. "One chestnut daifuku ready to be eaten."

Her large eyes widened even more and her slightly parted lips quivered. They closed into a tight line for a moment and then she smiled. "I'm surprised. I never thought I'd see wagashi in another world."

After a heartbeat, she uttered, "Oh, wagashi is..." and rapidly began to describe what the word meant, all while wearing that strained smile.

She was so flustered that she went from explaining how wagashi were sweets from Japan to talking about the seasons and what not. She didn't even notice that she'd gone off on a tangent.

I placed the finished daifuku on a plate, wiped my fingers, and gently scooped up Kanon's pale hand. She trembled imperceptibly when I wrapped my hands around hers. Her countenance crumpled for a split second as if she were about to cry, but she quickly caught herself.

"I see daifuku also exists in this country," she remarked.

Kanon was a strong person. She'd been suddenly summoned to another world, and though she'd been involved in nonsensical things like fighting a demon lord, she still stood tall on her own two feet without crying. In a situation where she knew no one, had no supportive friends or family, and had an unreasonable demand foisted upon her, she did not curse or hate anyone. She merely continued to try her best.



You're so strong and kind... I respect you greatly. So I don't want to lie to you. I hope you will forgive my selfishness and allow me to disclose my secret to you.

"No, Nevel doesn't have daifuku." I slowly shook my head.

She froze. "But..."

"I am the only person in this nation who can make it."

"Oh, then, did you read about it in a book? This is an amazing reproduction." Kanon's eyes lit up, amazed by the notion.

I looked her in the eye and shook my head once more. Then, I leaned my face close to her ear. In a whisper so quiet that only she could hear, I confided the secret that I had never told anyone else: I, too, was Japanese.

After a lengthy silence, a faint "Huh?" spilled out of her like a soft sigh.

"In my case, I was not transferred, but reincarnated," I added in a hushed tone.

She gaped at me. This time, she not only forgot how to speak, but also how to breathe. Her eyes were so pretty that I felt somewhat uncomfortable, but I didn't want to avert my gaze.

"It's a secret, okay?" I told her with a wry smile.

Kanon's brows shot up, an unexpected reaction which shook me. She slipped out of my grasp and threw her arms around me.

Confused by the sudden hug, I struggled to process what was happening. "Lady Kanon?"

"I'll come see you again!"

"Huh?"

"I have to return home first, but we'll meet again. As my reward for helping defeat the demon lord, I asked the king for the right to attend your wedding."

Destroying the demon lord was a tremendous achievement—I never would've expected that she'd use her grand wish for something like that. I was shocked beyond words.

"I don't know if it's possible, but I'll try to bring some souvenirs! Maybe some

sweets that have a decent shelf life. I can also bring cosmetics or anything else you want—I'll do my best! And I'll also negotiate to see if they can summon me after a shorter interval. So..." She paused and peered straight at me. "I won't let you feel lonely."

That's... That's unfair. She's cuter and lovelier than anyone else, and now she's cool too? That's gotta be a foul.

I wrapped my hand around Kanon's back and clung to her tightly, tears streaming out of my eyes. Kanon patted my head the whole time I cried.

After we composed ourselves, we happily ate the daifuku and then slept in the same bed, grumbling that it was just for one night. And, of course, we stayed up late, sharing whispers until the morning with blankets pulled over our heads.

The Reincarnated Princess's Visit

Kanon's returned to earth... But we promised we'd meet again, so there's no reason to lament. Even though I know that, loneliness is hitting hard.

As I made sweets, I ruminated about the fun times we'd had. I'd already used up all the rice flour, so it was normal baked treats today. I finished making a batch of madeleines—there were too many for one person to eat, which made me feel even lonelier.

I want to enjoy this with someone. Sir Leonhart's face came to mind first. He seemed extremely busy, and I knew I shouldn't hinder his work, but I still wished to see him. It'd only been ten days since we'd last met, but that was still *ten...whole...days...* Each day I couldn't catch a glimpse of him whittled away more of my mental strength.

If I could only just exchange a word or two... No, just let me see him from afar. Goodness, I think I'm suffering from Sir Leonhart deficiency.

I sat on the sofa in my room, absentmindedly staring at nothing, and sighed. "I'll only be a nuisance if I do," I mumbled to myself.

"A nuisance to whom?" Klaus asked.

"Huh?" I raised my head and our eyes met. "It's noth—"

I tried to dodge the subject, but Klaus spoke over me. "I know it's impertinent of me to ask, but aren't those refreshments for the captain?" He glanced at the basket on my lap, which of course contained my handmade madeleines.

My instinct was to fervently deny that, but the words caught in my throat. Baking sweets had been my way of distracting myself, except...midway through, Sir Leonhart's face had kept coming to mind. Plus, I hadn't eaten the madeleines, just actively packed them away in a basket, so I had no excuses. Feeling embarrassed about my contradictory behavior, I covered the basket with my hands in an attempt to hide it.

Eyes downcast, I whispered an excuse: "I do not intend to be a nuisance to his work."

“Guh.” A groan came from above my head.

I looked up to see Klaus clutching his heart for some reason. I was about to ask if he was feeling ill, but he coughed and smoothed over his appearance. His red cheeks were instantly replaced with a serious look, and then he knelt in front of me.

“You know he wouldn’t think of you as a nuisance,” Klaus asserted in a forceful and reassuring tone. Feeling pressured, I unwittingly straightened my posture. “I can confirm this. The captain would never hold you with disdain.”

“Klaus...”

“And if I see him treat you crudely—even once—then I will cut him down where he stands.”

“Klaus?!” My expression turned grave from how abruptly the mood had become disturbing. I’d been a bit touched by his sentiments, but he’d given me no time to relish the moment.

Even if it was a joke to assuage my uncertainty, I wish he’d come up with something easier to laugh at... That was *a joke, right? Klaus is puffing up proudly there, but he’s surely jesting, right? Right?!*

I eyed him apprehensively.

Klaus beamed at me. “Thus, follow your heart.” He then pushed my back with his hand. “Do what you wish.”

As always, my personal escort was a sycophant through and through. Yet, he was no mere obsequious yes-man—he understood my thoughts, had a complete grasp of the problems that plagued me, and endorsed it all. He was more like a foolish grandpa doting on his grandchild than a loyal retainer. There were times when I wondered if his behavior was acceptable, but right now, I appreciated the validation.

“Thank you, Klaus.” I pumped myself up with a small “let’s go!” and then stood up.

Klaus followed my lead and got up as well, inquiring about my next action with his gaze.

“Since I already made these, I might as well give some to him as a snack.”

“Understood.” Klaus nodded.

And so, we made our way to Sir Leonhart’s office. The closer I got, the more my nerves grew. By the time I could see the door, I already felt like running away. However, before Klaus could even knock, someone inside opened the door.

The person who came out wasn’t Sir Leonhart, but a man who wore the same uniform as Klaus. He must’ve belonged to the royal guard as well, and he looked slightly older than Sir Leonhart. Though he did not have any memorable features, I recognized his kind countenance that exuded a peaceful character. *I think he’s Sir Leonhart’s adjutant. If I recall, his name is Marx.* His complexion was poor and he seemed very busy.

When he saw Klaus outside the room, surprise flashed across his features for a split second. “This is unusual. Do you need something from the captain...?” he asked, his tone as gentle as his face. However, he trailed off when he noticed my presence; his eyes went wide and he did a double take. He quickly covered up his fluster, placed his hand over his chest, and bowed. “Pardon my discourtesy.”

I held out my hand, indicating for him to be at ease. “No, I’m the discourteous one for visiting without any notice. I won’t disturb your work, so may I have a moment?”

“Understood.” Marx turned on his heel to reenter the office. “I will get the captain imme—”

“Wait.” I said, stopping him in his tracks. “I don’t want to impose for too long. I merely brought some refreshments. Could you pass this to him?”

After seeing Marx’s weary appearance, I felt I couldn’t possibly interrupt Sir Leonhart now. *I don’t want my selfishness to take up his time. I’d rather he spent any free moments napping instead of with me.*

“An angel?” Marx murmured to himself, holding the corner of his eyes.

It felt like I’d just witnessed something I shouldn’t have—I genuinely became worried. “Well, I baked a lot, so please share them with everyone, okay?” I

handed him the basket and turned to leave. “Bye then.”

However, Marx hurriedly stopped me. “Please wait. Is there any way you could hand them to the captain yourself?”

“Huh?”

“It will make him very happy.” He returned the basket to my hands.

“But isn’t he busy?” I questioned, perplexed.

Marx shook his head. “It’s true that our workload has increased. However, it’s an amount that the captain would normally complete with ease but...” He paused and smiled wryly. “These past few days, his thoughts seemed preoccupied with something else and his efficiency has dropped substantially.”

He phrased it vaguely, but it sounded like he knew the cause behind Sir Leonhart’s distraction. I could tell that Marx was a reliable man who understood his superior well, but that familiarity also made me think that their relationship was a bit unfair. *What a petty woman I am.*

“If you speak with him, I’m sure he’ll regain his spark. Now, please, go on in.” Although Marx’s tone was gentle, he gave me no option to decline, and I subsequently found myself ushered into the office by a mysterious force.

Klaus saw me off, staying behind, and the door shut with a heartless click. *Huh? Wait a sec! I didn’t mentally prepare myself for this!* I stood by the entrance, petrified.

“Marx,” someone called out. This was the voice of the man I loved, a voice that I would never mishear for someone else. Buried in a mountain of paperwork, he continued to speak without looking up. “Sorry, but could you bring me some tea? My mind is foggy right now, so make it a strong one.”

I’d gladly brew you tea, but that’s probably not what I should do here. Hold on—is it okay for me to reply when that request was meant for Marx? I kept quiet, cold sweat streaming out of my pores.

Sir Leonhart raised his head, suspicious of the silence in the wake of his question. His movements looked awfully sluggish and weighed down by fatigue. “Mar—” His voice faded out midway. After a beat, his almond eyes widened.

More silence blanketed the room. He sat there frozen, his gaze fixed upon me. I, on the other hand, had been thrown into the room without readying myself for this, so my mind was completely blank. Unsure of what I should say, I weakly shot him a foolish smile, which caused Sir Leonhart to stand up with a start.

“Ro—”

“Ah.”

His vigorous motion caused the stack of documents in front of him to collapse. Several pieces of paper slipped off his desk, fluttering gracefully in the air before softly landing on the carpet. I bent down and reached out to pick them up. Military boots entered my vision and a shadow fell over me. I was clutching a piece of paper as a large hand covered mine. Startled, a strange-sounding hiccup of some sort escaped my throat.

“Um... Uh, the documents...” I mumbled, desperately trying to squeeze words out.

“Thank you very much,” he said, smoothly taking the papers out of my grasp.

I watched him roughly toss them on top of his desk and then rest his hand over mine again. The way he wrapped his fingers around me was unlike the coincidental contact from moments ago—there was intention housed in his touch.

“Sir...Leon?” I said timidly.

His grip was a bit too tight and it hurt slightly, but the temperature of his skin weighed on my mind more than that force. I stared down at his hands. He was oddly cold, and he felt tense, as though blood wasn’t circulating to the tips of his fingers.

“Do you need something from me?” he asked.

His words likely held no ulterior motives, but my cowardly side peeked out of my heart. *Maybe I really shouldn’t have come. I showed up without any business; of course he’ll think I’m a hindrance. If I get the impression that he thinks I’m a nuisance, I’ll hand him the basket and quickly be on my way.*

Decision made, I resolutely lifted my gaze to him.

Our eyes locked, and I was dumbfounded—Sir Leonhart's expression was beyond my expectations. He didn't look at me as though I was a bother, nor did he appear happy. Just like his frigid hands, the blood had drained from his face, and he was rigid with fear.

Why does he look so terrified? Sir Leonhart isn't afraid of anything... Well, that's probably an overstatement, but I doubt there are many things that could frighten him.

"Princess?" Sir Leonhart looked at me quizzically.

I snapped out of my shocked daze and frantically searched for words. I'd been seconds away from saying, *"I'm sorry for bothering you,"* or *"I have business to attend to, so I'll be going now,"* but even with my head in a jumble, I knew those were not the appropriate things to say in this situation. My thoughts were spinning in circles, but I spotted the basket I'd neglected at the edge of my vision. *Oh, yeah!* I held it out to Sir Leonhart.

"I baked some madeleines! I was hoping you'd try some!"

His eyes grew round, and he seemed caught off guard by the basket I pushed in front of him. "They're...for me?" he asked, pointing to himself in surprise.

I nodded vigorously.

He digested my words silently, and then the corner of his eyes softened in relief. "I'm elated."

I'm a hundred times more elated though! I mentally shouted with indignance, feeling beside myself with joy. His defenseless smile was powerful, like a surprise invasion. I clutched my heart—judging by the intense palpitations, maybe I was suffering from arrhythmia. Yet somehow, I managed to stand. *Calm down. Calm down.* I repeated those words to myself like a spell.

"If you have time right now, would you like to accompany me during my break?" Sir Leonhart suggested, gesturing to the guest sofa.

"Are you sure? What about your work?"

"I tried to cram too much into my schedule and now I can't think straight.

Taking a break would actually help me make more progress."

Well, if he says that much, then I have no reason to refuse. I rejoiced and took a seat, then placed the basket on the table and opened the lid. I pointed the contents toward the seat across from me, which was where I thought Sir Leonhart would sit.

Creak. I felt the sofa sink down—something heavy dented the cushions beside me.

Hmm? What's that? I turned to my left. For some reason, Sir Leonhart had taken a seat next to me. And...he was quite close.

A question mark rose up over my befuddled head. My brain locked up. He was sitting next to *me*—not on the one-seater sofa available across the table. This was a highly unexpected situation.

He snaked his arm around my waist, pulling me close; my head was on the verge of bursting. *What's happening? It hasn't been formalized yet, but we* are *engaged, so this distance isn't an issue... Yet, up until now, Sir Leonhart has never tried to forcefully close the distance between us. This was likely out of consideration for me since I was a beginner in romance. He's always a gentleman...unless his emotions get the better of him. So...where's this coming from?!*

Who knows if he was aware of my inner turmoil...? Regardless, Sir Leonhart brought his face close to the side of my head and affectionately nuzzled me. *I have no idea what I'm supposed to do!*

"S-S-S-Sir Leon?!" I didn't have the composure to be ashamed of my stammering. After all, our current position was far more embarrassing.

"You met the son of Marquis Eigel the other day, correct?"

"Huh?" It took me a moment to process the sudden question. I blinked a few times and then nodded. "Oh, yes."

Marquis Eigel only had one son—George. I'd certainly met with him the other day, so I agreed with Sir Leonhart's statement. Though, it wasn't as if I understood in the slightest why he'd brought it up.

“It seems that the two of you spoke in the garden—what was it about?” he asked.

I was at a loss. *How should I reply?* I didn’t really feel guilty of anything, but I simply couldn’t immediately recall the contents of our innocuous conversation. However, as though he loathed the seconds of silence, the arm around my waist tightened. It felt like a declaration that he would never let go.

“Ummm... I told him Johan had returned home and we made some small talk... Oh, and he congratulated me too,” I vocalized my recollections as they came, but Sir Leonhart’s dark expression persisted. His gaze stayed glued to me.

“Is that all?”

I hesitated. *I remember something else that came up during our chat...but wouldn’t telling my fiancé be lacking in tact?*

“There’s nothing else in particular,” I replied, feeling somewhat fraught.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes squinted. The back of his long, rough finger gently caressed my cheek. “Nothing, huh? Even though you made such an adorable expression that day?”

“Uweh...?”

A-A-Ador... Adorable expression?! I reacted more to his words than his accusatory tone. *Gosh. Adorable expression? That means Sir Leonhart subjectively thinks I’m cute, right? What kind?! What kind of face do I need to make to get him to think that again?!*

I didn’t know how Sir Leonhart perceived me while I was in mental disarray, but he currently wore a tragic and sorrowful expression. His furrowed brows, downcast eyes, and shadowy countenance had an attractive allure.

“Marquis Eigel’s son has adored you since he was a child. Perhaps he confessed to you.”

I stiffened, which in retrospect was a terrible move. Sir Leonhart’s eyes glinted precariously.

“Did it please you to hear that he’d loved you for so long? Did you make that face when he begged for you to choose him?”

“N-No, of course not!” Realizing that the story was rapidly deviating from reality, I became flustered.

I *had* been a little happy to hear that I was his first love, but in the end, that had all been just talk of the past. If George had confessed to me the way Sir Leonhart described, I would’ve rejected him without hesitation. Wanting to clarify what had happened, I opened my mouth—at the same time, Sir Leonhart wrapped his hands around my cheeks. Pain tinged his jet-black eyes as he squinted at a close distance.

“No. I won’t give you to anyone else,” he said before fiercely pressing his lips against mine.

My eyes widened. He leaned over me, pushing me down until I felt the sofa cushion against my back and head. I knew I’d been pinned down. By that point, my brain was already overloaded and had stopped functioning.

Then, something pliable slipped into my mouth, tracing moisture across my lips and parting my teeth. As someone who had zero experience in all things romance, it was impossible for me not to panic.

“Hng...” I reflexively bit down—not too hard—and Sir Leonhart’s face twisted in pain.

Wh-What should I do? I hurt him! But I’m not trying to reject him. I paled and tried to apologize in a trembling voice. “Ah, I-I’m sorry.” My head was filled with the fear that he’d detest me. “I’m sorry for injuring you... Please, don’t hate me.”

After a beat, he uttered in a confused tone, “Huh?”

I nervously peered up—he looked just as baffled as his voice had sounded. The shadow and sorrow had been wiped clean off his face. Sir Leonhart examined me, wavering over something, before opening his mouth.

“You don’t want to be hated by me?”

“Of course not,” I replied instantly. My bewilderment grew and I tilted my head to the side. *Why would you ask me such an obvious question with an incredulous look?*

“When you were in the garden...when you were with *him*...you blushed. Please tell me what you were thinking at the time,” he requested, his eyes meeting mine.

I thought for a moment and then remembered. As though I were reenacting the moment, I flushed scarlet. Sir Leonhart waited quietly for me to speak. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to turn tail and run, but I knew escape was impossible. Resigning myself to my fate, I took a few deep breaths and then answered him in a faint whisper.

“Lord George called me cute...” I noticed Sir Leonhart’s brows instantly knit together, so I hurriedly continued, “And I wondered if you’d ever considered me cute as well!”

“Huh...?” The noise that spilled from his throat sounded like a stupefied and astonished sigh. At that moment, I felt even shyer.

R-Right! He probably thinks I’m spouting nonsense! I covered my crimson face with my hands. “I just thought it’d be nice if you did,” I murmured in a small voice. “It was but a mere wish.” *I want to dissolve into the air and flee from reality.*

Suddenly, he hugged me tightly.

“I have.”

“Huh?”

“Every time we meet.” He then paused. “No, even when we do *not* meet—I think you are cute every day. You are cuter and more beautiful than anyone else.”

A tiny squeal burst from my lips.

“Every time your hair flutters in the air, it sparkles like the sun’s rays and steals my breath away. Your sky-blue eyes are more stunning than any expensive precious gem. I love your alabaster hands and your little fingernails that are sculpted like mermaid scales. Your straightforward nature and kindness are admirable virtues, and I find your bottomless curiosity and honesty very adorable.”

“Wait, I can’t handle this,” I said in protest. *There’s too much information pouring out of his mouth—I simply cannot process it all! I’m going to die from overdosing!*

I pressed my hands over Sir Leonhart’s mouth, physically forcing him to stop the eloquent flood of words gushing out. *I don’t want him to get the wrong idea again and think I hate him or something...but I’m teary-eyed and blushing so hard that there’s no way he’d misunderstand.*

At close proximity, he maintained eye contact and gently removed my palm from his face. He brushed the back of my hand with a kiss and then grasped it, weaving his fingers with mine.

“I love you.”

“Hwah?”

“I love you. I love you more than the world,” he whispered. “So please, don’t cast me away.”

His entreaty threw me for a loop. *C-Cast him away?* Consternation overcame me—a choice that I never would’ve even considered my entire life had suddenly sprung up from nowhere. I had no idea what he could possibly be referring to, but I responded regardless. “I-I would never cast you away though.”

“Of course you wouldn’t...” Sir Leonhart’s cheeks reddened in shame and he drooped like a sad puppy. “I already knew you were such a person.”

He’s so...! He’s so cute*!*

He roughly ruffled his hair with his fingers and then sighed. “I was jealous because you made such an adorable expression in front of another man.”

I looked at him with surprise.

“It made me wonder—what would I do if you realized that a man closer to your age would be better? How would I react if you pretended that the discussion of our engagement never happened? I’m such a pathetic man.” His mouth curved into a distraught smile. “Please forget I said that.”

My chest pounded, betraying me as the hopeless woman that I was. I was not

upset in the slightest that he had doubted me. After all, I was very familiar with fear and trepidation. I knew that loving with an earnest heart also led to anxiety at times, so my only opinion on the matter was that this jealous side of him was also lovely.

He was about to sit up, but I reached my arm out, buried my fingers in his stiff black hair, and gently caressed his head. He stopped moving, surprised by my unexpected action.

The corners of my eyes softened, and my lips relaxed into a gentle smile. *I love him. He's so cute. I want to be with him forever!* My heart screamed such things as I stared at his handsome face, my gaze radiating all the love I could muster. "Sir Leon, you're adorable. I love you."

He breathed in sharply and his face dyed an even deeper shade of crimson. Red, all the way up to his ears. He held his hand over his mouth, averted his gaze, and then muttered, "You are far more adorable than I..."

He was charming even when he whispered weakly. I stretched up and kissed his cheek. He got a bit upset at that and lectured me, saying something like "I want to cherish you, so please stop doing things like that." (I am heavily paraphrasing here.) Regardless, only he would know whether I had truly reflected upon my actions or not.

A Certain Spy's Melancholy

My resting place for the day was a room in an old inn. I lay down on my bed, and the out-of-tune song echoing from the tavern downstairs made me furrow my brows.

"So damn noisy," I complained.

"Oh well. Can't be helped for today," said Bear, my roommate, though he seemed to be in an awfully good mood rather than a begrudging one. He placed a bottle of alcohol and some cups on top of the shabby table near his bed. His expression was gentler than I'd ever seen it, and I didn't need to wonder about his cheery attitude; he was happy for the same reason as the folks downstairs who were drinking enough booze to bathe in.

The citizens were going wild over the engagement between the Kingdom of Nevel's acclaimed hero and the goddess.

Nevel's knight captain, Leonhart von Orsein (also known as the Black Lion General), was a brave soldier, renowned not only within our borders but in all the surrounding nations too. Not only was he the eldest son to a County of venerable lineage and talented to boot, but he also had an excellent reputation. On top of all that, his handsome appearance was enough of a reason for women to never give him peace. A man with such assets had been a bachelor for so long, but now his partner had finally been decided.

His fiancée was Nevel's first princess, Rosemary von Velfalt. Though her beauty was radiant like the sunlight and she had boundless knowledge, she was a humble and compassionate princess. She boasted overwhelming popularity among the citizens of Nevel, as well as those in the neighboring nation of Vint, and at some point, people had begun to call her "goddess."

