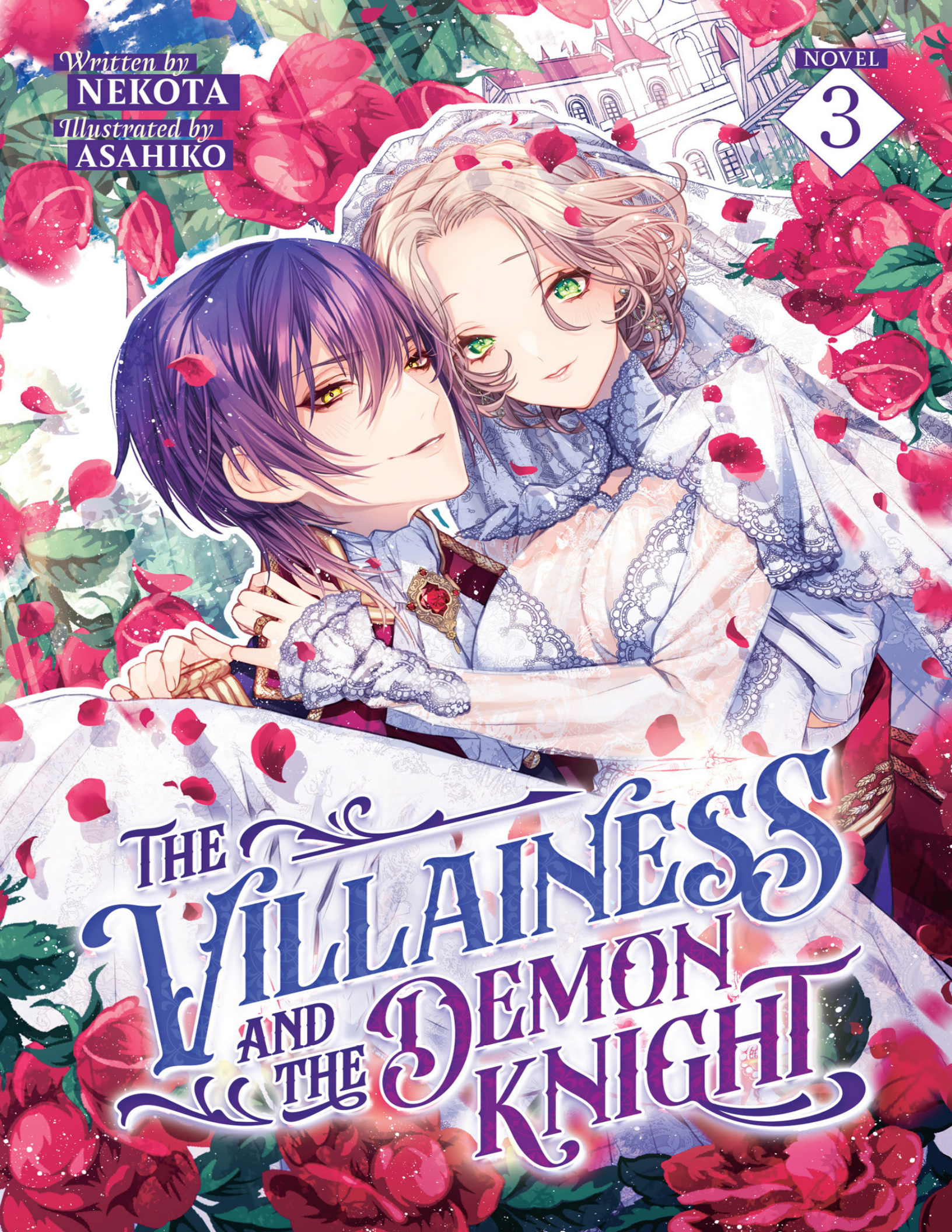

Written by
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NOVEL
3
THE VILLAINESS AND THE DEMON KNIGHT

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The Villainess and the Demon Knight

NOVEL

3

Written by

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ASAHIKO



Seven Seas Entertainment

Akuyakureijo to kichikukishi VOL. 3
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Chapter One

I, CECILIA CLINE, WAS REINCARNATED INTO AN OTOME game and found myself playing the role of the villainess. After being cast aside by the former second prince, Felix, and nearly forced into becoming a prostitute by his scheming lover, Lady Mia Meyer, the new second prince, Lucas, saved me. He changed my fate when he proposed to me, and soon afterward, we pledged our futures to one another.

After battling an ancient dragon that appeared in the border forest, Lucas lost all memories involving me as a consequence of taking the divine sword Eckesachs into himself. Thankfully, we were able to rekindle our love. Not long after that, my overpowered knight and prince swept me away to the royal castle. Ever since then, we'd been busily preparing for our engagement ceremony.

Not only was Lucas the second prince and a Hero treasured by the kingdom of Bern, but his impeccable looks, noble lineage, and public persona made him a very high-spec man. Because of this, many women wanted to get close to my fiancé, fighting for scraps of his favor. My days were spent fighting off those opportunists with grace while managing my social affairs like a proper lady.

Of course, no reasonable noble would dare interfere with the marriage agreement between the royal family and my family, the Cline marquessate. Even though Lucas had lost his memories of me, we had already sworn our love to one another and even exchanged rings, effectively cementing our marriage. Abandoning me and choosing

another woman would be unforgivable, even for royalty. For this reason, Lucas's memory loss had been kept highly confidential. The engagement ceremony was publicly announced and proceeded as planned.

No one in their right mind would risk their necks by dragging Bern's reputation through the mud, especially considering that other kingdoms would be watching.

Our only enemy attempting to meddle in our engagement was the queen. She'd brought Lady Viviana Belloni, a relative and daughter of a marquess from a neighboring royal family, in addition to her entourage (a key part of the queen's faction) into a scheme to separate us.

To be quite honest, I had no desire to meet with Lady Viviana, but since she was a guest of the palace, I had to treat her with the courtesy befitting a future second princess. That was why I invited her to a tea party held in the garden of the second prince's quarters within the castle.

"Oh my, so Lady Viviana is bedridden with lovesickness?"

A soft breeze carried the floral scent through the large gazebo, which had been built to provide shade from the sun. The garden, now vibrant with color, had been replanted with my favorite flowers upon Lucas's command. The surprised voice of a young lady who belonged to the neutral faction echoed through the garden, while the daughter of a marquess from our kingdom—a close friend of Lady Viviana's—replied in a solemn tone.

"Yes, it seems the person she loves is already betrothed, which makes it difficult for her to meet with him freely…"

Well, of course she can't meet with him freely. Regardless of his engagement, Lucas is a prince and the vice-captain of the knights. His schedule is quite packed!

Besides, her so-called "lovesickness" has gone beyond just being playful and is now a full-blown breach of etiquette. She's trying to force an audience with him using the queen's power, ignoring his work commitments. Now Lucas has been complaining to me every night, saying, "Cece, I'm so tired… Won't you comfort me?" Can't they think about the burden that puts on me?

"It must be quite difficult since there's nothing she can do," I said, glancing at the concerned eyes looking my way.

The daughter of a count who sat diagonally across from the queen raised her voice, not bothering to hide her displeasure. "It seems Viviana's beloved is being *forced* into marriage by his fiancée, who's using a mere promise as leverage!"

Oh, so now she's claiming that Lucas's promise to me before he lost his memory doesn't count? But I love him too, so it's only natural that I'd protect my position as his fiancée by standing behind our vows and the rings we exchanged. It might upset her that the ring's significance had been publicly acknowledged, but using everything in your arsenal to navigate high society was a basic skill.

Besides, the engagement had been formally decreed by the king. Even though I had willingly made the vow, I was only told after the fact that the ring couldn't be removed. *Isn't it kind of cruel to give*

me a ring that can't come off when my fiancé is about to embark on a life-or-death battle with a dragon?

Even if I could understand that Lucas losing his memory was the necessary consequence of becoming a Hero, seeing him forget all trace of my existence after making me cry my eyes out and then hide away while silently watching me was just too cruel. *Isn't that heartless, even if he* was *just waiting for me to stop crying?*

Could…Lucas have been the one who said I was forcing him into an engagement? No. Surely not.

As I sighed to myself, the aforementioned solemn young lady let out a small, tired sigh of her own.

"His determination to keep his promise is admirable, but Lady Viviana has been so heartbroken that she's hardly eaten of late. I do hope the matter is resolved quickly."

The subtext was that she wouldn't attend any tea parties I hosted in the future unless I broke off my engagement with Lucas.

Despite the sudden cancelation, she didn't even send word through an attendant but instead sent young ladies from the queen's faction to inform me of her absence. This forced them to attend the tea party solely to relay that message.

Even though I'd already invited ladies from the queen's faction, having even more of them attend was just too bold. *Does she mistakenly think she's still in her own kingdom?*

I only allowed them to come in so as not to insult Lady Viviana and the queen, so there was no reason for me to stay quiet about the

matter. *Go ahead and pass on the message, "I'll gladly take on this fight."*

Aware of the somewhat amused gazes directed at me, I lowered my teacup and feigned a concerned expression.

"Didn't she come earlier today to request an audience with Prince Lucas to discuss the matter of the engagement? I saw her being turned away by the knights in front of the palace from the window of Prince Lucas's study. I'm sorry to hear she must've pushed herself in her condition…"

When I mentioned that Lady Viviana, who was supposed to be bedridden, had been turned away at the gates without even entering the palace because of her unannounced visit, her friends' faces stiffened and they exchanged glances. I tipped my head as if to say, *"Is that all?"* and this time, the young ladies from my faction began speaking up with amused expressions of their own.

"Oh, my. So you were with Prince Lucas, Lady Cecilia?"

"And not just in the parlor, but invited into his study? He must really trust you!"

I flashed them a grateful smile for backing me up.

"Yes, His Highness invited me to join him for lunch. I did ask if I might be intruding, but he insisted, saying he wanted a break."

When we were alone, I let him give me a *tiny* kiss, and things almost went too far on the sofa…

A break, huh?

As the memory threatened to wipe the smile from my face, I raised my cup to my lips just as a lady-in-waiting appeared at the entrance, announcing the time.

"It seems it's time for the party to end. I had a lovely time with you all today. Please come again sometime." As the hostess, I stood and expressed my gratitude, handing the departing ladies over to the knights. As I watched them leave with frustrated expressions, Kate approached me after the lady-in-waiting whispered something into her ear.

"Lady Cecilia, I have a message for you from Prince Lucas."

I have a bad feeling about this…

"What is it?"

"He says he would like to talk with you at leisure and asks if you could wait for him in the second prince's parlor. It seems he'll be back early from his duties today."

"I see. Were there any other plans on the schedule for today? Anything I need to confirm?" I couldn't help but ask, even though I knew there wasn't.

Since I was brought back to the second prince's palace, I'd spent my nights in Lucas's private quarters.

I only used the room reserved for the second prince's wife for morning and evening preparations when the ladies-in-waiting came to greet me. Thanks to those skilled maids who secretly possessed a key, I snuck through the adjacent marital bedroom, which made it look like I was always staying where I was supposed to be.

How has nobody caught on? I wondered. But I supposed the maids were covering up the finer details with some kind of trickery and overpowered illusion magic. I could only use healing magic, so I wouldn't understand the details. And honestly, if I got caught, I'd be mortified, so I thought it was best not to ask too much.

I also knew they'd enchanted the ring with various spells, but I didn't want to ask about that, either. I was especially grateful for the illusion magic. If the ladies-in-waiting saw the bite marks on me, I'd die of embarrassment!

Thanks to my maids' overpowered magic, I'd been able to keep up with this secret cohabitation. But with my position as Lucas's fiancée and the power that came with it, I had even less opportunity to escape now than when I lived at the duke's estate. *Lucas is totally having his way with me…*

"Let's have a talk in the parlor" was just his code for summoning me, and "I'll be back early" was a signal that he planned to make love to me even more insistently than usual.

He'd already pushed me too hard the night before, leaving me exhausted by morning. And then he called me before noon to his study today, only to embarrass me even further. If he was planning to do it again tonight, I had to figure out some way out of it!

Please, clever maids, make up some excuse about me having to work!

I shot a pleading look at Kate, who bowed her head apologetically.

"Well, His Highness mentioned that if Lady Cecilia had any urgent work, it might be more efficient to handle it together, so he could come to your study if necessary…"

"I see…"

The look on her face was telling me to give up, which was quite disheartening.

I guess I'll have to resort to that *method…* I was deep in thought when one of the remaining ladies, a close ally from my faction, giggled softly.

"Hehe. Thank you for today. I'm relieved to see that you're doing well. I'd heard a little rumor and was concerned."

I clenched my stomach to keep my expression from crumbling, maintaining the slight smile on my face as I always did.

"Thank you. I've just been a bit busy, but there's nothing to be concerned about."

No matter who tried to come between us, I would never give up my position. The engagement between Lucas, the second prince, and me, daughter of Marquess Cline, wouldn't waver. A small rumor was just that—a rumor and nothing more.

I made sure my words carried that meaning, and she smiled, seemingly reassured.

"I see. Then I hope you'll invite me here again sometime."

The warmth in her handshake and her thoughtful gesture turned my smile into a genuine one.

"Of course. I'd love to have you over again once things settle down."

After bidding farewell to the last guest, I moved to the parlor within Lucas's quarters. And then, despite knowing it was unseemly, I threw myself onto the sofa with a groan.

"There's really nothing we can do…" Kate muttered.

"Indeed…" Elsa agreed.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Though His Highness does seem to be in an exceptionally good mood. Oh, Kate, is this enough stuffing for the cushion?" Elsa asked.

"Hmm, I think you should add a bit more."

I slumped onto the couch with a sigh, watching as Kate and Elsa busily sewed small cushions.

What are they doing? And why are they making so many of those tiny cushions? Wait, are they planning a pillow fight? That sounds kind of fu… No, wait! It sounds dangerous! A pillow fight could be a life-or-death battle when they're involved!

I glanced nervously at Anna, silently asking what they were up to, and she held up one of the cushions and explained.

"Though your gaze is weary, you still look like a goddess, Lady Cecilia. Rest easy! These are your weapons. Since you tried to throw a pillow at the prince this morning, we've made them smaller so they're easier to throw. We will stack them by your bedside for your convenience."

"Thank you…"

I wasn't sure if thanking her was the right thing to do. No, it *was* the right thing to do. *I mean, I really should be grateful to get such an important weapon. Whether I'll use them is another matter, but it seems like a good way to show I'm upset! I'll make good use of them next time.*

After thinking of all that, I let out another long, deep sigh.

Recently, there was a rumor going around the palace that Lucas and I weren't getting along. That was the "little rumor" the young lady had mentioned earlier before she left, and apparently it was because of my behavior, including the exhausted sighs that escaped me now and then and the way I kept a certain distance from Lucas whenever he got overly affectionate and tried to pull me close.

People had begun to say that I was struggling to connect with Lucas because of his amnesia, which was why I seemed so melancholy.

Meanwhile, Lucas faced the opposite treatment: people praised him and said he was doing his best to rekindle our relationship despite losing his memories, which infuriated me.

What's up with that? It's not like it's my fault! I really want to explain myself, but how would I even go about that? Honestly, I just want to make excuses to someone. Not that I could tell them, anyway. It's all because of what happens at night!

"All these rumors about us not getting along have spread just because I'm tired…"

Every night, Lucas gets to have his way. I never expected that we'd have to put on a show of being close, and because of a certain

overly handsome Hero's behavior, there are rumors that I'm becoming melancholic! Even if I try to refuse, Lucas's speech becomes more casual, and his memories start to return. Then he starts teasing me and I get all blushy and can't resist! I really want to do something about that! It's my body, yet it responds exactly the way he wants! Betrayed by my own body!

Frustrated, I clenched my fists, and Elsa piled up the cushions with a smirk, saying, "Oh, how tragic. I'm sure the rumors would vanish if we stopped using illusion magic…"

I couldn't help but blush. Then, without warning, Kate suddenly threw a cushion at Elsa.

"A cushion?!" Elsa exclaimed as she went down like a bowling pin with a soft *thud.* I considered the possibility that there really might be a rock inside. Meanwhile, I looked at the letter on the desk and braced myself.

Watch out, Lucas Theoderic. I won't let you have the last word!

"I absolutely won't do it tonight!"

"Huh? Where'd that come from all of a sudden, Cece?"

It's not sudden at all!

I made the declaration the moment Lucas walked into the room, smirking at me as he toweled off his wet hair.

"Saying that while you're wearing my shirt almost seems like you're seducing me."

I knew he'd say that! But too bad, I was ready for it! I shot him a triumphant look and replied, "This shirt is your stand-in for tonight. You must stay on this side of the pillow, and I won't speak to you for a while if you touch me."

"Wait, what?"

"That's all I have to say. Goodnight!"

"Hey, wait! Cecilia?! You're telling me that my *shirt* is standing in for me even though I'm here? What the hell? Who even put this idea in your head?!" Lucas crawled into bed with me. "Cecilia, don't you think it's cruel of you to use my own shirt as a replacement right in front of me? At least move the pillow. Cece?" he said stubbornly.

"Lord Lukie, just go to sleep already." I brushed him off coldly, and he fell silent.

He rested his arm on the pillow but didn't try to reach over it, so I smirked to myself, relieved that my secret weapon had worked. I mentally thanked my mother for her advice, although I vaguely remembered her giving me some kind of warning along with it. But my eyelids were so heavy I couldn't resist it any longer and drifted off to sleep.

Perhaps it was that nagging feeling that I'd forgotten something, or maybe it was the lack of the usual warmth next to me. Either way, as I rolled over in my sleep, the sensation of the cool sheets made me stir from my deep slumber.

I knew it was a dream, but even still, I found myself desperately reaching out toward the golden eyes ahead of me, gripped with fear.

"Don't go… I want to be with you." My heartfelt plea was answered by a pair of strong arms enveloping me. The familiar warmth and comforting scent that hadn't been there before I fell asleep surrounded me, and I found myself clinging instinctively to the person I held most dear.

"Don't let go. Don't leave me. Love me forever."

His lips pressed gently against mine.

"All right. I have your permission, then."

His voice sounded happy as he murmured against my lips. The next thing I knew, his slightly rough fingers wiped away my tears and then suddenly gripped my chin, kissing me forcefully.

"Mmph!"

My eyes flew open in surprise as his golden gaze narrowed playfully. I hurried to push him away, but before I could, he slipped his long, callused fingers inside of me. The tingling pleasure made my intended protest sound like a naughty moan. *How dare this perverted, sadistic prince touch me like this!*

"Stop, Lukie… Stop… Ah, no! Ah, stop, please!"

Now that I realized he was caressing me, blood began to rush to my sensitive spot. It grew even more sensitive, and he rewarded me with gentle, teasing strokes as I clung to his nightshirt, unable to bear the pleasure.

"I love you, Cecilia. You're my one and only." Those tender words of love seemed to penetrate my skin as he pressed his thumb

against my hidden bud, first rubbing gently until the pleasure overwhelmed me and made my back arch against the sheets.

"L-Lukie, ah! Mmm!"

"You're curling up like a little kitten. You're so adorable. Don't hold back. Come for me."

"W-wait… If you keep going, I'll, I'll…!"

Despite my best attempts to resist, I buried my face against the source of my trouble. He mercilessly spread my slit and began to gently and insistently caress my clit. I couldn't take the sweet stimulation any longer, so I came yet again.

"Haah, Lukie… You're…so awful…and me-mean!"

I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me as my body twitched involuntarily, and I cried out, overwhelmed with shame at having climaxed right after waking up. As I scolded Lucas through my tears, he kissed my forehead tenderly and said, "How am I mean?"

Using sleep talk against me is cowardly! I glared at him impulsively, only to freeze up with a start.

Even though I knew full well that the buttons were literally popping off the fabric of his shirt that I wore, I couldn't stop his large hands from continuing. His golden eyes were dark with lust and penetrated me. All I could do was watch him with trembling lips.

"The agreement from yesterday doesn't count anymore, right? So I can embrace you now—instead of the shirt. Can't I, Cecilia?"

"…!"

The warning from my mother's letter flashed through my mind. *"P.S. Lucas seems like the possessive type, so be careful not to provoke him too much!"*

But it was already too late.

He snapped the buttons clean off with a sharp *pop*, crumbling them to dust in his hand. He opened his palm slowly, showing me the pieces before letting them scatter in the sunlight. He gave me a savage smile, and I felt a tiny shriek rise up in my throat.

The before and after is just too cruel! I'm sorry, buttons…

"I didn't think you'd use a shirt to replace me, Cecilia. Not only that, but you wouldn't even let me touch you or give me a goodnight kiss. Don't you think that's a bit mean? So right now, I'm feeling like I want to spoil you in a naughty way. I'm gonna get that shirt dirty and leave it in the other bedroom." He whispered those terrifying words sweetly into my ear, making tears well up in my eyes.

This isn't the kind of spoiling I signed up for! Where did this sudden sadistic mode come from?!

It wasn't the kind of situation I could just laugh off as sleep talking. *It's all over,* I thought, as a part of me let out a sigh of resignation and trembled with agreement.

"Hmm?" he asked gently, narrowing his eyes.

Maybe, just maybe, I still have a chance to negotiate!

Desperate, I opened my mouth to plead. "Please, please don't do that…"

"You want me to stop?"

Of course I do! I nodded furiously.

If this sadist went all out like this so early in the morning, I wouldn't be able to get anything done today. And on top of that, if he left the shirt in the marital bedroom next door, this engagement would turn into a wedding before I could blink!

I'd worked so hard to make sure things would go smoothlyup until this point, so to ruin it all because of something so stupid would hurt my pride as the second prince's fiancée. My soul would simply die of embarrassment…

"I'm sorry! I…I won't do it again."

"Why did you hesitate just now?"

Oh, no, he noticed! Eek! Wait, no! Don't pull my shirt down around my waist like that! It's merciless!

"Cecilia?"

"It's just… I still need the shirt!"

"That's not fair, Cece."

Lucas's ears flushed red, and I frantically explained that I didn't want the shirt to be ruined, left in the marital bedroom, or not given to me at all. He let out a heavy sigh and pulled me up to sit on his lap, his legs crossed beneath me. Our noses almost touched.

"You *will* give me a goodnight kiss from now on."

"Y-yes."

"You may wear my shirt, but it is never to be used as a substitute when I'm around."

"Okay…"

He's jealous of an inanimate object… His possessiveness and the way he's talking are making my heart flutter!

"Oh, also… You know that secret weapon of yours that works so well on me? You're banned from using it for a while."

"Okay… Wait, what?"

"And tonight, I'm going to be a little rougher than usual, so make sure to get some rest."

"What? Wait, no! Not that!"

My secret weapon was banned over the crime of using his shirt as a replacement, and now tonight was looking dangerous… I wanted to protest, but…

"Were you going to say something else?" he said.

"I-I understand."

I quickly agreed with trembling lips when his large hand slipped into my panties, traveled past my slit, and pressed against my asshole. *For the record, I object to threats!*

"Although it's a bit out of order, let's go ahead with our goodnight kiss. It's just us here, so let's behave as couples do." He gave me a sly, seductive smile that left me fuming.

He's tricking me into going along with this, and that earlier kiss doesn't even count?! Fine then, if that's how he wants to play it. Thanks to someone*, my embarrassment is long gone, and if I'm going to be held at his mercy tonight, I'll fight back with every weapon I've got!*

I kneeled between his legs with a determined fire burning inside of me.

Seeing the surprised look on his face and his golden eyes widening as they caught the light made me smile seductively. I reached for the exposed skin near his collarbone and traced it with my palm, his shoulder twitching in response. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed myself against him, feeling his entire body stiffen like a rock.

Ha ha! Come to me, my cute little Lucas! But I'm not done yet!

"Lord Lukie… my Lukie…" I whispered.

"Y-yes?"

For some reason he straightened up as I leaned forward and gently placed a few soft kisses on his cheek.

As I pecked him a few more times, I saw his lips trembling as if he were about to say something. "Don't be hasty," I told him with a smile. "That's for last night and this morning's kisses. It's different when we kiss as a couple, right?"

"Y-yeah, you're right," he stammered.

He's like a completely different person again. Why is there such a sharp contrast in his demeanor?

His flushed face and his misty eyes stirred something within me, making my heart want to leap. *But that doesn't mean I'm going to take it easy on him!*

I pressed my forehead against his and locked eyes with him. *I love you so much that it actually makes me angry!* I poured all my

love into my gaze before kissing his thin lips.

His lips trembled faintly, and as I gently changed the angle of our kiss a few times, I felt his strong arms wrap around my body. At first, he held me gently like I would break, but then his grip tightened as he pulled at my shirt like he was trying to rip it off. I realized this was going too far, so I quickly pulled away and gave him a bright smile.

"Good morning, you wicked, perverted prince."

"What? Huh? G-good morning. Wait, is that it?" Lucas stared at me in disbelief, and I nodded firmly.

"You said you wanted a goodnight and good morning kiss, didn't you? Now let go of me."

His hands, which had been resting on my waist, started to wander suspiciously, so I quickly stopped him. He muttered next to my breasts with a look of frustration, his face flushed.

"Damn it, I can't believe I got played like this. Kissing me while you're dressed like that was heaven…"

What are you saying?! Now I'm embarrassed all over again!

"This is *your* fault! It's because of you that I'm dressed like this, remember?"

I hastily pulled the shirt closed and glared at him, but for some reason, he just laughed, his face brightening with a smile. I didn't get it.

"Ha ha, you're just as beautiful today as ever, Cecilia."

"U-um, thanks, I guess…"

Wait, did he just compliment me?

Feeling completely taken off-guard, I frowned and thanked him, only for him to take a lock of my hair. Then, in a sweet voice, he said something so warped I had to pull away.

"You're shy at times, but you can be bold, too. And your sparkling green eyes are absolutely irresistible. Can you glare at me a bit more?"

How did it come to this?

I found myself shaking my head involuntarily with shock, but then he just gave me a wicked grin before pushing me down and kissing me without warning.

"Ah! Lukie, what are you—mmph!"

He pulled up my nightshirt and pressed the hard tip of himself against my panties, rubbing back and forth as if searching for something, causing a shiver to run up my spine. Panicking, I tried to twist my hips away, but Lucas always seemed to know my body better than I did, so he took the opportunity to tease my upper palate with his tongue, effortlessly silencing my resistance.

He licked at sensitive spots inside my mouth that I hadn't even known about until recently, while his hardness pressed against my lips and my clit. My toes curled as my legs kicked at the sheets. With that, he must've realized. He started rubbing that same spot even harder, so I couldn't help but push him away.

"L-Lukie, stop! What are you doing?!"

"Huh? I'm just returning your kiss. Greetings are important, aren't they? If you try to run, this is going to take a lot longer. Do you want more than the shirt to get dirty?" he whispered, and his hand that had been lovingly stroking the mark on my lower abdomen slowly moved toward my panties.

Damn it, curse my sensitive body! I nearly gritted my teeth, but I froze when I saw him. His lips curled into a smile, and his gaze dripped with sensuality, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I looked down at his hands, which were still moving, and I broke out into a sweat when I realized there'd been a terrible misunderstanding. *No way! When you said "besides the shirt"—did you mean your nightshirt, too?!*

"No, stop! Lukie, let me go!"

My panties were damp, and his shirt that I wore, now buttonless, was soaked with sweat. His nightshirt was equally damp. The scene was turning into something highly inappropriate.

You've got to be kidding me!!

As I struggled and squirmed, he pressed against me again, and I felt his hard bulge sticking out from his nightshirt against my slit beneath my panties. *You beast!* I cursed him silently, my body stiffening with fear. *I won't run away, just stop!* I tried to tell him, and Lucas slowly drew back. Then he pressed down on the damp spot of my underwear with his fingers.

"You're so wet from something so simple. You truly are naughty

and adorable, Cecilia."

"L-Lukie, s-stop… Don't…touch me there…"

That's not something I need to be complimented for, thank you very much! And could you please stop making those squelching noises on purpose?!

"So what's it gonna be? If you want to continue kissing, I need you to open your mouth," he teased, running his thumb lightly over my lips. I felt heat collecting on my cheeks.

Damn it! I'm not falling for this trick! But I could tell he was planning to humiliate me if I didn't. *What a wonderfully terrible personality… I mean, no! Damn this stupid love!*

"Fine! Do as you please!"

And just to make a point, I mouthed, "You conniving, perverted idiot, Lucas!"

He chuckled softly, the way only a true deviant could, and delivered another infuriatingly cheeky request, leaving me utterly defeated.

"Ha ha. More, Cecilia. Glare at me harder. But *only* me."

God, you're such a perverted sadist! His earnest tone made my heart race, and I hated myself for it.

I suppressed my internal screams as I glared at him with all the fury I could muster, even as his lips pressed against mine, and managed to spit out a few insults between kisses.

"Mmm, nngh, you, you pervert! Stupid Lukie!"

He squinted at me, smiling, before kissing me even more deeply.

Why do things always end up like this?

"Mm, ahhh!"

Contrary to the force behind his grip, his kiss was gentle, his tongue intertwining with mine in a tender, loving way. The warmth of his hands and body melted away my resistance, and before I knew it, I'd tilted my face to accept him. His golden eyes were full of passion, and they seemed to narrow in pain as he gazed at me.

"Hey Cece, if you're done glaring, does that mean you're ready to go further?"

His rough fingers stroked under my breasts, and I barely held back a moan as I quickly responded.

"N-no! I was glaring at you!"

"Were you? And?"

What?! I was definitely glaring, wasn't I? How much more does he want me to glare, anyway?! I wondered. Meanwhile, his fingers began caressing around my belly button, causing my body to twitch involuntarily. I felt the pressure from his nightshirt again and quickly blurted out words of protest.

"W-wait! No more, Lukie!"

"Then glare at me one more time. Go ahead."

What on earth does that even mean?! I mean, who tells someone to redo a glare?! That's definitely not something I've ever been told before in my life. As I began to feel a bit uncertain about this whole situation, Lucas suddenly began to play with my breasts.

Even though he only lightly squeezed me through my disheveled shirt, my body was already completely out of control, so it arched up off the sheets and pleaded for more. I was so embarrassed and frustrated that I simply had to speak up.

"Eek, no! F-fine, I'll glare! I'll glare, so stop! Nngh, that's too much! I can't!"

"Why are you so cute and naughty? Go ahead, then."

Huh?! First, he doesn't make sense, and now he calls me naughty? That's it. Now I'm mad, so I'm saying it out loud this time!

"You…you black-hearted, perverted idiot, Lucas!"

I glared at him as hard as I could, panting as I spoke. But he just smiled happily at me in return.

"Not good enough. Do it over."

Wow… His smile is so dazzling and gorgeous… Wait, it was still no good?! And what does he mean, it's "not good enough"? Are you a sadist or a masochist? Make up your mind! As I pondered this, he began teasing my hardened nipples again. A sweet sound escaped me. Hearing it alone was enough to make me feel embarrassed, and I shook my head frantically, trying to push him away.



"Eek! No, stop! I didn't mean it! Forget what I just said! I'll do it again, I promise, so please stop!"

"You're such a tease. But still… Fine. One more time?"

That little… His eyes are all wide and sparkling—wait, is he actually getting turned on by this? If that's how it's going to be, then fine! I'll say it again, you jerk!

"You mean-spirited perv! Childish Lucas! Let go of me now!"

"Did you just call me childish?!" His eyes flew open when I put my whole body into that insult. Then his face flushed bright red, glaring at me with frustration.

Ha! I'm not scared of you! If anything, that expression is adorable and makes my heart pound!

However, just as I was about to bask in the satisfaction of having finally struck back—*bam!*—I was hit with the ultimate display of cuteness. For a moment, my heart stopped.

"You don't like it…?"

"…"

What? Are you really going to react like that? No way! What's with that embarrassed, sulky look?

Lucas noticed my wide-eyed, frozen expression, and he quickly hid his flushed ears and face with his arm, grabbing a fistful of his hair before turning away in frustration. He muttered, "Ugh, damn it…" under his breath, as if he were embarrassed by his own actions. That ridiculously beautiful man's behavior melted every single cell in my body. The power he had to destroy me was unreal…!

As I sat there stunned, he let out a deep sigh and said, "Cece. Do you not like that I don't act my age?"

"Oh, no! No, I love you just the way you are, Lukie. I love everything about you! I'm sorry. I went too far."

I panicked and reached out to him, desperate to reassure him as I saw the hint of insecurity mixed in with his pouting expression. His face softened in relief, and then he quietly mumbled, "I'm glad… I'm sorry, too. I'll try harder." He looked a bit embarrassed.

Seeing his relieved but embarrassed face made me completely let down my guard. *I can't do it. I can't fight back! Thinking I could one-up him was so foolish and naïve of me. When you tease someone, it always comes back to bite you. I'll be more careful from now on. I'm really sorry… Wait, why am I the one doing the apologizing here?*

After that, when he timidly asked, "Can we kiss and make up?" I was so flustered that I blurted out, "Yes, please!" in a way that made me want to crawl into a hole. Naturally, we ended up glued together until someone knocked on the door.

I never imagined that our little daily tussles would lead to an unexpected visitor.

The next day, I sat on the sofa in the parlor of my private chambers, which I rarely used. My body felt like it could collapse at any moment, and I tightly clasped my hands on my lap, willing myself to keep it together.

Lucas had been incredibly intense and done just as he pleased, true to his promise.

When I told him I was close, he teased me relentlessly. I cried, saying he was cruel, and begged for mercy. When I finally reached my climax, it was so overwhelmingly amazing and long that I could barely breathe. While I was in that state, he decided to go even rougher. I told him it felt too good and that I was going to die, but he was so delighted that he went even further. *H-he even made love to me in a place I thought I'd never be able to handle…* Eventually, I lost consciousness from the overwhelming pleasure and embarrassment of it all. *Way to go, survival instincts!*

In the morning, my body was so sore I was barely able to move, and I was about to get angry with him, but then he wrapped me up in a tight embrace, a ridiculously sweet expression on his face, and declared, "You're all mine. Your whole body reacts to me. I'm so happy. You're so adorable. Thank you, Cece. I love you," while his golden eyes sparkled like I couldn't believe. He cuddled me, kissed me, and my stupid heart just about melted…

Then he smiled gently and said, "I'll take care of the morning meetings and handle any urgent matters, so go ahead and take your time to rest."

There was no way I could stay angry then. Somehow, I ended up saying, "Thank you…" *Why should I be grateful to him?! Maybe you're the stupid one, Cecilia Cline!*

Ahh, my hips hurt… My body feels so sluggish, and my backside is stinging a little…

This is unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable!

"I can't believe I let this happen…"

"Cecilia? What's wrong?"

"Ah, um… I-it's nothing, Father…" I hid my trembling lips with my hand, forcing my eyes to form a smile to mask my true feelings.

"Cecilia, I don't think you're at fault. Clearly, it's the prince who's to blame. There's no question about that. However, having rumors about you two not being on good terms at this critical time wouldn't be wise. You're a clever woman, so I'm sure you already know that…"

I will never forgive you, Lucas Theoderic! Why… Why am I the one getting a lecture from Father?!

Father, that man has been out of control lately! Even when I beg him to stop, he won't, and no matter how many times I finish, he never lets it end! He just does whatever he pleases, and yesterday, he finally went so far as to do it…ugh…back there! He put his fingers inside there and played with me until I couldn't help but finish again! What about my dignity?!

I kept up my smile as I inwardly complained and spoke. "Well, Father. I deeply apologize for worrying you. There's really no problem between us."

Why am I apologizing to Father? Stupid Lukie!

The meeting I had to miss because of Lucas's antics was one we always attended together to check the progress of the preparations for the soiree. Since he was there, he was able to handle everything

on my behalf, which allowed me not to feel so guilty about taking it easy.

I don't have much choice, considering I couldn't get out of bed this morning…

As a result, rumors spread among the bureaucrats at the government office that a rift had grown between us, and Father rushed over to check on us. I never could've predicted that.

Father let out a sigh as I bowed my head, fighting the urge to cover my face in embarrassment.

