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The Reincarnator and the Goblin Maiden's Happily Ever After

Using a Past Life to Keep a Joyful Wife

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Ginorious
The two of them did their best
to get the impoverished
remote region back on its feet.


Ana can finally use magic?
“Here I go!”



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Chapter 1: Anastasia Shines

Anastasia

"You look so beautiful, young madam! Absolutely gorgeous!" Bridgette excitedly exclaimed as she took in the dress I was wearing. Ever since Sir Gino and I got married, Bridgette had been calling me "young madam" instead of "milady."

Today, Sir Gino and I were going to the royal palace, and it would be our first appearance as a married couple. I couldn't help but giggle. *Sir Gino's my husband now! I'm so glad it all worked out in the end.* I couldn't help but think back on everything that'd happened before this.

I'd been born cursed and, because of my appearance, made fun of as the "Goblin Maiden." But then at the age of sixteen I met Sir Gino for marriage talks. I learned that by the time he was ten, he was already a gifted merchant and had established his own trading company, which he had quickly grown into one of the biggest in the country. He was also exceptionally handsome and lauded as the "Black-Ice Flower Prince." When we met, I had no doubt that a man as wonderful as him would wish to have nothing to do with someone like me, but to my great surprise, he proposed!

I could still remember him urging me not to give up on my own happiness and promising to make me happy. I was able to change myself by listening to these words—but also, his constantly calling me cute certainly didn't hurt.

For a long time, I'd avoided standing out for fear of getting bullied in school, so I'd always submitted embroidery pieces that were very plain, but I eventually became able to show off the kinds of pieces I really liked to make. As a result, I won an embroidery contest and was even able to become an in-school research assistant. It was all thanks to Sir Gino.

It was also thanks to him that I was able to become friends with Lady Ekatarina, as well as speak more with my classmates. Even now, I lived my life guided by his past words encouraging me to be happy.

Sir Gino was truly an amazing person. He was consistently at the top of our class, and was so skilled in swordsmanship that he beat one of the country's best swordsmen in a tournament. I could feel myself getting warm with embarrassment as I remembered how, after winning, he dedicated his victory to me. Though it made me happy, having the attention of the whole audience, applauding and whistling, was all very embarrassing.

However, Sir Gino wasn't only talented, but a wonderful person as well. He was sincere, kind, and always trying to protect me. When Lady Lalah attempted to spill a dangerous chemical on me, Sir Gino immediately came to my rescue, very bravely using his own body as a shield. I still remembered how passionately he told me that I should believe him when he called me cute. He said he'd say it as many times as necessary until I believed it too. Though I'd felt bad for always causing Sir Gino problems, hearing his words cheered me up. I even cried because he was so kind.

After that, I stopped thinking of myself as hideous. Instead of casting my eyes down and avoiding the gazes of others, I decided to keep my head raised high.

At that point, I'd thought our happiness would continue forever, but then, at our graduation party, Sir Gino suddenly declared that he was ending our engagement and disappeared without a trace—at the same time leaving behind a cure for my curse. I was left completely stunned. He claimed that the reason had to do with him being unfaithful, but I later learned the truth from Lady Kate, the girl with whom he'd claimed to have cheated on me. In reality, he hadn't been unfaithful at all. He'd left so that, once I drank the cure, I could marry one of the princes and become queen.

However, the desire to not give up on my happiness was now engraved so deeply into my heart that I couldn't accept it, and I worked hard to make sure I could become engaged to Sir Gino once more. I successfully avoided the first prince's underhanded attempts

to woo me, and when I found Sir Gino where he was hiding in the slums, I boldly proposed to him, leading to us getting married at last.

It had been a long, difficult path, but we were finally married and I couldn't be happier. *Oh, it's about time to leave. I should go find Sir Gino.*

Ginorious

With my marriage to Ana, I officially became a member of the Sevensworth household, and as such, I was living in the same estate with her, my father-in-law, and my mother-in-law. Today, Ana and I were going to our first public appearance as a married couple, and currently, I was sitting on a sofa in the entrance hall, drinking tea, as I waited for her.

An outing with my wife...what a wonderful, sweet ring that has. I couldn't help but chuckle, my face melting into a smile. *I did it! Finally, I've gotten married!* After dying old and alone in my past life, my dream was always to get married, and now that wish had finally been granted. *I can't believe how much joy I feel!*

As I'd progressed through my new life, resolute in my quest to find a wife, I met Ana, Lady Anastasia Sevensworth. Though my family thought this wouldn't be a good marriage for me, I couldn't have imagined a better one. She was so kind, wise, and pure of heart. Plus, she was incredibly cute!

During our marriage talks, I couldn't help seeing my past self in her, making me emotional, and I ended up proposing to her. But it all worked out, and we became engaged. I was born as the fourth son to Viscount Adolni, and Ana was the daughter of a duke. Because there was such a huge difference in our statuses, I was adopted by Marquess Valvalier as his second son so Ana and I could marry. I also moved from the Adolni territory to the royal capital and began going to school with Ana.

Though the country's hierarchy was determined by noble status, the school was run as a meritocracy due to a succession battle that

had gone on between the first and crown princes during their attendance.

Of course, grades weren't the only thing that decided one's standing among the students; looks, charisma, and proactivity were all influencing factors.

Since the school practiced meritocracy, it only allowed for a minimum amount of outside interference from families, so the children were essentially insulated from the outside world.

Ana had a reserved personality, so her standing hadn't been very high, and that was very frustrating to see. I put together a plan to help her raise it, and as a result, her grades shot up to the second highest in our class, and she even earned the honor of becoming an in-school research assistant, essentially proving she was a genius.

As Ana's standing rose, her life changed along with it. More people started being friendly with her, and Ana herself began to change as well. Though she used to barely speak up in class, she was suddenly more vocal. She also went from being passive in group projects to volunteering for some of the more important duties.

Though the number of people who looked down on Ana lessened, Lady Florro and her group continued to bully her. However, Ana wasn't the same as she used to be. She solved her bullying problem all on her own. She'd already been a wonderful girl when I met her, but she grew as a person and became even more wonderful.

Back then, I'd had a theory as to the nature of Ana's curse. It reminded me of the severe hypermana syndrome that people with Magic Monarch levels of mana could become afflicted with in my past life. In my search for the cure, I discovered that this wasn't a new world I was living in now but was in fact the future of my old world, which gave me even more hope that there was a cure to be found. All I had to do was locate one of the medical facilities from my past life that was likely to contain documents with the answers. I did some research and found one—considered a dungeon in this world—and used what I found there to create a cure.

However, just when I was one step away from completing it, I found out that both the first prince and the crown prince had designs to marry Ana. My engagement to her was for political

purposes, and in terms of political advantage, I couldn't offer nearly as much as one of the princes. I realized that if I could cure Ana, there'd be nothing stopping her from becoming queen. A bright future would await her as long as I didn't stand in her way. That was why I called off our engagement, left her the cure, and disappeared; it was all for her sake.

About half a year of living in the slums of a certain city later, a girl in a lavish dress not suited for the dirty hall she stood in appeared at my door. It was Ana. Though she looked different now that her curse had been lifted, it was unmistakably her.

Then, to my huge surprise, she got down on one knee, kissed my hand, and proposed to me. She promised to make me happy and told me not to give up on my own happiness. Proposals from women weren't something this country encouraged, but even so, she'd done it without a moment's hesitation! I couldn't stop my tears. It had to have taken so much determination and courage to do that. I couldn't lie to myself any longer, so I accepted.

Through our reunion, I confessed to Ana about how warped my sense of self had become, so she began to study therapy and was even now still counseling me. She was truly a kind and wonderful person.

"Sir Gino."

Perhaps because this was to be our first appearance as a married couple, I couldn't help but reminisce about the past. But as I did, Ana appeared wearing a beautiful violet and black dress, the color of my eyes and hair.

"Ana... You're so cute...and incredibly beautiful..."

I could feel my cheeks burning from how furiously I was blushing. With Ana's counseling, I had been changing little by little. My fear of women had lessened dramatically. Up until recently, I'd never thought of any women as beautiful; all I could do was recognize that, logically, they were attractive. But thanks to Ana, I didn't put a barrier between myself and women anymore. They felt more real to me than ever now. That was precisely why my emotions were out of control with how cute and beautiful Ana was.

"Thank you very much," Ana giggled. "You look quite handsome

too, Sir Gino. I believe you're dressed quite appropriately as today's guest of honor."

Today we were going to a status conferment ceremony for me.

"Well then, let's be off. Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you?" I asked.

Anastasia

The thesis that Sir Gino had included with the cure for my curse had a great impact on the world. He posited that what we thought were curses were actually sicknesses, and this theory was all but proven by the fact that he'd succeeded in curing me.

The ones that had the most problems with this were the church. Up until now, they'd been explaining curses as trials that the gods had given man, and as such, they couldn't be cured without divine intervention. However, now it was clear that all curses were treatable illnesses.

"I'd like to humbly make a request of you," the pope said, bowing his head to me and Sir Gino.

In an attempt to save face, the church wished to declare that Sir Gino had received a divine revelation from God that helped him write his thesis. This way, even though they could no longer claim curses were trials, the cure had come from God rather than man's own development. The fact that Sir Gino, someone who wasn't supposed to know magic, had somehow discovered this magical treatment would only strengthen the credibility of their claim.

The pope was bowing his head to us to ask us to go along with their story. Usually communication from the church would be done through a regular priest, so the fact that the pope had come all the way here from the holy country of Waltdiez showed how serious this issue was to the church.

"Very well. However, I'd like to think that you'll do us a favor one day as well," Sir Gino said.

"Of course! Phew, that's a relief." *He looks like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders.*

After that, we sat down with other church representatives to go over the specifics. Gino and I had already agreed before coming that he would say yes to them, but I was present for this meeting as well so I would know what to say going forward. After all, as the person who'd had a curse lifted for the first time in history, the church expected me to get a flood of questions from both inside and outside the country.

It seemed the pope was not concerned about my mother ever letting the truth slip with how cunning she was; in contrast, both Sir Gino and I had only just become adults, so he was most likely worried about our maturity. Not only did the pope thoroughly go over all the fine details of their preferred story with us, but he even advised us on what kinds of expressions we should make when telling it to others.

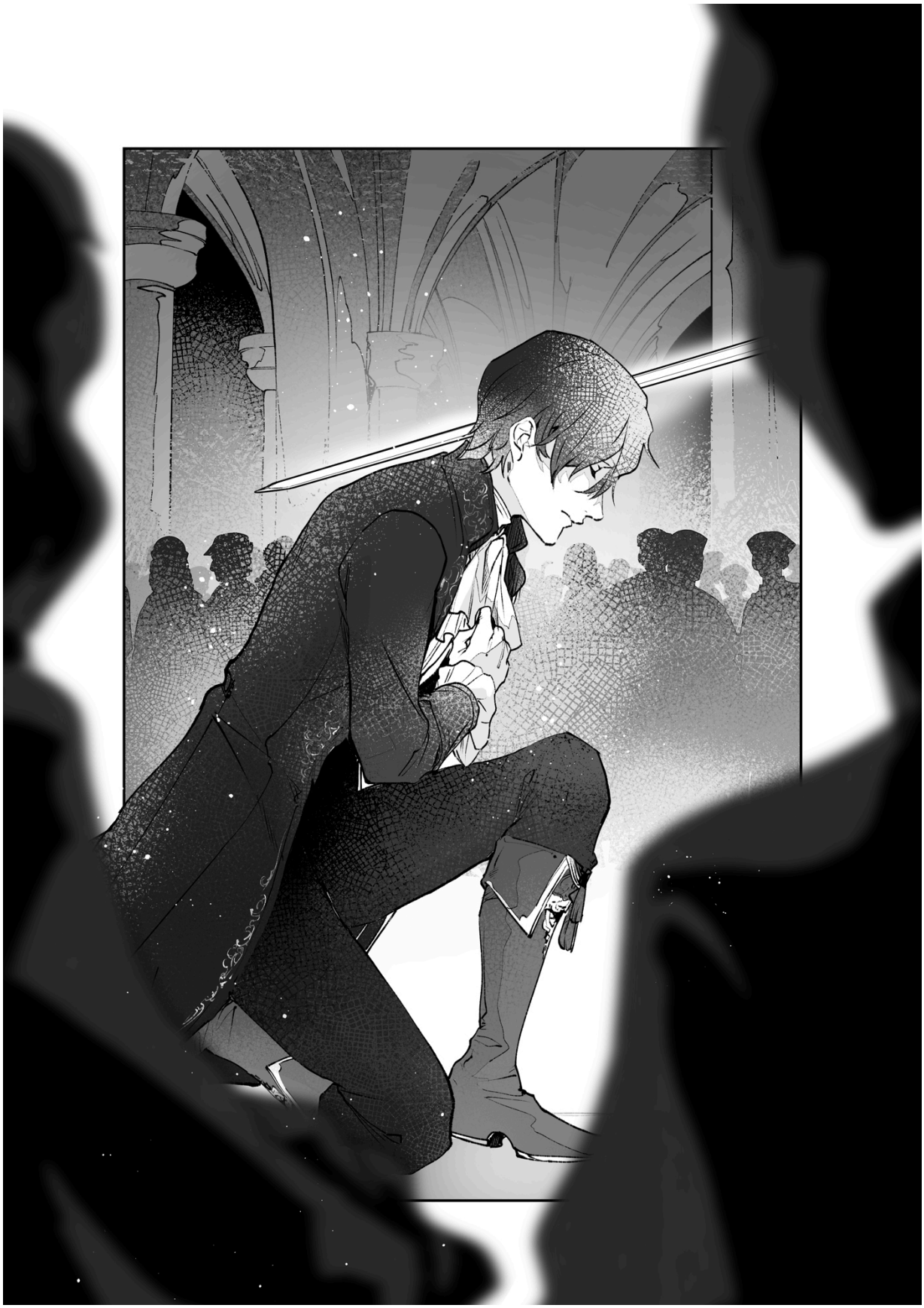
In the play *The Goblin Maiden*, the treatment for the heroine's curse was discovered through an Artifact. Of course, it was generally taboo to talk about Artifacts, so it was never explicitly stated by the characters, but showing the materials being obtained from a dungeon did heavily suggest it. From this point on, the script would be changed so that Sir Gino's character was given the cure through a divine message. The church would also declare the miracle publicly, making this the official story.

"By the way, since you've received a divine message from God, how would you like to be a saint, Ginorious?" the pope asked.

Huh?! A saint?! That's amazing, as expected of Sir Gino! Though I'd immediately gotten excited, Sir Gino simply turned down his offer. *Oh, that's a shame. But it's also very like him to not be easily swayed by high authorities. It's so wonderful how much integrity he has.*

Our conversation with the pope was coming to an end, so it was now time for the status conferment ceremony.

Sir Gino walked toward His Majesty's throne with a sea of eyes trained on him, and knelt. His tall body and long legs cast a regal pose, as beautiful and dignified as an ice sculpture. I couldn't help but be captivated by his beauty.





"Ginorious Sevensworth, I bestow upon you the title of Count Simon. May you loyally serve this country to the best of your abilities."

"I, Ginorious Sevensworth, vow to serve for the people, the land, and this country."

His Majesty and Sir Gino exchanged the standard words for this type of ceremony, and then the king tapped each of Sir Gino's shoulders with the tip of a blade. He then presented Sir Gino with the sword, which he sheathed and equipped.

"I, Pope Almacheius IV, hereby declare as a witness that such status has been bestowed."

At this, an official wrote Sir Gino's name down in the record of nobles.

During usual status conferment ceremonies, someone from the great cathedral would act as a witness, but today, the pope himself was present. Because it was such a rare appearance, the seats inside were packed, and the applause for Sir Gino was thunderous.

Usually even after a great achievement, the most anyone was awarded in terms of status was one rise in their title. However, when someone's achievements were related to magic, they could inherit status through the line of the royal court sorcerers. This was done so that when the magic of these talented sorcerers was passed down to their successors, they'd have an incentive to stay in the country rather than leave it. This was why Sir Gino was inheriting a title rather than receiving a new one entirely.

Sir Gino's thesis single-handedly pushed magic forward significantly. Since his achievement was greatly lauded, he was given a magic-related status. Usually those who earned status through their achievements were much older; however, Sir Gino was being granted his title at the young age of twenty. He was truly so amazing, to the point where I didn't feel I could match up to him at all.

"Hey, Gino! You talked with God?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

After the ceremony ended, we gathered at the great plaza in the royal court's tower of sorcery with Houses Valvalier and Adolni.

Though most from House Adolni were as stiff as statues from nerves, my sister-in-law was talking animatedly.

"I'm looking for a way to get rich quick, so if you talk with God again, put in a good word for me, okay?"

Even after this "revelation" about Sir Gino, her behavior hadn't changed at all. I was very impressed.

"As expected of you!"

"You're so amazing! I respect you so much!"

His little sisters from House Valvalier said this one after another. They seemed very excited after hearing the surprise announcement from the ultimate religious authority, the pope himself, about how Sir Gino had received a message from God.

The church was adamant about us not telling even family members the truth. The only ones who knew what had really transpired were father, mother, and a few select others. After we chatted for a bit, the royal court sorcerers arrived to recognize Sir Gino as a first-class grand sorcerer. Everyone had gathered here to witness this.

Those who could use magic were called sorcerers, though in Sir Gino's past life, they'd apparently been called mages. Grand sorcerers were those whose talents were recognized so much that they were granted noble status. A first-class grand sorcerer could even be granted a title as high as count. This practice was another attempt at keeping the talented ones in the country; since only the eldest son could inherit their family's rank, it would be to the detriment of this country if the most talented sorcerers left because they had no hopes of achieving their own status.

"Let us begin the ceremony," the leader of the grand sorcerers said.

Though this was also an official ceremony, it was much more relaxed than the previous one. Our families sat on sofas and were even given snacks and drinks. The court grand sorcerers were also sitting back and conversing with one another despite the ceremony having already begun. The only ones standing were Sir Gino and the leader of the grand sorcerers. I'd always heard that they weren't ones to concern themselves with formalities, and it seemed this was

true. It was a completely different atmosphere from the strict ceremony with His Majesty and the pope.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to explain how Count Ginorious Simon Sevensworth received this opportunity to become a first-class grand sorcerer. Uh... Grand Sorcerer Mecky, would you mind doing the honors?"

Usually the one giving the speech would be the head sorcerer himself, but he seemed to have thrown that responsibility entirely onto the leader of the healing magic faction, Grand Sorcerer Mecky. As a result, laughter erupted around the venue.

"Count Simon Sevensworth has truly made massive contributions to the world of healing magic. The thesis he wrote has been accepted by the academic society, and the terms in it have been recorded as official, technical language to be used henceforth," they explained, albeit with a stiff expression. "I will now read the terms that have been recorded, beginning with the components of the magic medicine invented by Count Simon Sevensworth. First, the relative density ratio for the composition of the magic medicine is hereby recorded as the 'rem le Anastasia' distribution. Next..."

We'd learned about the construction of technical terms in school, so I understood the meaning and I was sure father and the others understood it as well. The meaning of "rem le Anastasia" was "my beloved Anastasia."

"The body's defensive reaction to the magic medicine has been recorded as the 'Anastasia sa un' reaction. Next, the method with which to detect irregularities in one's mana circuits is recorded as the 'riyon Anastasia' method. Next, mana density..."

With every declaration, I received a new surprise. "Anastasia sa un" meant "for your good health, Anastasia," and "riyon Anastasia" meant "Anastasia shines."

"Pretty good naming sense," father said with a very content face.

"They're quite the romantic names," mother said, giggling.

Both Sir Valvalier and his wife were desperately trying to stifle their laughter as well.

His two little sisters clamored excitedly:

"As expected!"

"You're so amazing! I respect you so much!"

This is quite embarrassing. "P-Please wait," I said, speaking up after they finished outlining Sir Gino's exploits. I couldn't take it anymore. "D-Doesn't that mean that Sir Gino's name won't be commemorated in history?"

None of the names for his feats that were being recorded had his name in them.

"It's okay. Even if my name isn't remembered, the feelings that went into these will last for eternity," Sir Gino said, smiling.

I could tell that my face was turning red.

"It'll be all right. I'm sure people will look into the kind of person who made these romantic names, and through that process, they'll definitely find Gino. He'll be in everyone's memories without a doubt," mother said, holding back her laughter.

"Precisely. There's no need to worry. I've had several grand sorcerers in the tower of sorcery come to me already, pestering me about the names. All healing magic experts will learn these words, and they may even be taught in schools and written in textbooks. I think everyone who learns about them will wonder about the person who named them," the leader of the grand sorcerers said with amusement.

It might be in textbooks...? Will everyone who learns this in school have to memorize these terms? Academic terms can last for a thousand years at least. They might even spread to other countries as well. This is very, very embarrassing. I'd like nothing more than to return to the mansion and stay inside forever.

Chapter 2: Their First Time Governing

Ginorious

"Well, this isn't great..." I muttered to myself after reviewing the documents regarding the state of the Simon territory I'd inherited along with the title of count.

I was currently in the Simon estate's mansion, learning that not only did this land not have much in the way of water resources, but that it wasn't very well-suited for farming at all. The few crops that the people here *were* able to grow didn't yield much money either. Their territory's livelihood depended heavily on the sale of jute bags, but after the royal family confiscated this territory from House Sanger, all their craftsmen had left for the remaining Sanger territories.

Since this era didn't have any means of automatic production, industries couldn't function without craftsmen. But even before that, the territory had been losing more money than they made on the jute bags. Even if they went out of their way to train new craftsmen, all they'd be doing was focusing back on the very same industry that had put them in the red in the first place.

When the former crown prince ended his engagement, the king's retainer, Marquess Sanger, participated in the ensuing turmoil instead of taking a stance against it. As punishment, part of his house's territory was confiscated by the royal family, and that's what I'd received—a destitute territory that made me hemorrhage money simply by owning it. I was surprised that this was the land that'd been confiscated as a "punishment." The queen must have fought pretty hard to dissuade anyone from leaving the faction of her son, the former crown prince.

This financially troubled territory was a huge burden that no one wanted to be responsible for. Furthermore, it was difficult for the royal family to personally oversee a territory so detached from their own. Despite it being fairly large, the royal family had been generous enough to give it to me.

"Well, yes... I'd say you've been tricked," an old man with a white beard and hair said. He was Matthew, the head butler of the Sevensworth estate in the royal capital.

"That's life for you," added a plump old woman with white hair tied neatly back. She was Mary, the head maid.

Ever since I'd become a member of the Sevensworth family, I'd had a lot more opportunities to work with these two, and both of them had accompanied me and Ana here. I'd originally wondered if it was okay for the head maid and butler to leave the estate, but it seemed there was no problem. Even besides my mother-in-law, there were plenty of talented individuals already managing the estate's affairs, so there apparently wasn't much for them to do anyway. Usually, they'd go with either my mother-in-law or father-in-law when they left the estate.

But aside from Matthew and Mary, there were a good number of other Sevensworth staff with us, and there was one major reason for that: because we'd gotten caught up in the struggle for the throne. The queen's eldest son had lost his status as crown prince, leaving the seat unfilled, and though one might've thought that the first prince, who'd been in direct competition for the throne, would become the new crown prince, it wasn't that simple. All the people who'd backed the original crown prince had shifted to the fourth prince, and now there was a fierce battle going on between those two remaining factions.

Both groups really wanted Ana on their side. She was the only daughter of a family with enough power to sway the royal family, and her support would essentially guarantee that their chosen prince would become the next king. Plus, with her curse lifted, she had the same beauty her mother was praised for. She was now perfect to serve as the face of the country. That was why they were trying to come up with ways to engineer our divorce so they could have their

prince marry her instead.

Getting divorced in this country was relatively simple. In their religion, it was said that the chief god, Dura, punished the god of the afterlife, Yarna, for having multiple wives, but since he didn't punish divorces, gods continued to get married and divorced without too much fuss. As a result, in this country, while having multiple wives was taboo, divorce was made easy to do.

There were a lot of cases where even if the couple was happily married, they'd divorce if one of their houses became bankrupt or if the relationship between their families worsened. It was especially simple when the married couple didn't have children. Nobles used divorce for their own political reasons, just as they did marriage.

It seemed one of the factions had devised a plan for me to be given this land so they could label me as someone unworthy of the Sevensworths since I was in charge of a financially poor territory. I was sure that both factions would immediately go on the offensive if I ever gave them an excuse to.

The king of this country was different from the kings of my past life, in that he didn't have absolute authority. In fact, he didn't have much authority at all. His job was essentially to manage the balance between noble houses. He didn't even have the power to choose his own son's marriage partner.

The king currently still approved of my marriage to Ana, but I wasn't sure if he'd maintain that position if a valid reason against it was demonstrated. Most likely, if both factions pushed hard enough, he would have to give in to them for the sake of the country—even over what his little sister, my mother-in-law, might want. In order to avoid that situation coming to pass, the Sevensworths had made sure to send a sufficient number of people to assist me.

"Sir Gino, do you have a minute?" Ana asked.

"Of course."

Her face brightened and she happily trotted into the room. *She's so cute, like a little puppy.*

"I've planned an event to have tea with the influential women of the territory. Here's the guest list," Ana said, showing me a page in a vellum booklet.

"Thank you, but you know you don't have to work so hard, right?"

Ana had insisted on joining me on this trip, but I had no intention of making her do any work while she was here. Though I'd become the territory's ruler, I couldn't immediately step into that role since there was no guarantee that the families here would welcome my leadership. I was fairly confident there wouldn't be any open revolts, but it also wasn't abnormal for people to obey while secretly plotting against you. There were also plenty of ways to pull stunts that would just barely not be classified as rude. By rebelling like that, it was possible to eventually force a new ruler to give in. Becoming a new territory lord meant walking into a storm of dealmaking.

The Sevensworths had a very long history, and those who'd served them for generations were incredibly loyal. I doubted that Ana was used to having people plot behind her back. Having a tea party with these potential backstabbers would likely only bring her pain.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I don't want you to get hurt. I'll do the hard work so you don't have to. I'll protect you."

"I-I wish to protect you as well..." Ana's eyes fell to the ground. "Although I'd like to start by not being a burden to you," she said in a low voice.

That's why you're doing this? You want to protect me?

"Ana, you're the best girl in all of history!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

Overwhelmed with emotion, I tried to hug Ana but was quickly stopped by Bridgette.

"It's a relief to know that the next generation of Sevensworths will be peaceful," the head butler said with a chuckle.

"Indeed. We'll be able to retire without having to worry about anything," the head maid giggled.

"Why are the two of you simply standing there?!" Bridgette exclaimed. "Please protect the young madam! We're in the territory lord's office! It's not the place for such shameless behavior!"

Though Bridgette snapped at the two of them, they still seemed

very amused. Now that I was married to Ana and had become a member of the Sevensworth household, I was officially in a position of authority over Bridgette, but even so, I didn't change how I addressed her. I now called the head butler and head maid by their first names and treated them more casually, but my treatment of Bridgette was still much the same. I'd been given so many lectures by her, it was hard for me to see myself as above her, so I remained a little more formal.

"This really reminds me of how the master behaved in his youth. He was head over heels for the madam."

"Oh, me too. Back then, he saw her as an untouchable goddess, though. Unlike Sir Ginorious, he didn't even lay one finger on her."

Judging by how my mother- and father-in-law act now, I believe them. I can almost picture what they were like when they were young.

"I'm so proud to have been their number one servant back then."

"Have you gone senile already, old man? *I* was the one who served them the most."

"Have *you* gone senile, old woman? Perhaps you should retire tomorrow."

Their glares were so intense that it felt like sparks were flying, but from what my mother-in-law had told me, these two had always been like this. There was only a one-year gap between the two of them and they'd been rivals since they were kids.

"Sir Gino. Please allow me to help you."

Ana was already used to the pair, so she paid them no heed and kept her focus on me. Ultimately, I decided to support Ana's plan. After all, how was I supposed to deny a request from Ana when she was so cute? The most I was able to accomplish was having her promise not to overdo it.

"Sir Gino?"

"Oh, Ana? What's the matter? It's so late."

"I've brought you a late-night snack," Ana said as she entered the office.

"You're still up?"

People of this era usually slept early so they could wake at sunrise. Right now it was about one in the morning, quite a strange time for Ana to still be awake.

"I was reading the documents in the records room. I can't allow myself to rest if you're still working."

"You shouldn't be pushing yourself so hard!"

"If you think I'm pushing myself, shouldn't you take a break as well? I'll stop when you do."

I couldn't take a break right now. Both factions aiming for the throne had their eyes set on Ana. If I could make the Simon territory profitable, they wouldn't have a leg to stand on, but even knowing that, I wasn't finding any way to accomplish this. I needed to move fast, not sit back while they enacted their schemes.

"The room's dark as well. You know you don't need to try and conserve candles, right?"

She wasn't wrong. The office was dark because, despite there being multiple candlesticks around the room, I was only using the five-stemmed candelabra on the desk—and even then, only one of them was lit.

"I'm not conserving candles. I just prefer it to be darker."

Unlike the light bulbs from my past life that illuminated the entire room, candles had a much smaller range, which I preferred. By reducing the number of candles, you could make it feel like it was night inside the room as well. If my surroundings were dark, I could focus more on the documents in front of me. If I was reading books, I felt more immersed. I could also focus better on conversations. It just felt much more comfortable when my surroundings were draped in shadow. Ever since leaving House Adolni, I'd always use fewer candles when working or studying by myself, though I wouldn't do that if servants or Ana were around, so she'd never seen it until now.

"You're quite the romantic," Ana giggled. "I've always had servants handle the candles for me, but I'll try using fewer of them when I'm by myself as well."

Bridgette lit the single candlestick that was on the table in front of the sofa. *Yeah, I really like candles. The orange hue of the flame*

makes food look so appetizing. The faint light lit the intricately carved table, revealing small nicks and scratches from its years of use.

Ana had brought me a pirozhki to eat. Back in Japan, this would have been a fried food, but here, they were baked in an oven. They could be stuffed with a variety of ingredients, and today's had sautéed lamb and mushrooms mixed with cheese. It was perfect for a snack. She'd also brought me a slightly sweet honey tea, which was ideal for fatigue in the colder seasons.

Ana stayed while I ate. Even though she didn't have any food of her own, she sat across from me. Just seeing her smile made any weariness I felt disappear.

"Ana, you shouldn't worry about me, and just sleep."

"I'll sleep when you do, Sir Gino."

Even though I asked her repeatedly to sleep, I couldn't convince her at all. In the end, I gave up on working late at night altogether.

Anastasia

Today I was having a tea party with the top women in the Simon territory, and they'd be arriving at the estate any minute. I needed to make sure to deepen ties with all of them, but that wasn't my only goal. I also needed to gather as much useful information as I could about the territory politics to help Sir Gino. *I'm going to do my best!*

"Oh my, is this a dress made of jute?"

"That's right. Since this is my first time meeting you all, I thought such a dress would be appropriate," I said as their eyes all fell onto me.

I'd decided to wear a dress made with jute, which was their territory's main export.

"Up until now, we've only been using it to make bags. I never knew we could make dresses out of it."

"This could be a huge opportunity for our territory!"

I hadn’t only worn this dress with the objective of getting closer to them. It was also a business proposal: I hoped that by showing them one of these dresses in person, they would see the potential of jute. I felt so relieved seeing their positive reactions.

“Hm? The texture of this part here is a little different.”

“Oh, you’re right. It’s soft and has a luster. It resembles jute, but it’s a different material.”

“It’s flax, which isn’t cultivated too much in this country but is a standard material in the kingdom of Ienhu. Imported clothes are common in the royal capital, so you see flax quite a bit. It’s a crop that can be grown in cold climates without a lot of water, so I think we should be able to grow it here as well.”

“Oh my, we could grow it here?!”

“We’re going to have to build up our production system from scratch again anyway, so I think it’s a good chance to focus on something with more revenue potential than jute. The loss of the craftsmen is a grave setback, but if we’re smart about it, we can turn this crisis into an opportunity.”

All the jute craftsmen had already left the territory after it was seized. Though there were still fields upon fields of jute, there wasn’t anyone left who could work it into different products. Since the territory had all but lost their primary industry, I decided to propose a new one.

“That sounds wonderful!”

“Excellent idea! Please allow us to help with this new venture!”

Everyone agreed to my suggestion, and we immediately began discussing plans to implement it. Though this was a tea party, it eventually heated up to the point where it felt more like a debate. I could understand why they were so fired up, though. This wasn’t a wealthy territory. A new industry was an incredibly crucial undertaking.

“How about instead of looking solely at profits, you try looking at our people? Can someone who hasn’t even spoken a word to the people living here really fix the territory?” a woman around fifty years of age said with displeasure.

The room fell silent as a result. Her name was Lady Leslie and her

house specialized in engineering, which wasn't connected to the jute industry at all.

"Yes, you're right. It's important to take the people into consideration. I'd very much like to hear what you have to say," I said.

"Lady Leslie! You're being rude! Perhaps you should think about your manners first!"

Though I'd thanked Lady Leslie for her input, a gray-haired woman in her thirties rebuked her. Her name was Lady Bihjee. Since the beginning of the party, she'd been very kind to me.

"Are you okay, Lady Anastasia? Please don't let her bother you." She checked on me before turning back to argue more with Lady Leslie.

"O-Oh, that reminds me. I saw the play, *The Goblin Maiden*. I heard it's based on a true story, but is that true?"

"I heard that too! I seriously came all the way here just to ask you about it! Can you tell us?"

One of the other ladies tried to dispel the heavy atmosphere by changing the subject to the play, and everyone excitedly followed along. Though there were no theaters here, everyone knew the play. This was because our family had paid a handsome sum for theater troupes to even perform it in the streets if they wanted to. It seemed that it was put on almost daily in their public square, so they all knew the story well.

Perhaps they didn't want to simply change the topic but actually did want to hear more about it. We discussed it for a little while, and after learning how most of the events were indeed based on truth, they all squealed with excitement.

Oh, this makes me so happy! Everyone was very impressed with Sir Gino's character in the play, but little did they know that the real Sir Gino was much more wonderful. I couldn't help but giggle. As we talked, a woman in her forties entered the room.

"Sorry I'm late. I had other business to attend to."

Though she apologized, she didn't seem sorry at all. If anything, her smile looked almost devious. It was good manners to arrive early to a party when the organizer was of a higher status than you, yet

she'd arrived late to the tea party of a duke's daughter. I could only assume it was some kind of strategy. She was most likely trying to say that we were far from being on friendly terms, and if I didn't make enough concessions, we never would be.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm the matron of House Shumer, Avery Shumer."

I went still with surprise. Under Marquess Sanger's rule, everyone in this room had once been a noble; however, their titles had all been granted by him rather than by the royal family. When the territory was seized and the marquess left, any nobles who retained their titles went with him, so the only ones remaining were those who'd had their statuses revoked entirely.

In other words, Lady Avery was a commoner. She'd introduced herself with her house name on purpose, essentially stating that her family was all but certain to receive status once again.

"Lady Avery! You're being very rude!" Lady Bihjee cried, defending me once again.

"Oh, my apologies. It was merely habit," she said, unbothered.

As the two of them geared up for a heated argument, I intervened. "Thank you, Lady Bihjee, but it's okay."

"But this is unforgivable!"

I was able to stay composed because I understood what Lady Avery was doing. This was also part of her plan. In order for everyone to work together smoothly, it was necessary to have the support of Lady Avery's house, so she was emphasizing the importance of her family by basically demanding their status be restored. After arriving late, she was asking for me to compromise a great deal. She already seemed pleased with the fact that I didn't reprimand her for her tardiness.

Overall, there were two kinds of people at this party: those who were strong-willed like Lady Avery and those who were friendly like Lady Bihjee. I could understand the strategies of both sides.

The Avery family's land was perfect for growing flax, and they also helped manage many of the other farms. Their family was definitely one we wanted on our side if we were to enter the flax industry. She had enough power to act brazenly like this, and she

knew it. On the other hand, the people being friendly to me were those who didn't hold as much power, so they were trying to curry favor by acting kindly instead.

Sir Gino had warned me that I'd encounter these two types of people. For the former, they were the kind that thought the territory wouldn't work without them, so they were quite bold; however, their confidence was misplaced. In fact, Sir Gino had specifically told me that I could remove any house from the territory that I wanted. He promised that no matter which family—or families—I got rid of, he'd find a way to work around it, so if anyone showed me disrespect, I should banish them without a second thought.

That being said, I didn't want to just give up and rely on his damage control. If this territory had currently been prosperous, it'd be simple to get rid of even a powerful house, but right now, the people here were in very real danger of a famine. It was better to not shake things up too much. This was where I needed to be strategic. I'd work hard and be a wife that helped her husband! *Oh. My husband. Heh heh. I'm certainly acting like a wife. Oh, and I* am *his wife. How wonderful!*

"Lady Anastasia? Are you all right? Your face has turned red."

"And you're grinning. Did something good happen?"

"O-Oh, don't mind me. It's nothing."

I must control myself. I'm in the middle of work! I need to focus! After that, it essentially became a tea party between me and Lady Avery, and we eventually got on the topic of gems. She was particularly fond of them and had come dressed in jewels as well. I began to notice a lot of things, such as which ladies praised Lady Avery, which ones kept close to Lady Leslie, certain ladies who I thought would be close due to blood or business but weren't, and others who were actually close despite having no direct ties to one another. There was a lot I learned by being here that I'd never have done just by reading documents. This tea party had been quite fortuitous; I had much to report to Sir Gino.

"In your case, I think a rainbow gem would suit you. If you'd like, I'll give you one the next time I see you," Lady Avery said, looking amused.

"Lady Avery! That's enough!" Lady Bihjee shouted.

"I've never heard of that before. What is it?" I asked.

"It's a specialty of this territory, but...well, it's only natural that someone of the premier ducal family doesn't know about it. It's a cheap rock that commoner children wear. It's not truly a gem."

"Lady Avery is essentially calling you a little girl. Seriously, how rude! Lady Bihjee is right to be upset on your behalf."

"Oh? I'd very much like to see this gem," I said.

"It's so nice how Lady Anastasia is truly a noble who doesn't fight."

"It really is a breath of fresh air."

"She doesn't take the slightest offense. I'm sure Lady Avery won't find a single fault in her."

Though everyone seemed to think I should've been upset by her remarks, I wasn't. From the perspective of someone over forty years old, I was sure to seem like a little girl.

"Young madam, *please* allow me to arrest that insolent, unpleasant woman," Bridgette said after everyone left.

"You really don't have to be so angry. I'm not bothered at all," I said.

"Oh, Bridgette, you don't have to worry about anything at all. This is all a part of the young madam's plan," Mary chuckled as she calmed Bridgette down.

"It is?"

"Well, of course. She's received wisdom from the madam herself, since it is her first time working as the lady of a territory. It's the very wisdom of the woman called 'the empress,' who everyone in the country fears. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

Finally, Bridgette calmed down. However, if this was how she reacted, I feared what Sir Gino would say after I reported all this to him.

"What?! That Avery lady, or whatever she's called, must be punished for her insolence! She deserves to be in chains! Now!" Sir Gino yelled to the guards.

As expected, he's angry. "P-Please wait! I ask that you don't get angry. Lady Avery was merely fighting for her house's sake. I knew that, so her actions didn't bother me whatsoever."

I needed to calm him down. He'd only just become the territory ruler, and he'd surely alienate the people if he immediately took such drastic action like this. If Lady Avery were to be punished, it should be at a later time and for a reason that the people of this territory would accept.

"The young madam is right. Wouldn't it be better if you first calmed yourself and then praised her for how well she did? Her efforts have greatly helped ours," Matthew said.

"You're right. Ana, you did wonderfully. Thank you. You've really made things a lot easier for me."

"Well...I'm just happy to be even a little bit of help." I couldn't help but look down out of embarrassment.

It was all I could do to withstand his kind smile, which threatened to melt my heart, and the touch of his hand over mine.

"But Ana, I really don't want you to push yourself. All I ever want is for you to be happy. For that, I'll spare no effort or expense."

He is truly kind. He really is working hard for my sake.

"I...I'd like to work hard for your sake too." Though my contributions thus far were embarrassingly small, I built up my courage and told him how I truly felt.

Sir Gino's eyes widened and he froze. "Ana! How are you so cute?!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

In the next moment, he'd spread his arms wide open and shouted with joy. But before he could get too close to me, Bridgette pulled him back.

"I understand that Lady Avery's house is strong-willed, and it only makes sense after the situation they were left in. However, they're overstepping their bounds."

Matthew nodded in response to Sir Gino. "I've reviewed past records, and it seems that even when this territory was still under Marquess Sanger, it didn't get much attention from him or his house. It became even worse when it was taken from him, as the royal

family never cared too much about this territory to begin with. As a result, the powerful families here have basically had free rein to do as they liked. I'm sure that's only served to make them more arrogant."

"I see. So because they don't have many opportunities to interact with those of higher status than them, they're immature in how they negotiate? No matter how your plan goes, Ana, I think it's good to have some kind of punishment in the beginning. Otherwise, she'll keep acting like that and just make things harder on you."

"I'll be fine."

"No, neither I nor the servants here can stand you being mistreated. This needs to be addressed."

Regardless of how things proceeded, it seemed that Sir Gino would start things off with a punishment.

"I'm so useless," I said to myself as I sorted through some papers in the documents room.

One day, I'd be the wife of the premier duke and take over my mother's duties. However, I was nothing compared to my mother. Everyone was always one step behind her, but I always seemed to be the one who was stumbling and falling behind. Even my plan was something I'd only been able to come up with by borrowing my mother's wisdom. I wasn't making my own path forward, and I knew this wasn't good. I was nothing but a burden to Sir Gino. I needed to work harder and become someone useful to him.

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At Lady Leslie's suggestion, I covertly took a look around the town. More than any documents or books could tell me, I saw firsthand how horrible the state of things was. The slums were especially bad, with every last person seeming to be lacking food.

I also stopped by a jeweler and borrowed their account book. This was something my mother had advised me to do, as jewelers typically had more information regarding the flow of gemstones than even the territory leaders. It was common for underhanded deals

done by neighboring lords to appear in their records, so apparently if I wanted to find anything shady, it was the best place to look.

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Today, I was distributing food to those in the slums after what I'd witnessed during my undercover observations. Everyone looked at us with suspicion as we set up a station and began cooking in a large pot. Before long, a sizable crowd had gathered around us. Though they all seemed hungry, they kept their distance.

"Why won't any of them come closer?" I asked.

"From what I've read, it seems that though there's been food distribution during times of famine, there hasn't ever been anything like this where someone comes and cooks for them directly. It's most likely the first time these folks have seen a noble cooking."

"They don't think this food is for them. They're not standing by waiting for it to be ready; they're waiting for whatever gets thrown away."

I was shocked when I heard Matthew and Mary explain. I'd learned in school that this kind of outreach in the slums was a good way to get a read on the state of the town and deepen bonds with the people living there. This was something so basic that it was written in a textbook. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of policies the previous territory lord had had, where they didn't even serve these poor people food once.

"You're very thorough with your research as usual, Matthew," I said.

"Sir Ginorious was the one who asked me to look into past records," Matthew said, chuckling. "He was trying to work from the shadows to make sure your plan went smoothly. He loves you so much, young madam."

"He truly does," Mary giggled. "I'm sure it won't be long until you two have an heir."

I couldn't help but look down due to the outlandish nature of what the two of them were implying.

"Oh? What happened for you to have come to a place like this?"

Suddenly, I heard Lady Bihjee's voice, and when I looked up, I saw her approaching with Lady Leslie.

"We heard that a noble was doing something strange in the slums, so we came. Would you like some help?"

Both Lady Leslie and Lady Bihjee offered to assist me. Since this was the first time something like this had happened in the territory, word appeared to have spread very quickly.

"Oh my, you two cook?!"

Both ladies had whipped out their own aprons and were headed to the cooking station.

"Well, of course."

"Yes," Lady Leslie said simply before jumping right in.

Lady Bihjee kept me company in the meantime.

"That's amazing! I'm not even allowed to touch a kitchen knife."

"Well, of course they wouldn't let the premier duke's daughter touch one. But the two of us are commoners. Even when we were nobles, we were closer to commoner status than not," Lady Bihjee said as she deftly chopped vegetables.

Her knife work is amazing! She's so skilled! I'd...like to try it too. Oh? There's a knife right there. It's time to take on the challenge of cooking!

"Whoa! Be careful!" Lady Bihjee said, frantically rushing to me.

"Young madam, you mustn't!" Bridgette said, catching my hand.

"Lady Anastasia, there's a certain way to hold things that you want to cut. It's dangerous to hold them in a way that puts your fingers in the way of the knife's blade."

"Exactly! Please never do anything so dangerous again! Cooking is off-limits!"

Before I knew it, the knife was taken away from me and I was unable to help. *How unfortunate.* As the cooking progressed, a carriage arrived and out of it stepped Lady Avery.

"Lady Anastasia, is it truly wise to be wasting your time doing this when you could be working on fixing the territory's policies?" she asked, not even trying to hide the disdain on her face.

Her reaction was exactly as I'd predicted. This wasn't a part of

the area that her family controlled, so it would've been better if I'd gone to her territory and tried to win over the people there. Instead, I'd prioritized giving food to the people of the slums. After all, they were in a much more dire situation than others.

"I apologize if I've displeased you. However, I'm not fooling around. Supporting those in the slums is a part of territory policy."

"Oh? It seems you know nothing of running a territory, Lady Anastasia. If you don't wish for your people to starve, you must think of a long-term plan to give them food. This is nothing more than a stopgap. I think it's better to go back to your mansion where you belong."

She was likely referring to getting the jute industry back on its feet. Essentially, she was telling me that I should be prioritizing jute because it was the most important thing to their economy.

"It's true that business needs to flourish in order for a territory to be prosperous, but improvement takes time. The people here are hungry *today*. Making plans won't feed them this minute. I believe it's best to simultaneously tackle poverty while also developing new industry."

I had no plans to back down this time. I would accept any insults she had for me, but if she meant to get in the way of these people getting food, I wouldn't stand for that. It was a sign of a failed system when those in power neglected those in need.

"Give it a rest already, Lady Avery!" Lady Leslie said.

Lady Bihjee had stepped over as well. Unlike me who had nothing to do, the two of them had stopped cooking to jump to my defense. I suspected that Lady Avery's displeasure partially came from her position. The fact that a slum got food before anywhere in her own area might not sit well with her family since it could make it seem as if we didn't respect them. It might affect the hierarchy in the territory, which was very important to her house.

This hierarchy was also important to Lady Leslie and Lady Bihjee. They didn't want Lady Avery's house to have so much power anymore. If we only focused on jute, then houses like Lady Leslie's, which wasn't very involved in the industry, would be in a bad position.

"I understand your stance very well, Lady Anastasia, and I think this has been a very fruitful conversation. I shall excuse myself for today," Lady Avery said before leaving.

Most likely, she was implying that she'd use this event as a bargaining chip later.

"These people think that so long as they can get to you, they can control Sir Ginorious," Mary laughed. "You keep finding yourself in difficult situation after difficult situation."

"They think they can control him through me?"

If anything, I would have thought that going directly for Sir Gino would be more efficient. I'd follow anything he told me to do.

"Anyone would think so after observing the two of you for a little bit," Mary said. "It's obvious how much he loves you."

I could feel myself blushing from her grin.

"Your resolute attitude was magnificent. Remember, if you fall, so will Sir Ginorious. You're much easier to deal with than he, with how cold he can seem, so more people will likely try to get to him through you, but you must stand your ground."

Matthew's right. I won't cause Sir Gino any trouble! I'll be careful about making any kinds of commitments too easily. Oh? It looks like the food might be ready soon. I need to reset myself, because this is where my work begins!

The adults were still frightened, making it hard to approach them, so I first went to the children who were watching us intently.

"Ms. Noble? When will you give us your scraps?" one of the children asked.

As expected, they're waiting for the leftovers. "No scraps. I'm serving you all soup and bread."

"I...don't have any money."

"No money is needed. I'd simply like to speak with you a little."

"About what?"

"Well...maybe about this town, or what you did yesterday. Things like that."

"Huh?! That's all?!"

"It's more than enough. Please call your friends over. We'll give

everyone soup and bread."

"Um...will we get food if we speak with you too?" one of the adults asked.

"Of course. I'd love to hear whatever you have to say."

Everyone cheered, and the knights had them line up to receive food from the great pot. As each one was served, we chatted for a bit, and little by little, I got information regarding the town.

"It's so good! There's actually salt in the soup!"

"Whoa! There's meat too!"

"What *is* this bread?! It's so soft and delicious!"

The children were overjoyed and dug in as soon as they got their bowls. *Heh heh, they're so adorable. I'm so glad to be able to feed them.*

"Here you go, Ms. Noble."

"Hm? What is this?"

"I made it. Dad always says to pay back the favor, so this is for the soup and bread," one of the kids who'd finished eating said, giving me a bracelet with stones on it.

Does he make these for a living? "You have a very outstanding father. Thank you very much. I'm so happy to receive your gift."

"Ms. Noble, here! It's rope I made at work from the grass in the field. It's not as strong or special as jute rope, but...it's all I have. I'm so sorry! Please use it for yard work!" a woman in her thirties said, handing me a coil of rope.

"Ms. Noble, please take this!"

"I made this. Here you go!"

What's going on? All these people are giving me things.

"This is the culture of the slums here. Please accept them. If you break the rules, you'll be doing great damage to their way of life," Lady Leslie explained.

It seemed that the rule here was to always return the favor. In an already poor territory, they lived in the poorest part, so it was important to help each other in order to survive. To cultivate this mentality and prevent things like stealing, the leaders had developed these customs, which were now followed very strictly. I happily accepted every last one of their gifts.

Ginorious

"As I thought, this won't be easy," I muttered under my breath.

I was currently formulating a plan where we could focus on flax garments instead of jute bags, but the only conclusion I could reach was that it wouldn't be easy to pull off. Though there was no doubt that there would be a huge surge in revenue compared to what they'd had before, it still wouldn't be enough to get the territory back into the black.

"Sir Gino!" Ana excitedly entered my office. Merely seeing her smile was enough to erase my exhaustion. "I received this when I was serving the children food."

"Wait, this is prismatic ore!"





What she'd handed me was a bracelet made of thin plant stems adorned with a stone. The stone looked like iron ore, but it had a rainbow sparkle as if a film had been placed over it. In my past life, we'd called it prismatic ore and used it as an ingredient for the production of mithril.

"Oh, so I was right! I thought it resembled what I saw in one of the books I read," Ana said happily.

After coming clean about my past life to Ana, I had begun teaching her magic. At first, I'd intended that to be all I taught her, but then she asked to start learning Japanese, which was the language that all the texts were written in. Ever since I visited that buried university library from my past life, I had a lot of books stored on crystal balls, and she was eager to read every last one of them.

Because of that, I made a golem that could print the data from the crystal balls onto vellum paper. Ana was learning Japanese through these books. Though she was far from mastering it, many of the books had pictures, and not too long ago, she'd read one about ores and minerals.

"It's called a rainbow gem in this territory, and it can be mined from a nearby mountain. I think the territory could make an enormous profit from mithril."

"Yes, you're right. If we use it as a material for magic tools, it could be extremely profitable, and mining would even create jobs for the people here. All we'd need then is to establish a trade route."

Magic tools were incredibly high-end items. Nobody would buy them at their proper value if they were sold through regular vendors. Who would go to a grocer and buy magic tools along with their vegetables? To be able to sell something high-end at its appropriate price, you needed a suitably high-end establishment, and since this was a very specific category of product, specialized staff as well. Not even my company's stores were suitable for selling magic tools.

"Lady Ekatarina will be arriving in two days. Perhaps we should consult her," Ana suggested.

"Huh? Lady Byron is coming here?"

In addition to textiles, Lady Byron's family also dealt in magic tools, so they had a large network of merchants who specialized in

that area. She was also very close with Ana and was someone I could trust. I would have absolutely no problems trading with her.

"Yes, I asked her to come. I've business with her, but I'd also just like to see her again since it's been a while."

Ana was a noble through and through, meaning she wasn't one to tell lies. Even so, I had a feeling there was more to this than just that. Most likely, the mithril was one of the main reasons for the invite, but she was pretending like it had been nothing but a whim. She was being considerate of me by kindly not boasting about her foresight and my lack of it. It was just another example of how wonderful a woman she was.

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Currently, I was in the middle of an evening party with some of the bigwigs in the territory. Most of them seemed restless, and that had to do with the fact that I'd be granting statuses tonight. It was normal for these kinds of announcements to happen at large events, with an official ceremony to be held later exclusively for those receiving a title. The reason for the more public announcement first was so everyone could hear it from the territory ruler themselves rather than by word of mouth, hopefully resulting in less friction during the shift in hierarchies.

There were many ways to earn status as a commoner, including by gifting an Artifact or exorbitant amount of money to either the royal family or a powerful noble, but that would be extremely unlikely for anyone in a territory as poor as this one to accomplish. The only way for these people to be granted status was if the territory lord assigned it for administrative purposes. Since this was status that was given rather than earned, it wasn't too unusual for it to be revoked if the person in question was no longer needed for certain duties, nor was it unusual for it to be granted if new duties arose.

"As your territory lord, I have an announcement. The Sevensworths shall grant status to those who are heavily involved in the management of this territory. I will now read the names of the

houses who will receive such status," I said, standing at a modestly raised podium. Everyone's eyes nervously focused on me. "First, I grant Sir Peter and Lady Leslie the titles of baron and baroness. Next, I grant Sir Mark and Lady Annie..."

As my announcement continued, I saw joy, sorrow, and a mix of other emotions appear on the audience's faces.

After I finished, one of the ladies whose name was not called spoke up, seemingly frustrated. "Why did Lady Leslie receive status? Did Lady Anastasia not tell you about her rudeness?"

"Are you referring to when she told me I should meet with the people of the territory? I found that quite helpful and not problematic whatsoever," Ana said in my stead.

"You did?"

"Our house doesn't have a habit of punishing those who speak out of turn. Lady Leslie's house is in charge of the engineering in this territory, which engages quite heavily with laborers from the slums. I believe her statement was meant more as a call for help due to the conditions there. The people seem close to her as well, only further proving that theory. I have no problem with anyone speaking up if it's out of concern for their people. She's someone I'm happy to have as a retainer."

Ana not only answered the question but also made it clear what the Sevensworths' policy for its retainers here would be. *She's brilliant as always. By making our territory policy clear now, it'll cause fewer problems for us down the road. Ana's really wonderful in everything she does.*

Lady Leslie looked at Ana, seemingly touched by her words. *Yeah, that's right. Ana's a wonderful woman who can see through your insults to your true intentions. Judging by your reaction, you're just realizing that too. It's all right, let it soak in. Ana's amazing.* It felt good to see Ana being respected by everyone. Though, the truth was, Lady Leslie should have been thanking her. The only reason she was given the carrot and not the stick for her rude behavior was because Ana had stopped me from doing so.

"But you don't plan to give our house status at all?!" Lady Avery

asked with a look of outrage.

"Of course not. We've discovered a number of problems with your house."

Specifically, we'd found discrepancies in the documents regarding the jute bag industry. Ana herself had discovered contradictions between tax records and production amounts, and her primary objective in calling Lady Byron was to compare these documents to the Byrons' own tax sheets. House Byron had a very strict system, which was much more trustworthy than this territory's, which consisted of only a few tax officers and spotty bookkeeping.

There was a big discrepancy in the value of exported items to the Byron territory versus the tariffs, way too large to be explained away as a careless mistake. This confirmed that someone had been cooking the books.