Denizens throughout Nevel were bubbling with excitement—their nation's two greatest treasures were to be wed. Our current location was normally a desolate place located near the edge of the royal capital, but the atmosphere here was no exception to the festive mood—the people had been celebrating the whole day. Numerous drunks had hassled me during my short walk from

the inn's entrance to the top of the stairs. I'd needlessly wasted much energy on tearing off rowdy partiers who were clamoring about celebratory booze or urging me to drink on their tab.

"Crow, want to join me for a drink?" Bear offered me a cup.

His question gave me pause. I eventually got up, accepting his offer. He uncorked the bottle and poured wine up to the cup's brim. The dark-red liquid was like crystal, and the light of the lantern reflected off it, casting illusory ripples on its surface.

Without bothering to propose a toast, I took a gulp and choked on the strong, bitter taste. I didn't have the time to relish the intense flavor as the alcohol burned down my throat. After a beat, the distinct smoky aroma of the barrel-aged wine wafted up my nose.

Unlike the cheap booze that the folks in the tavern were guzzling down like water, this drink had no unpleasant aftertaste. It must've been quite costly, but it still had quite a powerful flavor profile.

I glared reproachfully at Bear, but he didn't notice due to his unusually chipper mood. He sipped his wine—his mouth relaxed in a small smile with the boisterous laughter as his background. He looked like a father delighted about his child's marriage.

Though I was about to tease him, I restrained myself. He would probably agree without any embarrassment, and in reality, his sentiments *were* probably close to fatherly love. I averted my gaze from the man celebrating his old pal and his benefactor's engagement, then tipped my cup. I practically lapped the wine from the glass; the deep flavor of tannins dragged out the bitter feelings residing in the depths of my heart.

I hadn't met with the princess for a while now. Though I watched over her from the shadows, the reverse was not true. *That night* had been the last time her azure, gemlike eyes had gazed upon me—the very night she had fallen into despair under the control of the demon lord.

That night...I had failed to save her.

Just remembering it made my insides burn. The frustration, disappointment,

and anger I'd felt toward myself... All the emotions vividly rushed back to me.

Even though she'd been frightened on that night... Even though that brave princess had been shaking and hoping for someone to help her... I'd been right there, and yet, I had been unable to do a thing for her. The unusual drowsiness and fatigue that had assaulted me was no excuse; magical powers were of no matter either. After all, Leonhart von Orsein had rescued her in defiance of all that.

Such a valiant man was to be the princess's fiancé. They suited each other too perfectly. There was nothing more for me to say. A captured princess marrying the knight who'd saved her... It was like a fairy tale too good to be true. There was nothing funny about it, yet I laughed.

"Crow."

I raised my head—Bear held out the wine bottle toward me. The cup in my hands had emptied without me realizing it. I thought for a moment and then held it up. Though I didn't particularly enjoy wine, I felt like drinking a bit more today. Right as the rim of my cup and the mouth of the bottle clinked together, the door to our room flew open without warning.

"Sorry for intruding!" A man loudly stomped in without bothering to erase his presence.

Bear and I furrowed our brows and exchanged glances. *"The nasty guy's shown up,"* we both said wordlessly.

"Yes, you're intruding," I griped. "So go home."

"Ohhh, I'm *so* hurt. Shouldn't you be showing your exhausted colleague some gratitude after they've worked so hard?" He smiled aloofly, not even bothering to pretend to be offended, which only inflamed my irritation.

His kind face and calm demeanor made him seem like a harmless, gentle man. However, depending on how he was handled, his true form was an assassin who could become a powerful drug more poisonous than any toxin—Ratte. Currently, there was only one person who could keep a tight hold on his reins.

"Give me some too," Ratte requested, taking a seat on my bed without permission. He brazenly reached out for Bear's wine.

“No,” Bear declined curtly.

“How stingy.” Ratte pouted, though didn’t seem offended in the slightest. He rummaged through his own belongings and pulled out a bottle of alcohol he’d procured from somewhere. He proceeded to uncork it with his teeth and gulp it down straight from the bottle.

“You finished?” I asked.

Ratte glanced at me. He’d recently been in the neighboring nation of Lapter under secret orders. Apparently, he had completed his greatest mission of replacing their king, but their internal affairs were far from stable.

“I’ve worked plenty. I told him to find someone else to do the rest,” he replied immediately.

My eyes widened. *Told who? Don’t tell me he said that to the new sovereign...?* Exasperated, I remembered the existence of the antithesis to Ratte’s relaxed attitude—I looked across at Bear, and his expression was indescribable.

Bear was a noble by origin and had been formerly affiliated with the knight order, so Ratte’s attitude toward royalty must’ve been unthinkable for him. It was a bit late to be shocked though. Ratte fundamentally did not curry favor with anyone.

“In the first place, I belong to the princess,” Ratte said, the corners of his eyes arching merrily. He drank from the bottle again, but this time respectfully, without any sign of his chaotic movements from seconds ago. The polite gesture made me suspicious of what he was plotting next.

Was I the first to react, or had Bear beaten me to the punch? Regardless, we were both awash with irritation and directed our scowls at him.

Ratte tilted his head in a deliberate manner. “Hmm?”

“Are you seriously planning to have her hire you?” The question came not from me, but from Bear, in a deep, rumbling voice. He was oozing a murderous aura that would make a normal person break out in goosebumps, but Ratte did not flinch at all.

“There’s no planning necessary. In fact, it’s already been set in stone. The princess has agreed as well. It’s too late.”

It was irksome to see him laugh, but regrettably, everything he’d spouted was sound logic—their contract had already been exchanged and it was not our place to interfere. Furthermore, Ratte was an aggravatingly outstanding man. Bear and I might’ve had the edge in limited areas such as simple contests of strength or speed, but when it came to a battle to the death, where anything was fair game, neither of us could match him.

Ratte would undeniably be helpful to the princess and, above all, he would never betray her...and only her. He could even double as a guard *and* a spy—he was the epitome of an ideal hired hand.

Even still, we couldn’t reconcile the personal grudge we held against him. Bear didn’t want such a dangerous person hanging around his precious friend’s marriage. And I...

“Why don’t you two just be honest?” Ratte gave an exaggerated shrug and sighed. Then, the corners of his lips quirked up into a smirk. “Just admit it—you’re jealous.”

Ratte’s assertion was correct; he’d hit the nail right on the head. I didn’t dislike working under Nevel’s king, and in fact, he was the sole person I respected. There should’ve been nothing to be dissatisfied about. I knew my place and would never wish to have the princess for myself. I wasn’t that big a fool.

But...I hated that I would be separated from her. The years I had spent watching over her from the sidelines had been excessively enjoyable and striking. And now I had an unattainable, childish dream: if it were possible, I wanted her to remain as the princess forever.

“Oh? Bulls-eye?” Ratte watched us brood in silence, his eyes growing round.

I knew this was his way of mocking us on purpose. He knew how to read the room, but he intentionally chose not to for the sake of agitating people. I glared at him. Bear also shot him a murderous gaze, and the cup in his strong grip cracked, letting out a hollow scream.

“I’ll kill you,” we spat in perfect unison.

Amused, Ratte chuckled. “Go ahead and try.”

That accursed savage smile... How can I choke the life out of this man? Someone, please teach me how.

The Reincarnated Princess's Resolution

An engagement ceremony was held for Sir Leonhart and me under the witness of my parents, the king and queen of Nevel. The commemoration was then announced to the citizens, and I received many congratulations from numerous people. I was at the height of my happiness...or I should've been, but I ran into one small hiccup before I could attain my greatest joy.

It happened a little over half a month after Kanon returned to Earth. Father summoned Sir Leonhart and me to his office. Thinking that this was a meeting to discuss this and that about our betrothal, my head was so high in the clouds that I didn't notice the worry clouding Sir Leonhart's countenance.

In retrospect, father must've said something to him beforehand. If he hadn't, then there would be no explanation for how all the groundwork had been laid ahead of time.

My carefree self first noticed something was abnormal when I entered my father's room. He was not the only one waiting for us—Chris and Johan were there as well. *Oh?* I wondered, tilting my head to the side. They were my family, so it wasn't too strange for them to be present...but wouldn't my mother's attendance have been more important than my brothers'?

Why are they here? The question echoed loudly in my head. I didn't feel the regular sense of security from seeing my precious older brother and adorable little brother. I felt restless, and my heart hammered away in my chest. *Honestly, I have a terrible feeling about this.*

I'd unwittingly stopped in my tracks, so Sir Leonhart gently pushed on my back, urging me to move forward. I looked up at his handsome face; his brows drooped dejectedly. However, he kept his palm firmly planted on my back. By the time I realized that I might be about to face a new adversity unaided and alone, all paths of escape had already been thoroughly shut down. Not knowing when to give up, I remained in place, standing straight as a board.

"Sit." My father pointed his gaze at the sofa.

I reluctantly obeyed. Sir Leonhart sat next to me, about a fist's length away. Ill at ease, I glanced at father—his usual expressionless veneer crumbled ever so slightly. He raised an eyebrow slightly, his exasperation showing through.

"Don't be so wary," he said.

"Not possible," I replied reflexively.

I mean, the atmosphere here feels like I'm in the middle of a stressful interview! Chris and Johan look deadly serious and Sir Leonhart looks stiff. I doubt a heartwarming future, one where my family gives me their blessing and wishes me a happy future with my husband, is about to play out. My head may be a field of flowers, but even I can tell that much!

"Sister. It's nothing to be afraid of, don't worry," Johan said, wearing a textbook smile.

Oh, I'm very afraid. My younger brother's smile was definitely hiding an ulterior motive. My wariness shot up. Seeing how I was trembling like a tiny animal, Chris's shapely brows sagged, perturbed.

"Rose. I want you to calm down and listen carefully."

That was a classic line used to deliver bad news; I already wanted to cry. Sir Leonhart covertly gave my hand an encouraging squeeze and I returned it.

"I-If this is to tell me we can't be engaged anymore...then I refuse to listen!" I glared at them with teary eyes.

Chris's eyes went round and my father let out a long sigh. Johan squinted, scowling at our linked hands.

"No one is insinuating such a thing. We're telling you to calm down," father said, his voice dripping with irritation.

Johan muttered under his breath, "I would oppose it if I could."

I wanted to retort with, *"I can hear you, y'know!"* but I had a feeling I'd be stirring up a hornet's nest, so I stopped myself.

"If anything, it's the opposite," my father continued. "We're here to discuss how to solve the obstacles that may hinder your engagement."

“Huh?” I blinked in surprise then turned to Sir Leonhart with questioning eyes. He smiled, though it did not reach his eyes, and nodded. Seeing that, I finally calmed down and straightened my posture. If I could indeed marry him, then overcoming an obstacle or two was no problem. That was how it had always been, ever since I’d reincarnated.

“So, what are these obstacles?” I asked.

My father let out a bored-sounding snort, eyeing my determined expression. “It looks like you’ll do anything for him.”

“Yes.” I didn’t feel shy about agreeing—it was the truth.

I felt Sir Leonhart’s hand flinch, so I glanced up at him. He turned away, trying to hide his blush. His expression led me to flush red as well, but a cough from Johan quickly returned me to my senses.

My father watched this exchange, and when we looked back, he nodded gravely. “Very well. Then become a duchess.”

A long pall of silence blanketed the room. I wordlessly peered at his face as I digested what he’d just said.

Of the five ranks of nobility, dukes and duchesses are the highest. A duchess is connected to royalty by blood... For example, when Chris succeeds the throne, Johan will become the royal prince but he could be conferred the title of duke to demote him to a subject of the nation. Father said “duchess” which must refer to me, seeing as I’m the only woman here. Because I have royal blood, I do *have the right to receive that title. I see... I’ll become a duchess. But, uh, why?*

“Huh?” I uttered, absolutely dumbfounded.

I gaped at him, mouth hanging half-open. Chris, Johan, and Sir Leonhart regarded me with concerned eyes. I felt cold sweat running down my back. They all looked at me with a sense of pity, but the reality thrust before me was not one I could escape.

“H-How did you reach that conclusion? Will I not be marrying into the Orsein Countdom?” I stammered out of impatience and unease.

My father just stared at me quietly.

Unable to stay on the sidelines, Johan interjected. “That’s the first issue—count is not a suitable title for a royal princess.”

There were plenty of examples where a princess had married a count in Nevel’s history and in this world. Furthermore, the Orsein family was an ancient and honorable lineage, one the royal family trusted deeply. They were a distinguished bloodline who had produced innumerable outstanding knights.

I frantically raised these points to them, but everyone here already recognized Sir Leonhart’s worth...which meant my arguments were not solid enough to persuade them.

“Even if he does not wed you, Leonhart’s accomplishments will promote the Orsein family to the status of marquis. However, that rank is still insufficient for you,” my father stated.

“Insufficient?” I parroted, astonished. *“So what should I do?”* I almost asked, but the answer came flooding back to me immediately.

So that’s why he told me to become a duchess... I felt dizzy.

“You are too influential for a mere marquis to marry.” Father paused; his pale-blue eyes captivated me. “You have earned too many achievements.”

I was astounded. My eyes bulged—he sounded as though he were insulting me. *What did he just say?! What did this* geezer *just say?!* You’re *the one who told me that I needed to rack up accomplishments if I wanted to marry Sir Leonhart!*

“Father, aren’t you the one who told me to build up my achievements?!” I cried, unable to hold my thoughts back.

“And I’ve already told you—you overdid it. Learn some moderation.” He shot me a look that said, *“You fool.”*

I balled my hands into fists. *You shitty old maaan!* I clenched my teeth, barely restraining myself back from flying into a rage. Sir Leonhart rubbed my back; his gentle pats soothed me and cooled my fury.

“Princess. Why don’t we hear them out first?” he suggested.

“Y-Yes, of course,” I replied. *Whoops, that was close. If I show him such a*

demonic expression before we marry, he'll cancel our engagement! I took a deep breath and composed my face. The stares of my family hurt, but Chris's lonely gaze aside, I severely wished to ignore the other two.

"Rose, His Majesty's phrasing is questionable...but it's true that your achievements are immense," my older brother said.

Johan nodded. "He's right, sister. Because of your contributions to resolve the epidemic in Vint, there are now many citizens who revere you as a goddess. Your name is more renowned there than their own nobility; if we aren't careful, your power could rival that of Nevel's ruler." He paused for a moment. "Also, the 'Dew of the Sea' was it? As the inventor of a ground-breaking product, you're also very popular among sailors and merchants."

"Huh? H-How...?" I asked, trailing off. *"How did you find out?"*

Picking up on the question I hadn't finished, a troubled smile crept across Chris's face. "It started out as a rumor, and now it's become a well-known fact."

Are you serious? Well, "Dew of the Sea" is a nickname for "Rosemary" among merchants, so I suppose the name was a pathetic attempt to hide its creator... I didn't want to be exposed, but it seems like I was the only one trying to conceal my identity. How embarrassing.

"Above all, you are the master of the Khuer tribe and pivotal to the medical facility project," my older brother continued. "If you marry into another family, it'll provoke needless strife."

I couldn't even groan. My only act of defiance was to silently glare at my father. Considering the fact that a hospital would be built because of me in the future, it would bring trouble if I married into another noble's family. The facility was planned to double as a learning institute—thus, the standard of medical treatment would rise, and youths who aspired to become doctors would gather there.

Along with an influx of youth, the flow of medical equipment and other goods would also flourish at the site where the facility was erected. Ultimately, it had the potential to become a great metropolis of this world. The construction area was within the royal family's territory, and at this rate, it would be under the crown's jurisdiction, but as the Khuer tribe's master, I was not exactly

irrelevant.

Good and bad, all of my responsibilities would come with me wherever I went. If Sir Leonhart and I married, then the Orsein family would become an enormous authority. The power balance between noble families would be thrown off, and the situation would breed discord.

In anticipation of this, the feudal lords had written a petition—they would make an exception if I became a duchess. That was preferable to the power concentrating too much in one family, and the proposition was also supported by the high nobility.

Mm-hmm, I see. So everything has already been arranged. The only thing left is for my brain and heart to go along with the plan. Sir Leonhart wrapped his hands around my clammy fingertips, which were cold from nerves. I timidly met his gaze; his gentle eyes urged me to speak.

After a beat, I said, “Sir Leonhart.”

“Yes.”

“The Orsein family’s successor is, well...”

He interrupted me gently. “Fortunately, my family is blessed with two more sons. The younger of my brothers has been learning from my father for many years now, so the family heir is of no concern.”

“I see.”

I hung my head; the words I wanted to say were caught in my throat. If I were to claim the title of duchess, then Sir Leonhart would become my spouse—he would not be head of the family, but *my* husband. Though I knew he was not one to care for power or status, I felt guilty that he wouldn’t get what he deserved for his abilities and achievements...because of me.

“Lady Rosemary.”

I timidly looked up at him.

“I do not desire status or glory. I desire you.”

Taken aback, a nonsensical sound spilled from my lips. “Huh...?”

Sir Leonhart peered at me, his eyes resolute, and continued. “If I can be your husband, then I will not balk before any hardship. No matter what happens, I vow to be by your side and support you forever.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I forced them down. I was worried about whether I could be the head of a household—a pushover like myself was probably not suited for politics or managing territory. It would be difficult to lead others if I was not broad-minded and tolerant toward people of all kinds.

But the man I loved had shown me such devotion... I didn’t want to flee from those responsibilities now. Also, I wasn’t alone. I had friends who would help me and a husband who would stay close to my side. If I didn’t know how to do something, I could ask him; if there was a field I struggled with, I could rely on him. We could share our worries together.

I smiled clumsily at Sir Leonhart, then asked, “It may be an arduous path, but will you tread it with me?”

His eyes narrowed in delight. “Yes, with pleasure.”

When I saw his smile, I was convinced once again. *I’m sure that if I’m with him, I can walk down any road.*

The Pathos of a Certain Doctor

I moved the ground-up herbs from the mortar to a piece of paper. Rolf, who'd been waiting next to me, tapped against the edge of the paper with his finger to nudge the powder to the center, then deftly folded it.

I was so impressed by his careful work that I almost forgot he was normally an insufferable brat. I put the wheel pestle down. My shoulders were rigid and crying out in pain, so I rolled them and shook my hands out.

"Ahhh," I groaned in a deep voice. "My shoulders are so stiff!"

Rolf placed the chartula on a different desk and shot me an exasperated glance. "Are you an old man?"

"I *am* an old man." I replied with a snort. *What's this kid saying?*

I was almost thirty; what was there to pretend? I felt my age all the more since I was speaking to a young boy in his teens.

Rolf blinked at me a few times and then frowned. He looked grumpy rather than displeased. He sulked like a child and muttered, "If you're an old man...then her husband's an old man too."

Indeed, I agreed internally. Just the other day, our master's fiancé had been officially chosen. He was a man around my age, though that was the only quality we shared. Our rank and pedigree were so different that it would be impertinent of me to compare myself to him. There was also the matter of his appearance—I didn't even want to compete with him in that aspect.

The phrase "old man" did not apply to that lady-killer...

"Mary will get angry if she hears you say that," I chided.

By now, I'd seen her with the knight captain many times, and I could tell she was absolutely smitten. From what I'd heard, she'd been earnestly pursuing him for a long while. Mary was nonchalant when it came to herself, and she even tolerated it when a certain rascal called her "ugly," but she likely wouldn't stay quiet if her sweetheart were insulted.

“If you don’t want her to wholeheartedly despise you, then cut it out,” I finished.

Rolf withdrew into petulant silence, but I knew he understood. He might’ve been a cheeky brat, but he was also quick-witted and he knew how to read the situation. He was not rude to anyone besides Mary, and though he called her nasty things like “ugly,” he had a good hold on how much she would permit. When they’d transitioned from being fellow children around the same age to a princess and her subordinate, he’d been relieved that her true nature had remained the same. Though I wasn’t sure whether he himself realized that.

“If it was going to be someone that age, then...”

“Hmm?”

“It would’ve been nice if it’d been you, Wolf.”

Rolf’s remark surprised me speechless. I blinked a few times and took a long hard look at him. He awkwardly averted his gaze, but he did not retract his statement.

“Well, other than our ages, the knight captain and I don’t share any resemblance,” I said.

“How so?”

“In just about everything. He’s the captain of a powerful nation’s royal guard and the eldest son of a prestigious countdom. And have you seen how handsome he is?”

“But you’re the eldest son of the Khuer tribe. Sure, we’re from a village in the middle of nowhere, but we’re unrivaled when it comes to medicine. Considering how your value will shoot up in leaps and bounds in the future, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to tie you down through marriage. And yeah, your face is scary, but it’s still attractive. I’ve seen a fair number of castle maids swoon over you.”

Well, well, it seems Rolf unexpectedly has a favorable opinion of me. “Who would’ve thought that you held me in such high regard. The Khuer tribe *is* invaluable, and I know that I’m quite the catch.” I patted Rolf on the head to calm him down. “But I’m missing the most important thing. I’m sure you already

know what that is.”

I’d contemplated what I would do if Mary were forced into an undesirable marriage for the sake of her country. If it were a loveless, political engagement and her fiancé a good-for-nothing man, then I would’ve done everything in my power to interfere.

But this was not that. *Mary...* That young girl, with her own strength, had secured the husband she’d long desired. They were a happy couple, so deep in love that there was no room for anyone to butt in. What could I do about that?

Also, Mary had originally assumed she would be marrying into another family, but I was satisfied to hear that she would become the head of a dukedom. It was fine for a princess to be the master of the Khuer tribe, but I feared it would be too heavy a responsibility if she were to become a countess as well. Finding a different master was unthinkable, but I did not want our existence to cause her trouble.

“I’m content with Mary as our master.”

Rolf stayed silent in protest.

I smiled wryly. “It’s about time you do something about your tendency to exclude outsiders. Why don’t you take a page out of Lily’s book?”

I understood his desire to surround himself with only people he was comfortable with—I also sympathized with his dislike of being separated from someone he cherished because of marriage. That attitude would’ve been fine if we were a tribe that felt complete just staying inside our safe bubble...in other words, the tribe we’d been up until recently. But we had all decided to interact with the outside world. We needed to accept change.

Back in our little village, Lily had been more stubborn and scared of strangers than Rolf. But now, she was proactively socializing with folks outside our tribe. She was still anxious around strangers, and her nerves showed when she met new people, but she endeavored to expand her world. Her efforts to help her master, Mary, were commendable.

Also, Lily had changed in another heartwarming fashion. I gazed out the window at the medicinal plant garden. She was tending to the herbs, and next

to her was a young man clad in conspicuous white robes—Michael von Diebolt.

He was an earth-affinity sorcerer who had the rare power to heal and accelerate the growth of plants. He had wonderful chemistry with us doctors, so we had formed an intimate bond. He was gentle, affable, and a humble person.

Lily kept her distance from men, unless they were Khuer, but she was close to Michael. Their personalities meshed well and they got along in conversation—I often saw them enjoying themselves together.

They spent much of their time chatting about Mary, and even the other day, they had been discussing her marriage with great zeal. I knew Lily was an ardent admirer of Mary, but Michael also had a tendency to idolize her. Rather than being a boy and a girl on the same wavelength, their relationship was more like kindred spirits who had no interest in the opposite sex. However, it would be a joyful event if they became a married couple in the future.

Such thoughts ran through my head as I watched Lily and Michael. Rolf's gaze was pointed in the same direction as mine.