"For such a rumor to spread just because you missed one meeting, and for it to spread so quickly… Some nobles from the queen's faction are likely behind this one. The queen herself has been quiet lately since she's been busy assisting that marquess's daughter from another kingdom who's been petitioning for an audience with the prince. Prince Lucas spread the word that you were unwell this morning, so there were no issues, but try to avoid any actions that could give the impression of discord. That goes for the prince as well."

"I'm sorry, Marquess."

I suddenly heard an apology directed toward my father and glanced around the room to see Lucas standing quietly at the door.

As we made eye contact, I almost glared at him when his golden eyes narrowed into a smile, but I quickly turned my gaze back to Father. Lucas kissed the back of my hand with a wry smile, which only made me angrier, causing my voice to come out flat.

"We're on good terms, as you can see. However, since it seems there was a misunderstanding, from now on, Prince Lucas and I will maintain an appropriate distance while keeping our relationship friendly. Isn't that right, Prince Lucas?"

"Yes, exactly."

Your face is a bit tense. Did you finally realize I'm mad at you? Sure, I should take responsibility for being unable to say no, and I do feel bad about that. But you really pushed me too far this time!

"Lord Lukie," I called, not looking at Lucas and instead watching as Father made his way out of the room. I saw him flinch in my peripheral vision.

"Yes?"

"As I said, I expect you to maintain an appropriate distance from now on."

"An…appropriate distance."

"You do understand, don't you?"

"I-I understand…"

See? I thought, shooting him a sidelong glance as I spoke. "Well then, I'll remain here in my own quarters, so if you need anything, feel free to contact me."

"…!" I heard him gasp as I gave a demure curtsey with a sweet smile. *A little self-reflection will do you some good!*

"I'm sorry, Cece…" His sorrowful voice and flustered demeanor made me turn away in a huff, leaning on Anna and Kate as they helped me toward the bedroom door.

I could hear Anna muttering, "Serves you right."

Kate said, "It's definitely his own fault."

"Guess we won't have goose for a while…" Elsa said sadly.

Finn said, "My master is an idiot…"

And the black dragon said, "Yeah, stupid Master… His partner gave him a taste of his own medicine!"

I guess I'll need a shirt now. That ridiculous thought went through my head before I turned back around toward Lucas one last time in front of the doorway. Best to finish him off now.

"I love you, Lord Lukie. So make sure we do our best to show it. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"O-okay…"

His reply sounded normal, so why were his cheeks turning red? *You'd really better reflect on this! And for the record, I won't sleep with you again until I calm down!* I sent him that message with my eyes and closed the door, my skirts billowing behind me.

After that, Lucas behaved, and we maintained a proper, distanced relationship, so the rumors about us being on bad terms quickly died down.

Even though I reflected deeply on my behavior, I couldn't help but feel…unsatisfied. I thought it was only natural that I felt that way.

Most engaged couples didn't kiss every morning and night, let alone sleep in the same bed. In fact, that kind of behavior before marriage was expressly forbidden. It was unthinkable for the average

person to deal with this ridiculous issue. So who could blame me for feeling bothered by it?

I'd learned the hard way how important appearances were, but honestly, it was very frustrating.

Since then, we'd been maintaining an unexpectedly pure relationship—one I could've never imagined before, but this "pure" relationship was starting to irritate me in a way I didn't expect.

Just as we'd agreed, Lucas treated me kindly and gently, so my strength returned. I was pleased that I could now behave properly as his fiancée.

But no matter how much I tried to signal my affection, Lucas showed no interest in taking things further. He was doing what I told him to, so I had no reason to be dissatisfied. None. At. All. But I hadn't realized how painful it would be to see my fiancé, my beloved, be hit on by so many women!

He always behaved like a true gentleman, befitting his status as the second prince, carefully maintaining a polite distance so our bodies wouldn't touch. Although that gave me some relief, it was also stifling. The deeper my love grew, the more I realized how ugly emotions could grow alongside it, and I couldn't help but feel disheartened.

To make matters worse, because I'd been the one to leave in a huff and declare we wouldn't sleep together until I'd calmed down, I couldn't very well admit how lonely it was to sleep alone.

After he kissed me on my cheek, the sensation of his fingers gently tracing my lips made my chest tighten, and I found myself

selfishly thinking, *I wish he'd just come for me…* I sighed at how I let this thought occupy my mind day after day.

Yet, for some reason, something always seemed to happen to make matters worse whenever I felt this way.

As I smiled at the lady standing before me, dressed far too extravagantly for midday, I couldn't help letting out a quiet sigh and thinking I really don't get along with the people from the neighboring kingdom.

I was taking a break during teatime in the second prince's garden gazebo when I encountered someone I hadn't expected to see —well, more accurately, when someone stormed in.

"Like I said before, I need to talk to her! I'm a guest invited by Her Majesty the Queen, so what's the problem with having a short conversation? Now let me through!"

"I don't care what rank you hold. Only those permitted by His Highness the second prince are allowed entry. Please leave."

I glanced at the woman who was arguing with the royal guard, taking in her appearance, and sighed once again. *I really wanted to avoid seeing her until the soiree, I thought,* knowing there was nothing I could do about it. As the commotion escalated, I signaled to the agitated guard and maids to stand down.

"This is far too sudden. Regardless of whether she's a guest or not, this rudeness is simply…"

"It's fine. I'll see her. Let her pass."

I hesitated for a moment, considering whether I should apologize for the guard's conduct, but decided against it for the sake of future dealings.

Even though she was a noblewoman with royal blood and a relative of the queen's, the guard had made the right call, and her disrespectful behavior was crossing a line. More importantly, it was best to remain cautious, considering the recent incident with Felix. If I acted weakly, I would only be seen as inferior, and that would make things harder for me down the road.

I rose from my seat, clearly showing I had no intention of apologizing. She seemed offended by that, furrowing her brow.

Her emotions show so clearly on her face, don't they? Even though she's a distant relative of the queen, I can see the resemblance.

I introduced myself first to make it clear that I held the higher position. "I believe this is our first meeting. I am Cecilia Cline. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Viviana Belloni. A pleasure, I suppose, second prince's fiancée."

Wow, what an attitude. She's acting like my identity is only to be the second prince's fiancée, implicitly including Felix in that statement. It's so incredibly rude, considering she's here to attend the second prince's engagement ceremony. I'm genuinely curious—what kind of education do they give royal families in other kingdoms?

She'd never even bothered to attend one of my tea parties. Despite those petty thoughts, I smiled and said, "Well, you seem to know quite a lot about me," throwing in a bit of sarcasm as I covered

my mouth with my fan, letting the ring on my finger sparkle as a warning.

I really want to wrap up this conversation before the maids decide to put those clenched fists to use. What would I do if it came down to that?

Apparently, rumors had been circulating within the royal guard since the Fenrir incident about how dangerous the Lebensklinge were. And honestly, I agreed. If even the strongest knight (when it came to combat) couldn't stop them, then they could easily kill royalty. I was just glad they were on our side.

That was why it was difficult not to notice the royal guards assigned to Viviana glancing over at my maids.

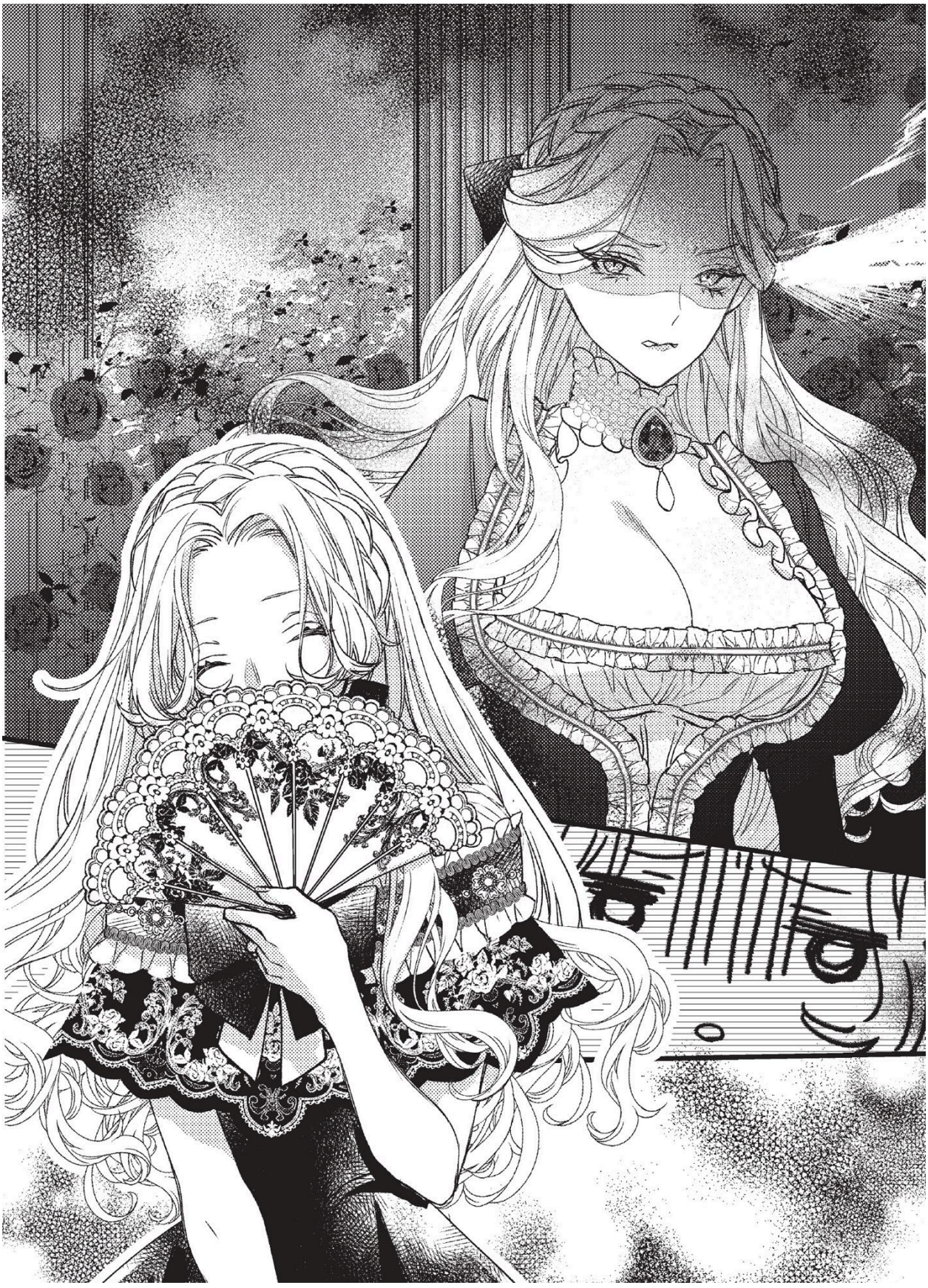
They're breaking out in a cold sweat, aren't they? Hopefully the maids won't clench anything other than their fists…

As I fretted over that, Viviana finally spoke up.

"Cecilia, don't you think Prince Lucas is just a wonderful man?"

"Indeed. He's so wonderful that it troubles me sometimes."

I smiled demurely as I replied as if to say, "Oh ho ho, he certainly loves me!" while also glaring right back at Viviana. *You're looking to pick a fight, aren't you?*



"When I heard he was a Hero, I imagined a knight built like a mountain, but when I finally met him, he had the face of a beautiful god, his body tall and elegant. I was honestly so stunned by how incredibly handsome he is, I couldn't help but think how happy I would be if I could be by his side."

"Hehe. Oh, Lady Viviana. You're so charming! Prince Lucas *is* a very handsome man, but his heart is even more beautiful. And I'm quite happy with him, I assure you."

Wow, she really is trying to start a fight. I have to admit that's pretty impressive, for a noble. But since she'd started it, I didn't hold back with my blunt reply. And naturally, that made her visibly furious. *Honestly, she's so easy to read, it's almost amusing.*

"Well, I happened to hear that Prince Lucas doesn't remember you. I've heard you've been spending time together, but hasn't he changed quite a bit since before? That must be so lonely for you."

"No one but Prince Lucas can understand the hardship he went through during the battle against the ancient dragon. Not only did he protect our kingdom, but he came home after taming the dragon. Although some may whisper idle nonsense, I have nothing to worry about when it comes to His Highness, as he is continuing our relationship just as he has before."

Did she really just throw his memory loss in my face like that? Sure, it's an open secret, but doesn't she understand what classified information means? Surely she's been told not to say it out loud. Whose job is it to inform the neighboring kingdom that their education system is in complete shambles?

As those thoughts ran through my mind, Viviana muttered under her breath, "You're just as stuck-up and unpleasant as I heard…" before laughing and twisting her face into a smirk. "Lady Cecilia, even if you don't have anything to worry about, what about Prince Lucas?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I mean, you spent six years engaged to Felix, didn't you? Six years is a long time. Surely you must've thought about marrying him at some point. And if Lucas knew that, don't you think he'd believe that you still have feelings for Felix?"

Her words were sharp with an intent to cut me down, leaving me momentarily speechless—not because I believed Lucas would think that, but because she'd touched on something I had never truly realized myself. Even though I'd never had any romantic feelings for Felix, I'd still spent six long years as his fiancée.

I thought back to when Lucas and I first met, followed by that one-sided promise I made all those years ago.

"I'll strive to become a princess worthy of your protection! I can't wait until the day we meet again, Lukie!"

Oh, yikes. I'm the worst. How could I stand beside Felix all this time while holding onto that promise to Lucas? From the very beginning, I was already betraying the man who was supposed to be my husband. I'm terrible…beyond terrible…

Yes, I've put in an absurd amount of effort to protect Felix's position and to support him, and I really wish I'd get some credit for that. But the truth is, I'd remained his fiancée not because I ever

wanted to marry him, but to keep my promise to Lucas! What was I thinking?! I had no intention of marrying Felix at all!

The worst part was that while I felt only a sliver of guilt toward Felix, my biggest fear was Lucas finding out. What if he hated me? *No, I never, ever want him to find out! Ugh, I'm truly awful…*

I must admit, this fight goes to Viviana. I've taken quite a mental blow here. Not only am I feeling down, but now I'm worried that he's going to find out the truth. It'll take a while to recover from this one. Still, if I don't respond now, she'll spread all sorts of lies about me.

Come on, you can do this! I weakly encouraged myself and slowly turned my gaze to Viviana with a smile.

"Prince Lucas hasn't changed at all, so I've been truly happy. I just haven't given much thought to other matters. You're so attentive to little details, Lady Viviana. I could learn a lot from you!"

"Hmph. Even though you spent six years with Felix and he abandoned you, you didn't speak one word against him. How admirable, Lady Cecilia."

She's got an impressive talent for sarcasm, doesn't she?

"Oh, I wouldn't say that I blame him. I believe you've misunderstood something, Lady Viviana. It's true that after spending six long years together, our relationship came to an unfortunate end. But those six years were precious to me. If I hadn't been engaged to Felix, I might never have had the chance to be with Prince Lucas."

I smiled. Just then, the trees rustled, and a familiar, tall figure emerged. My eyes widened in surprise.

Lady Viviana spoke first. “Prince Lucas! My, whatever brings you here? Could it be that you’ve come to see me?”

Those words profoundly angered me, and I glanced at Lucas to see what he would say. He didn’t look back at me. Instead, he gave a dazzlingly beautiful smile to Lady Viviana and spoke to her in a soft, almost whispering voice.

“You’re quite troublesome, Lady Belloni. Your attendants have been looking for you. There are many who are concerned about your well-being, so please try not to stray too far from the guesthouse.”

“Oh, my! Ha ha! Were you worried about me? I’ll go ahead and return, but would you escort me to my room?”

Escort her?! To her room? You’ve gotta be kidding.

Her complete lack of decorum stunned me. Proposing something so outrageous right in front of his fiancée! And just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, Lady Viviana kept going, making me feel completely exasperated.

“Lady Cecilia, you don’t mind lending Prince Lucas to me for just a little while, do you? After all, you trust him, don’t you? So it’s fine, right?”

There’s nothing fine about that statement! Does she seriously think I’m someone who’d lend my fiancé to someone who’s clearly after him? No way. Absolutely not. What is she thinking?!

My eyes reflexively narrowed into a glare, but at this point, I didn't care. I raised the corners of my lips and spoke. "I'm terribly sorry, Lady Viviana, but I just remembered there's something I need to discuss with Prince Lucas. Do you have a moment, Your Highness?"

My eyes met his, and then a shiver ran down my spine. He had a smile on his face, his golden eyes narrowing as they always did. But they were completely devoid of emotion.

What's happening? He's smiling, but not really smiling…

It was a mask. A mask devoid of any true emotion.

It was a look that he had never directed at me before, and the shock of it left me reeling, my thoughts racing.

But why? Why does he need a mask with me? Is he hiding something? Is he trying to suppress something? Endure something?

I continued to smile as I stared at him while he kept the mask on his face. He narrowed his eyes as if to conceal the emotions within the golden depths and responded to me in a soft, gentle voice.

"How could I possibly refuse a request from my beloved fiancée? I must apologize, Lady Belloni, but please have that knight over there escort you back to your quarters."

Lady Viviana was pouting, and I watched as he lifted her hand to pass it over to the knight. My face stiffened as she looked up at Lucas with dreamy, loving eyes.

It was because I'd realized something. Lady Viviana's coloring and appearance resembled mine.

She had light golden hair and greenish-blue eyes. She favored flashier clothes and makeup than I did, so from the front we gave a completely different impression, but since we had similar builds, someone could easily mistake her for me. *That's why Her Majesty called her to Bern.*

She wanted to provide Lucas, who'd lost his memory, with a replacement for me. If that didn't work for some reason, she could have Viviana visit him frequently, spreading rumors about the two of them being close inside the palace.

The reason it hadn't worked was that, despite his memory loss, Lucas had insisted upon me living in his quarters and was overly attentive toward me, making it impossible for such rumors to spread.

It's fine. Even if the rumors of discord about us are dying down, there shouldn't be a problem. I wanted to believe that.

However, while I was exhausted from the ugly emotions within me, I found myself at rock bottom after realizing just how terrible I had become.

And after seeing that cold mask on his face directed at me for the first time, fear and confusion took root inside of my heart, leaving me with no room for such thoughts.

My heart pounded in my chest as Lucas slowly turned toward me, the fabric of my dress sticking uncomfortably to my back, which was damp with sweat.

"What do you need, Cecilia?"

"Ah…"

His gentle tone of voice and the smile plastered across his face made more cold sweat trickle down my back.

The urge to flee and the desperation to ask, “What’s wrong?” rose to my throat, but when I caught sight of the knight standing behind Lucas, I forced myself to smile, tightening my stomach muscles.

“It’s nothing important. I just thought we could discuss what happened in your quarters…”

“I see. This might take a while, then.” He gave me a self-deprecating smile that looked somewhat sarcastic as well, and I clenched my hand into a fist beneath the folds of my dress where he couldn’t see.

Is he angry? No, it’s something heavier than that… What is this feeling?

Fear surged through me, making my chest feel cold. But even still, I gathered my strength and forced myself to ask.

“Could I have some time alone with you?”

“Of course, but I don’t have much time right now. I’ll send Finn to escort you after dinner to my study.”

“All right.”

I managed to respond, my knees trembling as Lucas held his hand toward me. Slowly and cautiously, I placed my hand in his. He gripped it firmly, and I flinched. But then, his thumb gently brushed against my skin like always, and I found myself gripping him in return as if to cling to him.

He gazed at our intertwined fingers for a moment, exhaling softly before lifting my hand to his lips and placing a kiss on it.

"Shall I walk you back?" The tenderness in his voice made me want to cry. I blinked, looking up into those golden eyes.

"It's fine. You're busy, aren't you? I'll see you later."

"I'm sorry. Until later, then."

There was something in his apology that felt heavy, but I shook my head slightly and squeezed his hand once more before slowly releasing it. He did the same, our gazes locking for a few seconds. For just a moment, his golden eyes flashed with a terrifying light before he turned on his heel and walked away.

That light drained the blood from my face, making my lips tremble.

I've seen that look before. But only once, on our very first date. It was the same look he gave me when I told Lukie, "This is the last time!"

And now, even if it had been for just a fleeting moment, that same light had been directed at me.

My whole body trembled at the memory of that look in Lucas's eyes. Madness—no, hatred—is what colored his eyes. And a desire to kill.

Does he hate me enough to want to kill me?

Chapter Two

AFTER A TASTELESS DINNER, I WAITED FOR FINN TO come. I was so nervous, I couldn't stop shaking.

Anna and the others were clearly worried, fidgeting anxiously around me, but all I could do was offer them a weak, apologetic smile, unable to reassure them.

No matter how many times I replayed the scene in my mind, Lucas's eyes had indeed reflected hatred and malice, even if it had just been a second.

Why? Why? I asked myself this over and over again, but no answer came.

I think he might've overheard my conversation with Viviana. Perhaps something I said had hurt him deeply or made him upset.

So that didn't mean his feelings had shifted toward Viviana, or that he stopped loving me, either. Because if he had, I felt like he wouldn't have squeezed my hand in return. That was just a guess, and perhaps I was just being optimistic for my own convenience.

Still, no matter how often I went over our conversation, I couldn't make sense of it.

If I don't understand, then I should just ask him directly. But what if I really hurt him? What if his love has turned into hatred? And what if he tells me that tonight?

I shut my eyes and shook off those terrifying thoughts.

This fear was nothing compared to the moment I thought he had died alone. Now, he was right within my reach. I told myself that even if he hated me, I could try again, no matter how many times it took.

First, I needed to have a serious conversation with him because before that light had appeared in his eyes, he'd covered his emotions with a mask.

And it was to hide something from me, or to endure something he felt, or maybe even in an attempt to mask any malice toward me.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and I lifted my face toward it.

Finn entered the room, and I couldn't help but smile wryly when I saw how pale he looked.

"Sorry for getting you involved in this," I said.

"M-Master said… He said if you're feeling unwell, then perhaps it's best to skip today…"

"I'll go. I have to."

Finn and the others gasped at my response, probably hoping I would stay, so I asked him with a self-deprecating smile, "Is it really that bad?"

"It's not just bad! Prince Lucas hasn't been like this at all lately."

"So he's acted like this before?"

"…" Finn's face stiffened before he looked at the ground. I asked him to take me to Lucas, and he nodded faintly.

He opened the door to Lucas's study without knocking, and I stepped into the dimly lit room, where only a small candle flickered and the pale moonlight filtered through the windows. I strained my eyes to see and found a silhouette standing silently by the window on the other side of the desk. I directed my trembling legs toward it.

Though his expression was hidden in the shadows, there was no doubt he was watching me. I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to the punch.

"You came. I thought you wouldn't." His words almost felt like a rejection. I steeled myself before I responded.

"Why did you think that?"

"Why? You know why, Cecilia. You've realized…the feelings I have for you."

I struggled to suppress the urge to step back in fear, hearing that unsettling, sneering laugh and seeing a side of him I'd never seen before.

I won't run away. This was the part of himself that he tried to hide from me. It was something I hadn't seen before, but it was still definitely a part of Lucas.

Clenching my hands, I met his gaze, and he let out a soft laugh.

"And yet you came anyway. Don't you care if I kill you, Cece?" He spoke in a frighteningly sweet voice, and at the same time the room filled with an overwhelming magical energy which emanated from him.

"…!"

I was transfixed by the concentration of mana filled with malice that coiled around my feet, almost collapsing around its weight. But the ring he gave me flashed brightly and repelled it.

That light gave me courage, so I tightened my grip on the ring and returned my gaze to him, forcing the words through my throat against the pressure of his shadow, which was so still I wondered if he was even breathing.

"Why? What's the reason?"

"You really want to know the reason I want to kill you?" There was a hint of pain in his mocking laugh.

"Yes, I want to know," I insisted as I stepped forward.

"I never wanted to know. I never wanted to remember," he muttered coldly.

He didn't want to remember?

His amnesia was limited to only memories involving me. His words seemed to reject my very existence, shocking me into silence. Finally, he stepped away from the window and approached me.

Though his face was cold and expressionless, his golden eyes shimmered openly with hatred and malice. Yet amidst the madness, there was also undeniably love. Unable to bear it, I reached out, and he gently pulled me closer. He smiled at me but looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"When I'm with you, my memories keep coming back. Important memories…and unimportant ones, too."

"What do you mean?"

"My Cecilia…You never talked about it in detail, and those idiot nobles were desperate to hide it, but I did some research on you right after I lost my memories. And I found out you were engaged to *him*."

I flinched, and he slowly stroked my stiffened shoulders to soothe me before pulling me closer to whisper again.

"But that was just knowledge. I have no memories of those six years you were engaged to him. I must've spent all those years just watching you. I didn't care to remember what I thought about during that time. Because now, you belong to me, and your gaze is only on me…"

As he spoke, he caressed the Mark on my lower abdomen as if to confirm its presence. I swallowed hard as his large hand wandered up my body…until it slowly wrapped around my neck.

"…!"

He pressed his lips against mine with a faint, mocking smile. But as I faced the madness in his golden eyes, I let out shallow breaths from the fear. He spoke close to my lips, his voice as cold as ice.

"Listen, Cecilia. You were Felix's fiancée for six years. By the time we met, you were already betrothed to him. I fell for you, longing so deeply for you that it made me feel like I was going mad with desire. Yet you were standing beside another man. You made a promise to me so that you could continue standing by his side for the sake of your future together. Am I wrong?"

His cold, questioning voice trembled slightly, and my chest tightened as I reached for his earring.

"I couldn't think of giving up, even knowing that the promise wasn't meant for me. I endured it for six years. You remained beside Felix, enduring whatever torment he put you through, making me wonder if you might actually love him. The thought of never being able to have you plunged me into despair so many times. I wanted to die so many times…"

"You wanted…to die?" I unconsciously repeated his words, and Lucas's lips curled into a grin, no longer bothering to hide his savage expression before he let out a piercing, gut-wrenching scream.

"How many times do I have to say it? I love you, Cecilia, and only you! I'm crazy in love with only you! I want to take all of you and make you mine! I want to be connected so deeply you can't ever leave me. I want to lock you away so no one else can ever see you! How much love does it take for you to understand that? I can't even reach out with this madness inside of me! Watching you stand next to another man and smile at him makes me want to kill you! How could it not?!"

"…!"

The weight of his emotions nearly brought me to my knees, and I gritted my teeth to endure it.

I could see despair rising in his eyes, tainted with love and hatred. The regret that swirled in my heart for having practically forced him to say it all was physically making it hard to breathe, my body trembling as I struggled to take breaths.

Seeing me like this, Lucas twisted his face in pain and pressed his forehead against my shoulder as if begging for help.

"I wanted…to kill you, Cece. I loved and hated you for working so hard for Felix as his fiancée, despite your promise to me. I yearned for you so much it hurt, and I wanted to kill you. I wanted to die so many times because I was so terrified of wanting to kill the person I love so much. But now you're mine. You're mine, and yet you said that those six years with Felix were '*precious*.'"

"Ah…!"

Those words!

What I had said to Lady Viviana hit me like a bolt of lightning.

I had indeed said those six years were precious—because they were the years that connected me to Lucas…

I wanted to slap myself for not considering how much he must have suffered during that time.

I remembered how he had hidden all his pain from me.

I'm sure he'd intended to keep it hidden from me, probably for the rest of his life, never letting me find out or know the truth.

He'd buried his suffering deep, lost those memories, and then was thrown into sudden turmoil when those memories abruptly resurfaced. Despite all of that, he still tried to shield me from the pain and here I was, forcing him to reveal it!

"I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's my fault. There's something wrong with me. I never intended to let you see this. I'm so sorry. I love you, Cece. I love you so much and I want to protect you. But at the same time, I want to break you. I want to make love to you until you can't handle it anymore. I want to expose

your body until you're a complete mess and kiss you until you stop breathing. I want to kill you for saying those six years were precious!"

He turned his face away to hide it, but I reached out to cradle his cheeks.

Startled by the warmth of our touch, Lucas trembled and looked up at me with a pleading gaze. I called out to him in a voice that was barely a whisper, and he smiled softly, as if giving up. I held my breath in surprise.

"Cecilia, I'm probably crazier than you think… No matter how many times you swear you love me, I'll always have these filthy emotions toward you, and I'll selfishly crave you for the rest of my life. That's why I didn't want to remember those six years."

"…!"

He clutched his chest as if trying to grip his own heart as he made that confession, his face so pale it looked like he was dying. His words sent a shiver through me, and without thinking, I instinctively tightened my grip on his shirt, unsure of what he would say next. Lucas let out a self-deprecating laugh.

"I didn't want you to come. These feelings aren't something I should unleash on you. It's selfish of me to throw them at you. Then to still cling to you is nothing short of disgraceful. All I can do is laugh about it. I don't deserve to stand by your side, regardless of whether I remember or not."

"No, Lord Lukie… Lukie!"

No way! This can't be!

"But still, I love you… That's why I can't ever let you go. I'm sorry, but… Do you want to run away from me?" Although he wasn't crying, his face was twisted with unmistakable grief, and in the end, he smiled without making a sound.

Are you kidding me? After making me love you this much, do you think you can just let me go if I say I want to run away?

Furious, I grabbed both of his cheeks, pinching them hard.

"Ow! C-Cece?!"

With a loud noise, I pulled that beautiful face closer to mine as his eyes widened in shock. And then I glared at him before kissing him fiercely.

"Answer me, Lucas Theoderic Herbst…!"

"Y-yes?!"

"Do you love me?!"

"Of course I do!"

"You love me so much you want to kill me?"

"Yes, I do."

"And if I told you to kill me, would you?!"

"N-No…" he answered, dumbfounded.

So then stop trying to end this conversation unilaterally! I thought as I kissed him again, snorting angrily. I knew that was unbecoming of a lady, but I continued anyway.

"And why is that?"

"Because I love you."

"What do you ultimately want?"

"I want…to be with you."

Nicely done! I nodded and then pulled him toward the most calming place: the bedroom.

"Cece? What…are you?"

"Just follow me, I have things to say to you too!" I declared firmly, signaling that the conversation wasn't over. Lucas gasped, biting his lip.

"…!"

Lucas seemed both baffled and somewhat unwilling as I tried to shove him onto the bed. *Ugh, he won't budge!*

"Lord Lukie, sit down."

"But… Why are we in the bedroom? I just said I wanted to make love to you until you break…"

His golden eyes flickered with uncertainty, questioning if it was okay. *I'll explain all of that!* I pointed to the bed and glared at him.

"Lukie! Sit down right now!"

"All right."

You should've just said that in the first place! I thought as he plopped down on the bed. I stood over him and stretched his cheeks out.

"Wha… ahh… Cewi… Ceciwia? Wha awe you…?"

I couldn't help but think that he was infuriatingly handsome even as I stretched his cheeks out. I almost laughed out loud at the

ridiculousness of it but decided against it. I let go of his cheeks and took a slow, deep breath as I cradled his flushed face and finally spoke.

"Lukie, I…"

"Wait."

He tensed up like he was frightened of what I would say and reached a hand toward my mouth. I kissed his palm in acceptance. Surprised by my unexpected gesture, he froze. I intertwined my fingers with his and then guided our joined hands to my heart, conveying my determination to give him everything.

"I love you so much."

"What?"

"I truly love you. So much, in fact, that if you really wanted to kill me, I might not even mind. I love you, and only you, so deeply that I feel unworthy of you, like I bring nothing of value to you."

I was surprised by how effortlessly the words slipped out. *Maybe there's something wrong with me, too!* I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"You're really not going to run away?" he murmured in disbelief.

I couldn't help but huff a little before raising my voice slightly. "I'm not going anywhere! I want to be with you forever!"

At that, he gently and cautiously wrapped his arms around me, his golden eyes glimmering with a hint of moisture.

"You weren't really thinking of letting me go, were you?" I asked, seeking reassurance.

"Of course not! I was planning to cut the tendons in your legs, chain you up inside a barrier, and gradually break you down."

He spoke in a serious tone and relayed his intentions to imprison me in greater detail than I'd expected. *Um, that's a crazy answer!* But then I felt a wave of relief wash over me, and I realized I'd already laughed it off.

I hesitantly looked at Lucas, who gazed at me with pleading eyes.

"Did you not want to say it?"

"Of course I didn't! I didn't want you to know how selfish and disgraceful I am. I only have feelings for you, but… Why do you have to be the one I show my weaknesses to also?"

My heart ached at the sight of him covering his face in anguish. *He's so adorable and precious. You really are crazy in love with me, aren't you?*

I felt a mixture of guilt for not noticing his pain and joy that he desired only me. My eyes welled up with tears.

"I-I'm sorry for making you say it."

"No, it's all my fault. You're not to blame at all, Cece. I couldn't hide it any longer and ended up hurting you. I'm really sorry…"

As I wrapped my arms around Lucas's bowed head, I whispered softly, "I'll tell you my secret to apologize."

He tightened his grip on me as if to say he wouldn't let go, then looked at me with those sparkling, golden eyes. "It's something I don't already know?"

"Well, yes. Because it's a secret. Do you want to know?"

"Yes! Tell me now." His response was more threatening than encouraging, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Haha. You're so childish sometimes, Lukie."

"Well, I can't help it! I lose my self-control when it comes to you! Sorry for not being mature enough. Anyway, please don't hate me…" His entire face blushed all the way up to his ears, and he raised his voice in embarrassment.

I felt my heart swell as I hugged him tightly, laughing softly before speaking. "Lukie, I worked hard for six years. Those six years were painful."

"I know. You did put in a lot of effort." Hearing him recognize my struggles nearly brought tears to my eyes, and I tightened my grip around him.

"But the real reason I worked so hard for so long was because I met someone wonderful six years ago."

"Huh?! Wait a second. You met someone else besides me, Cece?!"

"That's right. It wasn't you," I said meaningfully.

He frowned for a moment but then gradually widened his eyes. I couldn't help but chuckle as his arms tightened around me.

"I admired his determination and focus. Occasionally, his eyes turned golden for some reason. Don't you think that's strange?"

"…!"

As he continued to blush, I placed a finger gently on his trembling lips and smiled.

"But when I first met him, he was so curt and had a terrible attitude with me. Don't you think that's pretty rude?"

"Ugh, well…"

"I wonder why he acted like that toward me?"

"I was…I was embarrassed…th-that you saw me lose…" He flushed even deeper, his eyes darting around as he spoke. *He's so cute.*

But I wanted to say a little more. "Seeing him continue to challenge himself released me from my pain, and I burned his image onto my heart. I wanted to become worthy of his protection."

"Y-you went through all of that for six years?"

"Oh, and you know what? Even though we exchanged our promise as children, he kept it for all those years."

"Cece…!" Lucas muttered against my chest, and I tightened my hold on him, not letting him look up.

I cleared my throat nervously and then said, "But I realized I'm the worst kind of woman."

"Huh?"

"Because I was working hard just to see him. During my conversation with Lady Viviana, I realized I never intended to marry Felix, and I felt like the worst woman ever."

"…"

His silence made me fear his reaction, so I clung tightly to him, pressing my face against his daybreak-colored hair.

"I worked hard for six years just for that wonderful person. I'm such a foolish and terrible woman, but please don't hate me…"

I paused before continuing. "You suffered profoundly during those six years. I'm so sorry I didn't notice. But for me, it was a precious time spent striving to be with you."

Lucas shifted and tried to lift his face. I held him tighter, silently pleading with him not to look up, but he was too clever for me.

He pulled me down onto the bed, with me ending up on top of his large frame. I quickly pushed against his chest.

As my disheveled hair fell delicately around his handsome face, he gently brushed it aside and said, "You worked so hard. You're an amazing woman." He smiled at me sweetly and with contentment. "I can hardly believe we felt the same way. I'm so happy it feels like I could die. You thought about being with me for six years?"

"Not *you*, Lucas. Lukie," I tried to deflect from the mixture of happiness and embarrassment bubbling up inside me as he lovingly stroked my cheek.

"Haha. You really care about that little detail, huh?" he said with a laugh.

Of course I do! I turned away in a huff, but I couldn't bear to tear my gaze away from his golden eyes, which looked so happy I felt like crying. I had to press my lips together to suppress my tears. He

brushed his fingers over my lips, and the tenderness of his touch made my emotions overflow.