Ana was also the one who'd figured out who was behind these incorrect reports. When she went to a jeweler to check their account books, she noticed that nearly every year, Lady Avery was buying a new piece of jewelry that she shouldn't have been able to afford from her income. This all but confirmed that Lady Avery's house was the one behind the false reporting, so there was no way we would be giving them status now.

My mother-in-law had predicted this would happen. Though she'd never been here, she had surmised it due to the unusually low profits from the jute business and the unexpected level of poverty that the people lived in. That was all she needed to determine that there was most likely foul play going on.

"What kind of problems?" Lady Avery asked.

"We will be releasing the full details of our findings, but there is one thing that has already become clear to us. Your house has been taking an unfair amount of taxes from your farmers. You can expect to take responsibility for that soon."

A territory's lord was ultimately responsible for the well-being of the people living there—and the one who would bear the brunt of any revolts if the people felt mistreated—so it was illegal for local governors to change tax amounts without permission.

But sometimes this was overlooked, and that was precisely what

had happened here. Neither House Sanger nor the royal family had cared much about this territory, so for these kinds of places, they'd send envoys in their place to check for any kind of illegal dealings. Unfortunately, a lot of the time, a simple bribe was enough for them to turn a blind eye.

According to the law of this territory, in the event that a noble was found to be unjustly taxing their people, the guilty party would only have to return the money and pay a fine. But if a regular commoner swindled someone, they would not only have to pay a fine, but serve jail time as well. It was a system rigged for those in power. All they cared about was using their position to line their pockets. This unfair system was something we needed to fix.

Ana was also the one who discovered this unfair taxation system. While serving food to those around the territory, she was able to talk to the farmers that worked under the Avery family's jurisdiction. As a result, she found out that profits were essentially an eighty-twenty split, with the farmers taking the lower amount. It was horrible. Usually, it would've been forty-sixty in favor of the farmers.

"Do you think by getting rid of us, the territory won't go hungry anymore?" Lord Avery asked.

Judging by his anger, it was obvious that he expected to have received status tonight. I was aware that they'd already talked with the farmers to make sure they'd corroborate their story—that is to say, threatened to raise the tax rate even more if they ever spoke out about it.

They must've thought that even if we did notice something, we'd turn a blind eye since they were a very important house that controlled the majority of both farmland and farmers for jute. Even if we learned of the unfair taxation, it shouldn't have been easy to toss them aside. In their minds, losing the support of the Avery family would doubtlessly result in a territory-wide famine.

"There's no problem in that regard. We will be shifting our focus primarily to the production of wood used in furniture and such, along with establishing a secondary flax industry. It will be more than possible to manage this territory without the help of your house."

They had miscalculated. They'd thought they were untouchable,

but we'd already put together a plan for the future that didn't involve relying on the Avery farms.

"We won't forget what you did here today!"

"There will be a day that you come to us in tears, mark our words!"

Lady Avery and her husband said respectively before leaving.

I couldn't blame the party atmosphere for becoming so wild, given the main purpose for the gathering.

"Why wasn't our house granted a title? We haven't been involved in anything illegal like that, and we provide a decent amount of revenue. I thought we were friends too..." Lady Bihjee said, glancing at Ana.

"You should know better than anyone why," I said.

Lady Bihjee gulped, visibly shaken. "Well... I hope everything goes well for you with your wooden furniture ventures." She sneered before leaving as well with her husband.

"I'm not sure I understand. What did she mean by wooden furniture venture?"

After the evening party ended, Lady Byron came up to me and asked this question. Since she'd come all this way to visit, she'd also attended the party and heard what Lady Bihjee said. I couldn't blame her for being confused. The three of us had already spoken quite extensively about starting a mithril business for magic tools; we'd even had a conversation about it just today. Judging by the scale of what we were going to be trading, it'd make sense if it was our primary venture, not the furniture.

"I said that we'd be making furniture and such, right? Magic tools use a lot of wood in them, so I wasn't lying, right?"

After all, nobles didn't lie, so I'd chosen my words carefully. Lady Byron, like Lady Bihjee, had misinterpreted what I'd said as a statement that we'd be entering into the wood business.

"Why did you say it like that? You need everyone's help in the territory, so wouldn't it have been better to be straightforward?"

"Lady Bihjee and the others are tied to the king's concubine. I'm sure they'd try to get in our way if I told them exactly what we were

doing.”

“Huh?”

This was the reason we’d brought so many servants from the Sevensworths. The first prince’s and fourth prince’s factions already had people set up in this territory, and we needed spies to discern who they were. That was the job of the Sevensworth servants. We’d never be able to help this territory flourish if we had people working against us. We needed to weed them out first. Ana was a big help in this regard too. There was a limit to what the covert operatives could do, since people would be wary if too many newcomers showed up all at once, so it would have been slow work to investigate each person one by one.

Ana thus gathered a lot of valuable information about the people in power during events like her tea parties, and then determined who we should focus on. The people who kept their guard up around me let it down in front of Ana, which I felt was a great talent of hers.

Lady Bihjee was one of the people that Ana marked first. The only ones who would immediately run to the defense of someone they were just meeting for the first time were people who most likely had ulterior motives. Even so, Ana was amazing. She had not only unearthed the unfair taxation from Lady Avery’s family but had also discovered the prismatic ore. It was all thanks to her that we’d figured out a trade route for the magic tools and also that we’d discovered so many people we needed to weed out. She was the real hero of this story, and that was something that the people in this territory needed to know.

Anastasia

In the end, Lady Bihjee’s family left the territory. Though I believed they’d had the choice to remain, like many of the people who were secretly communicating with other houses, they elected to go.

At first, Lady Avery’s family had planned to stay in the territory,

which made sense with the sheer amount of land they owned. However, the end result was the exact opposite.

After the people learned they were being overtaxed, they stormed the Avery estate in anger. Since it seemed that violence could erupt, we sent knights there and promised the people that we'd prepare a forum in which they could be heard. Only after that did they disperse.

During that forum, a lady who was pleasantly serving tea suddenly attacked Lady Avery with a knife. The knights immediately stepped in, so we were able to avoid the worst possible outcome; however, Lady Avery sustained serious injuries to her face and arm.

The identity of her attacker turned out to be a farmer who'd been so malnourished from poverty that she couldn't even produce milk for her baby, leading to it starving to death. She sobbed as the knights held her down, glaring with an intense hatred at Lady Avery.

Sir Gino used his own money to buy a plot of land in a public cemetery, which he gifted to the woman because she hadn't even been able to afford a proper burial. After receiving it, she moved the remains of her child there from her garden.

Sir Gino also paid for the funeral expenses, which allowed her to have a proper service. When she'd initially cremated his body, she'd lit the fire herself because she didn't have the money to make a donation, which was necessary in order to receive a holy flame from the church.

But now, she was able to not only hold a funeral but also have the holy flame there too. It was said that the body was sent to the heavens with it. We watched as the smoke from the wooden box and cremated child lifted to the heavens while the mother sobbed. I couldn't help but cry as well seeing this.

Her punishment for inflicting harm was being sentenced to one year of labor without pay. Her job now was to be a keeper of the cemetery where her child was buried. She greatly thanked Sir Gino for allowing her to work where her child rested.

But the list of people who loathed Lady Avery didn't end with that woman. There were families who'd had to sell their family members into prostitution to reduce the number of mouths to feed. If this

territory had been more bountiful, perhaps the people wouldn't harbor as much hatred as they did, but overtaxation in an already impoverished territory had pushed countless families from struggling to desperate.

This was why Sir Gino punished Lady Avery's house so intensely. If he were too easy on them, it would incur the anger of everyone else and easily lead to a bigger problem. A mere fine with no jail time at all was essentially a slap on the wrist and an insult to everyone who'd suffered. So in order for the people to be content with the punishment, Sir Gino had the Averys pay a very high fine and seized the majority of their wealth. Now poor and hated by those around them, the members of House Avery fled the territory.

The idea of expelling one of the most established, powerful houses outright had come from my mother, but neither Sir Gino nor I had planned on actually doing it. However, we knew we needed to cut down Lady Avery's house, so in the end, the results were much the same. I had no doubt that my mother had known this would happen. She'd also suspected Lady Avery of shady dealings. Being able to predict this much without even seeing the territory in person was something I couldn't do. As expected, I was still far from being able to match my mother.

If we were following the proper order of things, we would usually take the fine and the money they had stolen first and then distribute that among the victims. However this would take too much time.

In the interest of doing this quickly, Sir Gino took a different route. First, he personally compensated all those affected and decided to take time to receive all the money due from Lady Avery's household. The reason he was willing to put the financial burden on himself was so he could help the destitute as soon as possible.

The people in the territory were overjoyed. As soon as Sir Gino became the new territory lord, he had punished those responsible for overtaxation and returned the money to the people. It was as brilliant as the play *The Path of Redemption for Lieutenant General Cormon*, where the evil local magistrate was swiftly punished for his crimes. Sir Gino should have basically become a hero at this point, but that wasn't exactly what happened.

"None of this was because of me! It's all thanks to the wonderful work of my wife, Anastasia Sevensworth! If you're to thank anyone, it should be her. The ultimate woman in the world is Anastasia Sevensworth!" he'd said in front of everyone. And that was how all of the people in the territory came to thank me.

Currently, I was sneaking around the main road of the territory's capital. As I did, I heard a troubadour singing a song about me.

"The voice of the justice princess rings! In the name of the moon, she will punish you! Our princess will punish all evil with a flip of her skirt! She will defeat all the evildoers with her princess kick!"

The story had been so embellished that it'd become complete fiction with flashy action scenes. The young girls listening seemed to enjoy it a lot, though, and were clapping along. As a noble lady, I had very mixed feelings about this. The troubadour was dressed as a woman to match the song, and one of the small girls excitedly followed along when seeing him kick his leg in the air. However, her mother quickly stopped her, saying it was shameless. It went without saying that I'd never done something so shameless that not even a little girl should do it. In general, I didn't like being the subject of songs because it was embarrassing, but if I was to be a part of a song, I'd at least prefer that it didn't involve me being some kind of girl that did high kicks in a skirt. I'd much rather be someone dignified. Lady Ekatarina was currently visiting, and she laughed quite a bit when she saw the troubadour's "princess kick."

Ginorious

The first round of mithril magic tools to be made was searchlights. Mithril had an extremely high content of magic particles, and for pure mithril, it had a special property that allowed it to absorb magic particles from the air to naturally replenish itself. The searchlight harnessed this property to use the magic particles as its power source, which would be replenished over time.

This wasn't what mithril was usually used for, but I decided to try

it anyway since all it required was to engrave a magic circuit for illumination in pure mithril. It was too risky to build anything too technically complicated for now; if we tried, the number of spies around me and Ana was sure to increase greatly.

The refinement and processing of the pure mithril from prismatic ore, as well as the magic circuit imbuement, was handled by our house. I made specialized golems and added a biometric verification system so only Ana and I could use them. This step was the core of our operations and not something we could allow to be leaked to anyone else.

When we were done processing the mithril, we sent it to our territory's workshop, where they assembled the magic tools with the respective wooden parts. After that, they were finished and ready to be shipped to Lady Byron's territory, where they used their network to sell them.

The entire production process involved a lot of people, including more prominent houses who were involved in the excavation of the prismatic ore and creation of the wooden parts. Ana was a huge help in understanding the complicated relations between the families in the territory to discern how to have them all work together.

I felt that Ana was really good at these kinds of things. She was very kind and spent a lot of time thinking about the feelings of others, which helped her make suggestions that they wanted. Her gentle, pleasant demeanor belied a very strong will, and even if the person she was dealing with came at her strongly, she wouldn't back down if she had reason to fight.

The searchlights flew off the shelves, and it seemed that our plan of keeping them at a low price so even commoners could buy them was working. Magic tools were usually things that could be made for cheap but were sold at high prices. With how fast they were selling, though, we were making a great revenue despite the low price tag and it seemed that we'd be able to close the first year at a profit. As a result, the territory quickly became more prosperous and the faces of the people seemed brighter now that they weren't so worried about food.

We also started the flax industry from scratch. It seemed that it

would take a while for this business to be profitable since Lady Avery's household, who'd been in charge of all the farmers until recently, had left the territory.

Since the main source of revenue was now the flourishing magic tool business, I greatly lowered taxes on flax earnings, changing it to a twenty-eighty split in favor of the people. I also implemented a two-year no-tax period until the business was fully up and running.

Also, in order to make sure nobody went behind my back to make their own tax arrangements, I made this announcement directly to the people. This unprecedented rate was a dramatic improvement and a weight off their shoulders. Of course, the farmers were overjoyed and thanked me, but I told them to thank Ana since she was the one who discovered the overtaxation. It was only because our main business was generating enough revenue that I could lower taxes on flax-related business. It was all thanks to Ana's contributions.

I made sure to explain how wonderful Ana was to the people in the territory, and now they were all singing her praises. It really felt good, but apparently Ana wasn't too happy. She complained to me about how another song was made about her, but I didn't think there was much she could do about that. After all, how could troubadours *not* make songs about a girl as wonderful as her?

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"Sir Ginorious! There's a fire in the workshop!" a guard cried as he ran over to me.

He was referring to the magic tool workshop. But as I gave instructions on how to deal with it, another person frantically rushed in.

"Sir! There's a fire at the mine!"

I was currently heading toward the mine after deciding to leave the workshop fire to the knights. I made sure to attach a cart to the carriage I was in, just in case there were any injured that needed to be brought back to town.

With normal carriages, adding too much extra weight could cause difficulties when going over hills, but this was a luxurious Sevensworth carriage with eight horses, so I was confident it could easily transport the injured.

I also didn't have any guards riding with me because I'd sent them all to deal with the workshop fire and guard Ana. After all, it was clear that there was something afoot and they were aiming for both Ana and me by setting fires at the same time. They were hoping we'd use the knights to deal with the fires, leaving us unprotected. Most likely the ones responsible for this were those looking to use Ana in their plot for the throne.

They were trying to make me fail at managing this territory by making my leadership skills appear questionable and using that as a way to have our marriage dissolved. If the premier duke's successor was shown to be less than capable, that would shake this country at its foundation, and it'd be easy for the royal family to step in and suggest a different heir.

But I had already seen through their plan. After Ana discovered the prismatic ore for mithril, we were able to start an entire business making and selling magic tools. Though they'd wanted to show how ineffective I was as a leader, they'd instead accomplished the opposite.

Now that their plan had failed, I'd expected them to attack in a different way. Their most likely method would not be to go after us when we were in the safety of the Sevensworth estate in the royal capital or the Sevensworth territory, but in this territory where there was less security. As expected, they were now making their move, and they were being quite brazen about it by attacking two places at once.

I had to protect Ana at all costs, so I sent the remaining knights to guard her. Meanwhile, I decided to play right into their hands and go by myself to the mining site, giving them the perfect chance to attack me. I planned to use their ambush as an opportunity to capture the assailants, thereby removing some of the pawns of whoever was behind this. The fewer pieces they had on the board, the more their moves would be limited.

"You're quite stubborn, Sir Ginorious."

"You really are. Why wouldn't you take any guards with you?"

Matthew and Mary were sitting across from me in the carriage. I'd intended to handle this myself, but these two insisted on coming with me. Since a fire was a race against time, I gave up arguing and let them come along. It wasn't a problem, though; I knew I could easily protect them. I'd just tell them to stay in the carriage and deploy a magic barrier around it.

"There's an anticavalry blockade two hundred metres ahead. There are men positioned behind and beside the fences, observing us. They're roughly seventeen in number. Four archers, three spearmen, six armored, and the rest are unknown. Your orders?" the coachman asked through the small window into the carriage.

He almost sounded like a knight giving a report, but then I remembered he *was* actually a knight. Though he was wearing a robe and hood, under it was his armor and a helmet that covered his face. I'd asked for a knight to be the coachman in case of an attack.

"Slow down and stop upon approach."

"Yes, sir."

As he followed my orders, I prepared my magic.

"Oh, an ambush? How troublesome," Matthew chuckled.

"So very true," Mary giggled.

Though I'd worried that the two of them would begin to panic, it seemed that I had worried for nothing. If anything, they seemed perfectly calm.

"I suppose we should get going," Matthew said.

"Huh?! No, wait here!" I exclaimed.

But Mary just giggled again, holding back my arm as I tried to stop Matthew. "Don't worry. Sit back and relax. Leave this to us."

As Matthew hopped out of the carriage, Mary forcefully sat me down before leaving as well. *This is bad. I need a new plan. I never thought these two would leave the carriage.* I exited after them in a panic.

"That's him! Shoot the young guy!"

"Huh?!"

I let out a sound of surprise, but not because the archers had

fired at me. That I was expecting, which was why I'd cast an invisible magical barrier around the carriage. My surprise came from how, before the arrows could even reach the barrier, Matthew had jumped forward and plucked all the arrows out of thin air.

"You lot sure are antsy," Mary giggled. "You're going to immediately fire upon us without even trying to talk first? But honestly, this saves us the trouble of asking your objective."

Despite the hail of arrows that had just been shot at us, Mary was smiling.

"This smell and coloring...it's dried aconite root," Matthew said, examining the tip of one of the arrows. "Head maid, I leave Sir Ginorious to you."

"Yes, no problem."

Immediately, Matthew vanished and in the next moment, he had somehow reappeared in front of the archers, who were a considerable distance away from us. He took a strange stance where he bent his thumb, index finger, and middle finger into a peculiar shape and then took out the archers in one swift attack, easily knocking them out. He kept seemingly teleporting around to defeat all the archers in the area. *I can't believe my eyes! He's moving unlike any gray-haired old man I've ever seen!*

"He's bare-handed! Armored units, surround him! Spearmen, attack him through the gaps in the formation! Finish him off!"

The armored units tried to surround Matthew but were unsuccessful as he easily knocked them out as well using the same three-fingered stance as before.

I cast magic on my left eye to be able to use *inspect*. As a former engineer, this kind of magic was child's play. *Oh, I see. So he's using chi.* He struck the armor with the tips of his fingers, but the armor didn't dent, nor was the enemy blown away. He was simply touching them and somehow rendering them unconscious. It was all due to the chi he was releasing from his fingertips, sending it through the armor and into their bodies.

In my past life the fusion between Western magic and Eastern chi had resulted in a magic revolution, birthing modern magic. I'd even learned about chi in school. However, what we'd learned was the

application of chi to make magic more efficient. We were still effectively using Western magic. What Matthew was using was chi without any mana, which was completely different from how it had been used back then. It was more like a form of martial arts.

"Dammit! Everyone, get out here!" shouted a man clad in armor, who looked to be the leader.

In the next minute, people came out from behind the rocks and bushes on the side of the road. Ultimately, about forty men appeared, meaning that up until now we'd only seen around half their total forces.

"I want everyone to stop that old fart! You don't have to kill him, just slow him down! You two go and finish off the target!"

The men surrounded Matthew again, forming a circle.

"I've been waiting to see if you had anything special up your sleeve, but...it doesn't seem like it. In that case, let's get this finished quickly," Matthew said, staring intently at them while taking a ready stance with slightly bent knees.

He still kept his three fingers in the same unique shape, though. *Oh wait, I know this! It's the praying mantis fist! I remember seeing this exact stance in games in my past life!* In the next moment, the pace at which people were knocked out was kicked up a notch. Even though I was more than ten metres away, I couldn't follow his movements at all. Every now and then I'd see an afterimage of him, but in the span of a few seconds, a number of the attackers that'd surrounded him were now lying on the ground, unconscious.

"Th-That strength and technique! A-Are you the Grim Reaper?!" one of the assailants yelled.

"If I take any more of them out, I fear our cart may not fit them all. Head maid, I leave the rest to you. I'm going to take out the observer across the river."

"Sure, no problem."

In contrast to the taut, frightening face Matthew was making, Mary seemed very nonchalant.

"Huh?!"

I couldn't help but let out another sound of surprise. Judging by the color of the water, the river should've been fairly deep. If you

stood in it, it'd at least go up to your knees, but Matthew was walking on *top* of it. *Is that another form of martial arts?! Is that even possible without magic?!*

"That's called waterwalking," Mary giggled. "It might seem shocking if you haven't seen it before, but it's nothing too out of the ordinary. Many of the servants at the Sevensworth estate can do it."

I had no idea... A lot of them can walk on water? My surprise only increased at learning that many of the people I met on a regular basis had this skill.

"Well then, I suppose I should finish up here," Mary said, raising her hand.

As she did, pale red flower petals began pouring from her empty palm.

"Wait, this is the plum flower blade storm!"

"That means she's the Flower Sword Saint!"

The assailants were beginning to freak out. Judging by what they said, the flower petals were most likely plum blossoms, but I was confused as to where they got the "blade storm" part from. What she was holding wasn't a blade, nor did she look to have a blade anywhere on her person. It didn't seem like a very apt name.

There was also another thing that was strange. From what I could tell, the flower petals were made of chi. Usually chi couldn't be seen with the naked eye, but I could see the petals even without using magic. It felt wrong to call them chi.

"Hurry and defend yourselves! Don't think about anything else! Summon all your chi to survive this attack! Use the shields on the ground! Survive this as best you can!" the leader guy screamed.

I could tell with *inspect* that they began coating themselves with some kind of chi barrier.

Mary simply giggled. "Do you really think the crimson petals from the ancient tree of Mount Hua can be stopped by something as flimsy as that?"

The smile she wore sent a shiver down my spine.

After loading all the unconscious men into the cart, we resumed our journey. Seeing as the whites of their eyes were clearly visible

and some of them were even twitching, there was no need to restrain them. In order to make sure they couldn't recover by themselves, I messed up their chi circuits so they couldn't move even if they wanted to.

"Please leave their interrogation to me. I'll start as soon as we take care of the fire," Matthew said as we rode in the carriage.

"Oh, I think that's a great idea. You're very knowledgeable about pressure points," Mary agreed.

"What's that about pressure points?" I asked.

"Well, humans have several vital points connected to their meridian. Chi flows through these points, allowing them to do a variety of things. However, if you change the amount of chi, you can achieve different results. Depending on your technique, you can even make them speak only the truth. Among the Sevensworth staff, I'm the most skilled when it comes to pressure points. As you can see, I'm the most useful both in and outside of battle," Matthew explained.

This caused Mary to giggle. "How very true. You are skilled with those pressure points. What an old-man skill to have." It seemed that hearing him call himself the most useful got on her nerves. The rivalry between these two was very strong.

"Oh right, I forgot that you're very skilled with those flower petals of yours. But you might consider stopping that soon, no? It's more of a young woman's game, not something someone of your age should be using. Wouldn't you agree?"

And just like that, the two of them were at each other's throats.

"You don't look well. Should we stop the carriage so you can rest?" Mary asked me with concern in the midst of their bickering.

"No, I'm okay."

We needed to get to the fire as soon as possible. The reason I didn't look well was because I'd witnessed Mary's attack earlier. Though at first I was confused why they called her attack a blade storm despite her not having a blade, I immediately understood after seeing it in action. Each petal was effectively a blade, strong and sharp enough to cut through the metal shields as if they were paper.

I'd watched as countless petals came at the assailants, viciously slicing them from all angles. It was a horrible sight to behold. Even accounting for my past life, this was the first time I'd ever seen anything like that. Though Mary looked like a kind, plump old lady with her white hair tied behind her head, her strength in a fight was unbelievably high.

"I truly apologize that you had to see a gruesome scene like that; however, this was an order from the madam."

"From my mother-in-law?"

"Indeed. She anticipated you would be attacked in this territory and ordered the two of us to serve as your guards."

I had never asked why they insisted on coming with me to address the fire, but now I was finding out that it was because of my mother-in-law's orders.

"Her thought was that you could use this to experience what a battle is really like, which is why I purposely spilled blood. Especially since the head butler's attacks don't draw much, it was up to me to help educate you."

"Why was showing me blood necessary?"

"Well, you're going to be the next duke, aren't you? That means you'll be in the position to lead our forces. It'd be problematic for everyone if the leader of our army fainted at the sight of blood," Matthew said.

"The battlefield is truly a chaotic place. Corpses wind up next to you before you even know it, and sometimes you even have to sleep in trenches. If you lose your appetite over something like seeing blood, then you won't be able to keep up your strength."

That was true. This country wasn't as peaceful as Japan had been in my previous life. People were fighting for their lives against monsters everyday, and sometimes countries or territories even fought against one another. Even today, my life had just been targeted. As someone who would be leading the premier ducal family one day, I needed to get used to these kinds of sights.

I thought I'd be taking the attackers by surprise by not bringing any guards with me. The assailants also thought that they'd be taking me by surprise. But we'd all been outmaneuvered by my

mother-in-law, who'd read this situation way before it'd even happened. She'd not only had these two stick with me for protection, but also had the wherewithal to use them as part of my education.

Though I thought I'd come up with a pretty good strategy, in the end, I'd just been dancing in the palm of my mother-in-law's hand, and what I'd thought would be a life-or-death battle had turned out to be nothing but a safe tutorial of her own devising. *I need to work harder. I'm still lacking so much if I want to be the head of the Sevensworths. I need to get better if I want to be a man worthy of standing next to Ana.*

"With all that said, your next meal will be a bloody steak, which will be paired with a drink made from the blood of a soft-shelled turtle. How does that sound? I hope you'll do your best to finish all of it," Mary said.

"I have absolutely no confidence I can, especially in regard to that drink, but I'll do my best. In order to become someone who can stand next to Ana, I will become a guy who can drink that turtle blood with a smile." I accidentally said this out loud despite intending to just say it to myself. I was most likely still a little shaken.

Matthew smiled. "I think you have the wrong idea, but I like where your heart is, at least."

Anastasia

I was currently in the documents room called the Cordierite in the Sevensworth estate in the royal capital, and I was looking over the report I'd received from our covert operatives. Though they usually didn't put any sensitive information into writing, they would still make reports from what they saw and heard from their posts.

Mother was the one who got the most use out of this. She'd analyze all the information and make plans based off it. She'd even give information to father, who was busy with his duties as the prime minister and head of our family.

Now I was reading them often because, just like how mother was

supporting father, I wanted to support Sir Gino since he was so busy. Trying to gain information from all of these reports was like trying to look at individual rain droplets and predict what shape the cloud they fell from was. That was to say that it was very difficult. But even so, mother could do it so easily. Since it was still impossible for me to do it like her, I was trying to train myself in order to become like my mother.

Sir Gino was a truly, truly, amazing person. Though he'd already been very impressive when we were students, even after graduating, he'd earned the status of count, become a first-class grand sorcerer, and even turned a previously destitute territory into a prosperous one. At this stage, I was still not suited to be with him. At this rate, I'd be nothing but baggage.

"Huh?! When did this happen?!"

My eyes widened as I read one of the reports from the Simon territory, wherein fifty-nine assailants attacked Sir Gino in an attempt to take his life. *Mother knew about this... She knew about it ahead of time, and that's why she had Mary and Matthew accompany us to the territory.* The fact that she'd been able to analyze all the data to predict not only the assassination attempt but exactly where it would take place was incredible. Then there was me, who was only just now finding out about it after the fact. The difference between us was so large. *I really am useless...*

"Sir Gino didn't tell me anything about this either..."

That might have been the biggest shock to me. Despite having been in so much danger, he hadn't breathed a word of it. I wished he had. After all, we were husband and wife...

"Sir Ginorious probably didn't tell you because he thinks you would be uncomfortable with that kind of violence. I'm sure if you show him that you can handle it, he will tell you," Bridgette said, trying to cheer me up.

She might be right. Sir Gino has started to open up to me about his weaknesses. But it's possible that the reason he didn't tell me about the assassination attempt is because I'm not reliable. I'm sure that's why he had all the guards with me too. It might have all been because he was worried about me not being able to handle the

violence. It seems I really am just a burden on him... But I won't give up! I'm going to keep trying my best!

Chapter 3: The Shadow Behind Ginorious's Smile

Bruce

"Thanks again for your help this month, Bruce," a well-built woman in her forties said, giving me my monthly salary.

She was the owner of the adult establishment where I worked as a bouncer. In other words, she was my boss. The job was so easy, though, that even a geezer with a cane like me could do it. There wasn't even a need to be there most of the time, since they'd just call me if there were any problems, so I was able to spend most of my shifts relaxing at home. Some weeks I didn't even have to go in at all. The only reason I was here today was for my paycheck.

"No problem. Call me if any issues come up," I said back to her.

After getting what I came for, I left to return to the slums, but on my way, I stopped in an alleyway and bought some salted mushrooms from a stall. It was payday *and* my day off, so I wanted to celebrate with mushrooms, some salted fish, and a stiff drink.

These mushrooms always reminded me of the kid that used to come over to my place pretty frequently. He'd always pick some up before stopping by, so it became a habit for me to buy them too. It was all his fault that I couldn't be satisfied unless I got food from that stall.

"He was such a strange kid," I mumbled.

He hadn't been a bad-looking guy, but he'd had no self-confidence at all. Despite all the girls at the establishment bein' head over heels for him, he'd been completely oblivious. Plus, he'd treated me, an ol' geezer with no money to his name, real kind.

He said his name was Kirklyle, but I knew it was a fake name—not that I cared. Even the name I went by was fake. The slums were

filled with people who were hiding from someone or something. It was normal here to not pry into someone's past.

But then, one day, he just disappeared into thin air. Most of the girls that had a thing for him flew into a fury. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to be called in to deal not with unruly customers but the girls themselves crying and making a scene. They weren't in any condition to work, so the establishment closed early that day.

They'd said the head of a merchant family had come to collect his son, but I figured that was a lie. The way Kirk moved and spoke was too refined for him to be anything other than a noble. The deciding factor was how he fought, which included many of the same swordsmanship techniques that nobles were taught. Judging by how thoroughly his existence here had been wiped clean, I could guess that he was from a pretty important noble family. In that case, there was only one that fit the bill. Most likely, Kirk was the hero in the *Goblin Maiden* play. The girl he'd talked about leaving so she could be happy was most likely the heroine from that play. I was just happy to know they were able to get hitched.

Suddenly, I froze mid-bite as I ate in my home. *I can't believe I didn't notice sooner. No, their technique of concealing their presence is just too good.* I was surrounded by five...no, six people. *Are they from House Hechsagon?* The reason they let themselves be known now was most likely a declaration that there was no escape. Not that I could run anywhere with this leg of mine.

I heard a knock on my door, but I didn't sense any intention to attack me. *Looks like they wanna talk. My highest chance of survival seems to be in entertaining them.*

"You're Sir Bruce, I presume? My name is Matthew Micker and I was called here by my employer. I'd like for you to accompany me somewhere. Would that be all right?"

There was an old guy with white hair standing at my door. He was maybe a little older than me and was smiling elegantly. Despite how he looked, though, I could tell at a single glance just how much of a monster he was. I had no chance against him in a fight.

"No need to be so tense," he said with a chuckle. "I mean you no harm. If anything, I aim to take very good care of you."

I hadn’t been born yesterday, so I had no intention of taking him at his word. But that didn’t change the fact that I had nowhere to run and I couldn’t beat him. There was no choice left to me except to obediently follow him.

Ginorious

“Bruce, thank you for coming,” I said.

“K-Kid?! I-I mean, milord. What is going on here? Why did you have me brought here?” Bruce asked, his eyes widening as he was led into my office by a servant.

“We’re not in public, so you can address me like you used to. It’s been quite some time.”

I had him sit down and, over some tea, asked him to fill me in on what had happened after I left. Apparently, the girls at my former workplace had caused some trouble, which wasn’t too surprising considering how crazy I remembered they could be. It also seemed that another one of the bouncers had disappeared just like I had. A lot of the hired muscle in that part of town were runaway covert operatives, so it wasn’t too rare to see them vanish all of a sudden when they felt a threat to their safety. Looking back on it made me realize how crazy that world was.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you this, but please keep my working there a secret,” I said.

Though I’d tried to be vague when he and I used to talk to each other, I’d told him a decent amount about my life. It probably wasn’t hard for him to figure out who I was, but even so, he didn’t try to sell me out even though the value of this information was probably very high. I knew he wasn’t exactly wealthy, so the fact that he didn’t rat me out was proof I could trust him. That was why instead of having an elaborate plan for making him keep his mouth shut, I simply asked him to.

“Of course I will. You know how monstrous those servants of yours are, right? If they even caught a whiff of me looking to sell you out, they would’ve picked up on it in an instant and taken me

out. I'm not lookin' to toss my life away," Bruce said both seriously and jokingly while smiling. "So why'd you call me here?"

"Oh, right. Show me your knee."

I had him roll up his tattered pant leg and began using diagnostic magic to examine him before switching to healing magic. This was something new I'd been learning, mainly for Ana's sake. Now that she was studying how to use magic, somewhere down the road, she'd complete her mana circuits, which would make it impossible for her to be affected by anyone who didn't have Magic Monarch levels of mana like her. Her mana would become very dense and circulate very quickly, essentially creating a magic barrier around her.

When that happened, both normal offensive magic and healing magic would basically become completely ineffective on her. The only kinds able to get through the barrier would be either her own magic or magic that was extremely compressed. At any rate, it was necessary for me to learn how to produce the latter kind as soon as possible.

Though technology-wise it was pretty difficult, I'd already made a mana compressor. The idea was that so long as I learned healing magic, Ana wouldn't have to learn it herself. Fortunately, I'd already gotten a lot of books from the library of the medical facility I'd gone to.

"Kid, I heard that God taught you a way to lift curses, but you can't learn magic just from that. I know it takes a lot of training over a long period of time. Are you sure it's okay for you to show me this? You're not even from a household that specializes in magic."

"The secret about me working in that adult establishment is much bigger in comparison, but you've kept that secret, haven't you?"

"This is still a hell of a thing to find out..." Bruce said, exasperated, but his eyes were gentle.

"I think you should be okay now. Try standing."

Bruce nervously began to stand without his cane, and slowly, surprise appeared on his face. He took a few cautious steps around the room, then a few more assured ones. He bent his knees and even jumped, and with each movement, he looked more and more shocked at the extent of his recovery. Magic wasn't very developed

in this era; the healing magic from the church wasn't nearly enough to be able to heal an old wound like this.

"So, who do you want me to kill? I like the cut of your jib and you even fixed my leg. I don't mind goin' out with a bang for you."

I guess I was right that he's a runaway covert operative. Otherwise, what he's saying is way too intense.

"Oh, no. I'm not really looking for anything in return."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"Nothing, really."

"Listen, kid. Even normal healing magic is more expensive than I could ever afford, *and* you just healed me past what that magic is even capable of. There's no way you'd use such a powerful spell on a penniless geezer like me without wanting anything in return. Not even a former covert operative with no ties to your house, who can't be traced back to you even if they fail?"

Though Bruce gave me a lecture, exasperated at my thinking, I'd been honest when I said I wasn't looking for anything in return. As someone who'd lived to an old age once already, I understood how painful it was for your legs and back to weaken. In my past life, I'd lost the ability to visit friends who lived far away, and eventually even the ones who lived in the same town as me. It became painful to even go outside for the leisure activities I used to enjoy. Living alone, not being able to leave my house, was like being in a jail. I understood this pain and wanted to heal Bruce's leg as a fellow old person. That was my entire reasoning.

"Sheesh, you're the least noble-like noble I've ever seen," Bruce sighed while smiling.

It seemed that Bruce had opened his heart to me if he was stating so directly that he used to be a covert operative.

"If you're interested, how would you like to work as a servant on my family's estate? I'll have work for you that keeps you out of sight and I think it'll be safer than working in town. You'll make a lot more money too. You'll be able to drink top-shelf alcohol every day instead of the cheap stuff."

Usually when covert operatives, who knew the dark secrets of a family, ran away, there would be pursuers who'd try to catch them in

order to shut their mouths permanently. It was dangerous for these runaways to work jobs that put them in the open. For Bruce, staying inside the mansion would be a lot safer.

"Plus, if you work there, there'll be salted mushrooms whenever you want. Our chef can recreate the taste from that stall in town."

"Oh? That does sound good."

In the end, it was the salted mushrooms that sealed the deal.

Anastasia

Sir Gino hired an elderly friend of his that he'd made while working in the slums. I wasn't surprised that, in addition to people of similar age like Sir Anthony, Sir Gino was able to make friends with older individuals like this man.

Mother also approved of his hiring, thinking it was a good way to handle someone like him who held valuable information. However, that was not the reason Sir Gino took him in. He wasn't being calculating, but a good friend. He was a very kind person.

"So what is it you'd like to ask, young madam?" Bruce asked from opposite me as we sat in the thirty-fourth drawing room, the Tiger's Eye.

"I'd like to hear about Sir Gino when he was living in the slums."

Bruce agreed and began speaking. "The kid... I mean, Sir Ginorious always drank hot water. That habit of his made him seem really noble-like. Commoners only drink cold water, of course. Then again, there aren't really many nobles who drink straight-up hot water either."

"Oh, is that so?"

Recently, every now and then, Sir Gino would drink hot water instead of tea. On cold evenings, he'd go out on the balcony and drink it in the cold air. He said it felt especially nice on those nights. It wasn't something I'd ever seen him do in the past, and I'd never heard of anyone preferring simple hot water before. It must have been a habit he picked up from being in the slums. *Heh heh. It feels like I've gotten to know Sir Gino a little better. I'm so happy!*

"He was pretty popular with both the ladies at the establishment where we worked and the women in town."

"H-He was that popular?"

Though I'd known about the women at his work, I hadn't realized he was so popular even with others in the town. I was shocked.

"Yeah, everyone was head over heels for him. Some would say they couldn't get him out of their heads after seeing the wistful, sorrowful look in his eyes as he looked into the sky. Some apparently liked how cool and stolid he usually was, but how when he did smile, there was a deep shadow in it, which made their hearts skip a beat. Some even whined about how unfair his sad eyes were because it made them want to comfort him."

My heart hurt. If only I'd realized what'd been going on during the graduation party when he ended our engagement, none of this would've happened. It was all because I'd given up on my happiness that I'd caused Sir Gino so much pain. I wouldn't allow myself to do that ever again. But even so, I'd never seen Sir Gino's smile have a deep shadow in it. Every time I saw him smile, it was bright and so warm, it could melt my heart. I'd never seen him act sorrowful or melancholic. The people living in the slums seemed to know a side of Sir Gino I didn't. It was frustrating...very frustrating. *Those slums are very dangerous. Life is long and it's possible that Sir Gino may need to travel in the future. If he does, I will strongly ask him to avoid that neighborhood.*

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"Sorry for the wait, Ana."

Sir Gino came into the entrance hall of the Sevensworth estate after finishing work early. Today, he was wearing a long coat with a standing collar. With his tall stature, the black coat accented his cool beauty and lithe figure. He looked very wonderful.

"The papakha looks very cute on you. The white fur with your silver hair really accentuates your innocence, and your coat is wonderful too! Your beauty really stands out!"

I've done it! Sir Gino's complimented me on my outfit

coordination! I'd taken time picking out my outfit because I wanted him to compliment me, and since it was snowing today, I decided to wear this coat and a papakha, a round hat made of animal fur.

Sir Gino and I were heading to see a play in town. We decided to go today specifically to view the snow-covered city from our carriage afterward. We made sure to have ten horses in order to not get stuck in the snow.

First, we headed toward the theater. After we arrived, we got out of the carriage and Sir Gino escorted me inside to the VIP room. The general seating area had more atmosphere to it, but we were watching a tragedy today. In order to be able to cry without anyone else around us, we'd chosen to sit in a private room.

We came to watch this play at my request. The ladies Sir Gino worked with in the slums had apparently mentioned how he would wistfully stare at the sky or have a shadow behind his smile. I wished to see those sides of him as well. I was sure that if he saw a play about a difficult life, I would be able to see him make those same expressions the other ladies had seen. By the time we received our drinks, the play was just about to begin.

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The curtain rose on a bed where an old lady was sitting, and an old man sat in a chair beside her. The old lady had dementia and didn't even know her own name, but the old man read her a story. The book was a love story between Lady Allie, the daughter of a baron, and a merchant named Sir Duke. As the man told the story, the actors on the stage began to reenact the scenes.

The two met by coincidence in the city and fell in love at first sight, and it didn't take them too long to begin courting one another. Though they wished to get married, the difference in their statuses was too great. Lady Allie's father wouldn't allow her to marry a commoner.

"I'll expand my company, earn status as a noble, and then we can get married. Wait for me."

Lady Allie took Sir Duke's words to heart. In order to earn noble

status, Sir Duke worked himself to the bone, however, Lady Allie wasn't able to wait forever. With those around her getting married one after another, she began to feel pressured and eventually married a noble boy from a good family who fit her father's conditions. However, she didn't tell Sir Duke this. He was still working so hard, and she couldn't bring herself to break his heart. Instead, she cut communications with him completely.

Even with no way to contact her, Sir Duke continued to work until, finally, he was able to obtain status as a noble. When he went to tell Lady Allie the good news, he found out that she'd married.

The spotlight focused on the old man. "She could've at least told him. What a coward, right?" he said with an annoyed expression.

Lady Allie's happiness didn't last long. Her husband's business failed, and he was no longer able to make donations to the royal family, which had earned him his status in the first place. Just like that, Lady Allie lost her status, and at the same time, her husband disappeared without a trace. She began the hard life of raising her son on her own. However, when her son grew up and found a fiancée, she not only got into a fight with her, but also developed dementia, leading to her being kicked out.

"I remember... I'm Allie and you're...Duke."

The old lady seemed to momentarily regain her memories as she listened to the story. She then asked why she was here in this bed. Since Sir Duke never married, he didn't have any children to pass his wealth down to, so he'd decided to donate regularly to social programs instead. During one such donation, he had to go to the church's relief building, and that was when he spotted Lady Allie on the streets being transported to a noble hospital where she could be fully taken care of.

"Have I asked you this question many times before?"

"Yes, you have. This is how you begin this conversation every time you start to remember," the old man said with a very gentle smile.

Lady Allie's memories usually faded again within the hour, but this time she managed to keep them even after Sir Duke closed the book and left. She found out from the staff that he'd paid for all her

expenses at the care facility and had been shouldering this financial burden for years.

In the next scene, Sir Duke received an urgent message from the hospital and rushed over. Lady Allie had breathed her last breath after jumping from her room's window.

I want to solve this while I'm still myself. I cannot allow you any more burdens after betraying you. I'm truly sorry for all the problems I've caused you. I wish I could take it back. I'm sure we would have had a wonderful life together. Thank you for giving someone like me all your love.

Duke cried while reading her final letter. "It's all my fault! I should have told you how I still loved you, how much I still treasured you, but now it's too late. It's all because I tried to put on airs and was too stubborn after you turned your back on me. It's all my fault!"

The curtain fell as Sir Duke embraced the lifeless body of Lady Allie.

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Even after the curtain fell, I couldn't stop my tears. Sir Gino was crying as well; however it was slightly different from how I imagined. There was no shadow on his face at all. Even though he was crying, he still looked incredibly happy.

"Of course I'm happy," he said. "Regardless of whether we're watching a tragedy or a comedy, I'm always so happy to be able to spend time with you, Ana."

It was embarrassing hearing him being so direct. However, I felt the same. Being able to spend time with him made me unbelievably happy.

We began discussing the play. Though the trouble all began when Lady Allie decided to get married, I felt that she wasn't entirely at fault for doing so. As a greater noble, my marriage had come later than it should have. Everyone around me had already married, and having to watch that without any hope for myself had been difficult.

Sir Gino agreed with me. In his past life, he'd lived to an old age without ever being able to get married. The entire time, he'd had to

watch everyone else marry and live happy lives without being able to do so himself.

I also understood Lady Allie's final choice. When her own child, who she'd painstakingly raised, tossed her aside, it must have been a great shock to her. She must have felt worthless, and after continuously receiving poor treatment from others, it was only natural that she would begin to devalue herself. It was similar to how I lost my self-confidence after being constantly referred to as the Goblin Maiden. The only reason I was able to change was because of Sir Gino.

Sir Gino felt the same as I did, and there were many other scenes that we agreed on. *Heh heh. I'm so happy that we feel the same way about this play. I feel that we share the same thoughts much more than before we spent time apart.* It made me happy to feel how much closer we were becoming, little by little.

After we were done discussing the play, we returned to our carriage to take a ride around the snowy town. Up until recently, it had been necessary to wear a coat during travel on cold days, but Sir Gino's company had invented a heater for carriages.

A coal burner was built into the back of the carriage, and the flow of hot air warmed the floor and seats before exiting through a vent. According to Sir Gino, they'd had something similar in his past life, so he'd used it as a model to apply to carriages. The heat also traveled to the driver's seat, so it was popular with the drivers as well.

Like this, we were able to leisurely gaze out at the snow from the comfort of the carriage. The town's small church roof was covered in a sheet of snow, the docked boats were draped in white, and the trees looked like they were blooming with snowy blossoms. Up until now, I'd refrained from going out on winter days, but now it was like seeing a whole other world.

As the carriage entered the suburbs, the buildings gave way to open fields of white. Amid the silently falling snow, there was the sound of our carriage traveling. It was a very mysterious but beautiful experience, and I was so happy to be able to spend this time with Sir Gino. After we circled around the suburbs, we began to

return to the town when we saw children playing in the snow near the woods.

"This brings back memories. When it snowed at House Adolni, I'd often make snowmen with my sister."

Noblewomen didn't play in the snow because it was unbecoming. However, true to form, my sister-in-law didn't care about convention at all and played in the snow regardless...with Sir Gino.

"I'd like to do that as well! I'd like to make a snowman with you too, Sir Gino!"

"That's okay with me, but are you sure?"

Yes, I am. I want to know this side of Sir Gino that my sister-in-law knows. As his wife, I wanted to see all sides of Sir Gino! We stopped the carriage right on the outskirts of the royal capital and got out of the carriage together. Typically, noblewomen were only supposed to walk on cleared paths, so it was my first time stepping onto fresh snow. I could feel my heart racing.

Sir Gino escorted me through the silent, white world before me. The cold air stung my face as we walked through this pure, untouched land with the snow crunching beneath our feet. After walking a little bit away from the carriage, it was as if we'd entered a fairy-tale world where we were the only two people in existence. This was the first time I was making a snowman, so Sir Gino taught me how it was done. We began by rolling snow into balls. *Though this is unladylike, it is quite fun!*

"Oh my, you've made a snowman with just two parts?"

All the snowmen we saw in town had three parts to them, but he'd only done two. However, Sir Gino was already adding the face, meaning the construction part was done.

"The ones we made in my past life only had two. My sister also comments on how weird it is."

"Oh, is that so?" I giggled.

Sir Gino's snowman had a short torso, a wooden cup as a hat, a yellow carrot for a nose, and wide-set eyes. It was very adorable. This was a snowman from his past life and one that only he could make. I learned something new about him today, and the joy from that made me smile. Sir Gino was smiling as well. I didn't see even

the smallest hint of a shadow. He was simply happy.

"Sir Gino, you always seem so happy."

"Because you're next to me. The only person I act like this around is you, Ana."

"How do you act when I'm not around?"

"I don't have such a happy face on, that's for sure. It's a much sterner face."

Oh, I see... So the face I see is a special one just for me. I couldn't help but giggle happily. Though I wasn't able to see his smile with a shadow, I was still very happy to learn that the face I saw, the one I'd thought was absolutely ordinary, was a special one that only I ever got to see. *I suppose even special things can be found in everyday life.*

Chapter 4: Anastasia Worries About Her Husband and a Joint Military Exercise

Anastasia

I was currently sitting in the Cordierite, the documents room of the Sevensworth mansion. The kingdom of Thorsdale, which neighbored the Sevensworth territory of the Luchizua Kingdom, was acting strangely. There were always signs before a war broke out. For instance, territory lords and the royal family might suddenly begin buying up grain or weapons, and military exercises might become more practical.

If this happened solely within two territories, then this was a sign that they were going to fight each other; however, when it happened across an entire country, it spelled the start of a much larger—likely international—conflict. I'd also received information that the Thorsdale Kingdom was building a new, powerful weapon called the "Sun Flower."

There was another thing that had caught my attention. We'd found traces of secret communication between their royal palace and our own. Rather than official letters, someone was having servants from the royal palace slip notes to shopkeepers in the royal capital, which were passed on and eventually delivered to the Thorsdale palace.

Under normal circumstances, these communications might have remained unnoticed, but one of the senders just happened to be a person of interest to the Sevensworths. Their description matched that of the man with light purple hair and narrow eyes who'd given Sir Gino a certain sword that'd been tampered with during the

swordsmanship tournament. Thanks to that, we were able to pick up on this secret correspondence.

This man mainly visited the Morning Star Palace and Evening Star Palace on the royal estate. The Morning Star belonged to the first prince, and the Evening Star was the king's concubine's residence. *What does this mean?*

"Oh, there you are, Ana," mother said as she entered.

I moved from the desk to the sofa to join her for a tea break.

"You seem to be working very hard these days. I hear you're spending a lot of time here."

"You're here quite frequently as well. I'm merely doing as you do."

"Well, your father doesn't really have time to read these reports, so I do it in his stead. However, unlike him, Gino comes here quite often. I don't think you have to be nearly as thorough as me."

"But your efforts really help father, don't they? I feel like I should do the same."

"Marriages come in all different shapes and forms. Just because I do something, it doesn't mean you need to do the same thing. You should do what's right for your relationship and support him in your own way," mother giggled with amusement.

But how can I be of help to him? I know I can't continue doing nothing. I can't let him protect me and do everything for us without contributing anything in return. As I am right now, I'm nothing but a burden to him.

"This here is a report I asked to be given to me immediately, and I came here to show it to you," mother said, laying several pages on the table in front of me.

"Wh-Wh-What?!" My hands shook with surprise as I read the words.

A veteran flower operative—in other words, a covert operative who used their womanly charms to seduce their targets—had been dispatched to Sir Gino. She was one of the best at what she did and went by many monikers, such as "Scarlet Lips," "Divine Enchantress," "Bewitching Butterfly," and "Blossoming Temptation." Just reading these names on the report made me want to cry.

The women Sir Gino had worked with at the adult establishment were also masters of seduction. I had nothing compared to the techniques they knew. These kinds of women specialized in ensnaring men, and this specific woman they'd sent after Sir Gino was on a whole different level from those girls in the red-light district...

"I-I-It'll be okay. S-S-Sir Gino is a very faithful man. H-He'd never stray. I-I-I trust him."

"There's no need for him to actually be unfaithful, though. All that woman needs to do is make others think that he was."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, they could start a rumor about him being seen with a woman who's not you. Then, if a year from now she appears with a baby with black hair and purple eyes, how do you think people will react? Even if Gino isn't actually unfaithful, others will think that he was. Those who wish to separate the two of you will certainly use this as an opportunity to do so."

"I-I-I must go to Sir Gino immediately!"

"You're like a kitten all puffed up. So adorable." My mother laughed as I rushed out of the room.

I'm not a kitten. I'm a grown woman. In order to stop any rumors like the one my mother mentioned, I need to deal with this as an adult lady.

During the carriage ride to Sir Gino, Bridgette began giving me advice.

"Young madam, you must be wary of more than simply women getting close to Sir Ginorious. You must also be sure that nobody secretly slips a love drug or aphrodisiac into his food or drink. There are even magic tools that can cast *charm* even if they don't look like they're capable of doing so. Magic drugs and tools are incredibly expensive, but it's very likely that someone like this flower operative would be in possession of them."

"R-R-Really?!" I couldn't hide my shock.

This is terrible! I'll have to be by his side at all times! Oh...that actually doesn't sound so bad. My eyes began to sparkle as I thought about how I'd always be with him. Thinking about it, it

might be too early for Sir Gino to deal with something like this on his own. He was still healing from his distrust of women, so if I told him what was truly going on, it might only serve to hurt his progress. I needed to take care of this quickly by myself without him noticing. *I'm going to do my best!*

Ginorious

"Sir Gino! We're done for the day. We're gonna hit up the grilled meat place and have a drink. On the company's dime, of course. Wanna join?" Lady Kate asked, standing up from her seat after the meeting ended.

"It's not even lunchtime yet."

Hearing this, she frowned and the rest of those in the room laughed.

"So on brand for ya, Boss Lady," one of the men said.

Lady Kate was the vice president of the company, and everyone, even the older employees, called her Boss Lady. Also, for the record, *I* was the only one done for the day. As soon as the meeting ended, my business at the company today was over. After this, I had some work to do at the mansion for the duke, so I needed Lady Kate to manage things here until the evening.

"Oh, by the way, can you give this to Ana? It's a present," Lady Kate said, pulling out a wooden box from her bag.

"Is it some kind of anniversary?"

"Nope. Just something fun I found that I felt like giving her."

Before I knew it, Lady Kate and Ana had become good friends. At first, she'd treated Ana like a princess, but now she was treating her much more casually. She really was good at befriending others. Her thinking of giving someone a present without any kind of special occasion was proof of how sociable she was.

"Can I look inside?" This was a present for Ana. I needed to be sure it was safe, especially these days since we were being targeted.

"Of course," she said.

I was speechless by what I found. There was a painting in the

flat, twenty-by-twenty celchimetre wooden box.

"Is that...cubed pork belly?"

As I said, this painting was of a large, life-size piece of pork belly. Judging by the dark, crispy-looking bits at the top, it had probably been seared before being braised, and I could tell how steeped in flavor it was by the color, which could only have come from being soaked in lots of sauce. I could definitely see myself seeing this late at night and getting hungry. Lady Kate had visited the Sevensworth estate many times, so she should have definitely understood the grand, elegant aesthetic that they had. Did she really think a painting like this would fit?

"Looks yummy, doesn't it?" Lady Kate giggled.

I finally understood. From the start, she hadn't been thinking about whether or not it would fit the aesthetics of her room or if Ana would even necessarily want it. She'd simply found this painting and thought of giving it to her. My little sister in my past life had also been like that. *She really is just like my little sister.* After confirming there was no danger in her gift, I promised Lady Kate that I'd give it to Ana, and then left the company.

As I headed to my carriage, I noticed a woman crouching down about fifty metres away in a narrow alleyway. She was holding her knee as if it hurt. I entered the alley and walked toward her. In my past life, calling out to a woman I'd never met before would have taken more courage than I ever possessed, so I'd have just walked away in this situation. However, I could do it now thanks to my counseling sessions with Ana.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt your leg?"

"Yes...I twisted my knee. It's difficult to walk," she said, rubbing her leg.

I should probably take her to my carriage so I can drop her off wherever she's headed.

"There he is!"

I heard a familiar voice from the entrance of the alleyway. *Oh, it's Ana! Wait, why is she here? Bridgette too.*

"Bridgette! I'm counting on you!" Ana said.

"Understood!"

Footsteps echoed on the stone-paved road as Bridgette accelerated across it, moving at a frighteningly inhuman speed. Despite having been fifty metres or so away, she'd immediately closed the distance and was staring down at the woman I'd just met with a look that could kill.





In the next moment, the woman abruptly leaped up, kicking off the sides of the buildings to get to the roof, and disappeared as if fleeing from Bridgette. It reminded me of parkour from my past life. *Wasn't her leg injured?*

"Huh?"

"Sir Gino!" Ana exclaimed as she ran to me.

Oh, she's cute. She's so cute! The way she's desperately running over here despite not being especially fast is so cute!

"Um, um, d-did you accept any kind of drink from that individual? Or perhaps she gave you something small to hold on to?" she asked out of breath in a panic.

"No, I didn't get anything."

Hearing my response, her expression shifted from a frantic one to one of relief. "I will accompany you whenever you leave the mansion from now on."

"Really?! I mean...that makes me happy. It makes me so happy, but...are you sure about that? Don't you have things of your own to do?"

"No need to worry. I will adjust my schedule."