"Doesn't it feel like Lily's been stolen away? Aren't you lonely?" I asked. My question harbored no ill will, only curiosity.

I'd been prepared for him to snap at me, but he only sighed, exasperated. "I'm not a dumb kid."

The warmth in his gaze as he observed them was testimony enough: he wasn't just putting up a strong front. Lily and Rolf were more than childhood friends, so close that they couldn't see each other as romantic interests. Rolf wore the expression of a younger brother delighted by his older sister's happiness.

"I do tend to exclude others, but I'm not such a rotten person that I'd get in the way of someone who seems so happy," he said.

"Rolf..." My eyes narrowed at him. "Then, what was your comment from a few seconds ago?"

"It's called nepotism." He shrugged aloofly.

The corners of my mouth curved up slightly and his nonsensical demeanor made my head tilt from side to side. He looked me straight in the eye, and a mature, wry smile spread across his face. “I know the most important thing is for her to be happy...but wouldn’t it be even better if you were happy too?”

I was so caught off guard that I forgot how to speak. I’d never thought anyone would notice. In fact, I’d deliberately pretended not to notice myself. I adored a girl over twelve years younger than me, and I’d put a lid on those feelings since it would be problematic if that adoration grew to become something more. I’d stopped watering that sprout before it could grow and had patiently waited for it to wither.

Unfortunately, it was tenacious—sometimes, I needed to frantically crush it down when it threatened to bud out of nowhere. If someone were to ask me whether my feelings were love, I would reply *“I don’t know.”* And I wanted to keep it that way—unknown. Her engagement was the finishing blow. I’d never give a name to that feeling and it would slowly shrivel up and perish.

“Thanks,” I said, messily ruffling Rolf’s hair. Though he looked annoyed, he didn’t smack my hand away. *What a nice boy.* “I’m a happy man.” I laughed, pretending not to notice the tiny ache in my chest.

The Reincarnated Princess Exhausted

My cheek pressed against a desk as I languidly sat in the rest area adjacent to the greenhouse. *I know this is improper behavior for a princess, but please overlook it. I'm tired. I'm super, extremely, very tired.*

I stared through the glass at the plants. Their presence soothed my soul, and I let out a long sigh. The path to becoming a duchess was far harsher than I'd anticipated.

To begin with, I lacked the training needed to become one. Though I had received education to be a princess, the subject matter was different. I had been preparing my whole life to marry into another family, whether it be the royalty of another nation or a high-ranking noble, so it was only natural that my instruction differed from a duchess, who was tasked with managing territory.

I thought I had understood that, but learning jargon nonsense was tough. In addition, I was painfully aware from my previous life that math and I were an especially bad mix. I wanted to complain, *"Everyone should focus on their own specialty, so can't I just hire an accountant?!"* But, it would be problematic if the person on top didn't understand the basics. That sound logic made me break out in tears.

Also, I was being crammed full of knowledge at an obscenely rapid pace. I had to memorize one topic after the next—my head felt like it was about to burst. In the first place, my brain never had great specs, so it was screaming in pain. I feared that the information I was packing into my mind would spill out of my ears while I slept.

I've only just begun learning the ropes and I'm already this exhausted. Am I going to be okay? Though I was full of anxiety, I knew I couldn't resign. So, as a meager sign of rebellion, I'd fled to the greenhouse during my short break.

I don't even have the energy to chat about the material over a cup of tea with my teachers! I feel bad since they're taking the time to help me, but I'm sorry, I just can't. Just let me laze for a bit and slack off...

My personal knight, Klaus, usually stuck close to me, but today he stood guard outside the room, probably out of concern for my fatigue. I was very grateful that he was considerate enough to give me some alone time, even if it was only a moment's respite.

"Ahhh." I breathed out lifelessly.

I felt so lethargic that my eyes wouldn't focus on anything. Eventually, I zoned out, gazing glassily at a dewdrop on a leaf that sparkled in the sunlight. I wasn't sure how long I stayed there.

Suddenly, the door opened with a creak. Thinking that it was Klaus alerting me that my break was over, I sluggishly raised my head and got up.

"It's about..." I was about to finish with *"time, isn't it?"* but I cut myself off. Klaus was not the one who had entered the room.

"Apparently, you still have a bit more time." A friend I hadn't seen in quite a while stood there with a worried expression.

"Teo!"

"Princess, you look terrible. Please rest for a bit longer," he said with a strained smile. Teo was my caring worrywart of a friend. Though his words often sounded like teasing, his tone and expression were earnest and concerned.

He came up next to me and sat me back down in my chair. He'd always been tall, ever since our childhood, but I felt like the gap between our heads had increased further. I looked up at him; his physique was large and sturdy. His appearance had matured as well, and his calm personality showed through his profound smile. He was now a grown man.

"Where's Lutz?" I asked. "He's not with you?"

"I had business with Miss Irene, so I'm on my own today. I'm sure he'll be here before long though, so please just wait and rest."

I hadn't seen Lutz in a long time either, so I nodded and obeyed.

"Your studies seem to be giving you a rough time," Teo remarked.

I sighed. "There are so many things I need to remember. I know everything's

important, but I don’t have good recollection skills, so it’s hard to memorize everything.”

“You’re a persistent one, so you’ll be fine—just don’t wear yourself out too much.”

“Your assessment pains me, considering that I ran away during my break,” I confessed in a whisper, averting my gaze.

Teo continued to peer at me with kind eyes. “Doing that much is fine. Actually, you’re awful at relaxing—you can afford to be easier on yourself, you know.” He pulled out a chair and sat across from me.

“Be easier on myself”? It’s difficult to loosen up in moderation. I know I’m not the diligent type, so I have to be tough on myself. If I start cutting corners, it’ll become a permanent habit, and then I’ll endlessly spiral down the path of depravity.

“Though, you’re *you* because you can’t do that.” He paused and then added, “You’re surprisingly clumsy in that way.”

I couldn’t utter any kind of objection. He wasn’t trying to make fun of me—he’d said it out of pure concern and affection. It made me tingle in embarrassment.

“You’d work until you collapsed if there was no one to watch over you... At least, that’s what I used to think, but it looks like you’ve found someone who will stop you.”

Teo broke off for a moment. His eyes were downcast—the silence lingered for a few seconds, as though he were hesitating over what to say. For a moment, it looked like he was suppressing some feeling, but it must’ve been my imagination.

When he looked up again, his expression was tranquil. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

I lost myself in his deep ruby eyes and was a beat slow to respond. “Thank you.”

His words and his smile were sincere, but that wasn’t all. I sensed that there

was something else stuck inside his heart. Nevertheless, I didn't want to force him to disclose whatever he was hiding...nor did I want to overlook it.

My feelings were in dissonance, and I couldn't decide on what to do, but I called out to him in a quiet voice anyway. "Teo—"

But as though he were cutting me off on purpose, he abruptly started a new topic. "To tell the truth, there's something I want your advice about."

I blinked at him in surprise and repeated after him. "Advice?"

"Yes. Will you give me some?"

Despite my confusion, I agreed.

"It's about the medical facility you devised. I heard that it will be a learning institution and a research facility too."

I hadn't expected our conversation to turn down this path, but I gave him a bewildered nod. "Brilliant healers and doctors will gather there, so it would be a shame to leave it as a mere medical facility," I stated. "Wouldn't it be more advantageous to establish a place where people can devote themselves to the craft, develop new medicine, pass that knowledge on, and raise the future generation of doctors?"

Well, it'll be a huge undertaking that will be more than advantageous, I quipped to myself.

"Though, I'm sure it'll run into more troubles than I can currently envision. There will be people who grew up in all sorts of environments, have varying educational backgrounds, and even have different values—all gathered in one place. Obviously, some might clash." I sighed again, then admitted, "Honestly, there are a mountain of problems."

I'll just have to wait and see. It'd be great if the different facilities can operate independently, but I'm worried that factions will form and create rifts between them. I've heard horror stories of internal medicine departments and surgery departments being on bad terms, even though they're all doctors. I wonder if people from professions as different as doctors, researchers, and teachers can respect each other and cooperate.

My worries were endless, but if we didn't take action, we would never know what the problems were.

"Still, I think there's value in building it," I said. It was my job to try everything I could to resolve whatever issues came up so they could proceed without delay. My duties might not end in my lifetime, but I would entrust them to my children or grandchildren.

After I said all I needed to, Teo's eyes narrowed, as though he were looking at something blinding. His gaze made me feel a little restless. He remained silent for a while, dropping his vision to where my hands were clasped on top of the table.

He brooded over something with an awfully serious expression and then finally raised his head. "Is there anything I can do to help you with that?"

His question was so unexpected that an astonished noise escaped from my lips. "Huh?"

The Determination of the Fire Sorcerer

My life probably first began when I met the princess. Until that day, I'd only been alive physically. I would wake up early in the morning, eat, work until the night, and then sleep. Rinse and repeat.

I'd had no purpose in life. Because I didn't want to die, I'd lived out of sheer force of habit. Meeting Lutz had left a strong impression on me, but he had also been dead inside. And so, I believed that our lives truly began after meeting her.

Upon first impression, she'd seemed like a pure being, a princess out of a fairy tale—cute, kind, loved by all. But the real princess was not a sheltered little girl, ignorant to hardship. She was intelligent and always thinking about what she should and could do as a princess, and taking action. With such a role model by my side, I'd naturally begun to think about my own future.

As an apprentice sorcerer under the control of Nevel's royalty, I knew it was already set in stone where I could work. However, I didn't know what I should do after I lost the title of apprentice. One path was to be like my teacher—I could research magic and leave that knowledge behind for future generations.

Perhaps I would need to train young sorcerers as well, but the probability of people being born with magical powers decreased by the year. Currently, no new blood younger than us had been discovered, and the likelihood of someone appearing in the future was low.

So, I wanted to search for a different path. However, I knew this was difficult for a fire-affinity sorcerer like myself. Unlike earth and water sorcerers, offensive spells were my specialty. In the past, I hadn't been able to think of any use for my powers besides being a weapon in an emergency situation.

But then, the princess had used me as a stove. She didn't see me as a tool to kill people—instead, she'd shown me the path to bringing people happiness with delicious food. If it were possible, I wanted to work under her forever. I wanted to choose the path where I could help people.

The princess was frozen in shock for several seconds before she spoke. “Teo.” She looked at me directly, and her eyes, the color of the azure sky, were awfully serious. “I’ll be honest.”

I gulped. I had fantasized about being in this position over and over. Every time, I’d concluded that she would say, *“I’m sorry...but that will be impossible,”* and bluntly turn me down. Or, she would decline in a roundabout manner, saying something like, *“As a sorcerer, you should aim higher.”*

When I imagined either answer, I became frightened. I just couldn’t optimistically think she would accept my help. Even so, I didn’t give up, and finally worked up the courage to ask her for advice.

“Of course—please be honest,” I replied. “I’d be grateful if you would be forthright and turn me down if it’s not possible.” Because I was unwilling to give up, I had forced an unsavory role onto the princess. I threw on a smile, albeit forced, hoping that it would alleviate her guilt. But she looked conflicted for some reason.

“Huh? No...” she said. “It’s actually the opposite.”

“The opposite?” I repeated dubiously, unable to comprehend what she meant.

She took no offense to my tone and nodded, her expression solemn. “I think there are a lot of things only you can do.”

“Huh?” I was dumbfounded, even though I had been the one to offer my help.

This was a far cry from what I had predicted. I had taken care of medicinal plants with the princess, so I had my fair share of knowledge. I was also well-acquainted with medicinal herbs through self-study. But in the end, I only knew more than the average person.

I was far behind those whose main occupations were in the medical field, such as doctors and healers. Though I was motivated and always willing to work hard, my skills would not add to the valuable minds already present in the medical facility.

Yet the princess had said there were things only I could do. Not things that I could do too, but things *only I* could do.

“In the joint research facility, we plan to work on the development of new medicine. We will gather all kinds of materials from around the world and test their efficacy, but there are cases when merely mixing them will not produce any results. Sometimes chemical reactions... I mean, sometimes we need to heat them up or cool them down to extract the active ingredient.”

I twitched at the words “heat up” and “cool down.”

“But wouldn’t it be difficult to regulate the temperature by lighting a fire under a pot?” she continued. “It’s impossible to control the heat with precision that way. But you...” She looked at me with a face that said, *“You can do that, right?”*

Her expectations for me and her tender gaze made me want to cry, but I grinned instead. I’d probably messed up and pasted some kind of tearful smile on my face.

I didn’t care.

“Why yes—that’s my specialty,” I said.

The princess had a fixation on controlling magic with meticulous accuracy, and she had been the one to suggest that Lutz and I train in that regard. If we were mere weapons, then the stronger the firepower the better; outside of keeping control of our powers, regulating our ability to kill people was unnecessary. But the princess had emphasized the importance of the temperature and duration of our spells.

I’d wondered in the past why she obsessed over that, but the answer was extremely simple: to the princess, we were not weapons, but a Stove and an Ice-room.

“Your powers are exceptionally useful...so think it over carefully. It’s not a job that will produce immediate results, and I think you will undergo many hardships until the project finally gets on track. Also, even if you succeed, you will be treated as a co-developer, or perhaps even as an assistant,” she said. “I cannot promise you status or glory.”

The creases between her brows spoke for her frustration.

“This operation that I’m attempting will not be completed in our lifetime. It

will likely only shape into something during our children's or even their children's generation. I may not be able to repay anything back while you are alive; I can't involve you in this with a clear conscience." The princess lifted her face. "So, if you want to be an accomplished sorcerer like Miss Irene, then let's pretend this conversation never happened."

What a foolishly honest and amazing woman. It's impossible not to be charmed by her. I barely managed to suppress my desire to stand up and scream, *"I love you!" I feel elated...and kinda ticklish.* I put on a somewhat mischievous smile to conceal those uncontrollable emotions.

"If you need me, then shouldn't you lure me in? Even if you have to trick me?" I teased.

"That's...true. My inability to make logical decisions is a fatal flaw." She could've told me off, seeing as I'd been the one to broach the topic, but she frowned and began reflecting on herself instead.

"I'm joking," I assured her. "I came to you without any pretenses precisely because you're a princess who doesn't have a single crafty bone in her body. You're fine the way you are."

She appeared a little bashful at that comment. *Ahhh, she's so cute. She's an incredibly beautiful girl, but she doesn't care how she's seen. She smiles with her whole being—dimples, wrinkles, and all—it's so absurdly cute. I bet the knight captain also loves that smile.*

"I respect my teacher and I know I have a very important duty...but if it's permitted, then I wish to walk a different path."

If I did nothing, I would go on to officially become a full-fledged sorcerer under the Nevel crown. My life would end as reinforcement to the military in times of crisis...and that terrified me. I dreaded being helpful to no one and disappearing without leaving anything behind. But even more than that, I loathed that my activity would be tied to the battlefield, and I did not wish for strife.

"Honestly, things like status and glory are irrelevant to me," I told her. "I can't even fathom what attaining them would be like. I'd be happy if I were given recognition, but I don't care if I receive nothing. Daydreaming that my name

might be left in the corner of a book a hundred years after I pass away is enough for me."

I didn't want to die as a weapon stored away in some depository—I wanted to be medicine forgotten inside a medicine box. When I imagined that I might help someone out in the distant future... Well, I doubted I'd have any regret if the establishment still didn't have a solid shape by the time I perished. And if I was with the princess, I surely wouldn't have time to bask in those kinds of sentiments anyway. Among those hectic days, I would be able to live how I wanted. I was confident in that.

"You always work hard to help others...and I want to be your strength. Please, Princess. Let me work under you."

"Teo..." Her voice was a little hoarse and overwrought with emotion. She fell silent for a moment. After making her decision, she pursed her lips. "Very well."

When she nodded, my whole body almost went weak. Evidently, I'd been feeling extremely nervous.

"I'll discuss this with my father. It may be a hard and long battle, but I'll pitch...I mean, *propose* a plan that encapsulates how compatible your powers are with medical research."

I was surprised that she had already thought so far ahead. Though I didn't think her acceptance of my help was on a temporary basis, I didn't expect that the next steps would be taken immediately.

Seriously. How many times do you need to make me fall in love with you before you're satisfied? I already know my feelings will be forever unrequited—how cruel. Yet even after thinking that, I didn't feel despondent, but refreshed.

"Also, Teo. By any chance, have you discussed this with Miss Irene already?" She'd apparently remembered that I was away from Lutz because I had some business with our teacher.

And she was correct. I had gone to my teacher about this topic. "Originally, I planned to speak with her after I obtained your consent," I explained, "but I figured it would be better to take the initiative. After our meeting, her reaction was quite favorable."

“That’s wonderful to hear. If Miss Irene is on board, then it’ll be easier to negotiate with my father.” The corners of her mouth twisted up in a smirk like a child plotting mischief.

I felt renewed happiness just knowing that I would be able to continue watching over her mercurial facial expressions. My heart had of course ached when I’d heard the news of her engagement...but I refused to ruin her jubilation. Nor did I try to forcibly erase the feelings that I held for her either.

Perhaps my affection for her would one day transform into a mix of respect and love, or platonic love for a dear friend, or perhaps it would remain the same my whole life... But I wanted to leave it as it was. If I loved her forever, then I wanted to live with that feeling and one day breathe my last breath. *I won’t wish for anything else, so please, just allow me that.*

“Princess.”

Her eyes fixed on me. She tilted her head as if to say, *“Yes?”*

I love you.

“Teo?”

“Before you draw up a plan, please give me a shout. I will assist you to the best of my ability.”

“Of course. I’m counting on you.”

As I gazed at her smile, I thought, *Yes. I truly am happy.*

The Reincarnated Princess Worries

I stared at Teo's smile, formulating a plan in my head. *After talking to him, I've worked out a draft, but I don't really have enough time. I could use the breaks in between my lessons, but there's no regular pattern and Teo might not be available when I am. Plus, I doubt I can finish negotiations in a short period of time, and if I whip up a hasty presentation, it's even more doubtful that father will agree.*

I could easily picture the king scoffing and saying, *"do it again."* I could even imagine him calling me a fool and tossing the documents back at me.

Oops. Snap out of it. I admonished myself for actually getting upset by a fantasy. *That was an exceedingly accurate depiction...but it's still not reality. I'm brimming with motivation since this all depends on the quality of my presentation!*

"All right." I balled my fists tightly. *There's never enough time, so first, I need to be more assiduous with my studies. If I work hard and get ahead of schedule, then I'll have more time to spare.*

Also, I should discuss Teo's participation in medical research with the Khuer elders. I don't know much about what tools they have for experiments, so I need to learn about them. I need a referral to experts too... Hold on. Wouldn't Lord Julius have the connections I need?

The gears in my head turned and excitement welled up inside of me. Even when I was busy, if my objective was clear, then I felt like I could keep going.

"Teo, let's do our best, okay?"

"Yes."

Suddenly, the door to the break room swung open violently. Surprised by the loud noise, Teo and I turned toward the entrance at the same time. There stood Lutz, his shoulders rising and falling as he gasped for breath, a sign that he'd run over. His forehead was covered in sweat; his complexion looked awful. Pale-faced, Lutz looked at me and then Teo.

After some pause, I called out to him in a questioning tone. “Lutz?” *What on earth happened to him?*

Lutz turned away as though he were trying to escape my gaze. His eyes narrowed, and he glowered at Teo. “I met our teacher just now. I *know* what you two talked about... Are you actually serious about what you mentioned the other day?” His tone was fierce and accusatory.

Teo disregarded Lutz’s belligerent attitude and calmly replied, “Yeah. I’m serious. I was discussing it with the princess just now.”

Lutz inhaled sharply and stomped over to Teo, grabbing him by the collar. “Teo, you...!”

The chair Teo had been sitting on fell over with a loud crash that echoed inside the room. Klaus immediately burst through the door, but I raised a hand to stop him. I indicated that I was physically safe, though I wasn’t mentally fine right now. *I’m not following...but they’re butting heads and baring their honest feelings. I feel like we shouldn’t interrupt.*

Teo faced Lutz without trying to shake off his grip.

“Do you really think such a childish, dreamlike idea is going to come true? If you were an earth-affinity sorcerer, then maybe, but how are our powers going to *help* people?”

“Lutz.”

“Talk to her all you like, but you’re just going to bother the princess. She’s busy enough as it is, so stop bringing up this meaningless—”

“Lutz!” Teo shouted, interrupting the rambling. He looked his friend straight in the eye. “The princess has already consented.”

After a beat, a silly noise spilled out of Lutz’s mouth. “Huh?”

“To tell you the truth, I also thought I was only being a nuisance to her. But she listened to what I had to say and told me there *was* something only I could do.”

“Th-That’s impossible...”

Compared to Teo’s determined tone, Lutz’s gaze wandered helplessly like a

lost child. He looked like he couldn't believe it, or perhaps he didn't *want* to believe. It pained my heart to see Lutz so shaken.

Lutz and Teo had always been together. They'd grown up in the same orphanage and had worked in the same place, but their ties ran deeper than the average inseparable friendship. They had been persecuted in the past because of their rare disposition for magical powers, even kidnapped during the Skelluts plot, but they had always overcome their adversities by joining forces.

They were brothers and best friends, as well as rivals that pushed each other forward. They shared a bond that could not be described with the word "partner" alone. But now, they stood at a crossroads...and depending on their decisions, they might go down separate paths. I couldn't imagine how forlorn and lonely it would be to lose the person you had assumed would always be by your side.

"There's a possibility that I can utilize my powers at the research facility of the medical institution... I might be able to use my abilities not to kill, but to help people live." Teo removed Lutz's hand from his collar easily—Lutz's grip hardly had any strength left in it.

Teo's brows drooped with distress as he peered at Lutz's bewildered expression. "I should've done a better job of showing you that I meant what I said. I didn't think my wish could come true either, so I didn't talk to you about it with confidence. I'm sorry." Teo lowered his head.

Lutz's shoulders jolted up.

"But today," he continued, "the princess believed in my potential...the potential that I didn't even believe in myself. So I'm going to quit dawdling for good."

"Teo..." Lutz vacantly gaped at his friend's solemn countenance and then knit his brows together, forming deep wrinkles. He dropped his gaze like a child trying to hide the fact that he was about to break into tears. "So this is how you're leaving me too."

"Lutz..."

"The princess and you are going to disappear. I'm always the kid left behind."

“Lutz! That’s not true,” I blurted out. I’d watched over them without trying to interject, but I couldn’t keep silent at that heartrending comment. “Teo and I don’t want to leave you. We just don’t want to selfishly determine your future for you.”

It would be reassuring if Lutz also helped me like Teo. Part of it was out of expectations for his powers as a sorcerer, but that wasn’t all. It would be heartening to have the help of a friend who had been by my side since I was young. However, if I said that, I would be deciding Lutz’s future—not directly, but I would be narrowing his options.

Teo likely came to me alone because he also didn’t want to do that to Lutz. I’m sure Teo doesn’t want to be separated from Lutz either. Me too. I love the time we spend together chatting about silly things. How can I express that in words? “I want you to decide for yourself” or “This is for your sake.” But telling him that now would sound shallow, and my feelings wouldn’t reach him.

While I fretted about what to say, Lutz’s heart closed up. “Forget it. Just leave me alone.”

“Lutz!”

He turned his back on us and fled from the break room. I reflexively stood up. Teo’s gaze spurred me on.