"It's Lukie I'm talking about, you know…"

"Yeah, I know."

His golden gaze melted at my apology, filling my heart with love. I pressed my lips against his fingers. Realizing I wanted a kiss, he quickly pulled me closer. I relaxed into our tender kiss, feeling like we were confirming each other's existence.

"You were engaged to Felix, but you weren't even thinking about marrying him?" Lucas held me tightly and teased me in a playful tone.

Oh, come on, Lucas! Don't ruin the mood!

"Ugh! I was only focused on fulfilling my role as the second prince's fiancée! It might sound like an excuse, but it was really tough! I was so busy with my princess education that I thought I might get an ulcer!" I raised my voice out of embarrassment.

Lucas smirked and whispered gently, "So when you got engaged to me, did you think about what came after that? Did you think about marriage?" There was a certainty in his intelligent gaze that made me bite my lip.

Damn it… If that's how it's going to be, then I'll just say it!

"Well, *someone* didn't even mention our engagement until after he engraved the Promise Mark on me and made it so I couldn't marry anyone else!"

"Well, that *is* true."

See? My reasoning isn't weird at all! I thought.

His golden eyes glimmered, and he slowly smiled wider, setting my heart racing.

Uh-oh, he's about to say something embarrassing…

"So, Cece, did you think about marrying me regardless of our engagement?"

"…!"

What is his incredibly happy, dreamy smile supposed to mean?

I mean, a ridiculously gorgeous guy who held an eerie resemblance to my crush made love to me so hard I passed out before carving a Promise Mark in me! Who could think of another man after all that, huh?!

Absolutely no one, right?! So what does it mean?!

My face burned furiously as I pressed it against his chest.

"Well, maybe…" I said hesitantly.

Then Lucas brought up something I never expected. "Speaking of which, remember the first time we had sex and *you* kissed *me*?"

"Huh?"

"I felt really happy about it, but looking back, it seems a bit strange, don't you think?"

"…!"

"Even though it must've hurt a lot, you moved your hips against mine and wanted to kiss me, and then you…"

Nooo! Lukie, you idiot!!

Why do you remember such an unnecessary detail so vividly?! That's a memory I'd rather forget, and I really don't want to hear more about it…

As a wave of embarrassment washed over me, I could feel the urge to stop this conversation rising up inside of me. With tears in my eyes, I pleaded, but Lucas's golden eyes sparkled with delight, and he mercilessly pulled my hand away from my mouth.

"Cece, I just thought of something."

"I don't want to know…"

"Under ordinary circumstances, if a girl barely knows the man she's having sex with…"

"L-Lukie, please don't…"

No matter how hard I tried to silence him, he kept speaking without a care.

"There's no way…"

"No, no, no!"

"…that he could carve a Promise Mark on her. Right?"

His deliberately provocative question, combined with his blissful, mischievous expression, made me tremble with shame. I felt completely overwhelmed and commanded my body to move, but of course it wouldn't.

He held me down, spinning me around until I felt his soft touch against my back, making my face heat up even more.

Even in the dim light, I could tell that he was smiling. I turned away in a panic, but he pressed his lips against my ear, whispering

words that seared into my mind.

"My beloved Cece… When did you start to love Lucas rather than just Lukie? Tell me."

His warm breath in my ear sent my heart racing and left me gasping.

N-no, that's not true! It can't be!

Words of denial whirled in my mind, but somewhere deep down, I accepted it, but I couldn't say it. *I'm the worst! I feel like crying!*

"I love you, Cece."

"Wh-what?"

"I truly love you… Ever since I first laid eyes on you, I've loved you so much I could break you and kill you."

That's so scary… Who would be happy to hear something like that? Only a maniac! Oh no, I can't believe I'm *one of those girls!*

"Ah…"

As I let out a heated sigh in response to his obsessive confession, he asked, "Would you like me to completely and utterly break you?"

That was terrifying, but for some reason, I found myself responding in a shy voice. "D-do you really want to break me that much?"

My cheeks flushed even more. *Now what am I supposed to do?! I never planned on being a masochist…*

Yet he kept pressing despite having looked like he was in so much pain only a moment ago. *I'm glad he's feeling better, though!*

"You really know how to get me addicted to you. Cece, say you love me."

Wow, he's so stubborn! I can't believe he's pulling this out now. It's almost admirable how true to his desires he is. He's so infuriatingly cool!

"Y-yes. I love you, Lukie… Prince Lucas."

I said both names! I did my best, so can we just end it here?

"Since when?"

So persistent!

"I-I won't say!"

"Say it."

"No way!"

"I wanted to be with you right after I became a member of the Imperial Order."

"I-I won't tell you!"

"During my first battle against the demon foxes, you and I made eye contact for a split second."

"…!"

How do you remember that? Your genius brain is truly annoying!

Since he'd pressed my hands against the bed, I couldn't hide my flushed cheeks. I glared at him, trying to deflect, but Lucas just narrowed his eyes. "Ha!" he said, as if the look on my face had

confirmed it for him. Then he spoke in a low, sweet voice, giving me no room to hide.

"Didn't you sometimes watch the knights training in the distance?"

"…?!"

The thought that those actions might've had significance unbeknownst to me shocked me, and I widened my eyes in disbelief.

Words failed me, and I unconsciously shook my head in denial, moving my mouth silently.

Seeing my reaction, Lucas called my name sweetly.

You're really being stubborn about this! You're pushy with a terrible personality!

"My adorable Cecilia… Why were you watching the Imperial Order? Who were you looking for?"

"I wasn't looking for anyone! I just happened to watch, that's all…"

"Oh? So you *were* watching?"

"N-no, that's not it!"

Argh, I can't stand being relentlessly teased anymore! He remembers everything, down to the smallest detail! Is this the final form of his demonic teasing? How terrifying!

I felt overwhelmed with a mixture of embarrassment and the desire to laugh, but I wanted to cry instead. No—I was already crying.

Because at this point, I truly felt like the worst woman ever.

I had gotten engaged to Felix without ever intending to marry him and had my eye on Lucas the entire time!

I hadn't even realized I liked him, and then I swore my love to him right after we made love. *How awful is that?! Oh no, this is too much. Felix, I'm so sorry! But honestly, your behavior has been unacceptable!*

Realizing Lucas had seen right through my thoughts, my mouth opened and closed like an idiot, utterly at a loss for excuses. His eyes lit up with joy when he saw me like that.

"I'm so happy! You've had me in your heart for six years, and for a whole year, you've been loving me as Lucas?"

"D-don't say it like that! It makes me sound like a cheater!"

I should've only been focused on Felix since I was the second prince's fiancée. Though I couldn't say it with absolute certainty, I probably only ever saw him just as the second prince.

Lost in those thoughts, my mouth continued to move on its own. "I-it was only after you saved me and we got engaged that I first learned what love was! You're the first person I've ever fallen for! So from our engagement, you're all I think about and all I see, and um…"

I didn't want him to get the wrong idea and think I just fell in love with anyone, so I pushed aside my guilt about Felix and spoke earnestly, suddenly realizing how wide-eyed Lucas was at my desperation.

In the end, I could only think of Lucas, which left me flustered. My eyes watered and my cheeks were burning when I saw his golden

eyes darken while he smiled sweetly at me.

"Not a single bit, huh?"

Why is he looking at me? And what does that mean, a single bit?

"Heh, I see. I can't believe it. I'm so happy. Not even a single bit, huh? Haha…"

He seems to have accepted it on his own, but I'm a bit too afraid to comment on it… Should I just leave him alone?

I decided to stay still and quiet as he mumbled to himself, smiling darkly with happiness, with his face buried against my shoulder. Then he thanked me with a chuckle.

"Sorry, but I'm just so happy. Thank you, Cece. I love you."

"Um, n-no, thank you…"

I replied, tipping my head slightly. *Wait, what do you mean?*

Just then, he planted a sweet kiss on my lips, leaving me bewildered as we kissed.

But before I could even process what was happening, Lucas pushed me down onto the bed with surprising force as he showered me with kisses. Before I knew it, he pulled my dress down, leaving my undergarments exposed.

"Mm, huh? Nngh, ahh… Lucas, what are you doing?!"

"What do you mean? Come on, Cece. You're the one who led me over to bed. What else is a married couple going to do in bed? What's strange about that?" he asked me with an adorable smile. Shock overcame me as my husband quickly continued stripping my dress off.

Yes, I did bring him here. But I had no intention of that. *We'd just argued about it, didn't we?* I tried to convey that we hadn't made up yet, but Lucas replied earnestly.

"I'm sorry about that. I'll make sure to respect your boundaries going forward. I'm truly sorry. So please let me make love to you."

"Um, okay…"

I was so caught off-guard by his overly straightforward apology and request that I automatically responded.

"Yay!" He let out a small joyful cheer and quickly got back to the business of undressing me.

Wait, that sounded a bit strange, and aren't we back to square one now? I thought to myself, feeling a shiver down my spine at the sound of his deep voice. He used his otherworldly beauty to its full effect, pleading with me adorably and striking me right through my stupid heart.

"I love you, Cecilia. I've really missed you. I'll take good care of you, so please don't go anywhere. Never leave the cage of my embrace again."

"Okay…"

Somehow, it felt like there was something not right about his wording there, but here I was, giving the same response twice without hesitation. *Seriously, I'm too weak against Lucas*…

He held me in his arms, kissing me as he pulled my dress away from my legs.

Now stripped down to my underwear, I unconsciously reached out for my discarded clothing, but he grinned and tossed it far away from the bed.

I saw the dress hit the wall in my peripheral vision. I covered my body with my arms, knowing it wouldn't do much good.

"I told you I wasn't going to run away!"

"I know, but I wasn't planning on letting you go anyway."

"Ugh, I-I can't help it! It's just so embarrassing…"

No matter how many times it happened, I still found it incredibly embarrassing, especially when my reason was so strong. I shot a glare at Lucas, who laughed as he placed a quick kiss on the corner of my mouth.

"You've done this so many times, but you still make those cute little gestures. I feel bad for making you feel shy, but you're going to move your hands. Ah, you're so beautiful…"

"Mm…"

As he spoke, he removed my arms from my chest and wrapped them around his neck, gently touching my still slightly soft nipples through the fabric of my undergarment.

His gaze lingered on me like he was making sure of something, slowly tracing my skin, sending shivers down my spine and causing my nipples to harden in an instant.

He kissed me as he slowly stroked my sides and back, then pulled away to call my name and whisper sweet nothings, filling me

with a happiness that overpowered my embarrassment. I couldn't help but pull him closer and whisper in his ear.

"L-Lukie, can you take off your clothes, too?"

He was still dressed, except for his jacket, since he met me right after work.

I wanted to feel him holding me, and the fabric against my skin only felt like it was in the way. It was embarrassing, but I earnestly asked to feel his skin, burying my face against his shoulder.

At that, his large hand, which had been tracing my body, came to a halt, and he called my name.

"Cecilia. I have a favor to ask."

"Wh-what is it?" *My voice sounds so quiet!* I thought to myself as I looked up at him, trembling in response to his warm breath in my ear. His golden eyes sparkled with affection, making my face flush even more.

"I want my adorable wife to help undress me."

"…!!!"

What a strange favor! Sure, I asked him to undress, but I never expected him to ask me to help! Helping him get dressed is one thing, but taking it off?! Isn't that way too forward, even as his wife? Is it really okay for me to do such things?! I didn't learn anything like that in my princess education, so could someone please help me?!

I stumbled over my words, flustered, and Lucas's voice sounded sexy and tempting.

"You were thinking about our bare skin pressed against each other, weren't you? Come on, Cece. I'll take it off, but I need you to help me."

He took my hands and placed them on his neck.

"Ah…" I let out a small noise at the sensation of his firm Adam's apple against my palm, and then he began to move my hand downward.

He slipped my fingertips under his shirt, and I felt the hard muscles and heat against my skin. Lucas watched me closely as I gritted my teeth, then leaned in to kiss me softly before whispering once more as if inviting me to fall deeper.

"It's okay, no one is watching. I was the one who asked you. So come on, Cecilia. Don't you want to feel our bare skin touching?"

"L-Lukie…"

"Will you unbutton it for me?"

"Y-yes…" His voice was low and sweet—almost a hypnotic whisper. It felt like my mouth was moving of its own accord.

Seeing the joy light up in his golden eyes at my quiet reply made me hesitate for a moment, and then my trembling fingers moved to the buttons of his vest. My breath sounded strangely loud, and my heart raced uncontrollably.

Once I finished unbuttoning the last one, I froze with bewilderment, leaving my hands suspended in the air. He took them in his and guided them to his shirt.

Understanding his intentions, my eyes widened in shock as I desperately fumbled to unbutton his shirt, my vision blurring with tears.

Why is he embarrassing me like this? My face feels like it's on fire!

His skin looked tantalizing as it peeked through his shirt. The more buttons I unfastened, the more his toned and muscular body revealed itself, which further embarrassed me. *But still! I'm his wife!*

I encouraged myself with that powerful thought and clumsily worked on the buttons. But when I reached the hard part, my hands froze.

"L-Lukie, um, the next part is…"

There's no way I can do it. I glanced around, pleading for help, but my husband was having none of it.

"Can you unhook my pants and pull my shirt up? Then I'll take them off."

"Wh-what?! But, um, I…"

"I need my beloved wife to do it for me."

I looked up at his perfectly handsome face with tears in my eyes, but I sensed no willingness to yield. Instead, he was taking advantage of my title as his wife, so I retreated in defeat. *I shouldn't have asked him to take off his clothes!*

I mean, isn't it just unfair that he's so perfectly sculpted? Not just his face but his body, too. It's like the gods went overboard creating him.

He stood out even among the knights because of how tall he was, and when he took off his shirt, he was even more muscular than I had imagined. Definitely not the same person I met back then.

As I let my mind wander in denial, I unhooked his pants, my trembling fingers brushing against his body. The sensation of his hard muscles suddenly brought me back to reality.

His large hands, which wielded swords, his long and sturdy arms connecting to his broad shoulders, the solid muscle covering his frame, and the scars scattered across his body…

He'd transformed into someone entirely different from the person I first met, all to protect me, and now I was going to offer myself to him to share our love. Imagining that made me impulsively turn away.

"Didn't I say I wasn't going to let you go, Cecilia?"

"Ah! W-wait, Lukie!"

Naturally, he immediately caught me and pulled me back into his arms. My body pressed against his warmth, making my heart race.

As I found myself in that position, Lucas chuckled softly, kissing my neck and licking my collarbone teasingly. He nipped at my shoulder while I desperately tried explaining that I wasn't attempting to escape.

"I'm sorry, that was a mistake!"

He laughed joyfully again, offering a rather frightening warning. "Haha. Cecilia, I'm very happy right now. And very excited, too."

V-very excited? Uh-oh, if he's saying that himself, it must be bad!

"W-wait, don't bite me!"

"If you try to run away, you might not be able to get out of the barrier."

Not the room? Now we're up to a barrier? I promise I won't run away!

But still, he'd grown so much stronger and broader in the past six years, and being enveloped in his large frame made me feel incredibly protected, which only added to my embarrassment. I really wished he could understand my feelings as I blushed and opened my mouth.

"B-but this is just too embarrassing!"

"Embarrassing? We've done this so many times, and you've touched me before. So I thought you were used to seeing my body by now?"

How could I possibly be used to it?! You're the one who always toys with me. Is there any girl who can calmly look at her partner's body in that state?! If there is, I'd like her to teach me how to stay calm!

"But I mean… your body is completely different from before!"

I couldn't help but cover my flushed face as I said that, and when Lucas let out a surprised, "Huh?" I quickly turned around, feeling flustered and defensive.

"S-six years ago, you were just a kid! Your arms and legs were so thin you looked like a little girl!"

"A l-little girl?! Hey, I wasn't that scrawny!" he protested.

Seeing him blush for once and get all worked up is so cute! I could feel a part of me squealing in the back of my mind, and I couldn't help but agree.

"You were like this!" I gestured with both hands, trying to get my point across. "You *were* scrawny! And compared to other knights, you were really short, too!"

Lucas was clearly not satisfied with my answer and shot back in frustration.

"Excuse me?! Sure, maybe I looked small compared to the knights, but I was pretty tall for my age! And I had a decent build, too! I was way bigger than Felix and almost the same height as Leon, even though he was older!"

Why is he so smug? It's adorable! But comparing yourself to Felix, who was a prince who hardly ever exercised, is hardly fair. Plus, I never even cared about Leon's height!

"After I met you, you made such a big impression on me. All I could think about was you! I don't even remember what Felix or any of the other boys looked like back then!" I huffed back at him.

"Wh-what? Then what's the big deal?" Lucas covered his mouth and muttered under his breath, "Wow, that's making me really happy right now…"

Ugh, how can he still not get it after all I've said?

"What I'm *trying* to say is, your body is so different from six years ago, and thinking about how you've been protecting me all this time makes me a little nerv—whoa!"

Eek! Why are your eyes suddenly so dangerous?!

His golden eyes flickered like flames, catching the gleam of his smile as he leaned in, his cheeks slightly flushed. He stared at me with narrowed eyes, his voice dripping with sweetness and mischief as he whispered.

"I've been training for six years just for you, Cece. Of course I've changed."

"…!"

Why is he taking off his shirt just to show me when I said I was nervous?!

"You're all red… So, how do you like my body, Mrs. Herbst?"

Argh, how infuriating! He's even laughing! And now he's purposely pressing his body against mine, pinning me down so I can't even resist! He's so incredibly mean!

"I-I don't know… L-Lukie, wait… Mmph! Mmm!"

The moment I tried to protest, his deep kiss drained all the strength from my body. As I glared at him in embarrassment, he pulled away, and his smile softened.

"No more waiting. You know, you were always beautiful, Cece. So that much hasn't changed. But you've grown so much. It's been tough protecting you all this time."

His voice was filled with emotion as he spoke. Before I realized it, he had tossed my undergarments aside, just like my dress. *My modesty!* I crossed my arms over my breasts and was about to glare at him when something he said made me anxious.

"N-no, I wasn't like this before…"

"What's wrong, Cece? Did I say something to upset you?" he gently caressed my cheek as he asked, sounding a little worried. As my unease grew, I nervously spoke.

"L-Lukie, do you…not like my body?"

I wasn't fat, but my breasts, well…they were out of proportion with the rest of my body, and it had been bothering me lately. Lady Mia was rather slender, and Lady Viviana had a well-balanced figure. So that left me feeling a little conflicted. Maybe it was just a case of the grass being greener on the other side, though.

As that thought ran through my head, I glanced up at Lucas once more, only to be met with a gaze brimming with raw desire. I couldn't help but gasp in response.

"You have no idea how happy you make me, do you? I've loved you and only you for six years, Cece."

"I-I know…"

His voice was so deep it seemed to sink into my very bones, and those dangerously lustful eyes made me shrink back as I nodded. *He's being so intense right now it's starting to scare me! But is he actually happy about this?*

"All I've wanted is you for six years. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Huh? Um, n-no, I don't understand." I meekly denied it, and Lucas leaned closer, hooking his fingers under the waistband of my underwear. He smiled, looking oddly pleased.

"I don't respond to anyone but you."

"Huh…?"

Respond?! Does he mean…the brothel was his first time?! You've gotta be kidding me! There's no way he did all that his first time! I was shocked, and he laughed, looking a bit shy but clearly amused.

"I don't get hard for anyone else, and I've never felt desire for another woman. Only you, Cece. It surprised me, too. From the moment we met, I had an uncontrollable desire to make your body mine. It was so painful."

Wh-what is he saying?! That he's wanted me like that all along? I already knew he was dangerous, but this is too much! Yet for some reason, my heart raced, and I wanted to hide my face. *I-I might be crazy for liking this, too!*

I felt embarrassed by the sudden rush of emotions, and then he smoothly slipped my underwear off my legs. He spread them apart, and the instant my most sensitive area was exposed to the air, I felt a burning heat press against it. I couldn't stop the scream that escaped from my lips.

"Eek! Lucas, this is too embarrassing!"

"How could you think it's even possible that I wouldn't like your body?" he asked as he gently stroked me with tenderness. The tip of his hard cock nudged against me, pleading for entrance. Panicking, I tried to twist my hips away, but his strong arms held me in place. *I-is he really planning to do this right now?!*

"I-I don't think that… Lukie, no! Don't push it in yet!"

"Now that you understand, can you please show some mercy to a man who's utterly mad for you, Cece?"

If anything, you should be the one showing mercy to me! I'm not ready for something that huge without any preparation! And don't lick your lips like that while looking so eager! I looked at him with teary eyes, and Lucas gave me a reassuring smile.

"I'm not planning on hurting you by rushing it, I promise. I just really want you. I want to feel like we're truly one, like we're really in love. I'll go slow. So please, my dear Cecilia… let me have you?"

He's so beautiful when he smiles like that. He doesn't look like he's thinking anything inappropriate… But the strength with which he's spreading my legs apart is terrifying! His face and actions are so at odds with each other!

Even so, when he kissed me tenderly, confessing his love with every touch, joy overtook my body when he held me in his embrace. I trembled from his warmth spreading across my skin as he held me close. Urged on by those emotions, I pressed my lips against his, my fingers tracing the golden earring, which matched the color of his eyes.

I whispered shyly and said, “P-please just don’t make me pass out, okay? Tomorrow’s a busy day, so…go easy on me, please…”

As I said that, my face turned a deep shade of red. Lucas just gave me a sweet smile. Then, without a word, he kissed me again.

What does that mean? Answer me!

Panicking, I grabbed his shoulders, but he only held me tighter, pressing me down with the weight of his body as if to say he wasn’t going to let me go. That familiar heaviness settled on top of me, sending a shiver of happiness down my spine. Unable to resist, I wrapped my arms around his broad back.

His lips kept brushing against mine, over and over, soundlessly calling my name while his fingers traced my skin with an exquisite, gentle touch. His tongue moved softly against mine, whispering words of love in the brief moments we paused for breath. It was a tender, loving act, one that slowly filled my entire body with warmth and happiness.

Heat began to swell deep in my belly. The pleasure slowly began to build, and with it, love poured out of me, leaving a wet sensation between my legs. A tremor ran through me as I felt it.

“Mm, nngh, ahh, nooo!” *I can’t believe the sheets became so moist just from kissing and holding each other!* My lips trembled with shame.

Lucas panted with desire and asked in a pleading voice, “You’re so adorable… Can I put it in?”

“W-wait, Lukie!”

"Please, Cece. I need to be inside you. I need us to be one. I'll go slowly and stop if it's too much," he reassured me gently, caressing my cheek. As he spoke, the surge of affection I felt for him made my body move on its own, my most intimate place twitching and clinging to his length. *Oh no! Why is my body so honest when it comes to Lucas?!*

"Hnngh…"

He slid just the tip inside with a faint wet sound, and I couldn't stop a gasp of desire from escaping.

"Say it's okay, Cece."

"K-kiss me…"

"If you insist."

As he slowly pressed his lips to mine, I shook with embarrassment and whispered, "Please… fill me up as deep as you can."

Lucas exhaled deeply, trembling slightly. "You're going to drive me insane. I almost came just now," he muttered under his breath. "Cece, my dear, precious Cece. I'm so glad I met you. I love you so much I want to break you. I love you so much I could kill you."

As he confessed with overwhelming love, he pushed his hips forward, and I clung to him, gasping between breaths.

"Lukie, I want to love you forever, so please don't break me. Ahh, it's so big! Nnngh!"

His ears flushed adorably as he clutched the sheets by my head, nearly tearing them apart.

"You're too cute, Cece. I almost want to break you. But if I did, you'd stop talking to me, so I'll hold back…"

This love is terrifying! Your thought process is seriously dangerous! Please, by all means, hold back!

Seriously though, it's too big! There's no way I can handle all of it without any preparation! Well, that's what I thought, but my stupid body is taking it on! Ah, it feels so good I can't bear it!

As he slowly pushed inside, the burning heat and overwhelming pressure of his presence made me writhe. I reached out, grabbing his head, calling his name.

"No…! Lukie, Lukie…!"

"Nngh, you feel so good inside… Just relax, Cece."

I can't! I shook my head frantically, and Lucas, sensing my struggle, pulled back slightly. The sensation of him retreating and dragging along my inner walls sent shivers through me, sparking a familiar sensation deep inside. My teeth chattered.

Something's wrong with my body. I feel so strange. What is this? It's like I'm going to come… Wait, I am going to come!

"No, wait! Lucas, stop!"

"You're so tight… Sorry, I'll stop once I'm halfway in."

As he pinched my trembling nipples, I gasped and exhaled sharply. He bore down on me, the pressure deep inside splitting me open, sending fireworks crackling across my vision.

"No, it's too much! I-I'm going to… Ohhhh!"

His voice sounded surprised. “Huh?”

As I heard his shocked tone, the pleasure exploded inside of me, spreading through my body. My throat trembled as a long, shaky moan escaped.

Lucas held me tight in his arms, and I felt comforted by his warmth, tears welling in my eyes.

He hugged me gently, calling my name in a confused but tender voice. My body, ever honest, spasmed with joy.

I couldn’t believe that my body reacted to my heart’s response like that. My eyes flew open, and I reached out to Lucas, feeling embarrassed and desperate to shield myself from his gaze… And then my second orgasm hit, making me cry and wail.

“No, no, not again! Stop looking, Lukie! Lukie, I’m… Ahh, I can’t stop!”

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding, Cece…”

I turned to Lucas in surprise, pleading for help, but instead, I saw flushed cheeks and dreamy eyes. My incredibly handsome husband looked very excited right now.

Wh-what’s with that face? I’ve been coming so much it’s physically painful. But I’m already getting a bad feeling about this!

“W-wait, p-please, Lukie…pull out just once…”

“If I push all the way in… *Haah*… It’ll be dangerous. Ah, you’re so sexy and adorable, Cecilia. Does it feel that good to have me fill you up?”

“S-stupid Lukie! N-no, wait! I-I really can’t! Eeek!”

I told you to pull out, so why are you shoving it back in, you sadist?!

And why do your golden eyes keep sparkling and lighting up every time I call you stupid?! You're seriously weird for getting happy over that! You promised you'd stop if I couldn't handle it, but you have no intention of stopping at all! Ahh, feeling him enter me slowly is even more painful…



"Cece, your pussy is gripping me so tightly and won't let go. There's no way I can wait when you're being so sexy and want me so much. And you're coming again, see? I love my wife so much…"

He pushed his hips against me with a squelching noise, and the sensation of being filled up made my mouth fly open with a gasp. For a moment, I felt like I couldn't even breathe.

"Ahh, haaah, nngh!"

It was like I had a searing heat inside my brain, nothing but golden light filling my vision. *I'm pretty sure I'm going to pass out now*… I tried to hang onto hope and closed my eyes, but then his large body leaned against me, and he plunged inside of me as deep as he could, pulling my body back from unconsciousness as I spasmed once again.

How dare you gaze at me with your eyes filled with desire and chuckle like that, you beast!

"I'm sorry, Cece. But don't go to sleep yet."

"Th-then be gentle!"

"Ha ha. Sorry, I'm just so happy. I'll do my best."

What do you mean, you'll do your best?! You said you'd stop, but you didn't, so I have no faith that you're not going to fuck me into unconsciousness again! I was so angry I was about to tell him that, but he gave me a gentle kiss and whispered in my ear. *I can't hear the squelching sounds anymore, either*…

"But Cecilia, you realize I haven't even done anything yet, right? All I did was push myself all the way in."

"Huh? Ah…"

"See? All I did was put it inside of you. I haven't even started moving." He gave me a dreamy, naughty smile, and I was so embarrassed that tears welled up in my eyes.

"…!"

I can't believe this! Not only did I get wet just from the sensation of his naked body on mine, but now I've orgasmed repeatedly just from him putting his cock inside of me! I could die from embarrassment right now! I-I was never like this before, I promise! I can't take it anymore!

I was so flustered I couldn't stop crying, and I began to sob like a baby, turning my face away. And, of course, the sadist was absolutely thrilled. *I can't believe you!*

"You're so unbelievably adorable! The fact that no one else will ever get to see you cry like this drives me wild… I want to see more of it…"

I heard that, you know! Can't you at least keep those kinds of wishes to yourself?! And be gentle with me! I glared at him through my tears, and he apologized with a sheepish grin.

"Sorry, I'll be gentle, I promise. I'll wait until you calm down, okay? Can I kiss you?"

"Fine, but just kissing! Nngh, it's so painful…"

"I bet. Your pussy has been throbbing this whole time." He sounded pleased as he brushed his lips over mine, but all I could think was, *And whose fault do you think that is?!* I ended up lightly

smacking his shoulder, which only made him smile more happily for some reason. *Seriously, why are you so happy?*

"I think I'm the happiest man in the world. I love you, Cecilia."

"Stupid! You're so mean… But I love you too, Lukie," I couldn't help but say it back to him when he held me in his arms and told me it so lovingly, so I accepted his kiss with a flushed face.

I thought I'd be able to bask in the happiness of our tender kiss, but of course, things can never be that simple. Due to my stupid heart loving everything he did to me and my body's ridiculously high sensitivity, I was already starting to react to the pleasure of his tongue rubbing against mine. Suddenly, I panicked, but it was already too late.

"Wait, stop! Let go! Let's just stop kissing!" I begged him, but he didn't stop.

"Haaah… you like it when I nip at your tongue with my teeth, don't you? You're about to come, aren't you?"

"Nngh, mm, haah… Ah, no… I'm gonna… Lu-Lukie!"

"God, feeling you clinging to me when you come is so adorable, Cecilia… Do it one more time."

He's not stopping! Where is that sweet guy who said he'd wait till I calmed down?! And there's no end in sight to these kisses, either! They keep making me come over and over again! He said one more time, so why does he keep going?

I was desperate and weakly smacked his shoulder, begging him to stop because I just couldn't take it anymore. But all I got in return

was that dreamy smile. “The way you’re hitting me is so cute. Will you do it more?” he asked, deflecting my protests.

I became too flustered to keep smacking him, and to top it all off, he started making requests in between kisses.

“Cecilia, I love you. Say you love me too, okay?”

“I… haah, w-wait…!”

“Say you love me.”

“I-I do love you, I told you that. And only you, Lukie… You idiot…”

Can I please catch my breath first?!

With sparkling eyes, Lucas embraced my head, and once again, the endless torment of coming from kisses began. My husband was completely out of control at this point. *Now, what should I do?!*

And an inevitable outcome of the torment was that the demon in him emerged.

“Haah, you’re so tight and swollen and soaking wet inside… I’m so close. Can I come? Can I start moving now?” His sweet whispers paired with the kisses on my cheeks made me panic.

Absolutely not! What are you even saying?! I shook my head frantically.

“W-wait! I-if you do that right now, I-I’ll die!”

“No, Cece. You’re just turned on. Don’t stop breathing, okay?” Lucas gazed at me with narrowed golden eyes, licking the saliva off my mouth before grabbing my hips firmly, slowly thrusting as if to check my response.

"No, that's not… Ah! Lukie, stop! Let go! I really can't take it… Ahh, ughh!"

That was all it took for my body to spasm with pleasure. I clung to his neck, crying out as he thrust into me hard, taking me helplessly to my climax. My vision blurred and shimmered, and I had one breathless orgasm after another.

"Please stop, it's too good! I'll die! Please stop!" I sobbed and begged him.

Lucas panted heavily, his brow furrowed, looking conflicted before delivering a devastating announcement that left me utterly breathless.

"Cece. I'm sorry you're crying, but there's no way I can stop now. You're going to just have to keep coming until I finish."

"No, that's…impossible! Wait until I…calm down… Don't move, ahh, no!"

"Nngh… You've been clenching me tight this whole time, Cece. I want to hear something other than 'no.' Cecilia… Haah, it feels so good, Cece…"

The bed creaked louder as he called my name, and my body and heart trembled from the force of it.

I'm going to die at this rate! I frantically tried to reject his plea, which finally made him stop.

"Ahh, ahh, it feels too good. I can't… I hate how good it feels. Lukie, Lukie, please stop… You'll break me… I'm going to come again! Oh, no!"

"Damn it… Moaning 'no' like that is *so* naughty. You need to realize how much you turn me on, Cece."

What am I supposed to say to that?!

As I gasped for air, trying to suppress my overwhelming emotions, I saw warm, red droplets drip onto my breasts, which only made me gasp even more.

Oh my god, Lucas is really going wild now, panting like an animal!

"I shouldn't have promised to stop… Fuck, you're so tight I'm dying over here…" He cursed filthily as he gritted his teeth, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth and his clenched fists.

What do I do? He's really trying to hold back! But isn't it kind of bad that he's being so serious…? My body is still spasming, and his eyes are totally fixated on me!

I started frantically thinking of an escape route when I felt a sense of real danger from his beautiful yet furious expression, but just then…

"Don't even think about it, Cece. You know what happens if you try to run after making me hold back this much, right?"

"I-I understand… Ah, no! Not there! Not *there!* Stop, Lukie, please!"

Of course, I knew what would happen. *But stop moving inside of me while teasing me back* there!

He effortlessly slipped two fingers into my asshole, moving in small, alternating motions. The obscene sounds I heard made me so

embarrassed that I wanted to die. I shook my head wildly, pleading with him to stop, and Lucas finally pulled out his fingers, exhaling softly.

"Good. Now, catch your breath. Just so you know, the more you tease me the worse it'll be, so it's in your best interests to just tell me to go ahead."

Is he saying that out of concern?! But when a handsome demon says that with his pupils blown out and blood spilling from his mouth, it's nothing short of terrifying… I'm still nowhere near calm, but I'll just have to believe in my own strength. Or wait—is it that very strength that's doing me in? No, I have to stop thinking about it.

I intertwined my fingers with his, gathering my courage to look up at Lucas.

"I-I'll do my best, so… Lukie, um…?"

"You want a kiss?"

How does he know?! My face flushed as he gritted his teeth. *Why does he look so frustrated?*

"Honestly, Cece… All right, open your mouth."

"Y-yes, Lukie… Lukie… Mm, hnngh… Ah, wait… I'm gonna come again!"

"Damn it, that's supposed to be my line. Just… please tell me when I can finally keep going!" he grumbled and kissed me just the way I wanted, and my emotions spilled out uncontrollably from my lips.

"Mm, I love you, Lukie! I love you! Mm, Lukie… Mmph?!"

Suddenly, he covered my mouth with his hand and threatened me. "Cecilia. If you keep being this adorable and turning me on, I don't care how much you cry or scream. You'll be naked and won't be leaving this bed for a long time…"

Eek! The wild demon has arrived!

I watched in terror as he dramatically wound chains around the bedposts. I steeled myself with every bit of courage I had left. *You can do this, Cecilia!*

"I-if I can't get up tomorrow, you have to…take care of me, okay?"

Lucas quickly nodded. "Of course, my beloved wife."

You answer so quickly when it comes to that, don't you?!

"I did it. I really held back. I did such a good job," he said, although it was mostly through threats!

"All right, Cece. Sorry, but I'm going to have to do it at least five—no, that would be too rough on you…four more times, so hang in there, okay?"

Only compromising by one round isn't a compromise at all! He's planning on fucking me until I die! Can anyone blame me for not answering?!

I was about to shake my head, but my vision swayed as his skin pressed against mine.

"Ah, you're so rough now! Ahh, you idiot, Lukie! Mmm!"

I reached my limit and scolded him through moans, but Lucas just smiled with an unbearably blissful and feverish grin.

"Ugh, that stupid happy look on your face… It's the best…"

You pervert! Why is it making my heart race?!

Chapter Three

WE'D FINALLY SHARED THE FEELINGS WE HAD bottled up for years, and with just a few days left until the official engagement ceremony, I found myself brimming with excitement—that is until the latest bit of news left me sighing deeply.

"The dress color?"

"Yes, I snuck in last night to confirm it. There's no mistake about it," Kate said.

Snuck in? Security at the guesthouse should be tight with extra guards on duty, even for the Lebensklinge. That sounds incredibly dangerous. Hopefully it was okay…

"I see. Thank you, Kate. You've really helped me out. But please, don't do anything too dangerous, all right?"