Really?! She'll change her schedule so she can be with me?! "Thank you, Ana! How are you so cute?!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

Just as I lost control of myself and tried to hug Ana, Bridgette stopped me. All the excitement had attracted some onlookers who were curious about what had happened. It would've been bad to be caught hugging Ana in a public alleyway with so many people watching. *Phew, that was close.* At any rate, the most important thing was that the amount of time I could spend with Ana was about to drastically increase. I may not have understood why, but I did understand that this was a very wonderful day.

◇◇◇

Something was going on with the kingdom of Thorsdale. It was a neighboring country, but it felt like war might be brewing. Judging by how troops and supplies were being amassed at the border, one

could only assume they were preparing an attack on this country.

It didn't make sense, though. Looking through history, countries rarely went to war with other countries of similar military strength unless there was some kind of internal strife motivating them. For example, if there were financial problems, they might invade to pillage resources, or sometimes if there was great political strife, they'd use it to unite their citizens against a shared enemy. However, I didn't see anything like that to explain why Thorsdale would want to attack us.

But even if I didn't understand why they were trying to start a war, I needed to be prepared. In response, we arranged to begin military exercises near the border as a warning to Thorsdale. Participating in it would be the four noble families whose territories bordered Thorsdale, which included the Sevensworths, as well as a small force of royal knights, who would lead the four forces. It was also expected that, in the event of a territory participating in battle, at least one person from the ruling house would be present within the army. This was because this country believed that nobles should take the initiative and defend their people, so if a territory lord only deployed knights and soldiers, they'd be laughed at as cowards. This was true for military exercises as well. This time, I'd be attending as a member of House Sevensworth.

"Are you sure I cannot accompany you?" Ana asked before I left.

As much as I was tempted to give in, I quickly brought myself back to my senses. Ana's requests were so powerful that they blew away any sense of rational thought.

"Sorry. I can't let myself put you in danger. Please understand."

For some reason, Ana strongly wanted to accompany me on my trip to the border. Apparently, she didn't like me going out on my own. However, this time I absolutely couldn't take her with me—not to a dangerous military exercise.

Ultimately, Ana relented, on the condition that I would absolutely not help any damsels in distress or even talk to any women more than necessary, even for business. These weren't exactly difficult requests to follow. After all, I wasn't one to actively try to talk to women in the first place. Plus, the majority of the participants in the

exercise would be men. Women mostly stuck to the magic corps, so I was pretty confident I could do what Ana wanted.

By the time we arrived at the location for the military exercise, the armies from the other territories had already arrived. Usually everyone would send an army proportionate to the size of their territory, but this time, everyone had been asked to send two thousand soldiers.

For the Sevensworths, this wasn't a huge burden at all, but the other participating houses looked like they'd had difficulties scraping together that many. I could see a number of people who appeared to be adventurers instead of soldiers, and some even looked like farmers. I could only assume they'd been forced to participate in order to meet the quota. Then, there was a small force of about fifty knights from the royal knights' third battalion. There were so many people gathered in this remote area, the amount of drinking water needed would likely be three rivers' worth.

"Nice seeing you again, Ginorious," a small, bespectacled man greeted me before the commanders' meeting.

"Same here," I replied to Hugo Fibass.

He was my former classmate and had been at the top of our grade before I transferred in. He was also part of a military family that prized academics and education, making them the perfect people to serve as tacticians. As such, he was a part of the strategic unit of the royal knights.

As amicable as he was being at this moment, I quickly moved on to greet the other leaders.

"Welcome!" Baron Crow Hass Burton said to me with a welcoming smile.

He was the leader of this military exercise and was a very exceptional individual, having been granted the status of baron at a young age. He was also the current head of Marquess Burton's house while also having the status of baron, which was why he had both "Hass" and "Burton" in his name. Though his smile kind of unnerved me, I didn't let it show. As exceptional as he may have

been, I hated his guts.

When I was still a student, there'd been an incident where a classmate of ours, Lady Florro, attempted to toss dangerous chemicals onto Ana to disfigure her, but I'd stopped it just in time. I could still remember how she'd recounted her cousin calling Ana a monster during their marriage talks. Baron Hass Burton just happened to be the very same cousin that Lady Florro had been talking about. I had no doubt because he fit the description perfectly.

"It's really impressive how you turned the Simon territory around to be profitable," Hugo said, looking amused while flicking his long, dark blue hair away from his face.

He'd returned to talk to me after the meeting. I was surprised at how differently he was acting from how I'd known him in school. Back then, he'd barely spoken to me or Ana at all. Apparently, he'd been very dissatisfied with the fact that we'd both dethroned his seat as the best student, so he'd often glare at us.

"Truly impressive," Baron Hass Burton agreed.

I knew precisely why they were both being so friendly; it was because they wanted something from me. They were no doubt buttering me up so that they could say their piece.

"It was all thanks to Ana. It's no exaggeration to say she single-handedly got the Simon territory back on its feet."

I went on to explain Ana's amazing feats in great detail. I couldn't care less what they were plotting. My priority was making sure they knew exactly how wonderful Ana was. *This is the girl that you berated and ended marriage talks with, Baron Hass Burton. I want you to know how amazing she is.*

"You really haven't changed, Ginorious," Hugo muttered after about an hour of me talking.

I'm only getting started. Can you not interrupt me?

The military exercises progressed without issue. We practiced crossing rivers, countering night assaults, executing frontal assaults, hiding in the forest, moving the injured, transporting supplies, and so on. As to be expected, we covered a lot of different strategies,

and they didn't hold back on simulating real battle conditions. On the third day, joint exercises began, and that was when a problem came up.

"Everyone, it is time for us to exact justice!" Baron Hass Burton yelled.

The armies of the Wyze, Baker, and Lavern houses, along with the royal knights, had all turned on the forces I'd brought. I understood immediately what was happening. This was a surprise attack.

"Sorry, Count Simon Sevensworth, but you're going to die here," Baron Hass Burton said, his eyes trained on me.

He and his knights were deep in the back of the Wyze army. But even at that distance, I could hear him well. *As a knight I guess he's good at projecting.*

"May I ask why?"

"Well, of course it's partially for the sake of our faction, but...I also have a personal grudge against you. It's your fault that House Florro lost everything, isn't it?"

As relatives of House Florro, House Burton was hurt by their bankruptcy. It was all because Lady Florro had been bullying Ana that they'd ended up in that situation, but I'd been the one who presented the evidence to expose her. *Is that why he wants revenge on me?*

"You should've realized as soon as you saw the request for each house to bring an equal number of soldiers, Ginorious. Didn't you learn in school that the victors and losers of war are determined before it even begins?" Hugo asked, amused.

He was also in the back lines of the Wyze army, but his calm voice still reached my ears. Even though he was small and not very muscular, he still had a loud voice befitting someone from a military family.

In front of the Sevensworth army was the Wyze army, and on either side of us were the Baker and Lavern armies. We were pretty much surrounded, which was a problem on its own, but the Wyze army also had the high ground on the slope where we stood, and all together, their numbers more than tripled ours. If we fought, we'd

no doubt be at a great disadvantage. It'd be hard for me to reach the two leaders, Hugo and Baron Hass Burton, in their position with the royal knights at the back of the Wyze forces.

"Did you come up with this plan, Hugo?" I asked.

"That's right. It's my plan, and Baron Hass Burton used his charisma to get people to follow it. Ginorious, you may have had the better grades in school, but it seems I'm the better noble. In the real world, the smarter person wins. You were only book smart. None of that translates to real life," Hugo laughed, amused while Baron Hass Burton smirked from beside him.

"Hugo, you should've challenged me to a battle of war tactics. When it comes to strategy, House Fibass is famous, so you might've had a chance."

"What are you..."

One of my retainers passed me the red flag I'd prepared, and I proceeded to wave it above my head.

"What?!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

The three armies that'd been facing us all raised red flags of their own and changed their positions to face the royal knights.

"Proud warriors of House Wyze! Capture these criminals—traitors to the crown!"

"Baker soldiers! Capture the traitors! Hurry! We must be the ones to capture them!"

"Lavern soldiers! Capture them before anyone else does!"

All three forces of two thousand soldiers immediately converged on the royal knights, but the ones who ultimately caught Hugo and Baron Hass Burton first were the knights closest to them. It was Viscount Alphie, who was the second-in-command of this military exercise, and his subordinates. They easily arrested the two of them.

"Ginorious, what did you do?!" Hugo spat as he glared at me from the ground, where he was tied up.

Hm...what did I *do? Nothing.* I'd *done nothing. I never had the chance to do anything.*

"Hugo, you remember how you said that the victors and losers of war are decided before it begins? I couldn't agree more. This was

over before it even started," I said.

After all, my mother-in-law had already solved this two weeks ago.

Count Wyze

"C-Count Lavern...?" My voice shook with fear.

The fourth person to enter the room was Count Lavern. *I knew it... This is the absolute worst situation... I can't stop shaking...* Currently, we were at the royal palace on a summons from Lady Sevensworth. In addition to myself and Count Lavern, there was also Viscount Baker, who was in tears, and Viscount Alphie, a top knight in the royal knights' third battalion.

I'd been the first to arrive, having no clue why I'd been summoned. At that time, I'd still been able to keep my composure. However, not too long after, Viscount Alphie arrived. That was when a cold sweat ran down my back and a bad feeling arose in my stomach. Next came Viscount Baker, and then finally, Count Lavern. If all four of us were here, it didn't take a genius to discern the reason we'd been summoned. It obviously had to do with the joint military exercise happening in two weeks.

Not too long ago, I'd had a meeting with the kid from House Fibass and a high-ranking knight from the royal knights' third battalion, Baron Hass Burton. They wanted us to work together to kill the son-in-law of the Sevensworths.

If he died, then their daughter would be widowed, which meant the enormous wealth and fearsome power of the Sevensworth family would be up for grabs once more. Of course, there was no chance that House Wyze would be the one to obtain it, but we'd certainly be rewarded handsomely for our cooperation.

This was like a dream situation where we'd be able to get rich quick...but that all hinged on us succeeding. If we failed, both the Sevensworths and the royal family would be greatly enraged. There was no chance that they'd be satisfied with just taking my life. They'd execute my wife, son, and my grandkids.

The best choice for most situations was the moderate, safe one. After living a long life, filled with failures, I knew that better than anyone. There was no such thing as winning forever when gambling. It was the same for one's choices in life. If I set myself on a path of taking risk after risk, there would inevitably come a time when I'd lose. I decided to reject their offer.

Though I didn't go along with their plan, I didn't report them to the royal family or the Sevensworths either. Fibass and Hass Burton were radicals plotting an execution. I was scared of what they might do in retaliation, and now I was facing my punishment for this great failure.

Everyone here was someone who'd been invited to participate in killing the Sevensworths' heir, so the reason we were all here had to be because the Sevensworths already knew about this plot. Even worse, we'd been summoned to the royal palace, which meant His Highness was also aware. There was a high possibility that they thought I was involved since I hadn't spoken up about the nefarious plan. There was no evidence of our conversation, so I had no way to prove my innocence. *Oh...how could this be? Is this where I meet my end?*

In the first place, there was no way that those young'uns could ever get one over on the Sevensworths. They had no clue how fearsome the keeper of hell and all secrets of the noble world could be. They might have thought they were smart, but they didn't know anything.

When she was still young, the wife of Duke Sevensworth had been known as the "Fairy Princess"; however, it didn't come from how fair of face she was. Fairies were cute, but contrary to their appearance, they were said to be very brutal. When she was still just a girl, she'd been able to outmaneuver many adults, leaving them in painful situations, which was how she'd earned the nickname.

She'd already been frightening in her youth, and she'd only gotten more fearsome, to where her nickname was now the "Empress." At this point, she was practically a demon with how sharp and merciless her mind was. She also had an enormous amount of information, wealth, and power at her fingertips. It was nothing

short of suicide to go up against a monster like that.

All us adults, with our great amount of experience, knew that we were absolutely no match for her and avoided any conflict with her. But even so, these young'uns seemed to have an insane notion that they could win. This was too excessive to be a simple folly of youth, and now, we were caught up in the cross fire.

Lady Sevensworth would be here any second to decide our fate. *I'm so scared... This must be how those on death row feel right before their head goes on the chopping block. I know there's no saving me, but at the very least, I need to try and save the lives of my grandchildren.*

I had no doubt that everyone else here felt the same. All of them were pale and shaking. Some of them were even sweating buckets despite it only being springtime and not even that warm. The crushing fear only grew the longer we waited. I was doing everything I could to endure what felt like eternity, when the servants finally opened the double doors. *It's Lady Sevensworth!* Though many years had passed since she'd become a mother, because of the miracle lotion, she looked like she was still only in her twenties. *She's so beautiful...and that makes her all the more frightening.*

Though she had an elegant appearance that made you want to protect her, she had the power to have my entire family executed before I could say even a single word in protest. She had an overwhelming presence that was in stark contrast to her soft, flower-like beauty, and an unsettling mix of kindness and cruelty in her eyes. All this made me feel a fear as if I'd been transported to a different space with an unknown monster approaching me. My heartbeat quickened and I began to sweat even harder.

I heard a squeak as Viscount Baker recoiled in fear. Lady Sevensworth simply smiled elegantly. Her graceful demeanor only served to frighten him. I understood how he felt. I was dangerously close to letting out a scream myself.

Lady Sevensworth sat and waited for tea to be served. If we were to observe standard noble etiquette, this would be the part where we'd engage in small talk; however, nobody was capable of speaking

under the pressure of waiting for her to give the order for our execution. What started as trembling turned into full-on shivering. My hands in my lap were slick with sweat. Fear overtook me so badly that I felt nauseous.

After the servants poured the tea, Lady Sevensworth gave them leave to go. In the silence that followed, the sounds of us fearfully sipping tea filled the room. In contrast, she elegantly drank without a sound and then turned a kind gaze to each of us, flashing a lovely smile.

"Will you all follow my orders?"

Oh, thank you, God! Thank you so much! What a relief! My family will be spared! Her clear, soft, beautiful voice rang like the bell of an angel's voice.





So long as we obeyed her, nothing bad would happen to us! Sure, we probably wouldn't get out of this completely unscathed, but at the very least, I was sure our grandchildren would be spared. If we did very well, we might even be able to hope for more. We might even get out of this alive! *Of course I'll obey you! I'll obey you with every last fiber of my being!*

"Yes, of course!"

"I will obey you!"

"Your wish is my command!"

"I will do anything you say!"

Every last one of us was in complete agreement. The relief of being rescued from certain death filled our voices as we excitedly answered her. Viscount Baker was so overjoyed that tears were streaming down his face.

Ginorious

My mother-in-law had realized that all the family heads who'd be sending their armies on this military expedition had been contacted by Hugo and Baron Hass Burton. She realized that they were plotting something, but even the Sevensworths weren't able to determine exactly what they were negotiating. That was when she had an idea. She'd call the four men to the royal palace and have them wait together in the same room for an extended period of time. They all had passive personalities, and summoning them all together would make them think she'd caught onto their plan. By calling them to the royal palace, it'd even make them think that His Majesty was aware as well.

In actuality, she hadn't told His Majesty anything. It'd be jumping the gun to tell him before she knew exactly what was going on. After thinking that they'd been caught red-handed, the four men spilled every last detail about the plan, allowing my mother-in-law to get a good grasp on the situation. She even got them to promise to obey her. That was how I came to this situation.

"And now you think you've really won against me?!" Hugo

snapped at me.

"No, not at all."

After all, in reality, I'd done absolutely nothing except raise a red flag as was planned in advance. Despite being the heir to the Sevensworths, my only job had been to do something so simple that a footman could've done it. There was no way I could claim this victory as mine. All of this was a result of my mother-in-law.

That was why I'd said that Hugo should have tried to come at me with tactics in a battle. After all, that was the forte of the military family he came from. But he tried to outmaneuver me in a political battle, which was extremely reckless in the face of the Sevensworths, or rather, my mother-in-law.

Every time I learned more of what my mother-in-law was capable of, I felt so powerless. Being able to break the spirits of those four men and simply ask them to swear fealty to her was something only she could have accomplished. The might of the Empress had shaken them to their very cores. It would've been impossible for someone like me, who hadn't made a name for himself at all, to do.

She was also impressive for taking fragments of information and piecing together a conspiracy. There was no way I could have done that. *Will I ever have the skills worthy of inheriting this house?* I needed to study more strategies. Though my mother-in-law was the force of this generation, it'd be my turn soon. I couldn't let Ana, who was so innocent and pure, have to bear the weight of having a secret dark side to her.

Chapter 5: His Friends, His Wife, and a Prediction from Hugo

Ginorious

Ultimately, House Fibass and all its collaborators were thwarted and dismantled. Usually when an assassination attempt occurred between noble houses, it'd be solved by a battle between the respective territories without any outside mediation. This was because the king's authority wasn't very strong, so he was generally happy to let the royal family simply remain as spectators while the disputing territories waged war on each other. However, this time, circumstances were different.

In this situation, when the three other armies had turned to attack the Sevensworth forces at the order of Baron Hass Burton, they'd left only one path of retreat—leading right into the waiting arms of our neighboring country, Thorsdale. We confirmed this with our scouts after capturing Hugo and the others.

The Thorsdale forces on this section of the border were reported to number four thousand men. Combined with the six thousand that Baron Hass Burton had gathered, that made a total of ten thousand soldiers against the Sevensworths' two thousand. If we'd fought, it would've been a complete massacre with absolutely no survivors to tell the truth about what'd really happened. Their plan had been to kill every last member of our army and then say we'd launched an unauthorized attack on Thorsdale and had been destroyed in the process.

The testimonies of nobles held a lot of weight in palace interrogations. Even if some of the commoner soldiers from their forces did step forward and tell the truth, their voices would've been drowned out by the nobles, making them seem like liars. In the end,

though, it never came to that, and the king himself intervened to hand down a heavy punishment. The reason for this was because a foreign country had been involved in their schemes. If it'd been just a fight between our houses, he would've turned a blind eye as usual, but he couldn't stay silent when they'd conspired with a foreign nation that showed signs of invading.

After his capture, Hugo was sent to a jail in the palace. It was a prison for nobles, so it was by no means uncomfortable; his cell had a bed, a sofa, and even servants. Hugo asked to meet with me, and though I had the option to refuse—and Ana even said I should—I ultimately decided to accept. Hugo's punishment had already been determined: He was to receive the death penalty. With that in mind, I felt that I couldn't very well turn down one of his last requests. As someone who was part of the reason he was going to die, I had an obligation to indulge him.

"Hey, Ginorious."

When I entered the drawing room of the palace, I saw Hugo already sitting there, wearing a sarcastic smile. The fact that he was ignoring noble etiquette in regard to greeting someone was due to us being former classmates.

"Hey."

It felt weird to greet him with pleasantries like "you look well" when he was so clearly worn out, and showing any sympathy would have likely not been appreciated given how prideful he was. As a result, my greeting was not much better than his.

"It's gotten warmer," I said.

"Yeah. It's the best time to see the sakoora bloom around the palace. I can even see them from my cell."

It was typical for us as nobles to have some small talk before entering the main topic of discussion. Though we were able to forgo the customary greetings, even we couldn't escape the custom of small talk.

Hugo was still dressed in noble clothes and his hair was neat, but his hands were in sturdy chains while his right leg was shackled to an iron ball. I tried my best to avoid looking at these obvious signs of him being a prisoner while speaking with him.

“So, why’d you ask me here?” I asked, getting down to business as our small talk wound down.

“I wanted to give this to you,” he said, taking out a ring with a chain threaded through it, making it a necklace.

“Is this...”

The large ring he handed me had a crest of the Seven Star Tortoise engraved into it. It was the Fibass house crest. When a noble used their family crest for personal use, they’d usually add something to the design to distinguish it; for example, the Sevensworths’ seal was a seven-headed dragon, but Ana added a lily to it to make it her own, and my mother-in-law added a rose. But this seal didn’t have anything extra. It was the truest form of the seal, meaning it belonged to the head of the house.

“I received this from my father because I’d wanted it for so long. He said I could have it now...at our end.”

The people being punished for my attempted assassination weren’t just the coconspirators, but their families too. Their statuses had been stripped, and spouses and other relatives were facing execution as well. This ring was the symbol of a disgraced house head. It had absolutely no use or value anymore. But even so, it was the last present that his father, who was about to be executed, could give to his son, who was facing the same fate. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant gift for me to receive.

“I can’t accept this. I can only imagine how valuable it is to you.”

“Take it. If you do, I’ll tell you something you’ll want to hear.”

“What is it?”

“Something very intriguing—information to defend the woman you care about so much.”

What?! Information to protect Ana?! “Okay. I’ll accept it. Now tell me.”

“Sure. I can only say it once, and I doubt you’ll ever hear it again, so make sure you listen closely,” Hugo said as a preface before reciting in cadence: “The sun sets, the stars set, all that’s left sparkling is the night’s morning star.”

I furrowed my brow at his sudden poem. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a four-stanza poem. House Fibass used to be a fortune-

telling family. We used to use these poems in our divinations, so it's kind of fitting that it's used at the end of our family too, isn't it?" His smile twisted sardonically.

So basically, he only wants to give me a cryptic hint, most likely to make me worry about some kind of problem. But it worked. After all, this has to do with Ana's safety. Of course, I'll be worried.

"I'll tell you one more thing, as someone who's finally learned from his mistakes. It was my own obsession that led me to this situation."

"Obsession with what?"

"To become the most knowledgeable and wisest person. I was focused on it more than I needed to be. You might not know, but for those of House Fibass, it's incredibly important to be the smartest. That's why I could never...I could never forgive you. And why I overextended myself in order to beat you. It's only now that I've lost everything that I realize how stupid I was," Hugo said, as if he were at a confessional.

The fact that he was sitting in front of me, recounting what he considered to be his failures, must've meant that while sitting in jail, he'd rid himself of this obsession. House Fibass was a military household, specifically of tacticians. Normally, if a person were to join the royal guard, they'd start at the bottom of the totem pole, but for anyone in House Fibass, they'd immediately be granted an officer position. Hugo had been able to join their tactics division directly as an adviser to the commander.

Many people resented House Fibass for being able to jump to high positions so quickly, but it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows for them. Members of House Fibass were always tasked with being the absolute best, which put a lot of pressure on their shoulders. I hadn't known anything about this when I was a student.

But even if I had, I wouldn't have stopped being the top student in our class. I'd needed to continue improving Ana's status in our school and I knew that Ana would have held back if she'd known his circumstances, which would have just made Hugo hate her anyway for taking pity on him. Even being aware of it wouldn't have changed anything. Ultimately, it was my fate to be hated by him.

"At this rate, you're going to make the same mistake as I did, Ginorious."

"What do you mean?"

"Your fixation on your wife is too strong. You won't be able to cut her loose even when the best move is to do so. That will lead to your ruin."

He's not reciting a cryptic poem, but actually being straightforward? "So this part of your advice isn't in a poem?"

"Yeah. I made the first part challenging because it's meant specifically for you. But the advice I gave you just now is a freebie for your wife. We've been together in the same class since elementary school. I don't hate her."

"You say that, but that advice is pretty cruel, don't you think?"

"It only seems that way because *you* don't like it," he laughed teasingly.

Then he told me to leave because he'd said all he had to say.

"But just one last thing," I asked right before leaving. "Why did you want me to have this ring so badly? You hate me, don't you?"

He'd made me take it, knowing that I wouldn't be able to resist hearing information about Ana if all I had to do was simply accept the ring. He used such a forceful method to give it to me, so there must have been some kind of reason.

"I know what kind of person you are. You'll never be able to toss away that ring so long as you live, right? That's why I gave it to you. You're going to carry that ring around for the rest of your life and regret the fact that you killed me, and in that way, it will give my life meaning."

He was making me carry the burden of his cross. That was why he was so willing to part with this important ring of his instead of asking to be buried with it.

"I never intended to forget you, even without this," I said.

I pulled the ring out of my pocket by the chain, showing it to Hugo as it swayed. Seeing this, his face turned into a very satisfied but terribly amused smile. I wasn't lying, though. Even without this ring, there was no way I'd forget about him so easily.

After leaving the room, I gazed down at the ring as I walked. *What a burdensome present. I knew he didn't like me, but I didn't think he hated me this much.* I was already pretty down in the dumps after learning that my former classmate had wanted to kill me, but now he was awaiting execution. And now I knew how much he hated me. All of this made my heart hurt.

This plot against me hadn't been stopped before it'd been enacted. They set the wheels in motion and now had no way of getting out of the consequent mess they'd made. In order to root out both Marquess Burton and Count Fibass, no effort had been made to stop them at all.

Both of them were a part of the first prince's faction. In fact, many who supported the first prince were middle or lesser nobles, but among them were Marquess Burton and Count Fibass. The two of them made up the core of the faction. With them removed, the first prince's power drastically dropped, and so did the chances of him becoming heir apparent.

"Sorry, Gino. I feel bad for what I've put both you and Ana through, but it was all necessary. If the first prince became the king through a normal route, somewhere down the road, our family would come into conflict with the royal family. I'm sure it's a price that you and Ana would have to pay."

My mother-in-law had apologized to me for leading my former classmate to ruin. But honestly, I didn't feel that she needed to apologize. I didn't think she was in the wrong whatsoever. Though we weren't able to establish a clear connection between the plot to kill me and the first prince, we were able to stop the plan. It was almost certain that the first prince had been the one pulling the strings.

Most likely, the one who'd given me the sabotaged sword during the swordsmanship tournament had been a covert operative of the first prince. After some research, I'd also found that the group that had tried to kill me in the Simon territory worked for the first prince as well. And now, there was this attempt on my life.

The first prince was the type of person who would do anything he could to attack us. There was no way that we could allow him to

become king. We needed to chip away at his strength, which was why it was necessary to destroy both House Burton and House Fibass.

"This was a plan that involved your former classmate being sentenced to death. It was too early for you to be making that kind of decision, which is why I did it instead," my mother-in-law had also said.

She'd been right. There was no way I could've made that choice, which left me depressed. This had nothing to do with whether or not I had the talent to lead this house—at this point, I didn't even meet the necessary mental criteria.

As I walked down the hall of the palace, I heard someone call out to me.

"Sir Gino."

It's Ana! The way she trotted toward me was so cute. *She's so cute!* Just seeing her face made all the negative feelings inside me go away.

"What are you doing at the palace?"

"It's not just me," Ana said, looking back toward a girl and a pair of guys.

"Hey, Ginorious!"

"It's been a while."

Down the hall, I saw Justin and Anthony waving.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Sir Ginorious. It's been some time since the time we met during my visit to the Simon territory," Lady Byron said, walking over to greet me.

Though Anthony and Justin, who were knights, had loud enough voices to hail me from afar, she needed to come close and greet me elegantly, as befitting of a greater noble. When we were still students, she'd called me Sir Valvalier, but after I married Ana, she'd begun calling me by my first name.

On the other hand, I still called her by her family name. I should've changed the way I addressed her when she did, but I didn't have the courage to do that. Calling someone by their first name was a sign of your closeness with them. It was a big challenge for me. For the record, with the exception of myself, all the people in

my class now called each other by their first names.

"What're you all doing here? I know Justin's here because of his job, but what about the rest of you?"

"I was called by Young Madam Anastasia," Anthony said.

"Yes, me as well. Lady Anastasia called me here."

Oh, Ana did? She must have done it knowing I'd be sad after speaking with Hugo. She's so considerate... She did this all for my sake...to cheer me up...

"Ana! You're so kind! How are you so cute?!"

"That's as far as you go, Sir Ginorious!" Just as I flew to hug Ana, I was stopped by Bridgette. "Do you know where you are, right now?! This is the palace—the strictest place in the country! Please refrain from doing anything shameless like that from now on, otherwise you will ruin the young madam's reputation!" Bridgette glared while verbally whipping me.

"You haven't changed a bit." Anthony burst out laughing.

I messed up again. Ana's cuteness is dangerous. It's next to impossible to keep my sanity.

After meeting up, we decided to go to a café. After all, I hadn't seen these guys in a while. I wanted to talk with them. At our school, the status of one's house didn't matter; all that mattered was one's skill in school. However, after graduating and entering the real world, we were supposed to abide by the statuses of our houses. But that didn't seem to bother Anthony since he acted and spoke with us the same way he'd always done, and even Justin, who was the son of a count, wasn't speaking overly politely to Lady Byron or Ana.

It seemed the school's meritocracy system had even affected the rest of polite society. Even in public places like evening parties at the royal palace, I'd seen former classmates of mine speaking informally to each other more often than not, regardless of their difference in status. To them, this kind of relationship was incredibly important and not something they wanted to change. I was of the same opinion. It felt very nice being able to speak like I had in school.

"Congrats on becoming House Treves' heir, by the way," I said to

Anthony.

Usually only the eldest son could inherit his family's title, but for the Treves family, their custom was to hold a battle when they became adults and the one who won would become the heir. It was a tradition completely unique to their family. Anthony had won the fight and the right to inherit the title of count.

"I suppose next is marriage. Have you already found a partner?" Lady Byron asked.

"No, not at all. I don't even know what qualities I should look for. Do you have any advice for me, Lady Ekatarina?"

Lady Byron laughed at his question. For House Treves, the search for a fiancée only happened after the battle for heir, since it was hard to arrange political marriages before then. The strategy changed for each person depending on whether they were going to be leaving the family or succeeding to it. Political marriages were a very inconvenient custom of this country, but as one of the most powerful families, House Treves couldn't ignore it.

Everyone here probably knew that I'd met with Hugo, but they'd all been talking about lighter topics and about things in their lives. Nobody even tried to bring him up. There weren't any heavy topics that came up at all. They were all good friends of mine who were genuinely concerned for me.

"So, I met Hugo today, and...it looks like he really hates me," I said.

Hearing me say this made everyone's eyes open wide with shock. The past me would never have wanted to discuss something like this with them, and I especially wouldn't have been the one to bring it up. The only person who wasn't surprised was Ana, who knew how I'd been changing. She looked at me happily.

I went on to tell them about my meeting with Hugo. I talked about how important grades had been to him and how even knowing that wouldn't have changed how I worked to maintain my spot at the top. I wasn't used to talking about things like this, so my explanation left a lot to be desired. But even so, they all quietly listened.

"You really don't have to worry about the grades that much. You

won fair and square. If he held a grudge against you, it was misplaced anger. It's on him for hating you," Anthony said, trying to cheer me up with a smile.

"Have you forgotten, Sir Ginorious? You're a victim of someone's grudge and ambitions, which resulted in a planned assassination attempt. You should be furious, not depressed," Lady Byron said.

She was always fair, and would even sometimes criticize her friends and defend outcasts. Hearing someone like her say these words took a load off my mind.

"I can't feel angry at him. I think Hugo... He was desperately trying to live. He was well aware of what it'd mean if he failed. But even so, he risked his life for his goal. I really think he tried his hardest. What I feel for Hugo isn't anger, but...sympathy—the kind you feel when the glow of a young person's passion and effort ends in failure."

If he'd succeeded in my assassination, his family's status would've shot up and he would've received a large amount of power and honor. Fail, and his entire family would be executed. He made one bad decision and as a result had sentenced his family to go together to heaven or hell.

Politics were messy. Even if you played it safe, it was hard to know what path was the safe one to take. If the nobles in this country made a wrong move, they'd be forced into a situation where they were walking a tightrope blindfolded through hell.

That's why the nobles of this country, especially the younger ones, were living earnestly. They were thinking seriously about their future in a completely different league from the young people of my past life. After all, one wrong step, and they'd be walking that tightrope.

Hugo had been the same. He'd been born into a household that was a part of the first prince's faction. He'd only had two choices: either to walk the path his family took and fight against the Sevensworths or do his best to deftly avoid carrying out directions in order to keep his position muddied. Between these, he chose the choice with the highest reward. I couldn't be angry at him for that. What I felt for him right now was pity for being forced into that life,

admiration for this youthful spirit to not lament over his situation and instead continue moving forward, and sympathy for how his hard work had not paid off.

"Just as always, you say the most old-person-sounding things. You're calling Hugo a young person, but you do know you're the same age as him, right?" Anthony said, laughing.

Though I was currently living as a younger person, sometimes I couldn't help but act like the old person I used to be.

"I have something I'd like to ask both you and Anthony," I said to Justin. "So, for Hugo, who came from a military tactician family, grades were incredibly important. At the same time, your grades in swordsmanship must have been very important for your families since you come from knight families. Did you two...ever resent me?"

In addition to being the best student in school, I'd also been the best swordsman. I knew there was a chance that Anthony and Justin didn't like that. We'd already graduated so this might not matter now, but I wanted to know how they truly felt.

"Yeah, you're right that our grades in swordsmanship were incredibly important. That's why we trained so hard—but look, we're knights, not tacticians. We've been losing in sword tournaments since we were young. If we showed even a shred of being angry that we lost, our dads would've smacked the crap out of us for embarrassing our family. We've all been raised like that, so I don't think anybody resents you."

"Yeah, what Anthony said. All the knights from noble families have been participating in swordsmanship tournaments from a young age. Fights can be a toss of the coin, so sometimes you get beaten easily by someone worse than you. We've all had that experience and we've all had to chivalrously congratulate the winner. Even if we're frustrated at our own weakness, we absolutely don't harbor any hatred toward the winner."

I looked at both Justin's and Anthony's faces and could tell they were being genuine. I'd hoped that, knowing the two of them, they wouldn't have felt any anger toward me, but hearing them strongly deny it made me feel better.

"Truth be told, as someone from a military family, I'd love nothing

more than to win against you, but Ginorious, you beat one of the best swordsmen in the country, remember? Seeing that was enough to make me give up. Though I mean, I still plan on beatin' you someday," Justin said, laughing.

"Justin, maybe you should try focusing on beating Lady Ekatarina before Ginorious?" Anthony teasingly quipped.

"Hey, come on, man!" Justin smiled ruefully.

"Huh?"

I couldn't help but make this sound of puzzlement. There weren't any classes on swordsmanship for girls. They'd always had embroidery at the same time as our swordsmanship classes, and I was pretty sure it had been like that for them even in their elementary school days. But was he saying that, somehow, a noble lady who never had a swordsmanship class had beat Justin?

It was true that Lady Byron was tall for a lady, but she was still smaller than Justin, who stood at two metres tall. She was also much thinner and much less muscular.

"This is something that happened before you transferred into our school, Sir Gino," Ana said, beginning to explain with Anthony and Justin chiming in.

Only Lady Byron stayed quiet, most likely trying to protect Justin's pride as a knight. She was very good at being considerate like this.

Apparently, during middle school, the two of them had gotten into a fight and decided to settle the matter with a duel. Lady Byron came from a magic specialist family and had fought by using both her magic and sword. Not having encountered this kind of fighting style before, Justin lost.

It took a lot of courage for her to accept a duel despite her opponent being from a prestigious family of swordsmen. As a student, Lady Byron had been at the top of the girl hierarchy. She not only had stunning beauty, but also the best grades, an overwhelming talent for embroidery, and a very virtuous personality. I'd thought that was why she was always at the top, but maybe the biggest reason had to do with her fighting prowess.

I couldn't help but think that by bringing up this story, both Anthony and Justin wanted to show how unbothered they were over

being defeated in a duel. Even though he'd lost to Lady Byron, a girl, Justin didn't seem to hold any grudge toward her and was friendly. Seeing this real-life example made me feel very relieved to have such good friends.

"Thanks for today. I feel a lot better after talking to them," I said to Ana as we walked to the carriage.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Ana said with a smile filled with gentleness. "You haven't said everything on your mind, though. I can tell..." she mumbled as I escorted her.

She was right. I'd only talked a little about Hugo. I wasn't able to tell them everything. I couldn't tell them about the ring I'd received or the warning he'd given me, or of the words he'd said to me, like a curse, about how I'd carry the ring forever, never to forget how I'd been the one to kill him.

It made my chest hurt as if a weight had been placed on it. His words had truly been heavy, and the fact that they'd come from a former classmate only made it worse. I hadn't fully been able to digest what he'd said enough to be able to talk about it.

"If possible, I'd like you to tell me about the rest."

"I think if I tell you, it'll only bring you pain too," I replied.

Ana was someone I could confide in now, but I couldn't bring myself to do so for this. It was already a very heavy topic, but Hugo had also given me advice to toss Ana to the side. It wasn't something that I wanted her to hear.

"I'm sure the reason you're not telling me is because I'm not reliable enough, but...even so, I'd like you to share a little bit with me."

"You? Not reliable?! Not at all! There's absolutely no way that's true! It's just that...I don't want you to be hurt."

Before I knew it, I'd stopped walking and turned to face Ana.

"Sir Gino, as spouses, we're meant to support each other, are we not? If there's a heavy burden you're carrying, I wish to share it with you. You don't need to worry about me. As long as you're by my side, I'll be able to overcome anything with a smile," Ana said, puffing out her chest with a smile as gentle as a lake sparkling under

the soft rays of the spring sun.

"Ana! How are you such a wonderful person?!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

I lost control of myself when faced with what was certainly the cutest person in the world, and the next thing I knew, Bridgette was pulling me back by the collar.

"Is your brain as primitive as a monkey's, Sir Ginorious?! We're on a main street where carriages are parked! Don't you know you'll hurt the young madam's reputation if you do something so shameless in front of all these people?!"

Her words hurt, but the fact that she had to warn me twice today hurt even more.

Currently, Ana and I were in the forty-eighth drawing room of the Sevensworth mansion, called Aventurite. On the table was a collection of snacks. After finishing dinner, we'd decided to have some wine. Unlike when we had tea together, we were sitting on the same sofa, our shoulders touching, instead of across from each other on separate couches.

There were only a few candles lit around us, creating a small radius of orange light while the rest of the lavish room was draped in a faint darkness. This was most likely Ana's doing as she remembered how I preferred fewer candles, but she didn't mention or boast about it at all. *She's such a wonderful person!*

"So...this is by no means a happy story, but I'd like you to hear me out."

I began telling her about my meeting with Hugo and how he'd given me his father's ring, which was incredibly important to him. I also told her about his grudge-filled words. Ana was the only one in this world who knew how ugly I'd been in my past life. Despite all those years of people laughing at and putting me down for how I looked, Ana accepted me with a gentle smile. That was why I was sure I could tell her everything.

"I don't think Sir Hugo truly hates you from the bottom of his heart," Ana said.

"Thank you for saying that."

"I didn't say it to cheer you up but because I believe it to be true. I truly think that if Sir Hugo despised you, he would not have entrusted you with the final present he received from his father. The same goes for his advice. He wouldn't have done any of that if he truly bore you ill will."

"But then why did he give me this?"

"I'm sure he wanted something to remain that proved he once lived. He was so frightened of the memory of him fading that he wanted at least someone to remember him, which is why he entrusted you with the ring. I believe that's why he said it gave his life purpose. His advice to toss me away is probably the same, in that he wants you, the person who will remember him forever, to keep on living no matter what."

What she said made sense. Rings that were proof of being the head of the house were worn at all times, but Hugo had put the ring onto a chain and made it into a necklace for me. I couldn't understand why he'd do that, but Ana's explanation made everything clear.

The ring he'd given me was proof of being head of a family, but in his case, this was a family that soon wouldn't exist anymore. I couldn't wear it in a way that was visible to everyone, so he'd put it on a chain for me to wear under my clothes. This could be proof of how he didn't want me to forget him.

"But why...me?" I asked, looking down at the ring.

"I can't think of him choosing anyone but you, Sir Gino. You're the person he was fixated on beating but never could. Even though he held a confrontational attitude toward you when we were students, I believe he accepted who you were. It makes sense that you're the person he would want to remember him the most."

That...might be true. Ana's so smart, as usual. She was so kind and had spent a long time thinking about the feelings of others, so she was a veteran when it came to putting herself in others' shoes. Despite having lived for a much shorter length of time than me, she already far surpassed me in that regard. She was much more in tune with other people than I was.

"If the time comes when you need to toss me away...I'd like you

to do so. I don't wish to become deadweight for you. I wouldn't resent you at all for doing so. If I could be of service to you, that'd make me happier than anything."

"Ana, there's no world in which I'd ever toss you away. That would absolutely never happen. Did you forget the vow I made before the gods during our wedding? I told you I'd never let go of you or leave your side ever again. Vows before gods are the most absolute, and I intend to keep mine even if it costs me my life."

I already knew what life without Ana was like. How could I ever leave a woman as kind and pure as her? I felt so much love for this cute girl who cared about me so much and offered me her gentle words. Ana smiled at me, looking at me closely. I felt myself sucked in by her smile and couldn't think of anything else but her.

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

My mind had gone blank except for the single thought of Ana. Before I knew it, I'd embraced her and even stolen a kiss. Now, Bridgette gripped the back of my collar, forcibly hauling me back. *Oh, right. I forgot she was here.* The rest of the room was dark, so I'd lost track of her.

"Sir Ginorious! Do you know where you are?! This is a drawing room! Do you plan to humiliate the young madam by making her walk the halls with disheveled clothes and makeup?! Do you know who cleans these rooms? The servants!"

"Oh, uh, well..."

For greater nobles, it was pertinent for them to always walk around with proper clothing, even in their own mansions. They had to always exude dignity as the lords of the mansion, which included dressing and sitting properly. If their clothes got even a little bit dirty, they needed to change immediately.

That was why there weren't many noblewomen who painted, as dresses with stains on them couldn't be worn ever again, meaning they'd have to be replaced, which got expensive fast.

"Do you have a brain on par with a goldfish?! How can you never remember to act in a way that doesn't risk the young madam's honor?!"

Bridgette's words were harsh. This was my third time being

lectured by her today, and I looked away, unable to bear the freezing look she was giving me. In the direction of my eyes was Ana, sitting there while looking down. She'd grown so red that I could practically see steam rising from her head, and her eyes seemed moist. She must've been embarrassed by Bridgette's implications. *Sheesh, she's so cute! How can she be so cute?!*

"Why are you smiling, Sir Ginorious?!" *Oh, crap. I was in the middle of getting lectured. I got so entranced by Ana's cuteness, I couldn't help but smile.* "Why are you always like this?! You're so impulsive when it comes to the young madam! It's like you get tunnel vision! Please use your brain at least a little bit!" Bridgette's voice echoed across the room.

Anastasia

Sir Hugo and his coconspirators had plotted Sir Gino's assassination. Mother figured this out in advance by analyzing various bits of information, and she'd even used their plan against them to defeat them. I'd read through all the same reports she did, but I never would have come to the conclusion that they'd been plotting his death.

Mother had also been able to completely foil their plans with just a few words. None of this was anything I'd have been capable of doing had I been in her shoes. I couldn't imagine anyone taking me seriously like they did her.

Mother had said that I should support Sir Gino in my own way, but I still had no idea what that would mean...

"I'm so useless... I'm completely inferior to mother in every regard," I suddenly complained to Bridgette.

"That's not true at all. At the very least, you're much more proficient in fighting than your mother. You're just as good as an assassin with your throw dart. You're also able to use magic and even have the potential to be the best in the country with your talents. If you continue your training, maybe the best in the world. Even Sir Ginorious said that, remember? I assure you that you have

many areas in which you excel, so you have no reason to worry at all."

Oh, that's true! I'm good in a fight! I should increase my skill in that regard! If I'm able to help defeat monsters and defend our borders, I'm sure that will be helpful to Sir Gino! In fact, I was in the middle of my magic training, aiming to get better so I could show Sir Gino how I'd be useful in fights. I needed to work harder and become someone who would be a great boon to our forces. *I'm going to do my best!* It'd be best if I could be like mother and win the battle before it even began; however, that wasn't possible for me as I currently was. That was why I'd try to prove myself on the battlefield.

"Bridgette, will you fight with me when I've no choice but to fight?"

"Of course! I will lay my life on the line for you, young madam! I promise to defend you with every last fiber of my being!"

I felt very reassured knowing Bridgette would stand beside me. I'd heard that out of all the servants, she was the most proficient fighter. *Oh, now that I think about it, Lady Ekatarina's mentioned that her family makes some of the finest armor for women.* Usually, female armor wasn't too different from male armor, but the ones designed by House Byron were special and came with high functionality while also having a sense of feminine elegance.

"Bridgette, could you contact House Byron? I've heard they have something wonderful called dress armor and I'd like to purchase a set."

"Understood. But also, why armor? Won't it be too heavy?"

"Well, isn't it normal to wear armor to the battlefield?"

"E-Excuse me?! Wh-Why would you do that?!"

"Hm? Aren't you the one who told me I should head to the battlefield?"

"That's! Not! What! I! Meant! At! All! Please, *please*, reconsider!"

"I've already made up my mind. If you don't wish to join me in battle, that's quite all right. I'll go by myself."

Bridgette clutched her head while mumbling. "I can't believe this is happening... How could I have spoken so carelessly?!"

Personally, I didn't find any fault with her words. If anything, I was very grateful for her wonderful suggestion to help Sir Gino.

Ginorious

After returning from some business in the slums, I joined Ana and Bridgette for another magic lesson. Ana was also studying Japanese through this process. At first, I'd only given her books with a lot of pictures in them, but as she progressed, she started picking up romance novels—her favorite genre. As expected from someone who loved to read, she was acquiring the language at an incredible pace.

Most recently, though, Ana had been very fervently reading books related to magic instead of her beloved novels. Out of the blue, she'd begun to very aggressively study magic. Today, she said she wanted to show me her progress, so we were now outside the walls of the royal capital. Though there was some danger of monsters out here, we were still close to the city, so this area was heavily patrolled by knights to keep it clear. We walked away from the road to where we'd be hidden from others. It was the perfect place for a magic demonstration.

"Here I go," Bridgette said, taking a stance. In the next moment, pitch-black koi appeared around her. They didn't emit any light at all and were infused with darkness.

Bridgette was a natural-born martial artist. She'd been taken out of the orphanage she grew up in and adopted by House Aldran, who served the Sevensworths, as their daughter because of the natural chi circuits she possessed, which were perfect for their fighting style. These chi circuits had only been further strengthened with training.

However, she also naturally possessed mana circuits, meaning she could use magic too. I couldn't blame Matthew for also taking her under his wing. She was a rare breed.

These pitch-black koi were produced with the magic she'd been able to use from birth, and they moved as fast as arrows through the air toward me. Previously, she hadn't been able to handle

multiple koi very well, but now she'd gotten very good at controlling their speed and precise movement. After observing them for a bit, I shot an explosive round about the size of a pebble into each of the koi, destroying them.

For this kind of magic, the remotely controlled objects had cores, and when the cores were destroyed, the objects were as well. It was easy for those with the ability to sense the flow of primordial mana to locate the cores. At this point, I had a pretty good understanding of where Bridgette placed hers in her magic, so it seemed like it'd be okay to step her training up a bit.

"You've gotten a lot better," I said.

"I'm not done yet. There's one more thing I'd like to show you."

In the next minute, a black mist began to manifest around us. Just like with the koi, it was made of darkness rather than light, and it was unnatural how shrouded everything became. I'd been taking into account Bridgette's unique chi and mana circuits to teach her magic that would suit her best, and she was already doing things she hadn't been able to before.

Within that pitch-black mist, the koi silently swam, and Bridgette attacked with her martial arts. The mist was made with mana, making it hard to see but also to sense specific mana signatures with how it was filling up the area. But this was perfect for Bridgette. She was the only one who could sense people in the mist. Though I was the one to come up with the idea, it was impressive how she was already able to put it into practice. After observing a bit, I destroyed the core of the mist and then the koi.

"Wow, I'm surprised by how much you've improved."

"Some things happened yesterday, and now it's necessary that I get much stronger than I am."

It sounds like there was some kind of trigger for this, but she doesn't want to say what it is specifically. I won't try to pry. Though she'd gotten a lot better, she was still only at the starting point in my mind. She didn't hide the core of the mist barrier very well, and when she moved, the preciseness of the koi's movements decreased. I gave her some advice on how to fix that and she listened very intently to me. *It looks like she's serious about getting stronger.*

"I'm next!" Ana said enthusiastically.

Oh, she's cute. She's so cute! I can feel myself smiling. But in the next moment, my eyes opened wide with surprise. Ana lifted her right hand to the sky and tens of metres above her, a massive fireball ten metres in diameter appeared.

"Here I go!"

In the next moment, she launched the fireball, at a speed many times the speed of sound, into a faraway cliff. An earsplitting explosion rang from the collision, and the very air trembled. One needed to be able to complete chi and mana circuits in their body to be able to freely use magic, but Ana wasn't done with that training yet. At her level, she shouldn't have been able to use anything stronger than what elementary schoolers were capable of. In reality, what she'd used was a spell called *ember*.

The *ember* I was familiar with produced a flame about as strong as a candle, which flew about two to three metres into the air. The heat was about enough to maybe leave a burn mark on the wall before fizzling out. In contrast, Ana had been able to fire off an enormous ball of fire that was hot enough to melt stone. In fact, the cliff was dripping with molten rock from where her attack had hit.

What is that stupidly powerful strength?! It doesn't even remotely resemble ember*. Besides, Ana's primary element isn't even fire.* Not only had she massively vamped up a very elementary spell, but it wasn't even her primary element. She already had more strength than all the magic troops combined. I was curious to see how much further she'd progress in a few years. *She really is a Magic Monarch fledgling.*

"Sir Gino, did you see that? Did I pass?" Ana asked, trotting over to me with a wide smile.

"You can activate magic now?! This is my first time seeing you use magic, but it's so powerful! You did so well, Ana! You've grown so much! Of course you pass!"

"Oh, is that so? I'm so happy!" Ana beamed. *Oh, she's cute. She's so cute!* "In that case, I'm ready to go to the battlefield, right?"

"Huh?"

"I'm thinking about heading out to assist with defeating monsters

and defending our borders."

Though Ana was all smiles, a wave of panic crashed over me.

"What? No! Please! Anything but that!"

If anyone died because of her, I could only imagine what kind of pain that would inflict on her. I'd learned a painful lesson with Hugo. Ana was kind to her core. If she took someone's life, I couldn't imagine anything worse for her. I was the only one who needed to shoulder that pain. I didn't want Ana of all people to experience that at all. I wanted her to live in peace, always smiling.

Besides, I didn't think I personally could endure the thought of her going to the battlefield. The mere thought of her in any danger was enough to make me lose my mind. I'd be in a state of immense panic the whole time.

"Oh, I see..."

Ana seemed very dejected. Seeing her like this made me want to give in to her every last whim... *No! Stop! Don't do it, Ginorious! You must stand your ground here!* In contrast to Ana, Bridgette was smiling with relief. It was as if an intense burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Every now and then, Ana would try and do something unthinkable; for example, if she saw a river, she'd try to play in it like a kid. We really couldn't take our eyes off of her. If only I could keep her in my arms forever. She was so cute, I couldn't help but think such thoughts.

Chapter 6: Political Disturbance and Succession

Ginorious

"What?! Are you sure?!" I couldn't help but exclaim after hearing the servant's breathless report.

On their way to the holy country of Waltdiez, the carriages carrying the king and the fourth prince had been attacked and had fallen from a cliff. Judging from the circumstances, the chances of them surviving were depressingly low.

The country was already in great turmoil due to the battle for the throne, and with both House Burton and House Fibass being eliminated, the first prince's faction had been put at an obvious disadvantage. With their backs to the wall, they'd begun behaving more radically while also digging their heels in regarding policies, leading to a near standstill in the government as the friction between the two factions only got worse.

There was essentially a deadlock amid the fears of the neighboring country potentially looking to attack. The longer this continued, the more danger our country would be in. As a way to calm the situation, His Majesty had decided to unilaterally put an end to the succession struggle, and it seemed his choice had been the fourth prince. They'd been on their way to Waltdiez to have him purified by the holy waters, as per tradition before being named the crown prince. Most likely, news of this spreading was the trigger for the coup d'état.

I chased after Ana as she ran from my office. His Majesty was Ana's uncle and he had always doted on her because of how much he loved my mother-in-law, his little sister. I had no doubt that Ana was devastated by this news because of how close they'd been.

"Ana!"

"Sir Gino..."

I caught up to her in the documents room known as the Cordierite, where she was already at a desk, holding a handkerchief to her eyes as she shuffled through some documents. Seeing her tears hurt my heart. I ran up to her and embraced her.

"I'm okay... This is a critical moment, so I must do what I need to."

"There's time to cry. I'll help you if you're behind on paperwork," I said, holding her face close to my chest.

Ana simply cried without saying another word.

"Young madam, Sir Ginorious! Her Majesty and the third prince have been attacked!"

"What?!"

"Huh?!"

Both Ana and I looked up in shock at Bridgette's report.

"Sir Ginorious, this is an extremely serious situation. Please return to your duties. I will comfort the young madam."

We needed to make our move now to be prepared for the great shifts in the political landscape. Both my mother- and father-in-law had gone to the palace for that very purpose. That meant both Ana and I needed to stay here and take care of any problems in the territory. *Of course, there's a lot of work waiting for me, but...I really want to comfort Ana!* After seeing that I wasn't budging a muscle, Bridgette forcibly ripped me off of Ana and wrapped her in her arms instead. Though Ana couldn't see it, Bridgette sent me a satisfied smile. *Urgh! Stupid work! I'm so mad!*

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A large instrument similar to a pipe organ began to play in the great cathedral of the royal capital.

"*O our gods, by the river clearer than crystal...*" a gospel choir sang.

All of us from House Sevensworth were currently attending the

funeral service for the four presumably deceased members of the royal family. The search efforts for the king and the fourth prince had been called off after a week since neither of their bodies had been found. The search for the queen and the third prince—the former crown prince—had also turned out similarly, with nobody knowing for certain if they were dead or alive.

Since none of their bodies had been found, all the caskets were empty. Holding a royal funeral without a body was already unusual, but four empty caskets was unprecedented. It was all because the first prince had forcibly had the funeral accelerated.

On the date of the incident, the dowager queen had been traveling outside the country, and she simply never came back, so she wasn't in attendance. Judging by how she'd essentially disappeared, she most likely wasn't dead but in hiding for her own safety. After all, it would be harder to kill her if she were a guest staying in another country's palace.

The only ones who could hide information about the people staying at their palace were the royal members of that country. Since we hadn't found a body or heard any information about her whereabouts, she was most likely under their protection. She'd probably determined that it was far too dangerous to return here.

The funeral felt strangely rushed, given how the fourth prince had just been chosen for the throne and now was all but assured dead. But also, the only members of the royal family who were still okay were the king's concubine, the first prince, and the first princess, meaning that the queen's bloodline had died out, leaving only the two children of the king's concubine to inherit the kingdom. It was obvious which faction was behind this. There was now no other candidate to inherit the throne but the first prince. Whoever had done this had gotten their wish; the first prince would be our new king.

"*O our gods, grant our city eternal peace...*" the gospel choir sang.

Amid the song, my mother-in-law was shedding tears. Seeing her like this seemed to bring a smirk to the face of the king's concubine. She clearly wasn't innocent in what had happened.

She'd been the very same person who'd changed the school into a meritocracy in order to show off how brilliant her first son was, which was further than most people would go. The authority of royalty and nobility came from the basis of their culture, which had them revere those of higher status than them, but if they started instilling values of meritocracy into the newer generations, the societal standard would eventually change. Her method of accomplishing her goal by any means necessary was just like the first prince.

However, I could understand why the king's concubine hated my mother-in-law. For one, it must've been very unpleasant how much her husband doted on his sister, but also, she had more influence on noble society than even royalty did. She must've been quite the annoyance to her.

Ana was also crying, so I held her hand in her lap. Right now, this was all I could do for her.