“He’s probably hiding under the tree in the corner of the greenhouse,” Teo said. “He always huddles up there whenever he feels down.”

“Is it okay for me to go after him?” I asked, implying, *“Wouldn’t it be easier for him to talk to you since you’re practically brothers?”*

Teo nodded and smiled. “Please go.” He looked like an older brother worried for his younger sibling.

The Determination of the Ice Sorcerer

I sat behind a tall tree in the corner of the greenhouse, head hanging as I hugged my knees.

"...the worst," I muttered weakly.

Of course, those words were not directed at my partner—they were for me. I had lost my temper, snapped at them, and subsequently run away. Teo wasn't at fault, but I had hurled inconsiderate remarks at him and had even shaken off the hand of my beloved when she was worried about me. *What the hell do I want to do?*

I slammed my head into my knees and tore at my hair, feeling so ashamed and so very pathetic. I wanted to disappear.

"I'm so uncool..."

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I'd intended to calmly talk about things with Teo. But when I'd witnessed the way their eyes twinkled as they looked toward the future... I hadn't been able to suppress my emotions. While I'd been stuck at a standstill because I feared change, those two had kept moving forward. It was as if *I* was the only one who valued the time the three of us could spend together now...and it felt like they had abandoned me to a life of solitude.

I need to stop them, I thought bitterly. Yet a moment later, I was revolted that the idea had occurred to me, even for a split second.

"Urk..."

Nausea rose up my throat, but I forced it back down and squeezed my eyes shut, taking short breaths. I felt like a pincushion. Over and over, I breathed in and out, trying to assuage the pain.

Then, I heard a soft noise behind me—the sound of shoes crunching on sand that had fallen across the stone ground.

Must be Teo. He's the only one who knows that I hole myself up here when I feel depressed. He's probably here to collect me after I cool down. What a nice,

caring guy.

Unlike me. That additional thought made me spiral down even further. The quiet footsteps slowly approached until they stopped right behind me, the tree standing tall between us. I heard the rustling of clothes—*he must've sat down on the bricks lining the flowerbed.*

However, he didn't say anything, and a peaceful silence fell upon us. A gentle breeze came in through the window that was left cracked open for ventilation. Only the pleasant sound of rustling leaves and twittering birds could be heard.

The thorns lodged in my splintered heart fell out one by one. I took a deep breath and felt the tension leave my shoulders. He wasn't here to berate me, nor was he here to console me. I reveled in the joy of having a friend who would quietly wait for me.

Thinking back, it had always been like this. I had been even brattier when I was younger, thinking myself to be the most pitiable person in the world. I'd acted brave, baring my fangs at those around me so I wouldn't get hurt. The only people who'd had the persistence and patience to talk to someone as asocial as me were Teo and the princess. When I thought about how I used to act, I wanted to roll around in embarrassment. Back then, I hadn't been pleasant to be around.

I'm surprised they stuck around for so long. Unlike me, they're both good people, which is why they forgive my poor behavior...but I can't presume upon them too much. Just because they're lenient doesn't mean I can get away with all my poor conduct. If I make that mistake, our relationship will collapse.

"Teo, I'm sorry," I managed to croak out in a pitifully hoarse voice. "I blew my top and said terrible things to you and the princess. I didn't mean it...though that's cowardly of me to admit. I can't retract what's already been said, so I won't ask you to forget it for my own convenience. But I was just being a little brat, throwing a tantrum and spouting nonsense to cause trouble. Don't take it seriously."

I rattled on rapidly without pause and ruffled my bangs in an attempt to hide my embarrassment. "I know that you're right." I was scared to hear his reply, so I kept talking. "As sorcerers, we have a path laid out for us, but instead of

blindly following it, you thought for yourself and chose your own way. That's...amazing. And the princess is also incredible for discovering a way to utilize your abilities."

Teo had always possessed a gentle disposition. He'd only aimed to become a sorcerer because he'd been born with special powers—had he been given a choice, he likely would've become something else. That was why, when I'd heard him speak to our teacher about wanting to work in medicine, I'd understood his feelings...despite my own negative emotions.

"I think you're much better suited for a job in medicine than being a sorcerer."

Not that it's an excuse for my behavior, but... If this decision had come not now*, but a little later, I would've reacted a little more positively. When I'd heard the princess was engaged, I'd felt wounded beyond repair... If he hadn't broken the news to me while I was already hurting, then I would've been better. Probably.*

"I knew that...but I still lashed out at you. I was so shaken by the princess's engagement that I couldn't accept what you wanted...though, in the end, that's just an excuse." A hollow laugh spilled out of my lips; I was bluffing myself in circles. "I really am uncool," I remarked with a sigh.

I pressed my forehead against my hands that were clasped together on top of my knees. "To me...the princess is someone extremely important, so I was really scared that I would lose her."

I heard him gasp quietly, but since he said nothing, I continued unloading my feeble complaints. "After all, I was half-dead before I met her. I didn't know what 'fun' or 'happiness' was. I feel like the princess even taught me how to breathe."

A girl younger than me had taken my hand and pulled me up to a sunny place. I believed that there, in that bright patch among my dark experiences, I'd taken my first breath. My life had truly begun.

"When I heard she would be going away, I was so upset that I couldn't stay composed. It was like the floor was crumbling around me. No, even *that's* not strong enough to describe the feeling... I was so shocked and frightened that it

felt like someone had just told me the sun wouldn't rise tomorrow. I almost forgot how to breathe."

To me, she's the most important girl in the world. My light. My sun. I won't know how to live if she's taken away.

"I'm so hopeless... In the end, I'm the same powerless brat. I can't walk forward unless someone leads me by the hand. No wonder you and the princess are tired of me."

I'm fed up with my attitude too. And I don't have enough energy to cheer myself up. I felt like I was succumbing to the crushing guilt and despair. I let gravity take me, buried my head into my knees, and closed my eyes.

Then, a dignified and tranquil voice rang in my ears. "That's not true."

I gasped and my eyes snapped open—it was a voice I hadn't expected. I had sensed someone behind me...and believed them to be Teo. But the voice I'd heard just now belonged to the girl I cherished the most.

Confused, I couldn't utter a sound. Though I wanted to look up, it felt like I was frozen in place and I couldn't move. I felt so ashamed—the girl I loved had heard all of my pathetic whining. I wanted to die. *I want to dig a hole, bury myself in it, and end my life immediately.*

My whole body broke out in an uncomfortable, sticky sweat. My face probably looked awful—stiff, red, and pale all at the same time. *If the princess takes a peek at me right now, I* will *die. Better yet, someone please kill me.*

She did not come around to where I was. Perhaps she'd sensed my ridiculous and earnest plea. She spoke to me in a calm but firm tone, our backs sandwiching the tree.

"Lutz, you're not powerless. And you're not hopeless either." Though she had listened to crappy, good-for-nothing complaints, she didn't laugh or tease me, nor did she try to comfort me with false words. Her clear, straightforward voice conveyed that she meant what she said from the bottom of her heart. "First of all, you're very clever."

"Huh?"

“You read thick, technical books quickly, and you understand their contents properly. Plus, you have great memory, so you never forget what you learn.”

“Princess?”

“Also, you have good reflexes. You’re a sorcerer, but you can fight on par with knights without magic. Miss Irene told me you could win in a bout of martial arts.”

“That’s—”

“And, you’re very kind. You’re bad at expressing yourself with words, but you treasure Teo and I greatly.”

“Uh...huh?” She was showering me with praise; I didn’t know what kind of expression to make. I didn’t even care how stupid I sounded.

“You went through so many hardships because you were born with magic powers...and yet, you listened to my selfish request—you made ice cream with me. You didn’t brush my idea aside as nonsense.”

I heard her stutter ever so slightly, and I timidly peeked over my shoulder. Her dainty hand was firmly clenched shut, as though she were holding something back.

“You said you came this far because I led you by the hand, but I’ve also made it this far because you and Teo were supporting me. Our relationship isn’t one-sided... Don’t call my precious friend hopeless.”

The pain in her voice moved me. When I remembered it was my fault she was hurt, I felt guilty... But more than that, I was elated. She was sincerely angry for my sake.

“Princess!”

I impulsively stood up, rushed to her side, and hugged her petite body from behind. She froze in surprise and then floundered, trying to distance herself. I tightened my hold to stop her.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “I’ll let go of you soon...so let me stay like this for just a moment longer... Please.”

I purposefully chose words that would keep her from pushing me away. In the

recesses of my mind, a part of me reprimanded myself for being underhanded, but feeling her warmth in my arms brought me great joy.

I love you. I love you. I love you so much that my heart aches. Your gentle warmth and touch, your flowery scent—all of you. I'll remember this sensation for the rest of my life.

"Lutz?"

Her voice sounds bewildered and full of concern. I fret that people are taking advantage of her kindness... Not that I have any right to say that.

I smiled wryly. "I'm sorry for a lot of things. For bothering you, worrying you, and all the other things. And thank you for not abandoning me."

The moment lasted only a few seconds, but I felt like I had been given a lifetime's worth of happiness. I gave her a final squeeze to savor the moment, then shook off my desire to hold on...and let go. She seemed relieved, which made me feel somewhat bitter, but I sighed. *It is what it is.*

I knew the princess adored the knight captain, so continuing to love her all this time was my own selfish whim. She looked up at me and I smiled.

"I won't shrink away anymore. I'm going to seriously think about my own future... So, if I hit a dead end, can I ask you for advice?"

"Of course!" The princess beamed at me.



“Tell me about the medical institution and research facility too. Stuff about what Teo will work on, or if there’s anything I can help with. I’ll listen, study, and decide if there’s something I want to do.”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded happily and then whispered, “Thank goodness.”

Compassionate, admirable, and cute to boot—she’s undefeatable. Wouldn’t it be a grave sin for someone to monopolize her? I secretly cursed a certain handsome man who had won her heart. *I hope he stubs his little toe. I’m probably a small-minded person, but let me get away with this much.*

After a while, my partner joined us. “Done talking?” Teo asked. When he saw that I had regained my sanity, his expression relaxed with obvious relief and he dropped a sarcastic remark. “I’m glad you’re back to your old brazen self.”

“Shut up,” I retorted aggressively.

The princess watched our banter with an amused smile.

Though I cherish our time together immensely, it’s impossible to suspend this moment for eternity. But if I work hard, I can maintain the link between us. I can’t afford to hug my knees and cower. It would be nice to research under the princess alongside Teo. Or, I could succeed our teacher and gain the power to help the princess. My future has potential. As long as I don’t abandon hope and give up, the possibilities are infinite.

The princess suggested that we return to the break room and continue over tea, so we followed behind her. Teo, walking next to me, regarded me with exasperated eyes.

“Luuutz. You’re makin’ an evil expression.”

“Oh, you know,” I replied. “I just thought it’d be fine if I didn’t force myself to give up.” *Their age gap is pretty big...and I hear men have shorter life spans on average.* “Don’t you think the princess will be adorable, even as an old lady?”

Teo’s eyes widened slightly for a moment and then he murmured in a dumbfounded tone, “Lutz...”

“I can dream what I want, right?” I smirked like a scheming brat.

The corners of Teo’s mouth quirked up as well. “I’d expect nothing less of my

partner.”

He raised his fist and bumped it against mine.

The Head Sorceress Becomes Sentimental

I was currently in a room within the sorcerers' quarters. Though there were three people present, it was dead silent, and the atmosphere was thick with tension. I—Irene von Altman—watched my two apprentices. They stood, eyes closed and hands touching, in the center of a magic circle that helped them regulate their magical powers. Their rigid expressions showed how deep in concentration they were.

The two were practicing the practical application of adjusting and sustaining the temperature output of their spells. It was training on how to utilize their magic on the human body for therapeutic purposes.

Though I put it in extravagant terms, the method was fairly primitive—Lutz cooled their temperature through one side of their linked arms, while Teo heated them up on the other side. After a set amount of time, they would switch directions. I was having them alternate and repeat this exercise.

Why had we started this special training? It stemmed from my talk with Teo. A week ago, he had visited my room, wearing a very serious expression. He'd come to discuss his future, and his idea had been far beyond my imagination.

He'd told me that he wished to work under the princess—Her Highness Rosemary—to help people. Considering Teo's gentle disposition and kind personality, it wasn't that unexpected. He always took care of the medicinal herbs and also studied pharmacology, so I knew he would be quite the valuable asset. However, I hadn't expected what he'd asked me after that.

He'd questioned whether magic could be used for medical treatment. In all honesty, I had never thought of that prospect before, since I'd assumed that only earth-aligned magic could be used for healing. I thought there might be some worth in scrutinizing the usage of water and wind magic, but Teo's affinity was for fire, which specialized in offensive spells.

Though I'd thought him to be mad and reckless in the moment, I had not rejected his suggestion outright—instead, I'd given him a chance to explain. The young man who had been controlled his whole life because he possessed

magical powers had decided to face his future head-on. He was no longer shunning his unique abilities or averting his eyes to seek a different path. No, he had accepted his magic and was even willing to tread the arduous road.

A person who could deny his wish without trying to ponder the problem out alongside him was not fit to be a mentor. Furthermore, his proposition had been splendid. If it was made into a reality, it would be heartening news for not only Teo, but for all sorcerers.

To my shame, I hadn't been able to think of a decent answer immediately. Similarly, Teo'd had nothing specifically pictured either. We'd decided to see what the princess would say first and had ended our conversation there.

He'd worn a smile tinged with loneliness, saying he would give up if his idea troubled her. When I'd seen him off, I'd fully realized my own powerlessness. Deep inside, I knew this was not a burden I should allow a fifteen-year-old girl to shoulder...but I couldn't help but have high expectations for her. With her flexible thinking and creativity, I knew she could surely show Teo a bright and promising path.

The following day, Teo had returned to me with his doubts cleared. I wasn't sure what had happened, but Lutz had entered with him, his expression similarly resolute. When I'd seen them standing side by side, I'd felt renewed gratitude toward the princess. At the same time, I'd also admired her knowledge and genius.

When Teo had detailed their conversation, I'd realized that her suggestion to use magic as an aid in the development of medicine was ground-breaking. We could extract medicinal components by heating up or cooling down an ingredient. We could even alter an ingredient's properties. Furthermore, it was possible to do things such as chill wounds, warm someone up to improve circulation, or other treatment-related tasks.

All of those options would require time before they could be attempted on a real person... But the idea was not foolhardy. Theoretically, it was possible and within the realm of feasibility.

Though I had researched magic for many years, I had never once thought of applying it in this manner. It also wasn't mentioned in any historical

documentation from back when magic was commonplace. I admired the princess from the bottom of my heart—she was someone who would truly change this age.

I was convinced that, in the distant future, her name would be passed down along with numerous anecdotes. And...perhaps the names of my two disciples as well. When I imagined that, it felt like I was witnessing history, and I felt a curious ticklish sensation.

“Guh.”

A quiet grunt snapped me back to my senses. The boys’ expressions were grim—beads of sweat trickled down their foreheads. They both appeared to be struggling, but Teo was quicker to adapt. Lutz had a vast amount of magical power, which made it fitting to call him an extraordinary genius, but for that reason, he was poor at finer adjustments. However, he did not throw in the towel and always practiced diligently. The sight made me feel deeply emotional.

The two boys had been like injured beasts when they’d first arrived at the castle to be protected by the crown. Lutz had been especially irritable, baring his fangs at everyone; Teo would wear an amiable smile, but his eyes had been perpetually frigid. Neither one had trusted the people around them.

As their superior, I’d been no exception. They’d never rebelled against me, but besides class and training sessions, they’d never approached me either. Our relationship had been to use and be used by one another. That was all.

I’d accepted it, thinking it would be fine as long as they had the mettle to learn the knowledge and skills needed to survive. But the princess was different. She’d persistently reached out to the unapproachable and wintry Lutz, to the distant Teo who’d always kept people at arm’s length. She’d done an excellent job of winning their trust.

Influenced by the princess, my two disciples had regained emotions suitable for boys their age. They’d developed a friendly rivalry, pushing each other to improve in leaps and bounds. They’d healthily grown and grown, in body and mind. In fact, they’d grown so much that I had to look up at them now, and their builds were strong—their faces had also matured into that of dauntless young men.

Not a trace of those miserable children, feral like starved stray cats, was left on their visages. I was very proud of that. When I envisioned how, in the not-so-distant future, they would leave the nest...I felt a bit lonely. However, there was also a sense of overwhelming jubilation.

This nation...no, this world has not been kind to these two boys. And yet, look at how magnificently they have grown.

"Ow!" Teo cried out, shattering the stillness.

He snatched his hand back with a start and retreated a few steps. Lutz opened his eyes and watched Teo rub his hands together vigorously.

Lutz furrowed his beautiful eyebrows. "You're exaggerating."

"You—that was more pain than cold just now, you know!"

"Seems like I screwed up my control a little there. Well, it happens. Let's move on and try again."

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

Their boisterous quarreling made me lament, and my uncharacteristic sentimentality vanished in an instant. *I take it back. It's much too soon for them to leave the nest. If I let these two chicks fly away with eggshells still stuck on their heads, they'll be a nuisance to everyone.* I earnestly wished that, at the very least, they would gain enough presence of mind to match their matured appearances.

"In the first place, you're way too sloppy!" Teo shook out the pain in his hand, shooting Lutz an exasperated look. "You need to focus more!"

Lutz's brows shot up and his frown spoke of his displeasure. "Huh? I'm doing this properly."

"You only focused for five minutes tops. The temperature got so shaky that I could tell you were distracted." Teo's remark must've been spot-on because Lutz groaned quietly. "I get that you're frustrated because you can't control your powers properly, but you need to fix your short temper first."

"You think you're sooo great just 'cause you can do it," Lutz grumbled.

"Why you—" Teo's tone dropped an octave.

It seemed like their childish bickering would drag on for longer, so I clapped twice. They jumped slightly and their gazes snapped to me. I sent a mild glare their way, causing them to reflexively straighten their backs. “Since you two are wasting your breath with chatter, can I assume that you still have more than enough energy for practice?”

“We’re sorry! We’ll continue training!” they yelled in perfect unison before returning to the center of the magic circle.

They pressed their palms together, whispering quietly among themselves. *If they’re continuing their trivial squabble, I’ll make them run laps around the castle.* I strained my ears to eavesdrop.

“I’ll be serious, so teach me a trick.” Lutz murmured.

“A trick?” Teo thought for a moment. “Hmm... You need to carefully pour your magic in, like you’re handling something fragile.”

“Huh? You want me to imagine that the rugged hands of a man—which, by the way, are bigger and rougher than my own—are fragile? That’s unreasonable.”

“You little... *You’re* the one who asked me to teach you, and that’s how you reply?!”

I hesitated—should I judge this to be an extension of their fight or a part of their training? They seemed to be on the verge of another augment, so I cleared my throat loudly, fed up with their antics. They quieted down but continued to banter in hushed whispers.

“Then pretend it’s the princess,” Teo whispered. “If my hands are too rugged and rough, close your eyes and imagine her.”

“Whaaat... That’s impossible,” Lutz muttered in a pitiful tone, but he reluctantly shut his eyes. “This is the princess’s hand... Her hand... The princess... You’re too burly and your fingers are huge... You’re not the princess.”

“I’m gonna punch you.”

Their easygoing conversation made me sigh. *It seems that it will be a long time before I can get sentimental about missing them...*

The Reincarnated Princess’s Visitation

The days flew by at a dizzying speed. No, really—I was so busy that I was literally feeling dizzy. Our engagement had been settled, and our wedding would be held in two years’ time. As I prepared for the ceremony, I also slowly readied my heart.

During this period of waiting, I thought I might feel lonely about being separated from my family, or perhaps I would harbor unease about married life. I imagined that each time disquiet struck, I would talk to Sir Leonhart and we would overcome hardships together, gradually becoming husband and wife...

At least, that was what I dreamed of. In reality, such touching and sentimental moments were nowhere to be found. My time was filled with studying, discussing my territory, attending meetings about the medical facility’s construction, and so on. The little spare time I had was crammed with preparation for my marriage: plan, review, and approve, I felt like I was working a whole assembly line. There was not one shred of romance to be found anywhere.

Free time led to unnecessary thoughts and apprehension, but since I didn’t have even a few minutes to spare, there was no time to worry.

Marriage blues? What’s that? Is it tasty?

During those hectic days, I managed to free up some time to go with Sir Leonhart to greet his parents. They had been present during our engagement ceremony, and I had also briefly met them before that, but I wanted to speak with them face-to-face. Not in an official setting as a princess, but as plain old me.

They must’ve been surprised and worried to hear that their precious son is suddenly going to marry a princess fifteen years younger than him. Maybe they think Sir Leonhart was forced into this engagement because he couldn’t refuse the selfish whims of royalty. Or maybe they’re concerned that our feelings are temporary and we’ll immediately want a divorce.

I'd like to receive his family's blessings for our marriage if possible. So, I want to have a proper conversation with them beforehand to straighten out any conflicts. And also, if they don't accept our love, then I want to convince them somehow. Even if they oppose our marriage, it's too late for me to give up on it. However, we still have time before the wedding—it might be possible to postpone the ceremony until they approve.

And so! I'm fired up today! They'd probably be horrified if I barged in and declared, "Please give me your son!" so I won't say that...but that's the kind of spirit I'm feeling. Now is the time for me to show them my affection for Sir Leonhart, the love I've hoarded for fifteen years.

I was so eager that I started breathing heavily through my nose.

"Princess? Is something the matter?" Sir Leonhart asked.

"O-Oh, um, no," I stuttered.

"Hmm?"

"I just thought we were a bit close."

"Do you dislike it?"

"I could never!" I exclaimed. *If anything, I'm ecstatic!* I screamed internally, but at the same time, I wondered how we'd ended up like this.

I'd been lost in thought about using this visitation to profess my overflowing love for Sir Leonhart, so why was *I* the one feeling overwhelmed right now? His parents did not live in a townhouse in the royal capital, but rather, in a mansion within their territory. We were currently taking a carriage to the count's domain.

It's been a long time since Sir Leonhart has seen his family, so he must have a lot he wishes to discuss with them. They'll probably fill each other in on what's happened in their lives and also talk about the wedding. I daydreamed of how delightful it would be if I could join in on their conversation...even if just a little.

These ridiculous fantasies had been blown from my mind when Sir Leonhart had sat, not across from me, but *next* to me in the carriage. Furthermore, there was now no space between us—our bodies were very much in close contact. He

even had one of his arms wrapped around my waist, and his other hand was intertwined with mine. We were so intimately glued together that I didn't know how to react.

"Does this irritate you?" Though his expression did not change, unease tinged his eyes.

"I have never thought that even once!" I denied forcefully, trying to clear away his anxiety.

Sir Leonhart sighed with relief. "Then please, let me touch," he murmured. "I haven't had enough of you." He leaned closer and buried his nose in my hair.

I inhaled so hard that I almost fainted. *Ahhh! Sir, you can't do that! This is a public establishment! Sir, I'm going to overdose!* I screamed internally as tears welled up in my eyes. Sir Leonhart was smelling me...which meant the reverse was also true. I was completely enveloped in his scent and I couldn't calm down.

Wow, he smells really, really good! My mind was in so much turmoil that it tired me out. I felt like I was going to run out of energy before I even met his parents. When he saw me grow limp, a wry smile spread across his face. He released my hand, pulled back, and peered at me. His large palm caressed my cheek, and he brushed my hair behind my ear.