"Woo-hoo! I got a compliment! Don't worry about me at all. I might not have any combat abilities, but being stealthy was my specialty. To be honest, I was more worried about the shockingly poor quality of the enemy's security!"

Uh, no combat abilities? That's got to be a joke. I mean, even Elsa and Anna are making faces in response to that one!

"Still, I never thought she'd have the audacity to wear the same color dress as me, but here we are!" I sighed.

"It's hard to deal with this level of stupidity, which far surpasses our expectations," Elsa said.

"Even though we know better than to think logically with them, they still manage to do things outside our expectations. We must make sure to keep checking on them regularly," Anna agreed.

"Good thing we've been monitoring them!" Kate chimed in enthusiastically.

I muttered something about how perhaps our neighboring kingdom has a completely different culture, although my words didn't sound as supportive as intended. They replied by setting a cup of tea in front of me for some comfort, and I thanked them.

My gaze then shifted to the dress design sketch in front of me. *So it's come down to this one, after all,* I thought, glancing at Anna and the others.

"Can you check Lukie's schedule for me?"

"He's free this afternoon," Elsa said.

"I'll make sure to confirm the accessories, too," Anna said.

"He's probably going to veto it," Elsa murmured at the end, and the room fell silent.

There had originally been two dress options for the soiree.

One was a classic A-line gown in champagne gold with elaborate embroidery in gold thread, which just so happened to be the exact same dress Viviana chose. It was my top candidate because it went well with Lucas's outfit, and he was the star of the soiree since it was being held to celebrate his triumphant return.

The other was a simpler mermaid dress, created entirely in Lucas's colors, a deep blue-violet with gold embroidery along the hem.

The boat neckline had a daring plunge that was adorned with golden lace, making it a rare sight both in color and design for a ball gown.

Personally, I thought the mermaid gown was gorgeous and wearing it would have made me happy, but when I asked Lucas what he thought, he covered his face and squatted down, rejecting it on the spot.

"It's unbelievably beautiful, and it suits you perfectly. I simply can't approve it because of those reasons. You look too good. Sorry, but if you wear that, I'll be forced to draw my sword, Eckesachs. I don't want anyone else to see you as it is, but to show off those specific parts of you even more? It's breathtaking and stunning, but there's absolutely no way."

I looked down at the sketch with a sigh and turned to ask Anna and the others what they thought. "Is it really that bad?"

"No, it's absolutely perfect! I can already picture a goddess descending upon the soiree! In fact, you'll look so divine it'll be impossible to describe. We can't wait to see you in it!" Anna said.

"All eyes in the room will be on you. No doubt about that! The problem will just be Prince Lucas and the massacre that follows," Kate said.

"You'll certainly drive all the men there wild with fantasies with your pale skin and that tightly fitted blue-violet gown showing off your sexy curves, plus the low-cut neckline revealing a teasing glimpse of your cleavage and the open back!" Elsa said.

She dramatically twirled around the room, and I felt like burying my head in my hands, overwhelmed by the weight of this issue.

There were other options, of course, but Lucas would be wearing his Hero's armor, so I'd look completely outclassed standing next to him. No matter what I wore, I'd be overshadowed by my overly gorgeous fiancé in that gleaming white knight's uniform. But as a woman, I had to try my best. After all, standing out was the whole point of a ball.

That was why I'd be in real trouble if he rejected my only remaining option.

Maybe if I try begging him, it'll work? But what if it doesn't? The ball might turn into a bloodbath, led by its very own guest of honor…

The blood drained from my face, recalling his earlier threat to draw Eckesachs, when suddenly Anna and the others cheered me on.

"You can do this, Lady Cecilia! Shall we prepare a slightly risqué nightgown for tonight?"

"All the lives of the nobles depend on your honey trap, Lady Cecilia! How about a devilishly sexy one with a slit up the thigh?"

"M-make sure it's a black one…" I was truly grateful as always, but I really didn't want to go along with that suggestion. *If I put on a nightgown like that, forget the nobles, I'll be putting my own life in danger!*

I decided to save that option as a last resort and racked my brain for other ideas.

Lucas told me not to wear this dress because of the cleavage. He was probably right—the neckline was rather low, even though it was covered in lace. I understood that others might perceive it as

vulgar, given that the show of cleavage was quite dramatic. But if I altered it, the dress might look frumpy. *Perhaps my chest is the problem?*

As I glanced down at my bosom, Anna and Kate immediately stepped in to reassure me.

"Lady Cecilia, that's not the issue at all."

"But I'm not proportionate…" I said.

"No, your proportions are perfect! In fact, this dress wouldn't suit anyone *but* you, Lady Cecilia. It's a very mature design, so if someone who can't pull it off tries to wear it, the dress would completely overpower them, and it would look very unfortunate!" Anna said.

"The simple design and dark color palette not only emphasize your figure but your movements and posture as well," Kate agreed.

"So I think what Prince Lucas disliked was how much it draws attention," Elsa said.

I nodded in agreement.

"Lady Viviana is wearing champagne gold with gold embroidery, right?"

"Yes, it's almost identical to the dress you chose, Lady Cecilia," Kate said.

"It seems like she's given up on being escorted to the ball, but she's still relentlessly submitting requests for an audience with Prince Lucas. I suspect she'll try to dance with him," Anna said with a frown.

"Because Prince Lucas's attire is already set, it will look like she's trying to stand beside him by wearing the same color as you, to make it seem like he chose it for her."

What incredible nerve!

Even though the host went out of their way to imply that one shouldn't choose to wear champagne gold by putting the color on the invitations, she chose to wear it anyway and was planning something brazen. I almost admired her boldness. If nothing else, I could learn a thing or two from her.

With that thought in mind, I busied myself preparing for the soiree.

After receiving confirmation for a meeting with Lucas, I gathered the now thinner stack of documents and headed to his study, only to see him surrounded by several noblewomen. The sight made me grip the papers tightly.

"Prince Lucas, our family is trading with the North now, and we've brought in so many of their specialty products. I simply must invite you to a tea party soon."

"Oh my. In that case, I have something I'd love to show you, too! My father bought me some rare silk from the East, and it's such a stunning color. I'm wearing a gown made from it for the soiree. I'd love to dance with you, Prince Lucas."

"I want to dance with you too, Prince Lucas. Will you ask me?"

I struggled to control myself, trying not to glare when I heard the sweet words flowing from their lips.

"Ladies. I'd say, 'if the opportunity arises,' but I'm afraid I must decline. I don't want to give my beloved fiancée the wrong idea, so I cannot accept your invitations now or in the future."

I was just about to let out a sigh of relief at Lucas's textbook-perfect response when my breath caught in my throat. Another lady approached him with a sultry smile, clearly aiming to intimidate the others.

"Goodness, is Lady Cecilia that petty? It's just a dance, after all. This is a ball to celebrate Prince Lucas's successful campaign, and we simply want to share in the festivities with him."

I was seized by an unbelievable surge of emotion when Lucas took her outstretched hand.

Mine. He's mine!

The feelings boiled and churned inside me, and for the first time, I displayed the unladylike habit of letting my heels clack loudly against the floor.

"No, Lady Viviana. I refuse because I don't want her to misunderstand. That was why, for this ball, I've decided not to dance with anyone but her. I'm sure you can understand."

As he politely released her hand, I saw his eyes widen slightly at the sound of my heels, but I couldn't meet his gaze. Not now.

I merely smiled serenely at the women around me and stepped forward.

"Forgive me for interrupting your conversation, but Prince Lucas and I have an appointment regarding preparations for the ball. Could

it be that I got the time wrong?" I narrowed my eyes, subtly urging Viviana to mind her manners, and she reacted instantly.

"Oh, Lady Cecilia! You went out of your way to arrange a meeting with Prince Lucas when he's so busy? I could never do something like that."

"Ha ha ha. Don't be silly. It would be impossible to proceed with the preparations for a royal ball without confirming things with the royal family. You're such a jokester, Lady Viviana." I smiled in response to her mocking smirk that was saying, "Do it all yourself," but deep inside, I thought, *Saying something so disrespectful is hardly something to be proud of. Exactly what kind of education did you receive, anyway?!*

Her face reddened, and she raised her eyebrows with anger.

As I watched her expression, I suddenly felt a wave of emptiness wash over me. *She and I are both acting like fools.*

This isn't why I asked Lucas for his time. I didn't come here to start trouble, yet I ended up doing just that. On top of that, I dragged him into this petty conflict between women, and my heart is aching with regret. I clutched the documents closer to my heart.

I know this is normal and to be expected.

After all, my fiancé wasn't just the second prince. He was Bern's Hero, a man whose beauty went beyond mortal standards. I couldn't even let a shred of my chaotic emotions show so I could be worthy to stand beside him. I had to remain composed, just like I had with Felix —no, even more than that.

I'm going to embarrass myself if I keep this up… I feared that more than anything. Before Viviana could speak again, I turned toward Lucas.

"Prince Lucas, I'm sorry to have taken up your valuable time. Here are the usual forms, and these are the documents regarding the soiree that need your approval."

"Thank you as always, Cecilia." His sweet smile had a questioning look to it, but I brushed it off with a smile in return. I leaned in, quietly mentioning the dress in a way the others wouldn't notice.

"And about the document at the bottom—there's not much time left, so I'd appreciate it if you could approve it as soon as possible."

"The bottom?"

"Yes, please check it later. It's not urgent, so I'll be excusing myself now. If you need an explanation, feel free to call me."

As Lucas went to flip through the papers, I gently placed a hand over his to stop him. I took a deep breath, trying to cool the burning sensation in my throat, and smiled at him once more.

"Cecilia?" he called softly, but I dipped down into a slow curtsey, flashing a smile at the glaring Viviana before excusing myself.

"If you'll excuse me." Lucas outstretched a hand to me, but I spun around to brush it off, my dress billowing behind me.

I wanted to return to his quarters, but I knew there wasn't enough time. Instead, I quickly walked down the hallway and headed

for a quiet corner of the government building where I knew not many people went.

Anna and the others gave me worried looks. I placed my hand on the door of the archive, which housed books meant for the royal prince and princess and which was rarely used, and whispered in a trembling voice, "Watch to make sure no one comes."

They nodded silently in response. I quickly muttered a soft apology and thanks before slipping through the heavy door. Without worrying about the sound of my footsteps this time, I ran straight to the large window, which was covered by thick curtains.

I frantically reached out to it and wrapped myself up in the curtain. The scene burned into my mind, played over and over again, and my ugly, tangled heart finally screamed out.

No! No, don't touch him! He's my Lukie! My Lucas and mine alone!

But no matter how much my heart screamed, I couldn't put it into words.

Deep down, I knew he couldn't be mine alone, and I had to accept that. My pride told me so, but that very pride ripped at my heart.

Lucas had shown me his vulnerability, and I loved him even more because of it. At that moment, when he revealed a side of him only I knew, I truly felt like I wanted to give him my life, my everything.

I loved him more than he could ever know. If it would bring him joy, if it would heal him, I would gladly let him break me or kill me. That was the depth of my love for him.

There was no one else for me now but Lucas. I couldn't accept anyone else. And so, the thought of Lucas accepting someone else, even for a moment, was unbearable.

How am I going to manage in high society? I gripped the fabric tightly, resting my forehead against the window.

My chest tightened painfully, and I muttered under my breath, "He really is popular, isn't he?"

First of all, he's incredibly handsome. He's the perfect second prince. An actual Hero, no less, and his reputation for being gentlemanly and kind is well deserved. He's truly amazing.

Though, if anyone could still call him gentlemanly and kind after seeing him at night, I'd be impressed. Not that I'd ever tell them. Or allow it, for that matter!

I laughed at my own nonsensical thoughts before slumping over again.

No matter how much I tried to keep other women at bay, I knew there would always be someone lingering around. That was just how noble factions worked. And more importantly, I understood how powerful Lucas was, and that his own charm made it inevitable. Thinking about that made my throat feel hot.

I couldn't stop thinking about Viviana's eyes, which looked up at Lucas with adoration.

I know better than anyone.

It wasn't about his face or his status. It was about his relentless determination, his sincerity, his unshakeable strength and purity, always looking forward with his feet firmly planted on the ground. His determination to fight to protect people drew others to him.

No matter how much I try, I know there will always be other women lurking around.

"Understanding and accepting are two different things, aren't they? You're such a fool, Cecilia," I muttered, tears welling up in my eyes. I pressed my lips together, breathing through my nose as I fought back the burning sensation in my eyes.

The knowledge and refinement I'd required as a second prince's fiancée were utterly useless when it came to love, which made me both sad and frustrated. It was beyond shameful that I, who he once said he loved so much he could kill, had to run off and cry because I couldn't have him all to myself.

"He had those feelings for six years."

"I can't even reach out with this madness inside of me! Watching you stand next to another man and smile at him makes me want to kill you! How could it not?!"

I remembered the scream that had ripped through me like a blade, and I shuddered.

Back then, Lucas and I had been in completely different positions. He had suffered far more than I ever did, far more than anyone I could imagine. I recalled when he told me he'd wanted to

die and the despair that had been in his eyes. My whole body trembled again, and I gritted my teeth.

Lucas had endured that kind of pain and still, even now, whispered words of love to me.

I couldn't sit here crying and wallowing in self-pity if I wanted to become someone he could be proud of.

This kind of thing would keep happening even after we were formally engaged and married. I had to come to terms with these ugly feelings, process them, and face them head-on. *I have to, but…*

But the ugliness inside me kept rising up, tearing away the strength I'd just summoned to move forward, covering everything in darkness.

No, it's too cruel. How could you smile at someone who's looking at you like that right in front of me, Lucas…?

Don't let them touch you so easily! You said I'm the only one for you!

"Lukie…"

"What?"

His voice answered me suddenly, responding to his name, which I'd called out in anguish. I instinctively gripped the curtain tighter.

There'd been no sound of the door opening, no footsteps, yet his voice was already so close. The deliberate click of his boots on the polished floor made my heart pound loudly in my chest. As I shrank back and panted shallowly, a gentle voice spoke as though coaxing me out.

"Cecilia, hide and seek isn't a game you want to play with me."

"…!"

I guess he's got a point. He is *a Hero hailed as the strongest one in the land, after all! But I never imagined he'd actually chase after me! Here I am, overwhelmed with sorrow, crushed by a sense of helplessness, wanting to cry my eyes out, and he came after me. He's so unfair…*

I didn't want him to see me like this. Not in this state. Yet, the fact that he'd noticed and come for me, that he cared enough to follow, made me unbearably happy. I tried desperately to keep the tangled mess of emotions from spilling out, but as his footsteps grew closer, I bit my lip.

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry…

"It seemed like something was wrong, so I came to check on you. My dear, what are you doing wrapped up in the curtains like this? Though, I've never seen a cuter curtain in my life…"

His arms wrapped around me through the fabric, and the pain I'd been holding back slipped out despite myself.

"Waaah…"

"Cece? Are you crying?" The worried, confused tone in his voice as he gently peeled back the curtain made me meet his golden eyes.

"What happened? What's wrong?!" He raised his voice as he pulled me tightly into his arms. I unconsciously shook my head, but in the warmth of his embrace, the mask I'd been wearing as a proper lady fell away, leaving me trembling.

Tears blurred my vision, and through them I saw Lucas's worried face, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Cece. Cecilia! What happened?! Please tell me! Anna, Kate, Elsa! Come out and explain this!" His beautiful face twisted with anger as he called out, his golden eyes burning with a terrifying fury. I saw Anna and the others kneeling nearby, their faces pale. In a panic, I tugged at his clothes.

"N-no, that's not it…"

"What do you mean? Something terrible must have happened for you to cry like this, like you're trying to hold it all in!"

Something terrible must have happened…

Those words stirred something in me like anger, and I couldn't hold it any longer.

"It's unfair that you made me fall so in love with you—that's what happened!"

"Wait, what?"

I yanked at his cravat and glared up at his startled, frozen expression.

And then, as the tears kept spilling, something snapped in me, and I blurted out everything.

"Why are you so popular?! Why do you smile at *her* and take *her* hand?!"

"M-me…?"

His face paled at my words, and I shot back a sharp, "Yes, you!"

before burying my forehead against his chest, clinging on for dear life.

The tears wouldn't stop, and I couldn't breathe properly. My shoulders shuddered violently as I bit down on my lip.

How pathetic and ugly I must look right now! It's not even his fault… A voice of reason whispered somewhere in my mind, but of course, I already knew that. I knew what I was saying was irrational, but I couldn't stop once I started. Ignoring all logic, the words kept flowing out of my mouth.

"I love you! I really do love you! And yet, I have to watch other women throwing themselves at you every single day! I hate it, but I have to grin and bear it!"

I know it's not a big deal, and I'm sorry about that! But I love you so much, and I couldn't hold back anymore! So what if I ran away and hid?!

The selfish thoughts spilled out, and I noticed my hand gesturing awkwardly in the air as irritation bubbled up inside of me. I thrust my right hand out toward Lucas.

"Your hand!"

"Huh? My hand?"

"Give me your left hand! Hurry up!" I glared at him, and he hastily placed his left hand over my right one.

"Here."

This feels like he's a dog asking for a handshake. How adorable… With that ridiculous thought in my mind, I brought his hand up to my lips.

"C-Cece?" I heard Lucas stammer as I kissed the left hand he'd offered to Lady Viviana.

I can't Mark him as mine. This doesn't hold any power at all…

Even though I knew it was pointless, I hated the thought of him touching her. I pressed my lips to his broad palm, then stroked the calluses from his sword. He was always protecting me, always loving me. Yet here I was, taking out all my frustration on him when none of it was his fault. Guilt and anguish twisted inside me, and I bit my lip again before taking a deep breath.

"I'm sorry… You haven't done anything wrong, Lord Lukie."

"Cece?"

He called my name in a puzzled voice. I slowly lifted my gaze to meet his, forcing a smile as I gathered strength deep in my core.

He came after me. He's worried about me.

So now it was my turn to try. I swore to myself and on all the pride that I had, that I would become a woman worthy of him.

"I'm sorry for forcing my selfish emotions on you and behaving improperly. I know you're busy with work, so thank you for taking the time to look for me. I'll return to my duties now, so please do the same, Lord Lukie."

I apologized and bowed gracefully, then quickly turned to head for the door, but…

"Wait."

"Huh?!"

He caught me so easily. Before I knew it, we were face to face again, his golden eyes locked onto mine with such intensity that it left me flustered. I averted my gaze, but he grabbed my chin, making my shoulders tremble.

When he called my name, I grew even more embarrassed, lowering my gaze. He showered me with gentle kisses on my forehead, my temples, my eyes, my cheeks, and my lips. My resistance crumbled with each soft kiss, and my lips began to quiver. Then Lucas whispered devilishly to me in the sweetest voice imaginable.

"You're so adorable, my Cecilia. Please don't cry all alone like that again."

Eek, he's trying to seduce me now…

My heart raced in a panic, swelling with a mixture of affection and pain. I wanted to cling to him so badly, but I forced myself to resist with everything I had.

Pull yourself together, Cecilia! You can't just show him such a pathetic side of yourself, lash out at him, and then expect to be comforted! That's not how it works, so stop trying to seduce me, Lukie!

It was as if he'd heard my silent scream. He pulled me into a tight embrace and then whispered sweetly in my ear to finish me off and make me blush.

"I love only you. So please let me take care of you…"

"I… No, stop…"

At this rate, I'll get swept up in the moment! I panicked, so I pushed against his chest with all my strength, but he didn't budge. *Can't you take a hint? I'm sure he realizes that when I said I was going back to my duties, I'm really just trying to run away! Ideally, you're supposed to start to come after me but then let me get away. And why are you lifting me up?!*

"Let me go! Please put me down!" Despite my protesting, I wrapped my arms around Lucas's neck, overwhelmed by the sudden floating sensation.

Please, I'm so embarrassed!

"I won't let you go. Come on, Cece. Lean on me more, won't you?"

"N-no, stop it!"

"What do you mean, 'No, stop it'?" He gave me an annoyed look as I pushed against him while I stiffened my arms in protest, completely abandoning any ladylike behavior. Meanwhile, Anna and the others watched us from a distance and whispered to each other, the content of their conversation leaving me frozen in place.

"So it was just a lovers' quarrel…and it's Prince Lucas's fault at that! All that worrying for nothing!" Anna said.

"I saw my life flash before my eyes… I think we deserve some hazard pay for this one. But Lady Cecilia's tears looked so divine!" Kate gushed.

"Lady Cecilia is so cute! I'm so jeal—Argh, I want…roast goose…" Elsa croaked.

I'm new to this whole romance thing. Sorry to bother you, everyone…

I averted my gaze from Elsa, who was now doubled over after Kate had apparently punched her for being too loud. Unable to bear the humiliation, my face flushed a deep red, and I trembled while Lucas gently shielded my face against his shoulder to comfort me.

"All right, I'm sorry for yelling earlier. Tell Finn to give you all the hazard pay you need, whatever it takes."

Wait, his anger qualifies them for hazard pay?!

Although I was still in shock, the room suddenly erupted in cheers, with cries of "Woo-hoo, lovers' quarrels are the best!" and the three onlookers quickly disappeared from the scene. The whole thing felt ridiculous, but I really wished they would keep their comments to themselves before running off.

As the room grew quiet again, I felt a wave of tension wash over me.

Now what do I do? That whole scene was so embarrassing I just want to disappear, but I can't since he's holding me! It's too embarrassing, so I must think up a good excuse!

As I frantically tried to think of a way to escape this situation, Lucas gently stroked my hair and called my name softly.

"Cece… Cecilia."

His tender voice made me look up, and I gazed into those golden eyes full of love. And then, suddenly, I felt a surge of frustration. *I'm not wrong for feeling like this!*

"Why are you laughing at me?!"

"I'm sorry, it's just… you're too cute, Cece. Wait, I'll stop now."

The proper response is to get serious before saying my name in the first place! Covering your mouth after the fact doesn't help at all! What are you even trying to say now?!

"Cecilia, are you jeal—Mmph!"

"D-don't say it! If I say anymore, I won't speak to you ever again! And don't look at me!"

"Damn it… You're way too cute. I could never stop looking at you."

As he said that, he gently pulled my hand away when I tried to cover his mouth and then tightened his embrace around me with a grin. *I feel like crying!*

Stop acting like I'm the only thing in your world. You're making me so happy!

I was furious at myself for being jealous of all the attention he got from other women, but if he kept treating me so tenderly, I'd crumble and let myself rely on him.

I want to stand beside you on my own two feet. I want to be strong enough to fend off any woman who comes for you on my own!

"Please put me down!"

"If I do that, you'll run away, won't you?"

"Yes, because I haven't had any time to sort through all these feelings!" I snapped back at him, and Lucas finally set me down with a troubled expression on his face. He looked shy and muttered

something nonsensical. *I honestly don't understand what he's thinking. Now I'm stunned!*

"I figured. Just so you know, I'll chase you down if you run."

"Chase me down?! Excuse me?!"

I froze in mid-step, gulping as his gloved hand reached for me again.

Um, what's your right hand doing? Why are you hooking your fingers into my dress? I just heard the fabric snap! Don't tell me you're about to tear off my dress?!

"You're just too cute, Cece. I feel like tearing that dress apart right now, pinning you to the window, and having my way with you."

He is *going to rip it! And is it just me, or did he confess to a terrifying desire?!*

"So you…you should probably run."

"I won't run."

What does he mean, I should run?! He's even gesturing toward the door, but I'm not going anywhere! Who in their right mind would run when someone warns them they'll chase them down? This is turning into some twisted game of tag…

I seriously don't understand this! Here I am crying, so he should let me go, like a gentleman! Wait a second—this sadist gentleman chases me down every time I try to escape! If I don't handle this head-on, it's going to end badly. Anyway, I suppose he was a bit gentlemanly to warn me this time. Wait, what even is the definition of a gentleman at this point?

As my mind swirled in confusion, Lucas raised his left hand to his face and pressed his lips to it, just like I'd done. *What is he doing?!*

"I belong to you. This hand, this body, even my life—it's all yours, Cece. So if you don't like it so much, should I just cut it off?"

His sweet voice, that tender expression, and those frightening gold eyes sent a shiver down my spine. I instinctively reached out and grabbed his fluttering left hand. Lucas let out a small chuckle, then deactivated the mana he held in his right hand.

"I can't compete with you. I love you, Cecilia. I'm truly sorry. I swear I'll never smile at another woman or even hold her hand again."

He pulled me close, gently stroking my cheek as he spoke, and I felt heat rise in my throat. When I shook my head slightly to refuse, he whispered again, "I promise," and I forced the words out of my throat.

"L-Lord Lukie, no… S-stop…"

Before I could say anything else, he stole a kiss, the sensation of it so comforting I almost clung to his clothes but hastily pulled away. Lucas reached out and intertwined his fingers through mine. He pulled away from our kiss with a soft, moist noise and then nuzzled his nose against mine. I bit my lip and frantically shook my head.

"No! This is my problem. I don't want to burden someone in your position with my selfish whims!"

I'd worked so hard for us to be happy together, and yet here I was, carelessly throwing it all away because of some impulsive desire.

My face turned pale as I realized my foolishness. I kept insisting I could handle things myself, but Lucas only gave me a rueful smile and then said the most unbelievable thing.

"I always thought after we got married, I wouldn't have to keep up appearances with the other ladies anymore. Spending time with them is such a pain, and I never saw the point of faking a smile."

"I-it's a pain?"

Wh-what?! That's the farthest thing from gentlemanly I can think of! The word gentleman just flew out the window!

"I told you, I only have feelings for you. But in high society, a blank expression isn't acceptable, especially toward noblewomen, so I had to fake it. You've probably never seen me expressionless, though."

"Well, true, but… Eek! Lukie?!"

Before I could tell him I didn't believe he was expressionless, he suddenly swept me into his arms. Startled, I wrapped my arm around his neck, and for some reason, he laughed, clearly enjoying my reaction. *Why? What's so funny?!*

"Haha, you're always so serious. It just makes me want to eat you up, Cece. Have you forgotten my position?"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I'm the Hero, Lucas Theoderic, remember?"

My breath caught in my throat, and I froze, staring into his flickering golden eyes. He slowly brought his face closer to mine.

"I don't like to brag, but I'm the master of a black ancient dragon. I'm probably the strongest man on the continent." He whispered those words against my lips, making my cheeks flush even as my blood ran cold.

He's planning on physically using that terrifying power to do something! This isn't just about our relationship—if he goes through with this, it'll cause serious political problems, perhaps even affecting his rights to the throne!

Just as I opened my mouth in an attempt to stop him, Lucas cut me off with a lighthearted tone.

"I can't control myself when it comes to you, you know?"

I figured he chose those words on purpose. I found myself so speechless over his disturbing honesty that I couldn't even muster enough strength to retort, "If you know that, then just stop already!"

Instead, I shook my head slightly, which only made Lucas's smile deepen at the sight of my hesitation.

"You know I only need you, Cecilia. Anyone else is just an annoyance. I want to eliminate anyone who gets in the way of our relationship. I know that sounds extreme, but it's the truth."

His words were casually frightening, and yet for some reason I felt my cheeks grow warm. *Why is my body betraying me right now?!*

"But I know you want us to stand together as the prince and princess, so I'm just going along with it for your sake since you're so precious to me."

I was so shocked that I just stared at his ridiculously radiant smile. *Huh? For real?* I thought to myself, which was quite unladylike.

I never imagined that this flawless man was only holding up this perfect façade because of some personal feelings. *So what happens if I just say I don't care anymore?* Of course, I wouldn't dare say that out loud, but the weight of responsibility was starting to feel unbearable…

I swallowed hard, and Lucas let out a soft sigh, his breath tinged with a slight laugh.

"Don't worry. You seem to enjoy your role as the princess, so I've decided to take it seriously, too. Just do whatever you like, Cece."

"Um, okay…"

Just as I began to feel reassured by his gentle words, he said something that made me freeze.

"I'll eliminate everything…and everyone who bothers you." His lips were curved into a smile, but his eyes weren't laughing. They gleamed coldly as I opened my mouth, forcing air through my tight throat.

"L-Lukie, no… You can't…"

"Why not? My beloved Cecilia was crying. Surely I can't stand for that."

"N-no, I don't think it's necessary…"

Ahh, what should I do?! What a terrible burden to bear!

"There's no need for you to worry. I won't even leave any ashes behind."

Was I supposed to feel comforted?! You shouldn't just casually talk about eliminating people! Besides, how many people in this world can even make someone disappear without a single trace?! If he does something like that, it would be painfully obvious to everyone who was responsible for it!

"P-please stop, Lukie! I-I'm fine. You really don't need to do anything like that…"

"You wouldn't have cried if you were fine. I can't forgive anyone who made you cry like that. Although I do love it when you cry from pleasure… Mmph!"

I clapped my hand over his mouth. *Why does he always have to ruin the moment with something so unnecessary?!*

I was touched—no, moved *by how worried he was for me just now! My heart was actually pounding! Give me back my racing heartbeat, Lucas!*

"A-anyway, you absolutely can't go around doing things like that! Besides, like I said earlier, this is my problem, so I'll take care of anyone who tries to get close to you myself!" I practically shouted, and he blushed slightly.

His fingers traced the tear stains down my cheek, and he looked like he was pondering something.

Wait, it's not over yet?

"Is that a request?" he asked.

"H-huh? I guess so."

Is it a request? But if I don't ask him not to, he won't even leave any ashes behind. It would be a full-on disappearance. It would look like they just got spirited away! And the people slated to disappear are the ones making a move on my fiancé. I'd really prefer it if he didn't take matters into his own hands like this, but it's not like I actually want them to vanish. I'd regret it for the rest of my life!

So I guess I do have to ask him, don't I? Although it feels a bit unfair…

I nodded and said, "Please, Lukie," those thoughts still swirling in my head.

"I see. Well, I suppose I can put it on hold for now," he said in a teasing tone of voice.

"Put it on hold?"

That doesn't make me feel reassured at all! What happened to my request?! I stared at him in shock, and he looked down at me with a terrifyingly sweet smile, his pupils fully dilated.

"There's one more thing I have to check. What's the meaning of this?"

"…!"

He held the dress sketch in front of me, and I instantly felt the blood drain from my face.

I'd made sure to put it at the bottom of the pile and told him to check it later, so why did he check it first?! *Should I have slipped it in the middle? No, that would've been weird. Well, there's no point in regretting it now, but what should I do?! If I mess up the answer*

here, Lady Viviana might just end up as the first official missing person. This feels so unfair. I absolutely can't let him do that!

I averted my eyes from the sketch he fluttered in front of me and twisted my hands together in front of my chest, frantically trying to come up with an excuse. Just as I lost myself in thought, his low voice called out to me, and I panicked.

"Cecilia?"

"Y-yes! I, um, thought this dress would be better for me after all…"

I could've died from embarrassment on the spot. My excuse was far too honest. *I'm such a fool!* And his "Really?" sounded absolutely terrifying.

"When I told you I didn't want you to wear that dress, you promised you wouldn't, didn't you?"

"Y-yes, I did. But…didn't you also say that it would look good on me?"

"And that made you change your mind? My dear Cecilia, is that really your final answer? If you're going to change your mind, now's your chance."

Ack! The way he said that is clearly a warning. He knows exactly why I switched dresses. I hadn't planned to resort to begging, but it looks like I have no choice. He's already onto me, so I should be honest. That's my best bet…right?

I clasped my hands together in prayer and shifted my gaze away from his wide, anger-filled eyes. Then I hesitantly spoke.

"Um, I chose that dress…"

"Yes?"

"Because someone else…is wearing the first one I picked…"

"You don't need to wear it."

"No! I mean, I really do prefer this dress!"

"Why?" He let out a heavy sigh, his face twisted with displeasure. *But he's willing to listen! He's so kind! This is one of the things I love about him! No, stop indulging him so much, stupid Cecilia!*

"It's…the same design as the one we made our vows in, and it's all in your colors…"

"…"

Ahh, I'm going to die of embarrassment! And here I am, filled with impure thoughts! He's not reacting at all. Please! React! Or else my own shame and guilt will crush me!

I lifted my teary-eyed, blushing face toward the heavens, but when I looked up, our eyes met. He squinted regretfully at my flushed face, then dropped his gaze and muttered under his breath. "Damn it, she's too cute. Don't lose it, man…"

Maybe he'll say yes after all?

"So other men are going to see you in this dress, huh? That bitch Viviana… Now she's crossed the wrong person."

I quietly waited for him as he muttered darkly to himself. He finally let out a long breath and said, "No, it's not happening this

time."

"Huh?"

He refused?! What am I going to do?!

I panicked and felt the color drain out of my face as he gave me the most beautiful, dazzling smile.

"Cecilia, I really do think that dress suits you. You'd look absolutely stunning in it, and I'd love to see you wear it."

"A-about that…"

"But that's why, my dear… my one and only Cecilia…"

"…!"

"You understand what I'm saying now, don't you?"

His golden eyes gleamed with a dangerous madness and pierced through me. I nodded frantically. *I get it, but isn't it a bit much to murder someone over a dress?! My jealousy seems like child's play in comparison! This is just too heavy and scary! But if I give up now, the dress will still be a problem. Plus, what will happen to Lady Viviana?!*

This is so unfair! But I have to stay strong, or else our esteemed guests may turn into piles of ash.

"B-but, I really want to wear that—Eeek!"

The moment I tried to protest, the clasps on my gown popped open, and he yanked down on my corset, exposing my breasts in an instant. I let out a startled scream that echoed against the ceiling and quickly covered both my mouth and chest.

What the hell are you doing?! Stop! This is a library! I shook my head furiously, trying to stop him, but he whispered something heavy and chilling that sent shivers up my spine.

"You won't wear it. Will you, Cecilia?"

"…!"

He loosened his cravat in one smooth motion, smiling softly as though his actions weren't completely stepping over the line. His hand slipped up the hem of my dress, and I backed away, pressing my tense body against the curtain behind me as I felt tears spring to my eyes.

No way… This is the library, and we're by the window! This can't be happening!

"Don't worry, Cecilia. I'll take care of everything for you. All right?" He spoke in a tender voice, madness gleaming in his golden eyes as he smiled. "I'm really good at killing without getting caught, so you don't have to worry."

How can anyone not *worry after hearing such a thing?! Plus, you're not even the one I'm worried about, although I could never say that out loud!*

"L-Lukie, s-stop… please don't… Wait!"

"I'm not asking. It's simple, isn't it?"

"But that's not fair. Can't I wear the dress I want t—ahh!"

Just as I felt his fingers rub against my panties, they suddenly slipped inside, pressing and rubbing my most sensitive spot, making my back arch involuntarily.

His lips fell upon my trembling bosom, slipping his tongue between my skin and the fabric of my corset, licking me as a tingling sensation surged through me. My nipples hardened, responding to his stimulation.

He gently teased one of my nipples with his fingers while he hungrily lapped at the other with his tongue. My thighs tensed up and squeezed against his arm as my mind filled with shame, shaking my head desperately to resist.

"L-Lukie, we're in the library. Stop, please!"

"You knew no one would come in here, didn't you? Besides, we're not outside, so I didn't break our promise. I've already put up a barrier and ensured no one can enter through the hallway."

Wow, that's frighteningly efficient!

"But please, wait! Ahh!"

"No. This time, I won't back down. There's no way I'm going to let another man see you in that dress. Say you won't wear it."

"But… There's no other dress I can… Ah, your fingers!"

My body tightened around his fingers, a shiver running through me as I pressed my hand to my mouth to stifle any sound. Lucas wrenched my hand away and kissed me, his tongue rubbing against mine. As he pulled away, he whispered words that sent chills down my spine.

"You're already wet, so my cock will go right in without a problem. If you don't say it, I'll push in and come inside you over and over."

"I-inside?"

I couldn't immediately process his words, staring in disbelief at the way his golden eyes were slyly narrowed. The moment he loosened his clothing, my heart began to pound like crazy. My entire body was flushed from the tips of my toes to the top of my head.

Wh-what?! What kind of terrible things is this man thinking?! What a sadistic demon!

"Can you even walk around like that?"

The very thought of me trying to walk in this state made fear wash over me, tears threatening to spill down my face.