After the funeral ended, the four empty caskets were placed in the royal mausoleum. Not just anyone was allowed inside: They had to be at least marquess status or higher, or have royal blood. In our family, Ana and her parents could enter, but not me, so I was waiting in the royal garden by myself. While alone, I couldn't help but think about some things.

It wasn't clear how many guards had been with the king and the others since that was classified information, but they should've had a considerable number of guards. Even so, the four of them were all assassinated at the same time. This must've been the work of a meticulously laid plan, made over a long period of time and involving a very large number of people.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was what Hugo's poem had been referring to. The sun was the king, the stars were the queen and her children. Then the sunset was the first prince. I'd told my mother-in-law about the poem as well, but that hadn't been enough to prevent this terrible result. It was a plan that even she hadn't been able to subvert.

I truly never thought that anyone would go this far. After all, even

though assassination was always within the realm of possibility in royal politics, it was hard to believe that someone could so easily kill off members of their own family—a family that I was now technically a part of. It felt so unreal to think about through the lens of my former life. These kinds of things had only ever happened on the news, which felt like a completely different world to me entirely.

Though there were many advantages to having my past life's memories, there were some disadvantages too, one of which being the peaceful mindset from my past world preventing me from being able to predict events like these. I really needed to correct this as soon as possible. A man who would have been sentenced to prison for his horrible crimes in my past world was becoming this country's king.

The worst part was that he wasn't a fool. Thinking back to our school's history lessons, there weren't many monarchs who'd killed their family for the throne who turned out to be idiots. Most likely, the ambition and mercilessness required to kill one's flesh and blood, as well as the decisiveness to successfully carry out their plans, were all talents that made them competent as king. He'd be a much more formidable foe than the former king, who had at times been very indecisive.

I couldn't help but think that Hugo hadn't just known about this plot but had been a part of it. If so, then he would've only leaked this top secret information to me as a challenge. He'd essentially been telling me that he'd come up with this plan and dared me to stop it.

"Sir Gino," Ana said in a sad voice.

The royal mausoleum was the location of the final part of the funeral ceremony, and that had ended a while ago. Those who'd gone in were now filing out to leave. Though Ana had come back, my mother- and father-in-law were still inside. According to Ana, though everyone was leaving, her mother continued to stand over the king's casket and cry, and the duke stayed right by her side. We waited for them for a time, but it was getting late, so Ana decided to go check on them.

When she returned by herself, she had a melancholic expression,

making me worry.

"What happened?"

"Father... He was doing a strange dance."

"Huh?"

"Mother was still crying in front of the casket, and father was doing a silly dance to try and cheer her up. However, it only made her cry harder and collapse into his arms."

Oh, that's what happened? I was imagining something completely different.

"After living with them for all this time, I thought I knew everything about my parents, but seeing that made me realize there's a whole world between the two of them that I'm not aware of. I was unable to interrupt once I realized that, so I left..."

I don't blame her. I'm sure it's normal for married couples to act differently when it's just the two of them.

"Ana, how about we go home? We'll have more time to ourselves and can spend lots of time together. Let's talk the night away," I said.

"Oh my, that's a wonderful suggestion. I would like that!"

I offered my elbow to escort her, and she placed her hand on it while giggling. *But still, silly dancing, huh?* The duke was the type of person who'd practice very hard to make his wife, whom he was head over heels for, shine brightly on the dance floor at parties. Apparently, he'd been working at it from a young age, so he was very skilled. Knowing him, his dancing must've been so perfect that it was almost unnatural.

I could get through most normal dances well enough, but I didn't have the talent to dance strangely on purpose...but maybe I should try. The duke danced like that for my mother-in-law's sake, and seeing that made Ana realize that her parents had sides to them that even she didn't know. If I danced like that for Ana, maybe it would help her understand what it felt like to be in that world. *That's right! Even if I can't do it as well as the duke can, I should still try my best!*

"Ana! I'll try dancing strangely too!"

"Huh? Um... Perhaps another time."

Hm. If that won't cheer her up, then I guess this plan's a bust. What should I do, then? As I escorted Ana to the carriage, Ana began giggling as if realizing something funny.

"Oh, I understand what you were thinking when you suggested dancing for me. I'd like to dance for your sake as well, Sir Gino."

"Ana! How are you so cute?!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

Before I knew it, I'd tried to hug Ana, and I was promptly stopped by Bridgette. Ana's cuteness was so great that I felt like my heart was gonna burst. It made me lose all sense of reasoning once again.

"Sir Ginorious! Really?! On the day of the royal funeral?! Right here in the palace, one of the strictest places in the country?! How can you be so absolutely shameless?!"

Bridgette's voice as she lectured me echoed across the night-filled royal garden.

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There was an official announcement that four of the royal family had perished due to unforeseen accidents. Of course, there wasn't a single noble who actually believed that. It was basically an open secret that the first prince's faction had assassinated them.

As expected, the first prince was crowned king, and at the same time, my father-in-law resigned as prime minister. The public reason he gave was that he wanted to tend to his wife who'd become frail after her brother's passing. In reality, though, he was boycotting the sudden coronation of the first prince.

"Welcome, Duke Sevensworth," one of the servants from the royal palace said as I exited the carriage.

In addition to leaving his government post, my father-in-law had also returned to the Sevensworth territory to relinquish his title. As a result, I became the new duke and Ana rose to the position of duchess. Usually there would be a large succession ceremony, but it was put off due to our family being in mourning, so I'd only inherited the title through official paperwork.

Now, my name had changed from Count Ginorious Simon Sevensworth to Duke Ginorious Sevensworth. Up until now, I'd been the head of House Simon while also being a member of the Sevensworths, but now I was head of the Sevensworth family too. In the situation where one was head of multiple houses, the individual only used the title of the house with the highest status. It made my signature a little easier now.

I was currently at the palace for a meeting between nobles. Though the Sevensworths had relinquished the position of prime minister, we still had an obligation to attend noble meetings, and now that I was the duke, I was the one to attend.

"Good day, Duke Sevensworth," Lady Byron said to me in the hallway to the meeting room.

I returned the greeting and asked that she address me as she usually did. "Did you inherit status as well? I don't think I heard anything about that," I said.

"Oh, no, I'm here as a stand-in."

One way of protesting the politics of the palace was by passing down one's title; another was by sending a stand-in to official functions. Since Lady Byron was the only child of House Byron, it could only be her or her mother, and choosing the daughter sent a more powerful message since she was of lower standing. But then again, Lord Byron could return to represent his house at any time, so this method of protest still wasn't as impactful as relinquishing his title entirely, since it still indicated a possibility of cooperation in the future.

"As I thought. There are a lot of young people here," I observed.

"Did you expect anything different after what happened?" Lady Byron asked in a bitter tone.

Our houses weren't the only ones protesting the recent events. The heads of the noble families in the fourth prince's faction were all absent, with many wives sent in their husbands' steads, and a lot of young people too. Most of the latter had likely received their house's title in the same manner as I had. The neutral faction was a little better, with about a third of the actual family heads in attendance. The first prince's faction had about eighty percent of the family

heads present. It seemed he had their overall support; however, it was hard to hide the fact that his faction had become very weak due to it now consisting mainly of lesser nobles.

In my past life, countries with absolute monarchies usually wouldn't be too destabilized when a king was assassinated as long as the next one was immediately crowned, but the position of king in this country was much weaker. The new king would be in trouble if he remained estranged from the majority of the greater noble houses.

"It seems that this country has finally reached a dangerous point," Lady Byron said, speaking my thoughts out loud.

As Lady Byron and I continued our conversation, an announcement rang out across the room.

"His Majesty has arrived."

Everyone bowed, and then the meeting began. Up until now, the first prince's faction had remained entrenched in their policies in order to recover even a little from their disadvantageous position, but now it was the reverse. They'd become much more flexible and had even begun relenting on budget proposals they wouldn't have agreed on before. The government was actually getting things done.

"Though I've become king, I'm still green. I don't claim to have deep ties with any of my subjects, which is why, in an effort to deepen my bonds with all of you, I'd like to propose a law."

His aide went on to explain the proposal. Essentially, he was taking hostages. In the first place, luring all the children of noble families to attend school in the royal capital via the promise of positions in the royal palace after graduation was already a form of taking them hostage. But that didn't seem to be enough for our new king. Now he wanted to keep them at the palace, limiting their freedom to leave. Worse yet, this king would be able to specifically name who he wanted to take as his "wards."

"The idea is to focus on young women with no children. It will be less of a burden to have them stay at the palace than the men, who typically shoulder more of the responsibilities in their houses. And since they're younger, they should have fewer responsibilities in general. With no children, too, there will be no worry about

separating a mother from her child," the king said, answering a question from the crowd about how he would choose who was taken.

"Does this mean that you're going to construct a new palace for them?" my elder brother from House Valvalier asked, a silent anger in his eyes.

He really doted on and loved his little sisters. There was no way he'd be on board with essentially offering them as concubines.

"There are no plans to create a new palace. We've been busy, so we've only been able to make space in one of the current palaces. Since it'd be poor form to have both the men and women staying in the same place, for now, we're just having women stay. When everything's ready, we'll have a separate area for the men as well."

Though this was what he said, nobody believed him for a minute. Since many royal members had passed away, there was ample room in their respective palaces. They should have been able to prepare rooms in the blink of an eye.

"However, I *am* without wife or fiancée. *If* a bond happens to deepen between me and one of the women, I will of course take responsibility and make her my queen," the king said with a bright smile.

His eyes, though, couldn't hide his true, ugly intentions.

"Stay sharp. His objective must be Lady Anastasia," Lady Byron whispered into my ear.

Yeah, I figured as much. If he wanted to turn this bad situation around where most of the greater nobles were distancing themselves from him, his best option was to get the Sevensworths, with their enormous amount of authority, on his side. Considering how the Sevensworths were currently protesting him, his fastest option was to forcibly take Ana as his wife. If he and Ana conceived a child together, most likely my father-in-law would relent.

Due to religious influence, divorce was a very easy process in this country. If you had no children and it was found that your spouse had an affair *and* created a child with someone else, that was immediate grounds for them to marry that other person instead. There weren't many of these dishonorable cases in the noble world,

but the law was clear about these situations. Currently, Ana and I didn't have a child together, so the king was trying to use that to his advantage.

"I'd like you all to consider this suggestion. Thank you," the king said before leaving the room—and us—in absolute silence.

Everyone was thinking of what their best move was. If this law was ratified, they would have two options: comply and give over members of their families to be hostages, or rebel against the royal family.

Judging by the crowd, the first prince's faction approved of the law, most likely because they thought it would give their daughters a chance at becoming queen. The majority of them were lesser nobles, so barring any kind of special circumstance like the one this law presented, there was no world in which their daughters would be considered for the position.

Both the neutral faction and the fourth prince's faction were in a precarious position. Not only were the heads of their houses currently sitting out in protest, but now there was a possibility that they might have to rise up against the new king in order to keep their daughters from being taken. Doing so would mean a battle between their combined forces and the first prince's faction, which could very well spark the start of a civil war.

At first, making this proposal during a time of turmoil among the nobles seemed like the new king was digging his own grave, but after thinking about it a little, I realized it was a very well-thought-out plan.

Usually, the two protesting factions would rebel, but there was currently the threat of a foreign invasion hanging over all our heads. Having a civil war now would be the worst possible idea, so there was a high probability that the nobles would allow this law to pass in order to keep the peace so there wasn't unrest if the country was attacked. And if it was passed, the king would be at a huge advantage and primed to acquire House Sevensworth as an ally. Having hostages would also make it hard for nobles to revolt in the future. His desperate plan had a good chance of success thanks to the Thorsdale situation.

"Well then, I think it's time to put this to a vote," said Viscount Lefou, who was in charge of recording votes for all policies.

"Wait a moment," someone interjected. I was surprised to see that it had come from someone in the first prince's faction: Baron Lillard. "I believe that Duke Sevensworth should be the one to record all the votes for this matter."

Though he used to be a staunch supporter of the former crown prince, after the prince had rejected his daughter during their graduation party, the baron had jumped right to the first prince's faction in a fit of rage. He was the only duke supporting the first prince, but it hadn't been too long since he'd switched sides, so he was still treated as an outsider. *Now that I think about it, his daughter hasn't become engaged to anyone else since then. She's certainly a childless young woman.*

"I agree. I believe that Duke Sevensworth is best suited to do this," my eldest brother from House Valvalier said, his eyes still cold with anger. There was nothing that could make him stomach this deal that threatened his precious little sisters.

"I agree as well."

"Me too."

Voice after voice erupted, agreeing that I should be the one to record the vote. Usually, this would be the assembly speaker's job, but the current speaker was a core member of the first prince's faction, and it would be similarly inappropriate to appoint someone from the fourth prince's faction also. Plus, if a complete record of voting was not presented, it would be viewed as tacit approval and mean this hostage law would go into effect.

The Sevensworths were objectively the best option for this role. The minimum requirement to coordinate a vote was authority, which the Sevensworths had in spades, and my father-in-law had even been the one to do this in the past. He'd left our house in the perfect position to appear impartial.

However, there was something that bothered me. Our new king must've realized that I'd be chosen for this position and that I would now have the power to nullify his law proposal. *Does he* want *me to take this role?*

To some, the task of recording votes could bring with it the temptation to try and influence the results; however, that kind of petty interference was beneath a household of the Sevensworths' wealth and status. We wouldn't be tempted by something as trifling as that, so it was hard to think that he was trying to tempt me with petty bribes.

The only other duties of the vote coordinator were to sign at the top of the final document and present it to the king, at which point it was customary to listen to any small requests the king had, such as to fetch him wine, cheese, and so on. One's honor was very important for nobles. They'd save face by listening to the king's requests. *Oh, I see. He'll try to use this custom to his advantage.*

"Duke Sevensworth, please make a decision! At this rate, your wife will be swept off too!"

Hearing this loud voice brought me back to the situation at hand. To the crowd, it must've seemed like I was reluctant to take this role.

"Of course I accept the role," I said to all the panicking nobles.

Hugo, this was part of your plan too, wasn't it? You might've wanted a fair fight with me, but I don't intend on playing along. After all, Ana's future rides on this. I'm going to use anything I can to destroy this plan, and by doing so, I'll push this king into a corner. Sorry, but it doesn't look like we'll be having a fair fight anytime soon. I touched my chest where the ring lay hidden beneath my shirt and looked out the window at the sky.

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After the vote, we moved on to the next order of business. Ultimately, the consensus was that houses could freely send wards to stay at the palace if they so desired, but it wasn't obligatory and the king wouldn't designate who was sent. The noble families would have full freedom of choice. The members of the first prince's faction began preparations to send their daughters to the palace, while the others breathed a sigh of relief knowing that they didn't need to send their daughters away as hostages.

"Here's the report, Your Majesty. Please review it at your leisure."

The king seemed dissatisfied as he took the document, but his eyes showed a glint of joy.

"Say, would you listen to a request of mine, Duke Sevensworth?"

"If it so pleases you."

"Our neighboring country of Thorsdale is preparing to invade us. I'd like House Sevensworth to stop them."

A restless hush fell over the meeting room. Usually, the king would simply ask for some kind of food or trinket, but our new king had made a huge ask. If I refused, he'd use that as an excuse to nullify the vote we'd just taken and enact his hostage law. If that happened, a civil war was practically inevitable, so every house, regardless of faction, would try to convince the Sevensworths to reconsider our answer. And if we maintained our refusal, they'd eventually turn against us. A territory couldn't survive without the cooperation of other territories, so if we were cut off, we'd be put in a difficult situation.

However, if I said yes to this request, it would mean going to outright war with a neighboring country. The Sevensworths would be the only ones exhausting their resources and power in the conflict. From this king's perspective, whichever choice I made probably worked in his favor since either would result in the Sevensworths losing power, which was his aim.

Most likely, he predicted that I'd say no. Thinking about it logically, it would be the worst possible decision to have our family fight a war all on our own, since there was an extremely high possibility of being destroyed in the process. I imagined he was fully prepared for me to decline and already had a plan to put pressure on me so I would offer up Ana in exchange.

Hugo had told me that my fixation on Ana was too strong and that I should cast her aside when the time was right in order to save myself. Most likely, in this situation, he would've said the correct choice was for me to not have accepted the role of vote coordinator in the first place, but if I hadn't, the hostage law would have almost certainly passed and the king would have used it to make Ana his queen. Sure, the Sevensworths would profit greatly from that, and

I'd be compensated handsomely for my wife being taken from me. Based on gains alone, it was undoubtedly the best choice. But...there was absolutely no way that I would ever, *ever* let that happen. Did he really think I would let him get away with making a law to put Ana through a horrible experience and rip the two of us apart?! *I'm not letting you touch a single hair on her head!*

"I accept," I said, suppressing my anger. The other nobles began to buzz with surprise. "However, I have a condition. I'll do this as long as we're allowed to annex the territory of Thorsdale. Would that be acceptable?"

The king's eyes widened. I couldn't blame him for his surprise; I was essentially saying that we'd occupy the foreign country and take it for ourselves. I wasn't just going to stop at repelling their forces. I was declaring that I would be invading them instead. Thinking about the difference in our forces, this seemed like a suicide mission.

"Yes...that's acceptable," he said after considering for a moment. Most likely, he was thinking there wasn't a single chance I could pull this off.

"I'd also like to confirm one more thing. Though the Sevensworths plan to execute this mission by ourselves, I understand that there are many who deeply care for this country. If they offer to send their forces, may I accept? And would it also be acceptable to take donations from those who don't wish to send their forces?"

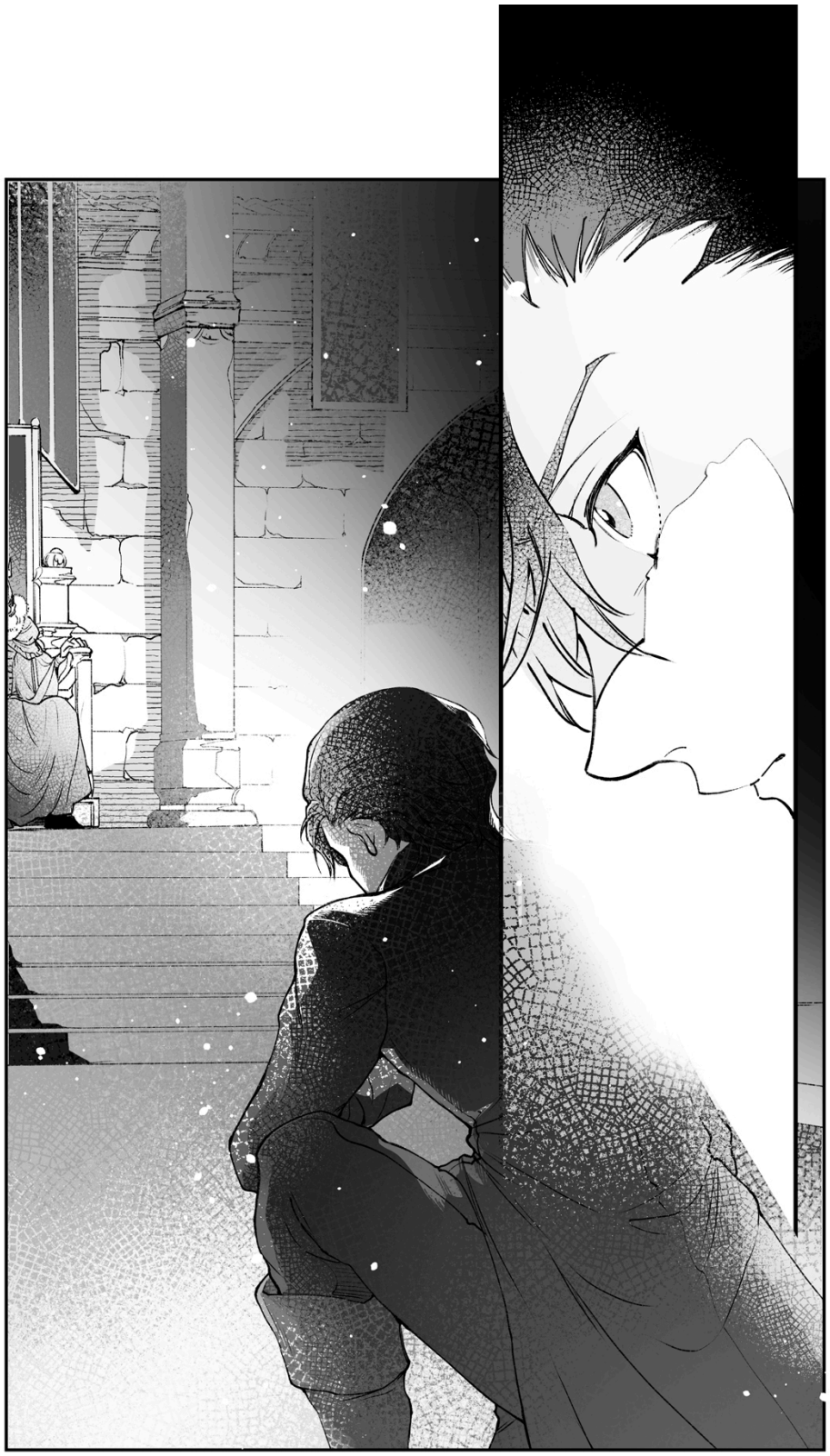
"That's acceptable. We must respect those with a love for our country," he responded immediately.

From the look behind his eyes, I could tell he was sneering at me. In his mind, he had no problem letting allies of the Sevensworths fall in battle alongside us. It would only weaken his opposition while making him stronger. He also likely assumed that whatever we received in donations wouldn't even come close to exceeding standard wartime taxes.

Now that we'd all heard his verbal agreement, all that was left was for the king's aide to draft the official record. Soon enough, he'd realize he made a mistake.

In any case, we had time to prepare. Our covert operatives had

discovered that Thorsdale was constructing a new magic weapon called the Sun Flower, so they weren't likely to mobilize until that was complete. Rumors of it had already leaked to other countries, but that couldn't be helped since it was massive enough to be seen from a far distance.



After I returned to the Sevensworth estate, I told Ana everything that had happened. Before I was even finished, she began to cry and told me that she'd stay with me no matter what. She was so cute that I felt like I was going to lose my mind.

Anastasia

As I spent time with Lady Ekatarina doing embroidery together, I was notified that a guest had arrived for me. It was Lady Janail, my former classmate and daughter of Marquess Grimardy. She'd come without making any prior appointment, so I assumed this must have been very important.

When I went to the thirty-fifth drawing room where she was waiting, I saw that she was crying.

"Lady Anastasiaaa," she wailed. "M-My engagement...it was eeended!"

Lady Janail shot up from the sofa she'd been sitting on and threw her arms around me. I guided her back to the sofa and sat while comforting her. After a little while, she'd calmed down enough, and I proposed that we have tea with Lady Ekatarina.

"Lady Ekatarina... I'm certain she dislikes me... She was always glaring at me... I'm sure it's because I'm not too bright..."

Oh, it seems she is under the same misunderstanding that I'd been under. As Lady Ekatarina's friend, I must resolve this. I will explain that she wasn't glaring at her, and that she's a very frank and kind person.

"Lady Janail, what brings you here to visit Lady Anastasia?" Lady Ekatarina asked after she'd joined us from the embroidery room for tea.

"I...I'm so sorry," Lady Janail said, shrinking from her.

It seemed that she was once again misinterpreting Lady Ekatarina, but I knew my friend wasn't displeased but simply curious. Lady Ekatarina always gave very precise advice, so I felt that she was perfect to help Lady Janail. That was what I'd been

thinking when I invited her to join us, but...perhaps it was a bad idea after all.

"Well, Lady Anastasia helped me with Sir Chris in the past, and she listened to me so warmly... Lady Anastasia's also the only friend from school I still meet with... I don't have anyone else to talk to about these things..."

Now that I think about it, Lady Janail was often alone when we were at school. She'd still been invited by other girls to do classwork together, so she hadn't had any problems like I'd had in finding groups, but she'd always been alone during break times.

My chest began to hurt. It was only thanks to meeting Sir Gino that I'd been able to make friends. Even after graduating, I was still friends with Lady Ekatarina, Sir Justin, and Sir Anthony. Before Sir Gino transferred in, I'd always been alone. If I'd never met Sir Gino, it was possible that I would've been alone the entire time I was in school. I felt like I could really relate to Lady Janail.

"Thank you very much for choosing me to confide in. Feel free to say anything you'd like if you're comfortable," Lady Ekatarina said.

"Thank you very much. I can tell you mean that."

Then Lady Janail began to cry and dab her eyes with her handkerchief. She'd been in the same elite class as us since elementary school, but we'd never been that close. I only really began spending time with her starting in high school. Lady Janail had lent me the complete set of a romance series everyone had read in elementary school, which had recently concluded. Though it was geared toward children, reading it again made me discover much more complicated emotions in the characters and clever foreshadowing. It was incredibly fun to revisit.

The reason she'd lent me those books was because she deeply regretted something she'd accidentally said when Sir Gino first transferred into our school. I didn't actually remember her saying this, but apparently she'd told me not to be so excited about my engagement because it was only a matter of time before someone as popular as him was swept off his feet by some of the other ladies at our school.

That was around the time when problems had first begun

appearing in her engagement with the first prince. I hadn't even realized she was having problems with him, and by acting so happy, I'd caused her displeasure. But she told me I had nothing to apologize for and that it was her fault for getting jealous about how happy I was. Though I'd tried to apologize for making her feel bad, she'd apologized back at me. I didn't even remember the incident, but evidently it'd been eating at her for so long that she brought me the books as a way to repent. She was a very kind, proper, and beautiful person.

Since then, she'd continued to lend me books every now and then. We'd exchange books and long letters with our thoughts about them, but we never really had tea together.

"I received a letter from Sir Chris today...saying that he's ending our engagement..." Lady Janail began speaking in the same slow way that she'd done during our time in school.

Sir Chris was the nickname of the new king. Even though their engagement was over, she still couldn't change how she felt about him. It really resonated with me since I'd felt the same when Sir Gino had ended our engagement. I couldn't bring myself to stop calling him Sir Gino back then either.

Even so, ending their engagement through a letter was an extremely horrible way to do it. I'd never heard of anyone being so thoughtless. Even Sir Gino and the former crown prince had had the courtesy to end their engagements face-to-face with their betrothed.

Besides, Sir Gino had told me not too long ago that our new king himself had stated that he had no fiancée, and that was before he even sent Lady Janail the letter. It was horrible for him to publicly announce this to others while only informing Lady Janail through the mail like an afterthought. Between this and the time he'd wanted to take Lady Janail as his concubine rather than his wife, it only made it clear how insincere a person he was.

"I...I don't know what to do anymore. Up until now, all I've done is listen to what my father and brother tell me to do because they said that was how I would achieve happiness as a noble lady. Everyone else said the same thing too, but...I'm not happy at all..."

"You should forget about that idiot of an ex-fiancée and find a

new one."

Lady Ekatarina is as direct as usual. All I could really do was sympathize with how Lady Janail felt, but Lady Ekatarina immediately offered a solution while also calling our new king an idiot.

"But...father says that he can't find any potential partners for me..."

"I'm sure that's true with his connections. After all, all the children from old-guard families are usually engaged from a very young age. However, I think there's a lot of other houses you could try. As long as you're okay with it, I wouldn't mind introducing you to some of them," Lady Ekatarina said, looking at Lady Janail with an unnaturally kind gaze. Apparently, she'd been very shocked about Lady Janail's comment that her eyes were frightening.

About a century ago, it had been looked down upon for nobles to dabble in industry; however, that mentality had greatly changed over the years, and now it was more strange for a noble house to *not* have at least one business of their own. After all, it brought their territories more wealth.

The old-guard families, however, held true to tradition and didn't own any businesses even now. Many of them had long histories and farmland, and their customs were antiquated, with marriages arranged at a very young age. Without businesses and much wealth of their own, they didn't have many avenues to explore when searching for potential partners, so they mostly married each other.

"W-Would you really?" Lady Janail exclaimed.

"Of course. The person I could introduce you to the soonest would be Sir Anthony. He's gentle and very attentive. I believe he's not too unattractive either. I would recommend him."

"S-Sir A-A-Anthony?!"

"Yes, but I hope you understand that you'll need to put in work as well. For military families like his, they expect the wife to have an active role, unlike houses of the old guard. There will be a lot for you to learn."

"I don't think it'll work out... Sir Anthony was always the center of our class. He was even kind to someone like me, who was near the

bottom. He's such a wonderful person. I doubt he'd want to be with someone as unremarkable as me... I'd be useless..."

Oh? It seems she might actually like him. Could this be a good match?

"I'd think working hard would be a nice alternative to spending the rest of your life alone. At the very least, it's better than doing nothing. Why don't you do your best to become someone Sir Anthony will fall head over heels for?"

"I...I've never tried working hard at anything before. Up until now, I've merely followed what I've been told to do...even the things I didn't want to..." Lady Janail seemed slightly dejected from Lady Ekatarina's words. She seemed not to have much confidence in attempting something she'd never done before.

"How about this? Tell your father that I will prepare a tutor for homemaking in his stead, and that you will be having lessons at House Sevensworth," I suggested.

For old-guard families, it was standard for women to have tutors for homemaking but not much else, since they believed that women had no need for academics. Since Lady Janail had been engaged to the first prince, they'd approved of her having specialized tutors for the sake of appearances. However, now that she was no longer engaged to royalty, there was a high chance they wouldn't allow her to continue. My offer to provide a tutor was rude as it went against her family's direction, but I didn't mind since this was for her sake.

"I don't have any confidence... I don't know if someone as slow as me can do this..."

"After I met Sir Gino, I learned the importance of not giving up on my happiness. I was even lower than you in school, but I decided to fight for my happiness and not give up, and I changed. I'm sure you'll be able to change and become happy too."

"Putting in the effort to change yourself is fun," Lady Ekatarina said from behind me. "Watching yourself become who you want to be, little by little, is very enjoyable. It makes working hard every day very fulfilling."

It was fun gradually getting better at embroidery and being able to do what I previously couldn't. It was a lot more fun than staying

in my shell. I was sure that Lady Ekatarina's hard work and determination was because she knew that same joy.

Lady Janail fell silent, seeming to be contemplating a great deal. Lady Ekatarina and I patiently waited for her to speak again.

"I'll do it... I'm done following orders... Now it's my turn to work hard for my happiness..."

Now that she seemed motivated, we began to discuss the specifics. Since we didn't have much time, we decided to focus on the kinds of training that House Treves needed their wives to have. In the meantime, the Sevensworths would look for a tutor. After her studies progressed to a certain point, we'd speak with Sir Anthony. Up until now, Lady Janail had had no clue what to do and had been very uneasy. But now that she had a clear goal, she cheered up a little.

Now that this topic had mostly been settled, our conversation changed to the war that my house would be leading. Sir Gino would be going to war soon and I was so worried, I couldn't help but cry.

"Lady Anastasia, it might not be possible immediately, but I'd like our houses to form an alliance."

"I-Is that the official stance of House Byron?"

I couldn't help but be surprised by Lady Ekatarina's words. Both of our houses were in the neutral faction; however, we were different in the sense that House Sevensworth had a direct connection to the former king. Besides, House Byron was cautious of our house's expansion of authority and took strides to limit our movements. It wouldn't be easy to simply form an alliance. Plus, our house would soon be waging war and might end up destroyed altogether. There weren't many houses who would suggest forming an alliance right now.

"No, this is my own personal opinion. However, I will make sure that the members of House Byron come around."

She's amazing. We're only a little over twenty years of age, and Lady Ekatarina isn't even the mistress of her household yet. But even so, she was declaring that she would be able to bend the will of her house. Nobles didn't tell lies, so she wouldn't so easily mouth off something that wasn't possible. She simply had the confidence

that she could accomplish this.

"There's still time. I will make sure that our house supports yours even during war. After all, we're friends."

I felt so touched by this declaration that my tears began falling once again. I'd been so filled with worry since the news of Sir Gino going to war, and her words made me so happy in the midst of it all. She was a very wonderful person and a precious friend of mine.

"Whoooa! A single lady changing the policy of their entire household is amazing! You're so impressive!" Lady Janail exclaimed.

For women who belonged to old-guard families, they couldn't even decide what dress they were going to wear on their own. The notion of changing an entire family must have been a huge shock to Lady Janail.

For the sake of my family's survival, Lady Ekatarina was working hard. As the mistress of this household, I needed to work even harder. I wanted to do something as well, but what? In my mind, going to battle would be best, but Sir Gino was vehemently against it. If I kept asking, he might come to dislike me. *What should I do?*

"Lady Grimardy, it's nice to see you after all this time. I heard you'd stopped by, so I thought I could come by and greet you," Sir Gino said, entering.

It was very rare for him to pop in during a girls' tea party, but we all easily began talking, and Lady Ekatarina told Sir Gino her earlier proposal.

"In that case, I'll cooperate for Ana's sake too. First, we'll increase the types of magic tools being sold to House Byron from the Simon territory. If the benefits of trade between our territories become strong enough, it'll be easier to convince your family of an alliance. It may take some time to build the facilities necessary to increase production, though."

Sir Gino's as capable as always. He's already come up with a realistic plan. It wasn't too rare for families to clash and, as a result, friendships to be lost. I wished to stay Lady Ekatarina's friend for a long time, so it'd make me very happy if we could form an alliance.

However, Sir Gino was right that it would take time. The Simon territory's population was disproportionately small due to how

poverty-stricken they'd been all these years. First the population needed to grow, which most likely wouldn't happen before the war began.

"Um, by the way... Lady Byron, Lady Grimardy, may I...call you by your first names?"

The two of them tilted their heads at his question. Out of our elite class, Sir Gino was the only one who still called the noble ladies by their family names. In our most recent counseling session, he'd made a resolution to overcome this. That was why he was bringing this up now. Sir Gino was taking steps to overcome his distrust of women.

"Of course, I wouldn't mind at all. You have the same family name as Lady Anastasia now that you're married, so I've been calling you by your first name for a while," Lady Ekatarina said.

"I don't mind at all either... But also, you're asking us now? You might be the only one out of our former classmates who still calls people by their family names."

"Thank you both," Sir Gino said.

I was surprised to see that he was wearing a genuine smile. If this had been the Sir Gino of the past, he would've stayed stone-faced in front of women. If he did smile, it would only have been as the barest curve of his mouth. Now, however, he was very naturally and warmly smiling.

I'm so glad he's able to do this now. It shows how much better he's gotten. But also, I feel very conflicted. Lady Janail was clearly struck by Sir Gino's gentle smile. After conversing a little longer, Sir Gino excused himself to return to work.

"What's the matter? Why are you puffing your cheeks out like that? It's very adorable, though," Lady Ekatarina asked, giggling, after Sir Gino left.

"You can't have him."

"Huh?" both Lady Ekatarina and Lady Janail asked.

"You can't have Sir Gino. Please look elsewhere."

At this, the two of them began laughing.

"So this is what it looks like when a kitten's fur stands on end," Lady Ekatarina laughed.

I'm not a kitten. I'm an adult woman.

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of trying to take him," Lady Janail said with a grin.

Seeing this, I felt reassured and calmed myself down. As I did, I realized what I'd said out of jealousy and quickly apologized to Lady Janail.

"Don't worry. He was always surrounded by girls at school, so I always knew you had it tough. I can understand why you're so defensive after having to endure that for so long." She smiled at me.

I truly hope that this kind girl can find her happiness.

Chapter 7: Surprising Visitors

Ginorious

War required a large amount of money. In most cases, that money was raised by enacting a temporary tax, but this time, I used a method that I knew about from my past life—crowdfunding.

As a result, I received a lot of donations for the battle against Thorsdale, not just from nobles but also commoners across the kingdom. Though in my past life, crowdfunding had been enacted through the internet, I made do with what I had—posting on physical notice boards. Overall, it might not have been exactly how it worked in my past life, but the concept was the same.

To be honest, since communication technology wasn't very developed in this country, I didn't really expect to be able to spread the word quickly enough to raise much money; however, contrary to my prediction, we got a lot of donations. We even received large amounts of grain, swords, arrows, and other supplies.

As a reward for donations, we gave everyone either vacation tickets or special vouchers that they could use to buy products from the Sevensworth territory. Receiving a gift after donating was something that nobody had ever seen before, and this helped to spur interest.

War was of great concern to commoners, but up until now, they didn't have much way of knowing when one was even starting. We decided to explicitly state on the reward vouchers that they were thanks for their donations to the war efforts, which helped spread word that war was on the horizon and prepared the people for what was to come. The information spread through the country a lot faster than I expected.

There were many reasons why I didn't raise taxes to collect funding for this war. Firstly, the Sevensworths had a lot of money, so

we could easily fund it even without extra taxation. With crowdfunding, you never knew how much you'd actually raise, but it let people donate what they were able, and the amount didn't really matter much.

"Hey, Ginorious!" I turned to see a guy running toward me, waving his hand.

"Justin, you came too? What about the royal knights? I thought your dream was to join the royal guard?"

Currently, we were in the grand hall at a different estate that the Sevensworths owned in our territory, where we were enlisting any knights or soldiers who wanted to volunteer. A lot of people were signing up, stuffing the large hall full with new recruits. Justin was one of the ones who'd joined. I was here to guide the enlisting efforts.

"I quit. I don't wanna become a royal guard with how the country is now. It'd be a stain on my honor as a knight," he said, laughing loudly.

After graduating, Justin Ryan had had the option of joining Count Ryan's order of knights. As the little brother of the house heir, he could have easily done that and lived an easy life, but he'd decided to pursue the honor of joining the ranks of the royal guard, who were known as the strongest in the country. For Justin, whose pride was very important to him, I could understand why he quit.

"I'm not the only one. Count Fletcher's here too; the guy you fought in the swordsmanship tournament."

Another reason I decided to use crowdfunding had to do with recruitment. With the signboards asking for donations, and with the tickets we distributed, we sent a clear message that we were fighting this war without the help of the royal family. It became known throughout the country that the royal family had no intention of lending their support.

Up until now, commoners only heard about which noble houses were or weren't fighting in the war through rumors, but this time, it was clearly written out for them. Thanks to this, the antipathy toward the royal family from the commoners grew stronger. This country wasn't a democracy, so in most cases, the opinions of the

commoners didn't really affect politics too much, but right now, it was having a significant influence.

There was a term in this country, "Toothless Knights," which referred to those who were paid great amounts of money but were useless in a fight. This was the general perception of the royal knights currently. Nobles cared a great deal about their honor, and anyone who wanted the honor of wielding their blade for their country couldn't bear to be labeled as "toothless." Most everyone with other job prospects had quit the royal knights.

I was proud at how everything had turned out as I'd expected it to with crowdfunding. The true objective of this plan was to reduce the royal family's forces.

"Duke Ginorious, how great it is to see you in good health. It's my honor to greet a descendant of the great dragon."

My eyes widened as I saw who had called out to me. It wasn't because of how, among the men here, she stood alone in her gorgeous dress and her curled, golden hair. It was because of the way she'd greeted me. It was customary in modern day for women to lift both sides of their skirt; however, during the time when the Sevensworth territory had been its own country, women had held their skirt with their left hand, covered their heart with their right, and bowed their head. Doing this now was an affront to the royal family, and nobody in the territory did it anymore. However, the record of it remained in the history books.

The one who greeted me was Lady Francess Lillard, the daughter of Duke Lillard. She was the same woman who'd had her engagement with the crown prince called off during their graduation party. However, she should have been a part of the first prince's faction now. So why was someone who supported the current king here, where knights and soldiers of the Sevensworths who opposed the new king were gathering. And why did she greet me like that?

As someone who'd once been on track to become queen, she must have undergone very strict training about how to conduct herself, and she was famous for being a flawless noble lady. That perfection paired with her golden hair and eyes gave her the title of "the Gold Rose." Ana and a lot of other girls looked up to her. She

wasn't like my sister, who'd do things for fun without considering the consequences or where she was, so there must have been a reason for Lady Francess of all people to give me this old traditional greeting. I tried to hold back my confusion and returned it before asking why she'd come here.

"I'd like to ask that you allow House Lillard to support you in this war by joining your bottom ranks."

Huh?! You want your forces to work under Sevensworth command?! You want to join our side?! Between this and the old Sevensworth greeting, it was almost as if she were trying to say that they were submitting to the Sevensworths as the true royal family. Of course, this situation would be a great boon to us, but I couldn't understand why she'd do this.

I figured this would be an involved conversation, so I took her to the estate's thirty-fifth drawing room, called the Windmill, to talk. We sat across from each other while drinking tea. After exchanging enough pleasantries to satisfy noble etiquette, I decided to return to the topic at hand.

"Why are you offering your help to our house? I thought House Lillard was part of the king's faction."

The "king's faction" was the new name for the first prince's faction. Usually, whenever Ana and I spoke, we still referred to him as the first prince, but technically, since he was king now, the right term was the king's faction.

"As you know, House Lillard is not very influential there. Because of this, as a show of the new era we've entered, we'd like to offer our assistance to House Sevensworth."

In a fit of rage due to his daughter's engagement being ended by the former crown prince, Duke Lillard had shifted his house's support to back the first prince. He was the only duke to do so, but since he was new to the faction, viscounts and others had more influence than him. It must've been hard on his pride as a noble to be regarded as beneath those with lower status. At this point, he must have been unable to handle it any longer.

"If that's the case, you don't necessarily need to submit your

house under our command. You could simply stand alongside us as allies. If anything, I believe that would be the normal thing to do."

"This is a golden chance for our house to contribute, so we'd like to do our best to assist you, Sir Ginorious. We'd like you to entrust us with the first strike," she said, curtsying again in the old Sevensworth way.

Not only was she acting as if I'd already accepted her request to enter under our command, but she even made the request to strike first. She'd also shifted from calling me Duke Ginorious back to a more intimate "Sir Ginorious." It reminded me of charismatic salesmen and showed me how much she excelled at negotiations. She really lived up to her reputation as the "Gold Rose."

The reason for joining us made sense. They'd been essentially sidelined and treated lesser in the first prince's faction. Of course joining our forces and regaining their glory was a more attractive option. The request to strike first under our command was also a way to do that. If they were going to sell their services and make us indebted to them, they might as well go big.

"You seem fairly certain that we're going to emerge victorious in this war," I said.

At the same time, though her reasoning made sense, there was something off. The only way they could reap the benefits of this arrangement was if we won. If we lost, they'd go down with us. This was a war between one territory and an entire country. The Sevensworths were definitely at a disadvantage with our forces. But even with that in mind, House Lillard seemed assured of our victory, and I couldn't understand why.

"Well, of course I am," she said with a confident smile. It didn't seem like she was lying.

"What makes you so confident?"

"In order for you to trust me, I'll reveal my secret. I'm actually a natural-born sorcerer, and I can see the flow of mana."

"I see...you have a magic eye, then? So what did you see of our house?"

"Allow me to begin by repeating what the pope claims. Though you have healing magic that was bestowed upon you from the gods,

you're not a trained sorcerer, so you have not studied magic. That's why you are supposedly unable to use magic, correct?"

"That's right. That is what the church says."

"However, I saw you activate magic during your battle with Count Fletcher in the swordsmanship tournament. It was unbelievably efficient, and very complicated to the point where I couldn't even tell what kind of magic it was. It was a type I've never seen before in my life. If you can use magic like that, I've no doubt that your existence alone will easily make up for your army's lack of manpower."

I see. She saw me use magic. Well, now it made sense why she wanted to join our house. The swordsmanship tournament had taken place a long time before the church had come out with their story of how I'd had a divine vision. She knew the church wasn't telling the truth and therefore, she saw me not as someone blessed by the gods but as a very skilled sorcerer who could even lift Ana's curse.

The Sevensworths would be hailed as heroes if we successfully defended the country from an invasion. It would raise our status, and if we didn't lose too much in the effort, then the current king, who was already in a shaky position, would be put into an even more precarious one.

Though there were some houses who predicted we'd be successful, they all expected it to come with severe losses. However, she alone could tell that I was a sorcerer with magic technology too advanced for this era. She realized I could most likely come up with an answer to Thorsdale's new weapon and keep losses to a minimum.

Now that I thought about it, it was true that she'd started talking to me more proactively after the swordsmanship tournament. So this was why her attitude had changed so suddenly. For the mock battle, I'd initially planned on letting Count Fletcher win, but I saw Ana cheering her heart out for me in the stands, and I realized I couldn't let myself lose. Seeing her so earnestly cheering for me, I decided to give it my all instead, and as a result, I'd used a magic called *overclock*.

Though I'd started off the battle with body fortification magic, I'd made sure to disguise it so the sorcerers in the stands couldn't sense me using it. However, I'd used *overclock* in the midst of our duel. Since it was spur of the moment, I forgot to cloak it.

What she'd seen wasn't my body fortification but *overclock*, which meant her magic eye most likely wasn't good enough to see through my cloaking spell. That being said, I still needed to be careful. I used a much stronger cloaking spell than usual to mask my analysis magic now. As I observed her, I realized that she had a magic circuit in her right eye. *I see... Judging by the structure of the circuit, it's always active and it can only see mana.*

"You're not the only one in House Lillard who can use magic, are you?" I said.

She didn't even blink or flinch at my question. She was really living up to her name as the Gold Rose. However, with the analysis magic I'd cast on my eye just now, I carefully observed the flow of chi in her body and could see that she was flustered.

But that wasn't the only thing I learned. There was something abnormal about her circuits too. For natural-born sorcerers, they could use magic from birth; in other words, they were born with mana circuits and chi circuits already developed. Usually, they were optimized for a specific type of magic that they'd naturally be good at. However, her circuits were not efficient enough to function as a base for her eye, which could only be because she was trying to develop new circuits, which were affecting the efficiency of the ones she'd been born with. If she continued to develop new ones, the efficiency of the flow of mana to her eye would continue to drop until one day she'd be unable to use it altogether.

For example, Bridgette was a natural-born sorcerer and her circuits were optimized for producing and controlling pitch-black manifestations. As a result, if she'd been a student in my past life, she wouldn't have been able to learn magic like we did. She'd have to create entirely new circuits to do so, which would interfere with her natural ones and lower their strength. However, I was teaching her specific magic that fit with her magic circuits.

The problem with Lady Francess was that some of the circuits I

saw were ones she'd manually created, and hadn't been born with. In other words, she was actively studying magic. Though it might not have been public, most likely House Lillard was a family that specialized in magic.

"I'm impressed... I didn't expect you to figure that out. You're right. We've kept it a secret that House Lillard has magic in our blood. Everyone descended from our family can use it."

I knew it. I should be more wary of this fact than her magic eye. When a family hid their affinity for magic, more often than not, it meant that they passed down a troublesome kind. Something worth hiding, such as charm magic, brainwashing, mind reading, and so on. *Oh, I know what I should do. I should give Ana and the others a magic tool that prevents their psyches from being influenced by magic.*

In the middle of my thoughts, Matthew whispered something into my ear. Ana had come to the drawing room to join us. Lady Francess agreed and Ana entered. With her in the conversation, the topic shifted to our days as students. It seemed that when Ana had still been at the bottom of the school hierarchy, there'd been a time when she'd been pushed into a puddle, becoming covered in mud. While she cried, Lady Francess had taken Ana by the hand to the changing room. *Damn you, Lady Florro! Your bullying of Ana went that far?! I knew I hated you!* Apparently, Lady Francess had helped Ana many times after that too.

"I truly thank you for everything you did for me. I really looked up to you back then," Ana said, smiling.

I wished I could've started in elementary school with them. If I had, it would've been me protecting Ana. Though I was happy so many people had helped her throughout the years, the sparkling eyes of admiration that she showed Lady Francess made not so pleasant feelings well up inside me.

"That was definitely Lady Francess," Ana said after Lady Francess had left.

Yeah, I completely agree. Recently, Ana had a habit of checking to make sure the women I met with didn't give me anything like

food, drink, or small items for some reason, and had done the same today.

"Sir Ginorious, madam, a very important guest has arrived. May I ask that you meet with them?" Mary asked as she entered the drawing room.

Wow, so many guests today, I thought, but I supposed it couldn't be helped. We'd just started recruitment for the war. My mother- and father-in-law were gone for the time being, so that left Ana and me to deal with everything.

After I received the title of duke, Mary and the other servants changed the way they addressed our family. My father-in-law became lord master, my mother-in-law became lady madam, and Ana became madam. However, I asked that they continue calling me the same as always because I didn't feel like my skill was worthy of respect yet. I didn't explain my reasoning to them, though, so they didn't know that this was coming from my sense of inferiority or uneasiness. I planned on having them change the way they addressed me once I had more confidence. I wanted more than anything to hurry up and become a man worthy of standing by Ana's side.

"Good day, Duke Sevensworth and Madam Sevensworth. I'm honored that you agreed to meet with me. It's an honor to greet descendants of the great dragon."

"Y-Your Majesty?!"

Both Ana and I exclaimed this at the same time, our voices echoing across the twenty-second drawing room, Dianthus Musk. Our shock was not only at the decidedly not dead queen standing before us, but also that she'd addressed us with the highest level of formality as though we were monarchs, and had also used the old Sevensworth greeting method. We frantically urged her to stop bowing to us and had her sit down so she could tell us what happened.

"Why are you dressed as a commoner?" I asked.

It wasn't unheard of for nobility to dress as commoners when sneaking around, but usually they'd wear clean, new clothes. What Her Majesty was currently wearing was ragged and stained, with not

a single piece of jewelry, and she had her hair messily tied behind her like a commoner as well.

"I thought this the best way to keep Christopher from finding us."

She was referring to our new king. By not using any honorifics, she was very transparently displaying her disdain for him. Today was the first day of our recruitment efforts and a lot of people had come to join, and they weren't all just commoners. Nobles like Justin and Lady Francess had also come. The current king was no doubt very keen to see which nobles would side with us, and had sent his own people here to find out, making them very busy. That was probably why she chose to come today, and why she'd chosen to dress as a commoner just in case.

"They said you were attacked. Are you all right?" Ana asked.

Her Majesty answered this question by explaining how they'd been attacked within the city limits of the royal capital. For their safety, they'd tried to return quickly to the palace, but they found out that the first prince's faction had already taken over. So they left the royal capital and traveled to our territory through the mountains, risking being attacked by monsters to take a path that not many people had their eyes on.

It made sense why she seemed so weary. As someone who'd gone from being the daughter of a marquess to being the queen, it had likely been her first time traveling without a bathroom or proper bathing facilities, let alone camping outside in monster territory. It must have been incredibly tough.

Though at first, they'd tried to go back to her maiden family, House Klein, they changed their minds and decided to come here instead. I already knew why.

The Sevensworths were very clear in their opposition to the current king. If we were going to stage a revolt, then having the queen and her son alive would be useful to us. We were certain to keep them safe. House Klein, on the other hand, was trying to avoid conflict with the current king, so there was the chance they'd hand the queen and prince over to him. Ultimately, she'd decided to rely on politics instead of blood since it was the objectively safer option.

"I humbly ask that you graciously grant us refuge," the queen

said, standing up and bowing once more.

Ana and I frantically stopped her.

"We will of course treat you with the utmost hospitality. You will be assigned a large number of servants to attend to your every need. Of course, we'll make sure you're well protected as well. Please use this estate as you like. If you have any complaints or requests, please let us know," I said.

Her Majesty seemed relieved from the bottom of her heart and deeply bowed her head in thanks.

"Um, by the way, is he..." Ana asked, looking at the person sitting next to Her Majesty.

I knew that it was the former crown prince, but he seemed different. When we entered the room, Her Majesty had stood and greeted us perfectly, and had also explained the situation and asked for our protection. During all that time, he hadn't moved a single muscle. Not only did he not even try to greet us, but he didn't join the conversation at all. He was sitting on the sofa very slovenly, blankly staring at the ceiling.

"The reason we went out that day was because my foolish son accepted an invitation from the girl he bends over backward for. She said something about having made an important decision, so she wished to speak with him. It sounded very suspicious to me, but my son begged, so I relented and went with him to the meeting place. As expected, we were ambushed by assassins, and she herself tried to kill him. Now he's like this due to the shock of everything."

"That's...quite a lot of hardship."

It was clear that the person he loved, Lady Mariott, had been a plant used to strengthen the first prince's position. The one who'd pushed the former crown prince to end his engagement with Lady Francess, the one who'd asked him to destroy his own reputation and turn aside the throne, the one whose every request somehow ended up benefiting the first prince—it was all her. There was no doubt that the first prince's faction had sent her to seduce him. But even after all the things she'd gotten him to do, he'd continued to trust her, and now he was living with the result of his actions. All that trust, wasted.

“It’s your fault, mother...” he muttered, still looking at the ceiling. After essentially being a statue in this room, he finally spoke, surprising all of us. “It’s all your fault! If you hadn’t done that, then my dear Lily...she wouldn’t have...”

He’d erupted into a fury over Liliana Mariott, the daughter of Baron Mariott. Her nickname was Lily. Apparently, talking about her was a trigger.

Her Majesty had no words in response. She simply looked sorrowfully at the floor. Though they didn’t say it outright, I could tell what’d happened to Lady Mariott from the way they were acting. Since Her Majesty had suspected they would be attacked, she must have had a plan in place. And the fact that they were here meant the assassins had failed and most likely been killed. It’d have been one thing if the assassins only assaulted their carriage as they fled, but if they’d launched an attack in the establishment where Lady Mariott had lured them, then the only way they would’ve gotten out was by fighting, which would undoubtedly lead to casualties.

“I don’t think you have anything to apologize for, Your Majesty,” Ana said, surprisingly saying something that could result in more heated words.

After appearing in noble society more, Ana had had more opportunities to speak with Her Majesty and had become more sympathetic to her.

“What are you saying?! She’s clearly at fault! It’s because of the guards she brought that Lily died!”

“I think it’s quite natural to defend yourself if you or a family member are in danger of being hurt. Her Majesty is not at fault for repelling the attackers. The ones at fault here are the ones who attacked,” Ana said. Hearing her sound argument, the prince lost his words. He had nowhere to place his anger, so it all got focused into his fist, which was now trembling. “Every time you caused some kind of problem, Her Majesty swept in to solve it. She cares about you so deeply. How can you say these cruel things about her?”

“She only did that to keep her power! Everyone at the palace knew that!”

It was true that there were quite a few people at the palace who

thought that. More specifically, there were a lot of people who bad-mouthed the queen in order to keep her in place. The former crown prince had grown up hearing these things, and most likely, Lady Mariott had said them as well. From her standpoint, a rift between the prince and his mother only benefited her. He most likely ate up every last one of her words.

"How does protecting a former crown prince help her gain power? How does her accompanying you to a place where she knew an attempt would be made on your life help? How would defeating the assassins help her? It was all for your sake, because she cares about you deeply. Even her being here today is because of that. She tossed away her pride and essentially prostrated herself before us. Can you truly not tell how much love she has for you?"

The prince looked stunned. Lady Mariott had snaked her way into his heart so deeply that he believed every lie she fed him. No. Wait. Maybe...

"It may be true that many people talked poorly of Her Majesty, but you were right by her side the entire time. It's hard to think you didn't know these were all lies. You probably tried to not think too deeply about it because that way, you could easily release your frustration by lashing out at your mother whenever your relationship with Lady Mariott had problems." I couldn't help but say this.

The reason the former crown prince was surprised wasn't because he'd just realized his mother actually loved him; it was because this was the first time someone else had pointed it out. The face he'd made was the same one people made when someone hit the nail on the head.

"And what basis do you have to say that?!" he snapped.

"If she was truly using you as nothing more than a political tool, then you would have distanced yourself from her. However, whether it was at the palace or even here, you show no signs of being wary of her. If anything, I see a strong sense of trust. You know that even if you lash out at her for your own mistakes, she'll never abandon you. All I can think is that you understand that she will always give you unconditional love."