"You're still not used to it?" he asked.

"I am not," I admitted. "It'd be nice if you could wait a little bit longer."

"That's a shame. I'd actually hoped to have you sit on my lap."

"Please don't treat me like a child," I mumbled in a sulky tone. *I balk at a man's touch and yet I hate being treated like a child—I'm so annoying. Though part of the problem is that Sir Leonhart lets me get away with it.*

He blinked a few times, and then his eyes narrowed suggestively. The corners of his mouth curved up into a sexy smile. *He's not playing fair...* Looking straight into his alluring eyes almost made my knees give way.

His fingertips brushed against my cheeks. This was not a tender touch like moments ago, but something more sensual. He leaned forward, face inching

closer to my ear. The moment his breath grazed my earlobe, I felt my entire body jump.

"It's because you're not a child that I want to put you on my lap."

His sweet, husky voice made my knees go even weaker, and I froze, eyes wide, blushing madly. Sir Leonhart breathed out an amused chuckle. *It seems that I'm being teased.* Wordlessly, I shot him a reproachful stare. I was vexed at how he had me dancing on the palm of his hand, but at the same time...well, it was wonderful when he enjoyed himself. Conflicted, I lightly hit his chest with my fist in a meager act of protest.

"I'm sorry. Don't be upset." He gently grasped my hand and pressed a kiss to my forehead to pacify me.

He's too sweet. I feel dizzy. Every gesture, every word from him was an act of pampering, and I no longer knew what to do. My unrequited love had lasted for too long, and now, I could no longer cope with the sudden and excessive supply of adoration. Also, Sir Leonhart seemed so used to all things romance, which only encouraged my desire to flee.

I wish I could calmly return the favor like a proper lady.

"It's been too long since we last met, so I became inappropriately excited. If you're not fed up yet, then please, stay with me." His brows drooped slightly as he twirled a tuft of my hair around his fingers.

I was once again reminded of how formidable my lover—I mean, my *fiancé*—was. There was a vast gulf between our levels of experience; I wasn't sure if I could ever get the better of him, not even if we spent our whole lives together.

"Romance Mode" Sir Leonhart is very powerful... I'd honestly imagined him a bit tamer. I expected him to treat me kindly and courteously, but I also thought he might be too *much of a gentleman—I worried that the distance between us wouldn't shrink. What a luxury...to be left wanting more. But I also wouldn't mind him being a bit more forceful, and I'd feel conflicted like the heroines in the shojo manga I read long ago.*

And yet...I never expected that I'd be overloaded on this much physical contact!

I peeked up at him and our eyes met. Sir Leonhart tilted his head to the side, urging me to speak. *Ahhh! He's so cool!*

"May I say something uncute?" I asked.

"I'll likely still think it's cute," he replied, "but go on."

S-See! That's what I'm talking about! He spits out honeyed words without hesitation and it renders me speechless. How can he just say *that without batting an eye?! And he states it like it's obvious! He doesn't even get shy! My face has been scarlet this whole time, and there's no sign of the heat abating.*

His eyes were heavy upon me, gazing as if I were something precious. Unable to compose myself beneath the weight of it, I averted my eyes a little. "Sir Leon, you seem very used to this."

There was a short pause—perhaps he hadn't expected that comment—and then he repeated my words. "I'm...used to this?"

I knew he'd had previous lovers and even a fiancée. Though I didn't intend to dredge up that past, I had some mixed feelings about the expertise he was demonstrating. What if he had once whispered words of love like this to the others? Were there many women out there who knew how much he adored physical contact? Deep down, I understood that there was no point talking about the past, and I hated how part of me cared about it.

After I blurted out how I felt, I couldn't bear being in his presence. The mood had turned depressing, so I tried to dispel it by finishing my spiel in a joking tone. "It's just insignificant envy."

However, Sir Leonhart was not deceived. He did not become aggravated nor did he seem to be at a loss. He simply stared at me, motionless, eyes round.

What? Did I truly say something so absurd? Or maybe he didn't think my personality was so dismal. What should I do? If he's disappointed in me, I'm not sure I can recover.

"Is this...uncalculated?" he muttered to himself. Unsure of what he was talking about, I questioned him with my gaze. He furrowed his brows. "Astounding."

I'd be glad if he meant that remark in a good way, but it's probably a bad thing. I must've done something bizarre.

Without knowing why, I wanted to cry—Sir Leonhart offered me a troubled smile. He drew me close, then peppered my temple and the corner of my eye with soothing kisses.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Don't look so sad."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. You exceeded my expectations and said something far cuter than I could've ever imagined."

Huh? I acted clingy, brought up his past, and criticized him for it. Nothing about that sounds cute to me. I figured he was telling a compassionate lie to ease my worries, but when I peered up at his face, Sir Leonhart seemed extremely pleased. He truly meant what he'd said.

Maybe Sir Leonhart has peculiar tastes...

The countdom was very far away. It wasn't a hugely significant distance from the capital, but it seemed to take a considerable amount of travel time. During the journey, Sir Leonhart took every opportunity to pamper me; I stood no chance against his fierce attack. He single-mindedly overpowered and overwhelmed me.

All the while, I thought I was going to melt into a pile of mush, and by the time we arrived, I'd probably long lost my physical form. *Meeting his parents in this pathetic state, my legs unsteady and shaky, is a mistake. I've worked so hard! I wanted them to see that a levelheaded bride was joining the family...but look at me now! Sir Leonhart has to support me so I can stay on my feet; my dream of composure is long shattered.*

I furtively tapped his arm, which was wrapped around my waist, and I peered up at him, signaling that he should let go of me. He ignored my entreaty with a smile. *Ignored indeed... He's good at reading the room, so I'm positive he understood what I wanted!*

"Please watch your step," he said.

Dissatisfied, I glowered at him, but nodded. “Okay.”

A small chortle escaped from his lips. *Shit. He’s so damn hot.* A sense of defeat washed over me, but at that same instant, I noticed that our surroundings were astir. Not by noisy yelling, but surprised gasps—and several at that.

Wondering what had happened, I raised my head to see Sir Leonhart’s parents gaping at us. Our eyes met. And, before I alighted from the carriage, I did not miss the astonishment that flashed across the dignified faces of the knights and servants who were lined up in orderly rows. However, because they were all highly trained professionals, they instantly rectified their stiff expressions as though nothing had been amiss.

So basically...someone unimaginable showed up and caused these experienced pros to do a double take. What if they’re thinking “Oh crap, the crazy princess with romance for brains is here”? What should I do? Urgh, my heart.

Sir Leonhart’s father, Count Gregor von Orsein, cleared his throat to hide his agitation and then smiled at me. “Welcome. Thank you for traveling such a great distance to visit us today.”

His hair was black, with gray strands mixed throughout, and his eyes were dark. Because of his facial features, I could tell he and Sir Leonhart were related, though the father was on the wilder side. He had a fierce countenance, but his charming smile softened him, giving off a mild impression. His large, sturdy physique was in no way inferior to an active-duty knight—he certainly didn’t appear like he was approaching his fifties.

“You must be exhausted from your long journey. Please come in,” said his wife, the countess, who stood beside him—Lady Gabriella.

Her soft, silky, chestnut-colored hair was worn up, and her gentle eyes were a beautiful shade of amber. I’d heard she was three years younger than her husband, so she should’ve been in her late forties, but she appeared much more youthful. Her visage was lovely like a young girl’s; her slender and petite figure stirred up my desire to protect her. *I’d believe it if someone told me she was Sir Leonhart’s older sister...or even his younger sister!*

Standing a few steps behind Sir Leonhart’s parents was his younger brother,

Martin, the middle child of the three. He had a gentle countenance—his hair and eyes were a brighter shade, resembling his mother more than his father, Sir Leonhart, and the youngest son. His appearance was closer to that of a civil official than a knight, but though he had a skinnier physique, he was still quite toned with muscle.

Next to him stood the youngest of the three brothers, Kevin. As I'd already mentioned, he had inherited his father's hair, eyes, and fierce looks. He was tall with a large build, but his appearance was oddly reminiscent of an adorable puppy.

Once I'd taken a good look at each of Sir Leonhart's family members, I suddenly remembered the strange discomfort I'd felt. I tilted my head. Then, I immediately realized what it was. In my memories, Lady Gabriella and Martin exuded a soft, soothing atmosphere, but today, their expressions were rigid. Every now and then, they would glance at me, concern visible in their eyes.

It doesn't seem as though they dislike me or that they oppose our marriage...but something's up. What's going on?

After they led me to my room, I tidied myself up, and then Sir Leonhart's mother invited me for tea. She was a kind woman, so there was no need to feel nervous...but I was a bit uneasy about the grave expression I'd seen earlier. I met up with Sir Leonhart in the room next to mine and he informed me that he would also be attending. However, Martin came with his own proposition soon after.

"A bout?" Sir Leonhart knitted his brows together slightly. He looked only somewhat displeased, but his well-chiseled face gave the expression intensity.

Martin was not perturbed. "Yes. It's been quite some time since you were home, so why don't you give a little lesson to Kevin and the knights?" A gentle, textbook smile was pasted on his face, but I could tell he had no intention of withdrawing.

He's strong.

"It doesn't have to be today," Sir Leonhart countered. "I can't leave the princess alone."

“Sir Leon,” I said, gently interrupting him before he could refuse. “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to leave your side,” he asserted with a serious expression.

Ohhh. My heart twinged and began pounding so intensely that I worried I had developed arrhythmia. I held my chest and peeked up at him. “I also wish to see your gallant figure.”

Sir Leonhart was struck speechless for a moment, then finally, hesitantly, he said, “It’s dangerous.”

Martin quickly came to my aid. “It shouldn’t be an issue if she watches from the terrace on the second floor.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful.” I fixed my expectant gaze upon Sir Leonhart, and he nodded in defeat.

“Then I will let mother know first. I’ll have her prepare tea for you there.” That sorted, Martin left the room.

Sir Leonhart turned around to face me, pulling me into his arms with one smooth motion. He let out a long sigh by my shoulder.

“S-Sir Leon?”

“Here I thought I could finally spend a whole day with you,” he murmured sulkily.

My pulse shot up to an even higher rate than before—it wasn’t a twinge this time but a great pang. I battled with the mysterious urge to rave nonsensical words and roll around on the floor. *He’s so, soooo cute! Too goddamn cute! He’s normally a composed adult...but then he acts like a sulky spoiled child. He’s so cunning. Too sly! I love him!*

“Once we return to the capital, our days spent apart will resume,” he continued. “That’s why I wanted to stick with you today, even if you got fed up and irritated with me.”

AHHHHHH! So cuuute! My (future) husband is too adorable! I want to fling the windows open and scream to the world how much I love him. Of course, I refrained since I didn’t want his family and the civilians around to view me as a nutjob. But, if I lost focus for even a moment, I felt like I would sprint to the

windows.

“I wish to be by your side every day. I would never find you irritating,” I assured him.

I reached a hand up to his head, which was buried in my shoulder, and weaved my fingers through the strands of his hair. I patted him gently—he froze. After a small pause, he demurely nuzzled his head into my palm.

Are you telling me to headpat you more?! Are you a kitty? Argh, he’s so cute! I wanted to rub his head so fiercely that he might spontaneously combust from the friction, but I bit my lip and held myself back. Instead, I carefully caressed him over and over.

“But I want to see you in valiant action...” I murmured. “Will you go along with my selfish request?”

“Asking me like that is unfair.” Sir Leonhart peeked at me. The area around his eyes was flushed red.

I fervently patted his head, not bothering to hide how cute I found him. He looked a bit conflicted at that. His gaze wandered around the room for a few seconds as though he were thinking about something, and then he looked at me again. His blatant stare caused me to flinch instinctively.

The corners of his mouth tugged up and he brought his lips to my ear. “Then come watch. Please fall in love with me again, okay?”

There was a soft, intimate sound, so close to my ear—he’d kissed my earlobe. The shock elicited a nonsensical squeak out of me. “Eek!” I was red up to my temples.

Sir Leonhart gazed at me, wearing a satisfied smile. *N-Not cute! But so hot!* It was frustrating to be led around by the nose like this, but in the end, I allowed it...because I loved him. *I don’t need to watch him in a bout to fall in love again—that happens every second of my life. But if he found that out, he’d keep teasing me, so my lips are sealed.*

The Countess’s Concerns

I married into the Orsein family in the spring of my sixteenth year. The very next year, I gave birth to our eldest son, Leonhart. Even without the bias of a doting parent, he was a capable child. He was intelligent, cheerful, and skilled at everything he tried. His progress with the sword was especially remarkable. My husband and father-in-law both instructed him with great enthusiasm.

Leonhart did not grow conceited. He put much effort into diligently training, and by the time he reached adulthood, he was unrivaled when it came to swordsmanship. My eldest son had a gentle and caring personality, so our second and third sons were also attached to him. He also had many friends and was always laughing, usually in the center of his social circles.

He was popular with young women, so we didn’t choose a fiancée for him. Fortunately, the Count Orsein household was affluent and had no need for a marriage of convenience. Because of his nobility, there were some restrictions as to who he could choose, but I wished that my sons would wed women they truly loved.

By the time he was of marriageable age, he was already seeing a woman. However, contrary to our expectations, we did not hear anything about marriage. Instead, years passed without any sign that he would settle down.

When my husband became tired of waiting, he decided on a fiancée for Leonhart. I grew uneasy. I was not dissatisfied with the young lady who was to be his partner; she was modest and beautiful, and she had a gentle character. She also appeared to be fond of Leonhart.

They were still too distant to feel love for one another, but they seemed to have a good relationship. Surely my unease was groundless. Perhaps it stemmed from feelings of not wanting my son to be taken away from me, and I admonished myself for being a selfish mother.

However, my bad premonition proved to be correct. Their relationship became awkward, and not long after, their engagement was canceled.

Though Leonhart insisted that the fault was his, he never gave us a specific reason. She was the same. They blamed themselves and gave no further details. My husband regretted that the two youths were left with large scars on their hearts.

At that point, we stopped submitting marriage proposals and simply watched over him quietly.

After the breakdown of his relationship, Leonhart showed no intentions of finding a special someone. He threw himself into work, joining the acclaimed royal guard. Though stories of his popularity among women reached our domain, we never heard any romantic gossip. Even when dubious rumors spread that he had fallen in love at first sight with a noble lady, he remained as devoted to his duties as always, and eventually, he became the captain of the royal guard.

"He grumbled that he's not suited for marriage," said my husband. It was the evening after Leonhart had returned home for the first time in a long while.

Our son had distanced himself from us after his annulled engagement, but the day he'd visited, he'd stayed up late drinking wine and conversing with my husband. Leonhart must've been relieved to hear that Martin's engagement had been settled.

Apparently, all my husband had done was nod and say, *"I see."* He now hung his head, disappointed that he hadn't been able to find words that might comfort his anxious and hurt son. *"He said he's missing something inside him—the ability to love. I don't believe so. He just hasn't found the right one for him yet...a woman he wants to hold dear. I wanted to object, but I didn't have any definitive evidence, so I couldn't."*

The men of the Orsein family were fundamentally full of love. Each of them only seemed to have eyes for the one they'd set their heart on—they poured all their affection into that one person. I'd heard that my husband's granduncle had lost his fiancée at a young age, and he'd remained a bachelor for the rest of his life. Likewise, a few generations ago, the older brother of the head of the household had been single for a long time...until he'd met his beloved in his late fifties. He'd wed her the next year.

They all sought after their irreplaceable sweetheart. Leonhart was likely the same. However, I couldn't bring myself to say anything out of fear that I would do a poor job consoling him. There was no guarantee that he would ever meet the one—it was certainly possible that he might never chance upon her. Despair after seeing the light of hope was always much darker.

I began to think that Leonhart would be fine as he was now. Perhaps being a perpetual bachelor was better than risking empty hope. We had two more sons, and Martin was intimate with his fiancée. Kevin was following in my husband's footsteps and studying how to manage our domain. There was no need for Leonhart to marry just because he was our eldest son.

I was content as long as my sons were happy. Well, that was what I'd thought, but you never can predict how life will turn out.

"Lady Gabriella, thank you for inviting me." Leonhart's fiancée smiled nervously. She was the Kingdom of Nevel's first princess, Her Highness Rosemary von Velfalt.

"I deeply apologize for asking you to join me out of the blue," I replied. "You must've been surprised."

"Not at all. I wanted to speak with you as well." Her shy and bashful demeanor was so enchanting... She even captivated me, though I was a fellow woman.

The princess was a highly exalted woman in this nation, a rare, unconceited soul. She was very intelligent—I'd heard of the magnificent achievements she'd left in her wake. Her gorgeous beauty resembled the queen's, and at first glance, she seemed difficult to approach, but she was actually very amiable. Her platinum-blonde hair seemed spun from spring sunbeams; sky-blue eyes were a perfect match for her warm, sunny personality.

It was as though miracles had gathered in the shape of a human...and that person was to be my son's bride. I honestly couldn't comprehend how this had happened. Joy and anxiety struggled for dominance within me.

"I'm sure Leonhart is upset that I'm interrupting your alone time," I remarked.

Her face flushed scarlet. He'd probably told her something close to that—my son was quite easy to understand. I could tell immediately that Leonhart adored Lady Rosemary from the bottom of his heart. If not, then how could he appear like that before us? His expression was gentle, and his eyes revealed how irresistibly in love he was. I had never seen him smile with such jubilance.

It was the satisfied face of a man who, after searching for so long, had found his other half. I was ecstatic that Leonhart had finally met his beloved, and in my joy, I unwittingly offered thanks to God.

However, his partner far surpassed my expectations.

She was a young princess overflowing with wisdom and beautiful like a rose that had just begun to bloom. She would surely grow even more lovely and charming in the future. Countless men would yearn for her, would line up to win her love. Would such an adorable flower treasure Leonhart—who was fifteen years older than her—forever? His love was directly solely at her, but would she be able to accept those deep feelings without being crushed under the weight of them?

"Oh."

Lady Rosemary's soft voice pulled me from the recesses of my mind. Her gaze was not directed at me, but below the balcony. Leonhart had just stepped out into the training grounds. He'd shed his coat and was now dressed lightly in a simple white shirt and trousers, but he still stood out due to his height. His tall, upright posture was dignified and refined.

A small sigh spilled from Lady Rosemary's flower petal lips. Her eyes were filled with passion for only one person there—Leonhart. *It seems that she is also in love with him. I would be glad if her affection is not a one-dimensional fleeting admiration for a gentlemanly knight.*

Feeling my stare, Lady Rosemary's cheeks reddened. Impatience flashed across her countenance for a brief second before she smoothed over her expression.

"Y-You have splendid training grounds," she said.

Our training grounds were certainly large and well-equipped. The Orsein

lineage had a long history of producing great soldiers. But it was clear to everyone that Lady Rosemary had not been gazing passionately at the training grounds. The maids waiting on us and our guards standing nearby lost their composure for a moment—a testimony to how obvious she was acting.

A peerless beauty had just told a terribly clumsy excuse. The gap between her appearance and behavior made my heart skip a beat, and surely I was not the only one. *My son's betrothed is far too adorable.*

I remained calm and smiled at her. "Thank you very much. The Orsein family has many people who excel in martial arts, so it has been designed to be spacious."

Lady Rosemary returned a relieved smile. Her attention was quickly drawn back to Leonhart as he clashed swords with his opponent. Seeing how captivated she was by his valiant display dispelled my worries to some extent.

Leonhart spent some time instructing the other knights with an imposing expression and then he suddenly looked up. He immediately spotted Lady Rosemary, and a beaming grin spread across his face. When he waved at her, she responded with a radiant smile and wave of her own.

They only had eyes for each other, and their display of affection made my concerns seem senseless. *No, people's hearts change. Oftentimes, the hotter the passion, the quicker the love fizzles out. It would be best for her to learn not only Leonhart's strengths but also his faults as soon as possible. That way, they'll be able to stay together for many years to come. But, he's not very good at depending on others... Will he show his pathetic side to his beloved?*

Such worries plagued me as I watched over them. The knights in the training grounds were abuzz as they'd followed the path of Leonhart's gaze and found Lady Rosemary. Now that they were aware of a stunning lady observing their training, they couldn't help but feel exhilarated. They reacted like healthy young men, and it was somewhat heartwarming.

Leonhart...did not think the same. Even from afar, I could tell that his mood had plummeted. *What a petty man.* As his mother, I thought that his narrow-mindedness was worrying. Especially now that he was thirty. He'd been much calmer ten years ago. I watched Leonhart's coaching become stricter than

before and sighed.

“I’m sorry my son is so small-minded,” I said.

“Huh?” Lady Rosemary’s eyes went round.

“If there’s anything troubling you, please don’t hesitate to tell me. He’ll listen to my husband and me.” *So please, don’t forsake him. If Leonhart loses you, he won’t be able to breathe anymore.*

“Oh, no. Nothing is troubling me at all.”

I couldn’t tell if she knew of my anxiety, but she firmly denied it. *I would be over the moon if she meant that deep in her heart and not just out of politeness. I want to believe in her...but I’m too afraid.*

Perhaps Lady Rosemary had picked up on my vacillating emotions—she cast her eyes down for a moment, mulling over her thoughts, and then looked back up at me. “I fell in love with Sir Leonhart over a decade ago,” she began.

I didn’t immediately understand what she was saying. A dumbfounded “Huh?” escaped from my mouth.

“If it had been the fleeting puppy love of a child...then fine, that would have been it. But I continued pursuing him all these years. If we’re keeping score of who has caused the other the most trouble, then I’m ahead...by an overwhelming margin.” The tips of her shapely ears had turned red out of embarrassment. Her brows drooped, and she smiled bitterly. “After all, I was a child fifteen years younger than him, openly displaying her affections. Not to mention that I’m a princess. I think he must’ve been very troubled. But Sir Leonhart did not evade my feelings because I was a child. He treated me with sincerity and tried to keep me away from him for my sake.”

She was speaking of how she’d been turned down, but the corner of her eyes softened gently.

“Yet, how could I ever give up on such a kind man? I asked him not to reject me. I persisted after him. This dragged on for a long, long time... And now, finally, he has eyes for me.”

Her blithe smile betrayed not a single lie. Hearing her heartfelt words moved

me. *She's been thawing Leonhart's frozen heart all this time... She never gave up, never allowed him to be alone. She chased him for many, many years. And due to her efforts, my son will now be wed. I should be thanking* her*, not God.*

This young girl must've cried so many times over a futile love. And just look at how charming she is—there must be plenty of other gentlemen who would whisper honeyed words to her. Thank you for never giving up. Thank you for pursuing him all this time without ever considering someone else.

Thank you so much for loving my son.

"Lady Rosemary."

"Yes?"

"May I give you a hug?"

"Yes— What?" She nodded once and only understood my question a beat later.

My request bewildered her, but I strode over to her side nonetheless and gently wrapped my arms around her slender body. I knew my behavior was insolent toward royalty, but I couldn't suppress my feelings.

"Please take care of Leonhart," I told her, my words filled with heartfelt emotion. Her petite shoulders twitched.

She lifted her head and nodded at me with a solemn expression. "Yes. I'd give everything to make him happy."

She looks so adorable, but she can recite some very gallant words. Our daughter-in-law might be manlier than our son.