Yet when he grabbed the back of my knees and pushed his fingers in deeper, my body responded with delight, dripping with wetness as it prepared to welcome him inside. I was mortified.

My face flushed despite fear filling my tear-filled eyes, and he looked at me with pure adoration, whispering in a low voice, "So you're okay with this?"

His words felt like a warning, and I shook my head furiously.

"N-no, please! Lukie, I'm begging you! I really want to wear that dress, just this once. Please, Lukie? Lucas! Please let me wear it?" I clung to him, pleading desperately. His eyes narrowed, and he gave me a pouty, displeased look.

"You know that's my weakness."

I'm so sorry! But I value my life, and I want to avoid our guests being turned into ashes! Most of all, I don't want you to have to do something like that!

I swallowed my pride and begged him in this disheveled state. And this demon made a proposal so bewildering that I froze on the spot once again.

"It's not like that woman is worth protecting, so this might be a good opportunity," he muttered, grabbing my chin. Then he warned me in his sweetest voice, "Unfortunately for you, I've already seen how adorable you look, moaning and gasping like this. So just begging me isn't going to be enough anymore."

"Wh-what?"

What?! I wasn't planning to beg! Well, maybe I wasn't sure if I would, but still!

I stared at him in shock, and the devilish knight before me grinned, not even attempting to hide his ferocity as he continued to threaten in a deep voice.

"Since I don't want anyone else to see you in that dress, I plan on having my way with you right here unless you promise you won't wear it. And if that happens, of course, I'll come inside you. I'll defile you. So it looks like you have a decision to make."

"…!"

What a terrifying man! Why is he still so handsome while being so scary at the same time?!

He tipped his head seductively as he spoke. Even though I was trembling, I glared at him, trying to show my refusal. He let out a soft laugh, his eyes melting into sweet golden pools.

"So don't you think you should beg in a way that makes me change my mind?"

"Huh?"

Stunned, I watched him as he touched my lips with his fingers and teased me, his golden eyes watching closely for my reaction.

Wait, is he actually asking me to beg?

"If I…if I try my hardest to beg, will you stop?" My voice trembled, and he slowly narrowed his eyes, confirming my suspicions.

The fact that he's actually asking me to beg! But maybe this is my chance! I'm a woman, and sometimes you just have to be brave! I feel like I keep saying that. My life has been demanding way too much courage from me lately.

With that thought in mind, I defiantly opened my mouth. "Fine! I'll show you the best display of begging you've ever seen in the bedroom, so you'd better prepare yourself!"

"The best, huh?"

"Y-yes!"

"And what exactly does that mean? How much are we talking here?"

Wait, what? I'm not even sure what he means by that! How much what?

I hesitated, and Lucas smiled at me intimidatingly, making me an offer I couldn't escape from.

"Remember that time you touched yourself in front of me?

Obviously, it's going to be better than that, right?"

"T-touched myself?!"

You expect me to go even beyond that?! You're setting the bar way too high!

That request was already the height of my pleading skills, combining all my knowledge from my past and current lives. *It was the best of the best! Asking me to top that is completely unreasonable! I'd like to politely decline this suggestion!*

Just as I thought that, his wet fingers toyed with my nipples, robbing me of the ability to think.

"Nngh! S-stop, Lukie!"

"Such sweet moans… If you really can't do it, then I'll just take you right here. After all, I don't care whether it's in the bedroom or here."

My body trembled, practically offering myself up to him as he planted loving marks on my breasts, all while his teasing words came with that wicked smile. Shame welled up inside of me, mixed with frustration, and before I knew it, I took the bait.

"I-I can do it!"

The moment those words echoed through the library, I snapped back to reality, only to be met with his deep, sexy smile, which nearly brought me to tears. *I've fallen for it… He's played right into my impulsive nature.*

"Ha ha. I'll look forward to it. See you in the bedroom, then."

And so I parted ways with a clearly excited Lucas and trudged my way back to my room.

I've always been a quick study, if I do say so myself. After all, I had to handle everything Felix was incapable of, which meant I ended up taking on the second prince's official duties as part of my own education. Honestly, it felt like I had an ulcer by the time I finished the grueling training to become the second princess. Just thinking about it now made my stomach feel heavy.

Anyway, I wasn't bad at absorbing new information, so I figured I could just read through it and somehow manage. And so, during my seventh year of training as a future princess, I, Cecilia Cline, picked up a guidebook on the marital bed for the first time and promptly hung my head in despair.

I couldn't stop my hands from trembling as I held the book open before me, and I could feel the maids who were helping me prepare giggle while they watched. But I couldn't muster the energy to scold them.

There's no way I can manage such advanced techniques with my mouth! Before I even delve into how embarrassing that it is, it's just not physically possible! There's no way it's going to fit in my mouth!

He's so big that, obviously, that part *of him is big as well! So Plan A is out, and even Plan B requires advanced techniques and nerves of steel! And then, to think that he'd be watching me while I*

do it… It's the kind of thing you have to get used to through experience, but honestly, I don't think I'll ever get used to it!

As those thoughts ran through my head, I glanced down at the revealing black nightgown I wore, the sheer fabric leaving nothing to the imagination, and then heaved another sigh.

Wearing this and then doing those things on top of it? I'm practically done for as a noblewoman! But since I'm technically wearing a wedding ring, can I just stop considering myself a maiden? And besides, it's with my beloved husband! The book is even called Wifely Duties in the Bedroom, Part Two*! Since it's a guidebook written on the marital bed, it can't be wrong, right?*

Just as I reached that conclusion, a thought struck me.

Wait a minute. Why Part Two? Where is Part One?!

I glanced at the cover again in a panic and then over at Anna and Kate. The two of them quickly averted their eyes from me with incredible speed.

"Kate, don't you think Part 1 would've been more important?"

"Well, I thought Part Two was more appropriate if you want to impress Prince Lucas. By the way, a Part Three exists as well, but I thought that one might be a bit too much for you, Lady Cecilia. It's quite, um, intense and rather, er, maniacal…"

I could hear their whispers loud and clear.

I definitely don't need Part Three! Also, where's Elsa?!

When I looked around, I saw her being carried off under the black dragon's arm. *How did that even happen?!*

"U-um, Lord Barnabash? Where are you taking Elsa?"

"Well, Mistress, you'll be cooped up in the bedroom for days, right? So I got permission from my piece of crap master to go out on a date. Hey Elsa, don't you want some roast goose?"

"Let go! Let me… Roast goose, you say?"

Uh-oh, she took the bait.

"Heh heh heh. Believe it or not, I know of a country that serves a delicious roast goose. So? Don't you want to go? I can fly us right there!"

Elsa easily succumbed to the black dragon's temptation and began to drool as she muttered, "A-all right, fine. But just for a little while." Then she was promptly whisked away. *Apparently, the allure of roast goose was too much for her…*

I watched their figures disappear into the distance. I couldn't manage to shake the words from my mind and felt cold sweat drip down my back.

It was true that I'd been secretly living in Lucas's quarters, but did Lord Barnabash just say we'd be stuck in the bedroom for *days*?! *That's way too long! This is bad. If I don't seriously get a handle on Lucas, I'll be bedridden before the soiree… Wait a second, that's not the point!* I realized, slumping further in defeat.

If I don't seriously get a handle on him, someone's going to end up dead, and there won't even be any ashes left behind!

Isn't my role getting a bit strange here? From a former prostitute—not that I ever actually did the job, of course—to second

princess. I feel like all I've been doing is being used for seduction! And it's always at the risk of my life, or at least my body. Not to mention, I've been taken hostage several times. I'm starting to feel a bit angry!

Sure, Viviana's partly to blame, but I swear half of it is because Lucas has a rotten personality! I mean, what's so wrong with me wearing the dress I want to wear?! Sure, I was a little happy he got jealous, but still! Those impure thoughts of mine… No, I'm not letting them go anywhere. I'll just put them to good use instead!

I shut the guidebook, put it in the drawer in the nightstand, and, after some thought, sat up straight.

Heh heh heh… You just watch Lucas Theoderic! You'll regret underestimating me after I endured six years of grueling princess education! I swear you will!

I pumped my fist with determination, and Anna and Kate did the same.

"Oh my, the goddess has become fierce! How utterly wonderful! I thought I'd have to torment that trashy woman from another kingdom to death, but even she's occasionally useful! Keeping her alive was the right choice," Anna said.

"I feel like something amazing is about to happen! At first, I was worried she'd get too carried away and miss the soiree, but worst-case scenario we could just kill her, and problem solved!" Kate said.

I really wish they'd stop trying to solve everything with violence… It would completely ruin all of my efforts. I dropped my raised fist with a sigh.

I waited quietly on the bed, and sure enough, Lucas opened the door and came inside. The moment our eyes met, his lips curled with amusement. I couldn't help but think, *Ha ha!*

Just you wait! I'm gonna melt your heart just as I did when I called you by your first name! I was vaguely aware that my thoughts were headed in a strange direction as I smiled back at him. Lucas looked slightly surprised, then sat on the bed and reached out toward me, but I quickly stopped him.

"Please don't touch me, Lord Lukie."

"What's this about?"

Ack! He's smiling, but there's no light in his eyes. If I don't explain this quickly, he'll start thinking about locking me up again! Panicked, I opened my mouth to speak. "I need to confirm our agreement first."

"Oh, you mean about the dress and the promise that I won't touch you? I'm sorry, but that depends on what happens from now on, so I can't give you an answer on that yet. You cried, and I was quite angry about it."

His casual words made my cheeks flush, and I wasn't sure what to say.

He acts so selfishly but then says stuff like that and makes me so happy! Just watch, I'll make you happy, too! No, wait! Er, I mean… I'll put you in your place, damn it!

"I-I have a request regarding that!"

"What is it?"

"No matter what I do, you absolutely must *not* touch me!"

"No matter what you do?"

Ugh, you can't mull it over like that. It's not fair, Lucas! You're supposed to agree like a gentleman to my request! Wait, who am I kidding? If this demon knight had just agreed to it in the first place, we wouldn't be in this situation. Why am I even negotiating about this bedroom stuff? It's so ridiculous, it's almost funny.

As I waited with those thoughts swirling through my mind, Lucas spoke up.

"When does it end?"

I tipped my head to the side, not understanding his question. "What do you mean?"

"If I can't touch you and you can do anything to me, then that means I'm just going to be tortured, aren't I? Then I'll be in pain."

"What…?"

"You need to make me happy, or it's not a request. Right, Cece? You're waiting for me in bed, so I assume that's the kind of deal we're making here, right? So naturally, there has to be an end, right?"

The way he tipped his head with an adorable smile as he voiced that request so true to his desires made me turn bright red with shock.

Wait, is he setting up some awful agreement here? But as much as I hated to admit it, what he was saying was completely logical, so I couldn't think of anything to say back to it.

"S-so you mean that I have to…m-make you…?"

Is he telling me that I have to make him come?!

I couldn't say the rest of the sentence out loud. I glanced at Lucas, and his golden eyes softened into a sweet, seductive gaze, making me grip the collar of my robe with one hand and the sheets tightly in the other as I took a deep breath.

Calm down, Cecilia. Don't try to beat him at seduction. There's no need for such a reckless move!

What I need right now is the courage to put my knowledge to use!

I mustered up the courage to shoot Lucas a defiant glare.

"Understood! I'll do my best, but in return, you mustn't touch me, Lord Lukie!"

"Got it. I'll make sure to restrain myself, so don't worry."

"R-restrain yourself?!"

What does he mean by that? I wondered, feeling a bit uneasy. But then he gleefully showed me the chains from before, and I felt the color drain from my face.

"They weren't very attractive, so I made them slimmer. Now they don't look like chains so much, but they're actually stronger. It was quite a challenge. Maybe I should make them red so they'll look better against your skin?"

Still as hardworking as ever, huh? He'd managed to restrain the black dragon with the old chains just fine, but now he'd reinforced them to be even stronger. *Who exactly did he put in all that effort for?*

And who cares what they look like? Didn't he say a long time ago, "I want to bind myself to you"? Could it be… No way, he doesn't mean they're for me, right?

In light of this glimpse of perversion he showed me, I decided it was better to keep my comments to myself.

"I-I see. S-so, um, please stay right there and don't move, okay?"

After I said that, I had him sit against the headboard, against a bunch of pillows, and his gaze on me intensified.

"All right. Go ahead, Cece."

"Go ahead?" Having him stare at me while I take off my robe is utterly humiliating! Oh well, time to be brave!

I slid my robe off with trembling hands, fixing the hem of my nightgown that had gotten disheveled in my embarrassment.

The silence and lack of reaction were so unexpected that I began to panic. *Is it too indecent?* I cautiously raised my head—only to find Lucas frozen, wide-eyed in shock.

We stared a while before his pale face flushed a deep red.

"Wh-what the… This is way beyond what I expected… How am I supposed to keep my hands off you with all this torture?! This is amazing… Damn it! That's why you made me promise?"

I couldn't help but stare in shock at the top of his head as he buried his face in his hands.

Th-this nightgown is more powerful than I thought… Wow! I couldn't help but think stupidly. *Could my first victory come so easily?*

Feeling emboldened, I abandoned my shame and embraced the mood. I approached the now-embarrassed Lucas and placed my hand gently on his knee.

"Lord Lukie."

"Y-yes?!"

He flinched dramatically, his expression so timid he looked like a child, and I couldn't help but feel triumphant.

"Do…you like this?" I tugged lightly at the hem, and his golden eyes welled up with emotion as he muttered under his breath.

"It's…it's perfect. Black… I didn't expect black. Your purity in such a seductive color… It was completely unexpected."

Thank you, nightgown and maids! There's my adorable Lucas!

Great, now that I have him hooked, I just have to seize the moment and carry out the mission! Let's finish this in one go! I thought, steeling myself as I kneeled beside him. I ran my fingers along his now-flushed neck, leaning in to plant a soft kiss on his cheek. His hands fidgeted in mid-air, so I smiled and teased him.

"No touching, remember?"

He bit his lip in frustration, his face flushed, and he wrapped the magic-forged chains around his own wrists.

"Damn it… I'm such an idiot! Fine, I get it. Damn it!" He sighed in defeat, lying bound in chains upon the disheveled sheets.

What a sight… What am I even doing? I began to feel like I had crossed some dangerous line.

Shaken by the unexpectedly lewd situation I found myself in, I scolded myself and pressed forward. My throat tightened with nerves as I slowly undid the buttons of his pajamas.

After I revealed his bare skin, I stroked his body with trembling fingers. His golden eyes were full of desire as they locked onto me.

I leaned down, pressing soft kisses to his skin. Lucas whispered my name in a quiet voice, and I knew what he wanted. Embarrassed but determined, I lowered my gaze and carefully slid my tongue into his open mouth, where he eagerly entwined it with his own.

The sound of our breath filled the quiet room, and the temperature under the canopy bed began to rise.

My body felt hypersensitive, and the nightgown clung to me. I tried to suppress my fidgeting, but Lucas, frustrated by his inability to kiss properly with his arms bound, let out a hot breath into my mouth.

That heat sparked something deep inside me, an uncontrollable desire that made me pull away instinctively.

"Cece, Cecilia… More…"

His ragged breath and pained expression made my heart pound wildly. His eyes were shining with moisture as he stared at me, and the sound of him calling out for me captured my heart and filled my world. A singular desire rose inside of me.

Just for now… Just for this one moment, Lucas belongs to me. This man is mine and mine alone. I want to love him more… so much more.

Moved by that impulse, I let my hand slide from his chest to his belly button. I inhaled sharply as I stroked the firm lines of his abdomen. I slipped my fingers inside his pajamas, following the line of his muscles down to his groin. I touched his hardening cock while I kissed the nape of his neck, and he let out a panicked groan.

"No way… Wait, Cecilia. Hold on!"

"Lord Lukie… Or should I just call you Lukie now, hmm?"

Anxiety welled up in the corner of my heart, and I found myself silently pleading with my gaze, begging him not to reject me.

Then he let out a low growl and turned his eyes away, muttering softly. "Why… Why are you doing it like this?" His expression seemed to darken, the gold in his eyes growing deeper.

Wait, something's wrong. Why did he just get annoyed?

The frightening atmosphere around him made me shrink back a little, feeling like I was being swallowed by his presence. But then, as if his earlier irritation had been a lie, he flashed a cute smile at me and proposed something quite puzzling.

"Cece, I have a suggestion for you."

"Wh-what is it?"

It was so sudden I was afraid to hear what he'd say next. When he spoke, my jaw practically dropped.

"You've done so much for me that I'll grant your request. But if you say my name before I finish, can I untie myself and touch you?"

Wait, that's right! This all started like that, didn't it? How could I forget? I'm so embarrassed I just want to disappear! But is it just me,

or does that suggestion strangely work in my favor? And didn't he just say he'd grant my request? Then…shouldn't that be enough to end things right here?

The moment that thought crossed my mind, his golden eyes glinted dully, sending a chill down my spine.

"Cece, I'd recommend not saying what you're thinking right now. I'm fine either way."

"O-okay."

Either way? That means if I say it's over, Viviana is going to disappear into thin air… This isn't a negotiation! It's practically a threat!

As I panicked over the offer I had no choice but to accept, that sadist tilted his head and watched me closely. I forced my numb tongue to move and hesitantly confirmed. "So as long as I don't say your name, you won't touch me?"

"That's right. It's simple, isn't it?"

It's way too simple! It's suspicious as hell, but I have no choice but to go along with it!

"Okay, I understand."

"Good. Then go ahead."

Nothing about this is good! I wanted to bury my face in my hands from the sheer embarrassment of having to start all over again. But I held myself together and gave myself a little pep talk.

Calm down, Cecilia. With these conditions, if I just hold out a little longer, victory will be mine. All I have to do is not say his name.

Feeling determined, I resumed, only to soon realize how utterly helpless I was when it came to Lucas.

I wrapped my trembling fingers around his already firm and tense cock.

As I gently applied pressure, it twitched slightly in response. The strangeness of the sensation startled me, and I quickly loosened my grip, looking to him for help with pleading eyes.

He exhaled a heated breath and said something that only made things worse.

"Cece, I'm sorry. But it's going to hurt if you keep doing it like that. You have to spit on it."

"What?"

That's not helpful at all! I thought with wide eyes. He shook his bound hands dramatically.

"I can't do it myself, and you didn't bring any lubricant, did you? So just spit on it to make it slicker, then grip the lower part a little tighter."

My eyes widened at his nonchalant instructions as I stared down at his rigid member in my hands, tears welling up.

S-spit on it?! Do I really need to do that even though it's so hard? That wasn't in the guidebook! Wait—is that why you're supposed to use your mouth?! It needs to be wet, or else it'll hurt?!

The delicate nature of the rather intimidating object in my hands threw me off, and I bit my lip. I heard a soft chuckle from above. *Hey,*

what are you laughing about? That pisses me off! Just watch! I can do what I need to do!

I cautiously stuck out my tongue and leaned forward with determination.

I ignored the saliva dripping from the corner of my mouth as I repeatedly licked it from the base to the tip, somehow managing to moisten it while feeling my own chest grow damp.

I feel like I'm going to die of shame. But I might be able to try Plan B since it's so wet now…

I got hold of my breath and slowly raised my gaze. He was flushed and breathing erratically like me, which gave me a surge of courage. At first, I honestly didn't think I could do something like this.

I used to believe that love was something you expressed with both your body and soul, and I couldn't understand how something as embarrassingly crude as this fit into that idea of making love.

But now, knowing that the person I loved was feeling pleasure because of me—that he was only focused on me, and with such raw excitement—made my heart feel full. I couldn't help but smile to myself.

It's still embarrassing, but if this is how I can show him my love, then I'll do whatever it takes.

I inclined my head and pressed my lips against his rigid dick as I slid the straps of my nightgown off my shoulders. I cradled my bare breasts with trembling hands and enveloped his cock in my cleavage, softly kissing the very tip.

"C-Cece… Nngh, fuck…" I heard his desperate voice rain on me from above, and when I quickly looked up at him, I saw that he was gritting his teeth so hard he had blood dripping from his mouth. *Wait, it's that intense?!*

"Don't… Damn it… This is…visual torture…"

"I'm sorry. Did it hurt?"

"Not at all. Please keep going!" His reply was tinged with frustration and made me think, *Oh, now he's a tsundere too? My husband's really getting good at making my heart race…* Feeling oddly defeated, I adjusted myself and once again buried my face against the burning heat of his body.

My jaw ached with effort, and I panted as I tried to catch my breath.

I'd done my best, holding him tight between my ample breasts, taking him into my mouth as deeply as I could, and I licked and sucked to the best of my abilities. Although it had twitched in response, there was no sign of anything more. Confusion and panic began to rise up inside of me.

What am I supposed to do to make him finish? I thought licking and squeezing could work… but now that I think about it, the guidebook only said to "devote yourself completely to the task." So what am I supposed to do beyond this?

Realizing the terrifying truth, I found myself flailing in desperation, forgetting my situation entirely until Lucas, still breathing heavily, called my name from above.

"Nngh, Cece… Cecilia… Haah…"

I looked up unconsciously, and the sight of that twisted face drenched in desire and the sound of his gasping breaths set my mind and every drop of blood in my body ablaze. I clenched my thighs tightly and pushed down the rising lust, refusing to accept it.

W-wait, his moans are too…erotic. I'm feeling strange. No, it can't be! I definitely don't want more of this!

Just as the alarm bells in my head began to ring, Lucas let out a long, hot breath.

The faint movement in the air clung to my skin, sending shivers through me, and my strength left my body as I collapsed, placing my hands on the bed to support myself. Drawn by his breath, I looked up only to meet his dreamy golden gaze through the strands of sweat-soaked hair that clung to his forehead, and my heart pounded in my chest.

"Cece, come a little closer. I wanna kiss you."

"K-kiss…"

I echoed his whispered words, and he licked the corner of his mouth to coax me further.

"Yeah, a kiss. I can't hold it in anymore. I just wanna touch you so badly. Is that wrong?"

The sight of his pleading gaze and sweat trickling down his neck made me gulp.

"A-all right…"

With an odd sense of restlessness, I placed my hand against his chest and hesitantly pressed my lips against his. The moment I did, he grabbed the back of my head and pressed us together forcefully.

"Mmph! Mmm!"

"I love you, Cecilia."

Surprised, I instinctively tried to pull back, but his words of devotion trapped me, leaving me unable to move.

His tongue entwined with my exhausted one mercilessly, and the sheer intensity of his possessiveness hit me like a wave of malice. My brain felt numb, and my thoughts grew hazy from the overwhelming passion of his kiss. My thoughts began to grow cloudy, and emotions melted within me when I heard him call my name, making me respond to him…

"Oh, Cece… My Cecilia… You're mine… All mine!"

"Nngh, Lukie… Lucas!" I lovingly uttered his name in the heat of the moment, which seemed to delight him. A chain of protective magic shimmered like twinkling lights as it danced in the air.

As I widened my eyes in shock, his tongue lightly nipped mine, and the lips I pressed against blew a soft, breathy laugh, making me tremble.

His golden eyes narrowed into slits like crescent moons, and a blissful, almost euphoric smile now crossed his once agonized, distorted face. The sound of his amused chuckle sent tremors through my entire body.

"Heh, heh heh heh! Ha ha. Ha ha haa! Finally…"

He rested his hands on the bed, seemingly exhausted, then raked his fingers through his damp bangs. As he slowly raised his head and revealed those dangerous, gleaming golden eyes, every instinct inside of me screamed, "Run!"

I tried to drag my weak body backward, but he suddenly grabbed my ankle, and a small scream of fear escaped me. This demon casually gathered the twinkling lights into his hand, the delicate chain floated above his palm. His smile was sweet and ferocious.

"What are you running from? We're not done yet."

"Ah-ah…"

"You remember our agreement, right? You said you'd make me happy, didn't you, Cecilia?" His voice was so calm and gentle, yet a cold sweat ran down my back.

This is bad… Really bad! We're on totally different pages here. No way… I mean, sure, I didn't confirm it, but… Lucas, you stupid, perverted, evil demon! I'm such an idiot!

As I cursed both of us in my mind, a thin, red chain slithered up my arm like a snake, wrapping itself around both my wrists before I could resist. Bound from behind, I lost my balance and fell back onto the bed.

"Eek! Lukie, take it off!"

"Hehe. Mmm, red suits your pale skin perfectly, Cece."

Wait, is he seriously complimenting me right now? This isn't flattering at all! And could he please stop wrapping it all around me,

especially emphasizing my breasts like that?!

"No! Lukie, I didn't agree to this… what?"

I was about to glare at his teasing grin when my eyes froze, fixed on his hands.

"Nice view. With those eyes of yours riling me up so much, I think I'll add something to ensure I don't break you."

"W-wait, hey! That's the belt for my robe, isn't it?! And by add, you mean…?"

I watched, horrified, as he slowly kissed the belt. *I have to get out of here!* Just as I tried to sit up, my vision was suddenly engulfed by the fabric, and darkness closed in around me.

Bound tightly and plunged into a world where only light seeped through tiny gaps in the cloth, I could do nothing but tremble. As I lay on the sheets, I gasped for air, calling out his name in a small, pleading voice. He responded by holding me gently, kissing my temple, and whispering in a low, sweet voice.

"Hey, my beloved wife… I have something I want to ask you."

As he spoke, he dragged a rough part of his hand—probably a callus from handling a sword—down my throat, nipping at my earlobe with his teeth. My body was extra sensitive due to my vision being obscured, and I began to tremble out of control.

"Hngh, ahh…"

He soothingly stroked down my shoulders to my arms, then traced my hand from my side to my leg before moving it back up, pulling my nightgown along with it.

The feeling of fabric gathered around my waist made me imagine myself with my skirt lifted, my bare backside exposed. I pressed my face into the sheets in embarrassment as Lucas deliberately raised his voice near my ear.

"Not wearing any panties? My Cecilia is really naughty. What are you hoping for, rubbing your thighs together like that?"

"I-I'm not…!"

He pointed out my indecent posture, making my voice falter as I tried to deny it. He chuckled softly, then called out sweetly, "My Cecilia. Mine alone," before his voice turned icy. "You know I'm jealous, don't you? I can't control myself when it comes to you. I always want to lock you away, to bind not only your body but your heart to me. Surely you know that, right?"

He touched the ring on my finger, and I trembled as I gave a small nod.

"Y-yes…"

"So don't you think I'd be angry if you worked so hard for someone other than me?"

As I continued taking shallow breaths, confused by what he was saying, his voice dropped even lower, and the pressure of his restraints tightened.

"Being unaware makes it even worse, Cece."

"Huh? L-Lukie, stop! What are you…?!"

Suddenly, I felt weightless as he lifted me up and placed me on my knees on the bed. He slowly stroked my most sensitive area, and

panic surged through me at the fear of what I couldn't see. I shook my head desperately.

"But it was you… You were the one who wanted this! Ah, stop! No!"

His teasing fingers suddenly pressed inside my lips and explored the slick walls within. The sensation made me shake my head in shame once more, but then I felt his warmth against my back, and his soft hair brushed my shoulder.

"That's right. This was my wish because I wanted you to rely on me. I was happy and angry at the same time. I never thought you'd go so far as to toy with me like that for her sake. Do you really want to help her that much? You were trembling, so nervous, and then you became so eager. But why?"

"Mmmph, huh?"

Confused by the frustration in his voice, I barely registered what he said when he pulled his fingers out. The moment I realized what he meant, my mind snapped back into action.

I remembered Lucas's muttering. *Why would you do something like that?* And the scowl on his face.

What was I doing back then?

As I frantically tried to recall, he abruptly pushed me down on all fours and pressed something smooth against my inner lips. "You're twitching like you need more than just fingers," he whispered, making my face flush as I cried out, my memory returning.

"Th-that's not it! I-it's because you called my name, Lukie!"

“Called your name?”

But even as he questioned me, he pinned my legs together and thrust inside without hesitation. It felt even bigger than usual, filling every inch of me, and I trembled as I begged him.

“It’s too big! Lukie, stop! Please, this position is too much, I can’t! Stop!”

With my vision obscured, my body was even more sensitive, and I climbed toward release almost instantly.

My body tensed like a tightly wound spring, but because I was bound, I couldn’t release the pent-up pleasure properly, leaving me desperate for more as my insides began to melt.

“Haaah, haaah, no, no! Stop moving, Lukie! Ahh, ahh, no!”

“You’re so quick to come. Damn it, your body responds to me so easily.”

With each slow thrust, his throbbing member scraped against my inflamed inner walls, causing my body to convulse and wetness to drip down my legs. I couldn’t even manage to bite the sheets.

“Haaah, haaah, no, please! Lukie, stop! I’m gonna come again!”

Even when I pressed my face into the sheets to stop my shameless moans, my body reacted with humiliation to the slightest movement of his hips. Tears spilled down my cheeks, and Lucas abruptly pulled out.

“Ah, no, stop… That’s cruel…”

I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief as the sensation of being filled suddenly vanished, and I heard Lucas exhale harshly as if

in pain.

"You make me crazy… I love you so much it pisses me off, Cecilia. Just like I belong only to you, you belong only to me too, right? Please tell me that."

As he said that, he kissed my face in gentle pecks, entwining his fingers with mine, then pressed the tip of his length against me again as if to open my slit. His loving gestures made me open my mouth to respond, just as something that wasn't a finger covered the sensitive clit, sending a shiver down my spine.

Wait, that's not his hand… Is it a barrier spell?!

"Lukie, stop! Something's…!"

"What do you mean? You know I love giving you what you want. If you're not answering, I thought you might be asking for more. Don't worry. I'll make sure it feels just as good as what you did for me. I'll stimulate that sensitive spot inside and torture your cute little clit at the same time until you're crying and begging for more."

Torture me?! There's nothing reassuring about that! It's like he's trying to break me! And wait, is he going to use that lightning spell inside this barrier?!

"No, please! That would be too much! I'd lose my mind!"

Please, if you do that, I'll really end up begging you for more! What happened to the normal me?!

The image of myself completely at his mercy flashed through my mind, and I felt my body flush in response. I shook my head, desperate to at least hide my shameful expression. Lucas laughed,

and then for some reason, he pressed something else, hard, against my other entrance.

N-no way! Why is there more?!

"Your clit is so sensitive to magic stimulation. It makes your whole body relax, and you're so much easier to slip into. Take a deep breath, Cece."

Eek! This demonic bully is way more sadistic than I imagined! No way! Absolutely not! There's no coming back from this, and now he's changing the target of his bullying! I nearly cried out in a tearful voice.

"But! You're the one who said my name like you wanted me! I-I thought you were happy, and I just wanted to make you even happier…"

"You did that for me…?"

Sorry… I love you so much I completely forgot my original purpose here! But seriously, there's no way I can handle all three at once, let alone with chains instead of fingers! But if my body proves me wrong and can take it after all, I might actually die of shame, so please stop! I nodded desperately, tears streaming down my face.

He wrapped his arms around me even tighter, and he spoke in a soft tone filled with emotion as he apologized.

"S-sorry, I misunderstood! I got a little jealous. I-I'm so happy… I'm really sorry, Cecilia…!"

Honestly, your jealousy is way over the top! I sobbed despite myself. *Binding me up and teasing me all because of a little jealousy?*

That's beyond twisted! You're a complete demon, through and through!

I found the sheer magnitude of this guy's jealousy terrifying! Yet, a part of me is actually delighted by it. Damn you for making me fall so in love with you! It really pisses me off!

And he said "I'm so happy" in such an excited voice. You can't just blurt that out mid-apology! We're going to have to have a serious talk about this later.

"Can we end this now? Will you untie the belt and chains?" I asked, feeling a bit frustrated. "Um, Lukie?"

"I'm really sorry, but…you look too good in them, so they're staying. And we're not done yet."

"I-I what?"

Excuse me?! I don't need that kind of compliment right now! And what do you mean, we're not done yet?! Wait, so we really weren't *thinking of the same ending here?!*

I need to check! I tried to turn around, but he suddenly slipped his arm under my knees and hoisted me up, spreading my folds open before pushing his heat deep inside of me.

"Eek! Ah, no!"

That was all it took for a wave of pleasure to wash over me, which made me so frustrated with myself. I hunched over, trying to keep him from going in any deeper, but he pressed his lips on my back.

"It's like I'm drowning in you. I want you to drown in me, too, Cecilia." And with that, he rocked back and forth, rubbing his tip along the shallow part of my insides. The gentle rhythm made a series of unsatisfying climaxes ripple through me.

He teased my nipples and left marks on my skin. The stimulation was all too intense for me to bear, yet at the same time felt like it wasn't enough, so I ended up snapping at him.

"Stop this! Why are you like this?! You're being so mean, Lukie! You bully! You pervert! Just do it right!"

A happy smile spread across his face, and then he made another one of his "requests" that carried a predictable answer.

"Ha ha. No, I'm not doing it on purpose. You're the one who leaned forward. That's why it feels good, but the angle makes it too difficult for me to go any deeper. I want to fill you up completely. I want to defile you until you're mine and mine alone, until you can't live without me, my beloved. So tell me, Cece. How much of me do you want?"

"H-how much?" *He's asking me to indulge him when he's being so needy? What a terrifying tactic! Fine, I'll say it, damn you!*

"I-I want you to make love to me…in the place no one else but you ever has…"

I trailed off in embarrassment at the end. He leaned over me in a sudden rush, and just as my cheek pressed against the sheets, a loud *thud* rang out, and my entire body jolted from the impact.

"Eek! Ohhh!"

A hot, throbbing sensation raced through the upper half of my body, searing my brain. I opened my mouth wide as I trembled from the overwhelming waves, tears welling up in my eyes as he mercilessly thrust inside of me over and over again.

"Nngh, ahh! No, I'm gonna come! Lukie, please wait! Ohh, ohh, it feels so good! I'm gonna come… No…!"

"Argh… Haah… Look at how sexy you are when you take me… I love you, Cecilia. Surrender completely. Fall for me, be my Cece forever. I want you to be unable to live without me."

His words were like a poison there was no going back from, that seeped deep into my core. I clung onto him, trembling, like I was begging for it.

"Nngh, Lukie… It's too deep! Ahh, nngh! I'm coming again! Lukie, Lukie!"

"That's right. My precious Cecilia, I love you so much I could kill you. Say my name more…"



He begged as he licked the back of my ear. Suddenly he began to thrust harder, going deeper and deeper inside of me. My body was no longer trembling as I frantically called his name, pleading for help.

"Eek… Lukie, Lukie, Lukie… Lucas… Ahhh!"

"That's right, baby. Say my name. I'll never love anyone else but you. I don't need anyone else but you. So Cecilia… That's why you should surrender to me and say my nickname if you want to stop me from breaking. Don't forget that."

He pounded that message into me over and over again with his love and I responded in kind by climaxing again and again until I eventually collapsed limply into his arms. Finally, he took off the chains and blindfold, and I squinted, searching my blurry vision for the color of daybreak.

"L-Lukie, where are you?"

"I'm right here. You don't have to look so worried. I promise I'll keep my word this time."

"This time"? That's not very reassuring! How am I supposed to convince him next time? Foggy thoughts floated through my mind, but something entirely different came out of my mouth.

"I can't…see… I want to see you…Lukie…"

"Oh, right. I'm sorry about that."

The faint golden blur I saw seemed to be tinged with red.

He cast a healing spell on me, gently dressed my weakened body back in a soft robe, then pressed a loving, tender kiss on my

forehead. My heart overflowed with endless love, and I started tearing up again.

I was so exhausted I couldn't even speak. He watched my lips tremble fruitlessly and murmured bitterly, "You're too cute for your own good. It's almost painful. I'll never be able to stop wanting to make love to you. So please, just go to sleep. You made me so happy, and it felt amazing. Even having to hold back was heavenly, and I'd love to do it again…" he mumbled with an endlessly tender goodnight kiss.

I'm so glad I tried my best, I thought, feeling comfortable and content before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Four

THE SENSATION OF LUCAS SUCKING FIRMLY ON MY neck made me sway just a little in disbelief. *I can't believe we're doing this in a parlor so close to the ballroom!*

Then, without stopping his kisses on my neck, he cast a gentle healing spell on me, and the moment he finally pulled his lips away, I felt the cool touch of the necklace against my skin, making a breath escape my mouth. The warmth of the magic spread beneath my skin, filling me with relief even as I glared at his beautiful face, which leaned toward me.