"Th-That's not..."

"I've heard that you haven't changed how you act with Her Majesty at all since you were a child. Most likely, you chose to stop trying to think too deeply about the lies people told versus what you knew to be true. However, you're an adult now. You can't keep stretching out this misunderstanding forever. The only ones who can still rely on their mothers while lashing out at them are children. How about you show your mother how mature you've become?"

He had no rebuttal and instead stormed out of the drawing room without another word. Her Majesty deeply apologized for his lack of etiquette, both coming and going so rudely.

"It's quite all right. He's only twenty-five. Though he's technically an adult, he's still young from the view of society."

"Oh? That's something that an old person like myself would say, Sir Ginorious," Matthew chuckled, seeing how Her Majesty was looking at me with a suspicious expression.

Oh, right. I was younger than the former crown prince.

I recommended to Her Majesty that he go through a psychological healing program at our estate. It was the same kind of program that people who lost their family to monsters or carried huge emotional scars would go through to turn them into soldiers.

But that being said, it wouldn't be anything too hard. Though there was a counseling element to it, at its essence, it was just working the body through physical means. By using the body, the brain would secrete chemicals, essentially creating an endorphin high. By repeating that process, they'd find relief in their heart while delving into training and become great soldiers.

It wouldn't be too bad for him to go through that. When I had lived in the slums after ending my engagement with Ana, I'd practiced my swordsmanship and martial arts for hours on end. It was best to do some simple but difficult training whenever one felt down. By doing that, you could forget about unnecessary things. Even if my heart hurt to the point where I couldn't sleep, if I trained until I was unsteady on my feet, I'd simply crawl into bed and pass out.

Ultimately, Her Majesty enthusiastically agreed to my suggestion. What she was worried most about right now was whether or not he

would try to take his own life.

Chapter 8: The True Identities of Bruce and Lady Mariott

Ginorious

"Sir Gino, this just arrived for you," Ana said, strangely giddy as she handed me a long, thin, wooden box.

With crowdfunding, all types of donations were welcome, so we received a variety of goods. Ana was working on organizing everything and was now giving me something that'd been personally addressed to me. The majority of what we received were things like arrows and grain, so it was unusual to say the least that anything would be sent to me specifically.

I opened the box to find a double-edged sword. The gilded metal that had been intricately spun to form the sword's guard was so beautiful that it could be called a work of art. Its black sheath was also ornate with golden finishes, and was even inset with purple crystals. My eyes widened as I drew it from its sheath and saw that the blade was made of a metal that had a sparkling black luster.

"Is this adamant?"

Straight swords like this were long and light so they were easy to wield even from horseback. The thinness of the blade risked making it brittle, but this weakness was made up for by it being made of adamant, which was a very sturdy metal. This sword was not only beautiful but practical as well.

"Isn't it amazing?! The blade was forged by Buela Pistah, and his wife made the sheath and decorations!" Ana exclaimed.

"Isn't this a little...*too* valuable for someone like me?"

The price of a sword varied greatly based on who smithed it, and Buela Pistah was the best in the country. He was also very proud and known to refuse requests even when offered a great deal of

money. His wife was a renowned sheath maker, and together, their creations were worth more than several lesser noble estates combined. I'd started crowdfunding as a way to reduce the strength of the royal family, and the money we got from it was a nice bonus, but I felt bad accepting something this lavish.

"Oh? According to the servant who delivered it from the royal capital, this is a gift from Buela Pistah himself. They passed on this message from him: 'You're going to find out how amazing this sword you said you didn't need is!'" Matthew recited, chuckling with amusement.

Back when I was still a student, I'd competed against Count Fletcher in a swordsmanship tournament, where the prize happened to be a sword that Buela Pistah himself had forged. Despite winning, I gave the sword to Count Fletcher since I figured that, as a knight, he'd appreciate it more than me. I honestly hadn't cared too much about it. The only thing I'd cared about was dedicating my victory to Ana.

"It seems that Buela Pistah is quite impressed with you, Sir Ginorious. Our covert operatives visited one of the drinking spots he frequents, and the fact that you selflessly gave away his sword without a second thought, plus the way you would fight a war for the sake of the country without any support from the king, is all very impressive to him. He was practically singing your praises. Most likely, that sword is his way of encouraging you. I think it best that you accept his gift."

If that's the case, I suppose I should.

"Um, S-Sir, Gino? I think the black of the sword and sheath really suit you well. I'd very much like to see you with it equipped." Per Ana's request, I fixed the sword to my belt. "Oh, it's just as I thought! It looks very nice on you! You look very dashing!"

What?! Did she just call me dashing?! She thinks that of me?! Heh heh heh. So I'm "dashing," eh? I decided against tossing this expensive sword into the treasure vault; instead, I was going to keep it on me and take good care of it. I was on cloud nine, but that was when Bruce came, saying he had something important to talk to me about.

He asked if we could speak alone, but neither Matthew or Bridgette agreed. They didn't know who he was, so they were still wary of him. Bruce relented to have Ana, Matthew, and Bridgette stay, so ultimately the four of us remained in the room.

"So, what's up?"

Ever since he'd started working at the Sevensworth estate, I'd stopped speaking formally with Bruce. He'd strongly requested it because, in his words, *"I'm not your damned guest. Treat me like a friend."* I took the opportunity to have him go back to speaking casually to me as well. When he had to speak formally, he spoke less, most likely because he didn't have much experience with nobles and their etiquette. So, I had him continue speaking formally with Ana and the others while having him promise to speak casually to me when he really had something to say to me.

"Let me join the war. I wanna distinguish myself in battle no matter what." He looked almost desperate as he asked.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on first? I don't even know your real name."

"True. Let's start from there."

Bruce then began to tell me everything about himself. His real name was Hans Hartley, and once upon a time, he'd been a covert operative of the Liebeh Kingdom. The way covert operatives worked in that country was a little different from ours. In our country, covert operatives worked for individual houses, but in Liebeh, they were essentially mercenaries who worked for anyone who could pay.

His problems had started from a job he took from a family called Hechsagon. After Bruce and his clan successfully finished the job, House Hechsagon attacked them in an attempt to silence them for good. Many died, but there were some who were barely able to escape, and Hans had been one of them.

"House Sevensworth really takes good care of its covert operatives. You even give them genuine status, which isn't something I even thought possible based on how my country works. You also don't use them as disposable pawns. Your house is truly one in a million. That's why I want to prove myself in this war, get status, and make a place where the others who got away can come

back to."

Hans proceeded to prostrate himself in front of me. It was the commoner's way in this country of formally making a request. Unlike in the kingdom of Liebeh, there were many houses in this country and neighboring ones that gave their covert operatives status, but in most cases, it was status in name only and it didn't come with a salary. They didn't receive any money aside from when they completed jobs, but they weren't always guaranteed work. Usually, they'd have to do commoner jobs too.

House Sevensworth, however, granted our operatives status as knights—the lowest rank but still a title—as well as a salary that amounted to about a hundred times more than the average commoner wage. We also didn't treat our covert operatives as disposable, unlike many other families, which was why many of them wanted to work with us. In fact, Hans wasn't the only one who wanted to serve us.

"What kind of job did House Hechsagon request of you?" Matthew asked.

"Sorry. I can't say," Hans said, beginning to sweat.

Ana seemed a little confused, not understanding what was going on. Ana hadn't completed her chi circuits yet, but she could tell that Matthew was releasing a very powerful demon's aura. Usually, it used both mana and chi, but right now, he was only using chi and bathing Hans in it, making him know that he was ready to kill him if need be.

"It's our family's creed to not talk about jobs we take. I've had to take out people in our clan who broke that rule. I can't be the one to break it, even under threat of death," Hans said, clenching his teeth.

Hearing this, Matthew stopped the demon's aura. Though Hans looked to be bracing himself for punishment over his defiance, I actually felt better and had a higher opinion of him. Though his clan had lived like mercenaries, they still had their own pride and creed. Even though he was forced to be on the run, he still wouldn't betray the trust of the one that hired him, even though they were the ones he was running from.

"What was your clan's specialty?" I asked.

"Well, it's probably easier to show you," he said, still kneeling on the floor and making signs with his hands like a ninja.

"Oh my!" Ana exclaimed with surprise.

Though I didn't make a sound, I was surprised too because he'd disappeared.

"This is quite impressive. Even I can only just barely tell where you are," Matthew remarked.

Even with my inspection magic cast, I couldn't see him at all. Testing things had been part of my job as an engineer in my past life, so I tried various inspection and detection spells until I was finally able to see him with a higher-level magic called *precision inspection eye*.

I discovered that the spell he used was a combination of concealment techniques using both mana and chi. One sent a hallucination to the brain to prevent the target from being able to perceive the caster, and the other diffracted light to create an optical camouflage. It was a fairly powerful magic that even graduates from college with humanities degrees wouldn't be able to detect. The only people who possibly could were those who had a master's or higher in a science field.

The optical camouflage range could diffract a lot of wavelengths on the electromagnetic spectrum, including ultraviolet and infrared rays. Even cameras from my past life wouldn't have been able to catch this if they were the cheap kind. After fully inspecting it to my satisfaction, I told him he could dispel it whenever he wanted.

"Sheesh, you could seriously still see me, boss?" Hans asked from a little bit far away, scratching the back of his head while wearing a look of disappointment.

He must have thought that I wouldn't perceive his skills highly because I'd been able to find him. Also, for the record, "boss" referred to me.

"Can you cast that magic on multiple people?" I asked.

"It's not magic. It's ninjutsu. The one I used is called 'Shadow Jutsu' and is the one that makes you the most difficult to find. I can only cast it on myself. There are others I can cast on multiple people, but the more there are, the easier it'll be to find them. If I

use my jutsu with the largest area of effect, 'Tree Leaf Shadow Jutsu,' then I could maybe...cast it on about three thousand people?"

"How long can the people in your clan keep the jutsu going for?"

"It really depends on their stamina and if they're well rested, but I can do it for about three days. Everyone else, even the greenest of us, could probably go for about three hours."

"Got it. I'm giving you status before the war, but in exchange, I want you to gather as many jutsu users as you can and have them help in the war."

"R-Really?!" Hans's face burst into a smile.

"U-Um, are you possibly a ninja?" Ana exclaimed.

"Yeah, that's what we're called in your country, but in ours we're called shinobi."

"Oh my, that's amazing! Are you possibly able to summon large frogs if you hold scrolls in your mouth?"

Ana, very excited seeing a real-life ninja that she'd only read about, immediately began pestering Hans with questions. However, I was more surprised by the huge boon we'd just gotten. This was so major, I'd have to redo our strategy from the ground up. It'd make more work for me, but I was quite happy. With this, we'd have an easy victory.

I'd taken Hans in and healed his leg as a way of thanking him for everything he'd done for me while I'd been living in the slums. I hadn't thought of having him do anything for me at all, but now, he was proving to be a huge asset. It really was true that good deeds were rewarded. As long as you were kind to others, your life would become better without you even realizing it.

"Can you use superfocused breathing?"

From this country's perspective, this was also something that ninjas could do. Ana was being herself, beaming brightly while asking question after question. However, her knowledge of ninjas mostly came from novels. Most likely, without even realizing it, she'd gotten some fantasy mixed in with reality.

Hans went right to work and began gathering up members from his clan. There were a few of them that I'd already been acquainted

with, like the owner of the Moonflower restaurant where I'd eaten gobies with Ana. This country had its own version of soy sauce except that it was made from fish, but the Moonflower made an actual soybean-based sauce. I was so surprised by how nostalgic the taste made me feel that I periodically went back there to eat.

Though I'd been prepared for Hans not to have been able to round up too many people, he'd gotten more than enough. With this, I had no doubt that the plan would go off without a hitch.

Anastasia

Sir Gino departed for the fort in preparation for the war. I'd planned to send him off with a smile, but in the end, I wasn't able to hold back my tears. I was tasked with staying at home, though I would have preferred to be with him. I was confident I could have been of use. Also, on the off chance that something happened to Sir Gino, I wished to die with him there.

Unfortunately, Sir Gino was very against me being near the battlefield. I would have protested more for him to change his mind, but I didn't want to risk him coming to hate me, so I held back. With him in danger and so far away, I was extremely worried and there was nothing I could do about it. *Please come back to me safely!*

"Are you thinking about Duke Ginorious?"

I was brought back to my senses by my aunt's voice. *I can't let myself get distracted like this. We're in the middle of having tea.* It was just the two of us in the forty-fourth drawing room, known as the Fan Columbine, but my preoccupied thoughts must have been making her uncomfortable. Much time had passed since she'd first arrived at our doors, and now I was calling her my aunt rather than "Her Majesty."

"I'm terribly sorry. He's the only thing on my mind these days," I said.

"There's no need to apologize. He had to deploy to battle because of me. If I'd been able to bear a child sooner, this situation would never have come to existence. The state of affairs in our country

wouldn’t be so chaotic.”

“You’ve nothing to blame yourself for. Children are blessings from the heavens, after all.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s that... The reason I wasn’t able to conceive for so long was that...I never noticed contraceptives being added to my food and drink.”

“Huh?!”

“You see, I was raised like a princess. All my friends at school were good people too. Before becoming an adult, I never met anyone who tried to deceive me or wished ill on me. It was only after I graduated, married, and moved into the palace that I learned how sheltered I’d been and what true evil intent was. Of course, I was taught in my training as queen to be wary of others. But even so, the real deal is much more frightening than anything you learn in a classroom,” she said as if mocking herself. “Back then, I was truly...truly foolish. I was a sheltered girl and far too trusting of others. That’s why he...he turned out the same...”

For a mere moment, I saw anger and resentment flicker in her eyes. I couldn’t blame her after all the horrible things she’d endured. However, the intensity was shocking. The rage that appeared on her face was like a bright pain as if she’d swallowed melted steel, and the bitterness that accompanied it was profound. It wasn’t a simple emotion like disdain, but more like a large sea of deadly poison bubbling up, threatening to cover her entire world in black. My body went cold all the way to my fingertips at the realization that someone right next to me could possess such intense emotions.

“That’s right. John was killed by that woman.”

I must not have been able to hide my fear and confusion, because she looked at me and said this. John was the nickname for Johnathan, my aunt’s first son and the second-born prince, but he had died when he was still young. Officially, he’d died of illness. “That woman” was the king’s concubine. I realized my aunt must have experienced hardships beyond what I could even imagine, to produce these emotions from her that could make a cold sweat run down my back.

“I swore I would die before I let anything like that happen again.

That's why I decided to make Dee king so he could have great power. I thought it was for his sake."

Dee was the nickname for the former crown prince, Dietfried. *So that's why she worked so hard for him... But despite her efforts, he deliberately caused problems to reject the throne.* I felt sorry for my aunt that he'd never realized her strong feelings.

"But...after coming here, I've started to doubt myself. Despite hating training, he's practicing his swordsmanship late into the night. He's much more lively than he ever was at the palace. It makes me wonder if I really was doing all this for him or as revenge against that woman. I can't help but think about that when I look at him..."

The former crown prince had turned over a new leaf. At first, he'd hated the program we'd placed him in to help his mental health, but now he threw himself into it. Even after completing the basic training, he would continue swinging his sword until the late hours of the night. He was enthusiastic to the point where his instructor had to step in to make him rest.

When he'd first arrived, he'd been almost like a living corpse, but now he was much more burly and a little tan. He'd become very healthy.

"The other day you mentioned 'ultimate love,' do you remember? I've been thinking about that over and over again. Did my motivations really come from 'ultimate love' for Dee? Or was my true intention all along simply to get revenge on that woman? It only makes sense that if you raise a child for revenge, he won't turn out as well as he should..."

"Are you planning on trying a new direction with him?" I asked.

"Oh? Have you already caught on to my plan?" *Oh, what a blunder. I meant to be more casual with my question, but she saw through me.* "That's right. The reason I came here was to do everything I could to get the Sevensworths to mobilize so I could take down that woman and Christopher. There's a low chance everything would go exactly as planned since Lady Jennifer can most likely see right through me, but it's not zero. I was planning on getting Dee to the throne."

Oh, I see. Sir Gino was right. Her telling me the story about her

son was a strategic move to get our family to act. However, I'm sure the intense emotions I saw in her were real.

"Don't worry. You don't have to be so guarded. Though that was my plan at first, I've decided to sit back and observe. At the very least, I won't do anything for a little while."

Once again, it seemed she'd read me like a book. *I'm truly not good at this...*

"Why did you change your mind?" I asked.

There was too big a difference between our skills. I couldn't casually wheedle information out of her, so I decided to be blunt instead.

"Lady Jennifer seemed so sorrowful at the funeral. I know it's only to be expected with how close the two of them were, but there was something that felt off. Then when I arrive here, both Lady Jennifer and Sir Azenagua are gone? That's when my theory was confirmed. Lady Jennifer is planning something, isn't she?"

I could feel myself gulp. I'd told her that both my parents had gone to their countryside villa to heal their hearts. I hadn't expected her to be able to see through me so easily.

I couldn't allow myself to leak information and be a hindrance to everyone. I needed to simply smile and hide all my emotions behind it, making sure not to give anything away with unconscious changes in my gaze, hands, or breathing.

"Going blank is another way of showing emotions, you know. There are situations where even if you need to erase your emotions, doing so becomes a tell. It's not good to become too guarded," she advised me through a giggle.

I really am no good. I can't defend against her at all.

"Everyone seemed to think that your mother was losing power when her brother, my husband, passed away, and when Sir Azenagua resigned from his position as prime minister, but I don't see it that way. I've made many plans against your mother and never once have I come out on top. I've worked hard to figure her out so I could win at least once, so I feel like I understand her better than most others. The reason that I'm intent on sitting back and watching is because I've no doubt she's mounting a counterattack."

Mother could even win against my aunt, who'd been fighting for decades in the royal palace as queen and could dispatch me as easily as if I were a child. I was starting to feel like I would never be like mother. Maybe it would be best to give up on this avenue of being useful to Sir Gino. *But what* can *I do?*

"Dee...he's actually been smiling at me recently. It's a very beautiful smile. He invites me to have meals with him and even tea. It's like he's a different person entirely from who he was at the palace. That's why I've started to wonder if my trying to make him king wasn't for his sake, but mine. I'd intended to spring into action after watching the movements of the Sevensworths, but now..."

She truly cared about the former crown prince and was ready to give everything up for him. I could easily see her deep regret and how deeply she loved him. I was truly happy to see their relationship improve to the point that tears began streaming down my face, making her frantically try to comfort me. Eventually, the tears stopped, and we returned to chatting with one another.

"Mother, Madam Anastasia, pardon my tardiness," the former crown prince said.

Though this tea had originally been meant for the three of us, he'd been delayed due to his training regimen. Now that he was here, we shifted from the heavy topics of before to much more lighthearted ones. It was a very enjoyable time.

"This is a very nice drawing room. I enjoy the breeze, and the scent of the sweet olives is very relaxing," the prince said, praising the Fan Columbine.

This room had a large window that stretched from the ceiling to the floor, which could be opened when the weather was pleasant like today's. There were sweet olive trees nearby, which the cool autumn air delivered to us, and the purple flowers of the aster tree also swayed in the wind. We could also see the red of the dianthus and the white and pink of the cyclamen. In the distance, a layer of light clouds was drifting across the clear blue sky.

"It's been a while since I've had these cookies, mother. They're just as delicious as I remember," the former crown prince said with a satisfied smile as he ate the cookies.

“You can have as many as you want,” my aunt giggled, wearing a very happy smile.

I simply watched over them, not really understanding why she was so happy.

“I made these cookies,” she said.

“You did?!” I exclaimed.

I couldn’t hide my surprise. Before becoming queen, she’d been the daughter of Marquess Klein and set to marry the heir to the royal family. She shouldn’t have been of a status where she was allowed to cook.

“When I was in elementary school, I threw a fit saying I wanted a homemade taste,” the prince began explaining.

Greater nobles who underwent strict education tended to have good grades and be at the top of their schools. The elite class, which both Sir Gino and I’d been in had solely consisted of greater nobles. On the other hand, the former crown prince had been in the third class, which had a lot of lesser nobles and commoners.

The commoners would have home-cooked meals that their mothers made, so all his friends in his class talked about a homemade taste. However, he had no clue what that was, so he felt as if he weren’t loved and went crying to his mother.

Though she’d never cooked before, she learned how to make cookies from one of the palace chefs just so she could give them to him.

“When I started middle school, I stopped eating them as much, even if she baked them for me. Eventually, I forgot about them entirely, but I recently began remembering the taste of those cookies. I had a craving the other day, so I asked her to make some again.”

I couldn’t believe this. Despite her jam-packed schedule every day, she’d still found time to learn how to make cookies simply because he asked, and then he wouldn’t eat them even if she took the time out of that schedule to make them for him? That was horrible of him.

“It’d have been one thing if he’d been a gentle girl like you, but he was completely normal for a boy in his rebellious phase,” she said

leisurely.

She really does care about him a lot.

◇◇◇

I'd been so busy today that I hadn't had a chance to take my usual morning walk, so instead, I decided to take a stroll in the garden now that the sun was setting. When I started my walk, it'd still been bright, but it was starting to get dark. It really felt like the sunset so quickly this time of year.

I gazed at the sky, feeling the cool autumn breeze against my face. The sky was painted a vibrant, dark red, and the fluffy cloudlets glowed from the setting sun. In the increasingly dim light, the white of the hanakurama flowers seemed like they were floating in the thin veil of darkness. It was a very fantastical sight.

I couldn't help but giggle at how enjoyable nighttime strolls were. I felt a bit less weighed down by my worry for Sir Gino. After walking for a little while, I came across the former crown prince in the garden. He was sitting by himself at a table under the open sky, blankly staring up at it. Though there was a cup on the table beside him, he didn't seem to be enjoying the tea so much as he was lost in thought.

I greeted him so as not to be rude, but I decided to leave him alone to his thoughts. After all, he'd just been through a very terrible experience. Just as I was about to continue on, he called out to me.

"I'd like to ask you something," he said. "When I ask everyone around me what I did wrong, they tell me that I didn't do anything wrong. They keep telling me that I'm a victim from being deceived. I'm sure everyone close to me will say the same, but there must've been something I did... Or something I could've done better. I can't help but think about that lately, and tonight as well, but...I'm no closer to an answer than I was yesterday."

Even without any context, I knew he was referring to the attack on him and his mother. I could only imagine how much it'd been weighing on him.

"I'm of the same opinion. I don't think you did anything wrong."

"That's not what I want to hear! In your position, you should be able to speak your mind freely to me without having to hold your tongue! You're the same as me, falling for someone beneath your status. I'm sure you've spotted somewhere I went wrong! I don't care if you're rude or say something hurtful—just tell me what you really think! I was the one closest to her. I should've been able to do something!"

His words gripped my heart, making me want to cry. Despite being deceived and almost killed by her, he still couldn't stop loving her. *Though this will come out quite harshly, I should answer him truthfully.*

"I truly don't think you did anything wrong. However, I believe that if you had been able to deeply enter her heart...there might have been a different outcome. Entering someone's heart requires a great deal of courage and is quite difficult. Even though you couldn't do that, I still don't believe you're at fault."

"What do you mean by entering her heart?"

"If you'd like...I can show you what information we have about Lady Mariott."

"Yes, please!"

Since the sun had set, I took him to the sixty-third drawing room, called the Windflower.

"Here you are," I said as I passed the former crown prince a stack of documents.

In terms of politics, Lady Mariott had been a key figure, so our family had thoroughly looked into her. I saw his eyes fill with a deadly anger as he read the documents about her mission to steal his heart. I could tell from his strained expression how badly he wanted the truth.

"Is this true?!"

"Yes..." I said apologetically in a soft voice.

He was currently looking through a collection of testimonies about Lady Mariott. There were clear citations of who had said what and when, so the credibility of the file was high. Many of these statements claimed that at a certain point in time, the people of

House Mariott had undergone a dramatic change. There were witness reports from people close to them, others who'd courted members of the household, and others still who did business with them. The range was extensive. Associates of Baron Mariott would claim to have had inherited status from him, but there was never any notification of such status being reported to the royal palace.

"Lily was thirty-seven years old?! That's not... That's not possible!" he exclaimed after reaching a certain point on the report.

I completely understood how he felt. It must have been a great shock to him since she'd been in the same class as him as well.

"It might be easier if you see for yourself. Bridgette? Could you bring someone who's skilled at the disguise techniques?" Bridgette then brought Azlate, a forty-year-old man. "I apologize for this sudden request, but could you demonstrate the disguise technique? Simply making yourself look younger is good enough."

"Understood. I will make myself about as young as the woman in the documents. Nothing else about my appearance will be changed, is that correct?"

"Yes, that is—"

"You can transform?! Then try transforming into her!" the prince exclaimed, overriding my order.

I could only imagine that seeing someone who looked like Lady Mariott would be painful for him right now, which is why I only asked for Azlate to only change his age. Though I could understand his desire to see even a similar resemblance to her, I wasn't sure if this was going to turn out okay.

"No...way..." His eyes widened as he saw the full transformation.

Azlate had become shorter, his body had changed into a woman's, and his brown hair and eyes had turned to pink just like Lady Mariott's. Since he'd used the documents as a reference, he transformed into the version of her that she'd been in school, so he was a little younger than she would've currently been. Azlate was truly skilled with how perfectly he transformed. Most people wouldn't be able to change their height or the color of their eyes, and would at most be able to make their skin look younger, but those from House Kaerey had a special bloodline and underwent very intense

training. Azlate had long since completed this training, which was why he was so skilled.

"L-Lily..."

The former crown prince stood up, tears streaming down his face. Azlate was currently the spitting image of Lady Mariott.

"It's been a while since I've transformed for you, young madam," Azlate said in his usual voice.

Though he could have changed his voice, he chose to keep his low, male voice, most likely to signal to the former crown prince, who was shakily approaching him, that he wasn't the real Lady Mariott. As expected, his voice snapped the prince out of his trance and made him collapse back into his seat.

"You're right. It was a lot of fun to see you transform when I was younger," I said.

As a child, whenever I'd come back crying for how I'd looked due to my curse, he'd transform for me. The surprise of seeing him become a completely different person always pulled me out of my sorrow. Though I hadn't fully understood back then, I knew now that there were people that could change their appearances, so I shouldn't worry about mine too much. I believed that was what he was trying to teach me.

"So everything in this report is true? Your covert operatives live up to their reputation. They really did a thorough investigation," the former crown prince said, crying while gripping the report.

I wasn't able to offer him any words of consolation. The emotions I saw on his face and in his eyes were so intense, I wasn't sure what to say. For the record, our family technically specialized in civil officials, but we were more commonly known for our covert operatives because we were touted as the house with the best ones in the country.

"I really knew nothing about her, did I? Now I finally understand what you said earlier. I never really was able to go into her heart. If I had, I would have seen through the illusion and seen her not as a noble lady, but covert operative. Maybe, if I had...things would have ended differently."

I'd hoped that learning the truth about Lady Mariott might have

helped him become disillusioned with her and move on, but even after learning the truth, it didn't seem that his feelings for her had changed. Despite her name, her status, and even her age being a lie, he still cared for her deeply. He was tragically pure of heart.

"What do you think? I'd like to hear your opinion as a covert operative. Do you think anything would have changed if I'd gotten into her heart? Feel free to speak your mind. There will be no repercussions. I want to hear what you truly have to say."

Azlate had transformed back into his original self and began to answer the former crown prince. "Normal covert operatives live a different life than those who work in this house. Though we live good lives here as nobles, most covert operatives grew up in terrible conditions, especially flower operatives. They're brought up as playthings for men, never to know what love is. Many of them have deep wounds in their hearts from what they've been through. That's why it's very dangerous for they themselves to be showered with love rather than the persona they created for the mission. If you found out who she truly was and had truly loved her...I think there's an extremely high chance that she would have had a change of heart."

"I see..."

Oh, what a big failure on my part. When I'd summoned Azlate here, I hadn't told him about any of the circumstances. I should have told him to gloss over this topic. Though there was a need to be honest, there was a better way to say things without inflicting wounds onto his heart. Hearing that "there's an extremely high chance that she would have had a change of heart" was too much.

As expected, the former crown prince looked very shocked. The regret in his eyes was so deep, and his emotions seemed to sink lower than depression. He looked like he'd died inside. He simply sat in his seat, head hanging, as a husk. I wanted to say something to rectify the situation, but Azlate's analysis wasn't wrong, so I couldn't even correct anything he'd said.

In our family, we gave our covert operatives status and a salary, whereas other houses only gave out status at best. The only time their operatives received pay was when they completed work.

However, there wasn't always work for them to do, so more often than not, they had to take on commoner jobs in order to survive.

However, they had status, meaning that they needed noble clothing whenever they met with their lords, as well as carriages for travel. Essentially, they needed to live like nobles on a commoner's salary, which meant everyone in their clan needed to save money. All things considered, commoners had much easier lives than they did.

Since amassing that much money was difficult, flower operatives often worked in high-end adult entertainment houses. I could only imagine how many painful experiences they had. It was only natural that these kinds of women would betray their lords if they found someone to love them for who they really were.

Even if they completed their missions and returned to their daily lives, all that'd be waiting for them was a life of squalor and the same painful jobs. They'd also have to continue hiding their identities both during and outside of missions. If someone actually saw past their disguise and loved them for the first time, they would most likely be so enthralled that they'd lay down their own life to protect their love.

The former crown prince stayed silent. I couldn't bring myself to say anything, frightened of what carelessly disturbing him might do in his situation. I ended up simply continuing to sip my tea even after Azlate left.

But after a long, very long stretch of silence, he began to speak.

"Thinking about it...you need to overcome the fear of being hurt in order to step into their heart and move from being friends to lovers. That probably goes for any kind of relationship. In order to deepen your bonds, you can't be afraid of being hurt, and you need to keep pressing forward. I couldn't do that... I never asked anything of Lily at all. I only ever listened to what she wanted because I was scared of her hating me, so I never was selfish with her at all. Maybe... Maybe somewhere inside me, I didn't trust her completely."

His eyes were unfocused as he looked at the ground. I couldn't help but gulp at his words. I was the same. I had never told Sir Gino my truest desires. Despite wanting to join Sir Gino on the battlefield, I was too scared of him growing to hate me. *Is it possible that I*

don't trust Sir Gino either?

"I'm gonna go do some training," the prince said as he walked unsteadily out of the drawing room.

Even after a day had passed, I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said about not having the courage to take the step forward into someone's heart. It made sense to me. If one kept pushing, they could gain deeper understanding and a deeper bond with the person they loved. In order to become a married couple with a bond like that, I needed to be courageous and take that step forward to understand Sir Gino better. To do that, I needed to show him what lay in my own heart. I needed to be selfish. However, if that clashed with his own opinions, then...

For me, being selfish felt like it meant wishing for something that Sir Gino didn't want. If I voiced these desires too much, I was afraid he would start to hate me. But if I didn't say anything, then I might end up with the same regrets as the former crown prince.

I was most scared of him falling out of love with me. The pain of him ending our engagement had been truly hellish, and I had no desire to feel that way ever again. But on the other hand, I strongly wished to get closer to Sir Gino. My feelings were in direct conflict with one another...

"Bridgette... Do you think Sir Gino will listen to my selfish requests?" I asked Bridgette as she helped me get ready for the day.

Hearing this, she began laughing hard. "Oh, that's what you're worried about? You shouldn't be at all. You could ask him for the moon and he'd deliver it to you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do, and I'm sure anyone else you ask will say the same. Even someone who's only seen the two of you for five minutes would come to the same conclusion. It's very obvious and plain to see."

"But...I'm frightened. I'm frightened he will leave me again, and that stops me from trying."

I thought I heard Bridgette say "That shitty bastard" under her breath, but it must have been my imagination.

"It's not your fault that you're unable to tell him your deepest desires. It's all because of the trauma you endured. It's Sir Ginorious's fault that you're hurt like this. Seriously, how could he hurt my precious young madam like this?!"

This was something I didn't realize. Even my primary physician, Dr. Susanna, said I was all better, but it seemed I was still hurt. There was a part of me deep down still frightened that Sir Gino would leave me, and it was caused by this trauma.

"However, I can at least say this much: Sir Ginorious could never *ever* come to hate you. Even when he ended your engagement, it wasn't because of any resentment he held toward you. He did it because he thought it was for your sake. Even when he lived in the slums, his head was filled with nothing but thoughts of you. Though there are a lot of problems with him, I believe it's okay to believe how much he loves you."

That's true. He distanced himself from me because he thought it would be best for me. Even after that, he continued loving me. What exactly am I scared of? There's no basis for this fear. It seems that I truly didn't trust him, which is why I felt uneasy.

"The reason Sir Ginorious did that was because of a lack of communication. Both of you were too reserved with each other and couldn't speak what was truly on your minds. Keeping your desires to yourself has the opposite effect of what you intend. These desires are a form of your true thoughts, so you should express them as much as you want and be more open with each other."

When mother learned that I'd been hiding the bullying from her, she told me that being honest with those you care about and telling them everything was important, and that was what it meant to be family. Now Bridgette was saying something similar.

With Sir Gino's counseling, he was slowly changing and becoming able to speak his true feelings. He was putting in this effort because he wanted to get closer to me. Now the problem lay with me. I was unable to speak my selfish desires and thus unable to tell Sir Gino my true feelings. I couldn't let this go on. I was the source of the problem. I was the reason we weren't getting closer.

Dr. Susanna had told me that in order to overcome my trauma, I

needed to try, little by little, to do all the things I hadn't been able to. I needed to follow her advice and start making the effort. But thinking about Sir Gino being displeased made me...

"It'll be all right. If you get into a fight, all you have to do is make up afterward. Some people even get closer after fighting. I'm sure that making up will be a cinch for the two of you."

That's true. We can simply make up if we get into a fight. Mother and father fight too, but father always apologizes profusely, and they make up. Though I was still frightened, I needed to believe in Sir Gino. To establish a relationship of trust, I needed to trust him first. I decided I would do it.

That's right. I will trust him. I will trust that I can voice my innermost desires to him, and that we can talk things out if we have different opinions, and that we'll be able to make up even if we get into a fight. In order to become even closer than we are right now, in order to become an even closer married couple, I will believe in Sir Gino and keep moving closer to him. To start, I would bring up my courage to tell him something that I desperately wanted to do. *I'm going to do my best!*

"Bridgette, I won't be wearing that today," I said as she brought over a blue dress.

"Understood. What outfit shall I prepare for you?"

"Armor and a helmet."

"E-Excuse me?! Wh-Where are you going?!"

"Hm? To the battlefield, of course. Where else?"

"Wh-Why would you go there?!"

"Hm? Didn't you tell me that I should trust Sir Gino to accept my selfish desires and that I should go to the battlefield to tell him my true feelings, and that it'll be okay even if we get into a fight because, just as you said, we can make up?"

"That's not what I meant! You can't go! Please, *please*, reconsider!"

"I've already made up my mind."

Bridgette cradled her head as if it hurt. "I can't believe this... How could I mess up like this..." she muttered.

I couldn't help but think she acted like this not too long ago as

well, but I didn’t think she’d messed up at all. I now had the courage to continue getting closer to Sir Gino. I believed she’d given me very wonderful advice.

Chapter 9: What It Means to Trust

Ginorious

Thorsdale began their advance with all their forces directed toward the Sevensworth border. Most likely, they were aware that our entire defensive force was collected here, and that if they broke through, there'd be nobody left to defend us and they'd be able to occupy our vast, bountiful territory. That was why they were focusing their full strength here.

We'd built a fort about ten kilrometres away from the border, behind a river, which would be our main point of defense. The river was deep and didn't have many good crossing points, so we'd situated our base by one of the few places it was possible to cross on foot. Rivers were naturally difficult places to mount an attack from, and past the river was a flat plain, so it'd be hard for them to take us by surprise. It was the perfect place to meet our invaders.

I had no doubt that the enemy would attack here, since it was the only route by which they could transport their new, huge weapon. They already had to move slowly because of their massive forces, but with that on top of it, they were extremely slow to advance. I anticipated the fighting to begin in about ten days. Our house's knights and soldiers were working hard, setting up abatis to stop mounted troops and bringing in provisions and munitions into the forts. I was in charge of directing them.

"Hey, Ginorious," an energetic voice called out to me from afar.

"Anthony! You really came."

"Of course! I'm a man of my word."

Anthony had brought a collection of knights and soldiers with him, all with similarly tan skin. Today was the day that our allies were joining us at the fort, and it seemed that his forces from House Treves were the first to arrive.

"But are you sure it's okay for you, the newly appointed heir to your house, to be here?"

Once the battle began, he'd definitely have to lead his men, since the idea that nobles protected their people was deeply ingrained in him. But even so, I felt like he himself didn't have to be here. He had older and younger brothers who could've come in his stead. If something were to happen, then losing one of them would surely have less of a negative impact on their house.

"That might be the case for other families, but not for military families. Avoiding a battle is grounds to be thoroughly chastised."

Oh, I see. Their values are different than our house's. House Treves was known for its bravery, to the point where they were known as a clan for fighting. Their request was actually to be put on the front lines. They probably expected this level of bravery from the future head of their family.

"Oh, hey! You're here too?" Justin called as he rushed over.

He'd only just arrived at the fort a little while ago. Unlike Anthony, who'd brought allied forces with him, Justin was here on his own.

I had no intention of making the people who volunteered to be here out of the goodness of their hearts serve as our shields, so I planned to station everyone like Justin not on the front lines but at a town a little bit farther back. Despite this, Justin had insisted on being at the front. Now that my former classmates were here, I enjoyed speaking to the both of them. Despite the bloody battle that was sure to ensue in the near future, being with them felt like we were back within the peaceful walls of school. I was reminded of how important their existences were to me.

"Sir Gino!"

"Ana?! Wh-Wh-Why are you here?!"

While we were conversing, Ana suddenly appeared. *What's going on?!* Though there was a special kind of armor made for female knights, she was wearing an even more unique set that included a long skirt. Ana dismounted from the cute pony she'd rode in on and adorably trotted over.

"I will be participating as well."

"No! Absolutely not! The battlefield is incredibly dangerous! If

anything happened to you...”

“I’d like to assist you on the battlefield. This is how I will be of help to you.”

Ana’s eyes looked straight into my soul and shone with a pureness that reflected her strong conviction. Despite how she might have seemed, Ana had a very powerful will. Once she set her mind to something, she wouldn’t give up until she accomplished whatever it was. I couldn’t help but admire her for that; she was truly a wonderful woman. I couldn’t find any words to try and change her mind.

Anastasia

“What do I do?” I wailed.

I couldn’t stop crying from the shock of what’d just happened. I’d worked up my courage to tell Sir Gino my selfish desire to join him on the battlefield, and was prepared to have an argument with him, but I never expected him to cry...

“Sorry. My head’s not on straight right now. Let’s talk again once I cool down,” he’d said, tears streaming down his face, before running away.

Though Sir Anthony had said that he and Sir Justin would speak with Sir Gino, they also said that they couldn’t agree to my request since they were knights, but they would at least try to listen to my side of the story.

I’d learned from my parents that knights didn’t get involved in others’ disagreements. Even if the members of the family they served got into a fight, if they ended up taking one person’s side, it could become a much bigger conflict that spread beyond the family and into their respective houses. Thus, it was imperative for them to always remain neutral.

Once they’d gone after Sir Gino, Matthew guided me to an empty room inside the fort, where I simply cried alone. *I knew it. I should have kept my desires to myself. Maybe we’re not at a point in our relationship where we can tell each other our selfish wants... That*

makes me sad... What if he hates me now? What should I do?

"Lady Anastasia, I'm here!"

"Lady Ekatarina?! What are you doing here?!"

"I made you a promise. Remember?" she said, wearing a bright smile as if her being here were the most natural thing in the world.

Even I knew how hard it would be to get House Byron, who was estranged from our family, to help House Sevensworth. It would've been one thing if the Simon territory had already strengthened their trade relationship with House Byron via increased production of magic tools, but that was still in the discussion and planning stage. There shouldn't have been any logical reason for them to assist in the war right now, but Lady Ekatarina, who wasn't even the head of the household, had somehow mobilized their forces for our sake.

"We're friends, aren't we?" Lady Ekatarina said, winking at me with a smile.

I could only imagine how much she'd had to go through to accomplish this. Despite that, she didn't boast or complain whatsoever. All she did was flash that magnificent smile of hers. *She truly is my precious friend.*

"Well, that aside, it seems you've been crying quite a bit. What's the matter?"

"Sir Gino... I think he hates me now."

I began explaining everything to Lady Ekatarina. She sat there, listening to every word I said without interrupting.

"Lady Anastasia... Pardon my intrusion..."

"Huh?! Lady Janail?! Why are you here?!"

In the middle of my story to Lady Ekatarina, complete with fresh tears, Lady Janail had arrived. Not only was she the last person I'd expect to see on the battlefield, but her family had absolutely no ties to our house and thus no reason whatsoever to send us aid. I couldn't contain my surprise.

"Well, I can't fight, but... But, you know, I can give my support in the background..."

"I had her come with me and my family's army. If she wants to marry into a military household, then there's no better place to learn what she needs to do than near the battlefield," Lady Ekatarina

explained.

After I'd returned to the Sevensworth territory to prepare for the upcoming war, it seemed that Lady Janail had gone to House Byron to continue her studies about military families in hopes that she could marry into a certain one. Since House Byron's forces were deploying to our territory, Lady Ekatarina advised Lady Janail to tag along.

"But besides that, what's wrong? What's got you so upset...?" Lady Janail asked.

I knew that she was in a much more painful situation than me since her engagement had just ended, so I was hesitant to put more problems onto her—especially since my situation was nowhere near as devastating. But since she asked, I decided to be honest.

"You shouldn't let yourself get so down. Cheer up! I'm sure it'll be fine." Even despite everything she was going through, she still smiled and comforted me. *She's such a kind person.*

"Worry not," said Lady Ekatarina. "I'm on your side. I will talk some sense into Sir Ginorious. Though it's not a proper lady's place to interfere with the affairs of others, I'll make an exception this time. After all, if there's conflict between the very family leading our armies, then there should be no problem if I say something as an ally."

I could feel the warmth of her heart as she forced a reason to talk with Sir Gino. I couldn't be happier. For now, I needed to reconcile with Sir Gino.

"I'll stay back... I'm slow, so I'm sure I'll only be a hindrance to you," Lady Janail said, staying in the room and leaving me and Lady Ekatarina to go to Sir Gino.

"Should you really be here on the front lines and not in the rear? I'm sure you could help there and learn too," I asked Lady Janail.

"Oh, don't worry... Everyone from House Treves is here, so it'll be more educational for me to be here with them."

"But it's dangerous here. It's possible for something to happen where you could even lose your life."

"I'm okay with that... If I don't get married, I'll end up spending the rest of my life in a convent as a nun... If I'll have to live like a

dead person for the rest of my life, I'd rather try my best now."

I hadn't realized she was this far at her wits' end. It was rough for women in old-guard houses if they didn't get married. Due to worries that something could happen between the unmarried woman and their sister-in-law, they'd send her off to a convent. To Lady Janail, that must have been the same as being sentenced to death. *I really can't forgive our new king.* I could understand him ending their engagement for a political advantage; however, tossing Lady Janail away like a pawn was unforgivable. She was mature, bashful but also straightforward, and very kind. It was horrible of him to push this wonderful girl into a corner like this. Fortunately, she hadn't lost her will to fight on. She was truly impressive. When Sir Gino had ended our engagement, I'd stayed in my room for days. She was a much better person than I was.

She was literally risking her life to find happiness now. *I should take a page out of her book. I need to do whatever I can to make up with Sir Gino, become more capable of expressing my true desires, and get much closer to him as well. I feel so motivated now! I'm going to do my best!*

Ginorious

I sat down at a riverbank not too far away from the fort and gazed at the river in a daze. I'd realized I had no words to try and convince Ana once she'd shown me those bright, sparkling eyes of hers. At this rate, I would give in and let Ana join the fight. I couldn't do that. The battlefield was a place filled with death. Once I began seeing the possibility of death closing in around Ana, I lost my mind. This wasn't a topic I could stay calm about, so I'd decided to hurry away and save the conversation for another time.

I couldn't help but let out a deep sigh. How could I be so pathetic a guy that I ran away in tears? How could I have shown Ana such a pathetic side of me? *I can only hope that doesn't make her fall out of love with me... No, this isn't the time to be down on myself! I need to figure out how to make Ana go home. I need to somehow*

find the words to convince her to get away from this place filled with death. I will *find the words before I see her next!*

"Oh, there you are."

In the midst of my thoughts, I heard someone call out to me from behind. It was Anthony, and Justin was with him too. *Perfect timing. Maybe they can help me.* As they sat down next to me, I told them everything I was thinking. I couldn't help but notice that despite the severity of this conversation, the two of them looked undeniably amused. I found myself stopping to ask what was so funny.

"Ah, sorry. It's just that...I'm happy you're actually coming to us for help."

"Same here. You didn't say a word to us before breaking off your engagement. We even told you to come to us if you had something weighing on your mind, but you never did."

Oh, that's true. Back then, I still didn't trust anyone, and I never even realized it myself.

"It's all thanks to Ana. Because I have her, I've come to be able to trust others."

I'd told her everything about the difficulties of my past life, and as I listened to her kind words in response, my heart felt at ease. I knew the reason I was able to speak my mind so naturally to Anthony and Justin now was because of that.

"So what would you two do if you were in my position?"

"I'd respect her choice. It's the same for anyone, even children, women, or commoners—if they have the determination to wield a blade, then they're a warrior, and a warrior's determination is not something to disparage."

"Yeah, I'm pretty much in the same boat. In my opinion, the only time you can stop someone who's determined to join the battlefield is when they're a young kid, though my family and Anthony's have different opinions on that. We're of the same mind when it comes to most other things, though. Even if an untrained woman wants to fight, we respect her determination to risk her life. After all, she's an adult."

They both had opinions that were to be expected of military

households. But then again, this way of thinking wasn't limited to just military nobles. In this world, people fought not just each other but against monsters too, and the battle was never-ending. Fighting monsters was essentially a part of daily life here. They were fighting more for their lives than we ever had in my past life, and maybe even more than the people in eras older than mine. That was the kind of world we lived in. Both nobles and commoners most likely had a much more warrior mindset than the people of my past life. Their common sense was different from what we'd had in Japan.

Determination...huh? It's true that I shouldn't trample all over it. Nobles fought for the sake of their people. If a noble displayed the desire to fight, then it was proper etiquette to respect their decision. I'd done that for Justin and Anthony. I only placed them on the front lines because they themselves had requested it.

However, Ana was the only one whose determination I couldn't respect in the same way. After all, if I did, it could lead to her death. That outcome was something I wanted to avoid at all costs. *I can't do it. I want to protect Ana! I'd sacrifice everything before I let her get hurt. She's so important to me.*

"Taking the organization of our armies into account, I think she's invaluable here. You're not going to be here with us because you'll be carrying out a different strategy, right? With you gone, and the core of the defense here being those from House Sevensworth, it'd be good if we could have at least one leader of House Sevensworth here. It'll help keep the people unified too."

Anthony's right. I'll be going on a separate mission and won't be here. That means I need someone else to lead our troops, and logically speaking, Ana fits the bill the best. But even so, I couldn't let that happen. The best possible leader for an army was also the best possible target for the enemy. If I put her in charge, she'd be targeted first. I couldn't do that. It was too dangerous.

"Good day, everyone. Here you all are. I've been looking."

The three of us looked up and saw Lady Ekatarina in armor. *I can't believe it. If she's here, then that means she was able to convince House Byron in this short period of time to mobilize for our side.*

"I've heard the details of the situation from Lady Anastasia, and I've come to ask one thing of you. Sir Ginorious...please do not clip Lady Anastasia's wings."

"Wh-What? I don't understand."

"I mean that you seem intent on clipping her wings instead of allowing her to fly freely, high in the sky. I implore you to respect her wishes. She won't be able to do anything if you continue to be overprotective and keep her in this cage you made for her."

Her words felt like a punch in the gut. *I'm...hindering Ana? I'm forcing her into a cage?!*

"I don't think there's much for you to worry about either. At school, Lady Anastasia had extremely wonderful grades in military affairs, strategy, and all other military-related classes. She is extremely capable. I'd like to encourage you to trust in Lady Anastasia more."

"Yeah, she's right. You should try to trust her a little more. She had better grades than me by a lot. I bet she'll be a much better commander than me at the very least."

"Wh-What? I...I don't trust Ana?"

I received another punch in the gut from Lady Ekatarina's and Justin's words. In my mind, I trusted Ana more than anyone in the world, and I didn't doubt her abilities. Just as Justin and Lady Ekatarina had said, Ana always had stellar grades when it came to military classes at school. Even our military history professor was surprised by how much knowledge Ana could retain. I was sure that Ana could be a wonderful leader.

Even as a sorcerer, Ana was a lot better than others. Even if she could only use *ember*, it was many times stronger than what magic soldiers could produce. I truly understood how exceptional Ana was, but even with all of that, I couldn't help but be worried about her on the battlefield. Was this really because, deep down, I didn't have faith in her?

"Sir Ginorious, do you believe that Lady Anastasia will fail? If so, it means that you don't trust in her. Being married means having each other's backs. You should have more faith in her and allow her to defend you in return. Or perhaps you think that she doesn't have

enough skill to do that?"

"Of course I don't think that!"

"Then why won't you allow her to fight with you?"

"Well..."

"Ginorious has always been overprotective. He went above and beyond to do things for her that she was truthfully able to do herself. I think that's what he's doing now," Anthony said. "Ginorious, if you didn't always step in and instead stood back and let her figure things out for herself, I bet she would've done even more great things, don't you think?"

His words felt like a blade in my heart. *I was being overprotective? All this time, I've been stealing opportunities from her for things she could've done herself and have been trying to keep her in a cage?* Thinking about it with a clear head, it might've been obvious that that was what I'd been doing. Ana was unbelievably excellent and was brimming with possibilities and talent. It must've been humiliating for a normal person like me to define her boundaries and keep her inside them. I was just selfishly trying to tie Ana down...

"You're right...I should trust Ana..."

I had no choice but to accept the fact that I'd been wrong. I shouldn't have been trying to hold Ana down. I should've been letting her fly as high as she could. I shouldn't have been limiting her but cheering her on. After all, she could fly higher than anyone in this world. *I'll listen to what Ana wants. But it doesn't change how painful this is.* I was almost paralyzed with fear from the thought of anything happening to Ana. My body was trembling, and tears began to stream down my face. I could only imagine that this was how people during wartime felt when they received a draft order for their family member.

Anastasia

A servant informed me that Sir Ginorious wished to speak to me, so I waited in a room for him to arrive. *I think I'll return home after*

we reconcile. I should be happy that I was able to at least voice my wishes, but I shouldn't force him to accept it if it's something that brings him to tears. His feelings are most important. However, it's unfortunate that I won't be able to be of use to him. I'll have to think of some other way. I don't wish to be deadweight that he has to protect any longer.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to attend to something," Sir Ginorious said as he entered.

He looked worn and haggard. I felt so guilty seeing him like this. He was so exhausted during this busy time. I should never have bothered him with my selfish ideas.

"Sorry. I was wrong."

"Huh?" I was taken aback. Before I could say anything, he'd deeply apologized to me instead. "N-No, I should apologize for burdening you with my selfish request!"

"No, it was me in the wrong. I should trust you more. I should be supporting what you want to do with everything I have. I'm the one at fault, so...when I leave the fort for my mission, I want you to be the one in charge. Will you do that?"

"Huh?! O-O-Of course! I'm inexperienced, but I will do my absolute best!"

I couldn't believe what was happening. This conversation had gone in a completely different direction than I'd expected. My mind couldn't keep up with it all. I was beginning to feel bad for Bridgette, who I'd already asked to help start preparing for our departure. I had no doubt that she'd feel very down when she learned of this conversation, since she seemed eager to return home.

"Sir Gino, um, I believe that in order to get closer with one another, we need to voice our true opinions to each other. That's why I asked you if I could join the war, and um...would it be all right for me to continue voicing my selfish desires?"

His eyes widened like dinner plates and he froze in place. "Of course! You can tell me anything! I can't believe my Ana wants to be closer to *me*! Pinch me, I'm dreaming! How are you so cute?!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

As Sir Gino shot up from his seat, both arms spread wide,

Bridgette pushed him back. “Sir Ginorious! This is the strategy room of the fort! It’s where the knights and soldiers work! What are you trying to do here right in the middle of the day?!”

Hearing Bridgette’s lecture, I couldn’t help but look down with embarrassment. My face felt so warm, I could only assume it had turned a bright red.

Ginorious

“Ana, don’t overdo it, okay? All you have to do is focus on holding out for two weeks. That’s more than enough for us to win.”

“Sir Gino, please be safe,” Ana said, tears pouring from her eyes.

Starting today, I’d be heading out with a unit on a mission deep into the enemy’s territory, which had Ana worried.

“Sir Gino, please take this,” she said, handing me an embroidered handkerchief. This country had a custom where warriors would be given embroidered handkerchiefs before going to battle as a way to pray for their safe return.

“Thank you! This embroidery is so wonderful!”

I’d unfolded the handkerchief and was bowled over by how great it was. Her skill at embroidery had increased a surprising amount. Though it was a little more avant-garde, it was very balanced and used various techniques that made you want to keep looking at it. Suddenly, Ana brought up Lady Francess.

“Um, Sir Gino, she’s very pretty, kind, incredibly wise, and very wonderful...”

These were probably her true thoughts about Lady Francess. She was flawless in all regards, which was how she’d earned the title of Gold Rose. However, even though Ana was praising her, there was something off about it. She dabbed her tears away with her handkerchief while puffing out her cheeks with dissatisfaction.

“Ana...are you angry?”

“It’s just...you’re already calling her by her first name. I was only able to start doing that after graduation, when I worked up the courage to speak to her at social functions. You only began calling

Lady Ekatarina by her first name recently, but I've heard from Lady Francess that you've been doing it for her for quite some time." Ana puffed her cheeks out more and poutily looked away.





She'd assertively acquainted herself with me during the school's swordsmanship tournament, and had kept it up even afterward. Ever since then, she'd always come over whenever she spotted me, and every time, she'd ask that I call her by her first name. At first, I said no, but if I kept refusing, it'd become a problem in social circles, so I ended up giving in. She had seriously been as pushy as a salesman. I explained all of this to Ana.

"You also chose her for your special squad. There are so many knights to choose from. Why did you choose her?" she asked.

Doing this had been the obvious choice for me. Having even one leak in your forces could lead to your downfall. Up until recently, House Lillard had been a part of the first prince's faction. Now they were saying that they were switching sides, but I couldn't allow myself to take that at face value. Leaving her in the fort was too dangerous.

If possible, I'd have preferred to have left her with the rear forces, but she specifically requested that her family be on the front line. It'd be a huge problem if I accepted other requests like House Treves' to fight on the front lines but not House Lillard's. That was why I chose her to join a smaller unit where even if we failed, not as many lives would be affected if she was to betray us. It wasn't something I could risk being overheard, so I whispered my explanation into Ana's ear.

"It's okay. I wasn't telling you this because I wished for you to change your plans. I simply wanted to be as honest with you as I could, so...I showed you my dirty jealousy."

What?! Ana's jealous?! Seriously?! Somebody pinch me! This has to be a dream!

"Ana! You're the cutest person in the world!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

I'd tried to hug Ana, but Bridgette, who'd been a little bit of a distance away, frantically came running over and pried me away.

"Please give it a rest! Why are you doing something so shameless when the eyes of all the forces here are on you, their leader?!"