The Knight Captain's Joy

I was well aware that my fiancée was a beautiful woman. Though I'd fallen for her essence as a person rather than her appearance, once Lady Rosemary had become dear to me, I'd started to see her beauty as another one of her many charms.

My beloved had inherited the queen's gorgeous looks and the king's dignified grandeur; she'd been turning heads since she was young. Her name had spread throughout the land through the poetry of minstrels, paintings, and rumors, and though her countenance varied somewhat, she'd become known to even the residents of a distant island nation that Nevel shared no official diplomatic relationships with.

Her pulchritude was like a small, stubborn rosebud—a reflection of her earnest personality—and as the years passed, she'd bloomed gently and brilliantly. She'd been a charming lady since long ago, but now, she was a whole different kind. They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but no human could lay eyes on Lady Rosemary as she was now and claim that she was not beautiful.

Thus, my current situation was only natural. Even women and infants were enchanted by her, so it was only reasonable that young knights would be spellbound too. Logically, I understood this fact, but my emotions would not acquiesce. I wanted to turn to the knights and shout, *"Don't look at her!"*

I fought the urge to knock out every single man who was blushing at the sight of Lady Rosemary smiling at *me.* I wanted to strip the memory of her visage from their minds. Though I continued to instruct them in swordsmanship, I could not suppress the irritation welling up inside of me.

I swung down with a training sword and a young knight frantically blocked my blow. He tried to push back with all his might—I could clearly see that he was not paying attention to anything else. If I eased up on my strength, I knew that his stance would quickly fall apart.

"There are too many holes in your guard!" I yelled.

“Yes, sir!”

His weaknesses became obvious after a few more exchanges, and I pulled my blow just before I struck his exposed vitals. The young man gulped.

“Do not neglect your defense,” I told him.

“Yes, sir! My apologies!”

“Next!” I called.

“Thank you, sir!”

One by one, I thoroughly crushed each knight. Normally, I would take more time to meticulously instruct them, but I had no room for that in my heart right now. My last bout was against Kevin, who persisted until the very end, but when he fell to his knees, I finally lowered my sword.

Martin appeared next to me out of nowhere and gazed at the heaps of knights collapsed all around. “Brother, are you trying to annihilate our order?”

I crudely wiped the sweat off my neck and exhaled. After a strenuous workout, my irritation had, for the most part, subsided. I turned toward Martin—his expression was as exasperated as his tone suggested. I knew I was being immature, so I didn’t comment on his attitude.

“Do you want a bout as well?” I asked.

“I’ll refrain. Unlike my two brothers, I’m a feeble man.”

Despite his claims, Martin was actually quite strong. His stamina was somewhat lacking, but his technique surpassed Kevin’s.

“Also, I’d prefer not to be another victim of your venting.” He shared our mother’s kind countenance, but sharp words easily rolled off his tongue.

“You’re the one who asked me to join their training,” I retorted.

“If you were your normal self, I know your guidance would be efficient and easy to understand.”

It was painfully true. Ashamed, I turned away like a petulant child.

Martin chuckled. “Besides, I’ve already achieved my true goal.” He looked up at the second-floor balcony.

I'd naturally picked up on their deliberate attempt to separate us. My mother likely wanted to speak with Lady Rosemary alone. My whole family knew that I loved her deeply from the bottom of my heart, and because of that, worry was blatantly plastered all over my mother and Martin's faces.

They fretted about whether the young and beautiful Lady Rosemary would abandon her affection for me eventually. After all, I *was* fifteen years older than her. Or, perhaps they worried that I was overly attached to her to the point of being annoying. Both were tantalizing questions...but I didn't want to ask my betrothed.

Lady Rosemary had already responded to my feelings, and I trusted her. At the same time, I knew that love and desire were not emotions that could be tied down by faith or a contract. Even if I worked hard to earn her love, there was no such thing as an absolute promise.

"You haven't even spoken to her yet," I pointed out, "so how would you know?"

"Mother's expression makes it clear as day." He glanced at me, his gaze half astonished and half critical, as though I was jabbering foolish nonsense.

I fled from his judging eyes and glanced up at my mother. Her face, which had been clouded with apprehension when we'd first arrived, had brightened up in the blink of an eye. She smiled at Lady Rosemary with a tenderness that she only showed family. I gazed at them in wonder; mother's afflictions had completely vanished.

Words alone are not enough to assuage someone's fears. That's why I planned to first show them the depth of my feelings and Lady Rosemary's nature. I thought my family would gradually accept our relationship over time as we visited them... So what magic did Lady Rosemary use to win her over so quickly?

"To tell you the truth, I'm quite relieved as well," Martin said.

"About what?"

"I worried whether a princess who was protected carefully and lauded as the crown's greatest treasure would be able to endure the affections that you've been accumulating for thirty years. And, even if she were to crumble under the

weight, it's already too late for you to let her go out of your own volition, correct? If that were to happen, then the Orsein County would need to take responsibility and help her escape to somewhere out of your reach." Martin narrated an unsettling scenario in a flippant tone. "Fortunately, it hasn't come to that."

He stated everything with a disturbingly composed expression, but I wasn't offended. I was actually grateful to have a dependable younger brother.

"My sister-in-law's affection for you runs much deeper than I expected—she appears to be a reliable young lady."

My shoulders trembled slightly when he said "sister-in-law." Lady Rosemary was my fiancée, and though I knew we would soon become family, hearing it in words was perplexing. I felt embarrassed...but also happy.

Martin laughed dryly at my flushing cheeks. "I never thought the day would come when I saw you so shy. You've ignored all women, from seductive beauties to lovely young ladies, but now you're acting like a boy who's just reached adolescence."

He sounded amazed rather than mocking, and that made me feel all the more abashed. I pressed my hand against my forehead, closed my eyes, and exhaled softly. "I know. Just leave me be, please."

"It's amusing to see you so discombobulated, but as someone who's looked up to you his whole life, I feel a bit conflicted. She loves you so much that it dispelled our mother's unease in an instant, so how about you pull yourself together?"

The fact that I'd become jealous of young knights... The fact that I'd taken out my anger on them... It pricked my heart. *I would've pulled myself together long ago if I could've. There's no need to be envious of anyone and everyone—Lady Rosemary loves* me*. She's a faithful soul, so she would never have eyes for another. I know this...but I just can't control myself.*

I become uneasy precisely because I love her, and because she loves me. I'm the happiest I've ever been, so I'm terrified of losing it all. A luxurious concern to have, I know, but it's the unblemished truth.

“I can’t,” I replied.

“You’ve gone and said it.”

“There’s no guarantee that this will last all eternity. So, for as long as I’m alive by her side, I will continue to pitifully lack composure and beseech her for her love.” After admitting that, I calmly added, “If I do, Lady Rosemary will be too compassionate to forsake me.”

Martin’s eyes went round. He blinked blankly several times and then squinted. “You’d willingly act like a buffoon? How shameless.”

“It matters not. I’d do anything to keep her by my side for the rest of my life.”

“And that’s what makes you a man of Orsein blood!” exclaimed a boisterous voice.

Someone vigorously clapped my back from behind with such strength that I had trouble breathing for a moment. An arm wrapped around my shoulders as I coughed for breath. My father guffawed at an earsplitting volume. Martin, who wore a sullen frown, was similarly trapped by my father’s other arm hugging him close by the shoulders.

“It’s in our blood to do whatever it takes to tie down the women we love!” he yelled.

“Please stop shouting such preposterous statements,” Martin scolded.

Our father didn’t appear to have heard him because he cheerfully slapped both of our shoulders. It hurt quite a bit. In fact, it hurt immensely.

“My sons, we’re drinking tonight!”

“Drinking with my brother?! I’m joining in too!” Kevin rose from the ground and energetically raised his hand.

He still adores me even after listening to that disturbing conversation? The men of the Orsein family truly did have a few screws loose. My father boasted about how he loved his children dearly, though our mother was still number one in his heart. And though Martin appeared unruffled, he cherished his fiancée, treating her like she was a precious jewel. Kevin had also begun to take interest in a lady as well.

The men of the Orsein family were only respectable on the surface, and that was thanks to our loved ones—because the women we held dear accepted our crushingly heavy affection with a blissful smile. With them, we could be just bumbling, happy men.

The Knight Captain’s Tryst

“I’ll leave the rest to you,” I said.

“Yes, good night.”

Martin raised his glass with one hand and smiled. He’d already emptied two whole bottles of wine, but no flush colored his face. Next to him sat a tipsy Kevin, who was singing merrily. Across from them, our father nonsensically lectured an empty bottle, his face glowing red. Among this chaos, Martin elegantly tipped his glass with full composure—he was quite the heavyweight.

My father noticed me standing and turned his attention to me. “Sleeping already, Leonhart? Listen to your father speak some more!”

I kicked myself internally, annoyed that I’d missed my chance to escape, but I forced a smile on and began to sit back down. However, Martin stopped me with a glance.

“Father, if you want someone to listen, I’m here. Kevin, you’re eager to hear what he has to say too, right?”

Kevin, who had been singing gibberish while gleefully lost in his own world, tilted his head in confusion when the conversation was tossed to him. “Huh?”

“Kevin seems to want to learn the mysteries of your strength, father. Right, Kevin?”

“I do?”

It was obvious that Kevin was clueless as to what was happening, but Martin forced the conversation forward nonetheless.

“I see, I see. You boys want to listen so badly?” Our father smiled widely.

“Yes. Primarily, Kevin does.” Martin nodded at him and gestured for me to hurry up and leave.

I covertly left the room, grateful to Martin for helping me escape and to Kevin for his oblivious sacrifice. The hallway was cool, unlike the room, which had been stuffy and hot. I hoped to sober up a bit before sleeping, so I took a small

detour before heading to my room. I strolled along, listening to jovial laughter from afar. I deliberately took my time, occasionally greeting a passing soldier on duty.

Unfortunately, by the time I reached my room, my head had not cooled down at all. I clutched the doorknob and then suddenly looked at the room next to mine. *Considering how late it is, she must be asleep by now. I'd like to see her sleeping face, but I could never insolently step into her room without permission. Furthermore, I'm inebriated. My reason has slipped, so it would be unwise to see her now.*

Merely knowing that Lady Rosemary slept in the room next to mine made me restless. *I'm no longer a greenhorn in my teens.* Though I cursed myself bitterly, it did nothing to deter me. I almost pictured her, defenseless and asleep, but I snapped back to my senses, shaking my head back and forth to drive out that reprehensible imagery.

After entering my room, I took off my jacket. I sniffed my cuff—it smelled of alcohol. *Yeah, I stink.* I'd washed off my sweat after training, but it was definitely time for another bath. However, my burning body and hazy mind indicated that I was still not yet sober. It would be problematic if I collapsed in the bath, so instead, I went out onto the veranda to clear my head.

The cool night wind caressed my cheeks and streamed inside. I peered up at the moon floating high in the cloudless, dark sky. I took a single step.

"Sir Leon?"

Shocked to hear my name, I turned toward the voice with a start.

There stood the person I had thought long asleep.

Her soft, platinum-blonde hair swayed in the gentle breeze. Her eyes usually shone like bright sapphires, but in the dim lighting they appeared a deep, navy blue, like the tranquil ocean at night. She blinked a few times, her long lashes fluttering over those watery pools.

Moonlight illuminated her slender body—she was swathed in white nightwear and stood out against the darkness. She was like a pale flower blooming under the moon. I felt captivated by her fantastical beauty for a

moment, but when I saw a teardrop glisten in the corner of her eye, I inhaled sharply.

My elation faded away; I sobered up instantly. My head rapidly chilled, and only one question came to mind: *who made Lady Rosemary cry?*

“Has your party ended alre— Huh?!”

The princess tried to veil her tears with a smile and go on speaking, but her words were replaced by a cry of surprise. I kept my eyes glued on her as I stepped on top of the banister and leaped. I landed on the balcony next to mine.

She stared at me, speechless, her eyes wide as saucers. Quickly closing the distance between us, I grasped her wrist. I gazed at her face at such proximity that I could feel her breath on me—her azure eyes were moist with tears. *I wasn’t mistaken.*

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“What?” Her long lashes quivered and she blinked several times. At the same time, the tears gathering around the corner of her eyes spilled out. I wiped the drops with my finger and repeated myself once more.

“What happened while I wasn’t with you? Who made you cry?”

After a small pause, she uttered, “Oh.” She seemed to have finally remembered that she’d been crying, and she hung her head to try and hide it.

But it was too late. I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t seen her weep. I placed my hand on her dainty chin and raised her head. Our gazes locked, and her eyes wavered in confusion.



“Tell me.”

A searing impatience and irritation welled up inside of me. I could feel my own expression gradually warp into something heinous, but I couldn’t hold myself back. I could never sit still when my one and only beloved was hurt.

“I-It’s not like that!” Lady Rosemary frantically shook her head.

“It’s not like what? If you’re trying to protect someone, then—”

“No! It’s really nothing like that!” Though she was flustered, she showed no signs of grief. I was still dubious, but I waited for her to explain. Her eyes roamed hesitantly, and then, with great difficulty, she said, “Well... I had a dream.”

“A dream?” I parroted.

She gave me a small nod.

“You had a nightmare?” I questioned.

Lady Rosemary was honest to a fault and a poor liar. Because of this, I knew—there was no sign of deceit in her voice or conduct. *It must’ve been terrible, something painful enough to make her cry.* However, she shook her head again. *If it wasn’t a nightmare...then why is she crying?* I was baffled.

“What kind of dream did you have?” I asked. “Will you tell me?”

A pall of silence fell between us for a while. I released her wrist and scooped up her slender hand, lacing our fingers together and wrapping my other hand around her waist. *You’re not getting away.*

She looked troubled, and rouge tinged her cheeks. Before she spoke, she let out a sigh. “It was a dream of the past... A dream about when I was a child.” Her tone was unexpectedly calm, even somewhat affectionate. She looked up at me and smiled, her eyes narrowed softly. “It was the day you rejected me.”

I never would’ve predicted that... My words got caught in my throat. “The day,” was a vague description, but it was enough for me to clearly recall what had occurred. I’d accompanied her inside a carriage after being sent on a mission to guard her. It was after I’d listened to her conversation with the king and, sensing my situation to be precarious, I’d tried to one-sidedly put an end to

Lady Rosemary's devoted love for me.

That day, I'd selfishly decided that her feelings were a fleeting admiration that would disappear when she became an adult. *Which means...the reason she is crying is...*

"Did I make you cry?" Putting my suspicion into words shocked me. I never would've imagined that *I* would be the one to cause my beloved pain enough to bring her to tears. *I'd been planning to land a few punches on whoever the perpetrator was...but what do I do now? Well, I suppose punching* myself *in the face shouldn't lead to any serious injuries.*

Lady Rosemary's eyes widened when she saw my expression stiffen. "No, not at all. My memories of that day are in no way painful to me."

"But I spurned you."

"No. You failed to do so. I wasn't spurned. After all, I covered your mouth and wouldn't let you speak." She giggled with that lovely, sonorous voice of hers. I was relieved to see that there was no shadow clouding her content smile.

"Yes, I remember. You stopped me from saying something boorish. With this hand." I lifted her fingers and brushed my lips against them. Not yet accustomed to my intimate touches, Lady Rosemary cast her eyes down in embarrassment. *You're lovely when you're shy,* I thought as I gazed at her. "I'm glad you stopped me," I said, and I meant every word.

We're together now because Lady Rosemary never surrendered. If I had pushed her aside, then her kindness would've compelled her to put an end to that love in order to avoid bothering me. I shuddered in fear just imagining it—I'd come so close to losing her hand and her warmth forever. *My life would've come to an end, and I would have never learned about true affection, or how vexing it is to not be able to contain yourself, or the happiness of loving someone and being loved... Everything.*

"At the time, I did all I could without caring how I came off," she remarked.

"You've always been one to give everything your all."

"It's a bit shameful when I look back on it...but I'm grateful to my past self. I'm connected to you like this now because I didn't give up back then." She

squeezed my hand.

“That’s right.”

“I was just so young, and the chances of you turning my way were practically zero.” Lady Rosemary appeared to be thinking fondly of her past. “I hated being treated like a child, but I exploited my privilege as a child to delay your answer.”

“That’s right.”

“I thought it was pointless to postpone the inevitable...but I just couldn’t give up.”

“That’s right.”

“I only knew how to charge forward while harboring my love for you.”

A heartbeat passed. “That’s right.”

Our eyes met. My chest ached and the words almost got stuck in my throat.

“When I awoke earlier, I heard cheerful laughter,” she said.

“Were we too rowdy?” I asked with a strained smile.

Lady Rosemary’s eyes twinkled gently and her lips curved up. She shook her head. “I was alone in an unfamiliar room, but thanks to that laughter, I didn’t feel lonely. It reaffirmed that this isn’t all just a dream.”

“Lady Rosemary...”

“I used to cry over my unrequited love, so when I thought about how I’m to marry you, I was overcome with joy... And that is what made me tear up.”

I couldn’t contain my emotions when I saw her abashed smile. So, I gave in to my feelings and threw my arms around her petite body, drawing her close to me.

“S-Sir Leon?!” she exclaimed.

I said nothing in reply. Instead, I buried my face into her soft hair and rubbed my cheek against her. *I’m sorry, I know you’re distressed, but please, bear with me.* “Me too.” It was pathetic how shrill and hoarse my voice sounded.

“Huh?”

“I’m happy too.” It was frustrating how only obvious sentiments came to mind at this moment. Surely there were words far more fitting to describe the depth and weight of my emotions—words far more splendid to offer to my beloved. But my stupefied mind was unable to find them. All I could think about was how lovely and dear to me Lady Rosemary was.

“I’m glad you didn’t give up on me.” I wrapped my palms around her cheeks, which were dusted with a light-pink blush, and turned her face up. I tilted her toward me. Unaccustomed to this, she closed her eyes.

“I love you,” I whispered just before our lips touched.

Her mouth arched up joyfully and I gently pressed my lips against hers.

The Reincarnated Princess's Family

After our visit to Sir Leonhart's family, we journeyed back to the capital. The day after our return, exhausted from traveling by carriage, I slept until almost noon and woke up with a dull headache. Just as I was about to decline my meal, thinking I'd partake in a light snack around three, I received an invitation from my mother.

I strolled to the gazebo next to the pond deep within the palace's vast garden. However, my mother was not the only one waiting for me—I was surprised to see Chris and Johan, who I hadn't been able to visit due to their busy schedules.

Isn't it considerably rare for the three of us to be gathered in one place outside of official affairs? The mother I used to know despised Chris, and he never approached her because he knew that. And, ever since he was young, Johan was also left to his own devices just like me. Then once he grew up, he went to Vint to study abroad, so his interactions with mother were practically nonexistent.

I was impressed that she'd summoned them here as well. My heart felt full when I thought that my pessimistic and dishonest mother had mustered up the courage to arrange this gathering. *Mother... You worked hard.*

The trio seemed to be struggling for a conversation topic though, and it was clear even from afar that the mood was stifling. When my mother noticed me nearing, relief washed over her face. However, she quickly snapped out of it and slipped on a mask of indifference.

Hmm? Confused, I proceeded to my seat, and she addressed me.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you. I've returned safely."

"I heard you returned last night."

I hesitated for a moment and then said, "It was late at night when we arrived, so I refrained from notifying you." *Her wording is very standard, so why do I feel like a husband getting berated by his wife for returning home late?*

“You must’ve enjoyed mingling with his family.”

Johan furrowed his brows at her blatantly snide remark. “Mother,” he admonished.

Don’t frown so hard! Mother’s sarcasm is actually just her being a cute tsundere. “I did. They were all very kind people and they treated me extremely well.”

“Did you become close to his mother as well?” she asked after a brief pause.

“Yes.”

“I see...” She wilted despondently, though the choice of topic had been her own.

Ahhh, jeez! If the answer was going to make you sad, you shouldn’t have asked! She’s such an adorable person. I grinned at her. “She’s a compassionate and wonderful lady. Just like you, mother.”

Her cheeks instantly flushed crimson. “O-Oh, my, is that so?” she stammered, imperfectly feigning composure.

Johan gaped at our mother as though he’d just witnessed something unbelievable. It was understandable since his mental image of her only consisted of bland memories from his early childhood. Similarly, until a few years ago, I had also misunderstood her as a haughty and hysterical woman. In reality, she was absurdly clumsy with her feelings and prone to feeling lonely.

Chris watched my mother and me converse with a warm smile. “Johan, Rose and step-mother are quite close, so there’s no need to fuss.”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” exclaimed Johan.

Chris’s remark caused a full-blown scarlet flush to break out across the queen’s face. However, Chris was also something of a natural airhead when it came to this sort of thing. He tilted his head and began seriously ruminating over what had been so wrong with his statement and what he’d done to elicit such a negative reaction from her. “Isn’t it true?”

“N—” Mother almost reflexively responded “no,” as a tsundere would, but she did her best to suppress the urge. “Yes. It’s true. We’re on good terms.” She

nodded shyly, her cheeks bright red. I couldn't think of anything except how adorable she was behaving.

"She's interacting with Chris normally? I don't understand," Johan mumbled to himself in a low voice as he pressed his forehead down into his hands.

Looks like he's overloading on new information and he can't take it all in. She's chatting with me without any hostility (although her tsundere nature complicates things), and she's even conversing with Chris, who she used to treat like her mortal enemy. No wonder Johan's confused.

"Sister... Am I dreaming right now?" he asked, wearing a grave expression.

I chuckled. "You are not."

Johan looked conflicted at that.

"We made peace with each other while you were abroad. Right? Mother, Chris?"

My mother and Chris exchanged glances. Chris beamed at us fondly; my mother awkwardly averted her eyes and nodded lightly.

Though I'd said that we'd all made peace, there'd been no comprehensive exchange of apologies and forgiveness. But they had bumped into each other quite often while I was bedridden, so I sensed that they'd become closer, albeit awkwardly. Neither had been proactive in their attempts, so in the end, they had only gotten to know each other a little better.

However, Johan did not accept this change. He regarded our mother with cold eyes, not quite glaring, but there was not a trace of affection in his gaze. She flinched.

"Made peace? Chris, sister, you're too softhearted."

"Johan."

I'd called his name to chide him, but since I didn't really want to offer reproach, my tone came out more distraught than I'd intended. Yes, we'd been neglected, and yes, we'd given up on mending our relationship with our parents...but that was a story from long ago. He and I had been young children back then.

Though we hadn't cursed or despised her, we had only seen our mother as a human who happened to be related by blood. And now that she was trying to bridge the gap, it was only natural that he would be unsettled.

I sympathized with how Johan felt, so I struggled to find my next words. At the same time, when I imagined how much courage it must've taken for mother to reach out to Johan and Chris, I couldn't bear to stay silent.

I loved them all; I didn't want anyone to feel hurt.

"You've misunderstood mother. She—"

"Rose." My mother gently stopped me. "Thank you for defending me. It makes me happy, but Johan is correct. I'm guilty of everything he says."

She lifted her head and looked Johan straight in the eyes. "I paid no attention to my children and forced my opinions on them. I never attempted to love you properly, and yet I feared that you would hate me. In the end, I ran away—I was a terrible mother... No, even now, all I'm doing is presuming upon Rose's and Christoph's kindness. I have not given a single thing in return."

Johan frowned, but he quietly listened to her speak.