"That's enough," I said.

"But I haven't even put on your earrings yet." He dangled them in front of me like a hostage, frowning as he spoke.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I retorted, reaching for them. "You're doing too much, even if others can't see it! Besides, I need time to touch up now!" I protested as I dabbed at his reddened lips with a handkerchief. He gently pushed back my hair and fastened my earrings. I blinked in surprise as I heard the soft click, only to have him cradle my chin with a loud sigh as if he were trying to soothe me. I was incredibly irritated.

"We have plenty of time. Besides, you were the one who asked me for—mmph, mm, I'm sorry. Mmph, mm I got carried away."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I glared at him, pressing the handkerchief against his lips. He backed off immediately and

apologized.

That's right… But I only asked for a little good luck charm to help get me through the night! Just one!

But then one thing led to another, and he started kissing me, then he held my jewelry hostage, and now my neck is a complete mess! You've done more than enough! Can't you just be satisfied already?

"Will you finish putting on my earrings, please?" I turned my other ear to him and tried to keep my voice steady, and he reluctantly put on my other earring. *Seriously, why is he doing it so begrudgingly?*

"All done. You look even more stunning than I expected…to the point where I'm tempted to drop the illusion spell…"

"Thanks…"

That's nice, but the way you sound so serious while you're toying with my ring is frightening me…

If he deactivated the illusion magic, I would have to wear a dress that covered every inch of my body, making it look like I had a death in the family or something. *So please stop that! After all, I'm ready to take anything Lady Viviana throws at me today, so I need my battle attire!*

As I inwardly clenched my fists to steel myself, he placed his head on my shoulder and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight.

"So beautiful… You're so beautiful. It kills me that I'm not the only one you're dressed up for. If you're thinking about that woman again—ugh, I wish that bitch would die—I promise I'll restrain myself, okay? Just one more kiss, please."

I know he's complimenting me, but this intensity is getting downright scary! Did he just say he wishes that "bitch" would die?! And what exactly is he restraining himself from?!

"No, because we really don't have time for this!" I protested.

"So if we *did* have time, you'd let me kiss you?"

"Wh-what on earth are you talking about?!"

No, no! That's not what I said! I shook my head frantically and tried to wriggle free, but he caught my chin and waist, holding me in place.

"Finn! Stand guard by the door and don't let anyone in, especially not the head butler!!"

"Yeah, yeah. I've been standing guard this whole time. Hurry it up already, you crappy master…"

You don't have to force everyone to wait on us just so you can—wait a second, Finn?! So that's why I haven't seen him anywhere! He's been standing guard for us! And he's actually holding off the head butler?! Knowing Finn, that wouldn't be impossible!

I began to panic, but just then, I noticed a flash of movement in the corner of my vision as one of my maids lifted a clock and a makeup kit. *Oh, my staff is just so efficient… Tell him off!* I looked

over, hoping for help, but instead, they just sharply urged me to kiss him, making me want to cry.

"Such violent beauty and sweet gestures! So moving! It'll take around ten seconds to fix you up. Factoring in the travel time, it should be a maximum of three minutes, Lady Cecilia," Anna said.

"Wearing matching lip colors is absolutely moving! We can't linger for long, so please be swift, Lady Cecilia," Kate said.

"The dress's true potential comes out when your cheeks have a bit more color! I want roast goose tonight, Lady Cecilia!" Elsa said.

Three whole minutes! Don't say that in front of him!

I trembled, and sure enough, his arms tightened as he whispered sweetly in my ear, making me shiver.

"All I need is one minute. Give me a good luck charm, too, Cecilia."

That's so not fair…

"O-only one minute."

I wondered why he shortened the time limit as I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck. He turned to face me, his golden eyes melting like honey as they urged me on. I was just about to lower my gaze when…

"I know. The remaining time is to let you catch your breath." The words he murmured happily were so tender that I froze with my mouth slightly agape, but before he could protest, his lips brushed mine with a soft chuckle and then his tongue slipped in. I ended up swallowing the words I couldn't get out.

"W-wait, your tongue! Mm, nngh!"

What is going on? Even a minute feels so long! And not only that, but his face is pressing against me so hard it won't even budge! He's so cruel!

"Mm, nngh! Haaah!"

He slowly pulled back, leaving a smudge of my lipstick on his lips. *You jerk!* I glared at him, panting. His cheeks were slightly flushed as he gazed back at me, and he murmured in a heated voice. "You're turning so red. Cece, you're so incredibly beautiful tonight that I don't want to let you out of this room. Shall I just tie you up instead?"

Uh-oh, that sounds dangerous! He's way too obsessed with those chains lately, all concerned about the thickness and their appearance and how easy they are to use… What kind of strange practice are you engaging in? And can you stop using me for it?

"Lord Lukie! I told you over and over again that I absolutely have to attend tonight's event."

I glanced at him, wondering why he was so against me attending, and he gave a sigh of resignation.

"You've been worried too much about that woman, and it makes me angry. I've mobilized the royal guards, and Anika and the others are coming as well. Even if she does show up, they'll handle it. It's not something for you to worry about. Just pay attention to me, and me alone." The frustrated tone in his voice made my blood boil.

"Lord Lukie!"

"Yes?"

"I'm your fiancée, aren't I?"

"You're my beloved wife."

"Wha?! Oh, r-right, wife. Of course. Anyway, as your wife, I'm the only one who has the right to dance at your side tonight! So driving away any woman who dares to get close to you is a duty reserved for me and me alone. Do you understand?!"

I felt an unnecessary surge of excitement when he corrected me by saying "wife" instead of "fiancée," and I blurted out my feelings all at once. He blinked at me, then smiled so brightly it was like flowers bloomed all around him.

"So you want me all to yourself?"

"Y-yes, that's right! I'm g-going to have you all for myself!"

His smile was so dazzling it made me stumble over my words. But I brushed it off. *Just go with the flow, Cecilia!*

"Then can I have you all to myself, too?"

"Yes! U-um, I mean, please."

Uh-oh, I went too far! I'm so embarrassed! Well, since I have the Promise Mark on me, it's pretty much impossible for me to dance with anyone else but you anyway.

"And I'm allowed to chase off any man who so much as looks at you, right?"

"Right. Wait, no! No, you can't!"

Whew, that was close! I almost agreed to it!

Wait, did he just click his tongue with that smile still on his face, or did I imagine it?

And what do you mean, you'll chase off anyone who even looks at me?! We're about to make our grand entrance. Everyone's going to look at me, so then what?!

But the more I thought about it, I figured he would get all the attention anyway, so maybe it wouldn't be an issue after all. Which, honestly, made me a bit sad. *Who decided that Heroes should wear white knight uniforms, anyway?*

Of course it's a good call, but the sheer elegance of that white uniform on that *body—wait, what are his measurements, exactly? I really wanna ask… Anyway, I feel like I'm going to go blind when I look at his dazzling, noble face! Plus, he has his hair swept back today, making him look even more divine than usual.*

Standing next to him tonight is going to require even more focus than usual…

But Anna and the other maids were on fire today, saying I looked perfect, so hopefully I matched well enough. Lucas even said I was beautiful, so hopefully I looked good. *I really hope so.*

After all, my rival has similarly colored hair as mine, a similar build, and she'll be wearing a dazzling champagne gold dress. Meanwhile, I'm wearing a dress in a completely opposite, deep blue-violet color. People will definitely compare us. Argh… I didn't mean to, but I've basically just picked a fight with her in return, haven't I?

Well, I was a former villainess, after all, and even if I weren't, I'm still a marquess's daughter and the second prince's fiancée! I

usually rise to any challenge, but this time, losing would mean not being able to stand beside Lucas, which I absolutely cannot abide! I have to settle this fast, before she causes any more problems and drags my husband into it, or else both of us will be in danger!

As I considered the ballroom-turned-battleground before us, Lucas called Anna and the others over.

My wonderful maids are as sharp as ever. When did they disappear? Thank goodness, they're saving me from dying of embarrassment.

They quickly touched up my makeup and then bowed to me as I rose from Lucas's lap.

"You look stunning. Now, it's time to proceed to the venue."

I thanked them with a soft smile and then turned my gaze toward Lucas. He adjusted his gloves, his eyes glowing with a dull golden light.

"Cece, I'll protect you no matter what. So don't forget what I told you earlier."

The unwavering strength in his voice and those eyes that stared straight ahead swept away all the anxiety inside of me. I nodded firmly.

"All right. I'll make sure to always have two guards by my side, and I won't stray from Anna and the others."

When I looked back at him, trusting him completely, he furrowed his brows like a stubborn child.

Read the room, demon knight!

"Damn it, I really don't want to let you out of this room. Are you sure we can't just skip it?"

"Prince Lucas?"

"All right, fine."

I raised my voice and used his formal title. My sweet smile urged him to get a grip, and he sighed dramatically, holding out his hand. I placed my hand in his without hesitation, and we headed toward the ballroom together.

The stares bored into my face and body.

I brushed off the emotions directed at me with a smile, placing my faith in the hand that held mine and stepped forward.

The soiree began when we kneeled before the king and queen, with the king expressing his gratitude to us and bidding us congratulations. It was the first party where I stood by Lucas's side from start to finish.

We joined the king and queen in a dance at the center of the ballroom, and after everyone applauded, we moved to seats that had been prepared beside the royal family's in a place of honor. I felt my smile stiffen as we sat down.

He's seated on a platform of equal height to the king's, just as I expected of a Hero. Even though I'm accustomed to attending these events as a quasi-royal, this position is quite nerve-wracking.

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, watching as he turned gracefully, his cloak swirling. Then I turned my attention to the

ballroom. The air seemed to freeze as dark, oppressive mana surged out from the hem of his cloak and flooded the hall.

The dignified composure he usually showed in his role as a member of the Imperial Order had given way to a terrifying pressure that sent everyone cowering, heads bowed, making the atmosphere suitable for anything but a party.

My heart pounded, and a cold sweat broke out as I struggled to understand what had driven Lucas to such a sudden outburst. I tried to speak, my gaze locked on his cold profile, when he murmured softly.

"I suppose I can barely tolerate a glance at the hem of your dress. It seems there are still fools who don't understand, but I can deal with them later."

It's because of my dress?! I wanted to drop to my knees and cover my face in shame.

His "tolerance" extends only as far as the hem of my dress? That means everyone has to basically look at the floor! I won't be able to greet anyone or carry on a conversation at this rate.

I was trembling from the sheer narrow-mindedness of his statement when he suddenly pulled me close, a dangerously sweet smile on his face.

"P-Prince L-Lucas?"

What?! I don't understand at all! The contrast between his smile and the aura at his feet is bewildering, and my chair is over there, not here! Even if we're technically keeping the appropriate distance,

having our faces this close defeats the purpose altogether! What is this?! He's aiming for that fine line where it's hard to criticize… He's being ridiculously clever!

I found myself impressed, caught off-guard by the absurdity of it all. But Lucas flipped my hand over and placed a kiss on my palm. *Wh-what are you doing?!*

"My beautiful lady, may I have your permission to kneel before you?"

This is not the time to be impressed, Cecilia!

What's he begging for with that kiss, anyway? Didn't he promise to behave properly? Is this what he means by respecting boundaries?! Yes, technically, he's keeping his distance, but that doesn't mean you can just look *like you're behaving!*

That radiant smile of his might let him get away with most things, but *this? Absolutely not! Especially not when he's trying to pull me into his lap!*

"P-Prince Lucas, you must be joking…" I somehow managed to reply. I took a shaky step back and glanced cautiously around the buzzing ballroom. Young ladies were hiding behind the backs of gentlemen, trying to avoid seeing our display of intimacy.

What is this obscene game of peek-a-boo?!

"You're being distant, Cecilia."

I am not! This is called normal! *I am behaving like a perfectly ordinary noblewoman!*

"Prince Lucas, everyone is waiting, so why don't we take our seats?"

Please, just sit down by yourself!

Even as his hand at my waist sneakily brushed suggestively against the edge of my dress, and even as he gently tapped the faint bite marks he'd left, even when he cocked his head adorably as if asking for something, I would never, *ever* call him by his pet name "Lukie" in public! *We agreed on waiting until after the engagement ceremony, didn't we? So just give it up and sit down already!*

When I smiled at him, infused with all the anger I could muster, he only deepened his smile and pressed a kiss to the back of my hand.

"You're charming even when you're cold, my goddess. Only you can command me. I will gladly obey your wishes."

His lips shifted to my fingertips as he casually disregarded the king's presence with a flippant remark, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

Lucas's position as a Hero in Bern was unrivaled. The fact that he was given a seat on the same platform as the king was proof of that. But no matter how high his position, it didn't mean he could ignore the king's commands.

To say that only I could command him publicly before the king rather than during whispered, secret words of love?! *Knowing him, this must be some kind of calculated move, but still… He may be a*

Hero who's tamed a dragon, but how could he say something so outrageous?!

His golden eyes narrowed slightly as if prompting me to respond. I exhaled softly, forcing myself to look up at him with a shy, demure expression befitting a prince's fiancée.

"I'm very flattered, but you simply must refrain from those jokes…" *I'll be angry, and I won't speak to you for days! I'll line the middle of the bed with so many pillows that you won't even be able to see my face. Are you okay with that?!*

"Ah ha ha. It was merely a joke, Cecilia."

"Oh ho ho, Prince Lucas. What am I going to do with you?"

Now, if you keep making those terrifying jokes while sounding serious about it, I'll make the second princess's quarters my permanent residence! Sit down!

I fixed a gaze full of simmering rage on him, but for some reason, he just smiled like he was enjoying it.

Argh, why does he make me so angry?!

At long last, the commotion subsided. I followed protocol and kneeled in front of the Hero Lucas, placing a kiss of allegiance on his proffered hand. I bowed to the king, then returned to my seat and sat up straight, looking out over the ballroom.

I'm exhausted. Being beside this man is an entirely different challenge than Felix. I suppose I'll have to investigate further into how serious he was about that comment tomorrow. I should do some more research into the Hero as well. There's no way the king would

let such an outburst slide with just a strained smile. That means the Hero, who wields the holy sword Eckesachs, is not merely equal to the king…

As I sat there, overwhelmed by the gravity of my fiancé's position, Prince Leon, who was seated nearby, leaned over and murmured softly.

"You did well. Thank you. I'm counting on you to handle him, because I can't."

"It's no trouble at all."

This is truly unbelievable, Prince Leon! What do you mean, you can't possibly handle him? But as long as Your Highness continues to reign, this overpowered Hero will remain by your side, so please do your best and don't give up!

"I'm really sorry for all the trouble I've caused. I truly am. But still, I think that dress looks better on you than the other one would have. Wait, Lucas! I was just complimenting her, saying your colors suit her!"

I shifted my gaze away from Prince Leon, who had now gone pale under Lucas's gaze, and glanced over at Lady Viviana by the VIP seats. She was shouting angrily at her attendant. "What is the meaning of this?!"

Could it be that she's not happy I didn't wear the champagne gold dress? But I worked so hard for this one… I had to go through endless rounds of kisses and orgasms, bound together by that cursed red chain at my wrists and ankles, and I was utterly humiliated for an

entire day. So I sincerely hope she will behave herself tonight. And please, no more trying to wear matching dresses, okay?

My eyes happened to meet Lady Viviana's. I pointed my fan at the neckline of my dress and gave her a sweet smile. She turned crimson and glared at me, clearly furious.

A contrasting color, and it's Lucas's color! Oh ho ho! I am his fiancée, so I won't let you stand beside him. You're really stupid! Villainesses have to really work hard in this world, don't they?

I tried to regain my composure and covered my mouth with the edge of my fan, letting out a soft breath. That was when a white-gloved hand was suddenly extended in front of me, catching my attention.

"Cecilia, please allow me to have the chance to have you all to myself once more."

Despite Finn whispering something into his ear, Lucas flashed a sweet smile at me. The twinkling lights from the chandelier glinted off his earring, making it gleam, and I clenched my teeth as I returned his smile.

"I'd love to, Prince Lucas."

Argh, I really can't stand this! It's infuriating! After everything he's done, I'm still filled with nothing but love for him. It's so frustrating! Damn it, now's the time to show what I've learned from all my princess training!

After reluctantly dancing a few more overly close dances with him, I moved toward Lady Anika.

Few high-ranking nobles would be foolish enough to hope for a scandal at a royal banquet like this. That was why the ones to be wary of here were the lower-ranking nobles whose situations were desperate enough that they'd lost all sense of decorum. However, without a formal introduction, it was difficult for those lesser nobles to approach someone of higher status. If any of them tried to make their way toward us, even when Lady Anika or Lord Alphonse weren't paying attention, the Imperial Order knights, who were acting as my bodyguards, would subtly step in their way. They'd even go so far as to touch the hilts of their swords as a warning.

Who on earth gave such a strict order? No way… Could the vice-captain have done it?

There wasn't even a sliver of a chance for anyone other than the most reputable nobles to approach us. If Lady Viviana tried to get close, Prince Leon would reluctantly take her by the arm and lead her into a dance to keep her at bay—thanks to someone's insistence.

As a result, the soiree was proceeding smoothly, without a single disturbance so far. There was no need for me to make any moves tonight.

I raised my guard for nothing! It's a bit disappointing, really. Although, it's best if nothing happens, of course.

I cast a sympathetic look at Prince Leon dancing down on the floor, only to have my view blocked by a broad figure.

Lucas slipped an arm around my waist and handed me a glass. I gave him a slightly reproachful glance but then thanked him politely, which made Lady Anika chuckle in amusement.

"Heh heh. I'm relieved to see that nothing's changed. When did my foolish brother sneak off to see you, Lady Cecilia?"

"Oh, um…" I stammered, feeling embarrassed by her knowing words.

Lucas casually responded, "It was quite soon after I returned from the campaign."

Don't you have any shame?!

"Wait, Your Highness. I heard her first official visit was to the second prince's quarters. That doesn't quite match up to what you're saying, does it?" Lord Alphonse questioned him pointedly, subtly implying, *"And weren't you supposed to have amnesia?"*

Lady Anika nodded in agreement, eyeing Lucas intently. I wanted to bury my face in my hands. *Oh no, this is going to end in humiliation, I just know it!*

"I fell in love with her at first sight the moment I saved her. There's no way I wouldn't fall for Cecilia all over again, so it's the natural outcome."

"I don't know what to say, even though he's my brother."

"When someone is this devoted, it's almost admirable…"

Nooo, I want to disappear!

This isn't something you just casually declare at a royal soiree to your sister and her husband with a straight face! Nor is it something you should say while kissing the ring on my finger and murmuring, "Then and now, I only have eyes for you!"

I'm already at my limit when it comes to trying not to blush, but is this really how the entire party is going to go?!

I inwardly lamented, but I couldn't help but widen my eyes when Lady Anika said something that surprised me.

"Ha ha. So that's why Lucas acted so intimidating and was joking around at the start of the soiree. I'm sure after that, nearly all of the young ladies decided not to approach him. And I'm sure no one would dare try anything with Lady Cecilia. Don't you think so, Anna and Kate?" she said.

"He's the kind of man who's willing to let her use him as a chair out of sheer love, even though he's the Hero!" Anna said.

"Anyone who tries to get between them is just asking for trouble," Kate agreed.

I brushed off their words—or at least, I *almost* managed to brush them off. However, what Alphonse said next was enough for the words to linger in my mind. "He'd probably send the black dragon straight at anyone who tried anything."

Wait, so all that glaring and vulgar back and forth had a reason?

Was he really fulfilling my impossible, foolish wish? I really wish *he'd consider a better approach.* Some of the young ladies and even a few older ones had fainted from the room's intimidating aura and oppressive mana. Everyone else within visible range had been left trembling or on the verge of tears.

Despite the slight anxiety I felt at the thought of our relationship becoming a source of such dread, I couldn't ignore the happiness

inside of me. My chest tightened with a pain that almost brought tears to my eyes as I lifted my gaze to my beloved.

My throat felt too hot and tight to properly voice my gratitude, but he still smiled back at me with genuine joy.

"You looked so adorable wrapped up in those curtains. But seeing you cry like that was unbearable…"

"You didn't have to add that part!"

You did it on purpose, didn't you? I lightly smacked his chest with a sound that came out far too soft to be considered admonishment. My cheeks flushed from the embarrassment of how weak I was when he expressed his feelings for me, and he pulled me even closer.

I was grateful for the time he gave me to collect myself, and I buried myself against his chest before glancing upat him. He sighed softly. *Huh? What are* you *sighing about?*

"My self-control's about to hit its limit… How about we head back to the room?"

"Your self-con… No, I am not going back! This is your fault in the first place…"

Panicking, I pushed against his chest to put some distance between us. But he tightened his grip around my waist, drawing our faces even closer.

"It *is* my fault, so everything about you is mine. If you won't go back, then at least look only at me." His words dripped with possessiveness, accompanied by a displeased expression on his face.

You're already the only one I'm looking at! Can you please not be so demanding?! My inner self was practically jumping for joy, and I couldn't stop her.

Unable to come up with a response, I ended up glaring at him out of sheer embarrassment. But for some reason, Lucas responded with a smile.

What? Why does he look so happy when I'm glaring at him? I just don't get it…

Just as I was caught up in this bizarre situation, trying to figure out if he was in a good mood or a bad mood, Lady Anika suddenly waved her fan at us in an exaggerated manner. *Ugh, what now?*

"That's enough, you two. Tone down the flirting a bit. It's starting to make *us* feel hot. Although it does seem like you're closer than before. Care to share some details?" Lady Anika tipped her head with a mischievous smile.

"You were a bit more formal with each other before, weren't you?" Lord Alphonse's comment made me stiffen. Meanwhile, Anna and Kate began to fan us with smirks.

"You're calling each other by first name, *cough cough…*" Anna said.

"And having lovers' quarrels—*cough, cough…*" Kate added.

Oh no, they're just making things worse! They're coughing, but that's only drawing Lady Anika's attention more! They're doing this on purpose, aren't they?!

"First names? Lovers' quarrels? Oh my… Really, now? So when should we have our next tea party, hmm?" Lady Anika asked.

Ugh, now she's planning another tea party! That's just another excuse to embarrass me publicly while disguised as a social gathering! I have to come up with some excuse to get out of it!

As I began to panic, Lucas touched my chin, directing my gaze toward him. *Please help!* I silently pleaded, but he just muttered something with a pouty look on his face.

"I'd rather just go ahead and get married already."

"Could you please not skip over the engagement?"

How selfish can you be? His sudden outburst made my cheeks flush, and I glared at him in exasperation. Lady Anika couldn't hold back her laughter. *She's really enjoying this, isn't she?*

"Heh heh. Lucas, even if you marry her, you can't keep Lady Cecilia all to yourself. Such a beautiful flower deserves to be admired."

"I don't want anyone else looking," he said.

"Such a possessive little devil. You should really show a bit of maturity since you're the older one, you know," she scolded.

"Just leave me alone already," he grumbled.

Her last remark made something click in my mind. *Wait a minute, I almost forgot… Lucas is two years older than me!* Being with him had always felt so natural and comfortable that I never noticed the age gap. He always made me feel safe, but he never acted like he was older than me. In fact, he was downright childish sometimes.

But even if Lucas was younger than me, I knew I would still love him just as much and want to stay by his side.

"Lady Cecilia, you could also try acting a bit more your age."

"Anika, don't say things like that…" Alphonse started.

"Cece?"

"I-I don't care about age…as long as I'm with you, Lord Lukie. I-I mean, I don't think age matters. Er, I mean, it doesn't, um…"

The moment I pictured him confessing his love to me as if we were the same age and calling my name out in that sweet voice, my feelings just slipped out. I desperately plastered a smile on my face to prevent any further pursuit of the topic when I noticed Lady Anika's eyes lighting up.

"Oh my, this is even better than I imagined! Heh heh…" she said with a quiet giggle.

I gritted my teeth hard. *Now's the time to force myself not to blush!*

The maids behind me, who were *supposed* to be on my side dealt the final blow when they began to chant in a sing-song voice. "Age doesn't matter, oooh!"

"Older or younger, it doesn't matter! Oooh!"

I could feel the heat rushing toward my face and sweat threatened to drip down my back. I turned a desperate gaze toward Lucas, silently begging him to put a stop to this, but he just leaned in closer.

"What were you imagining just now, my dear Cecilia?"

"N-nothing. Nothing at all."

But I was! And yes, I did imagine that a younger version of you would be so adorable! I'm sorry!

"My brother's got such a naughty personality. I wonder if it's our older brother's fault?"

"No, it has nothing to do with Lord Dirk. Never mind…"

What do you mean, "never mind," Lord Alphonse?! He flashed Lady Anika a tender look. *Wait, could his naughty personality be because of his sister's influence?!*

"Cece?"

As he gradually leaned in close to me, my cheeks began to flush. *Why are you cornering me like this?!* I thought with irritation, snapping back without thinking.

"I was just reminding myself that you're two years older!"

Lucas froze and narrowed his eyes, frowning as his face flushed. "I'm two years older, but is that a problem?"

No, no problem at all. But isn't he being a little too sensitive about it? Now that I think about it, didn't he say he'd try his best? As the memory came rushing back, I noticed Lord Alphonse and Lady Anika whispering nearby.

"I can't believe Lukie would get so embarrassed and sullen! The recording crystal! I need to get the recording crystal ready."

"It's all right, Anika. I have it right here."

What are they doing?! I wondered with bewilderment. I had

assumed such tasks would be left to the maids behind us…

Despite those thoughts, I couldn't help but smile at the duality of how someone so strong could also be so adorable.

If it weren't you, I wouldn't have fallen this deeply. And honestly, the sight of this divinely beautiful man getting flustered is just too adorable! Don't worry, my inner self is also swooning with delight, so there's nothing to worry about. But still, I should probably just put an end to things here and be honest about it.

"No, there's absolutely no problem. I genuinely was just remembering that you're older, that's all." I gave him a look that said, *Didn't I tell you that I love you just as you are?*

Lucas finally flushed with a frustrated look. *I don't get it. Ah, but he's so cute, though!*

"S-sorry I'm not acting like I'm two years older, then. And what exactly were you imagining, anyway?"

"I was wondering what it might be like if you were younger than me."

"And?"

I told him the basics of the scenario I imagined and laughed despite myself as he grumbled. "You're really going to ask me that?"

"He really asked!" Lady Anika said.

"So devoted," Alphonse agreed.

"Sticking to your convictions!" Anna said.

"Sticking to your first love!" Kate said.

I ignored their comments as my heart trembled sweetly, knowing how much he truly loved me.

"Do you really want to know more details?" My voice came out sounding more excited than I intended, making me feel a bit shy. I lowered my gaze. Lucas took my hand and gently lifted it.

"Of course I want to know. Now, how about a dance, my darling?"

"Yes, I'd love that."

Let's continue this conversation alone. His slightly bashful suggestion made my heart swell, and I placed my hand on his arm.

He spun me around gracefully, then looked at me with a warm gaze as he spoke softly. "Cece, I'm sorry. But I have to step out for a bit."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing serious. I'll be back soon, but just don't leave Anna and the others, okay?"

What's going on? Although the expression on his face and his tone of voice were gentle, there was something slightly unnerving about it all.

"I understand. I'll wait here, just as I promised," I responded. "I'm not some reckless child without common sense, you know."

Oops, maybe that was a bit rude…

Lucas smiled at me and then murmured softly as if casting a spell to protect my heart. "I love you, Cecilia."

"I-I love you too, but…where did that come from all of a sudden?"

His confession out of the blue caught me off-guard. My cheeks burned as I stammered a reply, but he didn't answer. Instead, his golden eyes just softened warmly.

Once the song ended, we returned to Lady Anika and the others. Lucas said a few words and left me in the maids' care. But before he left, he leaned in close and murmured something terrifyingly sweet in my ear.

"Break your promise, and there *will* be consequences, Cece."

"…!"

That was something I definitely didn't want to hear. Chills raced down my spine, and a cold sweat broke out all over my body.

He smiled calmly when he saw me freeze, then narrowed his eyes and traced his leather-gloved hand from my ear down to my jaw. The light pressure of his touch made my lips tremble. He let out a quiet laugh, then left with his cloak billowing behind him as he disappeared through the back entrance, which was reserved for royals.

I stared after him, still rooted to the spot. Kate approached with a glass in hand, pulling me back to reality. I let out a soft breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and quickly took the glass, bringing it to my lips to detract from my flustered state.

The image that flashed through my mind was that unnervingly dark smile on his face when he found *Wifely Duties in the Bedroom,*

Part Two, which I'd hidden in the nightstand drawer.

"That's where you learned these things? I was worried, wondering who taught you. Hm, my wife is so diligent…"

I'd completely forgotten to put it back. But it was just study material, so no lives should be at stake…

I blushed furiously at the memory of what I'd done according to that guidebook and muttered, "Please give it back."

He laughed, clearly pleased, and handed it over without a fuss. Then he proudly pulled out another book. The title read *The Husband's Guide to Pleasing His Wife,* but his fingers covered the edition number.

"Cecilia, I wanted to make you happy too, so I thought I should try harder as a husband."

As he spoke, he deliberately revealed the previously covered "*Extra Edition, Volume 1*" part of the title, and my face felt so hot I thought it might explode.

"What?!"

You don't need to study for that at all! It says Extra Edition *on it! Why start with the extra edition? And what's even* in *an extra edition?! There's no way it's anything good, that's for sure! The next volume should be* The Husband's Guide to Pleasing His Wife, Volume 2, *so why is it an* Extra Edition, Volume 1 *instead?! The number might be right, but the content is so wrong!*

I didn't even know where to begin or if I should even comment at all. But what I did know was that fleeing would be dangerous. I

swallowed hard and found myself staring into those dark eyes of his.

"Cece. My adorable wife."

"Y-yes?"

The demon knight called my name sweetly, like a seductive spell meant to melt me, and pinned me down with just his voice. He flipped open the book in front of me with a flourish.

"It's a little—just a *little*—intense, but do you think you can handle it?"

Seriously, what on earth is he thinking?! What sort of incomprehensible creature are you?!

I didn't even know how to respond. No one, not even a single soul, would look at that terrifying illustration in front of me and say, "Yes, darling! I'm all in! Bring it on!"

Or do all wives respond to their husbands' requests like that? Am I supposed to try harder as a wife, too? But can I even manage that?

I foolishly questioned myself, a shadowy version of me emerging from deep within my mind, whispering, "Of course you can. After all, you love him enough to endure being confined or even killed, don't you? You *want* to be tied up and kept by his side. It's easy for you."

Ah, I see.

So I can *do it. I'm already that far gone, huh? Well then, I guess I should show my resolve as a wife… Wait, what am I thinking?! I can't do that! No, absolutely not!*

Your mind is just playing tricks on you, Cecilia! You're hallucinating from exhaustion! Because this is beyond mere poetic expressions like "drowning in love." I absolutely can't let it get that far!

So refuse! Refuse everything! Just reject it all!

Faced with the utterly obscene, borderline perverse drawings and text that surpassed them in sheer shock value, I turned beet red, my body trembling and tears welling in my eyes. He tipped his head to the side and asked, "Is it too much?" I immediately jumped up and nodded my head as fast as humanly possible. *No hesitation, absolutely not!* I nodded my head so hard I thought my neck might snap.

He gave me a curious look and muttered, "Oh, so this one's for punishment, then…"

What? No way! It's way too soon to be bringing out the punishments!

Seriously, what does he mean by punishment? I've spent six years being educated as a proper lady. I don't deserve to be punished for anything! At least, that's what I *wanted* to say, but I couldn't muster up the courage.

Because if I said that and he decided to test out that book on the spot, I'd be in trouble!

No, no, no! That would be terrible!

Calm down, Cecilia. It's fine as long as you stick to your promise. Just stay close to Anna and always have a guard with you.

That's simple. After six long years of princess training, you've got this down pat! Ho ho ho…

Ahh, I'm so scared!

He's been murmuring things like "I wish you couldn't live without me" more and more lately, which I thought was strange enough, but who knows if he'd go as far as studying that kind of material! He even muttered about how "These magic ropes don't leave any marks and don't cause pain. How convenient!" But what if he turned his fantasies about tying us up together into reality?! Well, he certainly understands his kinks!

"Lady Cecilia, are you all right?" Anna asked.

"Oh, um, I felt a bit warm from dancing, so I'd like to step out onto the balcony." I was struggling to calm my racing heartbeat, so I felt grateful that Anna spoke up.

Thank you, my wonderful, capable maid! I really need to get ahold of myself, so please stay with me. Don't leave my side!

"Of course. Shall I bring you something to drink?"

"Another glass would be lovely."

Stay calm, stay calm, I repeated it like a mantra while informing Lady Anika and Lord Alphonse that I was stepping out, then made my way to the balcony with my guards in tow.

But just as I stepped out, I saw something that made my heart sink. A dazzlingly dressed group of young nobles surrounded by equally dazzling guards was moving through the crowd. In the middle of them all was someone wearing a champagne gold dress.

Ugh, not now! I'm too mentally exhausted to deal with her!

"Surely she isn't coming *this* way with that whole entourage?" Anna said.

"We should increase the guards. Lady Cecilia, the knights are changing shifts," Kate whispered, making me glance up.

I caught a glimpse of the knights coming toward us and tried my hardest to maintain my composure.

I quickly and discreetly moved my gaze around the hall, searching frantically for Lucas's blue hair, and my heart skipped a beat when I found it among the approaching group.

What is going on? Another knight had approached me and offered his hand. My eyes widened, darting back to him. Trembling slightly, I let my fingers rest on his palm.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" I said.

Standing face to face on the dimly lit balcony with only the gentle splashing of a fountain in the background, I stared at the crimson-uniformed knight. As I forced out the words, he softly chuckled and spoke.

"Yes, I suppose it has. Would you like another glass?" That familiar voice—one I could never mistake—sent a shiver down my spine. It was Lucas, using the same transformation spell he used when we would go out to town incognito together. But how could that be? Because Lucas was with Viviana's group, which was approaching me right now!

The outrageous turn of events left me feeling so shaken that I couldn't stop myself from raising my voice.

"No, that won't be necessary. What are you even doing here?!"

"I'm on guard duty."

"That's not what I'm asking, and you know it!"

His calm, collected tone only made me angrier. I tried to argue, but he gently drew me closer and whispered in a voice as cold as ice, "You wouldn't want to see a massacre, now, would you?"

The instant I understood his meaning, I gasped—only for a voice to call out at the worst possible moment.

"Good evening, Lady Cecilia."

I gripped my fan so tightly that my nails dug into my palm, forcing myself to release a slow, steady breath to calm my racing thoughts.

I felt the knight carefully watching my reaction. I shot a glare at him and then carefully released his hand.

"Good evening. Are you enjoying the ball, Lady Viviana?" I turned my face toward her as I spoke to her.

She met my gaze with a radiant, mocking smile.

Calm down, Cecilia. It's okay; we're still outside on the balcony. If she'd approached me inside the hall, this could've gone terribly wrong! It's fine. Just stay calm and deal with this…

But before I could finish calming myself, Viviana raised her voice in a shrill, piercing tone.

"By the way, Lady Cecilia, what are you doing out here, chatting so intimately with a knight all alone? Does Prince Lucas know?"

What is she playing at? What's her angle?

"Of course he does."

I hadn't anticipated this situation at all, and my blood ran cold as I tried to keep my voice steady. If this got out, it could easily turn into a diplomatic crisis. *No, it could turn into an all-out war!*

Here in Bern, the person standing beside me was arguably more important than the king himself, and any affront to him, especially considering he possessed Eckesachs, would be catastrophic. Cold sweat broke out on my skin.

The fact that the sacred sword Eckesachs had a will of its own meant it could choose its own master. If the sword were to vanish from Bern because of this insult, not even Viviana's ties to the queen's family could save her. *Nothing* could.

She wouldn't just lose her title. Her punishment would be very severe. As for the queen herself, at best, she'd be forced to drink poison. At worst, she'd be stripped of her title, paraded through the streets, and publicly executed.