We were surrounded by knights and soldiers. Some of them began clapping while others whistled, and others cheered. They

were all supporting in their own way. Ana had turned a bright red and was looking away. *Oh no. I did it again. Even though I'm in the middle of work and instructing our troops, my mind went completely blank except for the thought of Ana. She was the only thought in my head.*

◇◇◇

The enemy soldiers frantically shut the gates to their city, and I couldn't blame them. After all, to them, we suddenly appeared out of thin air, only about five hundred metres away from the gates to their royal capital. The reason they hadn't been able to see us until now was thanks to those of the Hartley clan that Hans had gathered. They were skilled with cloaking jutsu, allowing all five hundred of our men to remain hidden and walk here undetected. They were only able to see us now that we lifted the jutsu.

There was a reason that I decided to reveal our forces here, just outside where their arrows and magic could reach, instead of immediately launching an attack. I wanted to give the townspeople in the royal capital time to take shelter. It'd be easier for us to advance if the streets were clear.

Of course, it would've been child's play for us to use the Hartley clan's cloaking jutsu to enter the royal palace without anyone noticing, but I decided against it. After all, I was trying to extend an invitation to the nobles here to join our country. First we needed to do some damage to demonstrate the strength of our weapons.

My squad's job was hitting the royal capital, and I had seven other squads targeting other cities in the kingdom—each controlled by one of the seven noble families who'd aggressively pushed for this war. After infiltrating the country, we'd split up to mount our respective attacks, and each group had a member of the Hartley clan with them. Thanks to them, we'd been able to cross the border without any problems at all.

We'd divided a force of just under two thousand people eight ways; I had five hundred with me, and the smallest squads were about a hundred twenty. Though to our enemy, it might have not

seemed like enough to topple an entire city, I was about to prove them wrong.

"Okay, I think it's about time to get started," I said.

I poured primordial mana into my ring. Usually, it had a magic circuit for time acceleration, but thanks to the large amount of money I was still making from the rejuvenation lotion, I was able to buy an even more expensive jewel stone, which I'd swapped in for my usual stone. I paid the equivalent of several greater noble estates to buy a stone with high functionality, into which I carved a new magic circuit.

As I activated it, ten golems appeared out of thin air. I'd put a golem-summoning magic circuit into the ring. I was now able to summon them from the expanded basement of my estate on the outskirts of the royal capital.

"Wh-What are those?!"

"A-Are those demons?!"

"Whoa! Demons!"

"Eek!"

The people trapped outside the gates and the scouts on the walls began to scream with panic. I'd summoned four centaurs, four arachnes, and two asuras. Centaurs had human torsos with the lower halves of horses, and arachnes were similar but with spider bodies. Asuras looked closer to humans but had six arms instead of two. All the golems were made of pitch-black metal that deflected physical and magic attacks. I couldn't blame these people for thinking they were demons.

I'd originally started making golems to help me develop a treatment for Ana's curse, and since then, I'd left my factory for them active just in case. At this point in time, I'd made a hundred and ninety-eight golems. I'd assigned a number of them to each squad, which was the main reason they were able to manage with so few people. Of course, since I was the only one who could summon them, I'd given them their golems before we split up.

Usually I'd keep spare golems at the factory just in case I needed to replace any here, but I had every last spare—all thirty-eight of them—assigned to protecting Ana. They could easily wipe out an

army of twenty or thirty thousand people in less than three minutes. I was sure she would be safe. My only concern was that with how kind she was, she might have been trying to get them to protect everyone else instead. But that was why I'd given the authority to control them to Mary instead of Ana.

"Centaur 22, break through the gate. Arachne 45, protect the squad."

"Affirmative," both golems responded.

I'd equipped both of them with the ability to accept verbal commands, so when they heard my order, the two of them began moving. The centaur took his spear and charged toward the gate. The tip of his spear was fitted with a magic circuit that had mana so dense that it could be seen with the naked eye. The magic circuit activated in a flash, generating a magic charge that shot out as a controlled white beam. Its speed was carefully maintained so as not to cause a severe nuclear fusion while precisely releasing into the gate. Immediately after making contact, the surroundings brightened as if the sun had manifested near us.

The gate, which had instantly been turned to plasma, quickly began to evaporate, even heating the air around us. This caused violent winds and an incredibly loud noise. The arachne created a magic barrier to protect us.

These golems had been popular as security golems in my past life. They were strong enough that even formidable adults couldn't take them down easily—and these particular ones didn't have any limiters or safeguards that prevented them from doing real harm, so they were essentially a whole different breed. Even by the standards of my past life, they were fearsome weapons.

To a world like this where their technology wasn't nearly as advanced, just one or two of these would be enough to topple an entire city. But even so, I made sure that each of the squads had about ten or so golems with them—though in this case, it was mainly to help keep order after they won. It was important to keep something in the towns to intimidate the people and nobles.

I commanded our forces to advance, and we passed through the now-evaporated gate. Though soldiers came to attack, they couldn't

break through the arachne's barrier. The centaur outside the barrier, meanwhile, continued to eliminate enemy combatants one after another without taking any damage from their magic or arrows.

Seeing strange black knights silently defeat them in an overwhelming fashion made the enemy soldiers grow pale. I called repeatedly for them to surrender. For any that did, I had golems cast binding magic on them.

For our allied soldiers in the barrier, it was like they were taking a leisurely stroll. They marched straight toward the palace without having to stop once. When we reached it, there were more knights and a tightly closed gate, but these weren't any deterrents to the golems. We easily broke through, and as we advanced inside, the golems began searching for the members of the royal family. I was confident they'd be found in no time since the golems had the ability to see through walls and even hear sounds that humans couldn't.

Since our advance had been so quick, none of the royal family members had the time to run away and we ended up catching every last one of them. We also collected a number of nobles who worked in the palace, as well as some servants. Since there were so many, we split them up into rooms to confine them. The only ones in the throne room now were members of the royal family and the king's cabinet members.

"You have your forces invading Sevensworth territory. Order a retreat. Now," I said to the king, who was squirming on the floor in a magic binding that resembled a semitransparent tube. I purposefully spoke arrogantly to make the cabinet members feel the loss more strongly.

"Do you truly think I'll just go along with your demands?"

"Well, you don't have to. I'll simply deliver your head to the front lines to inform them of their loss."

In the next minute, the king began writing a retreat order, albeit very annoyedly and glaring at me all the while. He must've really been a courageous guy if he could still hold anger toward me like this. I couldn't say the same for his cabinet members, though. They were extremely freaked out and some had even fainted.

In our country, when we deployed for battle, someone from the house that was waging war had to be on the field. However, this country didn't have such a custom. They left war to their knights while they stayed at a safe distance. To the people in the royal palace, war was nothing more than words on a piece of paper. They'd never expected to be pulled themselves into the line of fire, even though they were the ones who'd started the war in the first place.

Anastasia

"Are they...human?" Sir Anthony nervously asked with a taut face.

I was currently surrounded by the golems that Sir Gino had left for me. There were some that had the upper half of a man but lower half of a horse, while others had the lower half of a spider, or looked close to human but had six arms and were two and a half metres tall. None of them seemed actually human.

"I never knew that House Sevensworth had these... The outer magic seal is so high-level, I can't even tell what it does."

Though she was trying to be roundabout with the way she was saying it, I could tell that Lady Ekatarina believed that these were Artifacts. *Perhaps it should be unsurprising considering she's from a prestigious family that deals with magic tools. Though it's impressive that while everyone thought that the golems were demons, she could tell they were magic tools.*

Specifically speaking, they were magic tools that Sir Gino had made, not Artifacts that we'd recovered; however, they were made of the same technology that Artifacts were, so her assumption wasn't wrong.

Artifacts were extremely precious, to the point where they could be a treasure of a country or greater noble family. They were also greatly coveted, which meant it was best not to advertise if you owned one, lest you become a target for attack. It was generally proper etiquette to never mention them at all. Nobles would usually go to great lengths to hide their Artifacts, so it must have put Lady

Ekatarina on the spot that we were so openly flaunting ours.

"These are puppets. They're friendly to us, so you needn't worry about them at all," Mary answered in my stead.

Sir Anthony breathed a sigh of relief, but it was clear that everyone was still very frightened of the golems. At this rate, their fear might get in the way of their jobs. Currently, I was using large spare tarps for the supply carts to cover them.

"Lady Ekatarina, you sure you're okay being on the front lines? Don't you specialize in magic?" Sir Anthony asked.

The leaders of our armies were currently meeting on the top floor of the fort. Though Sir Justin wasn't here since he'd volunteered as an individual, Lady Ekatarina and Sir Anthony were both leading their respective houses' armies. Since the enemy forces had yet to arrive, there was still time to talk.

"Of course I am. I will fight by the side of my friends when they take up arms."

I was already so happy that she'd decided to join this fight as our ally, but she'd even asked to fight on the front lines with me. She was truly a wonderful and very dear friend of mine.

"You really got guts. I know you're strong, but still, it's impressive for a lady who isn't even part of a military family to take up arms of her own free will."

It was no surprise that Sir Anthony was complimenting Lady Ekatarina. Those from military households highly respected bravery.

"Only one who can bravely stand in the face of a dragon and elegantly cut off its head can truly call herself a noble lady. There's nothing to fear from a mere war."

Lady Ekatarina was as dignified with her words as always. The training for noble ladies in House Byron was infamous for how incredibly strict it was. Even when she'd been a student, she'd accompanied a group of knights to take down a dragon nine metres tall. What was more, she'd used her own sword to cut off its head and then elegantly played an instrument in triumph. Hearing war described so lightly sounded different when it came from a real-life dragon slayer like herself.

"Hello, everyone. I've brought a light meal," Lady Janail

announced, bringing over a basket of sandwiches.

It was such a loud voice, and not one I'd ever thought her capable of, based on our days in school. Ladies from old-guard houses like hers never worked a day in their lives. They merely obeyed the orders of the men in their families, and in exchange, they were allowed to relax in leisure without ever needing to lift a finger. But Lady Janail had taken up the job of helping to distribute food at the fort and was carrying such a heavy basket all by herself. She'd changed so much, not only in regard to working but also in how loudly she could project her voice.

There were fresh vegetables and a smoked red meat in the sandwiches, which were made to be easy for the knights and the soldiers to eat during the mission.

It felt embarrassing to eat while standing, so I sat at a simple table with Lady Ekatarina. I glanced over at Sir Anthony and was surprised that even though it was mealtime, he continued to be on the lookout while eating. His focus wasn't broken at all. Lady Janail was eating right next to him too, also while standing. I was so surprised!

"You've changed a lot, Lady Janail. Eating on your feet? That's like something women from military families do," Sir Anthony remarked.

"After watching Lady Ekatarina and Lady Anastasia, I grew a little jealous of how they were able to forge their own paths. That's why I'm trying to change to be like them."

"Oh, really? But I think you're plenty wonderful the way you are now. I was already really surprised by how you asked to be placed on the front lines. It must take a lot of courage for someone like you who's never held a sword before to be here. It's really impressive, and I respect you a lot."

I couldn't help but eavesdrop on their conversation, but it sounded like things were going well. After she worked so hard, I really hoped things would work out for her.

"Katusha! Are you all right?!"

"Huh?! Sir Vin?! What are you doing here?!" Lady Ekatarina was so surprised, she shot to her feet.

I was surprised as well. Sir Kevin had arrived, drenched in sweat from running here. He was her betrothed and thus they called each other by nickname. His was “Vin” and hers was “Katusha.”

We sat him down at the table and waited for him to tell us why he’d come. It seemed that after learning that Lady Ekatarina had left for battle, Sir Kevin had asked his father to allow him to join as well. Sir Kevin’s family, House Withers, was close in status to House Byron as a marquess household, but also just like House Byron, they didn’t have strong relations with the Sevensworth family. Because of that, Marquess Withers wouldn’t allow Kevin to join our forces. When he’d tried to leave and volunteer by himself, he’d been locked in his room.

However, he wanted nothing more than to join Lady Ekatarina on the battlefield, so he broke out and hopped in various stagecoaches until he reached a town close to the fort. After hearing from the guards there that House Byron’s troops were at the front line and that today was probably the first day of battle, he’d frantically rushed all the way over here.

“Why did you come?! Why would you put yourself in danger?!” Lady Ekatarina asked angrily.

I understood why she reacted this way. He’d come all this way without any servants or guards, and since he’d slipped out of his house, he also didn’t have any armor, changes of clothes, or even any money. He’d sold whatever trinkets he had on him in order to get here. He’d been incredibly reckless.

“I would put myself in any kind of danger to protect you, Katusha!”

Lady Ekatarina’s eyes widened hugely and she froze for a moment before dropping her face, now wearing the soft, bashful expression of a maiden in love. Usually Lady Ekatarina was very dignified, but in front of Sir Kevin, she always acted like this. In actuality, I was confident that Lady Ekatarina was much stronger than Sir Kevin. Not only did he come from a household of writers, but he was also on the smaller side. In the past, he’d been driven to tears by the intimidation that the large-bodied Sir Justin had given off. However, it seemed that Lady Ekatarina was very pleased with his response.

“H-However, you needn’t push yourself too hard...” she said.

“If I don’t push myself now to protect you, when will I?”

In Sir Kevin’s eyes, Lady Ekatarina was an older girl, perfect at everything she did, and very beautiful. He was doing his best not to be perceived like a kid brother who needed to be doted on. It was probably why he frequently tried to stand taller and speak more like a military noble despite not being one himself. I had no doubt that he was trying his best to be a reliable man who would meet Lady Ekatarina’s expectations.

Lady Ekatarina’s expression had turned completely lovestruck. Not having seen this side of her very often at school, Lady Janail and Sir Anthony watched with great amusement.

“There they come. It’s the enemy forces.”

Near the horizon, the Thorsdale army appeared from the shadow of the mountain. With each passing moment, more and more figures took shape, and it seemed almost endless. We’d completed our preparations to intercept them and were now observing them from the highest point of our fort.

Though both Sir Anthony and Lady Ekatarina seemed completely unbothered, Sir Kevin’s legs were shaking. It didn’t seem he was in any state to converse.

“That large black contraption must be the so-called Sun Flower. It’s huge,” Sir Anthony remarked.

It was Thorsdale’s new weapon. From what our covert operatives had learned, it was as tall as a five-story building and was a similar shape to a sunflower. The reason information about it had spread despite it being a secret military weapon was because its size made it practically impossible to hide. Gossip even spread from it being the talk of the town it was built in.

However, the weapon approaching us didn’t seem to be in the shape of a sunflower. Rather, it was being brought in several, very large parts, each one needing tens of people to pull the cart carrying it. The flower of the weapon was split into four pieces, which along with the main base, made five parts total. It was clearly built to cause massive destruction.

Sir Gino's original plan was to have the golems that were equipped with resistance to area-of-effect spells go and destroy the weapon. However, he'd been so busy with other preparations that he hadn't had time to make enough of them, so all they could do was help defend the fort. Only our scouts, which were some distance ahead, were out of their protective range.

Though our golems might not have been able to attack the weapon as planned, I might have come up with a solution. The weapon had yet to be assembled, which meant that if we could destroy it before it was, it'd be worthless. My magic could reach it at this distance. I wasn't confident I could be accurate enough to hit it, but at the very least, the potential was there. *I must try. It's the job of the commander to keep casualties to a minimum.*

"Please send a message to the enemy forces. They are currently intruding on Sevensworth territory and they should retreat immediately. If they do not do so in five minutes, then we will launch our attack."

"Madam Anastasia, it might not seem so from how high up we are, but their forces are still five kilrometres away. Neither our arrows nor our magic can reach them yet," Sir Anthony said with worry.

"It's okay. I have a way to attack them from here."

"We must simply pass on the message, right? In that case, allow me to do so," Lady Ekatarina said. In the next moment, she received an object resembling a trumpet from a servant and told everyone to plug their ears. "Forces of Thorsdale, you are currently trespassing on Sevensworth territory. Leave immediately! If you do not do so, we will take this as a sign of invasion and commence attacking in five minutes' time."

I couldn't believe how loud she was able to make her voice. Even after covering my ears, they were still ringing. That trumpet was most likely a magic tool for this purpose.

"It doesn't seem as if they have any intention of retreating. If anything, they are laughing quite hard."

"It does seem that way."

"You can see that?!" I exclaimed, exasperatedly.

They still looked like ants to me from this distance, but both Sir Anthony and Lady Ekatarina were talking like they could even see the faces they were making.

"It's thanks to this magic tool. It helps me see far," Lady Ekatarina said.

"Everyone in my family just has good eyes. We like looking at the stars, so compared to that, it's easy to see faces," Sir Anthony said.

I hadn't noticed the other magic tool Lady Ekatarina was holding, but I was extremely surprised that Sir Anthony was able to see that far with nothing but his eyes. House Treves really was impressive. I could barely believe they were human just like us. Though I'd been in the same class as Sir Anthony since elementary school, I never knew he possessed such sharp eyes.

Five minutes passed in the blink of an eye as we spoke, and Lady Ekatarina informed me when the time was up via yet another magic tool that could precisely track time. *As expected of a family that specializes in magic tools, she has so many different ones.*

"I-I'll begin the attack!"

I raised my hand into the air, casting *ember*. My summoned fireball hurtled past the enemy forces and hit the middle of the mountain. After a few seconds, there was a large thundering noise from its impact. *Oh, how embarrassing. Everyone's watching and yet I completely missed the target. However, I'm only just getting started. If I shoot enough, I'm sure I'll hit at least one of the parts. I'm going to do my best!*

After about an hour of my repeated attacks, the enemy was in full retreat, completely abandoning the huge parts of the Sun Flower. Though I was aiming for the weapon pieces every time, I had yet to hit any of them even once. There was no technique with which to precisely aim *ember*; it was a spell that simply shot off a ball of fire. It was already a difficult magic with which to hit a target. It would've been best if I could use a spell with more directional control, but *ember* was the only one I was capable of at the moment. Even so, I was surprised by how I hadn't hit my target even once. In the meantime, everyone was standing around me as if in a daze. I had no doubt that they were very disappointed by how poor my aim was.

This is so embarrassing. But I'm still going to do my best! I'll work hard to keep casualties low!

"I did it! I hit it!" I couldn't help but jump for joy because I'd finally hit my target. *Oh, this is certainly not the behavior of a proper lady.* It'd taken two and a half hours, but I'd finally been able to hit one of the parts.

"It...melted," Lady Ekatarina said, using her magic tool to see into the distance.

"Judging from its color, the exterior of the Sun Flower is made of adamant, right? It's supposed to be hard enough to withstand physical attacks, and that's probably why they left it behind..." Anthony said, exasperated.

"I finally hit one! I'm going to keep going to see if I can hit the other parts as well!"

"Oh, madam, your objective was to destroy the Sun Flower?" Mary giggled.

"Yes, that's right."

"In that case, I think it may be better to have the puppets do it. All right, centaurs, please destroy those large black objects."

"Affirmative."

At Mary's command, the four golems whose lower halves were horses charged from the fort toward the Sun Flower parts with their spears. The spears seemed to possess very powerful magic, and they released straight beams from them. In the next minute, the area became filled with light and a violent wind blew past us even at this distance as if there'd been a large explosion.

"This is the power of House Sevensworth... How fearsome..."

"I can't believe it... They have enough power to change war itself."

Both Lady Ekatarina and Sir Anthony were muttering these words.

"Eek! D-Demon!" Meanwhile, Sir Kevin was still screaming after the golems had appeared from under the cloths we'd been using to hide them.

After the smoke cleared, there wasn't a trace of the Sun Flower

left. *How amazing! Their magic uses up a lot less mana than my* ember*, but they were able to produce a much more powerful and efficient magic than I did.*

"Perhaps I shouldn't have tried so hard. I should have deployed the golems to begin with."

"That's not true. Those puppets seem to have a set amount of time that they are able to operate for, and nobody else here has the power to melt away entire areas with a single spell. The fact that you could continuously fire off that devastating spell without running out of mana is the reason the enemy retreated in despair. It's all thanks to you," Mary said, cheering me up.

As Mary noted, the area where the enemy forces had once stood was now a ruin of glowing red and black. I hadn't been able to hit the dismantled Sun Flower at all, so I'd continued to fire off spell after spell, resulting in the scene before us.

"Yeah, I'm surprised too. I never knew you could use magic, especially not of that power and speed, and for over two hours straight. The enemy must've been scared to death," Sir Anthony said, also trying to cheer me up.

"Precisely so. Lady Anastasia, you are truly impressive. Even the court sorcerers couldn't have accomplished what you did here today. You will no doubt go down as the strongest sorcerer in history," Lady Ekatarina said, overjoyed. "Of course I'm happy. I have a friend whose name will be in the history books, her legend being passed down for centuries as a great sorcerer. I'm going to begin recording all the conversations we have at my house from now on. I've no doubt they will be very important in the future." She gripped my hands excitedly.

"Um...it might be troublesome if you record *all* of our conversations..."

"Madam, you should be happy. You've done much more than even Sir Ginorious predicted," Bridgette said, smiling.

That's true! I'm sure Sir Gino will praise me! Heh heh, I'm so happy! I wonder what kind of expression he'll have when he praises me. Oh, I can't wait!

Chapter 10: Ginorious Who Can't Kill and Francess Who Can

Ginorious

I received a report that Ana and the others had succeeded in their defense. I felt so relieved. From what I heard, Ana had been able to repel a force of close to thirty thousand soldiers all by herself. She'd continuously fired off magic from a distance, which had apparently made the enemy decide that if they got any closer to the fort, they'd be wiped out, so they retreated. They'd made the correct choice.

For a spell like *ember*, which didn't have any method of precision, it became more accurate the closer you were. They'd probably realized this and turned right around.

Despite pouring a frighteningly large amount of money into their new weapon, it'd been destroyed by Ana and the golems before they'd even had a chance to use it. Apparently, everyone was singing Ana's praises back at the base. *Heh heh. This makes me so happy. Yeah, everyone better realize how amazing Ana is!*

"I'm glad to see you in such high spirits," Matthew chuckled.

I couldn't help but beam as we walked down the hallway. I was really thankful for what Ana had done from a political perspective as well. She did perfectly by making them retreat without even a fight after showing them our power. If there'd been a lot of casualties, it'd be harder to govern this country, so if she'd used only the golems, we wouldn't be in such a good position now. This was all thanks to Ana deciding on her own to fight.

I entered the meeting room with Matthew. Everyone else had already gathered. We were currently in the now-occupied palace of Thorsdale, and I'd invited the chief nobles of this country to also

attend. Though we had captured the royal family, that didn't automatically end the war. Unlike in my past life, where countries usually had one centralized army, this country's armies were made up of various forces from different territory lords. Without them conceding, the war wouldn't end.

"I'll start off by explaining the current situation," I said.

At my signal, knights and soldiers brought in a collection of wooden boxes. When I'd commanded our seven squads to occupy their assigned territories, I'd intentionally not given them any detailed instructions so as not to restrict the versatility of their tactics. Thanks to that, we wouldn't have to force this occupation with more bloodshed. There was another method.

I'd allowed the squad leaders to make their own decisions, and they'd all decided to kill all those in the noble houses they were asked to target. They made sure to hunt down anyone who was part of the house but wasn't present as well. Both the forces led by the knights from our house and House Lillard did it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Since our enemies had essentially been trying to raze the Sevensworth territory to the ground, it was inevitable that the leaders of the houses that made those decisions would be killed. However, I felt it was a bit excessive to target their young children too.

In the boxes that had been brought were the decapitated heads of these nobles, preserved in salt. This undeniable proof would tell them exactly the situation they were in. After explaining the end of the seven houses that'd actively pursued war against us, I began explaining the fate of the royal family as well, but as I did, someone burst out screaming.

"Enough with the charade! I know your plan! You plan to destroy my house regardless, don't you?!"

He was Duke Sarouge. In terms of military power, he had the highest in the country. Though he was a close friend of the royal family, he'd been opposed to the war because of the negative impact it would have on his businesses. I didn't understand his outburst, though, because I had no plans to destroy his house. I stopped right as I was about to ask him what he meant, because Lady Francess,

still in armor, had stood from her seat at the table and walked over to him. Her expression gave away nothing of what she was thinking.

"Wha..." I couldn't help but let this sound of surprise leak out, but it wasn't just me.

Screams and sounds of shock broke out all across the room. Upon arriving in front of Duke Sarouge, Lady Francess had promptly unsheathed her sword and cut his head off without even blinking. She'd taken a life that easily. She then picked up his head from the ground and tossed it at the duke's retainer.

"Return to your house and prepare for war," she said in a cold voice, expressionless. There was no anger or amusement in her voice.

"Have you all forgotten? We're still at war. We've taken over this palace. If you believe it to be the same place it was during times of peace, you may lose your life very easily." Lady Francess smiled gracefully at the room that had completely frozen up.

Then she bowed to me and retook her seat. Now everyone's eyes were on me. *She got me... Now they think it was my order to kill him. She really lives up to her name as the Gold Rose. Her resolution is fearsome.* She had the decisiveness befitting of a commander. Undoubtedly, she made a much more excellent one than I did.

Thanks to that, the remainder of the meeting went smoothly. There was nobody who objected to our proposal, and we essentially got an unconditional surrender from every single one. As a result, this country now belonged to House Sevensworth. All the assets and territories from the dethroned royal family and seven large noble families would be split up between our house and those who participated in the battle with us. All the nobles were now under the command of House Sevensworth.

Hans

"I wanna leave the leadership position of the Hartley clan to my grandchild. Also, I'm leaving the clan," I said, bowing my head, which was a noble formality I'd learned recently.

The kid was hard at work in an office of the palace that we'd taken over. He wasn't a kid in the slums anymore. He was the duke of House Sevensworth, and my employer. You really never know how things'll turn out.

"Sure, but why?"

"You'll find out soon... I promise I'll be back to take responsibility. This is my sin and mine alone. Please don't punish the rest of the Hartley clan for my actions."

"Wait! What are you planning to do?!"

I ignored his question, though, and left the room. He'd won the war against Thorsdale. He'd captured the royal family in the blink of an eye and had placed the entire country under his command. When we lived in the slums, I'd already known he wasn't an average joe, but he was much more amazing than I'd ever thought. But he was soft. The only ones he'd sentenced to death were the king and the nobles who'd been in favor of the war.

The former prince and all the rest of the former royal family were still alive. He'd exiled them to a remote place and said that they could keep their lives as long as we never heard from them again. I couldn't believe how soft he was, but I couldn't fault him for it either. At barely over twenty, he was still a kid. He'd spent all his life in peaceful places like school and had only just stepped into the cruel reality of the real world. Sentencing an entire family to death wasn't something he could do, and even I knew it. This was the kind of job for adults. Dirty jobs like this were our territory.

"Where might you be heading off to?"

As I walked through the halls of the palace, my supervisor—or rather, my former supervisor—called out to me. It was Matthew, the head butler. He was a frightening old man who could get close without me even sensing it.

"There's somethin' I need to take care of."

"Under Sir Ginorious's orders?"

"No. This is my own decision, but it's for his sake and my clan's."

"Are you perhaps planning on eliminating the former royalty who left the palace not too long ago?"

I froze and slowly looked into his eyes, but I didn't see any intent

to kill in them.

"Yeah, I am. No matter how you cut it, letting them live is a bad move. I'm sorry, but I'm going no matter how you try to stop me. I already resigned from this household. I don't have to listen to your orders anymore. I know I've got no chance against you in a fight, but I also know you can't catch me if I run."

I was still a person who'd been the leader of a ninja clan. The kid had even healed my leg, so I could move as fast as I used to. I was confident I could escape anyone, even this monster.

"Well, what a coincidence. It just so happens that I was going to take care of that very job."

"Huh?! You were?!"

"Sir Ginorious and the madam are still too young, and they're both very kind. I was ordered by the lady madam to carry out the decisions they were too merciful to make."

The Empress herself?! I'd yet to meet her, but she had to be pretty sharp if she'd been able to predict this very situation.

"Are you sure you're okay with leaving the family? You'd finally found a place to belong," he asked as we walked through the hallway.

"I owe the kid—the master a great debt. He made a place for my clan and he's done so much for me, I can't possibly ever fully repay him in my lifetime. If it's for his sake, I'll throw away my life without a second thought."

"That's quite the impressive degree of fealty despite only having just joined the family."

"No, this isn't just out of fealty. I have other reasons. If we let the former royal family escape, I have no doubt there'll be another war. If that happens, people from my clan will die again. I messed up on that job from House Hechsagon and because of that, so many of my clan were killed. I don't want that to happen again. I can't stand it. So the fealty I have isn't as noble as you might think it is."

"Everyone has their reasons to be loyal to others. Being loyal for the sake of your clan is perfectly noble. For the record, my loyalty mostly is due to my father."

"It is?"

"Well, yes. Before I was even old enough to think for myself, I pledged my loyalty to House Sevensworth. I've been ready to throw my life away for them for a long time now. The day it was cemented in my very being was when my father passed away. As he died, he held my hand and told me to hold true to our family's tradition of ironclad loyalty. He wanted me to defend what he and his father before him had done to their dying days. The Sevensworths value loyalty even more than skill. I think that's why he told me that before he died. But even so...the final words of my father, the same man who used to let me ride on his shoulders...they were quite heavy."

"I see... There's no winnin' against your father's wishes."

Ginorious

"We did this by our own decision. It's all on us. So please only execute the two of us."

Hans spoke as he knelt before me in shackles that he'd apparently put on himself.

Though Matthew didn't have the same shackles, he was right next to Hans, down on both knees before me. Kneeling this way wasn't a usual part of noble etiquette, but it was one of the Sevensworths'. I'd watched my father-in-law kneel before my mother-in-law many times.

I'd received a report that the carriage carrying the former royal family members was attacked and that they'd all been killed. The perpetrators were the two men in front of me: Hans and Matthew.

"I apologize for the unnecessary duress I've made you go through for my sake."

I had a servant remove the shackles from Hans and help the two of them stand before I deeply bowed. It was all because I'd made the decision to allow the former royal family to live that they'd decided to take action to avoid a future insurrection. I'd known the risk and still had decided to let them live, but they stepped in to do what I couldn't. They'd done absolutely nothing wrong.

Despite knowing that I was risking a rebellion by not executing them, I'd let them live, simply because I didn't want to kill anyone. The former queen had begged me in tears to spare her children. The former prince also wept for me to spare his mother and siblings. Seeing them crying and hugging each other made it impossible for me to sentence them to death.

"I understand how you feel, but the former royal family weren't anyone that deserved pity. They were honored by all and lived a lavish life that commoners couldn't even imagine, but it was only because they're the ones who have the responsibility of dying in situations like this. Royal families carry a heavy burden. That's why it's not your fault even if they're sentenced to death. This is the price they have to pay for the luxurious life they've lived until now," Hans said after hearing my apology.

There was no family environment that perfectly fulfilled all human desires. Even in my past life, everyone was discontent with some aspect of their lives. Everyone had to accept the limitations of the circumstances they were born into, and there wasn't a person alive who could live without any shackles on them. But even so, those in that past society where everyone was equal had lived more freely than those born into an aristocratic world like this one.

Having difficulties when being born as a royal or as a noble was a given for people of this world. Hans thought the same, which was why he could so definitively say I shouldn't pity them. But I had the memories of my past life and how our society had functioned then, and I couldn't help but pity the royal family who'd essentially been born to die.

To be honest, I couldn't make a distinction. I knew that I had to kill the king and his cabinet members since they were the ones who'd instigated the war, causing the countless deaths. They were the ones who needed to shoulder the responsibility. But the prince and his siblings were so young that they hadn't been a part of the kingdom's politics at all.

"They shouldn't have had any sin that deserved death," I said.

"You've got it all wrong. They didn't die because they committed a sin. It's because keeping them alive would result in more of our

allies dying. That's just how war is. Killing the enemy soldiers in battle is natural, but you don't do it because they committed sins. It's because if you don't, they'll kill your people. Keeping your enemy alive means the conflict will never end. That's why we killed them."

It was clear that any guilt Hans felt wasn't about killing them but that he'd done so by his own discretion, without me ordering it. He felt absolutely no remorse for taking their lives. Killing the enemy to save his people was only logical to him. It was his form of justice and a good deed.

"That's right. It's justice. This is for the sake of protecting myself and my allies. Where's the problem? Anyone would choose the lives of their friends and family over some prince they've never even talked to."

He's right. The weight of a loved one's life is much heavier than a stranger's. All the knights and soldiers that participated in this battle would probably agree with Hans. It was the common sense of this world, which clashed with the values I carried over from my past life.

"I see... So it's justice... It's good..." I muttered, falling into my own thoughts.

During my past lifetime, our country had not been involved in war, and murder was very clearly an evil act. But on the battlefield, killing to save your allies was justice. If that was the case, not wanting to get your hands dirty even if it meant protecting your own people must have been evil.

What was just and what was evil changed depending on the time and place. However, the core of what it meant to be just was doing something for the sake of those precious to you. Hans was no different. For the sake of his allies and clan, he'd decided that killing the former royal family was the best decision. The only thing that didn't change over all the years was the desire to do right by those you loved.

I still wasn't able to break free from my past society's values where killing was always wrong. I didn't have strong enough feelings for my allies yet. I hadn't been thinking seriously enough about the people who would be hurt first in a rebellion—the common people and soldiers. I needed to think about them as if they were my family

and friends.

Even the most benevolent kings or countries that were kind to its citizens didn't give a free pass to criminals or those who tried to incite disorder. There were rules that needed to be followed, meaning that at times, they needed to be strict. The standards that politicians needed to follow were for the sake of the faceless populace, but I couldn't even follow these standards. I was truly a failure of a territory lord.

"You're not a failure, Sir Ginorious. I believe it's perfectly acceptable for you to remain your compassionate self. You have the attributes necessary to lead House Sevensworth into a bright future. Even if a problem does arise because of your actions, it won't be a big deal. After all, there are many in our family who will be able to deal with it," Matthew said with a gentle smile.

"I agree. I think you're good the way you are. I think everyone should work to better the house in their own way. There's no reason for you to do it all by yourself. Besides, it's almost unnerving how many cold-blooded people you have here."

I couldn't help but think that I was blessed with the people around me.

◇◇◇

We changed the name of Thorsdale to the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, making it an autonomous country. For pure convenience's sake, my title was changed to grand duke. This was the main reason I'd decided to take over this entire country. By making it an independent nation, I could rule it the way I wanted to. Even if the king tried to enforce his hostage law to take Ana away, I had no obligation to listen.

From the start, the Sevensworths had more political power than the royal family. We were powerful enough to take an entire country for ourselves without much effort. If we decided to form a country of our own, it wouldn't matter because his military forces could never match up to ours. Now we had the vast land of Thorsdale, so there was no way for the king to impede us economically either. The

power of this grand duchy would become the shield to protect Ana. This had been my goal all along.

Usually there'd be some kind of ceremony to honor the founding, but we were in the middle of finalizing the ending of the war and transitioning this land to exist under our rule. We'd have to save all the celebrations and ceremonies for later. Though this country had come into formation extremely quickly, it was all so I could secure Ana's safety as soon as possible.

Though Thorsdale had become the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, I still retained the same ducal status I had in the Luchizua Kingdom. As the head of this grand duchy, I was now a vassal of Luchizua as well. In essence, this duchy was a vassal state of Luchizua. However, there was someone who didn't find the situation all too amusing, and that was the current king.

Soon enough, an envoy from the current king came to present me with preposterous demands. "I believe that this country's royal family should be the ones to look over this country. This country only exists due to His Majesty. For the time being, all territory should be ceded to the king until a decision is made on how to divide it."

"This is why we had an agreement on how to divide the territory. I even have a contract."

I'd predicted this would happen after I took this country, which was why I'd made sure to have him agree to my plan for annexation prior to this whole affair. As expected, he'd come to complain now that I had succeeded. How annoying.

"Yes, but I think it's best to follow convention in this situation and not your own opinion of how to divide these territories."

"If you wanted to follow tradition, then the king himself should've been on the battlefield. It's not tradition for a member of the royal family to dictate territory division without having stood on the battlefield themselves."

It was true that more often than not, the royal family had a say in territory division; however, that was because they themselves usually participated as well. It was a given in Luchizua that nobles fought for their territory and the royal family fought to protect their country. In this attempted invasion, the royal family had not joined the battle,

resulting in Thorsdale being captured. It was very abnormal. As such, it was strange to leave the dividing of the territory up to people who hadn't even participated in the battle.

"Wh-What arrogance!" the envoy said in a rage. "In the first place, do you really think you can simply claim this as a grand duchy, making your own country?!"

This is seriously a pain to deal with. "It's also in the agreement and I have a contract."

In the past when the Sevensworth territory was still its own kingdom, it had possessed about the same strength as Luchizua at the time. In order to avoid wars with each other, the Sevensworths chose to obey the Luchizua Kingdom and were given special recognition as a vassal in return. They were given the right to official coronations and to even form their own country if they felt mistreated.

After poring through the documents that Thorsdale had been using, I found evidence of secret correspondence between Luchizua and Thorsdale's king at the time. He'd wanted to use Thorsdale to destroy House Sevensworth. This was the reason they'd suddenly tried invading us without any reason to do so. In the documents were agreements to not attack after they invaded the Sevensworth territory, plans on how to divide the territory up after they'd completed their invasion, and other very particular details of their partnership. This was more than enough reason for me to declare the Sevensworths as being treated poorly and form our own country.

To begin with, this was a contract from far in the past. It was possible that neither this envoy nor the current king himself even knew about it. The envoy was a low-level official, and the current king had never gone through the education that he would have gotten if he'd been the crown prince from childhood. But the fact that they weren't aware of this contract worked in my favor now.

"Regardless, this is unlawful! You're a country in name only! It's not legitimate!"

"Well, speaking of legitimacy, His Majesty isn't legitimate either."

"Wh-What?! How rude!"

"Our house is currently housing Sir Dietfried."

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

The envoy gaped for a moment before regaining his senses and asking if he could meet with him. Since he was nothing but a third secretary, I refused his request. *You get what you deserve.* It was His Majesty's fault for sending over someone this low-ranking to confer with the new ruler of this country.

The envoy strode frantically out the door, finally leaving the room in peace and quiet. It was true that the former crown prince was in our territory, and most likely His Majesty had already suspected he was here. He'd definitely been sending people into our territory to try and get information, but that was okay with me.

If he sent that many people here to be his eyes, that meant he had fewer around him. This was my way of helping my mother- and father-in-law with their plan. The queen had said that in exchange for us giving refuge to her and the former crown prince, they'd do anything, and we were going to take them up on that offer.

As part of my support, I sent some members of the Hartley clan to help my mother-in-law. I was sure the dowager queen and former crown prince would be fine. I had knights and golems protecting them, and they had members of the Hartley clan with them as well. The golems had sensors that could detect anyone getting close to them, which eliminated the potential for surprise attacks. If they tried to attack by using disguises, the Hartley clan could easily see through and detect them. Worst-case scenario, they could help them run. With these preparations, I was sure that everything would work out.

Chapter 11: Ginorious the Hero and Anastasia Who Won't Give Up on Her Happiness

Ginorious

"This is getting pretty bad," I muttered to myself as I sat in my office in the former Thorsdale palace, which was now the second palace of the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth.

There'd been various uprisings across the country now that it was under new management, and I knew that even the nobles who weren't participating yet were still only waiting for their chance, plotting behind my back. It was hard to know when exactly they'd strike. Ultimately, it seemed that Hans had been right: If the former royal family members had been allowed to live, the scale of these rebellions would've been much worse.

"It's because the ones who were taking advantage of the system until now are trying to continue doing that. It's inevitable for them to rebel if they see the system changing. It's not your fault, Sir Ginorious," Matthew said, consoling me.

I guess it really was only inevitable for there to be rebellions. Whether it's a coup d'état or a revolution, there's always someone behind it trying to advance their position. Even so, I couldn't help but think there were better ways to go about this. Since we didn't have many covert operatives spread around the duchy, information was coming in later than we'd like, which was a big reason these issues weren't being nipped in the bud. But even knowing that, there weren't any more covert operatives to spare since my mother- and father-in-law were using a large number of them themselves. *If only I were better at accurately grasping a situation from these*

scraps of information.

"Sir Gino!"

"Ana?! What are you doing here?!"

The doors to my office opened, and to my surprise, Ana was there. As far as I knew, she should have still been on the road. Before she got here, a messenger should have come in advance to announce her arrival, but despite that, here she was.

"I came with the messenger," Ana explained.

"Why would you do something so dangerous?"

"I'm terribly sorry. I've been so worried this entire time about if anything had happened to you, and the closer I got, the more desperately I wanted to see you. I couldn't hold myself back."

What?! Ana wanted to see me that badly?!

"Ana! I've missed you so much too!"

"That's close enough, Sir Ginorious!"

"Gah!"

As my love for Ana overflowed, sending me into a singular thought of wanting to hold her tight in my arms since I was finally able to see her again, Bridgette's fist reunited first with my solar plexus.

"Sir Ginorious! Please restrain yourself from committing such indecent acts in your office!" Bridgette said, beginning to lecture me while Ana cast her gaze to the ground, her face becoming red.

"Sir Ginorious, where are you going?" Matthew asked as I began to leave with Ana.

"We're going to have tea since we've been able to reunite after all this time."

I hadn't been able to see Ana for a whole two months. There was a lot I wanted to talk with her about. I wanted to hear all about her amazing work in defending the fort and about how she spent time with Lady Ekatarina and the others. At any rate, I wanted to spend some time with just us. I was going to be so busy with that, in fact, I didn't have time for work.

"There are rebellions happening. Might it not be best to keep working until at least late afternoon first?"

"Huh?! R-Rebellions?! Sir Gino. You should prioritize your work!

I'll lend a hand!" Ana exclaimed.

"I guess I'll work, then..."

My disappointment was probably clear on my face. The beautiful dream of my time alone with Ana vanished like a fog. Though I was happy to work with her, she'd just come off a long trip and I didn't want her to overwork herself, so I sent her to rest first.

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Ana had brought the forces from the fort with her, which solved a lot of our current problems. Fixing up the new territory went a lot faster, and we had more troops to deal with the rebellions. But despite all that, we still needed more.

The new land we'd annexed was much more vast than the original Sevensworth territory, and it had a great many more citizens too. It was impossible to manage all of it solely using our usual trusted network from House Sevensworth. This was another one of the reasons rebellions kept breaking out. There were many who thought it'd be impossible to keep them in line indefinitely with our comparatively small forces.

This was where the golems came in handy. After seeing how fearsome they were, the insurgents immediately understood why they lost the war against us. However, I didn't have that many of them to spare. Since I'd sent all my backup golems to protect Ana during the battle, there were none left in the basement of my private mansion back in the royal capital, and now I was having those golems protect the fort since there was a possibility of the rebel forces trying to attack. I couldn't neglect our defenses, so I needed them there.

That being said, I wasn't sure how long I could reasonably defend the fort. If it went on for too long, the cost to keep paying our allies would become a real burden. I also needed their armies to help keep the various territories in this kingdom in check. That was why I'd left the majority of the fort's defense to the golems, and had our allies leave the fort and come here.

My ring could currently only summon golems from the basement

of my private mansion. In order to summon an object, the destination and starting point needed to be written into the magic circuit, and I'd inscribed these to be my basement and the location of my ring respectively. This meant I could summon golems wherever I wanted so long as I was there with my ring, but I could only pull them from the basement. And though I could send them back to the basement, I couldn't just summon them from wherever they were in the world, so if I wanted to move my golems, I needed to go to them directly to send them back so I could resummon them in the next location. It would be best if I could go to the fort and get them, but the country border was too far away, so I decided to go to nearby towns and get the ones there instead. *Good grief. I was finally able to reunite with Ana, but now we're gonna be apart from each other again.*

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I sent the golems I recovered, along with soldiers and knights, to the places with the biggest uprisings. One after another, the rebel armies surrendered and we could help restore order. As expected, the intimidating appearance of the golems paired with their overwhelming strength came as a huge shock. The rebels called them "forces of the devil" and greatly feared them. On the other hand, our allied forces called them the "black steel knight troupe." At any rate, it seemed that most people thought the golems were living beings.

"Sir Gino! There's trouble! We've received a message from mother!" Ana said, frantically bursting into my office, holding a letter.

There's been a problem. Both Ginorious and Anastasia should immediately return to the Sevensworth territory.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Sevensworth

That was all that was written after it was decoded. There were faint traces of the letter having been folded, most likely from her using a carrier pigeon to deliver the message. There was always a chance of these correspondences being intercepted, so it was

normal for anyone using this method of communication to be vague with their messages.

"I've never received a message from mother like this before. What could have happened?" Ana asked, worried.

My mother-in-law wasn't one to use carrier pigeons unless it was an emergency since there was always a higher chance that it would be intercepted or attacked. As such, she didn't very much like using these kinds of dangerous, risky methods of communication which could easily lead to information being leaked. The only time she would rely on carrier pigeons would be in a time of desperation. If there was something she needed to let us know immediately to the point that she could risk the information being leaked, it must really be urgent. This was why Ana was so worried because in all likelihood, her mother was in great danger.

"Was the pigeon from our house?" I asked.

"Yes. It definitely appears to be one of our pigeons," Bridgette confirmed.

On top of that, the message had been written in our house's code as well. Though it wasn't exactly like my mother-in-law to use a carrier pigeon, there was no doubt she'd sent it.

"Ana and I will go back to the Sevensworth territory immediately. The situation seems dire, so we'll take the fastest horses. Matthew, put a small force together. We don't have a minute to waste."

For the time being, I left the duchy in Matthew's care while Ana and I set off for home.

It was now the third day of our journey back to the Sevensworth territory. Since we were in a rush, Ana was on horseback rather than in a carriage. There was a force of approximately two hundred mounted knights accompanying us as our guard, though it still wasn't ideal given that we were traveling through an unstable area.

We'd stretched ourselves really thin to assemble this force, but it would've taken too much time to send for more manpower from the squads who were dealing with the rebellions all across the grand duchy, and they already had their hands full.

Though there were two hundred total guarding us, there were

only about fifty in our immediate vicinity. The other hundred fifty were sent in a wide area ahead to search for enemies. It was best to use the forces we had to find out where the enemies were so we could avoid them altogether.

At this time, I had zero golems with me. There were fewer golems than there were soldiers in general, but I planned to pick up some of them when we passed by the fort. Though we still needed defense there, it probably didn't require all thirty-eight of them. It was overkill.

"What?!"

I couldn't help but cry out in surprise. My horse was also shocked and reared back on its hind legs. I frantically tried to control it. Up until now, there'd been nobody in sight, but after exiting the forest and advancing about a third of the way down the plains, a force of over ten thousand suddenly appeared in front of us, and a girl on a white horse began approaching by herself.

"Good day. As expected, you took this route in the interest of it being the fastest and safest," Lady Francess called as she got off her horse.

Both Ana and I dismounted as well.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"I truly apologize. Both of you are going to lose your lives here, but in light of our friendship, I've gained permission for us to have one final chat. Before you get any ideas, taking me hostage is pointless. My father is not so doting on me that he'd waste this one-in-a-million chance just to save my life."

Oh, so her father's here too? If he's here, that must mean these are her family's main forces.

"I see... So your family's magic is one that can hide your armies."

"Very well deduced. Not many take kindly to espionage magic like this, so it's a family secret."

I glanced over at Ana and saw that she had a very calm expression befitting of a noble; however, I could see that she'd gone pale and her hands were trembling. It seemed she was wisely trying to hide her fear.

I needed to save Ana somehow, but I couldn't think of a good

idea. I didn't even have any golems left in the basement I could summon. If House Lillard had come with only one or two thousand soldiers, I probably could have fought them, but with this many, it was impossible. I would run out of mana, and once that happened, I'd be no different than a normal person. The same applied to Bridgette. If she fought all these soldiers, she'd eventually run out of chi.

Ana's magic was also not going to cut it. She couldn't use defensive magic yet, and at this distance, she could be hit by their magic and arrows. There was the option of having Ana be the primary attacker while Bridgette and I focused on defending her, but that wouldn't work either. The amount of heat from her spell was too great, so we couldn't stand close enough while she used it. The best option would be to have Bridgette and me deal with their attacks, but we'd definitely run out of energy.

Lady Francess began giggling. "As I thought. You can't summon those black steel knights of yours, can you? I took a gamble, but it seems that I've won."

"What makes you think that?"

I might still be able to fool her. I just need to find out what she knows so I can see if there's a chance or not.

"The first time I saw them appear out of thin air, I was quite surprised. Then when I saw their strength, that surprise changed to fear. But at the same time, I couldn't help but think it isn't possible to produce these powerful Artifacts infinitely. Seeing you send them to help quell the rebellions made me realize there was a limit once their numbers around you ran thin. As expected, you eventually had to go retrieve them yourself if you needed them elsewhere, meaning you'd reached the limit on the number you could summon. Although, as I said earlier, this was still a wager since I couldn't be completely sure," Lady Francess said after first apologizing for the faux pas of speaking about the Artifact.

"Y-You assisted the rebels?!" Ana exclaimed.

"Yes, I did. It cost our house quite a bit of money, but in exchange, we learned valuable information and were able to split your forces. By doing so, we reduced the number of people able to

join you here on the battlefield."

In contrast to the two of us, who were in a desperate situation, Lady Francess was completely relaxed and snickering leisurely. When Ana had appeared on the front lines to join the war, I'd freaked out and stationed all the backup golems at the fort. Up until just now, I'd thought that this situation had come about due to my mistake of leaving the golems there, but it wasn't that.

The result would've been the same regardless. She would have kept inciting rebellions in order to spread the golems thin and judge how many of them I had. She'd keep going until I eventually didn't have any left to summon. Even if I'd left some golems to defend Ana, she'd have kept the rebellions going until I was forced to reassign them to quell the unrest.

"Was that carrier pigeon fake? Did you use magic to steal the decoder and one of our pigeons?"

"Oh my. It sounds like you're accusing me of theft. Though it's true that I snuck into the room of the former Thorsdale palace and took a peek at the decoder, I wouldn't go so far as to say I stole anything. I simply memorized all of it and returned it to the place I found it. However, what you say about the carrier pigeon is correct. I apologize that I borrowed one from your family."

As I thought. That letter was fake. The Sevensworths had a lot of our forces and golems in the grand duchy. I didn't think they'd risk it all on us potentially falling for their fake letter. But at any rate, she was truly impressive to have memorized that complicated decoder.

"Our family's code is compromised... Such a blunder..." Bridgette said bitterly.

Most likely other covert operatives of our family would feel the same way. They were touted as the best in the country and masters of information. I could only imagine how frustrated this would make them feel.

"If you kill us, you'll make enemies of House Sevensworth. Do you really think you'll survive that?"

"Oh? But it won't be House Lillard that kills you two, but the nobles from Thorsdale. They want the glory so they can take the country for themselves, and we want to hide the fact that we were

involved. It's a win-win."

It was true that there were numerous banners flying over the collective armies in front of us, all of different houses from the former country of Thorsdale.

"I see the flag of Sarouge too. They're okay lending a hand to the same person who killed the head of their family?"

"Well, of course. After I deeply apologized and explained the situation in tears about how I was unable to disobey your orders and told them about all the horrors I'd been subjected to, they eagerly accepted House Lillard's proposal to help each other get revenge. The eldest son approved his forces assisting."

So that's why she looked at me after cutting off his head. She'd already planned to have them focus their anger on me so she could bring them to her side. Maybe even the very reason that he burst out of his chair like that was something that she'd orchestrated beforehand. House Sarouge had the greatest military power in the entire kingdom of Thorsdale, so I could imagine that she'd wanted them on her side at all costs. It was probably easier to trick the naive son than the former head of the house, who she killed.

"Is that why you asked to join under our forces rather than as an allied force? To make it seem more likely that I was the one who ordered the death of Duke Sarouge?"

"That's not the only reason. It also made it easier to gain your trust and get more information. Although, it seems I might not have been too successful in that regard."

"How were you so sure that we'd succeed in taking down Thorsdale?"

Before the war began, she'd said that she wanted to join because she'd seen my magic. However, simply knowing that there was a talented sorcerer on our side wouldn't allow her to predict that we'd topple an entire country. The best that could be guaranteed would be successfully repelling an invasion with minimal losses.

But even so, Lady Francess had been so assured of our victory that she even set up this plan to bring House Sarouge onto her side ahead of time. The fact that she'd enlisted her forces under our command was proof that she was setting up for them to join with

her after killing the head of their house. She wouldn't have done that if she wasn't certain we'd win the war.

As far as I knew, our allies had at best expected us to be successful in our defense, but nobody expected us to succeed in occupying Thorsdale. Just looking at the sizes of our forces, we'd been at an obvious disadvantage. It'd be one thing if she'd known about the golems beforehand like House Sevensworth did, but without that knowledge, there was no way she would have been able to completely predict our victory.

"Have you forgotten that I'm a natural-born sorcerer? I know that other than you, everyone in House Sevensworth wears various Artifacts on their persons. I can tell by the complicated but precise flow of magic that they're not normal magic tools. If they're always wearing them, then they must have some defensive properties, and if that's the case, then they must be useful in war as well. If even those from House Valvalier and Adolni are wearing them, it's safe to say that you have many other Artifacts that are useful in war as well."

Oh, I see. It's her magic eye that can see mana. My ring was a magic tool as well, but it used primordial magic; her eye could only see mana, so she couldn't detect it as a magic tool. In addition, I'd cast a concealment spell on it to hide its activation. That was likely why she couldn't see it for what it was.

The magic tools I'd given to Ana and the others weren't fueled by their mana but by internal batteries. I wasn't surprised that she'd be able to tell that they were magic tools. They were always active, so it must've been easy for her to see their magic circuits.

"So you thought we'd win based solely on the number of Artifacts we possessed? Seems a little optimistic, don't you think?"

"Well, of course, it wasn't just that. You were also very confident from the start of the battle. That's what sealed the deal for me. I was certain there were other powerful Artifacts that could make up for the difference in forces. That's why I made a plan to get House Sarouge on my side just in case."

She got me. I'd tried to act like I was putting on a brave front, but that didn't work on her. I never expected her to be able to tell

the strength of my magic tools from that, though. She really lived up to her name as the Gold Rose.

"I never expected you to have such amazing Artifacts, though. I'll admit I didn't expect that there'd be absolutely no casualties and you'd be able to take over the royal palace." She smiled as if she were enjoying a game.

"Why are you doing this?" Ana asked, a mix of fear, anger, and sorrow in her voice.

Ana had looked up to Lady Francess, so this betrayal probably hurt her a lot.

"Making me queen is House Lillard's desire, as it is mine. This time, I won't be relying on any men and will accomplish this feat by my own strength. I truly do feel bad that I have to sacrifice you all to my goal. Both of you are good people, and I don't bear you any ill will. That's why I've come here to hear your last words. It's the least I can do."

I doubt that's why she's really here. I was cautious of them launching an unseen magic attack on us, so I cast an inspection spell and saw that several metres above the enemy army, there was a spell being cast, invisible to the naked eye. It was still incomplete, but by the looks of it, it was likely a spell to control one's mind. I'd wager this was the true reason House Lillard kept it a secret that they were a sorcery household.

They probably wanted to cast it on me so they could steal the golems before killing me. Lady Francess was here to buy time, which was why she kept volunteering information.

I know I say it a lot, but this world's level of magic was really low. The magic circuit of the spell was crude and primitive. It was the kind of thing that adults in my time could've made in seconds, but these sorcerers were struggling to make it at all. Judging by their speed, it would take another twenty minutes or so.