"I may not be able to change immediately, but I will endeavor to. If it's possible, then I'd appreciate it if you would watch over me to make sure I don't stray from the right path again."

After a long silence, Johan closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. "Very well. I'll observe you from now on and judge you for myself."

"Thank you." A delighted smile broke out across my mother's face.

Chris and I, who'd been watching them with bated breath, sighed in relief.

"After all, it'd make me look like a fool if I stayed upset when Chris and my sister have already put in a good word for you." Johan turned to face me, his expression relaxed. "Besides, it's because you were a crummy mother that my sister spoiled me so much. When I think of it in that way, I even feel somewhat grateful."

His radiant smile gave me mixed feelings. *Saying that makes it sound like there's no room for a mom in your life.*

However, our mother nodded in agreement. “Rose is much more mature than I am.” Her smile seemed a little lonesome. “But if I remain a deplorable mother, then Rose won’t be able to marry in peace.”

“Mother...” I murmured, touched that she would think of me in that respect.

Unlike me, Chris’s and Johan’s expressions hardened with realization. She looked at them, her brows sinking in disgust.

“Surely you two didn’t think something like ‘I could’ve done that,’ right?”

“Of course not,” Johan denied with a bright smile.

Chris quietly averted his gaze.

The amiable conversation put me over the moon. *I’ve been feeling forlorn... After my wedding, I will be physically far away from them. But those negative feelings are gone now. Even when separated, we’ll always be family.*

The Final Day As the Reincarnated Princess

The only noise in my silent room was the ticking of the clock's second hand. My gaze flitted to and fro from the clock to the cup in my grip. No matter how many times I checked, time progressed at the same steady rate.

The black tea I'd been drinking to calm myself had been neglected for far too long and was now lukewarm. Klaus, who stood nearby, instructed a maid to brew me a new pot, but I gestured for him to stop. Even when chilled, carefully brewed tea was not astringent and would still taste delicious.

I tilted the cup to my lips and my gaze unconsciously flew to the clock once more. The corners of Klaus's lips tugged up when he saw how fidgety I was.

"Perhaps you'll end up feeling more nervous today than you will tomorrow," he remarked.

"I...doubt that'll be true," I replied meekly. I knew he was teasing me, but I couldn't find any words to retaliate with. I'd been restless the whole day—nothing I said would sound persuasive.

Still, he went too far saying I'd be less nervous now than tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is a once-in-a-lifetime event for me: it's the day of my wedding!

The two-year engagement period had passed, and the momentous day when I would finally become Sir Leonhart's wife was finally here. Though I'd been swamped with preparations, I'd been eagerly awaiting the day...and I was equally nervous.

Right now, I felt flighty and unable to keep my feet planted on the ground, but it was for a completely different reason.

"Tomorrow is an important day for me, but that's not what I'm jittery over," I told him.

"Oh, really?" My composed knight smiled at me pleasantly.

My expression soured in response. Klaus had turned twenty-nine this year. He'd honed his swordsmanship, grown as a knight, and he had also mentally

become more temperate. That didn't mean he'd mellowed—as always, he had strong opinions on his preferences—but now, he was considerate enough to conceal his emotions in front of others. It was splendid that he'd learned how to avoid needless conflict.

But at the same time, it made him harder to deal with. There was no room for counterargument when he shot me a reasonable smile instead of impulsively arguing. As dependable as he was now, I had a feeling I would lose in a clash of opinions. *I'm grateful to have such a talented man as my retainer though.*

I'd been silently staring at his handsome face, so he asked, "Is something wrong?"

I shook my head in wordless denial.

The royal guard uniform looked very good on him, but today would be the last time he donned it. Tomorrow, he would be transferred to my dukedom's knight order. Apparently, the new captain of the royal guard had tried to stop him—Klaus had always been outstanding when it came to his swordsmanship, and once he'd rectified his impulsive personality, he'd deservedly become someone difficult to let go of.

The symbol of the royal guard and our nation's hero, Sir Leonhart, had also recently resigned from his position as captain, so Klaus leaving simultaneously must've caused many headaches. If Klaus had remained in the royal guard, then he would've been given a high-ranking position such as vice-captain. He could've possibily become captain one day.

However, he lacked ambition and refused the position without hesitation. *I feel bad for the new captain...but as the head of my household, I have no intention of letting go of such a capable person. So please, concede.*

As I was absorbed in deep thought and observing Klaus, someone suddenly knocked on the door. I almost unwittingly jumped out of my seat. Klaus smiled wryly and walked toward the entrance. After he spoke with whoever was outside, he turned back to me.

"She's here."

Before the words had finished coming out of his mouth, I leaped up and flew

out of the room. Klaus followed behind me. His tepid gaze screamed that he thought my reaction was heartwarming. That peeved me a bit, but I ignored him. I continued down the corridor, being careful to curb my excitement so I didn't break into a run.

Just as I turned down a hallway, the doors to the room I was gunning for opened, and two young men came out. Both wore robes that signified their status as sorcerers, and they looked up when they noticed my presence.

These were my friends who had been with me since childhood—Lutz and Teo.

"Oh, Princess," said Lutz.

"Hello, Princess," greeted Teo.

"Hello, Lutz, Teo."

I walked toward them, but Lutz became flustered and thrust out his hand. "Wait. We reek of sweat, so don't get close."

Just as he'd said, the two of them were covered in sweat as though they'd just run a marathon. They were wiping their wet foreheads and necks with a towel, and their hair was sticky.

"That's a testimony to your laborious efforts. Good work you two!" I didn't think they smelled particularly bad, but I kept my distance as requested. *My opinion aside, they hate it, so I should respect their wishes.*

"It was considerably easier than last time. It feels like we've improved." Teo's eyes softened shyly as he wiped his forehead with the towel.

I'd heard from Miss Irene that their growth was remarkable. They'd always trained diligently, but after they'd found a goal to work toward two years ago, their development had been incomparably rapid.

"How dependable," I said.

They both aimed to apply magic to medicine. Unlike earth-affinity sorcerers who innately had healing abilities, their affinities—ice and fire—specialized in offensive spells. In the beginning, they had struggled with their new regiment, and utilizing their abilities on the human body had been a distant dream.

Looking back, I'd seen them covered in wounds that resembled small burns

and chilblains. Those marks were proof of their tireless toils. They'd pushed through their failures and had continued practicing arduously. As a result, practical application of their powers was now a hair's breadth away. *They truly are dependable. As their friend, I'm so very proud of them.*

"I'll be useful for the medical facility as well, just you wait and see!" Teo said, grinning brightly like the sun.

Teo was a sorcerer, so I couldn't poach him for my dukedom, but he had obtained permission to work for the medical facility while still being affiliated with the nation. He was something like a temp worker, or perhaps closer to a loaned employee.

Though he would still be affiliated with the crown, that was more of a formality. Mostly, it was a pretense for the conservatives who still viewed sorcerers as a threat, and for the high-ranking nobles who were wary that my dukedom would gain too much prominence. However, I refused to let Teo and Lutz hang in limbo with their skills unused by those factions—I intended to do everything in my power to ensure that my two friends could exercise their magic to their hearts' content.

"I can't wait. I'll work hard too. We can strive together." I smiled at him with a renewed sense of determination.

Lutz cleared his throat loudly. "Did you two forget about me?" he asked with a displeased frown.

Teo and I exchanged glances and burst into muffled laughter. Lutz had retained his exquisitely beautiful appearance as he'd matured into a gallant young man, but he looked the same as always when he sulked. It tugged at my heartstrings, and I unintentionally gazed at him nostalgically.

"What's with that look?" Lutz glowered at me.

I hastily reined in my smile. It wouldn't be good to put him in a genuinely bad mood. "Of course I'm counting on you too, Lutz."

Like Teo, he would also be assisting the medical facility with treatment and research. Except, in his case, he would still be based in the castle—they would lend him to us for only half a month at a time. As Miss Irene's successor, he

would continue researching magic here.

He'd secretly told me that he aspired to take up the position of head sorcerer in the future. He wanted to work together with Teo to change people's perception of magic, showing others that sorcerers didn't have to be soldiers, but could be medical personnel.

"Let's keep doing our best together!"

"O-Obviously," he replied.

When he gets embarrassed, he looks the same as he did when he was a child...but he'll get upset again if I tell him that, so let's keep it to myself.

"I'll be more useful than Teo, so ask me for help as much as you want," Lutz said, puffing up with pride.

Teo smiled wryly next to him. "Princess, more importantly—"

"What do you mean more importantly?!" Lutz retorted instantly.

Teo coolly ignored him. "She's waiting for you."

I couldn't stand still when I heard that, and I immediately reached out for the door. Just before my fingers touched the knob, it opened from the inside. A girl appeared from behind them—her hazel eyes widened when she saw me. The luggage she'd been holding in her hands fell to the floor with a thud, but she paid it no concern. Her round eyes sparkled brightly and her lips curled up joyfully.

"Lady Kanon."

"Lady Maryyy!"

Kanon threw her arms around me, hugging me tightly and enveloping me in the gentle, tender fragrance of flowers. I embraced her back with just as much force.

Klaus had teased me about my restlessness, but in actuality, I'd been impatiently waiting for Kanon's arrival. Summoning magic had allowed her to cross over the wall that separated our worlds, and now, she was here to attend my wedding.

“Oh my gosh, I missed you so much! I almost picked up some really suspicious-looking magic books multiple times because of how much I wanted to see you! Ugh, why didn’t I push for them to summon me again sooner? I know it’s risky to use summoning magic too frequently, but my heart just won’t listen. I really wanted to come sooner this time and I barely— Oh! Congratulations on your marriage!” Kanon spoke at a breakneck pace, rattling off words nonstop.

I patted her back to soothe her. “Thank you. Take a deep breath.”

“I’m sorry. Got too excited there.” Kanon looked at me and laughed to hide her embarrassment.

She wore a thin layer of makeup and her hair now reached her back, both of which made her look much more mature, but her sweet personality and mannerisms were still the same.

“Tell me everything over a nice cup of tea. Now is the best time to enjoy the flowers, so shall I have the maids make preparations in the garden?”

“Yes, please do. I brought more than just stories, I also have the actual—” Kanon’s blissful smile stiffened midway through her chatter and she suddenly turned pale. She quickly let go of me and then screamed. “Ahhh!”

“L-Lady Kanon?”

“The souvenirs... I dropped them...” Kanon crouched down on the ground where her bag had landed and checked the contents in a panic.

Oh yeah, it made quite a magnificent noise when it fell. She’s become a breathtaking beauty...but she’s still as clumsy as ever. I dig it.

The Final Night As the Reincarnated Princess

Kanon and I had been chatting in my bed, and moments ago, she'd begun to nod off. She was now sleeping peacefully where she lay, so I pulled the blanket up to her shoulders. Apparently, she had crammed her studies in advance and moved up her part-time job shifts in order to attend my wedding. *She must be exhausted after working so hard.*

While sleeping, and with her makeup removed, she looked younger—it reminded me of the sleepover we'd had two years ago. Nostalgia and happiness filled my heart. *I want to stare at her forever, but that just won't do. Tomorrow is the day of my wedding, so it's time for me to sleep as well.*

I was about to crawl under the blankets, but a disastrous scene caught my eye: wrapping paper, ribbons, paper bags, and boxes were scattered all around the bed. *Oh, right. Kanon got so pumped up that she started a mass unboxing... I'd feel bad leaving it like this for the maids to clean up.*

I languidly stepped down from my bed and began picking up all the scraps, gathering all the wrapping materials into one stack, and stuffing them into a bag. Then, I organized the cosmetics set, sunscreen, hair oil, and everything else, sticking it all inside a box, which I placed on top of my desk.

The bottles are cute... I'd like to use them even after I finish the products, but I wonder if that's okay. It'd be fine if they were made of glass or metal, but plastic and vinyl materials might become out-of-place artifacts... If someone discovers them after I pass, they might turn into an eerie urban legend.

"Well, that'd be funny in a way, so why not?"

I stopped mulling over it, closed the box, and then surveyed my now clean room. I nodded in satisfaction. I'd finished tidying up, but unfortunately, I was still not drowsy at all. This wasn't an adverse reaction to the pressure of feeling like I needed to sleep—no, it was because I was simply too excited. It felt like I was on cloud nine, and I couldn't calm down.

I walked over to the window and nudged the curtain to the side. The round moon floated faintly in the cloudless night sky.

“Oh, tonight is a full moon,” I murmured to myself.

I glanced behind me. Once I confirmed that Kanon was still sound asleep on the bed, I opened the door to the balcony. Stepping outside, I quickly shut the door behind me so that the cool evening air wouldn’t invade my room. It had become warmer recently, but it was still chilly after dark. *I shouldn’t stay out here too long,* I thought as I took in the scenery beneath me.

“Wow!”

Moonlight dyed the streets of the castle town a magically beautiful pale-blue. It seemed that there were still many people awake—scattered, burning lamps flickered like stars. I was unwittingly enchanted by the sight.

That’s right, I heard that people from all over the nation have gathered here to celebrate our wedding. The capital has been bustling with festivities for several days now, and feasts are being held everywhere. When I thought of how some of those lights were people celebrating, I felt a ticklish, tingling sensation in my chest.

“It’d be a shame to sleep now,” I murmured pensively, breaking into a smile.

Suddenly, I heard a sharp knocking noise. Thinking that it’d come from the balcony door, I turned around in a fluster. I was worried that I’d woken Kanon, but there was no one on the other side of the glass. I tilted my head and then heard the noise again. Scanning my surroundings, I searched for the source of the sound. *There!* A bird sitting on top of the banister. I recognized its pitch-black feathers and clever eyes—this was Crow’s messenger bird.

The bird stared at me and then pecked at the banister again, making a soft knocking noise. Somehow, I had a feeling it was stating its objections.

“Are you telling me to sleep?” I asked with a wry smile.

My guess seemed to be correct because it stopped pecking. *What a clever one you are. And you resemble your master considerably.*

“All right. After all, we can’t have the bride show up with dark circles under

her eyes.” I nodded and turned on my heel. When I placed my hand on the glass door, I looked behind me. “Crow, thank you for your great efforts.”

The black bird cocked its head, but my words were for its master, who was certainly watching nearby. Crow had indeed helped me out a lot. He was my father’s subordinate and had been commanded to guard me. Over the years, I’d dragged him around from place to place.

It’d all started with a sea voyage, then Flanmer and Vint across our borders. He’d also clearly had duties foisted upon him outside of his job description. On multiple occasions, the situation would’ve been irremediable if Crow had not been there. I’d been embroiled in trouble countless times, and at each instance of turmoil, he’d come to my rescue.

“Thank you for all the times you saved me.” Starting tomorrow, I would no longer be a princess—I could no longer expect Crow to help me. “I’ll strive to become a splendid lady of my land, so watch me closely.”

With that, I turned away from the bird and did not look back again. Part of it was because I didn’t want my determination to waver, but more importantly, I felt like I was going to miss Crow. I cracked open the glass door and slipped inside. Right before I closed it, I heard a faint whisper.

“Do your best.”

After a beat, the door shut with a soft click.

Feeling a mixture of loneliness and happiness, a small smile played on my lips. I nodded. “I will.”

The Reincarnated Princess's Marriage

"You're stunning."

My eyes met another lady's through the mirror, and she complimented me with a passionate sigh.

"Thank you," I said. Though I was embarrassed, I gazed at my reflection.

My unblemished alabaster skin was tinged with light blush around my cheeks, and the lashes framing my azure eyes were long and curled. Beneath my elegantly shaped eyebrows, my eyelids were shaded with brown eyeshadow. My lips were colored a bright coral pink to highlight my fair complexion.

The castle maids had demonstrated their excellent skills with my wedding makeup and they'd done a fantastic job. My reflection in the mirror looked exceptionally more beautiful than normal. Once again, it hit me that I was indeed my mother's daughter.

"Please, take my hand."

I did so and carefully stood up from my chair so I wouldn't crumple my dress. I was wearing a pure-white wedding dress that had taken a popular dressmaker in the capital two years to make. Since my free time had been severely limited, my mother had taken charge of its design in my stead.

I felt grateful to her from the bottom of my heart; the dress perfectly reflected the preferences I'd relayed to her. Though princess-style dresses with many layers of pannier were in fashion right now, I had boldly requested an A-line dress with a simple silhouette.

It was made of a bustier-type silk with a high neck that was lined with lace—as a result, my skin peeked through a little around my décolletage and arms. However, it didn't make me look indecent because of the gorgeous craftsmanship of the lace. An intricate snowflake pattern was woven into the cloth from my collar to my wrists. Small buttons covered in fabric lined my chest, giving off a neat and pure impression. My train was on the longer side, and the way it gently spread out behind me was beautiful.

The wedding dress encompassed all the things I liked, and when I imagined that I was to head for my own ceremony now, a smile naturally spread across my face.

“Are there any problems?”

“None at all.” I gingerly lifted my arms and tried twisting my body—I didn’t feel uncomfortable whatsoever.

The past two years—when I’d aged from fifteen to seventeen—were right at the height of my growth. I’d had my measurements taken numerous times, and the end result was a perfect fit. The neck, chest, waist size, and even the position of the hip seams precisely conformed to my body.

“I’ve never seen such a gorgeous bride in all my life.”

“You look like a goddess of flowers... The knight captain must be the happiest man in the whole nation.”

I was the star of the day, so everyone sang their praises. Their extols made me feel a bit abashed, but at the same time, I appreciated them. *I’m usually pessimistic...but today I want to stand next to Sir Leonhart with my head held high. I wonder if he’ll also find me pretty...?*

When I envisioned the face of my soon-to-be husband, I instantly flushed scarlet. While I was smirking to myself, someone knocked on the door. One of my maids went to answer it.

“Her Majesty is here,” she announced.

I prompted her to let my mother in, and the queen entered, her beauty even more radiant than usual. She halted in place. Her eyes were upon me, wrought with emotion.

“Rose...you’re beautiful,” she told me, enraptured.

I felt shy in spite of myself. “I have you to thank for that, mother.”

“I’m glad I could be of use to my daughter.” Her eyes squinted happily.

She called for her attending maid. A servant respectfully carried over a tiara sitting atop a velvet cushion. It didn’t appear overly extravagant, but I could tell at a glance that it was expensive. It was generously mounted with gems that

were each extraordinarily clear and of fine quality. The sapphire that adorned the center was noticeably larger than the rest, and it shone splendidly.

“This is the tiara your grandmother wore during her wedding.”

“My grandmother’s?”

My grandparents had passed before I’d been born, so I’d only ever seen them in paintings. In portraits, my grandmother appeared to be a graceful belle.

“I’m sure she would be happy if you wore it.”

“Thank you so much.”

Wearing a national treasure sounds a bit intimidating, but I’ll gratefully use it.

My long hair, which now reached my waist, was tied up at my nape in a low chignon bun. My cord lace veil, which was embroidered with delicate flowers at its hem, was kept in place by the tiara.

This outfit was very mature... I fretted that it didn’t suit my age. *As the years pass, Sir Leonhart is becoming more and more attractive... I hope I don’t look out of place next to him.* I scrutinized myself closely in the mirror.

Then, someone knocked on the door again. “I’m coming in,” my father declared in a haughty voice. He didn’t wait for a response but simply strolled in as he spoke.

I wish he’d wait for permission before romping in, but it’d be pointless to comment upon now.

“How dare he enter a lady’s room while she’s still preparing. And without even waiting for a reply.” Though my mother grumbled under her breath, she didn’t snap at him directly. Today was to be an auspicious day of celebration, so she restrained herself from quarreling.

I feel like father and mother have become much closer. Their love doesn’t feel one-sided or lacking anymore, especially when compared to their past distance. The sight warmed my heart, and my mouth softened into a smile.

When my father saw my expression, he stopped, humphed, and crossed his arms. He carefully looked me over from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. However, he remained quiet, not seeming to have any particular thoughts

to share.

Unable to bear the silence, I spoke up first. “Don’t you have something to say?”

“Like what?”

“Like...that I’m pretty, or that you hardly recognize me.” *Though, it’s not like he’d ever say anything like that.* I imagined that he would scoff at me, but ultimately, his reaction defied my expectations.

“It’s far too late for that.”

What’s that supposed to mean? I tilted my head in confusion.

My father heaved a sigh. “You’re *our* daughter. Of course you were going to turn out beautiful.”

I hardened in surprise and my mother seemed equally shocked. Naturally, the maids waiting upon us could not hide their astonishment either. *Oh, so he* does *know he’s attractive. Is this his way of indirectly gushing about his wife?* There were so many thoughts swirling around my mind that I didn’t know what to comment on.

Everyone was in turmoil, and an awkward silence settled over the room. My mother’s cheeks turned pink and she lowered her gaze with shock.

“Ladies, let’s give them a moment.” My mother urged all the bewildered maids to exit the room alongside her. She likely assumed that my father wished to speak with me in private.

Please don’t leave me alone with him! At the very least, stay behind with me... Surely he wouldn’t lambaste me on an important day like this...but it’s the king we’re talking about here. I can’t let my guard down.

I braced myself, but my father went on about his business as usual and merely stared at me.

“You certainly are beautiful.”

“Huh?” I returned his straightforward compliment with an unintentionally grave expression.

He did not mind and just continued to speak. “But your true worth is not in your appearance.”

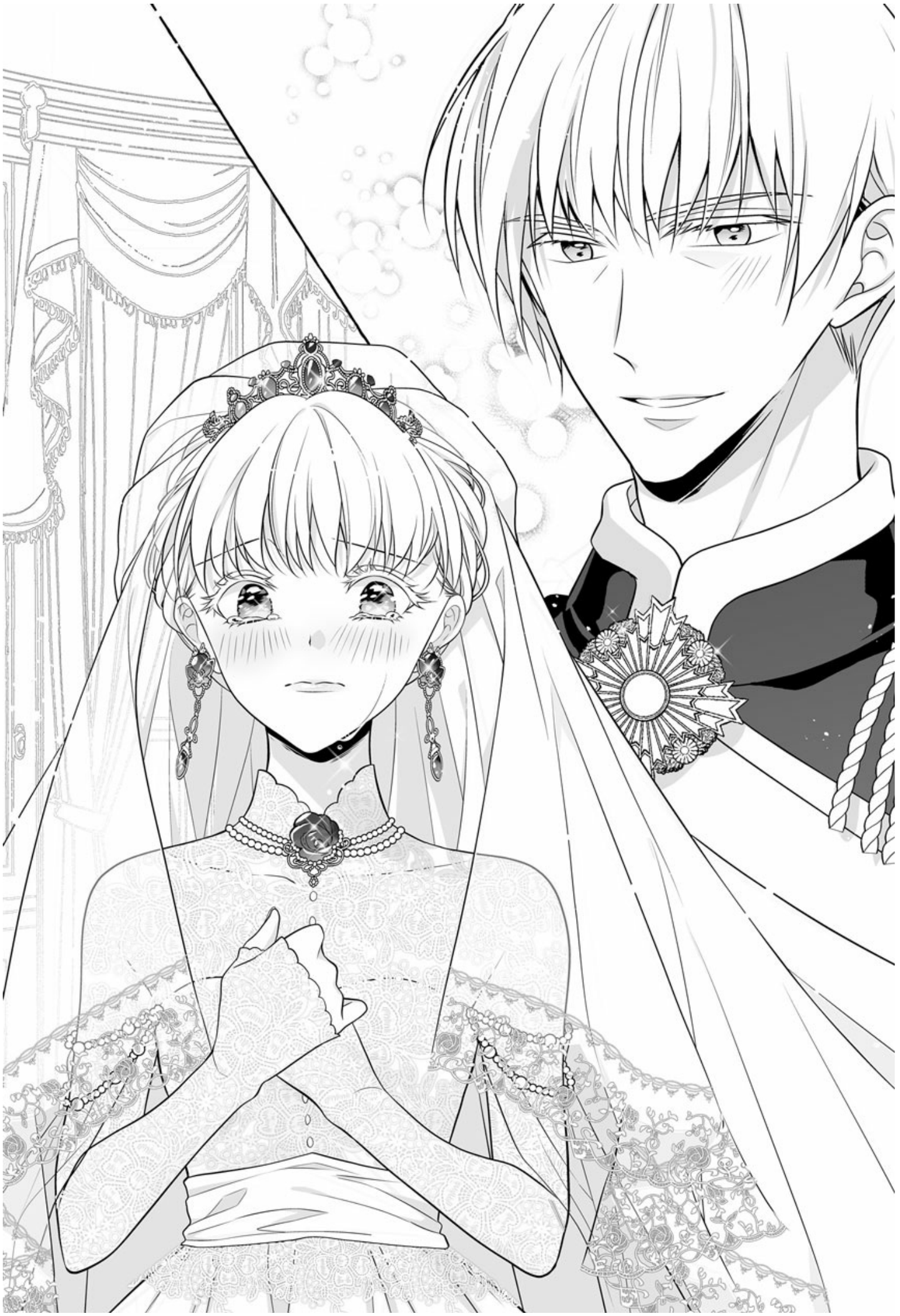
“What?”