And with that, His Majesty would be forced to abdicate, and since Prince Leon was descended from that disgraced queen, his reign would eventually lose its luster.

But more importantly, since Bern was next to the border forest, without Eckesachs it would be unable to slay the magical beasts and soon fall to ruin.

How many people would suffer because of her desires?

It no longer mattered what methods she used. No matter how noble the blood flowing through her veins, it had lost all significance and value in Bern. Yet this woman seemed completely unaware of it.

Half of me analyzed the situation with a calm detachment, but the other half seethed with emotion.

Meanwhile, I stared at the man who stood next to her—at his hair the color of daybreak and his handsome face full of fury.

Just then, I felt a hand gently touch my waist, tapping softly as if to soothe me. But the sensation only fanned the flames of my anger.

My Lucas.

"Lucas" tenderly took Lady Viviana's offered hand. As I watched them slowly step forward, I realized I was staring at his white knight's uniform with such irritation that I could burn a hole through it.

My Lukie…

"Is that true, Prince Lucas?"

Instead of focusing on Lady Viviana, who could barely contain her joy, I met the cloudy gold eyes gazing back at me and waited for him to speak.

"I have no idea what you mean. What's this about? Were you cheating on me, Cecilia?"

Hearing the voice I cherished so much speak with unabashed arrogance and address me with such familiarity made all the issues

swirling in my mind drowned out by the storm of emotion and memories.

Behind my closed eyelids, I saw the image of my former fiancé and his lover, forcing me to my knees with false accusations, shamelessly announcing the dissolution of our engagement.

I blinked once and then came back to reality.

The man next to Viviana and holding her hand was identical to the one who had been standing beside me just moments before. The sight played out as if it were the same nightmare repeating itself. The fan in my hand creaked, and that sound became the trigger that unleashed the rage within.

How dare they insult my precious Lukie?!

"Lady Viviana, I would appreciate it if you refrained from making such jokes."

My vision turned red with fury for the first time in my seventeen years, and I spoke with a voice so cold it didn't even sound like my own.

I raised only the corners of my mouth and looked her square in the eye. She chirped in a boastful voice, "Shouldn't *you* be the one to take things more lightly, Lady Cecilia? I can understand why you'd want to believe it's a joke, but…"

"Then it's not a joke?"

I tipped my head slightly as I asked, and Lady Viviana plastered a look of apology on her face. "I even considered stepping back, feeling I owed it to you, Lady Cecilia. But then, Prince Lucas…"

"Who?" I cut her off mid-sentence, thinking this would be the last chance I gave her.

She puffed out her cheeks sullenly, her response immediate and petulant. "You need to face reality. Isn't he standing right beside me? Prince Lucas. Lucas Theo—"

"Viviana Belloni."

How foolish! How arrogant! How utterly infuriating! To think she would use the one and only person I love in this world to humiliate me and drag me down!

Unable to even muster a smile any longer, I turned my gaze on Lady Viviana and the man beside her with his godlike beauty. My look could kill.

"What? How dare you?!" she began.

"Silence, Viviana Belloni. Close that foolish mouth of yours this instant!"

"Excuse me?! I carry royal blood! Even if you are still the Hero's fiancée, what makes you think a mere marquess's daughter has the right to speak to me like that?!"

Her words brimmed with haughty pride, drawing a dark chuckle from me.

"You are a marquess's daughter who barely bears the blood of a foreign royal house and uses our kingdom's Hero's name without permission. You dare to speak it so lightly. *You're* the one who should know your place. He is the true Hero who wields the sacred sword Eckesachs and commands dragons. *That's* how noble he is. You've

done something that cannot be dismissed as a mere joke. Now, return to your guesthouse immediately. That is an order!”

“Wh-what did you say?!”

Even though I made it clear that using Lucas’s name carelessly was an unforgivable act, she didn’t seem to grasp it.

Her face flushed with rage as she turned to the man holding her hand for help, and I shot an angrier glare at him.

How dare you stand before me again? I thought, pouring all my anger into my gaze.

“As for you, I don’t know what you were thinking when you did this, but I will not tolerate any more of your foolishness. Leave this place immediately. Leave my sight!”

But he merely smiled in response to my fury and spoke in a tone as clueless as it was mocking.

“Why? That’s strange. Aren’t we still engaged?”

“Are you joking?” I retorted sharply.

Pleased by my reaction, he twisted his handsome face into a sneer and burst out laughing.

“Pfft, aha ha ha! That’s right, you’re still my fiancée! And soon you’ll become a miserable woman, publicly rejected and abandoned once again, Cecilia!”

“…”

I understood now why Lady Viviana had gone to see Felix. After learning about the broken engagement, she must’ve decided to put me through the same ordeal. She wanted me to be humiliated again,

dumped in public by a man who'd already put a ring on my finger and treated me as if we were practically married. She wanted me to be a woman twice scorned, forcing me to walk away from Lucas myself, despite knowing that *his* declaring our engagement annulled would hold no validity.

All so she could take my place beside him.

Without even considering how much that would tarnish Lucas's honor.

"All that, for something so ridiculous."

"What's this? Are you finally going to cry and beg me not to do it?" the man beside her taunted.

"Oh my, how pitiful. Poor Lady Cecilia. But crying won't help you now! We've realized our true love, so stop clinging to the title of the second prince's fiancée and just disappear already, won't you? Oh, and don't worry. I've never been abandoned, so I'm not tainted in any way. I'm perfectly suited to stand by Prince Lucas's side!"

"Heh. Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha."

A laugh slipped out of me. I couldn't help it. I found myself caught somewhere between disbelief at being forced onto the same stage once again and sheer anger at how absurdly selfish her reasoning was.

Love could certainly be a terrifyingly powerful force.

I'd seen it between Lady Mia and Felix. And I, too, had been consumed by jealousy before, only to end up horribly burned by my own embarrassment afterward. In the end, I was practically roasted

alive in the hellfire of his sadistic jealousy. *No, Cecilia, don't think about that! You have to forget it! Why is my heart fluttering at the memory of such mortifying jealousy?*

Curse you, foolish heart! You're utterly hopeless! That's why it's easy to understand why people do such ridiculous things for love. Well, maybe not this *ridiculous…*

No, this is different. This isn't just a love-stricken tantrum. It's downright insanity.

Whether it was madness driven by love or not, I could never forgive it. I could never allow it.

After all, who could defile the honor of the very person they claimed to love just to clear a path by their side? It was unthinkable and unforgivable.

Lady Viviana was a perfect example of a highborn noblewoman. Prideful and shrewd, different from Lady Mia, who was just a ditz. But still, even then, Mia always acted on her own. This time, it was less about Viviana and more about the man standing beside her.

If that man had even a shred of common sense, he wouldn't be helping her carry out this reckless plan. And yet, it didn't feel like he was doing it out of affection or loyalty, either. It was as if he had his own agenda. *But that's impossible, isn't it?*

In any case, whoever decided that every wannabe couple had to have a villainess in their play was really annoying.

I'd only ever known the first act, where Lady Mia played the heroine, but could this be some kind of twisted sequel?

Not that it matters. I'm not about to give up here. Not now, after all the insults they've thrown at him. There's no going back for any of us.

I felt the steady presence beside me and the reassuring weight of his hand at my waist, then found myself smiling.

Sorry, but this villainess has a ruthless demon knight on her side.

You've got your own guard with you, and since you brought "Lucas" along, I'm sure you've also arranged for someone with magic, haven't you? I warned you to back off, so you have no right to complain, do you?

I will never forgive you or those who choose to aid you.

Well then. Shall we proceed with this "annulment" or whatever you're trying to pull? If you think you can, that is, I thought as I snapped my fan against my palm, putting on my best smile. Viviana raised her voice in frustration when I didn't react like she expected.

"Why are you smiling? This happened a second time to you because you always act so high and mighty like that!"

"It happened a second time?"

"That's right! Your fiancé chose *me!* Don't you understand what that means?!"

Apparently, she thought I'd be angry or devastated. I do understand what she's implying. But more than that, I have to wonder exactly how she even sees Lucas.

True, the spell was elegantly constructed, but the real Lucas was far more beautiful and sexier than this knockoff. As a woman, that made me grit my teeth. So I refused to acknowledge that the person standing beside her was Lucas, when I knew he was little more than some petty imitation.

But most of all, his eyes are all wrong.

The gold in Lucas's eyes was far more beautiful. It was a deep, vibrant gold, pure and almost maddening, that couldn't be replicated. His eyes shone with a brilliance that captured your heart and refused to let go. I was certain there was no shade of gold in this world as mesmerizing as his.

But this is cheap fool's gold. To think that someone would try to pass this off as him is simply infuriating!

"Ha ha. You really tried to be thorough in the details. But there's no need to worry about me. Please, by all means, go ahead. After all, now that you've realized your 'true love,' you're going to declare my engagement annulled, aren't you? However, you *are* aware that it's not possible to annul my engagement, of course?

"We've already exchanged marital vows." I concealed my smirk with my left hand as I deliberately showed off my ring.

"That ring isn't official, is it?! So just take it off! Besides, any marriage you had with Prince Lucas before he lost his memory is invalid!" Viviana's voice rang out in protest.

Invalid?!

Well, it was true that it wasn't an official marriage, but the vows were made in the presence of both our families and the crown prince himself. To declare it null and void so brazenly was honestly borderline treason.

Does this mean the queen really is backing her if she's acting so boldly? If she is, then that could be a problem…

Frankly, it was reckless for someone in the queen's position to object to the Hero's marriage. Her reputation took a hit the moment she supported Felix breaking off his engagement with me. Worse, she even hinted that if something happened to Lucas, she wanted me to take Felix back.

Now that Lucas had returned from his campaign, most of the nobles had distanced themselves from the queen since they feared his wrath. Even if I were to silence Viviana here, it wouldn't be over. The queen would be facing permanent seclusion, especially considering she'd already dumped most of her duties onto me, anyway. Honestly, that would make things easier. Then I wouldn't have to consult with her anymore.

I was so mentally exhausted that my train of thought dipped into quite a dark direction. But then I saw the pair of pale gold eyes glaring venomously at the ring on my finger.

"Yes, you should take that ring off." His voice was filled with inexplicable hatred, sending a chill down my spine.

Does he know it can't be removed? I clenched my fan tightly and felt the hand on my waist gently patting me to calm me down.

He leaned in ever so slightly, his familiar warmth easing the chill that had gripped me.

I outstretched my left hand and spoke to the man standing next to Viviana. “Go ahead. Try to take it off, then.”

His eyes lit up lit up happily and he grinned as he stepped toward me.

My body reflexively tensed up at the sight of his hand reaching out without hesitation, and suddenly, a sharp, crackling sound rang out. A bolt of violet lightning exploded from my ring, sending him flying back, scorching his white knight’s uniform. I couldn’t help but let out a gasp.

Wow, the Promise Mark’s power is way too effective!

But the fact that it burned meant that his uniform wasn’t conjured by illusion magic.

There was no way Viviana could get her hands on the real thing. The Hero’s uniform was regarded as a national treasure. Even if I did manage to settle this peacefully, the queen’s involvement was undeniable, and Prince Leon’s marriage would probably be pushed even more aggressively.

“Argh…”

As I inwardly panicked, I watched him fall onto the balcony floor, clutching his side with pain, a shocked look on his face as I fixed a cold gaze on him.

“So sorry about that. It seems the Promise Mark repelled you.”

I could feel my companion's shoulder shaking with silent laughter, but I chose to ignore it.

Stop laughing! That violent lightning is too powerful, even for a Black Dragon! I screamed internally, then turned to the couple before me and reiterated the significance of our bond.

But the man's face twisted with rage as he shouted back at me.

"Don't mock me! Since when did you start an affair with another man, Cecilia?! The Promise Mark should've disappeared! Is it the knight standing beside you?!"

"An affair with a knight?! I knew it! Things aren't going well between you and Prince Lucas at all since he lost his memories! Even though he always treats you so kindly, you are the worst kind of woman! You've been humiliated and cast aside before with disgrace, so just get out of his sight already!" Viviana shouted.

So he knows about the Mark disappearing once…

Right after Lucas returned from his campaign, Marshall Weber announced that he himself was no longer considered the Hero. Then, a royal decree was issued to never refer to anyone else as Hero Theoderic except for Lucas from now on. *I suppose anyone could've guessed that. But Lady Viviana's more of an airhead, so someone must be feeding her the information. I'll have to look into it later.*

Still, the way this man pretending to be Lucas is talking is seriously irritating me.

You're the one whose romance supposedly started from an affair, so why am I *the one being portrayed as the cheater? Does he*

expect me to shout something back dramatically like "You! When did you start having an affair with Lady Viviana?!" like this is a soap opera or something?

Absolutely not. I have no desire to scream such nonsense at someone I don't even like—no, someone I don't even know! And more importantly, the reaction of the man beside me is terrifying.

I'm quite fond of my life, so I'll refrain from making any reckless remarks. Also, I wish Lady Viviana would realize that her accusations are a bit off.

The way she was speaking didn't sound anywhere near a declaration of true love. And she wasn't even treating the person standing next to her as if he were Lucas. Despite all the trouble she must have gone to stage this farce, I couldn't help but find it terribly sloppy.

Meanwhile, as I stood there being falsely accused of an affair I never committed in front of the person I loved, my thoughts were going wild. *Just take them down already! Strike them down, and don't even give them time to recover, or they'll hit back!*

I gripped my fan firmly to steady myself as I looked straight at the two of them and opened my mouth to speak. "Would you stop this nonsense already? On what basis are you claiming that I have feelings for anyone other than Prince Lucas? And why are you so certain that the name etched on my Mark isn't his? Where is your proof?"

"Proof? My proof is obvious! Prince Lucas lost his memory of you! That's why you didn't come to the palace for so long, isn't it?!"

There it is again. His amnesia is supposed to be classified, so why does she keep speaking about it so boldly?

"Even if Prince Lucas did lose his memory, why does that prove that I was unfaithful to him? The prince's residence only allows for the rightful princess to live there. Even a fiancée can't remain without the royal family's approval and associated nobility's approval. Despite that, not only did he summon me there, but he kept me by his side and showed his unwavering affection through both his words and his actions. You saw it yourself, Lady Viviana. The very person I pledged my life to safely returned to me. So how could I possibly love anyone else with such a person by my side?"

I sighed my exasperation, and the man who was still on the ground ripped off his charred cloak and slammed it onto the ground.

"But you repelled me with the Promise Mark! If you truly loved me, there's no way the Mark could exist! The name should have changed after the campaign and vanished! So why can't I touch you?!"

I couldn't help but laugh at his desperate shouts, which revealed his identity.

"Ha ha. Pfft, ah ha ha! What you're saying doesn't even make sense! The Promise Mark exists *because* I love Prince Lucas."

"What?"

He stood there with his mouth and eyes wide open. I stared directly into his pale golden eyes and feigned a sorrowful expression.

"How terrible… Didn't you promise me that your love wouldn't change? That's why I also proved my unchanged love, too. Isn't it odd, though? If you were *really* Prince Lucas, the Promise Mark wouldn't repel you. And there'd be no reason for you to try to take off my ring." I tipped my head slightly and narrowed my eyes as if deep in thought. I saw the man in front of me tense up.

If Lucas wanted to annul our marriage vows, all he had to do was remove his earring, and it would be done instantly—no groundwork or other documents necessary. After all, he was the Hero. Even though I wore his ring, given that I wasn't yet officially his princess and he'd lost his memory, I probably wouldn't have any say in the matter. I'd be demoted back to just being a mere fiancée. Such was the reality of noble society.

Wow, imagining that is really depressing… As my shoulders slumped, my companion gave me a comforting pat on my waist.

He's tapping me like it's Morse code or something. Can he really read my mind? The fact that a simple tap can calm me down is kind of embarrassing.

I softened my expression, putting a smile on my face of gratitude and trust, then looked back and forth between the two people in front of me who were now too stunned to speak.

I really do feel like the villain here…

But I brushed that thought aside and turned my attention to Viviana, whose shoulders trembled with rage.

"Lady Viviana, as I already said before, the engagement between Prince Lucas and me cannot be dissolved. I will never

renounce my position as his fiancée. There's no sign of this supposed 'true love' of yours anywhere. How long do you intend to keep up this ridiculous charade?" I kept my tone quiet and calm, but her face twisted with frustration.

"Why?" she asked stubbornly.

Her question made my chest sear with a burning rage.

"*Why*, you ask? That's what I'd like to know. Do you think that just because you're related to the queen and have the blood of a neighboring kingdom's royal family that you can do as you please? If so, abandon those thoughts immediately. What you have done here is nothing short of a diplomatic offense. Worst case, you could have started a war. And why is someone who is repelled by the Promise Mark and cannot bypass it dressed in the white knight's uniform, which is granted only to the Hero of Bern?!" My words came out sharper than I intended due to my rising emotions, causing both of them to widen their eyes again.

I pointed my fan directly at the beautiful yet stunned face before me and let the irritation drip from my voice as I spoke. "And you. I won't even address the disrespect of wearing that uniform just yet. However, from this moment forward, don't you *dare* speak my name so casually! The only person who may call me by name is the person I've pledged my life to," I said.

"Wh-what?"

"And as for you, Lady Viviana. Oh, where should I even begin? Well, I suppose it's best to start with the most important matter."

"Wh-what do you mean, the most important matter?!"

I tried to organize my thoughts for a few moments, but as I did, I felt a surge of heat spread through my entire body, filling me with rage from the top of my head down to the tips of my toes.

She had created a cheap imitation and had the audacity to call that *thing* by *his* name repeatedly.

Lucas had spent nine long years in service as a knight. He'd undertaken countless campaigns as a Hero that threatened his life. Even his amnesia was treated like nothing.

The mockery of Lucas's life, all of his pain, suffering, and relentless hard work, is something I can never, ever forgive!

"Viviana Belloni. I hereby forbid you from ever saying the name of Bern's Hero for the rest of your life, from ever standing in his presence, or even associating with him in any way. And if you *dare* to insult our kingdom's Hero again, I will see to it by whatever means necessary that by tomorrow evening, you will be cast out of the capital and never set foot in the kingdom of Bern ever again. And I will make sure you are sent to a nunnery so that you can never bring about such a disgrace ever again."

"What?! Y-you can't be serious! You don't have the authority to lock me away in a convent!"

"Authority? Are you implying that I should stay silent in the face of this outrageous behavior?!"

Seeing her show no remorse about what she had done whittled away the last remnants of my self-control, urging me to show no mercy.

"Look!" I said, pointing to the man clutching his side, wearing the charred knight's uniform. "How many times are you going to call *that person*, who is merely wearing a white knight's uniform—a person whose uniform was scorched by nothing more than a simple Promise Mark, a person who can't even use healing magic, Bern's Hero?! How many times are you going to call that impostor by Prince Lucas's name?! Mocking me is one thing, but using his image in such a senseless act to demean him?! Don't you *dare* insult my beloved Lord Lukie ever again!"

The atmosphere on the balcony froze after my outburst.

As I stared at the gazes directed at me, I looked down and let out a small sigh. I wanted to curl up right then and there.

Oh no, I got too heated and said more than I should have… I want to crawl into a hole and die!

But I knew I couldn't let up just yet. *Come on, keep it together,* I told myself, struggling to make eye contact as my companion's face leaned toward mine. I tried to keep my face from turning bright red and steeled myself, but he showed no mercy as he lifted my hand, and I couldn't stop my lips from trembling.

Please, I'm begging you! I'm really mortified right now that I called you Lukie in front of everyone, so please don't pull me close and start kissing the ring!



"What is going on?"

"Wait just a minute! That knight right there must be the man you're having an affair with!" Viviana said shrilly.

The shock from our obvious intimacy sent the two of them into a frenzy. *This is so embarrassing!* I thought, yet the king of my world beside me completely ignored them.

"Ahh, I'm so happy. Call me Lukie again?"

Just where do you think we are?! I thought. *Don't say that! Read the room, I'm begging you! Ah, geez. I guess it's okay to spill the beans now. Still, this is way too much kissing. I can't keep my composure like this, so please stop!* I pulled my hand away from his lips and turned to face the others.

"How many times do I have to tell you before you understand? I swore on this ring that I would never dedicate my life to anyone but Prince Lucas," I said.

That was what the pledge was for. *I even told him he could kill me if he wanted to. My life can only belong to you, Lucas.*

Suddenly, Viviana began to say something very strange. "What?! So you want to keep cheating *and* marry Prince Lucas?! Is that it?!"

Huh? What? How does that even make any sense? I thought I had explained it clearly enough for her to understand what's going on!

I said I wouldn't let anyone else touch me for my entire life. Plus, I had the Promise Mark etched into my body, and what just happened was proof of that—although the violet lightning was extra and not caused by the Promise Mark…

Regardless, the knight standing next to me was completely unaffected by the Promise Mark and pulled my waist closer and kissed my hand.

"Cecilia, your anger is strangely sexy and beautiful… I wish those eyes were directed at me instead of them," he said.

Wait, what are you even saying? Now you're being totally absurd, and it's making me mad!

Are you saying that I make you blush when I get angry?! You're honestly bad at realizing when I'm mad at you! Once it's all over, we're going to have a talk about this! And I'll definitely be holding the mini pillows in both hands, so even if you blush, I won't let it slide! I'll use every trick in the book to hit you in that beautiful face with the pillows!

I couldn't help but glare angrily at him, even knowing that I shouldn't. His golden eyes melted dreamily.

"I'll only ever be yours, Cecilia."

Thanks, but you're totally misunderstanding everything. You don't have to say that right now!

I was feeling a mixture of anger and confusion at my future husband's obliviousness when Viviana snapped back at me, and I ended up shouting back, "How many times must I explain this?!"

"Lady Cecilia, just answer me!"

"Yes, I do want to get married! I've never once looked at anyone but Lucas since that desire burned itself into my heart!"

Argh, I'm such a mess!

Just as I was about to blush furiously at having to say such embarrassing things out loud, Lucas's impostor gazed at me with clouded eyes.

"Do you really want to marry Lucas that much?"

A chill ran down my spine when I saw his pale golden eyes swirling with obsession.

Wait, I know those eyes. The hunch lurking in the back of my mind turned to certainty. And because of that, the words I was about to speak became something else entirely.

"Felix?"

Both of them reacted when I spoke his name.

The man smirked, hatred dripping from his lips. Meanwhile, the knight beside me pulled me close as if to protect me.

I realized I was trembling slightly in his embrace, and I heard his low, deep voice above me.

"Breathe. It's okay. You're not alone. I told you I would protect you, didn't I? If you want to get away from here, just say the word. I'm here. It's okay. I will never let anyone hurt you again. Cece, my Cecilia… Just breathe," he whispered while gently slipping his gloved fingers into my chattering mouth, and I felt my lashes become wet.

He didn't care that I might hurt him by biting his fingers. He embraced me tightly as if to reassure me, to convey that we would always be together, and I felt the tension in my body and my clenched jaw gradually melt away thanks to his gentle strength.

As I blinked, scattering teardrops, I looked toward the nearby face, which flickered like a mirage and revealed the person I loved.

I called his name in a voiceless plea for help, and he answered with his voice full of resolve. “It’s okay. This time, I swear to protect you. I’m with you. I’m your knight and yours alone,” he said, making me cling unconsciously to his strong figure.

He pressed a soothing kiss to my trembling lips, entwining his tongue with mine to ease my tension, and as I began to relax, I felt my racing heartbeat return to its normal rhythm.

“Breathe out, Cecilia.”

“Haaah…”

I let out a breath just as he instructed and then drew in another deep one.

As his beautiful golden eyes narrowed with concern, I called his name to reassure him this time.

“Lukie…”

“Cece, you don’t have to push yourself. I’m sorry. I made the wrong decision here.”

He responded to me calling his name as if it were the most natural thing in the whole world. Then he kissed my forehead and the corners of my tear-filled eyes while apologizing, and I shook my head slightly.

At the same time, I grasped his crimson knight’s uniform and understood why he had done such a thing.

If two Heroes appeared at the soiree, a commotion was inevitable.

Felix and Viviana probably hadn't even considered the magnitude of the disaster it would cause. They simply acted on their selfish desires, and Lucas must've sensed what was about to happen, so he slipped away to let their plan unfold.

But instead of hiding, he returned disguised as Lukie, a knight of the Imperial Order, to make sure I wouldn't get hurt by this attempt to annul my engagement for the second time. He returned in disguise to protect me and to safeguard my heart, which feared Felix, just as he promised.

The reason Lucas made that threatening statement to me earlier was probably to lure me to the balcony so their plan would unfold.

The balcony I chose was the closest one and could only be accessed by one entrance, making it difficult for any other party guests to see the people there.

Not only that but the royal knights were stationed nearby, making it an inconvenient and hard-to-access place, even under normal circumstances.

So although I chose this balcony to get some fresh air, Lucas had made sure this would be the one I chose.

Under normal circumstances, no one would think of disturbing the fiancée of the Hero as she took a rest, especially not with the royal knights and maids around, along with guards positioned at the entrance.

That could've made the two of them give up on their plan, which would've been fine. But even if they didn't, Lucas wanted to make sure that I would suffer the least amount of harm from it as possible.

The reason he apologized earlier was probably for not making me leave.

But the guest of honor and his fiancée couldn't leave at the same time, and he knew that I would never run away from Viviana.

You were right—there was no way I would leave without you, so there was no need for you to apologize. You're always so kind to me…

However, it was true that I felt embarrassed and frustrated when he thought I would simply retreat when he told me to leave, considering my position.

By the way, and I'm not sure about this, but it looks like his usual defensive magic barrier enchanted with illusion magic is in place near the doorway. Otherwise, to anyone looking into the balcony from the main hall, it really would look like I was having an affair with a royal knight!

This is why it's so helpful that he's overpowered! I wanted to thank him as I faced him in his embrace and took a deep breath.

To think that just his kisses could return my heart rate to normal and calm me down. How embarrassing. I just want to crawl into a hole! But the sense of security he gives me is overwhelming, so I've completely let myself rely on him! Pull yourself together, Cecilia Cline!

"Lukie, my knight. Thank you… I love you." I leaned my forehead against his chest bashfully, determined to at least express

that clearly.

Then, as I looked up at him with a flushed face, I saw those golden eyes, which I adored so much, narrowing with joy. But for some reason, it also made me feel a pang of regret.

"That was way too mischievous. Don't scare me like that. If you wanted me to go to this balcony, there were much better ways to express it than threatening me!" I said.

My demon knight only smiled happily, and I felt the blood draining from my face.

"Ha ha. I wasn't threatening you. I was being serious."

Wait, what? It wasn't a threat after all? Was he being serious?

That's not good. Where are Anna and Kate? Hm? They were right here a second ago… And you are *a knight of the Imperial Order, right?*

You're the vice-captain, after all, and you're currently dressed in your Imperial Order uniform. Well, I guess it is a high-level illusion magic spell, after all.

His sweet, blissful smile seemed mismatched by his insatiable desire. It was so clear that he was thinking about putting the knowledge he learned from the *Extra Edition, Part 1* to use that I began to tremble.

"I-I'm keeping my promise. Right?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," he shrugged in response, and then I let out a sigh of relief. "But," he began, prompting my shoulders to tremble. "I was thinking of fulfilling your expectations," he said playfully,

looking at me lovingly with his shiny golden eyes, and my heart fluttered joyfully like the ebb and flow of the ocean. I shook my head vehemently back and forth.

No, I can't! That's not okay! I would die of shame after such an embarrassing act!

Yet he saw right through my thoughts and pressed me further.

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you on purpose anymore. I'll start gently, and I won't be rough until you're ready for it. I just want to make you drown in me, just like you want."

"…!"

That line, which reminded me of our first time, made me blush uncontrollably.

N-no way! Why is my heart racing like this?!

You're so unfair! You know I can't resist when you touch me! You're trying to ensnare me with your affection and take advantage of me again, aren't you?! Besides, your definitions of gentle and intense are completely different from mine, so I absolutely must protest about that! I haven't forgotten about the first time when you fucked me to unconsciousness, including all the embarrassment that followed!

I glared at his adoring face with teary eyes, thinking about what to say in response and how to protect myself for tomorrow. Then I noticed a small spark of mana flicker in the corner of my vision, which finally brought me back to reality.

The spell Lucas's imposter cast seemed to be fueled by raw mana, and my companion deflected it just by standing there. His

imposter contorted his face into a terrifying scowl. *Yeah, it's not as scary because you're not really Lucas*, I thought, unimpressed.

Since I knew the intensity of the real Lucas's anger, a mere look like that wasn't enough to faze me.

A literal demon was far more terrifying than a demon imposter, and the two were worlds apart.

It truly felt like my life was flashing before my eyes, and I knew what it meant to be on the brink of death. Yet the realization didn't affect me much. *It was much scarier when I first realized that the Lucas impostor was actually Felix.* I glanced at Viviana, who was clinging to his arm and screaming about infidelity.

Whose plan was this, anyway? And what were their attendants thinking?

Honestly, I was seriously starting to be concerned about the neighboring kingdom's educational system. Disbelief washed over me as I thought about this wild and unconventional plan. *Is this really the quality of our neighbors? What if everyone's like this? I really don't want to associate with such a horrible neighbor.*

I indulged in a little escapism and snappy comebacks before pulling myself back to reality and couldn't help but feel the weight of the fact that I had just kissed Lucas in front of Viviana and Felix. I tried to forget about it, but it was impossible.

"You… You wretched bitch, Cecilia. How could you do such a thing with a knight?! Don't joke around! How could you cling to a mere bodyguard and allow him to kiss your lips?!"

Oof, that hit hard. I was so embarrassed I wasn't sure how I could face *myself* again.

Where had all those six years of struggle and effort into learning how to become a lady gone? It felt like my education was really turning its back on me. *I'm so depressed!*

"You're cheating! You just showed us proof that you've been involved with a man other than Prince Lucas! Even if you don't leave of your own accord, he'll surely cast you aside once I relay this to him! And now I'll be his wife!"

I feel like I'm about to die from embarrassment. Could you please choose your words a little more carefully and consider my feelings?

That was asking the impossible. If they could do that, I wouldn't have gotten myself into this mess in the first place. Suddenly, a gust of wind swirled up, and Viviana screamed, breaking away from me.

Just then, the magic began to dispel, and I sighed, thinking, *Of course.*

"Eeek! W-wait! Felix, what are you doing?!"

"Shut up! Now that I've trapped Cecilia, I won't need you anymore!"

Wow, so he targeted me once again. He's so downright relentless it's disgusting! I traced a healing sigil in the air to help Lady Viviana, who was now on the ground after he'd ripped her away from my arm, crying and wailing. Just as I was about to activate the spell, a protective barrier enclosed around her, deflecting my magic.

Hey! I looked up and suddenly felt a kiss on my lips. I was so startled to be kissed in such a situation that I hissed in a low voice so no one could hear, "L-Lord Lukie!" *What do you think you're doing, mood-killer?!*

"I've already healed her. I couldn't you stand you looking at that woman one second longer."

Still, why did you have to kiss me to draw my attention?! Plus, being jealous is my *role!*

Besides, it's way too cool to deflect Felix's out-of-control magic by just standing there. No, that's a huge mistake! Forget I ever said that! The combination of my love-sick brain and lustful desires is really irritating!

Still, don't get too excited. Stay calm! I scolded myself. Lucas draped his cloak over my shoulders and said, "No more showing off," which made my cheeks flush from his possessive display.

My body can read the room better than he can. My husband has a terrible habit of ruining the mood…

Just as I predicted, Felix's short fuse blew, and he let out a growl. "Wh-what is the meaning of this, Cecilia?! Why would you show that face in front of this man?! His name is engraved on the Promise Mark, isn't it?!"

Wait, is he yelling at me? Isn't this ridiculous? And Lucas is still using the illusion magic! How many layers does he have, anyway? This is seriously overpowered.

I understand what Felix is getting at—he still hasn't realized that it's Lucas. Why wouldn't he think of that when he's also *using transformation magic?! What an idiot!* I thought, placing my hand on Lucas's sleeve while I pleaded.

"Lord Lukie, please dispel the illusion magic so Felix can understand."

"Okay. Cece, come over here for a moment, though."

The air swayed, and I watched as the crimson knight's uniform transformed into the white Hero's attire. It really *was* illusion magic… I watched as Lucas turned his back to Felix and the others, shielding me with his large frame, and gave him a puzzled look. "What is it?"

Hm?

He leaned in closer and…

"Hm? Mmph!"

Wh-what is the thinking?! Stop! Now he's kissing me with his tongue?!

I was so caught off-guard by the sudden kiss that I didn't even think to refuse. I just stared back into his golden eyes, desperately trying to respond.

Unlike the soothing kiss from before, this one was charged with emotion, making my inner muscles clench as I clutched onto his Hero's attire for help, only to have my tongue bitten as our lips parted.

"Oof! Lord Lukie, what are you doing?!"

"I thought it might take a little longer, so I thought a little protective charm was necessary. Or is this better?" As he said that, his hand smoothly glided down from my neck to my chest, and I felt my skin flush everywhere he touched.

"You idiot! You pervert, you are so mean…" I muttered insultingly under my breath, and he chuckled softly in response, making me bury my face against his chest to try to block out my sight and my hearing while I was at it.

It's not working… Ugh, it's so noisy…

"Wh-what?! Lucas?! Why are you here?! And what are you doing to Cecilia?"

"E-excuse me, but why is Prince Lucas here? He just answered the summons and left the party, didn't he?! Besides, I thought he had no memory of Lady Cecilia, so why are they acting like real lovers?!" Viviana exclaimed in shock.

It seemed like they had at least *tried* not to have both of them at the party at the same time, but their execution was lacking, to say the least. As those thoughts ran through my mind, Lucas spoke up.

"I never thought that you'd still mess up like this after receiving a royal education. You're even more foolish than I expected, Felix. That's fine. I'll deal with you first, Lady Belloni." Lucas's expression and voice when regarding Viviana were icy.

When I saw the blood drain from her face, I thought, *Oh, so this is what love really means.*

If the person I liked looked at me with such a cold expression and spoke like that to me, I wouldn't be able to recover from it for a while. My heart felt cold as I thought about it, but I wanted her to acknowledge her misdeeds properly and apologize to him. But Lucas went far beyond what I imagined.

I completely forgot about his sadistic side!

"I want you to bow your empty head and apologize to Cecilia right now. Because if you don't, your kingdom will be wiped off the face of this continent tomorrow."

"What…?"

His shocking words were delivered so calmly that it froze me in place.

I could only stare at Viviana, whose voice had become strained, because Lucas's words left me too frightened to look up at him. Suddenly, one of the knights behind her collapsed without a word.

Viviana let out a small scream. Anna appeared from behind her and spoke with a quiet fury.

"We have captured everyone in the courtyard and the guesthouse. The pests in the garden were about to use a sedative that would knock anyone unconscious with just a touch," she said.

"Wh-what?" Unable to grasp the situation, Viviana looked around as if searching for allies.

Then, as she turned to face the entrance of the balcony, a large sword appeared to block her way, prompting her to scream.

"Eeek! N-noooo!"

"Before you make such a filthy noise, apologize to our mistress first," Anna said.

"Planning to put Cecilia to sleep so she can be defiled is deserving of a thousand deaths. You should press that no-brained head against the floor. Or should I just separate your head from your body right now?" Kate asked.

Kate thrust the large sword toward Viviana's side to intimidate her from leaving, while Anna pointed the tip of her sword at the ground, making Viviana tremble with fear.

I witnessed the two of them radiating with anger and wearing expressions colder than anything I'd ever seen. I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to cover my eyes when I saw what they wore.

They were clad in black combat uniforms which were adorned with the emblem of the Hero's weapon.

Surely not even the Lebensklinge has the authority to kill a noble lady with royal blood from the neighboring kingdom right here. They're not planning on invoking the Hero's crest, right?!

My face drained of blood before the sight of the powerful emblem, and Lady Viviana began to shout hysterically in a shrill voice, which only further unsettled me.

"F-Felix! You're royalty, aren't you? Get these unruly people out of here!"

Ugh. Lady Viviana was so clueless that I could hardly bear to look at her.