That being said, I believed her when she said that she felt bad and that she didn't hold anything against us. I could tell that from her expression. Even so, she wasn't hesitating to kill me at all. She was a true noble through and through. She wasn't swayed by her emotions and could make a rational decision every time.

"In other words, the king said you could be queen if you destroyed House Sevensworth?"

"That's right. We've spent quite a bit of money on the rebellion in Thorsdale while also supporting your army," she said with an elegant smile.

As I thought. The current king's behind this. The reason they intentionally froze out House Lillard when they joined his faction was always to use them as a pawn for assassination. If she was successful in killing me, she could become queen and her family would become the core of his faction. If they failed, they'd go to the bottom of it. That was why the current king had offered them a seemingly miraculous chance to turn everything around, forcing House Lillard to make a very bold choice.

"There's no point in telling you my last words since you're the one who'll be dying here. Return to your army already so we can begin our final battle," I said.

For a brief second, I saw a look of surprise on her face, but it vanished just as quickly and she returned to a smile. She bowed elegantly before mounting her white horse and riding back to her army.

I began forming magic circuits to release a spell toward Ana while she watched Lady Francess ride away. Before Ana knew it, she collapsed to the ground. I'd used a medical type of magic for anesthesia. Medical magic was very powerful, but despite being hit by the full strength of this spell, Ana didn't fall asleep. She simply became unsteady on her feet until her knees buckled, but she still kept her consciousness. If she'd finished building her magic circuits as a Magic Monarch, a regular spell like this wouldn't have worked on her, but she hadn't gotten there yet. For now, it still affected her, albeit at a reduced impact.

"Bridgette, please take Ana and run away. Take the knights too. All of you need to protect Ana. As long as she lives on, House Sevensworth will survive. Protect her with all you have."

"What will you do?" Bridgette asked, looking right at me.

"Buy you time. You should know that I can do that."

"Understood... I promise I will protect her even if it costs my life!

I wish you luck in your battle!" Bridgette said with a serious expression before running away with Ana.

The knights tried to keep up with her, but on foot, Bridgette was incredibly fast, making it hard for them to do so. *Well then, I'm up. You've miscalculated something, Lady Francess. You're really underestimating how strong I am with the knowledge I have from my past life.*

I'd make sure Ana survived. Armies were built around central leaders, so if I could take them out, they'd be paralyzed. I just had to take out their high-ranking officers to give Ana enough time to escape while they fumbled to regroup. The reason I had Lady Francess return was to determine the positioning of the main force. I'd planted the idea in her head that I might still have some forces lurking around somewhere and I was sure that she'd report that to the commander because that was how it worked with these kinds of armies. Most likely, she'd report to her father. As expected, I saw her communicate something to him and was able to confirm his location, which wasn't too far from where the mind control spell was being cast.

What I was doing had no chance of me getting out alive. Simply running with everything I had to reach their commander would drain half my mana at least by itself, and I had no doubt that their forces would do everything they could to try and stop me. By the time I took out their leader, I wouldn't have enough mana left to flee.

Suddenly, I remembered Hugo's warning to me about how I was too fixated on Ana and how it would lead to my death. *Heh. Hugo, you really were a great fortune teller. Your prediction was right on the money. If I'd just given Ana to the current king, I'd never be in this position. But you know...I'd rather die than let that happen. Maybe this was part of your strategy too.* I gripped the handle of my sword tightly.

Those who died naturally were accepted back into the wheel of reincarnation, but those who died an unnatural death were stuck in this world, uninvited to heaven. That's what the church proclaimed and why they declared killing as an act of evil. If that was true, then my soul would most likely remain in this world.

I’m going to die... Whether it’s in thirty minutes, an hour, or a little longer from now, I’m going to be dead... I’m scared... My teeth began to chatter. That was why I screamed. I screamed to overcome my fear. I screamed to beat it down deep inside me while I charged forth.

I’d promised Ana that I would never leave her again, that I would stay with her and be by her side forever. *Ana, if my soul stays in this world, I want to remain by your side. I want to continue protecting you forever. You’re still young. I’m sure you’ll be able to fall in love again and I promise I won’t interfere. No matter who you fall in love with, I will always wish for your happiness. No matter who you love, I will never stop loving you. Ana... Please be happy...*

Anastasia

Out of nowhere, Sir Gino cast magic on me, and before I could even react, my legs gave out and my mind became so hazy, I could barely form thoughts. It took everything to resist the wave of sleep that washed over me. I couldn’t even speak. Bridgette scooped me up and began running away.

“Thank you... Sir Ginorious...” Through my fading consciousness, I could see that Bridgette was on the verge of tears.

“Ana!!!” Sir Gino roared. “For Ana!!! For her, I will become a hero who doesn’t fear death!!!”

It was as if he were pulling these words straight from his soul until his own existence was but a feeble candle in the wind. It was a tragic roar.





I desperately tried to keep my eyes open while turning my head toward him, but all that was waiting for me was a scene of complete and utter despair that made my stomach turn.

Sir Gino raised his blade and charged by himself into the enemy formation. Their forces, ten thousand strong, prepared themselves to intercept him. Burned into my eyes was the visage of a single man with a sword charging into a sea of enemies. There was no chance for his victory. This went far beyond recklessness, straight into the realm of absolute tragedy.

No! I don't want you to die! Sir Gino! Please! Please don't leave me a widow!

I struggled with all my might, making Bridgette lose her grip on me. Relief filled me as I dropped to the ground, knowing that now I could make my way over to Sir Gino. I began forcing my heavy limbs to move, crawling slowly back to him.

"Sir Gino... I will be by your side..."

I can fight. It's something that I can actually do. If I don't fight here, I'll truly have been nothing but a burden to you. I won't give up on my happiness. There's no world in which I can be happy without you in it. I'll fight with everything I have by your side so we can both emerge safely from this danger. I will sacrifice everything for that! I will absolutely never give up! I am going to do my best!

"Huh?"

All at once, the haze in my head dissipated and I felt a powerful heat from my abdomen. It was a heat that bubbled and circulated at an extreme rate, spreading throughout my body before I knew it. Suddenly, my surroundings went dark.

Ginorious

"Whoa!"

While running toward the enemy forces, I felt a violent wave from behind me. It was so strong, I almost fell over. *Wait, is this a mana quake?* I quickly looked behind me and saw something that seemed almost unreal. Ana had lost consciousness but was enveloped in a

bright light, her body slowly rising into the air.

"Ana...awakened?"

In order to use magic freely, one first had to construct magic circuits in their body and then create specific controls for each kind of magic they wanted to use. It was only after completing these steps that someone could cast spells, and it usually took a great deal of time to accomplish. However, "awakening" happened when these circuits and controls spontaneously formed on their own, without the person having to create them one by one.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake, making the enemy horses rear back and throw off some of their riders. The ensuing mana quake from an awakening was similar to the wavelengths from earth magic. It more directly affected the ground than living things, which was why the ground was shaking more violently than us atop it.

I'd read about this in records about Magic Monarchs from my past world. The same thing happened when the son of a carpenter in Nazareth awakened from the cross he was nailed to, and when the prince of Shakya awakened under a Bodhi tree. An earthquake always followed when a Magic Monarch awakened.

"Ana's okay, she doesn't need to be guarded any longer! All knights focus on protecting yourselves! Bridgette, make sure no one's close enough to see up Ana's skirt!"

In the distance, I could tell that Bridgette had been unsure of what was happening and hesitating in her actions but, after hearing what I said, was relieved and quickly shooed all the knights away. In the meantime, I ran back toward Ana.

In Buddhist paintings, the Buddha always sat in the center of a ring of light. This ring came to be called a halo, but that was only because in depictions, they made it look like it shone from behind them and made it smaller for the sake of composition. In reality, though, halos weren't a two-dimensional circle but a three-dimensional sphere, much larger than a person's body. This large ball of light was currently enveloping Ana's entire body as she went through the awakening in her sleep.

Seeing this unknown phenomenon, the enemy began to panic and shoot at her, but it was useless. Mere arrows and magic couldn't

make so much as a dent in a Magic Monarch's halo. Even if they used my golems or military magic from my past life, or somehow had a magic generator to create atomic mana to cast spells, or even an orbital magic strike to cast *divine judgment*, they wouldn't even be able to touch a single hair on her head. The only thing that could touch her now was another Magic Monarch of equal or stronger power. Magic Monarchs not only had unbelievably high magic power, but impossibly high defense as well. That was why they were known as the strongest mages. Nothing this current army had could so much as scratch her. Within the absolute defense of her halo, nothing—not even poison or viruses could affect her.

As Ana slept within the sphere of light, her rise into the air stopped at about five metres and light began sprouting from her back, taking a shape that could even be seen by the naked eye due to how dense the mana particles were. This was something only Magic Monarchs were capable of.

Within the gentle light, white wings grew from her back. She looked absolutely divine as they spread. Bridgette fell to her knees and began to pray, tears of joy in her eyes. Now that her awakening had completed, Ana slowly opened her eyes, regaining consciousness.





"Ana—you don't have to kill them. Just turn the ground into mud and then harden it to stop them," I said urgently.

She was no longer a sorcerer who could only cast *ember*. Now that she'd awakened, she could use both chi and mana. Just as a butterfly fresh out of metamorphosis knew instinctively how to fly, Ana instinctively knew how to use all types of magic.

But even though she could freely use magic now, it didn't mean she wouldn't feel pain if she killed someone. It had hurt me a lot when I sentenced the former king of Thorsdale to death. I could only imagine what Ana would feel since she was even kinder than I was. All I needed her to do was capture the army and then I'd handle the rest. I'd be the one to shoulder the burden of taking their lives, not her.

"Understood! Here I go!"

The instant Ana activated her magic, the ground turned to mud, dropping every last one of the enemy forces into it, and then she solidified it, making it impossible for them to move. The hardened ground had turned into an obsidian substance with gold flecks.

My analytic eye was still activated, so when I analyzed the ground, I confirmed that she'd changed the ground to orichalcum, which wasn't something that normal sorcerers could do. It required the extreme pressure that only Magic Monarchs were capable of. Most likely, in her urgency to harden the ground enough so that none of them could hurt us, she'd gone overboard and created this incredibly tough material.

"I...did it," she said with a relieved smile.

After that, her wings of light disappeared and Ana fell to the ground. I quickly rushed to catch her. Despite having never used any magic but the very basic *ember*, Ana had just released a great amount of mana all at once, and as a result, she'd lost consciousness. I sighed with relief seeing that she'd just fallen asleep. I could really feel that we were safe now.

"Please leave the rest to me," one of my knight commanders said. "Killing the enemies stuck in the ground will be no different from cutting the grass."

"No, that's okay. The Sevensworth territory is only a little farther.

Let's return there and send out squads to detain them all."

Though the commander was raring to go at a single nod from me, I decided against his suggestion.

"There may not be enough time to return before they break out of the mud," he advised.

"Oh, don't worry about that. They can't."

The enemy forces were desperately slamming their shields and swords against the ground, trying to get free, but it was to absolutely no effect. They would just tire themselves out without making a single dent.

The magic particles in the very atomic structure of the ground had changed it to orichalcum, which had a strength beyond what anyone here could even fathom. Cutting it or melting it would only work if a Magic Monarch like Ana did it, or if they had an incredibly powerful industrial excavator like I'd had as an engineer.

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"I... I worked so hard... I worked so, so hard and yet..."

After finishing the investigation about what happened that day, I heard Lady Francess mumble this as Ana and I visited her where she was being held at the eighty-fourth noble prison, called the Wind Chime.

We'd captured every last member who'd joined House Lillard's attack on us. After we'd taken Lady Francess into custody, we'd put her in the noble jail in the grand duchy's first palace, formerly known as the Sevensworth mansion. I'd changed its name to the First Palace of the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, with the second palace being in the former kingdom of Thorsdale.

"I've worked myself to the bone ever since I was young, all for the sake of becoming queen. I did all I could to be first in everything I did, whether it was school or politics or fashion or tactics. No matter how hard it got, I kept moving forward to become the most worthy of becoming queen."

She wasn't trying to brag but simply stating the truth. From the day she started at school until she graduated, she'd always been at

the top of her class. Even in her training as the crown prince's fiancée, she was touted as the best candidate to have ever been taught.

Even now, the high-end clothing store she'd inherited, Herr Mays, still made clothing that noble women absolutely had to wear. Using that as her weapon, she made herself the leader in fashion.

Before we even began this war against Thorsdale, she'd predicted our sweeping victory and had most likely been the only one to do so. She possessed foresight almost as impressive as my mother-in-law's. Her plans were equally impressive too; not only had she been able to reduce our forces, but she'd created a situation where it was impossible for me to make use of my golems by creating rebellions in places where we didn't have many covert operatives yet. Her strategy had been nothing short of brilliant.

Despite being an obvious cut above everyone else, she never forgot her humility and helping others. In school, she'd helped Ana when she saw her crying from being bullied. It was because of things like this that she had so many allies. All of her achievements truly made her worthy of her name as the Gold Rose. If anyone asked me who I'd thought was worthy of being the next queen, after Ana, I'd have said Lady Francess.

"You were able to accomplish so much that wasn't possible simply with talent alone. I can only imagine how hard you had to work..." Ana said.

She was right. Lady Francess had put in so much effort that it was no exaggeration to say she'd worked herself to the bone. When she moved to attack us on the battlefield, she showed nothing but rationality, lacking her own personal emotions. She was truly a noble and was the exact kind of person meant to lead, which had surely taken a lot of work as well.

As humans, it was impossible to truly get rid of our feelings, so she must have trained herself strictly to be able to make these kinds of decisions devoid of emotion. She'd no doubt had to fight down that side of herself many times growing up, and I could only imagine how hard her life had been.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I really did work so hard. It was

awful when my engagement was canceled. Everything around me went dark. I'd spent my entire life preparing to become the queen, and having him end it all just like that was like having my entire life be rejected."

Yeah, I can imagine. The ending of engagements was something that was typically only done with mutual agreement between houses. It must have felt like a bag of bricks was dropped on her when the former crown prince ended their engagement at their graduation party.

Of course, I couldn't forget that I'd done the same thing to Ana, and had no doubt put her through similar pain. I couldn't help but be reminded of the weight of the crime I'd committed against her. *I need to treasure Ana even more than I have until now. I need to become someone who treasures his wife so much that nobody can even come close to how well I treat her.*

"That's why I didn't want to rely on any man to help me become queen. I wanted to achieve it by my own strength, but...it seems that I've failed. But I can't help but wonder what I did wrong. Did I make a mistake somewhere? Did I not work hard enough? I've been constantly thinking about that ever since I got here."

Ana looked at Lady Francess, on the verge of tears. She could probably understand her pain. If the current king hadn't used a flower operative to seduce the former crown prince, she would have become an incredible queen. Ana must have viewed her as yet another victim of the battle for the throne.

"Lady Francess, you seem to think that you only need the right amount of strength to become queen, but that's wrong. The most important thing to gain status isn't strength, but luck."

"Luck...?" Lady Francess asked with confusion.

"If one is born a commoner or a lower noble, no amount of hard work will ever lead to them becoming queen. On the other hand, simply being born a greater noble won't allow you to become queen if you aren't a similar age to the crown prince. Many women are disqualified simply based on when they were born. What else would you call that besides luck?"

"Sure, that may be true for those individuals; however, I was

actually in a position to become queen."

"The same applies even in that situation, though. It's all about luck."

It'd been the same in my past life. Sometimes it just so happened that the project you were working on was a huge hit or the products you made sold like crazy. Those were the people who were promoted—the ones who'd gotten lucky. Of course, there were also people who dropped out of the rat race, but if we were comparing those who were actively striving for promotion, the ones who succeeded in the end weren't too different from the ones who didn't. If anything, more often than not, the people who got promoted weren't even the ones who deserved it most.

What set the winners and losers apart wasn't their skill, but luck. Those with good fortune continued to climb the ladder, and each time, luck remained the sole determining factor. I truly believed there were no rules. Just luck.

I'd read a lot of business publications in my past life that talked about ways to get promoted, but they all felt as reliable as the books that told you how to be successful at hitting on girls and winning at pachinko. Reading a book and suddenly thinking you'd learned the secret to success was just as unrealistic.

However, I definitely couldn't reveal anything about my past life to her. So instead, I talked about my experience with running a company, and how servants were promoted in House Sevensworth. This was a kind of conversation that tended to be hard for people to take to heart and actually reflect on because regardless of if it came from the winner or the loser, it would either come across as patronizing or like sour grapes. However, considering how wise she was, I believed that she wouldn't completely disregard what I was saying.

"The reason you didn't become queen is because it wasn't in the cards for you. Whether or not you climb the social ladder is up to the gods and not something you can obtain by your own sheer will. If you keep searching inside yourself for a reason you lost, you won't find it."

"If one believes that everything is based on luck, then what's the

point in trying?" Lady Francess asked, not convinced.

"It's only because of hard work that people can catch these lucky breaks. Besides, humans are impatient. It's harder to sit back and wait to gain status and honor than pushing to get it yourself. However, ultimately, whether you actually obtain those things is all up to luck. If you try to force the things you can't control, you'll just tire yourself out. What you should focus on are the things you can control like your grades and your own strengths."

"The idea of working hard while trying not to care about if I succeed or not is something that never occurred to me."

"Lady Francess, it's difficult to gain status but it's fun to try and improve yourself. I believe it's very enjoyable to work one day at a time to achieve your ideal self. My very precious friend taught me this, and I've only recently begun to feel how right she was. Your entire world will change with a little bit of a different attitude."

"That may be true..." Lady Francess said, considering Ana's words.

"Lady Francess, if you wanted to be queen so badly, there must have been something you wished to accomplish, right? Though we can't make you queen, we can at least try to put into policy what you wanted. Please share what you'd hoped to do and I'll try to see if we can accomplish it," I said.

"I'd like it to be possible for women to inherit status as well. I want women to be able to gain status without having to rely on men to grant it to them."

"Understood. I'll do my best to make sure that there are more women leaders in households and politics."

Though having women lead noble families or even the royal family wasn't outlawed, it was very much accepted that they never took these positions. It wasn't impossible to change, but since it wasn't a law, it would take time to change the country's traditions.

"Heh heh..."

Lady Francess suddenly began laughing in a hollow voice, and she continued for some time, but neither Ana nor I could figure out why.

"To be honest, the desire to make it so that women could inherit

status only came after my engagement was called off. I was so angry that someone's hard work could easily be nullified due to the whims of a man. Prior to that, I'd undergone my training to become queen, so I had more palatable wishes prepared, but now that I really think about it, there's nothing...absolutely nothing that I'd wished for back then. I feel so stupid that I can't help but laugh at myself."

I shouldn't have asked this after all. Ana had told me that prior to Lady Francess losing her engagement, she'd talked a lot about wanting to become queen and doing something when she achieved that goal. The future she spoke about was idealistic and made everyone at the school feel that she truly was the Gold Rose. That was why I'd thought Lady Francess had something meaningful she'd wanted to accomplish.

"Though I may have looked the part due to my education, I've finally realized that in actuality, I was empty inside. It only makes sense that the gods wouldn't favor a woman like me... Thank you very much. I now finally realize where I went wrong."

"Lady Francess...I'm not very interested in how you failed or where you fell short. However, I'm very curious to see how you stand back up."

"You're truly a kind individual, Lady Anastasia..." Lady Francess said, her soft eyes trained on Ana.

Those of House Lillard were scheduled to be executed, and soon their house would be no more. However, there was a chance for Lady Francess alone to survive. It was because the former crown prince had asked for her to be spared.

When they'd still been engaged, Lady Francess had warned him extensively that Lady Mariott might be a flower operative, but he didn't heed her words at all and only let himself become further intoxicated. However, since then, he learned that Lady Francess had been right all along. That was why he wanted to apologize to her. The prison she was being kept in was part of the same palace where he was staying now.

After speaking with her, he realized it was his fault that she'd ended up like this. As a way to atone for his sins, he requested her

life be spared. Though it was possible for our family to stay her execution, she'd declined the offer.

Even if she was pardoned, she'd still lose her status as a noble and be marked with a criminal record. From there, there were only two paths she could take. She could live in exile and work somewhere like the red-light district, or she could live under another noble's protection. In her case, there were quite a few noble houses that would have happily taken her in if House Lillard weren't being destroyed, so that was the path she would have taken if circumstances were different.

However, the reality was that without a house, there was no merit to anyone taking in a criminal and treating her well. If they did decide to take her in, they'd most likely treat her like a sex slave, and even if they didn't, there would still be rumors. Talk would spread even faster given her beauty and her reputation as the Gold Rose.

She couldn't allow herself to not only have the dishonor of being a criminal but of being a sex slave as well. Nobles valued their pride over all else. Even if she was able to avoid execution, her entire reputation would be poisoned.

Everything Ana was saying now was to give Lady Francess the will to live on and not choose suicide, and Lady Francess called Ana kind because she understood that.

It would have been one thing if we'd just taken some of the territories that House Lillard possessed, but they'd tried to kill both me and Ana. Since their objective had been the demise of our household, we were well within our rights to kill every last one of them, and as one of the orchestrators, she deserved to die as well. I especially couldn't forgive her for trying to kill Ana.

But Ana didn't think like that. She said the only reason our families fought was because of political strife, and that it was only because she'd been born in that house that things had turned out this way.

To Ana's mind, Lady Francess's desire to become queen from a young age had only been because the idea had been impressed on her from those around her. Truth be told, that might have been the

case. Despite it not having come from her own desire, she'd wanted to achieve it, which was only natural given the environment she grew up in.

Ana could relate to her in the sense that as the only child of a duke—and a girl as well—she'd also had to live with the burden they placed on her of what *they* wanted her to grow up to be. The pain of living for the sake of one's house was something she understood well. That was why Ana didn't want to dole out any punishment beyond destroying their house. She was happy that she had an excuse to not execute Lady Francess thanks to the former crown prince's request.

"I suppose...I'll think a little about living as a criminal."

Relief appeared on Ana's face. This seemed to be a step forward from when Lady Francess declared without a shadow of a doubt that she refused to live with the shame. What Ana wanted was by far the most important thing to me, so I also felt relieved that we could grant Ana's wish.

Chapter 12: The Two Princes Who Failed Due to Love

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The current king had summoned me to his royal palace. It wasn't the first time he'd extended this invitation to me, truth be told; I'd gotten the first letter requesting my presence right after we'd succeeded in occupying Thorsdale. At the time, I'd been very busy trying to restore order, which hadn't afforded me much time to leave and meet with him. After I declared the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, the frequency of the letters increased exponentially, but I still had my hands full with the rebellions and other things, so I once again deferred it to later.

But now that I'd caught the instigators of the rebellion, House Lillard, everything had settled down, and I'd even moved back to the original Sevensworth territory. I was out of real excuses and could no longer refuse his summons without it seeming blatantly intentional.

"Please wait here," a servant said as I took a seat in the royal palace of Luchizua. There were many pieces of art elegantly displayed around the room, which were changed out periodically. This room was called the Hartshorn and was the largest room in the palace for awaiting an audience with the king. Its size allowed for more artistic pieces than any other room, making it the most pleasant to wait in for long periods of time.

The fact that they'd stuck us here meant we'd be waiting for a while. I could only imagine how busy he was with preparations for our meeting. To him, having our house wage war alone against Thorsdale had been a huge gamble. If we'd been wiped out—or even just weakened enough to be neutralized as a threat—he would

have won and the royal family would have become the most powerful in the country. Even after distributing some of the wealth and industries he'd seized from our house to Thorsdale, his power would've greatly increased, as would have the stability of his position as king.

If our house had only ended up losing a little of our strength, though, he'd have lost his bet. In that scenario, our house would have been lauded as heroes for defeating an invading country all on our own, and it would have driven the current royal family even further into a corner. The current king sat on a throne earned through regicide, and that made the influence he had very weak. With the Sevensworths still standing strong, he'd have been put on his very last legs.

Contrary to most everyone's expectations, our house had not only emerged victorious in the war, but we'd even taken the entire country of Thorsdale for ourselves. Rather than succeed with only losing a little strength, we'd become overwhelmingly powerful. As such, the current king had lost his bet big time.

At this juncture, he only had a few options left, one of which was the very low road of assassinating the Sevensworths or something similar. Right now, he was most likely making us wait so long because he was preparing whatever assassination attempt he had planned. That was the situation we were currently in. Waltzing right into the palace now was the same as jumping into the fire.

"Oh my, this embroidery is amazing!" Ana exclaimed, looking at a piece that was displayed on the wall.

I'd wanted to come here by myself, but Ana insisted on joining me. I couldn't bring myself to refuse her request. Though I was extremely worried, I'd promised myself that I wouldn't hold Ana back. I had to let her fly with her own wings. But even so, I couldn't stop being worried that I'd brought her right into the jaws of danger. My heart was beating abnormally fast, and my stomach hurt.

"I apologize for the wait. His Majesty is ready to meet with you," the palace servant announced.

"It's been some time, Duke Sevensworth," the current king said

from his throne after both Ana and I bowed.

It was customary to call someone by their highest title when they had multiple of them, but he didn't call me "grand duke," meaning he didn't recognize my grand duchy.

"So it has," I replied while casually surveying the area.

The throne room was different today. Usually there would be dozens of royal guards standing against the walls, but now there were hundreds in the room, all arranged in six tightly packed rows. There were also bowmen and sorcerers, which was very unusual.

"Now then, Duke Sevensworth. I've heard you've been spouting something ridiculous about forming a grand duchy? Do you care to explain yourself?"

"I'm simply following our country's agreement with the royal family. When the Sevensworths agreed to join Luchizua, there was a contingency stating that we could leave if we ever felt unfairly treated."

"Is that right? When exactly would you say that I gave your house any unfair treatment?"

"When investigating the palace of the country formerly known as Thorsdale, I found partnership agreements between you and them. You were conspiring against us with a foreign nation to have them fight a war against our house, with the promise of splitting the spoils after they were done. I believe that perfectly fits the scope of being unfairly treated."

The nobles and knights in the room began murmuring. It seemed that there were people here who'd been following the king but hadn't been aware of this at all.

"You dare accuse your king of lying?!" he spat.

"Well, more importantly, I came here not to address this but another matter. I'd like to discuss your illegitimate claim to the throne."

"What?!" he screamed as he shot to his feet.

The nobles shrank with fear, while the knights drew their swords.

"That's right, my dear Christopher. I do not recognize you as king," came a voice from right beside us.

Everyone around us erupted in gasps of extreme surprise and

confusion.

"F-Father?!"

Hans had used his ninjutsu to keep His Majesty hidden and revealed him just now. I could only imagine how shocked the people were. Both Ana and I had also been blown away when we'd found out after returning to the Sevensworth territory to prepare for war.

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"Y-Your Majesty?!"

"U-Uncle?!"

Neither Ana nor I could hold back our surprise as we saw the supposedly deceased king there in the eighth drawing room, the Aster.

"I'm here as well." In the next moment, the dowager queen and the fourth prince stepped into the room.

"Thank you for having us."

"G-Grandmother?! The fourth prince too?!"

"It's all thanks to Gino," my mother-in-law said. "Though I'd already known my brother's life was being targeted, thanks to the poem Gino shared with me, I realized our mother was in danger as well. Because of that, I was able to perfectly execute this plan."

"But weren't you sobbing during the funeral?" I asked her.

"You can never trust a woman's tears, Gino. That was part of my plan as well. I needed to show how grief-stricken I was to lower their guard." She giggled at me, treating me like a child.

We'd been completely fooled. That being said, there was no way for me to be able to tell when a girl's crying was fake, what with how inexperienced I still was. *Would* I ever become capable of doing that? I couldn't imagine a future version of myself with that ability.

"But you were crying in the mausoleum as well, even when it was just you and father," Ana said.

"Oh no, you saw that?" my mother-in-law said, embarrassed. "I was crying because you became the lady of the house, Ana. You used to be so small, but it hit me then that you'd become a wonderful, full-grown woman, and you were going to leave the nest.

I was crying with joy as well as sadness, a very confusing feeling. To tell you the truth, I'd hoped to wait a little longer before passing everything down to you, but I ended up having to do it so soon after you graduated. I felt bad about that, and for not being able to give you a succession ceremony." My mother-in-law's voice grew emotional as she recalled these events.

Suddenly, I remembered something she'd once told me. *"If the first prince became the king through a normal route, somewhere down the road, our family would come into conflict with the royal family. I'm sure it's a price that you and Ana would have to pay."*

She must've already known about the assassination plot at that time, how the current king had planned to use underhanded methods to forcefully steal the throne. I couldn't believe this. My mother had already figured out everything. She truly deserved her name as the "Empress."

"Why didn't you tell me?! I was so heartbroken when I thought they died! And I was worried when I heard that grandmother had gone missing as well!"

It was rare to see Ana get angry, but both His Majesty and the dowager queen looked at her happily.

"I feel bad about keeping all of this from you and I'm truly sorry, but you and Gino are still learning to read the intentions of others. We'd all have been in danger if either of you let it slip in your facial expressions or tone of voice, so we had to keep it a secret for as long as possible. It was imperative for our movements to not be discovered."

I understood my mother-in-law's argument. She'd most likely wanted to end this conflict with as little bloodshed as possible. I was sure of it. If we'd ended up being unsuccessful in weakening the current king, and he found out that His Majesty was still alive, he'd have spared no expense in trying to kill him, and a true civil war would have erupted, leading to many losing their lives. They absolutely couldn't risk anything leaking by telling the two of us, who were still inexperienced.

The dowager queen hugged Ana, who had tears streaming down her face, and His Majesty patted her on the head. At any rate, I was

just glad that Ana was happy.

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"Duke Sevensworth, you fiend! You've brought an impostor of my father?!"

In the midst of my recollection, the current king—no, the first prince—froze with surprise and began yelling.

"If you doubt his identity, why not ask him something only he would know? That goes for everyone else too. Please feel free to ask him anything you'd like," I said in a calm voice.

The king wasn't here by himself, though. The queen was here too. The nobles began nervously asking them questions about things that happened when they were in school and during private tea parties. Hearing their answers, the nobles began bowing to them with the highest level of formality.

The former crown prince, the fourth prince, and the dowager queen weren't present. Neither the king nor the queen wanted to involve their children or their elderly mother, so as the people with the most responsibility on their shoulders, they'd come to handle this themselves.

"Now then, I think it should be obvious that we're not impostors. I'll give all the knights a chance to toss their weapons away. Do so, and I won't brand you as traitors."

Some of the knights showed hesitation, but ultimately, none of them dropped their weapons. It was only the queen, me, Ana, and Hans standing with the king, no guards or servants. In contrast, there were hundreds of royal guards around us. From any outside perspective, we were in a devastating position. Most likely, the knights who'd wavered had decided there was no benefit to following the true king now, while those who'd shown no hesitation were staunch supporters of the first prince and maybe had even been involved with the attempted assassination of the other royal family members.

"Don't make me laugh! Knights, these are traitors to the crown trying to foment an insurrection! Kill Duke Sevensworth and the

impostors immediately, but leave Lady Sevensworth alone. I won't stand for a single scratch on her!"

You're still trying to go after Ana?! You lowlife! I won't forgive you! Up till now, the first prince had been observing the conversation between His Majesty and the nobles to see where their loyalties would fall, but he made his move after His Majesty failed to turn the knights. Judging from his expression, he was certain he'd come out on top, but he was sorely mistaken if he thought we were weaker. Lady Francess had likely told him that I was no longer able to summon golems, and thus, he thought he was safe from that threat.

Every last person who'd been sent to attack me and Ana had been captured and were being kept in the Sevensworth territory, meaning no one had been able to spread word of how powerful she was. I poured primordial mana into my ring and suddenly, four arachnes appeared and summoned a magic barrier that deflected magic and arrows.

"Eek! D-Demons!"

"Demons!!!"

"Oh no! They've come to destroy the world!"

As usual, the golems got a bad rap. The faces of all the knights went taut with fear while the nobles began screaming about how the end was nigh. There were some noble ladies who collapsed to the ground or even began crying.

By this point in time, I already had more than enough golems stocked in my mansion's basement. I'd also been able to collect some of the ones that I'd lent my mother-in-law, as well as the ones I'd stationed at the fort.

As the golems protected us, Ana grew six wings of light and a radiant sphere enveloped her. In the next moment, every last noble was bound in what looked like a tube of light. They all fell to the floor along with the first prince, who was also bound. This magic not only took away the person's physical strength but also their ability to cast their own magic. Though it was an advanced, college-level spell, I'd had Ana learn it just for today. It was already powerful, but when combined with Ana's monstrous level of mana, it made it

absolutely impossible for any of them to escape.

"What?! She's the child of the gods!"

"Please bring us salvation!"

"Thank the gods! We're saved! They haven't abandoned us!"

The reception Ana got was the stark opposite of how my golems were treated. The nobles all prayed on their knees before Ana while begging her to defeat the alleged demons.

"Sir Gino! I did it!"

"Yeah, you did great; but of course you did. You're my pride and joy!"

Ana smiled happily as I patted her on the head.

We all became very busy after that. In preparation for my arrival, the first prince had switched out a lot of the soldiers and knights in the palace for ones loyal to him, so I had our soldiers who'd been waiting outside, hidden by the Hartley clan, enter and capture all of them. Ana and the golems helped as well, and soon enough, the palace was once again His Majesty's.

The nobles in the first prince's faction were currently being rounded up across the kingdom as well. This was why my mother- and father-in-law had been so busy. They'd had to fool both their enemies and allies to determine who exactly was on their side and who was their enemy. The reason they'd stopped making public appearances was to stay under the radar and begin the preparations to sweep the entire first prince's faction away in one fell swoop when the time came.

Of course, not all the preparations had been arranged so quickly. Take the family of the king's concubine, for example—House Lefou. As a reward for approving the punishment toward House Florro for their bullying of Ana, House Sevensworth had helped to build a great ironworks in the Lefou territory. Many of the workers sent to help were also from our house and they became our secret plants, who now worked from the inside to do things like open the gates for our soldiers. My mother-in-law had been preparing many similar setups across the country for quite some time. When she revealed this all to me, I was once again reminded how big a difference there was in

skill between us.

"I wanted to strengthen the king's authority and bring stability to the country, but...it doesn't seem like that's possible," the first prince muttered while blankly staring at the ceiling from the throne, where he was confined by tubes of light.

The fact that he said that in this situation showed how strongly he'd wanted a powerful royal family. If that was the case, it made sense why he'd try to assassinate His Majesty since the king had always relied on the strength of House Sevensworth to stabilize the country. If things continued as they were, our house would always be deeply intertwined with the royal family, and our power would continue to grow as well. The royal family would never be the strongest authority in the country. It seemed the first prince decided that he needed to get rid of us before we got too powerful, but for that to happen, he needed to first remove the current king, whose ties to the Sevensworths were too strong to be undone.

The first prince hadn't simply stolen the throne out of pure greed. That wasn't to say that his thirst for power hadn't been a huge motivator, because it certainly had been—however, he *had* had his own vision for the country that he'd wanted to enact.

I was currently in the throne room as well. As a very large room with few exits, it was being used as a place to keep the important individuals locked up, and I'd been tasked with watching over them.

"Duke Sevensworth, from your perspective, was I lacking power? Was that where I went wrong?"

"No, I believe you were aptly powerful, Your Highness. Your ability to be unemotional, rational, and passionate about politics all made you perfectly qualified to be king."

I could tell that he still hadn't given up believing himself to be the king. That being said, I didn't see him like that at all and I didn't address him as such.

"Then why am I being removed from my throne?"

He'd pushed things too far. In order to sit on the throne that wasn't his, he'd chosen the despicable route of assassinating his own family. That was why he was now paying the price. It took a lot of excruciating work to keep hold of something you obtained through

unscrupulous methods.

The hate and anxiety from those around you would be like shackles, gradually becoming heavier and heavier. In fact, during his time as king, he'd been met with rebellion from both the fourth prince's and the neutral factions, making his political authority unstable from every angle. Now he'd fallen to ruin from our family's wrath. His greatest mistake was in trying to obtain something he was not fated to have.

But just like Lady Francess, this wasn't what he wanted to hear. When I called off my engagement with Ana, I'd tried telling myself that it wasn't my fate to marry her, and by doing that, I'd convinced myself that was the truth. Both Lady Francess and His Highness were still young and full of vigor. I doubted they wanted to hear their effort was meaningless and that in the end, it was all up to luck. Without even consciously trying to, they'd try to identify where things went wrong and then correct it. Their thought process was different from mine as someone who'd already experienced a long life of learning to give up.

"I think your biggest mistake was not making Lady Francess queen right away and instead dangling it in front of her like a carrot to control her." Since I was sure he wouldn't listen to my true opinion, I decided to search for a specific point of failure for him.

"How was that a mistake?"

"Lady Francess's attack was very well executed and had us backed into a corner. However, you hadn't made her queen before this attack. If you had, I would have tried to negotiate with her and probably accepted anything she demanded. If I could at least save Ana, then I would throw everything else away. However, there was no royalty on that battlefield. Without a single member of the royal family in charge, despite this plot being spearheaded by them, we couldn't negotiate and only had the option of fighting. The simple act of you not making her queen took away your great chance to negotiate a way to weaken our house."

"What's to say she wouldn't take action according to her own agenda if I made her queen?"

"That right there is why you lost."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe that things would have turned out differently if you two had entered a romantic relationship. If that had happened, she would have happily offered you her assistance and may have resulted in a different outcome. She might have not pushed her luck by launching an attack on our house. If someone as clever and resourceful as her came at us not with force but with her smarts, our house would have been much more frightened. If you had treated her better, you wouldn't be in this situation right now."

"A romantic relationship? With that girl with the emotional capacity of a rock?"

"I believe Lady Francess simply has yet to experience love. She was the fiancée of the king-to-be ever since a young age, but she never really experienced love with him. She's not the type of person who enjoys playing with fire and has a strong sense of self-control. There's no telling how she'll change once she learns what love is like."

Lady Francess wasn't devoid of emotion. Though she was always smiling elegantly, in reality, she was silently suffering. She'd handled the ending of her engagement gracefully, which made everyone praise her as the Gold Rose, but in reality, she'd been terribly hurt inside. The reason she looked like she had no emotions and only thought rationally was simply because she was used to suppressing her own feelings.

"I highly doubt that she, of all people, would change simply by falling in love."

"I disagree. Take me, for example. Until I met Ana, I was the type of person who was very brusque with women. I was so uninvolved with them that I made my mother worry."

"What? *You?*" His expression was one of genuine disbelief as he stared at me.

Is this what people think of me? That I'm some kind of hopeless romantic who thinks love will always triumph?

"That's really the only striking difference between you and me," I said. "You put Ana and Lady Francess on a scale and then used Lady Francess as your pawn. As such, you never built a relationship of

trust with her. However, my bond with Ana is deep. That's why when Lady Francess attacked, Ana chose to fight with me, and that's how we won."

Ana's awakening had only happened due to her determination to fight, and that was only due to her believing in us without a shadow of a doubt. Getting to that point wasn't easy. People weren't nearly as altruistic as they thought. Even if someone thought they were acting out of the goodness of their heart, almost nobody really did things purely because they were a good person. On some level, it was always some kind of show to make yourself look good, or to feel proud about how good a person you were, or because you expected something in return. There were so many kinds of selfish desires woven in with altruism that you'd never really notice the impurities in your acts of good.

It was normal to feel irked when someone didn't thank you for doing something out of the goodness of your heart. That was why, in most cases, people wouldn't have awakened like Ana had. True, pure altruism was feeling happy about saving someone from a hopeless situation, regardless of whether anybody thanked you, or made fun of you, or laughed at you as a hypocrite; regardless even of whether you destroyed yourself in the process of doing something good. That was the level that needed to be met, and it wasn't something that normal people could reach. The only ones who could were people who had extremely pure and strong feelings, and Ana was one such person. She'd shown that she was one of the rare people in history who was truly altruistic.

"Ha ha ha... So Dietfried dropped his claim to the throne because he was drunk on love, and I lost my chance at the throne because I was indifferent to love? Ha ha ha, I suppose this generation of royals is filled with people destroyed by love." The first prince began laughing to himself.

His laughter sounded sad to me. I couldn't help but wonder whether or not he, the very same person who'd led both Hugo and Lady Francess to ruin, had also been doing his best to live.

His Majesty was restored as king, and the political landscape

shifted substantially. Both the first prince and his mother, the king's concubine, were stripped of their titles and incarcerated in the prisoner's tower. If His Majesty killed them, he'd earn the dirty title of a regicide monarch, so instead he locked them up. Most of the time when royalty committed large crimes like this, they ended up imprisoned rather than executed for this very reason. I'd probably never see them again; once they were in that tower, they'd remain there until they died.

The king's concubine had another child besides the first prince—the first princess. She was still in middle school and was not jailed; however, she did have her royal title stripped from her and was sent to a convent.

With His Majesty returning to the throne, House Lillard could finally also be dealt with. They were part of the first prince's faction. If their punishment had been left to the first prince when he was still in power, it would've been a mere slap on the wrist, at which point, House Sevensworth could've dealt with them as like in a territory war, but that would've only resulted in the deaths of the people we'd captured while their house and its status lived on. In order to destroy them completely, we'd had to wait until His Majesty became king again so he could pass judgment. Now we could finally send them before the king after all the time we'd kept them imprisoned in the Sevensworth territory.

The ones facing judgment weren't just House Lillard but the great number of houses that had conspired to assassinate the royal family. Now, their houses were no more and their territories were split between the royal family and House Sevensworth.

As thanks for our house's great contribution in helping him wrest back control, the king was very generous with the number of territories he granted us.

Though this meant that we yet again had even more territory, I couldn't exactly say I was happy about it. More territory just meant it was harder to manage everything. Since I needed more people to help with these territories, my mother-in-law suggested that I recruit Eric Jones and bestow upon him the title of count. In other words, my elder sister from House Adolni would become the wife of the lord

of a large territory. Though I trusted them both, I was still incredibly worried about giving such a big responsibility to my sister. However, there weren't many people I trusted, so it seemed like the best option.

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"Sir Gino, I think it'd be best if our house kept Lady Francess in our custody. I was the one who said I wanted to make sure she didn't try to end her own life, so I believe I have a responsibility to see that through," Ana said as I worked in the office of the First Palace of the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth.

She had a point. Ana had been the one who stopped her from self-harm, so she would feel terrible and very responsible if she talked her into living only for another family to take her in and treat her horribly. It was true that, out of all the houses that offered to take her in, many were terrible at hiding their greedy intentions. In order to avoid the kindhearted Ana from being hurt, it was best for our house to keep custody of Lady Francess.

"Okay. In that case, we'll take her into our house as my official aide."

This was probably better than letting her rot away doing nothing. It would also probably help her get back on her feet. Besides, she was extremely talented. It'd be a waste to not take advantage of her skills.

"I think Lady Francess is very...beautiful. Her golden hair and eyes are so enchanting that even as a woman myself, I find her beautiful. She's also wise and perfect in her mannerisms and gestures. She's a very wonderful person..." Ana's cheeks puffed out and she looked away.

"Ana? Are you angry?" I asked, quickly thinking of a way to improve her mood.

In the Sevensworth territory, there was a famous spot for baby's breath spirea. At this time of year, they were fully in bloom, and the petals on the breeze looked like snowfall. Ana liked flowers and would often walk through the palace's garden to admire them. I

proposed a stroll there and she perked up immediately as she agreed.

"Umm, if I may voice my selfish thoughts...I'd prefer if Lady Francess was assigned to me, not you."

"But..."

House Lillard being destroyed was a result of their attack on House Sevensworth. It was possible that she'd want to get revenge on our house. Ana would be in danger if I let Lady Francess stay by her side.

The only time Magic Monarchs were invulnerable was when they activated their sphere of light. She'd be defenseless if she were attacked in her sleep. Of course, I'd given her magic tools to prevent this from happening, but Lady Francess had a magic eye and could easily identify when someone had a magic tool on their person. Someone as smart as her could easily create a situation where Ana would have to take them off and become vulnerable.

Though I tried to push back on Ana's idea, I ultimately gave in. This was a battle I was never going to win. Looking at Ana, I couldn't help but wonder what I could really do for the sake of this incredibly cute girl. *I guess I don't have a choice. I'll just make a more powerful magic tool to defend her with.*

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"You're gifting this to me?" Ana asked as she peered at the wooden box I'd placed on the table.

"Yeah. I'm sure it will be useful to you."

Ana thanked me and then waited for a moment before I urged her to open it. "Is this...a stuffed bear?" she asked with a puzzled look, which made sense since Ana, a grand duchess, was not of the age to be receiving stuffed animals.

"It's not just any stuffed animal. Start by pressing this button," I said, showing her a button hidden under the ribbon tied around the bear's neck.

"Huh?! It moves?!"

After activating it, the stuffed animal began to move, greatly

surprising Ana. Bridgette was also surprised and leaped in front of Ana to protect her, most likely thinking she was in danger. It was truly impressive how she could move so fast and without a single sound that it was like she practically teleported.

"Th-This a mechanical doll as well?" Bridgette exclaimed.

The word "golem" didn't exist in this world, so I explained to Bridgette that this was just like the "black steel knights." It wouldn't be long now before His Majesty decided on the punishment for House Lillard, which meant Lady Francess would be transferred to our custody as Ana's secretary, meaning she'd be around Ana a lot of the time. In preparation, I'd made this golem as a way to stop any potential assassination attempts by her. Its ultimate directive was to protect Ana at all costs, so it was programmed to even ignore Ana's orders if it determined her life was in danger. Even if Lady Francess somehow tricked her into disabling it, if she tried to attack Ana, the bear would still activate to protect her life.

Though it looked like your typical, run-of-the-mill stuffed brown bear, it was installed with a very powerful barrier to block physical and magic attacks, which would deploy in emergencies. Even by my last world's standards, the barrier it produced was on the stronger side since it could protect against all elements and had extreme durability. It could easily shrug off Lady Francess's magic and even the focused fire from my golems. Even if she was suddenly rained down upon by a hail of arrows and a storm of spells while she slept, she wouldn't even be scratched.

"I...highly doubt anyone would be able to remain asleep until the moment they're under siege by an entire army in their bedroom. Surely an army at the gate of the estate would be sufficient to wake them," Bridgette said with a deep sigh.

I'd also worked hard on the different types of sensors I'd put inside the bear. For example, there was one that could even detect greater stealth magic, which meant there was absolutely nothing to fear in regard to Lady Francess's ability to hide her presence. Without any supplemental golems to help, the sensors were able to function at roughly three kilrometres. With communication with detection and guidance supplementary golems in the sky, that range

could extend all the way to thirty-six kilrometres. This way, no matter where Ana was, she would never be out of range.

"You're not going to use that technology to spy on her, are you? If you do..." Bridgette's eyes turned to slits.

Like hell I'd do that! What kind of person do you take me for?

"The only one who can admire the madam as she lounges in her room is me! Simply looking at her soothes my heart. The only one who's allowed that healing is me! I absolutely won't forgive you spying on her!"

What?! There's a side of Ana I haven't seen yet?! I want to see her like that! But peeking in on her without her permission isn't okay, and I don't want her to hate me... Grr... This isn't fair, Bridgette!

"By the way, is it capable of attacking as well?" Bridgette asked.

Of course it is, and it can fire shots with extremely high precision. Even without supplementary golems, it can accurately attack within a three-kilrometre area. With supplementary golems, it can go up to thirty-six kilrometres. If you held up a coin, it could easily shoot it wherever you were in its range.

With both its precision firing and detection abilities, even if Ana were to be attacked inside a building in the middle of the city, the stuffed bear could accurately dispatch the assassins by shooting them through their heads. It was also capable of attacking with very powerful offensive magic, and was strong enough to escape magic barriers or even cages made of orichalcum. If the attack was changed from a focused beam to a spread attack, it could easily eliminate thousands of soldiers in an instant.

I also took into consideration how to make it feel good while holding it, so I put cotton under the fur, but underneath that was a bundle of metal. Though it was quite hefty, the vector, scalar control mechanism made it light enough for a woman to hold it with ease in a single hand. Because of this control mechanism, it could ignore inertia and go faster than Mach four. It also had magic weapons for close-combat warfare inside it, making it powerful in close-quarters combat. Out of all the golems I'd made so far, this might have been the one with the highest specs. I used every ounce of my technology

to make something for Ana's safety.

"Oh my, you're a noble?"

The bear had a skirt that it lifted up by the sides to curtsy, just as a noble would do. Ana wasn't listening to my conversation with Bridgette at all. Her attention was completely focused on the moving bear. It made sense since she loved these kinds of cartoonish bears.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm the grand duchess of the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, Anastasia."

She's so cute! So incredibly so! She's introducing herself to the golem! That's so cute!

"Where do you hail from?" Ana asked, excitedly trying to become friends with it.

"Sorry, it's not able to talk. I'll add a speaking function sometime soon."

"O-Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea you weren't capable of speech," Ana said very apologetically to the bear, thinking she'd been insensitive to it.

I couldn't help but smile even more. *How is she so cute? Seeing her apologize to a golem is just too adorable.* Since I'd designed it to be her bodyguard, I hadn't equipped it with any speaking functions. However, now I clearly needed to. *I'll give it a high-functioning AI so that Ana can enjoy talking with it. It'll be a lot of work, but this is for Ana. I'd work myself to the bone for her sake.*

"Sir Gino. Does this cute bear have a name?" Ana asked, smiling excitedly, her eyes sparkling.

Ana's heart had been stolen by the bear, which was toddling around on two legs.

"The bear's yours, so you can give it whatever name you'd like."

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"Come out, Charlotte."

"Yes, madam."

At Ana's call, the stuffed bear climbed out of the bag on Bridgette's back. If someone attacked Ana and thought Charlotte was nothing but a stuffed animal, they'd be in for a world of hurt

since she could easily change the tide of battle to our favor. Whenever other people were around, Charlotte wouldn't move at all and would behave like a regular stuffed animal. It was only when nobody else was around that Ana would call her out of the backpack.

When I'd given her to Ana, she'd been dressed in only a simple skirt, but now she wore a lavish dress studded with jewels. Ana loved her so much that she'd gone through the effort of having it specially made.

The backpack she rode in was something that Ana had made herself as a present for Bridgette. Charlotte was a very important part of Ana's security detail now, and I wanted her with Ana whenever she left the mansion, but of course, to everyone else, Charlotte looked like a regular stuffed bear. Apparently, a grown woman walking around with a stuffed animal was very embarrassing, and Bridgette had always been red in the face when they walked outside, which was what prompted Ana to come up with this idea.

"Heh heh, what do you think of this backpack? The young madam herself made this ultimate masterpiece with her own two hands. Look at this wonderful craftsmanship and embroidery! Isn't it great?! She gave me such a *wonderful* gift!" Bridgette said smugly and with pride, grinning at me in an obvious attempt to show her superiority.

I had to admit that the craftsmanship and embroidery were truly wonderful. I was so jealous that I began grinding my teeth. Originally, Bridgette planned not to use the backpack at all and instead put it in a display case, but when Ana heard that, she looked a little down that after all her hard work, Bridgette wasn't even going to use it. Naturally, Bridgette did a complete one-eighty and put a cover over it instead to prevent it from getting dirty.

"Heh heh. You're cute as ever, Charlotte."

"You're much cuter, madam. Here, have a cookie," Charlotte said.

"Oh, thank you very much. That makes me so happy," Ana said with a bright smile before eating the cookie.

Rrgh! How dare you get so friendly with Ana! You're not even alive! This was my fault for giving it a friendly personality. I should

have made it so that it wouldn't talk outside of conveying important information. Though I was happy that I'd made Ana safer and that she loved her present, I wanted the *two* of us to enjoy this teatime we were having. I wished she would spend more time talking to me than Charlotte.

Chapter 13: Embroidery and a Best Friend

Anastasia

My uncle and aunt returned to the royal palace and were restored to the throne, making them the king and queen of Luchizua once more. The most surprising thing, though, was that the third prince, Dietfried, also returned to the palace.

His mother, my aunt, had seen how well he was doing living outside the palace walls and told him that he needn't return if he didn't wish to; however, he made his own choice to return with her.

"I've caused you so many problems all these years. I intend to stay by your side and make up for my behavior," he'd said.

Though my aunt was normally great at hiding her emotions, she was unable to hold back her tears. I also found myself crying. It was as if he'd become a different person. He even began to earnestly participate in government affairs. Due to how he'd changed, who would succeed the throne was once again a question on everyone's minds. Up until recently, the fourth prince had been the front-runner, but he enjoyed painting more than politics.

After absorbing an entire country, our house had grown much more powerful, and all the houses that had supported the first prince were wiped away. At this point, the next king could basically be decided by the royal family without anyone being able to say a word in opposition.

The royal family went back to their home in the royal capital of Luchizua, as did we of House Sevensworth. We'd returned with them so we could be present for His Majesty's restoration to the throne and all related events, and also to determine Sir Gino's official title.

But since we'd come all this way, I thought it was a good opportunity to meet with my friends as well.

I was currently in the sixteenth drawing room of our estate, the Green Rutile, with both Lady Ekatarina and Lady Janail.

"I've heard that Sir Ginorious making the grand duchy was all for your sake, Lady Anastasia. I couldn't believe my ears to hear that a single person would go to the lengths of creating their own country for the one they love. His love for you must burn as bright as the stars," Lady Ekatarina said, sounding very entertained.

This rumor was all thanks to what Sir Gino had said during the celebration after His Majesty's restoration ceremony.

"I know many of you have been wondering why I created the grand duchy without fear of relations worsening with the royal family, so I'll use this opportunity to explain all at once. It was all for the sake of my wife, Ana. In order to protect her from Christopher's evil clutches, I created my own country." He'd said this with the attention of all the heads of the noble families in the country gathered on him at the podium.

Since the former king had had his royal title stripped from him and was now branded as a criminal, he was simply Sir Christopher now. Given that, it was proper to not use any honorifics with his name in public settings.

When Sir Gino had announced this, I'd been standing behind him at the back of the stage, and it'd been very embarrassing to hear it in front of all these people. If his speech had ended there, I might have been able to endure the embarrassment, but he continued.

"I just had a great idea! In accordance with the inspiration of its founding, how about we change it to 'The Grand Duchy of the Cutest Woman in the World, the Woman Who's Too Cute for Words, Anastasia'?!"

Absolutely not! This was the first I'd heard anything about the name changing, and I couldn't believe what he'd come up with. The surprise, coupled with such intense embarrassment that I felt like I would faint, made me lose my senses. I couldn't stand the applause that'd begun to break out, and I moved to the front of the stage to stop Sir Gino.

Before I knew it, everyone had burst out laughing, mother and His Majesty included. The ensuing conversation between Sir Gino and myself must have been very amusing. The ideal place for such a talk certainly wasn't onstage during a party. It was such a shocking failure for me. Ever since then, I'd been so embarrassed, I couldn't bring myself to leave the estate.

"How romantic! Even the troubadours in the royal capital are singing about the romance between you two. I've actually been going into the city quite frequently to listen to the songs," Lady Janail said with a nonchalant smile.

I knew it... It's already become a song. I made the correct decision staying inside. Oh, how I hope we change topics soon. This is too embarrassing...

"Well, I have an announcement. Thanks to the help I received from the both of you, I'm now engaged to Sir Anthony," Lady Janail said, finally changing the topic. Her face was filled with joy as she said this.

Oh, thank goodness! She really worked so hard. It's quite difficult to marry into a military household from one of the old guard. It takes a lot of studying and it's necessary to change your own values. She's truly impressive to have been able to accomplish this.