“I didn’t hold any expectations for you when you were a child. Consequently I did nothing for you. However you thought on your own, took action, and your efforts bore fruit.”

I recalled the look in my father’s eyes the first time we had faced each other. Before I’d lashed out at him, he’d regarded me with the same gaze he might give to a pebble on the roadside. If I’d backed down and done nothing, then he would’ve looked at me the same way even now.

I’d been clumsy; I’d failed repeatedly. Though he’d been exasperated each time, little by little, he’d acknowledged me. I peered at him with expectant eyes.

He fixed his gaze on me and then opened his mouth.



“You are deserving of praise.”

I didn’t comprehend what he meant immediately. My mouth, rather foolishly, hung open somewhat.

“Who you are today is an achievement no one else can claim. This result is the accumulation of your steady and untiring efforts. You should be proud.”

What the heck?! All you ever did until now was pick at my faults—you rarely ever praised me. If you tell me stuff like that out of nowhere, then I won’t know how to react. It would peeve me to obediently take the compliment. I almost want to shrug it off.

My voice got caught in the back of my throat; no words would come out. I felt my eyes heat up and the urge to cry came over me. My shoulders trembled. All I could do was stand stock-still. But then, my father’s eyes softened into something I’d never seen before.

A gentle smile.

“Be happy.”

I inhaled sharply. I couldn’t hold back the urge this time. My vision blurred and teardrops spilled out of the corner of my eyes, trickling down my cheeks. I failed to stifle the sobs leaking out of my mouth.

“Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“Who’s fault do you think it is?” I unintentionally flared up at him as I usually would. The world around me was hazy.

My father reached his hand out and brushed the tears off my cheek. “Is it my fault?” he asked with a chuckle.

I truly have no idea what I’m supposed to do here! I don’t even know how to stop bawling! All this time, I’d disliked my father, but simultaneously, I’d wanted his recognition more than anyone else’s. I continued to weep and my face was, obviously, in an awful state.

At this point, my mother had figured that enough time had passed, so she returned. She screamed when she saw my cataclysmic condition and reprimanded my father. As he was forced out of the room, he looked at her as

though her behavior were incomprehensible—the exchange was so very funny that I burst into laughter, ruining my makeup even more. Quite the vicious cycle.

I wondered what on earth they were doing on my big day, but I was also elated beyond hope.

After that incident, I went through a great scramble. We needed to reapply my makeup, but my eyes had swollen, so we had to cool them down first. Once the redness had subsided, the maids fixed everything. We'd scheduled today with some wiggle room, but now it felt like we were cutting it close. However, the maids once again demonstrated their excellent professional spirit and worked together in full force to somehow make it in time. I only had words of gratitude for their efforts.

Apparently, after my parents had visited, many others had come by—unfortunately, I'd had to turn them away. My mother, who stayed to accompany me, said that Chris and Johan had heard about the incident with father and obliquely berated him.

I doubt father took any damage from it though. Knowing his indifferent attitude, I can easily imagine their words falling on deaf ears.

Kanon had also dropped by to see me. *It's like a dream come true that she's actually attending my wedding! I'm sure she looks wonderful in the dress she prepared for today. I really want to see her, but I have to be patient. We can take our time together after the ceremony.*

When the moment came, I headed to the wedding hall. Two girls who looked to be around ten years old waited near the entrance, dressed up in bright, lovely dresses. They clumsily curtsied at me. *Oh, the innocence! How adorable!*

The bridesmaids handed the hem of my long wedding dress to the girls. On Earth, their role would be called a trainbearer or a veil girl (at least, in Japan). I peeked over my shoulder to check up on them—they looked fairly nervous, and their expressions were rigid. One girl looked so bad that I fretted she would faint.

The young girl I was staring at met my gaze. Her eyes grew as large as saucers, and she blinked several times. Noticing something off about her companion, the

other girl also looked up at me. She instantly paled, and her face stiffened with the same surprise.

I secretly made a funny face, crossing my eyes, and they burst into laughter. The bridesmaids turned their gazes on the children, wondering what had happened. I brought my finger to my lips, gesturing for them to keep this moment a secret between us, and they nodded at me with beaming smiles.

Very nice. This is a huge, once-in-a-lifetime occasion, but it's worth being a bit silly. If the bride acts like this, then they should understand that it's fine to mess up a little.

"It's time."

The two knights standing on either side of the massive double doors simultaneously grabbed the knob. The doors swung open with a heavy creak, and dazzling light flowed in. Large marble pillars evenly lined the pathway beneath the tall, arched ceilings. High windows were fitted with blue stained glass that shone brilliantly in the sunlight. The towering walls were carved with angels and the triforium with arched sculptures. Everything was a marvel for onlookers to behold.

Both sides of the long church nave were lined with guests, and when the doors opened, their gazes all gathered on me. Slowly, I proceeded down the wedding aisle. I didn't have time to examine every single person's face but I saw Kanon out of the corner of my eye. She wore an ivory dress, and her long hair was half down, with the upper portion woven into two descending braids that connected near her nape.

I was almost captivated by how stunning she was. The tip of her nose was red, and she already looked like she was about to break down crying. *Oh no. She's going to make me cry too!* I inhaled through my nose to clear it. My urge to tear up somehow passed, and I focused on walking forward.

Standing in front of the altar up ahead were three priests, all dressed in white vestments with gold stoles hanging around their necks. The archbishop stood in the center, wearing a tall hat that resembled a miter. And, the moment I laid eyes on the man standing in front of them, I gasped for breath.

He wore the ceremonial dress suit of the royal guard. His navy blue jacket was

embroidered with gold thread, and its length was shorter than the normal uniform. A red sash was draped diagonally across his chest alongside many medals. His outfit was topped off with a pelisse coat that was navy blue and embroidered with gold thread, just like his jacket, and the long sleeves were bordered with gold and red trim. His neck was lined with extravagant fur. On the bottom, he wore white trousers and black boots, both similarly gilded with gold.

His bangs, which were normally worn down, were swept back. It gave off a stoic impression but also seemed somehow...boldly sexy. He was thirty-two, but his manly good looks had not diminished whatsoever. If anything, he had a calm seductiveness that added to his charm.

H-He's so hot! Sir Leonhart looked so magnificent in formal wear that I nearly fainted. *Someone, please praise me for not falling to my knees. The children will be traumatized if they witness a bride acting so bizarrely, so I'll do my best. Sir Leonhart is always an absolute dreamboat, but I feel like he's sparkling even more today. Honestly, I can't look him straight in the eyes.*

Oblivious to how hard I was struggling to keep my composure, Sir Leonhart's gaze captured me. His dark eyes, which usually harbored a sharp glint, blinked in surprise. I felt uncomfortable under his piercing stare. *Do I look weird?* Just when I was about to succumb to my worries, the corner of his eyes softened and rouge faintly tinged his cheeks. He smiled at me with great jubilance.

He mouthed, *"You look beautiful."*

I breathed in. *Stop. I'm going to die. I'll simply just die here. I already feel like I'm going to vomit blood from overdosing, so please, no more! I really will kick the bucket. The ceremony has just begun, but I'm already having trouble breathing!*

We'd been engaged for two whole years, but I still lacked any immunity to Sir Leonhart. I'd learned that he was a relatively touchy person, and every time his skin brushed against mine, I felt close to death's door.

I still can't believe that I'm going to be his wife starting today. Accustomed to him? Bored? Those words are completely irrelevant! My affection for him grows with each passing day. I feel like my heart's about to burst. Somehow, I

managed to paste a faint smile on my face, and finally, I made it to Sir Leonhart's side.

The archbishop began reciting a prayer in this austere atmosphere. His voice echoed inside the vast room as he recited a passage from the sacred scriptures. His tone was even and rhythmic; it reminded me of sutra chanting, which calmed me down. When I finally steadied my breathing, he changed from reading prayers to reciting our wedding vows.

"In health and in sickness, in times of joy and sadness..." he said.

The contents were no different than the vows I'd heard on Earth. In my previous life, when I had attended a relative's wedding ceremony, the oath had also sounded something like this. At the time, I hadn't understood the meaning of the words, but I remembered still feeling touched... That was probably because the couple had appeared so overjoyed. Their eyes and expressions had shown that they were the happiest people in the world. The bride's smile had been unequaled and she'd been, without a doubt, the world's most beautiful woman.

"For richer, for poorer..."

Will I be like that too? I'm standing next to the person I've been pursuing my whole life... What kind of face am I making?

"That you will love, respect, comfort, and help..."

There were days I wept because I thought he would never perceive me as a romantic partner. There were moments when my heart almost shattered and I wanted to quit. But I couldn't stop loving him no matter how hard I tried.

To be honest, I was never optimistic that he would ever love me back. I was perpetually desperate. Even after we've expressed our affection for each other, I sometimes still wonder if this is all a dream. But...

"Do you swear to be faithful as long as you live?"

"I do," Sir Leonhart pledged, tone earnest. There was not a trace of hesitation in his clean-cut profile.

Yeah, everything's fine. This is reality. I've safely found my way to his side, I

assured my child self inside my heart. *Today, my wish will come true.*

"I do." I was so overwhelmed with emotion that my voice trembled a little.

The ring bearer brought our rings over on a velvet pillow. I faced Sir Leonhart. He took off his white gloves and picked up a silver band with his large, rugged hand. Then, he gently lifted my left hand and slipped it onto my ring finger.

I followed his lead and picked up the second ring...but almost dropped it due to my nerves. He placed his left hand lightly over mine and gave me an encouraging squeeze. Distracted by his action, my shaking abated, and I managed to push the ring to the base of his finger.

When I finished, I looked up at him. I suspected that I wore a childish expression due to my excessive relief. I met his compassionate eyes—his gaze was filled with tender affection and the desire to protect me... However, it was brimming with more than just passion. His ink-black eyes conveyed his love more eloquently than words ever could.

Is that how he's been looking at me? My face instantly heated up.

Sir Leonhart lifted my veil over my head. He slid his fingers over my hot, flustered cheeks, then tipped my chin up.

H-Huh? Is this what we're supposed to be doing now? The gears in my head weren't turning properly from confusion, and all the while, his handsome face closed in on mine. Unable to handle it, I squeezed my eyes shut. Then, I felt something soft against my forehead. His lips then quickly moved away, so I let out a sigh of relief and opened my eyes. Sir Leonhart's face was still so close that my eyes wouldn't focus.

I blinked. Before my brain could process anything, his mouth pressed against mine, lips overlapping my own. I reflexively froze in surprise. My mind went blank, all thought wiped away by his kiss. It felt like our lips stayed locked for over ten seconds, and then, they finally parted.

"I see you two are quite the happy couple." The archbishop smiled at us as anyone would when watching a heartwarming scene. I knew he wasn't teasing us, but I was so embarrassed that I couldn't lift my head.

We signed our marriage certificate, and after receiving our blessings, the

ceremony came to an end. Sir Leonhart escorted me out to our carriage. My complexion was still very red, and he watched me with tender eyes. I shot him a small glare.

“Please let me at least mentally prepare myself.”

During our planning meetings, we had agreed that after the ring exchange, the archbishop would say, “Seal your vows with a kiss.” *Not only did we skip over that part, but I even thought it would end at a forehead kiss!* Though I scowled at him reproachfully, Sir Leonhard only grinned back at me.

“You were so breathtaking that I couldn’t resist.”

And he says stuff like that so nonchalantly! My cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red. He stroked my cheek with a touch so affectionate that I almost swooned.

“Also, it was to keep the others in check. Nearly all the men in that venue were enchanted by you.”

“Nearly” is clearly an overstatement. I was exasperated, but I still couldn’t hide my euphoria—my lips disobediently slackened. “Don’t worry. You’re the only one for me.”

“Forever?”

“Yes, for the rest of my life.” I nodded without hesitation.

A blissful smile spread across his face. It was the carefree expression of a young boy...and my favorite smile in the whole world.

“I will always love you too. Forever, even if death does us part.” He swore for not only our lifetime, but beyond that, as though it were the most obvious thing.

Delighted by his deep love, I leaned in close, pressing against him. *Starting today, I want to walk side by side with this man till the end of time. In health, in sickness, and even if death does us part.*



Epilogue

DIIING-DOOONG.

The celebration bells rang throughout the capital. Vivid flower petals danced under the brilliant blue sky. A young girl ran in the streets, enchanted by the dreamlike sight. The young boy running ahead of her stopped and waved, urging her on.

“Hurry up! The carriage is going to pass by!” he yelled.

“Wait, I can’t breathe...”

Gasping for air, the girl managed to follow the boy without losing sight of him. Due to the celebrations, the capital shops had been open for business in the morning, but currently, nearly all of them were closed. A great number of people swarmed the roadsides to watch the parade, and the closer the children got to the main road, the more crowded it became. The little girl slipped between people while carefully cradling a bouquet of flowers to protect it from being crushed.

“C’mon, over here. We can get through right there.” The boy pointed at a narrow alley and darted inside. It was blocked by boxes of goods, but he deftly climbed up, nimble like a wild monkey.

“I-I can’t!” she cried.

“You can. Don’t you want to see them?”

“I do...”

“Then c’mon. Here, take my hand.”

She passed the bouquet to the boy and then frantically stretched out her hands. Though she managed to get up one level, there were still more hurdles in her way. Encouraging herself whenever she felt disheartened, she pushed onward down the trackless path. Thus, she made it through the obstacles and reached an empty space between buildings by the road.

They squeezed through a gap barely big enough for children to pass through

and ran into a wall of people. Their heads bobbed around the waists of adults as they pushed their way forward. By the time they reached the front of the crowd, the children were exhausted.

The little girl's favorite dress and her hair, which she'd begged her mother to arrange that morning, were now messy and wrinkled. But her eyes still twinkled as she waited impatiently for their arrival.

Before long, the sound of cheering erupted in the crowd, and a carriage inched closer. Two splendid white horses donned in black leather with gold decorations pulled a magnificent carriage with a foldable top. Sitting on it was a tall, handsome man and a peerless beauty.

The man was a great soldier whose name was known even in the lands of neighboring kingdoms—the royal guard captain, Leonhart. The woman was Nevel's first princess and the nation's greatest jewel, Her Highness Rosemary. Today was the marriage between two national treasures. Furthermore, it was not a political union—anyone could tell at a glance that they were deeply in love with each other. The newlyweds were blissfully nestled close together.

The citizens congratulated them wholeheartedly—the young girl was among them. However, the wedding was not the only reason she wanted to greet them. A few years ago, the girl had lost her father to illness. She had been powerless to allay his suffering and could only watch him pass away. After that, she'd become very interested in becoming a doctor.

Nearly everyone around her had balked at this aspiration.

They'd told her it was impossible for a girl to become a doctor, or that it would cost too much money, or that it would be too much of a burden for her mother. They'd given reason after reason, trying to make her give up. Only her mother and the boy—her childhood friend—had supported her dream.

While helping her mother, she'd also worked hard to study books. It was around then when she'd heard that Princess Rosemary would receive the title of duchess and erect a medical facility in her domain. The facility would be more than a place for healing—it would also contain a research laboratory for medicine and new treatment methods, as well as a learning institution where youths interested in medicine could gather and train to become doctors.

Its doors would be open to everyone regardless of status, nationality, and gender. The little girl had even heard that there'd been talks about offering scholarships for exceptional students. At first, she hadn't believed in such a utopia. But now, after learning more, the girl's dream was no longer just a dream.

"Hey, they're here!" the boy exclaimed.

"Y-Yeah!"

The carriage was almost right in front of their eyes. It was difficult to approach because of the knights surrounding it. However, the girl did not give up—she leaned forward with the bouquet desperately thrust out in front of her, hoping to pass it along to the woman, who was waving at the masses.

Their eyes met.

Caught in the radiant beauty's gaze, the young girl forgot to breathe, let alone move. She froze with bated breath.

The bride reached out and gently took the bouquet from the girl's hands.

"Thank you."

So this is what it means to be overcome with emotion, thought the girl. She had so many things she wanted to say, but she was so overwhelmed that nothing came out. *At the very least, congratulate her.* But the words that spilled out of her mouth were completely different.

"I'm going to become a doctor!"

No, that's not what I was supposed to say! she thought, but it was too late. The bride's eyes widened; the little girl paled. *This is a place for celebration! What incomprehensible declaration did I just make?* Though she berated herself, the bride did not reproach her. She did not ignore the young girl's words as nonsense either.



A delighted smile broke out across the bride’s face, and she nodded.

“Yes. I’ll be waiting.”

It was a chance meeting that had only lasted mere seconds... A brief conversation that went unnoticed by those around them. But even so, that small event became an important lodestar for that young girl’s life.

Before long, the standard of healthcare in the Kingdom of Nevel became the highest in the whole world. It produced outstanding doctors and physicians who worked all across the lands. Among them, there was even one who spent her days helping the poor without compensation. She was a female doctor who became known as the saintess.

The dukedom where the medical facility was located flourished remarkably and became as prosperous and bustling as the royal capital. Merchants from various nations livened up the atmosphere and the streets abounded with curios and fine goods. However, its citizens agreed that the main attraction of their domain was none of those things.

The duchess and duke remained beautiful, kind, and deeply devoted no matter how many years passed. Those who lived there laughed merrily and proudly declared that there was nothing more valuable than the two of them.

Side Story: The Knight Captain's Marriage

Joyful shouts resounded in the air. Even after switching from the gorgeous and ornate parade carriage to a more practical carriage for the journey to our new domain, the sides of the road remained jam-packed with people. We were met with warm cheers until we reached the very outskirts of the capital, reminding me once again of how popular Lady Rosemary was.

As we passed through towns on the way to our new home, we would likely be surrounded by people once more. The thought filled me with pride, but I also had the childish desire of wanting to monopolize my wife. In truth, I hadn't wanted anyone else to see her in her wedding dress.

Today, she was even more beautiful than usual. She was a goddess; everyone seemed spellbound by her. Lady Rosemary was oblivious when it came to herself, so she paid no attention to such words, but it was not a joke nor a flippant remark. *How many young men wistfully fell for my bride at first sight during our wedding ceremony?* Just thinking about it gave me a headache. *I don't mind if it becomes a bitter memory for them...but don't harbor any improper hopes.* I directed my prayers toward people I'd never even seen before.

High-ranking nobles primarily married for political reasons, so in the end, their spouses were only partners in appearances. There were plenty of people who said that true love was saved for lovers or mistresses. In other words, there definitely existed pesky fellows who would not give up on a married woman—if they couldn't become her husband, then they would try to be her lover. And if that wasn't possible, then they wished for even a single dreamy night with her.

If a man bearing such foolish desires appeared, then I would indubitably hurl my glove at him. I would never share my wife with anyone else for all eternity.

"Sir Leon?" Lady Rosemary's voice pulled me out of my delusions of intimidating a nonexistent paramour. "You look very stern. Is something the matter? You have wrinkles here." She pointed between her eyebrows and frowned, trying to mirror my expression. She was so adorable that all my

irritation faded.

“Did something unpleasant happen?” she asked.

“It all vanished just now.” I wrapped my arm around her waist and she settled into my chest without struggle. She leaned her cheek against my shoulder, perplexed.

“What changed in these few seconds?” Her puzzled expression showed that she didn’t understand—my improved mood was because of her. The naivety made her appear a bit childish.

Affection welled up inside of me and my eyes inadvertently softened. “How could I ever stay upset when I’m with you?” I pushed aside her bangs and pressed a kiss against her forehead. Her soft cheeks turned crimson.

“You’re dodging the question.” She glared at me, but all I could think of was how cute she was.

“I’m only speaking the truth.” Though I answered honestly, the suspicion in her eyes did not disappear. I knew Lady Rosemary never stayed angry for long, and she wouldn’t push the subject, but I decided to come clean. I wanted to quell anything that could become the source of argument, no matter how small. “I was making a grim expression because I felt jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Because you looked like a goddess in your wedding dress.”

“Huh?”

“I told you, countless people were charmed at the sight of you. It is no exaggeration to say that a mountain of men fell in love with you today.”

“That’s absurd—”

“It is not,” I said, interrupting her before she could counter.

Lady Rosemary’s brows drooped. She looked perturbed but also bashful.

“I have no intention of handing you over to anyone else,” I continued. “I’ll strike down any opponent no matter who it is...though it won’t be enjoyable.”

“Your worries are unfounded.”

How can you say that when you don't understand your own allure? I heaved a sigh. *Her lack of self-awareness is another one of her many charms, but I wish she wouldn't be so defenseless.* I was about to lecture her, but Lady Rosemary spoke up first.

"After all, Sir Leonhart, you're my husband."

My eyes widened in surprise.

"You're like a perfect knight out of a picture book. No one would even think of doing anything to me when you're by my side... Also, there was an equally large mountain of women who were smitten by you." Her words implied that the jealousy was mutual.

Overjoyed and so in love, I gently embraced her slender body. Her hands on my back returned the hug and I savored that happiness.

"Me too," she murmured.

"Hmm?" I questioned, unsure if there was more.

She squeezed me tightly. "No matter who it is, I'll drive them away from you too," she said with brave determination.

I froze for a few seconds and then broke into a broad smile when the understanding hit. "Will you fight for me?"

"Of course I will. I won't forgive anyone who tries to lay a hand on my husband."

Lady Rosemary is always like this. She saves me in mere seconds. She doesn't tire of my jealousy but she also doesn't sweep it under the rug and pretend like it never happened. She accepts my feelings in her own way and reciprocates with something tantamount.

"That's very reassuring."

"Please leave it all to me." She puffed up proudly.

As long as my lovely wife stays by my side, I will forever be the happiest man in the world.