It was probably good that she'd come to the fort. Sir Anthony had been very thankful for her help with the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other tasks. At first, Lady Janail had been the one always initiating conversation with him, but eventually, as his admiration of her grew, he began to approach her more frequently, and before they knew it, they'd made a world for just the two of them.

Ever since then, Lady Janail, who'd come to enjoy household chores, was apparently even helping out the servants in the house. It was standard for ladies of old-guard houses to not lift a finger to do any housework, but here was one such lady who broke from tradition.

"How does your father feel about your engagement?" Lady Ekatarina asked.

The political standings of the Grimardy and Treves houses were quite far apart, but even so, Marquess Grimardy had approved the

match.

"My house used to be close to the former king. All the houses that aided his plot have fallen to ruin, so having members from the opposing side like House Byron and House Sevensworth mediate this engagement is a lifeline for him, so he's thrown his most fervent support behind me."

Old-guard houses generally considered it shameful for women to give their thoughts about politics, so if this had been the Lady Janail of before, she probably would have avoided the topic completely. *She's really changed so much.*

"So, how did he propose to you?! I'm dying to hear!" I asked, unable to hold back my curiosity.

Lady Janail and Sir Anthony had been in the same class since elementary school, so I very much wanted to hear how their romance blossomed.

"Well, actually, I...kind of pulled a 'Princess Anastasia's Courage,'" she said, her face turning red and her voice going soft as a mosquito's buzzing.

"'Princess Anastasia'? Are you referring to...me?"

"She is," Lady Ekatarina said, grinning with amusement as she began to explain.

Apparently, now whenever women proposed to men, they called it "Princess Anastasia's Courage." In the play *The Goblin Maiden*, the main character, Anassy, proposed to her loved one, Ginova. After learning that it was based on real-life events, news had spread that I was the one Anassy was modeled after, and the term for women proposing to men now had my name attached to it.

The play had been necessary to restore Sir Gino's honor, and I'd thought I'd prepared myself for the consequent talk that would spread. However, I'd had no idea that they'd actually name the proposal after me. This was so embarrassing...

But also, I was surprised that Lady Janail had proposed in the first place. Back during the bird and flower dance, she'd lacked any courage to dance with other boys, so her being so proactive in her relationship was a huge change.

When she'd still been engaged to Sir Christopher, their

communication had been almost exclusively through letters, with most of them being sent from him. Their relationship had been very businesslike, which made me feel bad for her since she truly had cared about him.

However, Sir Anthony frequently had tea with Lady Janail and would invite her out to see plays and musical performances. He also came to me and Sir Gino often for advice on what to do for dates.

Lady Janail would always talk about their dates happily, albeit sheepishly. She was so enthralled with her first true relationship that wasn't just for political reasons, and she seemed so happy.

"Well, anyway...my house actually had this lying around..." Lady Janail said, placing a worn piece of cloth on the table.

"I-Is this double-sided embroidery?!"

"Huh?!" I exclaimed at Lady Ekatarina's statement.

Though Lady Janail had casually placed the cloth on the table, Lady Ekatarina was extremely surprised, startling me as well. Double-sided embroidery was made through a technique that allowed the person to embroider both sides of the cloth at the same time. Though it was simple enough to do with both sides having the same pattern, this particular technique made it so that each side was different. It was an ancient lost art that was only written about in old books. Something like this shouldn't have existed in this world; however, it was right in front of us!

"So, since becoming engaged to Sir Anthony, I've gotten permission to help the servants with their work, and I found this the other day. When I saw it, I remembered you mentioning something about looking for embroidery with a different pattern on each side, so I brought it here for you two to see."

"Why is something so valuable so beaten up?!" Lady Ekatarina cried.

"Well...my father decided that the old fabrics in our storehouse should be disposed of, but our servants thought that would be a waste, so they cut them into rags."

Though it looked like someone had tried to repair some of the frayed embroidery threads, there were obvious signs of it having been used as a cleaning rag. The servants had likely cut it up to

make it easier to use, evidenced by the design that was definitely part of something bigger. There were many stains on it from being used to wipe up messes.

"A cleaning rag?!"

"Eek! I-I'm so sorry! Father doesn't care much about embroidery!" Lady Janail squeaked, shrinking back from Lady Ekatarina's fury.

I couldn't blame her for being angry, though, with how much she loved embroidery. Lady Ekatarina quickly apologized and explained that she wasn't angry at her personally. Though I was aware that old-guard houses didn't value women's crafts very highly, even so...this was a tremendous shame.

"Given how long your house has been around, it's very possible that there are still some double-sided embroidery pieces in your home. We will buy any of them that are left—from any of the old-guard houses—immediately," I said.

These were very important pieces of culture. If they were simply going to be used as rags, then it was better for us to purchase them all. This was perfect timing too. House Sevensworth already had wealth that rivaled a country, but now that we'd expanded, Sir Gino had been encouraging me to spend money more than ever before.

"Charlotte, come out."

"Yes, madam."

Out of the backpack that I'd made for Bridgette came Charlotte. Sir Gino had given her to me as a way to prevent attempts on my life. Though she was supposed to behave like nothing more than a regular stuffed bear in front of everyone else, I felt it was okay to reveal the truth to these two.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two. My name is Charlotte, and I'm the madam's stuffed animal," Charlotte said, trotting across the table and raising the edges of her skirt in a curtsy.

Both Lady Janail and Lady Ekatarina's eyes widened greatly before they frantically returned the greeting.

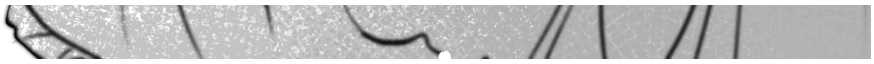
"This is House Sevensworth's new product, stolichny. Please have some," Charlotte said, bringing a plate with a slice of fruitcake with raisins in it for both of them from the tea cart. Charlotte was very

familiar with the sweets that were served in this house.

Lady Janail squealed. “It’s so cute! What is this adorable creature?!”

Though Lady Ekatarina remained outwardly calm, I could tell she was struggling, until she couldn’t hold it back anymore and her lips began twitching as she desperately tried to stop herself from smiling. As her best friend, I knew that Lady Ekatarina absolutely adored cute things. The atmosphere of our conversation had become a little too heavy, so I’d called Charlotte out to help and thanks to her, the remainder of our tea party was very lighthearted.





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We ended up purchasing many fabrics from various old-guard households, many of which had been made using very high-level techniques from ages past. They were extremely valuable learning materials for us. I took a few to show the embroidery professors at school, and both the professors and research students alike all exclaimed with glee. They each took a fabric and began fervently researching it.

Ultimately, out of everything we'd bought, there weren't any other double-sided embroidery pieces. The double-sided-embroidery-turned-dust-rag was the only one we could find, so Lady Ekatarina and I both began studying it. After graduating, Lady Ekatarina had won the award she'd been aiming for and was granted a position as a research student.

The more we looked at the double-sided embroidery, the more impressive we realized it was. In the areas that used the finest threads, they'd undone them into fibers that were thinner than even hair. The technique was incredibly impressive. Both the tiger on the back and the lion on the front seemed so realistic that I wouldn't have been surprised if they began moving at any moment. They were truly so intricately made, I couldn't help but gasp.

Every stitch was made with intention. The parts of the eyes that needed to match on both sides did so where they needed to and were very precisely different where that was required too. Despite using all kinds of strings, the tens of thousands of stitches were skillfully blended. The technique was unbelievable. Whoever did this must have been one of the leading embroiderers on their continent.

"It seems that this was made by two people," Lady Ekatarina concluded as we sat in the embroidery room of the Sevensworths' estate.

Lady Ekatarina was sitting next to me on the sofa while we closely examined the cloth together. I agreed with her theory. The higher the skill of an embroiderer, the more their personality shone through. The habits and techniques displayed, as well as the feelings

each piece evoked, were completely different between the front and back.

"If double-sided embroidery is something that's done with two people, then how about the two of us revive this technique?"

"Oh yes, let's do that! I'd be more than happy to assist!"

It had been Lady Ekatarina's dream from when she was still a student to revive this double-sided technique. I really wanted to help her realize this dream. But also, I was absolutely charmed by this style of embroidery. I wanted to study and learn this wonderful style and then make a wonderful piece of my own. It wasn't going to be easy, but I was confident that the two of us working together could succeed. This was the day that our challenge began.

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The deliberation over Sir Gino's title concluded. Up until now, he'd held both the inherited ducal title of House Sevensworth as well as the title of grand duke that he'd declared himself when founding the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth.

However, now that His Majesty had returned to the throne, father became the premier duke and chancellor of Luchizua once more. His position would be to work with the king to guide and manage the country, as he had done for nearly twenty years, since he was very familiar with His Majesty's brand of politics.

Meanwhile, Sir Gino was in charge of managing the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth. The original Sevensworth territory was already stable, so he was mostly focused on stabilizing the areas that had once belonged to Thorsdale. That being said, it was proving to be quick work. One big reason was that the instigators of the rebellions, House Lillard, had been destroyed, but there was also one more surprising reason.

"We humbly ask that you become a saint, Grand Duchess Sevensworth," the pope of the holy country of Waltdiez said, bowing his head from the sofa opposite me.

Since the pope himself had wished to speak with me, we were hosting him in the fifteenth drawing room of the First Palace of the

Grand Duchy of Sevensworth, called the Corydalis. Sir Gino was here as well, sitting right next to me.

When we'd rushed back to the Sevensworth territory after the fake emergency message from my mother, we'd been attacked by House Lillard and other houses from the former country of Thorsdale. The conscripted soldiers had had no choice but to follow orders, so they were released after one to two months of labor.

When they returned home, they talked about what happened, and rumors spread that I was a beloved child of the gods. According to depictions, children of the gods looked like humans but with white wings on their backs, which was exactly how I'd appeared when I fought against Lady Francess and her allied armies. This was the other reason the territory was stabilizing under our control.

"What would you like to do, Ana?"

"I'd like to accept."

"Are you sure? I thought you'd prefer to stay out of the spotlight since you don't like troubadours making songs about you."

"That's true, but even so...I'd like to accept."

Sir Gino was correct that I disliked songs being written about me. I especially disliked that one about the princess kick. After all, I was a lady, and I would absolutely never do something so unladylike. However, I couldn't deny that simply by being the subject of rumors, I'd contributed to the rebellions dying down. If I was officially recognized as a saint, I was certain that things would get even better.

I knew very well how hard Sir Gino was working to stabilize this territory. If I accepted the pope's request, I'd be able to assist Sir Gino as his wife even more. *I can do this!*

"There are some conditions for my wife becoming a saint. I'd like you to waive any requirements for her to make appearances at ceremonies."

Oh my. He called me his wife. Heh heh heh. I'm Sir Gino's wife. Heh heh heh. Oh, what a wonderful ring that has. That aside, I was beginning to wonder what my duties as saint would be. When I asked, Sir Gino explained that my obligations would normally include going to ceremonies in the holy country of Waltdiez, which occurred

almost weekly. I'd essentially have to live in the holy country. *I had no idea... If that's the case, maybe I should think a little more about this.* Since Sir Gino would be busy managing the former country of Thorsdale, he wouldn't be able to leave very often, which would mean we'd be apart quite a lot. I didn't want that.

"Well, there's no precedent for a saint to not attend these ceremonies..."

"You owe us a debt, remember? I'd like to cash in that favor now."

Sir Gino only told me after the meeting was over, but apparently, he'd predicted a while back that I'd be asked to become a saint. He looked into what it entailed and found out about the obligation to attend ceremonies.

When we'd first spoken with the pope about making the official story that the cure for my curse was a gift from the gods, Sir Gino had been sure to emphasize that we were doing the church a favor and would thus be owed a favor in return. In his mind, he was saving this for when I accepted the position of saint. Considering the amount of donations that would flood the church after the announcement, Sir Gino suspected they'd easily say yes to his condition since it paled in comparison to the benefit they'd be receiving. Sir Gino was very impressive. He'd already anticipated this situation so far in advance and had come up with a solution all on his own. *He's truly amazing.*

Ginorious

I was currently standing in the massive plaza in front of the Roy Waltdiez great cathedral, which was in the center of the holy country of Waltdiez. It was not only the largest cathedral in the world, but also where the pope himself resided.

The reason I was here was because of the ceremony to accept Ana as a saint. Though I'd made sure as part of the deal that she'd be exempt from the obligation of attending ceremonies, the pope had practically begged for her to attend this one. It was taking place

out here instead of inside the great cathedral simply because there were too many followers to fit inside.

Since this was the first time in maybe a century that a new saint had been appointed, there was a massive crowd of people—easily over twenty thousand.

"I always knew you'd grow up to be an outstanding woman, but I never thought you'd become a saint. You're amazing, Ana," my mother-in-law said with a proud smile.

"M-My little angel is becoming the saint of the world..." my father-in-law said through tears. "Ana, you've really grown up. You've become so wonderful."

"Father, you're embarrassing me. Please wipe your nose," Ana said with a troubled expression, handing him a handkerchief as he sobbed messily.

You got that wrong, my dear father-in-law. Ana is my *angel.*

My in-laws and I were in front of the great cathedral with the other high priests. Only close family members were allowed to stand in this spot for the ceremony.

"I think it's about time. Let's begin, everyone," one of the priests said, and we moved to our respective designated areas.

The pope and all other clergy members remained standing. There were so many attendees today that the church hadn't even tried to set up chairs. The pope stood at the doors of the great cathedral and declared that the ceremony was beginning. In the next moment, a large cloth was unfurled from the top of the great cathedral, long enough to reach the third-floor windows. A portrait of Ana praying in a white clergy outfit was embroidered onto the cloth. *Leave it to the church to be able to embroider something this large in such a short amount of time.*

The choir began singing, and then at the entrance of the plaza, Ana emerged from a white carriage. As she stepped out, I was there to take her hand and slowly escort her toward the great cathedral. We climbed the stairs and once we got to the top, Ana proceeded on by herself to stand in front of the pope. When arriving, she curtsied. Most people would have to kneel before him, but since she was becoming a saint, she didn't have to.

As she stood in front of the pope, he began a speech extolling Ana's wonderful qualities. After he finished, he presented her with a bracelet with the insignia of the key to heaven on it, which was proof of her being a child of the gods. He put it on her wrist, and then, with the aged, historic ring of the cathedral's bells, Ana was officially proclaimed a saint. The priests and followers all knelt in unison and offered a prayer to Ana.

The area was filled with the choir's song once again as Ana was enveloped by a holy light, and as three wings grew on either side of her back, she floated about one metre into the air. This almost didn't feel real. It felt so divine and holy.

"She's truly a child of the gods!"

"A child of the gods... She's right there in front of me!"

"This is unbelievable..."

"Dear gods! I thank you for this great miracle!"

A girl who had white wings wasn't a saint but a child of the gods. Though the church could recognize people as saints, nobody had ever been officially recognized as a child of the gods before. Unlike saints, who had the ears of the gods, a child of the gods was essentially a type of god in and of themselves.

Only in the holy scripture did a being like that exist, but now for the first time in history, a holy being appeared before man. Those witnessing this historic moment felt so blessed that they forgot they were in the middle of an austere ceremony and began crying out and shedding tears. This went for the followers and the high priests both. Even the choir members weren't immune to this touching moment, and you could even hear them choke up a little as they sang.

As Ana floated in the air, she began chanting a blessing magic. It wasn't the same magic that was used at marriage ceremonies, but one that was special for the followers. It was completed when she brought her hands together and cupped them in front of herself, where in the next moment, a golden light flew high, straight into the sky from her palms. It summoned a golden barrier of light that rapidly covered the sky, and soon after, shining yellow particles began dancing through the air like snow.

This was incredible magic. The best that even the pope could do was cover an entire city with blessing magic, but I had no clue how far Ana's magic was reaching. It covered the sky as far as I could see, and wherever it reached, the light was falling from it.

The effect of the magic was also unbelievable. Normal blessing magic could cleanse someone of their anger, malice, and all kinds of negative feelings. However, the effects only lasted a few moments at best. In contrast, Ana's blessing magic was filled with an insane concentration of mana. Being hit by this magic would immediately calm anyone and even make someone who was planning to steal something lose their interest in doing so. While everyone was still stunned from the fact that they'd just seen a real child of the gods, Ana came back over to me after her spell was finished. Now all that was left was for me to escort her back to the carriage and leave, since our role was over. There would be a sermon from the pope after this, but we had no reason to stay for that.

"Ana, you did great! I was so impressed by your divinity and beauty," I said as we walked together.

"Thank you very much. Heh heh. Perhaps I've been of some use to you?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I know how tired you've been from trying to unite all the new territories. I accepted this position because I thought I'd be able to help you this way, even if it's only a little. I'm going to keep working hard!" Ana said, smiling.

Her smile was so bright, warm, and divine that it could steal anyone's heart. *Oh, I see... So she became a saint for my sake? You were the only one who noticed me struggling and you wanted to help... You were thinking about me...*

"Ana, how are you so cute?!"

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

Before I knew it, I found myself hugging Ana, and my father-in-law was trying to peel me off of her in a rage.

"It seems that the relationship of the child of the gods and her husband is quite a bold one."

"Well, you see, it's not possible to judge their holy union by

human standards. Though it may seem shameless in our eyes, it's no doubt different in the eyes of a child of the gods."

"Indeed. This is a good omen. It could be a sign of the birth of a grandchild of the gods."

"Oh! That would be wonderful! Perhaps we'll be able to meet them next year?"

The high priests began speaking among themselves. Because a lot of them were old and hard of hearing, they were speaking in very loud voices. *Oh shoot. I've really done it now. I can't believe I hugged Ana in the midst of an austere ceremony in front of over twenty thousand people. I just couldn't hold back how much I love Ana, and suddenly she was the only one I could see.*

Ana had turned bright red and was looking at the ground, her eyes spinning. The blood seemed to have rushed to her head and made her dizzy. At any rate, the ceremony technically wasn't over yet, and my job was to escort her back to the carriage. I refocused myself and stuck out my elbow, and Ana tightly gripped my arm.

The purpose of our walking back like this was so the followers could actually see her up close and personal, so the original plan was to walk back slowly to give everyone time to look. It was also worth noting that when a guy escorted a girl, she usually only held his arm lightly, letting him dictate the walking speed. Right now, however, Ana was gripping my arm very tightly and pushing me forward, forcing us to walk at an incredible speed and reach the carriage in the blink of an eye. Also in the original plan, I was supposed to leave in the carriage with Ana, but waiting inside it was a furious Bridgette. Before I could climb inside, she slammed the door shut, leaving me behind as they departed.

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Ana's blessing magic had stretched so far that it even reached Luchizua and the Grand Duchy of Sevensworth. Absolutely everyone was surprised by this blessing magic, which was on a completely different level from what they knew. Thanks to this, they didn't even have to wait for the church's declaration—they knew immediately

that Ana was now a saint.

Since then, Ana had been helping in the former country of Thorsdale. She'd helped to complete the flood-control structures in practically no time at all, and even encouraged the seeds that'd just been planted to sprout immediately into lush fields. She was fully using her power as a Magic Monarch.

When she activated her powers and spread those white wings of hers, she was able to finish in mere moments what even all the court sorcerers combined couldn't accomplish. Rumors of the child of the gods performing miracles spread like wildfire until everyone in the former country was a fervent believer in Ana. Seeing the real deal performing feats that could only be explained as miracles was more powerful than any declaration of sainthood by the church.

At this point, there were absolutely no more rebellions. The child of the gods was an existence adjacent to the gods. If they raised a weapon toward her, it'd immediately make them an enemy of the gods themselves. Besides, Ana was helping to fix their roads, and the golems were keeping them safe from monsters. Their economy was rapidly improving, and it was becoming safer to live in the territory. There was absolutely no reason for them to rebel.

We asked the noble houses that had fought against us with House Lillard to pay a large amount in fines, as well as to give us an apology. Nobles placed great importance on their pride, so usually they would apologize in private where nobody would see; however, they all prostrated themselves in a public plaza, in plain view of even the commoners, and deeply begged for forgiveness.

There were many verses in the holy scriptures like:

"Thou will be deemed an enemy of the gods if you follow the orders of those who oppose the gods. Thou shall not obey their orders. Thou will raise thy blade against our enemies—those who make heinous orders and try to destroy you."

"Upon seeing an enemy of the gods, thou shall strike them down. No matter their power, you shall not have reason to fear our enemies. Even if you perish, what awaits you is peace that far exceeds the pain you experience in death."

The noble houses that attacked Ana were devout believers, and

now that the ten thousand soldiers we'd captured were back in the country, word inevitably spread about what had happened. It was impossible to stop them from talking, which meant the truth ended up spreading very quickly. As a result, the knights of these noble houses would no longer follow their commands, and their people and soldiers also began to turn against them. In order to survive, they needed a public display of receiving Ana's forgiveness.

Today was yet another day that Ana was performing miracles. She invited members of the church and began healing their ailments and injuries for free. Though Ana could use both chi and mana, she couldn't heal people on her own. Healing involved knowing the appropriate magic to use for their specific ailments. It wasn't enough to just be able to freely use magic; she needed medical knowledge as well. That was why whenever she used medical magic, I was there to lend a hand. I helped to direct her internal mana and to activate the appropriate diagnostic and healing spells.

When a Magic Monarch completed their magic circuits, they'd become unable to be affected by regular healing magic due to how dense their mana was and how fast it circulated through their body, creating a powerful magic barrier. Because of this, I'd already worked to come up with a way for her to be healed by magic via a supercondenser for mana. If I used my healing magic through this, it'd even be able to work on Ana.

To achieve this, though, I'd needed to study medicine and healing magic. Ana had enough mana to heal tens of thousands of people, so now with my medical knowledge, I could help her control her massive amount of mana to perform healing spells.

Usually, it was impossible for a normal person to control a Magic Monarch's mana even if they were willing, since the difference between their mana density was too great. But for some reason, I could control Ana's.

This was obviously abnormal, so I became worried that there might be something wrong and began poring over all the books I'd brought back from the college library. After much research, I found that there actually had been Magic Monarchs like this in the past,

and that scientists had even tried to study this rare phenomenon.

There were apparently three conditions that needed to be met in order for a normal person to control the mana of a Magic Monarch. The first was for the Magic Monarch to have been exposed to the normal person's mana for a long period of time. The second condition was that the Magic Monarch strongly wished for the person to be able to control their mana. The third was for the two people to have a strong, deep bond. All three conditions sounded like something that we met the requirements for.

Back when we were still getting to know each other, I'd given Ana a ring. In my past life, it was a health tool known as a pippue reiki ball, which helped to control the flow of mana. Occasionally when I touched Ana's hand, I'd covertly touch the ring to recharge it, and since it operated by using my mana, she'd been continuously exposed to it this whole time. As for the second condition, Ana had also told me that she wouldn't mind me filling her up with my mana before, which fit the condition of the Magic Monarch strongly wanting the normal person to be able to control her mana. The last condition needed no explanation. We were tied together by a deep bond. *Heh heh. Science has proven the deep bond that Ana and I have. Heh heh.*

"Hey, mama, the saint is holding hands with that noble."

"Those two are the real people that the characters Anassy and Ginova from *The Goblin Maiden* are based on. They're very close."

"Oh, I see! They're flirting!"

Ana currently had her hand on the afflicted part of a patient, and I was holding her other hand. It was necessary for us to have contact when I was trying to guide her mana, and it had sparked a conversation between a nearby mother and child.

"They've been holding hands in a place like this the entire time. They're flirting so, so, so passionately."

"They even held hands at the church. It's surprising, isn't it? They're so head over heels."

"They're married, but they're still that flirty with each other. Isn't it amazing? I'd expect nothing less from the couple *The Goblin Maiden* was based on."

"With this much tension, do you think they'll get home and go straight to the bedroom?"

The middle-aged women around us also began gossiping excitedly, and their voices were even louder. They used a lot of commoner slang, but I could essentially understand what they were saying. Plus, in true commoner fashion, they weren't especially shy about hiding the emotions on their faces.

Though Ana continued treating the patient as if she couldn't hear them, I could see that her ears were turning red.

Anastasia

Thanks to Sir Gino's tireless efforts, the territory quickly became stable. Our policy to reduce the land's custom of kickbacks to the government was a great success, and the burden on the common person was greatly lessened, even though taxes were increased. Because of how rapidly their economy was recovering and how safe the territory had become, people had recently started calling Sir Gino the Grand Duke of Miracles. *Heh heh. This makes me so very happy.*

When I told Sir Gino about this new nickname, he explained that it was because he was so lucky in winning my heart, but I disagreed. As a saint, I was working all over the new Sevensworth territory, so I had a lot of chances to speak with everyone, and I understood what they meant when they called him the Grand Duke of Miracles.

He'd reduced their financial load and had eliminated uncompensated labor and conscription. He'd also gotten rid of all the government officials who were unethical. Everyone had very high praise for Sir Gino, and the commoners practically viewed him as a saint himself, with how genuinely he considered all the people.

Though I continued my duties as a saint, I also wanted to finish achieving my goal with Lady Ekatarina of reviving the double-sided embroidery technique. Usually it'd be impossible to manage both at the same time, but Sir Gino came up with a solution by setting up teleportation circles between our estate in the royal capital and the

first and second palaces of the grand duchy. Thanks to this, I could freely move between these three locations and could continue working with Lady Ekatarina while also not neglecting the people in the new Sevensworth territory.

Not very long after this was implemented, Lady Ekatarina appeared with a contract in which she vowed to never reveal any information about the Artifacts that House Sevensworth possessed. Most likely, it was because she'd deduced that my quick travel was due to an Artifact.

It was good manners not to speak of Artifacts, but Lady Ekatarina didn't want something as flimsy as an unspoken promise between us, so she had taken the step of writing out a contract to state in no uncertain terms that the secret of our Artifacts was safe. It was her own way of assuring us that she wouldn't betray us. She was truly a wonderful friend.

Today, I was working with Lady Ekatarina on our double-sided embroidery as usual.

"And with that...we've completed it," Lady Ekatarina said as she finished the final stitch. Her voice shook from the tears welling up in her eyes.

At long, long last, Lady Ekatarina's dream had come true. We'd successfully been able to recreate the double-sided embroidery.

I couldn't stop my own tears, thinking back on the entire journey we'd taken over the past two years. Both of us had poured our hearts and souls into this. Every now and then we'd get into disagreements, but by talking frankly about our embroidery opinions, we became able to talk honestly about other things as well and thus increased the depth of our friendship.

I couldn't help but remember all the times we argued, had fun chats while embroidering, fell asleep next to each other on the sofa from exhaustion, and ate late-night snacks together. All of these were such bright, precious memories; I'd never forget the time we spent together as long as I lived. Through this process, we were finally able to give form to our passion. I was so happy. Before I knew it, Lady Ekatarina had embraced me, tears of joy streaming

down her face.

We reported the revival of the double-sided embroidery to the professors at school, who were extremely surprised that we'd been able to replicate the long-lost techniques of a fallen country in the distant past. For this reason, both Lady Ekatarina and I were to be promoted to honorary professors, though the official ceremony would come at a later date. Honorary professor was a position given to masters of a craft qualified to teach classes even though they were focused on other things.

Usually, the position was given to those further along in life. We were still only in our mid-twenties, so it was difficult to believe we'd actually achieved this.

Our professors sent letters to their peers in other countries, telling them about the revival of the double-sided embroidery technique. The response from this could not be understated. Many people wished to come to our country to see it for themselves, but there were too many requests, and as a result, we had to reserve the entire museum for a special viewing event.

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Today I'd arrived at the national museum for that exact event, and Lady Ekatarina and the embroidery professors were here as well.

"Congratulations, Ana. It's finally time for your work to be seen by the world," Sir Gino said, congratulating me with a joy-filled smile, as happy as if it were his own accomplishment. "Let's take a look around," he said as we began looking at the pieces currently displayed in the museum.

It wasn't just the double-sided embroidery piece that was exhibited here today. Since professors from various countries had come for the sake of looking at our embroidery, we'd had them bring their own pieces to be displayed as well. It was rare for so many works from all over the world to be collected in one place, and I desperately wanted to see them all, so I asked my professors for some time before we opened the doors for the event.

"I'm thinking about commemorating this day as 'Grand Duchess Anastasia's Embroidery Day,' but what do you think?" Sir Gino suggested.

"Um...perhaps not," I said.

As kind as Sir Gino was, he had the propensity to say the most absurd things sometimes.

All the pieces displayed here today were so unique and utilized amazing technique. Each one completely absorbed my attention as soon as I laid eyes on it. This was truly a very magnificent exhibition, and I was so happy to be able to see all of these fabulous pieces with Sir Gino.

After we finished, Sir Gino returned to his work and I assumed my position as a research student. First, I went to the place where our double-sided embroidery was displayed. Though the other pieces were displayed on the walls, our piece was placed on a pedestal in the middle of the hallway so people could appreciate both sides of the work.

The title of it was *Together Always*. On one side, there was a design of two lovers fighting back-to-back on a battlefield. The other side had two lovers relaxing together on a sofa while enjoying wine.

Lady Ekatarina had arrived here before I did, so we chatted for a bit while waiting for the guests to arrive. When the time came, we were flooded with many embroidery masters and their students from different countries.

"I'd like to introduce you all to our school's research students, the grand duchess Anastasia Sevensworth, and Ekatarina Byron, daughter of Duke Byron. They are the ones behind the double-sided embroidery. After preparations are complete, we are planning to elevate them all the way to honorary professor status," Professor Gertrude said, introducing us.

We used to call Professor Gertrude "Professor Kendall," but that had changed after we became her disciples.

"Oh my, you two did this?! But you're so young!"

"Oh my! Might you perhaps be the woman from *The Goblin Maiden*?! If you're the grand duchess, then you must be her, right?"

"Everyone, quiet down! Let's start by hearing about the double-

sided embroidery! Isn't that why we've all come?!" someone with a very loud voice quickly hushed the crowd.

Since there were so many people, it was difficult for everyone to view the piece at once, so we split them into two groups. Now the second group was looking at the embroidery, led by Lady Ekatarina as she stood beside it and gave her explanation while answering any questions the visitors had.

Meanwhile, the other group who'd already finished and were done looking around the museum went out to the garden to have tea. I was in charge of them, and we'd hold our question session there.

We sat down at a long garden table. Now that it was spring, lilacs, petunias, and rhodanthes were blooming.

Heh heh. The weather is wonderful and the flowers are so beautiful. It makes the simple act of drinking tea here incredibly enjoyable. As soon as the tea was served, many questions came flooding my way. As expected from embroidery masters, they posed very concise, technical queries. The revival of double-sided embroidery was actually the revival of dozens of other ancient techniques as well. When I demonstrated with needle and thread in front of them, everyone watched intently and then very carefully examined the smallest details of the cloth I'd just used.

"Both you and Lady Ekatarina are very beautiful! It really sets my creative spirit ablaze! Could I use the two of you as models for my next piece?!"

The people of the embroidery community were very much free spirits, and some of them suddenly began asking questions that had nothing to do with double-sided embroidery. As much as I wanted to refuse, this particular one was one of the top authorities on embroidery, so I couldn't immediately say no.

As I hesitated to answer, a spring breeze suddenly blew past us, sending the flower petals dancing in the air. I quickly held down my hair and skirt.

"Oh my, grand duchess, you're wearing pants underneath your skirt?"

It had been a very strong spring breeze. *Oh, how embarrassing...*

Underneath my dress, I was wearing pants for female knights, which I wore when I used magic. When I deployed my halo, I would rise into the air if I wasn't careful, and if that happened and men saw up my skirt...I wasn't sure if there'd be any choice left to me besides committing suicide. That was why I wore pants now.

"Of course she's wearing pants! How else is she going to do her princess kick?!"

"No, I—"

"Oh my, she really does the princess kick?! I was wondering if that was true since *The Goblin Maiden* was based on a true story. So you can really do a princess kick?!"

"Oh my! How surprising!"

"Amazing! This is like a dream!"

"What kind of songs are sung in your countries about *The Grand Adventures of Lady Sevensworth*?! In our country of Ienhu, we have songs of how when the enemy forces approached the defensive line of the fort, she quickly dealt with them using her princess kick!"

"U-Um, everyone, please..."

It seemed there were many people who liked that song about the princess kick, and now they were having a very passionate discussion about it. They were so deep into it that they couldn't even hear me anymore. It was just like embroiderers to get so excited over a topic that they wouldn't stop talking.

The song in question had at some point been turned into a series called *The Adventures of the Grand Duchess Sevensworth to Heal the World*. Despite being a married woman, somehow, the character's signature finishing move was a princess kick. And if everyone knew this, that meant the story had spread to other countries as well. *Oh, how embarrassing...*

Chapter 14: A Continuation of Happy Events

Ginorious

"Do you, Ekatarina Byron, swear under the holy bond that is marriage to take Kevin Withers as your husband, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health? Do you swear to stay by his side in good times and in bad? Do you swear to love, cherish, and be faithful to him until death do you part?" Ana asked Lady Ekatarina, stiff as a board.

As a saint, Ana was more than qualified to officiate a wedding, though it was her first time doing so. I was in attendance too, albeit as a guest.

"I do," Lady Ekatarina said, her serene voice echoing across the great cathedral of the royal capital. Her expression was much more composed than Ana's, despite this being her wedding day.

Their marriage should have happened sooner, but Kevin had disobeyed his father's orders and snuck out to join our defense against the former country of Thorsdale, resulting in his father flying into a rage and locking him in the house for a time.

But the silver lining was that thanks to the ceremony being delayed, Ana was able to officiate their wedding. Having your wedding performed by a saint was a great honor that would be spoken about for generations to come. *You really never know when fortune will find you in life.*

Now that I think about it, I think Lady Janail said something similar. Despite having her engagement ended and being thrown into the clutches of misfortune, she was able to achieve a much greater happiness now that she was engaged to Anthony. As a result, she considered her canceled engagement a stroke of good fortune. Ana

was also scheduled to officiate their wedding.

When the choir began singing, Ana started to chant her blessing magic, and when it was complete, a shower of light began falling from the sky like snow through the ceiling of the church. At that moment, the church bells rang and Lady Ekatarina and Kevin were bathed in a pillar of rainbow light.

Lady Ekatarina had personally requested that her best friend, Ana, perform her wedding, and Ana had asked in return if she could cast the blessing magic as the officiator. Her blessing magic was on a completely different level from what was possible for anyone else, easily able to cover the entire country, and she'd wanted the greatest blessing possible for her best friend's wedding.

"In the name of the gods, I, Saint Anastasia Sevensworth, as officiant, hereby declare the birth of a new married union."

With Ana's declaration, the bells that signified the formation of a new married couple sounded. Usually this was where the ceremony would end, but Ana spread her six wings of light and began floating about fifty celchimetres into the air. This part was Ana's surprise present.

"Seriously? She's really a child of the gods?!"

"I...can't believe my eyes."

"Whoa! Lady Anastasia, you're so amazing!"

Justin, Anthony, and Lady Janail exclaimed one after another from their seats nearby. A sphere of light appeared between Ana's palms as she held her hands in front of her chest. This spell used a high-level three-dimensional magic circuit that was still impossible for her to create since her understanding of magic was still only equivalent to an elementary schooler's from my past life, but with my help, she could use it.

Ana was able to freely manipulate chi and mana, so as long as she had the completed magic circuits, she could activate high-level magic, though in this case she still needed her wings of light for assistance. That was just how powerful the magic was.

When she was finished, a countless number of holy spirits appeared in the air, smiling as they flew around and sang. These spirits were small like faeries, but instead of having insect wings,

their wings were feathered like birds.

"Ekatarina Byron and Kevin Withers will be together for as long as the foundation of their love remains unshakable, and they have the blessings of the gods," they sang.

"Wow... What a miracle..."

"The gods themselves are blessing this marriage?!"

"Dear gods, thank you!"

Exclamations of surprise could be heard from all over the great cathedral, including from the priests, and everyone knelt in the face of this miracle. Tears poured from their eyes as they offered prayers of thanks to the gods.

Lady—or rather, Madam—Ekatarina's mouth was wide open as she gazed at the flying holy spirits. She was just as surprised and moved to tears as the rest of the audience. Their singing, accompanied by the illusionary snowfall of light, was projected across the entire country, and I had no doubt that those in the Byron territory were especially surprised. People unconditionally supported those who were blessed by the gods, so this blessing would be useful with whatever policies they wanted to pass.

When they finished singing, the holy spirits vanished, and Madam Ekatarina thanked Ana in tears. The two of them had revived a legendary embroidery technique together and cemented their place as the nation's foremost embroidery authorities. Their fame swept across the globe and there were a lot of people, both domestically and internationally, who traveled in hopes of being their student.

After this achievement, the two of them became even closer, which also meant they'd begun to argue every now and then. Their latest argument was over whose name to put first for their double-sided embroidery piece. Ultimately, Madam Ekatarina relented and allowed herself to be put first and Ana second.

I'd never argued with Ana before, but Madam Ekatarina was closer to her than me, her own husband, to the point where they could have friendly arguments together. Apparently, when they'd finished the embroidery, they were so happy that they hugged in tears. I couldn't help but wonder if Ana could have called me over to celebrate as well. I wanted to be a part of the amount of joy in that

moment that had pushed Ana to tears.

Ana was currently crying while patting Madam Ekatarina's head, which was also something they'd never done before. Their relationship had grown even deeper. But I wanted Ana to pat me on the head too! While I couldn't be happier that she had such a close friend, I couldn't help being a little bit jealous.

Anastasia

"Congratulations. You're with child," Doctor Susanna said with a bright smile.

I was so surprised, I lost all my words. *I'm...going to be a mother? This doesn't feel real.*

"Madam! Congratulations!" Bridgette said, pure joy in her voice.

Though I wanted to go tell Sir Gino immediately, he was currently in the Simon territory now that everything had calmed down with the former country of Thorsdale. He wouldn't be back for a little bit.

Since House Byron had fulfilled their promise to aid in the war, Sir Gino was making good on his end of the bargain by increasing production of the magic tools sent to their territory. Though I'd wanted to accompany him, I hadn't felt well, so he asked for me to stay home. Now, after undergoing an examination, I'd found out I was pregnant.

"Oh, how exciting! I can't wait to hold my grandchild," my mother said after I told her.

She was in a great mood after hearing the news. Ultimately, I decided to wait until Sir Gino returned instead of sending a letter to inform him. This was very big news, so I wanted to tell him in person.

"Um, would you mind keeping this a secret from father for a little bit?"

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I-It's embarrassing..."

"Well, if that's what you want, then I'll do as you say. He'll probably cry after he hears you hid it from him, though," mother

said, giggling.

It was still quite early in the pregnancy, so I needed to wait a little longer to be confident in its success anyway. I'd keep it a secret from father until then.

I began to get more and more worried as I read books about birth and childcare. I was so inexperienced. Could I really raise a child? One book said that sometimes fathers had even more worries about the pregnancy and birth than the women did. The men this happened to were usually those who were very serious, had strong senses of responsibility, and who weren't good at consulting others for help. *It's as if they're precisely describing Sir Gino... Will he really be happy with this news? Knowing him, I doubt he'll say anything harsh, but internally, he might think of this as a burden. Maybe it's better not to tell him at all.*

"You have nothing to worry about. Sir Ginorious will absolutely jump for joy," Bridgette said with full confidence.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course! That being said, it's normal for you to be worried. When you're pregnant, even the most trivial things can seem like the biggest problems. You're not alone in this, so please rest assured."

In one of the books I read, it said emotions could become unstable during pregnancy. *Am I just acting this way because I'm pregnant?*

"All right, madam. You're just going to rot away if you stay cooped up in your room all day. Let's take a stroll around the garden. I'm sure the nice weather will help clear your head."

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"Ana, how are you feeling? Did you find out why you were sick?" Sir Gino asked when he returned.

The first thing he said as he stepped out of the carriage was about my health. He was such a kind person to worry about me like that. It really warmed my heart.

"Well, I'd like to talk to you about that..."

Then I told him to come to the sixtieth drawing room, the Black Magatama, later.

"So, tell me what's wrong! Is your illness serious?!"

As we sat alone in the room, I could tell how nervous he was by the way his voice was shaking. He was sweating profusely, fraught with worry. *Oh...I see.* I only just realized that my phrasing might have made it sound like I was suffering from some kind of ailment. I'd been nervous when I told him to meet me, so my expression most likely hadn't helped to reassure him. *I need to straighten this out immediately, but also, now I have the determination to tell him.*

"Um, I-I'm pregnant..."

Bridgette had said that Sir Gino would jump for joy, but in reality, he didn't. Instead, his eyes went big as saucers and he shot to his feet, freezing like a statue. After that, he simply cried and embraced me while wailing. His tears were very warm and I found myself crying too. *I'm truly so, so very happy that I was able to marry him.*

The Sevensworths had a history of difficulties with conception. Both father and I were only children. If I were unable to have a child, it would greatly affect our house, and it'd drag even our servants into the chaos. I should have felt relief as soon as I discovered I was pregnant, but I never did until that day. Now, I finally felt relief and joy for the baby inside of me. It was all because Sir Gino had returned and was overjoyed about the pregnancy. It greatly helped change how I felt.

Ever since then, he stayed close to me all the time. He helped me with even the smallest things and was currently boiling water for me. As he got the water from the stove, our head butler, Matthew, asked Sir Gino a question.

"Sir Ginorious, might it be all right if we review the plans for your next visit to the Simon territory?"

"Sorry, but cancel all my plans."

Matthew stood there, shocked. "May I ask why?"

"I read in a book about how to prepare yourself for when your wife is pregnant that their emotional state is generally unstable, so it's best to stay by their side as much as possible."

"So, you're staying here in order to be close to the madam?"

"That's right. Until our child is born, I'm canceling *all* my plans. I'm going to be by Ana's side twenty-four hours a day until then."

"It's still very early into her pregnancy, so the birth won't be for quite some time. You not tending to your duties will be gravely detrimental..."

"That can't be helped. This is all for the sake of our child."

Matthew stared speechlessly in the face of Sir Gino's determination, then he turned to me with a pleading look.

"Ana, don't worry. I won't let you feel any unease. I promise," Sir Gino said, holding my hand with a very sincere look in his eyes.

"Um...I think I'd feel more at ease if you did your work."

It was true that I'd feel more comfortable with Sir Gino by my side at all times, but that wasn't realistic. If he neglected his work the whole time until our child was born, the Simon territory would be in trouble.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, of course! Any pregnant woman would become uneasy if they saw their husband lazing around the house," Matthew immediately interjected, not letting this opportunity escape him.

In the end, Sir Gino relented and returned to working properly. Though he did reduce his schedule greatly, he still made trips to the Simon territory.

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Though I was told to hold off on going out as much, I couldn't stay at home all the time. Today was one such case, and I was now heading to the royal palace for a ceremony. My grandfather, the king emeritus, had passed away, and I couldn't miss his funeral.

"This now concludes our services. Thank you all for coming," His Majesty said.

At long last, the ceremony, which felt like it had gone on for an eternity, ended. We stood and Sir Gino escorted me out of the venue. Suddenly, my surroundings went black. *Anemia.* I became unsteady on my feet; however, I was a member of House

Sevensworth and had to protect our dignity. I couldn't let myself fall in front of all these people.

"I'm sorry, but could you escort me somewhere private?" I asked, gripping Sir Gino's arm.

"Escort you?! I'm not letting you walk like this! What if something happens to you or our child?!"

"Huh?! S-S-Sir Gino?!"

While smiling to make me feel at ease, Sir Gino picked me up and began running at an incredibly fast pace.

"Oh my! How bold!"

"Oh, that's the so-called princess carry from the play!"





"Amazing! They're both so beautiful, it feels like I'm watching a play in real life!"

"Heh heh. Not bad, grand duke!"

Th-Th-This is so embarrassing! The ceremony had just ended, so everyone had yet to leave, and now they were all seeing me being carried away. Some of the knights even whistled and clapped. In public places, the only acceptable contact between men and women was for their hands to be touching, and even the most affectionate couples would be especially reserved in the royal palace. I'd never heard of anyone running while carrying their wife like this. I could have died from the sheer embarrassment alone. It was making my mind go haywire, and I buried my face in my hands.

"Oh my, look at that!"

"Wh-What?!"

"Oh, how romantic."

"Wow, it's like right out of the climax of a romantic play!"

Even as we ran through the hallways, the people we passed couldn't help but exclaim in surprise.

"Th-Th-This is so embarrassing! Please put me down!" I was so taken off guard, I hadn't been able to say anything at the start, but I was finally able to squeeze these words out.

"But your face is so pale...or wait, it's red."

"Of course it is!"

"Do you feel okay now?"

Yes, I do. Even if I had fallen from the anemia, it would have been better than being rushed through the palace while being carried.

Once he put me down, I began to escape to the carriage. I didn't feel anemic anymore, so I was fine to move quickly. If anything, all the blood rushing to my head made my face feel like it was burning.

As the carriage pulled away from the palace, the reactions of everyone we'd seen began echoing in my head. I couldn't stop thinking about how they'd commented on how bold "we" were being or how it was straight out of a scene from a play. I could feel my face getting gradually hotter.

"Um...I'm sorry. I just got so scared about the worst possible situation."

I understood his reasoning. He'd read a medical book last night that must have made him feel very worried; he'd gone pale after reading about all the different ways to die in pregnancy. *Sir Gino possesses a normal person's level of embarrassment...or at least I think he does. So the fact that he forgot his embarrassment and went to those lengths for me shows how worried about me he was. Though not the most skillfully expressed, he truly and deeply cares about me. He's a very kind husband.*

Sir Gino looked like a puppy who'd been scolded. It was very adorable. It was hard to believe that someone who was so calm and had the beauty of an ice sculpture could make a face like this. Seeing how different he was acting from usual made my heart skip a beat.

"Agh!"

"M-Madam!" Bridgette exclaimed as I furiously rolled around in bed. My mother had just finished telling me all about how Sir Gino and I had become the talk of the royal palace. Though she'd seemed extremely amused, I wasn't the slightest bit interested in knowing all the things people were saying.

It was so embarrassing, I'd immediately gone to my room and thrown myself on the bed in agony. *I've changed my mind! I'd like Sir Gino to be a little more levelheaded!*

Epilogue: An Early Proposal

"Have you woken up?"

An old lady sat in a chair, smiling warmly at the old man in the bed beside her. She seemed fifteen years younger than he; though she was old, she was still a beautiful woman with an air of refinement around her.

"How long did I sleep for?" the old man asked in a hoarse voice, not sitting up.

"About two days... I'm so glad you woke up. Here. Have some water," she said with a gentle smile.

"I had a dream..." he said softly after sipping the water.

"Oh? What kind of dream?" she asked, looking at him with a gentle gaze.

"I met you, we got married, built the grand duchy...and then the dream ended with you being pregnant."

"Oh my, that was quite the long dream," she said with a smile as warm as the sun.

"I'm so sorry to make you feel like this," he said.

Though anyone else seeing her smile might have thought it to be a very gentle, happy one, he alone could see the sadness behind it. He'd spent almost an entire lifetime with her, and thus he understood her better than anyone else.

"I'd love to show you a funny dance, but...I don't think I can get up," he said as he tried and failed to push himself to a sitting position. Instead, he placed his index and middle fingers on the bed and began making them dance. Since he couldn't stand on his own two feet anymore, he had his fingers dance instead. Despite the flame of his life reduced to mere embers, the old man mustered his strength to do this simple thing to make his wife happy. He wanted her to smile for real, with joy from the bottom of her heart.

"Thank you very much. I feel much better now," she giggled,

trying her best to smile for him.

After living a long life as a noble, she'd become skilled at hiding her true emotions, and with these skills, she summoned every ounce of will in herself to smile. Even when close to death, the man's first thought was always his wife, and she did everything she could to hold back the tears that were threatening to burst out from his heartfelt kindness.

"Ana... Thanks to you, I've lived a happy life. It was so much fun being surrounded by our children and grandchildren during the lantern festival. Now, even as I approach death, there hasn't been a single moment where I felt lonely or wanting. As long as I see you smile, that's enough to fill me with joy. It's all thanks to you that I was truly happy... That I could live the absolute best...possible life."

"I, too... I've lived the truly, most joyous life by your side."

"Ana... Will you kiss me?"

"Oh? You want a kiss from an old lady like me?"

"It doesn't matter what you look like or how old you've become... Ana, you have always been and always will be cute," he said, gazing at the old woman with all his love.

It was easy for anyone to see that he believed this from the bottom of his heart. She pressed her lips against his.

"Ana...let's meet in the next life. I'm the Grand Duke of Miracles... I promise I'll make a miracle happen... I promise we'll be together again... When we meet once more...will you marry me?"

"Oh my. This is quite the early proposal, and one I will accept," she said, tightly gripping his hand with a loving smile.

He squeezed her hand in return and gave her an adoring smile of his own. They simply looked at one another without saying anything further. After the long life they'd spent together, no words were needed.

"I think...it's almost time for me to go."

"Please wait for me there. I'll join you soon."

"Take your time... It takes a while to make miracles happen... A lot of preparation is needed."

"Oh, my dear husband. I will certainly find you in the next life. I will never give up on my happiness. That applies to my next life as

much as this one."

"You're going to look for me? How wonderful... We'll definitely find each other again, then."

"Yes, we will. If we find each other and you don't recognize me, I'll propose to you again, so please rest assured that we will be together once more."

"It's okay... Once I see you...there's no way...I won't recognize you..."

"Oh my," she said with an amused smile.

"Ana... I love..." But his words trailed off before he could finish his sentence.

"I love you too... From the very, very bottom of my heart, I love you..." she said, returning his heartfelt declaration with one of her own. But as skilled as she was at hiding her emotions, she was no longer able to hold back, and her voice began to shake.

And then, the room fell into silence. A very, very long silence.

"Rest well, Sir Gino..." she said, continuing to hold his hand as the first tear trailed down her cheek.

Then the tears she'd desperately tried to keep dammed up in front of him in his fragile state burst out like a flood as she remained, now alone, in that quiet room.

And so, the life of the one called the Grand Duke of Miracles came to a close. As one who had received a divine message from the gods and was the husband of the child of the gods herself, he was seen as the one next closest to the gods. The only reason he hadn't become a saint himself was because he hadn't desired it, and apparently, according to high priests, he was firm about his stance, and stories about his virtuous nature were born.

The Grand Duke of Miracles was a title that the populace had given him; they would have given him a holy title, but they wanted to respect his decision for not wanting to become a saint. He was simply that revered by the people that they all gave him that little bit of consideration.

Though he'd been born as the fourth son of a viscount, he'd received divine ordinance from the gods and completed the

enormous feat of creating his own grand duchy. He'd then brought miracles to it and proceeded to win four wars with said miracles. The turbulence of his life could not be understated.

Many of his retainers were impressed by his miraculous reforms of domestic, foreign, and military affairs, as well as the exchange market and regulations of financial institutions by a central bank. They revered him so much that the nobles would pull out their own healthy teeth in solidarity whenever he had to get his teeth removed.

He had an overwhelming amount of influence both domestically and internationally, but as soon as he handed off the reins of the grand duchy to his son, he had shut himself in the palace and refused to be involved in politics at all. The reason he retreated so suddenly was written in House Treves' records.

He was quoted as saying: *"I have something more important to do—spending the time I have left with Ana."*

After the grand duke's retirement, his friend Anthony Treves shared this. As if to prove the truth of it, even in his old age, the grand duke was always with his wife, as if he were offering every last second of his life to her. He continued treasuring her in a way that nobody else could replicate. As he resided in his royal villa, he lived a life so peaceful that it made the turbulence of his younger years seem as if it'd been nothing but a mirage.

Afterword

Hello, Shinten-Shinchi here. Thank you so much for reading this book!

At long last, the manga of the series has begun, and it's being drawn by Kazamori Inagi. They've done such a great job bringing the stoic Gino and the goblin version of Ana to life in the manga despite it being no easy task. I hope you check it out as well! It makes me so happy to see Ana receive Gino's direct expressions of love in manga form.

Well, we've finally reached the end of the series, which you could probably tell from the events that occurred after they got married.

When I originally posted this novel on Shosetsuka ni Narou, it was in the isekai romance genre category. I cut out everything after they got married because it'd make it a different genre, but as a published book series, I don't have to worry about adhering to a single genre, so I was able to include everything I wanted to.

In the web novel version, I wrote some side stories about what happened after Gino and Ana got married, but this third volume makes those events the main story. Unlike the side stories, they are actually a part of the overarching plot. I apologize to the web novel readers who may have expected a similar style to what they read originally.

Thanks to all of your support, I was able to write the entire series to the end. Truly, thank you all so much! Being able to take a story to its final destination is such an emotional experience, and I broke out into tears when I finished writing it.

I had so many things I wanted to include, so this volume ended up being a lot longer than I initially anticipated. Even after changing the line spacing, I couldn't fit everything into the allotted page count, so in the end, the total number of pages was increased. So yeah, that's kind of what happened and why this book is jam-packed

as if we went back in time to Natsume Soseki's days. I'm really sorry about that. It's hard to read something like this in today's world, isn't it? But I really didn't want to cut anything. On the flip side, thanks to how long it is, it feels like a story that keeps going on without ending, which is a big perk. To those of you who read the afterword before deciding to buy the book, please consider purchasing this volume!

Since this is the final afterword, I'd like to talk about one thing that wasn't really touched on in the story—the drawing rooms of the Sevensworth estate. Each one has its own unique name. For example, the drawing room where Ana and Gino first called each other by nickname was in the twelfth drawing room, the Sapphire Lotus. In Sinhalese, lotus translates to "padparadscha," and so the full name of the drawing room is "Padparadscha Sapphire," and true to its name, the door to the room is inlaid with very lavish padparadscha sapphires. All the drawing rooms in their estate in the royal capital are like this, where the doors are inlaid with gems. This is the reason they all have different names.

On the other hand, all the drawing rooms in their estate in the original Sevensworth territory are named after flowers. For example, the sixth drawing room, where Ana showed the third prince the documents about Lady Mariott, was the Windflower. True to its name, the door had a windflower—also known as an anemone—depicted on it. All the drawing rooms in this estate have flowers painted on them corresponding with their names.

The reason they all have different names is the simple fact that they have too many rooms. Their estate in their territory easily has over a thousand. They have so many drawing rooms, they have to name them by the design on the door, or else they'll never find the one they're looking for.

By the way, in gem language, padparadscha sapphire means "a single love," "a fated love," and "I'll be by your side forever and protect you." In flower language, anemones symbolize "the pain of love" and "truth." I'm sure if you read this volume, you'll know how much the third prince suffered while in this room. Just like this, all

the different rooms have some kind of meaning behind their name, design, or view from the window.

If you're wondering why I did this, it's for the people who will read this more than once. In my mind, it's the greatest reward to have someone reread your story, and it makes me happier than words could say.

I was really happy when I read the comments on the web novel talking about how they reread the story, so I'll be really glad if people reread the serialized version as well!

I put in a lot of work to make sure that even if only just one person rereads the book, they'll find something they didn't see before. If you're so inclined to, I encourage you to read the books over again and see if you can make any new discoveries!

Thank you for staying with me until the end of this story! This is my first publication, so I'm sure it's not perfect, but I will learn from this and when I write a new story, I'd be happy if you're all there to read it!


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Shinten-Shinchi
Illustrator
Tokima
3
THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER
Using a Past Life to Keep a Joyful Wife



3 THE REINCARNATOR AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Using a Past Life to Keep a Joyful Wife




Ginorious
The two of them did their best
to get the impoverished
remote region back on its feet.


Ana can finally use magic?
“Here I go!”





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The Reincarnator and the Goblin Maiden's Happily Ever After: Using a Past Life to Keep a Joyful Wife Volume 3
by Shinten-Shinchi

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