She should know that Felix was demoted to only *quasi-royalty* after the engagement fiasco. Yet she ignored Lucas's words and dared to ask Felix for help. And he would undoubtedly respond with something terrible. And now another person just showed up!

"You're just the Herbsts—Lucas's little lapdogs! Don't you dare challenge me! You should know your place, just like Lucas! Argh, wait!"

"The one who doesn't know their place is you. Shut your mouth, scum." Finn suddenly appeared behind Felix like a wisp of smoke, exuding an intimidating aura that made goosebumps pop up on my flesh. He crossed both of his swords against Felix's neck as if to threaten that he would slit his throat.

Then he slowly slid the blades down, causing crimson blood to drip down Felix's white knight's attire. Felix trembled and quivered with shaking lips, and then the balcony fell silent.

The scene in front of me lacked any semblance of peace. I felt my grip on Lucas's knight's uniform loosen as if my senses were dulled.

No matter how minimal the harm, Lady Viviana *had* done something unforgivable. If she had acted alone, perhaps she could've gotten away with a pardon. Instead, she'd brought the former second prince, who was still under house arrest, to this party and had him impersonate the kingdom's Hero.

Not only that, but she referred to him as the Hero Lucas—someone whom the legendary sword Eckesachs did not recognize as a Hero. It was nothing short of an insult.

Eckesachs was a sword with a will of its own, and it would not forgive such an act. The only reason the worst hadn't happened yet was because Lucas, the true Hero, was aware of it. He'd merely turned a blind eye.

Lady Viviana absolutely wouldn't be forgiven, but right now, what was even more troubling was that she'd been trying to harm me. It didn't matter that she wouldn't have succeeded, because the undeniable fact was that she *had* attempted it.

Lucas's exasperated sigh echoed in my ears as I mustered the strength to grasp his clothes tightly.

Please stop… It would be one thing to spill the blood of a noblewoman at a soiree, but another to wipe an entire kingdom off the map without question. *I beg you, spare us!*

After all, Felix was still technically quasi-royalty. *Can't we at least follow the proper protocols?* I desperately stared at Lucas, hoping my message would get through. "Fine," he muttered and turned his gaze toward Viviana.

"Lady Belloni, I've told you every time we've met, before the campaign and even now, that I love only Cecilia and have no intention of ever loving anyone else. I've said countless times that I have no desire to marry anyone but Cecilia. So no matter how much you plead, I have never called your name, nor will I ever. You said because I am the second prince and Hero it would be wise to avoid further scandals. I assumed you wanted to avoid ending up like Felix. Apparently, I was mistaken."

Um, did she really say all that?

So she was flirting with Lucas repeatedly in places I couldn't interfere? That ditzy brain of hers is surprisingly shrewd when it comes to these matters. Perhaps her romance IQ is higher than mine…

"B-but isn't that true? I heard the engagement between Prince Lucas and Lady Cecilia was by royal decree! So surely as the second prince, Prince Lucas had no choice but to choose anyone but her! I understand you may feel sorry for Lady Cecilia, who was once cast aside by Felix, but if you don't remember anything about her, then I should be perfectly fine in her place! I'm far more suitable than someone who was abandoned by Felix and clung to the position of second princess, anyway. After all, I have royal blood and Lady Cecilia does not. Plus, I love Prince Lucas more!"

I think she's been misinformed… Could Felix have been feeding her bad information? As I pondered this, Lucas embraced me and kissed the ring on my finger, showing it off.

"First of all, your understanding of how this engagement came to be is entirely wrong," he said.

"Wh-what?"

What is he talking about? It was a royal decree, wasn't it?

I felt just as confused as Viviana, and I looked at Lucas with questioning eyes.

"I asked His Majesty to allow me to be the second prince. Cecilia had no choice but to choose *me.* I defiled her and blocked off all escape routes to make it impossible for her to choose anyone but me.

I begged for her love. After the campaign, I sought her out to beg for her forgiveness and pledged my unwavering love to her."

Um, that was a little too revealing!

To casually mention how the Herbst duchy had interfered with the royal decree was one thing, but I really wished hadn't boldly confessed that he made love to me!

And can he stop rubbing my lower abdomen through the dress, emphasizing that we're still intimate every night? It's just too cruel, and I'm already hurting over here!

I desperately tried to maintain my composure while inwardly screaming. Meanwhile, Viviana glanced at Felix, her mouth moving in disbelief at Lucas's confession.

"That's what I thought," Lucas muttered, then narrowed his eyes at Felix, who was glaring at me with a look of hatred, before turning his gaze back to Viviana.

"Therefore, no matter what you say, I will never have any need of you. If you understand this, then apologize at once to Cecilia, my beloved. After that, the knights will escort you back to the guesthouse."

I was relieved that Lucas only asked for an apology and for her to return to the guesthouse, so I opened my mouth to suggest that she shouldn't apologize to me, but to Lucas, but Viviana's intellect was even more lacking than I'd expected.

"I-I am of royal blood! I am not equal to that marquess's daughter! How dare you look down on me like that and say I am not

needed! I will never bow my head to Lady Cecilia, even if it's Prince Lucas who asks me!"

Oh no, what is she doing… She just said something truly horrifying. Those aren't just threats. He was serious. The neighboring kingdom will really disappear off the face of this earth!

The gravity of her actions and her situation were truly lost on her, yet her pride shone through in her words, which drained the color from my face.

As I timidly looked up when I heard the quiet, derisive chuckle escape Lucas's lips, I gasped at how emotionless his golden eyes looked.

Uh-oh… I could only tremble with fear and shake my head. Lucas noticed and quietly declared, "Elsa, take her away to the dungeon. Barn, go now. The neighboring kingdom has little military power. Finish this at once."

Chilled by Lucas's demeanor, Viviana's teeth chattered, and her eyes welled with tears. She was suddenly seized by Elsa, who grabbed her arm without mercy.

I heard Barnabash's cheerful voice exclaim from somewhere, "Yay! I finally get some dragon work!"

"L-Lord Lukie!" I couldn't help but call out to him.

His expression immediately changed, directing a sweet smile at me. His beautiful eyes shone with an unsettling light that filled me with an unfamiliar fear as I tried to plead with him.

"Lord Lukie, please, let's handle this peacefully!"

"You can still talk about peace after all that, Cece?" he asked incredulously.

Oh wow, he's angrier than I imagined!

His voice was gentle, and his expression remained calm. His pupils were not dilated. Instead, they shone with a tranquil light.

Yet the rejection wrapped up in his sarcastic words seemed to unleash an intense, bone-chilling mana that swirled up from the ground, making me damp with cold sweat beneath my dress.

I had a feeling that if I moved even a little, he would kill me in an instant. Despite my fear, I grabbed his divinely handsome face and turned it toward me. *Please, I'm really begging you!*

He tipped his head to the side, looking puzzled.

"What's wrong? Oh, is this a *request*?"

"Please, I'm begging you! You came here to resolve this peacefully, right? So…" My frantic words drew a resigned smile from him.

"I wanted to resolve this peacefully, but *they* were the ones who refused. Don't worry, there won't be any more problems once I settle everything. There's no need for you to worry."

"…!"

What should I do now? This is really bad! That smile is genuine!

My body quivered at Lucas's unbelievable behavior. I could feel my heartbeat pulse in all of my limbs, and the phrase *"Once I settle everything…"* kept running through my brain.

Everything… Did that mean all the people, homes, livestock, fields—everything that existed in the neighboring kingdom?

The best-case scenario here was that Viviana would never stand before Lucas again and would be forcefully deported, never able to set foot in Bern again, and would spend the rest of her days in a convent.

The neighboring kingdom would pay some slight compensation to us under the guise of an engagement present, and the Belloni family would likely be stripped of their titles. That's where it could all end.

The damage wouldn't be *that* severe, even if the queen were put under permanent seclusion.

Viviana and the queen's pride would be painfully wounded, but considering what they did, that punishment sounded quite lenient.

If this escalated into a situation that couldn't be contained, the truth about Felix would remain hidden, and only the events that transpired would be widely reported to the neighboring kingdom, leaving them with no other choice than to apologize endlessly.

Everyone who came from the neighboring kingdom would likely be executed as a traitor, including Viviana. And the Belloni family would face execution all the way down to their most distant relatives.

Felix, of course, would receive the same punishment in secret, and the queen could likely end up in a similar situation, although the king would probably abdicate.

The neighboring kingdom would be forced to pay exorbitant reparations, plunging them into poverty and debt, and the burden would fall entirely on the common folk. A refugee crisis would follow, involving not just the neighboring kingdom but its surrounding nations as well.

Bern would naturally be affected too, and this would spark tension between Bern and the neighboring kingdoms.

That's why Lucas said he'd handle everything. If *he* handled everything, there wouldn't be any of these problems, because he'd wipe the entire kingdom off the map entirely!

The overpowered demon knight's rage was more than I imagined!

With him, it was either the best-case scenario or the worst-case scenario. There was no in-between. He was nothing but extreme.

I never imagined it would come to this. The incident with Dirk made him seem like a cute puppy in comparison.

He wasn't just showing people the gates of Hell. It was as if he was Hell incarnate. *Does that mean he's literally the embodiment of hell, walking the earth? Maybe Bern's Hero isn't* actually *a Hero, but a demon or an ogre or something? Yeah, that would make a lot of sense… Can't say I'm happy about it, though.*

How should I calm such a creature? Should I wear a sheer nightgown again? Maybe I should hand him the Extra Edition and say, "Just a little bit, okay?" Maybe then he'll return to normal, ha ha ha!

The fact that I feel like that might actually work makes me feel conflicted…

As I pondered such ridiculous thoughts, trying to stabilize my mental state, I scolded my trembling legs.

Once again, I realized he was a Hero who could command a dragon capable of unleashing widespread devastation. A single word from him could bring ruin to the queen and Viviana's homeland.

It wouldn't even take a night to accomplish it. It would be done in an instant, just like he said!

That terrifying vision was about to become reality. I racked my brain for a way to stop it. Then, the words he'd said, *"If you want to save me from breaking, just say my nickname,"* suddenly came to mind, and I desperately called out to him.

"L-Lukie, Lukie, please. I don't want that. I don't want you to do such things! So Lukie… Lucas! Let's handle this peacefully!"

He stared at me silently while I clung to him, urging him to listen. He heaved an exaggerated sigh that seemed to signal just how infuriated he was, his anger softening.

"Using that here is sneaky, Cecilia."

I felt relief wash over me. Maybe it was because I'd been exhausted from everything that happened before, and perhaps it was because my education as a lady had been so thorough, but I couldn't help but think, *"Who's the one being sneaky here?!"*

"You're the one being sneaky!" *What am I even saying?!* I felt my anger rise to the surface, and he shot back, visibly annoyed.

"Why am *I* the one being sneaky? You know I'm weak against your requests!"

"I know! But you also know that I don't want you to do such things for me! Why would you try to do it knowing I would stop you?!"

"I know, but there are some things I just can't forgive! They targeted my precious Cece! On top of that, she won't even apologize or listen to me! It's only natural that I want to make sure it never happens again!" Lucas shouted, and I felt my heart swell with joy.

I clenched my fists. *There are too many unforgivable things! He's so narrow-minded, but it's infuriating how cute he is when he's being so devilish!*

"You protected me, so we didn't suffer any problems! Besides, you've got all sorts of enchantments on that ring! I'm sure there was a defense barrier on it that no one can break through, right? I would've been completely safe no matter what!"

"Th-that's different!" He hurriedly spoke, sounding flustered. *Hmm, sounds suspicious to me!*

"It's not different! Then tell me what kind of magic you put on it! Everything, without hiding anything from me!"

"…!"

Come on. You can't say it? What are you hiding, pretty boy? His face turned red as he sulked. *He's so cute!*

I'm going to say it this time because I know you'll actually listen to me. You may be a demon, but you're kind at heart, and I love you! Argh, I'm such an idiot!

"See! No one other than you can touch me, let alone harm me, so you should learn to be a little patient!"

I confronted him, ready for a fight. He wrapped both his arms around my waist as he sulked.

"That's why I'm being patient now. I could touch you if I wanted to."

I heard a sense of resignation in his voice, and his gentle gestures, combined with the regretful pouty face, made my heart flutter. Did I really want to say anything else? I couldn't help but respond with a sudden rush of words, digging myself deeper.

"That might be true, but I've already said it's impossible for anyone but you ever since you engraved the Promise mark on me!"

Ahh, no! What am I shouting about?! I know I'm tired, but don't forget that you're a lady!

"S-so anyway, please be patient," I muttered with a sigh, trying to hide my tear-filled eyes and flushed cheeks. I clenched my fists as I quietly wrapped up my request.

Damn it, he's been doing whatever he wants ever since the soiree began. Why do I get so emotional around him? I thought I had the upper hand, but now I feel like I'm the loser here!

I trembled with frustration and tried to steady my quivering lips when Lucas suddenly grabbed my chin.

Then, he slowly lifted the corners of his mouth, and his beautiful golden eyes shimmered. I thought, *"He's not going to make me say it!"*

I quickly brought my hands to his mouth, but he stopped me with a swift motion, kissing the tips of my fingers, then my palms—even licking them. *Nooo, this is too much!*

I hurriedly pulled my hands away from him.

He let out a laugh, hiding his mouth while his shoulders shook.

Damn it, he's not even trying to hide it, and he's laughing so much! I can't believe he's teasing me into backing down like this. He's so devilish yet incredibly cool in moments like this… I can't forgive him!

As I tried to turn away in frustration, he lovingly caressed my chin and lips with his fingers, and my body became immobile, wanting to savor that sensation. He lightly stimulated my lips with his thumb, and my mouth instinctively opened ever so slightly.

Why did I just beg for a kiss? My face flushed bright red as he whispered in a sexy voice, "So it's impossible for anyone but me?"

"U-um, well…"

You jerk! Yes, yes it is!

This was supposed to be a tense and serious moment, but he was using that sweet voice that echoed in my core, trying to push me into a corner. *You really are a free spirit who can't read the room!*

As I screamed internally, tears began to well up as I overheard the whispers around us.

"It looks like the lovey-dovey fest has begun. Ooh, what a feast for the eyes. How long do you think it'll last?" Anna asked.

"It's the best! The visuals are stunning. It looks like they're about to kiss, so should we take these fools away so they won't be interrupted?" Kate asked.

"Oooh! A make-up kiss after a lover's quarrel on the balcony? Thank you, dear goose! We must capture this moment! Barn, stop touching me, you jerk!" Elsa exclaimed.

"A romantic rendezvous. Let's have a big kiss, too, Elsa," Barnabash said.

Well, some of them aren't even whispering, but since they came back, I won't comment on it. Sorry!

Although I found it romantic, I wouldn't let him kiss me again. I gritted my teeth, completely agreeing with what Finn said… "Seriously, my master is falling apart."

"I can't be with anyone but you, Cecilia."

"R-really?"

So we're both on the same page. That's good… I muttered inwardly. *We've come this far, so just end it already!* I looked at him with teary eyes, and he seemed to understand my unspoken pleas.

His divinely handsome face softened, and he whispered so sweetly it felt like I was drowning in a sea of honey. I felt like my face was on fire.

"I love you, my Cece. I truly adore you. If I hold back now, is it okay if I don't hold back in the bedroom?"

"Um…"

He tipped his head seductively, asking if it was okay to make love to me tonight, and for the first time, I was left speechless. *What are you saying?! What are you asking me to do?!*

I thought about where we were. Well, being seduced by a handsome guy on a balcony in the middle of a soiree was pretty romantic—I'd admit that.

But did you forget?

Just behind you, there's a young lady trembling with a sword pressed close to her face, with the former second prince standing there with all the blood drained out of his face because he's about to get his throat slashed!

So I absolutely won't answer! Of course you have to be patient and hold back! Both of us learning how to hold back should be the expected outcome, so please understand!

I looked at Lucas, begging for mercy, but he returned my gaze with such a melancholy expression that I felt a jolt of panic.

I know I shouldn't let that face trick me… But as I turned away, his grip on my chin was too strong to escape. To make matters worse, he pulled me closer, slowly stroking the edge of my dress where it met my skin, urging me to respond.

The contrast between the look on your face and what you're doing is just too much!

"Cece?"

"I-I'll answer you once we return to the bedroom."

Argh, but you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs. My body is so infuriating! So please stop kissing me like you did earlier, and stop rubbing the bite mark on my waist! Because my body can't help but react…

As I shook my head slightly and proposed a compromise, Lucas raised an eyebrow and chuckled softly, slipping his fingers in under the edge of my dress. I couldn't help but arch my back in surprise.

"Once we return to the bedroom, right?"

"Lukie, stop…"

Even though it was faint, the way his fingers moved was somehow enticing, making my breath quicken. Because I'd leaned back, my lips drew closer to his, and I couldn't help but focus on them as if expecting something more.

My lips quivered as I silently expressed my refusal to continue this here, and Lucas gave me a sweet, languid smile.

"That sounds like fun."

I'm not looking forward to it at all! The only thing I can say is, "I refuse!" I internally screamed with frustration. Lucas kissed my ring again tenderly, his blissful smile only making my heart ache.

I bit my lip in annoyance as my heart inexplicably rejoiced at being bested by the one I longed for. In a moment of embarrassment and regret, I exclaimed, "Then please let go of my hand!"

"Knock this off, Lucas! Love, you say? Do you even know what such a noble thing is?! They say you're the shield of the royal family,

but I know the truth. You're just a defective thing who's gone mad! Argh!" Felix shouted.

"Don't you dare insult my master, worthless scum! I'll cut your head off right now!"

"Finn, stop it."

Hearing the word "defective" startled me, and I shot a furious glance back at Felix. However, I turned my face back to Lucas when he spoke to stop Finn.

When our eyes met, I was concerned that he might be hurt. He smiled at me with a furrowed brow as if he were troubled.

This isn't good. He shouldn't be making that face. This isn't the kind of conversation we should we have on this occasion!

When I saw the complexity in his gaze, I instantly realized it was a topic he didn't want to discuss. Anger surged from my throat to my chest like a heatwave, and I clenched my hands together tightly.

"But that was just Prince Lucas taking Lady Anika's place! Besides, it was a royal decree! He has no right to say such things to this scum!" Finn shouted back in a way that expressed my feelings, but Lucas replied coolly, "Let him speak."

I reached out, wanting to convey that I wouldn't listen if he didn't want me to, but Felix's shouts cut me off, and what he said made me freeze.

"Ha! So you *are* aware that you're the lunatic from the Herbst family! You should've been disposed of long ago!"

"Disposed?!" I couldn't bear the shocking words and let out a faint gasp.

Lucas smiled with a troubled look on his face and said, "I got lucky. Rarely, the duke's family produces someone like me, specialized for combat. Because of that uniqueness, most of us have emotional defects. We don't recoil from destruction."

"That's right! By the time he was ten, he was already tainted by blood! He was useful and convenient as a faithful killing machine! But no matter how many he killed or how soaked in blood he became, his expression never changed even if he got hurt. It's clear that he's insane!" Felix continued his tirade. "I don't care how strong he is. What were Father and the duke thinking, keeping such a dangerous person alive, much less elevating him to a knight?"

Lucas's calm voice mixed with Felix's furious shouts, both of them reverberating inside of my head, making it hard to think straight.

Eliminate? Dispose of? He got lucky? Lucky to not have been eliminated? Why would they do something like that to a child?

I finally connected the dots to a memory that had always troubled me, and the gentle golden eyes before me blurred as the realization struck me.

"Thank you for giving me a reason to become strong…thank you for giving me a future."

Those were the words he said before our first date after the engagement… *That's what he was talking about, isn't it?* I instinctively

realized this was his way of conveying his resolve to me.

My trembling lips desperately formed words, my voice barely above a whisper. “Why…?”

Lucas answered quietly, responding to the many emotions packed into my question. “The ducal house of Herbst acts as a shield for the royal family and also works as their assassins. We’re mainly responsible for purging nobles who commit atrocities that cannot be exposed publicly, which naturally means one has to be accustomed to bloodshed. But my sister Anika is a gentle person, and she was already engaged to Alphonse, so I figured I would handle it. I never felt any aversion to it, after all. Well, now I can at least consider what comes with strength. But I’m sure you already know there’s something wrong with me, don’t you? I was truly lucky… Especially to have met you. If not for that, I wouldn’t be here,” he said, as if stating the obvious.

My hands trembled, and my lips quivered.

If I hadn’t met you when I was eleven…

If we hadn’t made that promise, if you hadn’t fallen in love with me, then you would’ve…!

“Ha ha! They even sent him off to the Webber household so they could kill him anytime if something went wrong! Yet this madman dares to speak of love!”

“That’s enough, Felix! Be quiet!” I shouted without thinking. *That was very unladylike, but I can’t bring myself to care in the least.*

I ignored Felix's wide-eyed stare and grabbed the front of Lucas's clothes, tugging at him desperately.

"Lukie, you won't be disposed of anymore, right? That won't happen now, will it? You're the Hero, after all!"

There's no way I'll let my husband be eliminated! Sure, he might be a sadistic brute and a pervert, but… Well, actually, those are mostly related to, um, nighttime activities, so I'll do my best to deal with that!

Anyway, I know he's a little off, but he's worked so hard. He knows his strength and what it can bring, and he's been using it to protect! He's not some defective person. He's kind! He's a Hero who risked his life to protect the kingdom and its people!

There's no way I'll ever accept anyone eliminating my Lukie!

I yanked at him again, ignoring the damage I was probably doing to the very expensive Hero's attire, demanding an answer. He blinked at me and then burst out laughing.

What? Why are you laughing? That angelic, childish smile of yours is beyond cute, but can you not do that right now?! I'm being completely serious here! I need to know so I can figure out a way to protect you!

"Calm down, Cece. There's no one who can eliminate a Hero like me. No, wait. There is…"

What?! But I thought you were the strongest on the continent! So strong that you don't need to be protected!

"?!"

Are you lying?! The very idea made me panic, and I tightened my grip on his clothes. He pried my hands off, only to kiss my clenched fists and utter a mysterious comment.

"That person is you, Cece."

"Cece? Cece? A woman's name… Wait, you mean *me*?!"

"Yes, I've said it before, haven't I? You're the only one who could kill me."

"What?"

Huh?! I can't even undo your chains, so how am I supposed to kill you?! And why would I kill the person I've pledged my life to? That makes no sense! You shouldn't even joke about this!

I glared at him, fuming. Lucas leaned in close, smiling seductively like we were sharing a secret. *Uh-oh, I don't like where this is going!*

"See, I'm unusually vigilant because of my circumstances. But when I'm holding you, I get so absorbed in you that even my subconscious guard drops. My defensive barriers would still respond to an external attack, but if it was *you* who slit my throat while I was sleeping, I could've died several times by now."

Hearing this soft-spoken confession of a very bloody possibility shocked me. *I'd never do that…* I barely managed to shake my head, which was pretty commendable, all things considered.

"I-I would never slit your throat…"

What…what is he even saying?

"You feel too good, and your cries of pleasure are so sexy that I lose myself entirely and completely surrender."

What?! Does he think I'm some kind of femme fatale ninja or something?!

His words were so outrageous that my face turned beet red, and I began to tremble. The handsome demon smiled softly with adoration when he saw me like that, and I finally managed to muster a comeback.

"L-Lukie, you idiot!"

Don't say things like that! I glared at him again, but he just smiled sweetly, like he was enjoying every moment.

"It's so cute when you call me an idiot, Cecilia."

"…!"

Argh! What am I supposed to do if you think even my insults are cute?!

Defeated by his overwhelming charm and tender caresses, I turned my head away in frustration, only to meet Felix's utterly shocked gaze. All the color drained from his face.

Oh no… I immediately buried my face back against Lucas's chest.

Crap! I forgot that Felix was even here! I can't believe I yelled at him and then started babbling about intimate stuff right in front of him. It's mortifying, but this is all your fault, Lucas!

I felt a surge of embarrassment that nearly brought me to tears, and I glared at him. "It drives me wild… But don't worry, he didn't

hear what you just said," he said as he held back a smile, his shoulders shaking with laughter. I thought about scolding him for that, but then…

"You… Are you really Cecilia?"

"U-um, yes…?"

I was taken aback but Felix's dazed muttering.

Did he really just ask me that after being engaged for six years? Does he not recognize my face anymore? How incredibly rude. And I really wish he'd stop calling me by my first name, especially since we're not even engaged anymore.

How terrifying and unsettling of him to address me so casually even though we'd never been close.

Meanwhile, Felix's lips trembled. "You're lying. The Cecilia I know doesn't show emotions like that on her face. She wouldn't raise her voice or act bashful like that. She wouldn't lean in and look at someone like that, smiling together…"

Why is my noblewoman's education failing me so today? What's wrong with me? Maybe that unnecessary burst of fighting spirit I had messed me up. I need to ask for re-education starting tomorrow…

I resolved to try to apologize, and I said, "I'm terribly sorry for showing such an ungraceful side of myself today," but then I heard Felix let out a small chuckle. *That's scary!*

"Ha ha… Ha ha ha! Hey, Cecilia! Why weren't you ever like that with me? You were my fiancée, weren't you? Yet you never showed

me that face. Show it to me now. Come here, kneel down, and smile at me."

As he spoke dreamily with his murky golden eyes, Lucas hugged me tighter as if to shield me. But seeing me held close in Lucas's embrace only made Felix more furious.

"Stop playing with me, Cecilia! Why didn't you love me?! Why did you love him instead?! Come here right now and leave that madman behind! Kneel before me and beg for my love back! The man you should love isn't that crazy, defective piece of trash, it's me!" He shouted passionately, and the sound of it ignited a heat in my head, throat, and chest. My heart felt like it was on fire. Something shot through my veins at incredible speed, and the world before me shimmered as memories of the past six years flashed back on my closed eyelids.

He belittled me every chance he got.

Even when we were together, I had to keep standing alone, with no one's support.

He didn't welcome my conversations or letters, and he gave me no proper escort. He pursued other women who mocked me, and in the end, he cast me aside and left me abandoned and fearing for my life.

Those six years were a struggle filled with suffering and frustration. I felt a heat rising in me, making me want to strike back and to hell with the consequences.

Driven by the storm of emotions raging within me, I stepped away from the shelter Lucas gave me and glared furiously at the man

before me.

"How many times do I have to tell you to be quiet?"

"That defective piece of trash's love is nothing but a sham! You've got it all wrong and—"

"Shut up!!" My voice came out louder than I intended. I tried to find what bit of composure I had left as I unleashed all my swirling emotions on Felix.

"Enough already! You think I have the wrong idea about this love? What's wrong with it? Do you think I'm so stupid that I would take a misunderstanding and call it love?! That's none of your business, anyway! Whether this is love or not is something *we* decide, and no matter what you say, I love Lukie! I don't need anyone but him! How dare you call him a defective piece of trash when he's protected you! You've never once tried to recognize his efforts. Just who do you think you are? Even if Lukie allows you to speak that way about him, I will never allow it! Don't you insult him *ever* again!!"

No matter how much I poured out my emotions, I couldn't calm down. I just kept going. "Apologize for insulting him right now! Do it!"

I heard Lucas whispering to me, "Cece, calm down." The gentle voice made my heart swell with frustration, and despite knowing it was shameful, I was having a tantrum.

"Calm down?! But this is just too much!"

"Yes, thank you. But you don't need to worry about it. Just take a moment to settle down." He cradled my cheeks in his hands and locked eyes with me. His gestures conveyed that what was happening

was unimportant, and I realized I was used to hearing that, which made my chest burn even hotter.

No, I can't! Just as I was about to speak, I saw an anxious expression of concern in his eyes, and I gritted my teeth.

I can't agree. But I don't want to trouble you.

I took a small, deep breath and clenched my fists. Then I glared at Felix, who looked completely dazed. I didn't want him to hurt Lucas any further, so I took Lucas by the hand.

"Let's go back inside now," I said.

"Cece!"

Suddenly, my vision swayed, and I was caught in a firm embrace.

I heard Anna and the others' panicked voices. I looked up through my blurry gaze at Lucas, who had his forehead pressed against mine to take my temperature. He let out a heavy sigh.

"You're probably exhausted, too. Your mana is depleted."

"My mana is depleted?" I repeated in confusion. I was feeling increasingly cold as I felt him wrap me up in his cloak again. He kissed my forehead and cheeks soothingly.

I wanted to cling to the warmth of his lips, so I wrapped my trembling arms around his neck.

He pulled me in tightly for a moment and created a small, rainbow-colored candy in his palm that sparkled. "I don't think you realized it, but you were releasing your mana all at once. It was probably because your emotions were heightened. This will restore it."

"Mana… Lukie, I'm cold… I'm scared…"

"It's okay. Your mana was depleted, and that's all. I can fix it. Just relax, now open your mouth, Cece."

He fed me the candy with his mouth. As our tongues intertwined, the mana candy slowly melted, letting me swallow it mixed with our saliva. Gradually, the coldness faded, and my body began to relax.

I'd never heard of anyone capable of restoring someone's mana like this on the spot. *Restoring someone's mana is incredible, Lucas…* I thought groggily, surrendering completely to his soothing kisses and strong arms that held me.

Then, my already fuzzy mind reached its limit as he whispered for me to lean against him more.

I must have been so angry because I'd never felt this mentally exhausted before. I felt completely drained. I let go of all the thoughts swirling in my mind and just floated in the moment, and without realizing it, I began to surrender myself to Lucas, forgetting our circumstances.

"Lukie, I want to go back to the bedroom."

I'd had enough of the coldness, the fear, the unpleasant words. All I wanted was to feel him, to snuggle up to him like a frightened child. Lucas stood up abruptly.

"I'll take you back right away. Anna?" he said.

"I'll prepare the room first. Excuse me," she said.

"Finn, Elsa, take them away for now. Kate, report this to Leon."

"Yes, Master!" they all answered in unison.

Lucas quickly issued commands. Felix, pale and kneeling on the ground, couldn't stop trembling. Finn grabbed him by his collar despite the blood dripping from his neck and dragged him out toward the garden. Elsa seized the still-dazed Viviana and pulled her to her feet, escorting her out of the balcony along with the Imperial Order.

Lucas held me tenderly, paying no heed to the curious stares as he took me back through the ballroom and ignored the commotion as we headed straight for the back door reserved for royalty.

That was when I realized I had messed up, but I made my mind up to just pretend like I hadn't seen anything.

It's okay. I'm not feeling well. There's nothing I can do about it. This is a rescue mission, I thought to myself, coming up with a bunch of nonsensical excuses.

Ah, being a villainess is no joke!

Chapter Five

A VIVID, BRIGHT GREEN LIGHT ILLUMINATED my colorless world, reflecting strong emotions.

The sounds that captured my heart came from soft pink lips, which parted to speak their will.

As I looked at the ring that fit snugly on the outstretched hand before me, despair washed over me at the same time as happiness in response to its existence.

At the same time, I felt something stirring inside of me, like a sensation that was clawing and writhing at me to break free.

I won't give up. I won't let her go. I'll protect her, no matter what. My Cecilia…

I hurried back to my bedroom in the second prince's quarters. I cast healing magic on Cece, who lay on the bed. I kissed her more deeply as our tongues intertwined, her trembling body sinking deeper into the mattress before I pressed my lips against hers one more time.

I kept a little weight on her to warm her up. I felt her lips relax, and then I reluctantly pulled away.

"Lukie…"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of everything. Just go to sleep."

I buttoned up the shirt I'd put on her and brushed aside her hair, caressing her pale lower lip with my thumb. As I slipped my

fingers through hers, which moved slightly as if searching for me, I kissed the back of her hand, and she fell into a peaceful sleep.

"I…love you…"

"I love you too… Goodnight, Cece."

I finally relaxed when I heard the soft sounds escaping from her slightly parted lips and watched the oversized shirt rise and fall.

I covered my face with trembling hands and let out a long, deep breath, chuckling derisively at how pathetic I was.

Just recalling the moment when she pulled my hand back toward the venue and her slender body swayed made the blood drain from my face.

I would surely break if I lost her. I would no longer care about this world anymore and would undoubtedly choose to chase after her. I raked a hand through my hair and took a deep breath at the thought.

No, I can't think that.

Cece wouldn't be able to truly rely on me as things were. If I wanted to make her happy and be someone who accepted my feelings without doubting them despite my memory loss, I needed to listen to her inevitable requests, no matter how much my emotions tried to resist.

I let out a deep sigh, gazing at her while she slept.

I knew that even if I kept losing my memory, I would always fall in love with her every time we met. I'd long for her again and again, despair countless times, and want to die over and over.

But I would reach out to her again and again, no matter how much it hurt, because I wanted her.

My Cecilia.

My one and only. My life.

Thank you for believing that I would always return and waiting for me with unwavering love.

I'm sorry for making you cry. I feel bad about it, but I can't help but also feel happy when I see the tears you spill for me. I'm sorry about that.

But I vow to never make you cry like that again.

You always get mad at me for toying with you, but the truth is, you're the one who's got me wrapped around your little finger, Cece.

The vivid image of her gentle demeanor, contrasting with the intense emotions she revealed, flashed through my mind.

She was dazzlingly beautiful when she confronted Felix, glowing with magic.

I was supposed to protect her, yet she stood in front of me to defend me. It was both impressive and frustrating. She looked so graceful, yet strangely sexy, confident, and incredibly attractive. I honestly wanted to lock her up away from everyone.

As I pondered that, I checked with trembling hands to ensure she was still breathing and stared at her sleeping face.

We definitely needed to discuss how to handle these interactions. Even if the ring was imbued with protective magic for

now, I wanted Cece to learn some self-defense tactics as well. I couldn't help but sigh at the thought.

My beloved doesn't realize how beautiful she is in so many ways.

It was hard to believe that out of all those people, the one with more mana than even Cece was targeted first. *It's just not normal. Ah, now that I think about it, I feel like I want to kill that damned mutt Fenrir all over again. I should've tormented him more.*

I knew she bought me time, allowing me to get there. The desperate choice she made, combined with various coincidences, miraculously let me save her life, and I felt truly lucky for that.

But still, I can't forgive that behavior and how we parted, Cecilia.

I made that heartbreaking choice to leave to protect you, yet you stepped out of that cage for something other than me, only to choose death, even if that wasn't truly your intention. I know I would've ended up destroying everything you were trying to protect if I had lost you.

You know I could never forgive a world that was built on sacrificing you, Cece. Because you realized my insane obsession. You made it so that no one else could enter your heart so that you wouldn't look at anyone else. You noticed, you cried, and you got angry. You hurled incredible insults at me.

You started with the classic ones—stupid, mean, wicked, and kept going like there was no end.

Now, if I had directed those insults at you, there's no way you would forgive me. Even if I apologized, if you told me you wanted to sever ties, that you didn't want to see my face again, I'm sure I'd unleash my magic and turn this whole area into a wasteland.

I might have even forcibly dragged Cece out, confined her, and then broken her. I was so tense I had felt the blood drain from my face back then.

But part of me felt joy knowing that I was the one who occupied her heart, that she directed such strong feelings toward me. All I could do was to watch over her quietly and sometimes kiss her ring affectionately, tears streaming down her face.

I remembered standing before Cece, filled with anxiety, when I asked if I could call her name. Her tears looked like pearls.

"Yes. Please say my name, Lord Lukie."

I almost collapsed from regret when I looked into her deep, love-filled, bright green eyes.

Why can't I remember when I love her so much? She gives me so much love in return, so how do I not remember a thing about this person?

I don't deserve forgiveness.

I shouldn't even be allowed to stand next to her, but I don't ever want to lose her. I can never let her go!

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Cecilia.

I feel awful. I'll apologize as many times as it takes until you forgive me. I'll tell you over and over I love you until I die. Until you

believe me.

Look at me one more time. (Find me.)

Call my name one more time. (I'm here.)

Accept me again.

Desire me as much as you want.

I was on my knees, crying out for forgiveness and love, with no memories to guide me, when Cece leaped into my arms, tears streaming down her face. Holding her slender, light body nearly tore my heart apart.

And then, overwhelmed by her softness and sweet scent, her tearful, shimmering eyes, and her voice clinging to me, I thought I might've died from happiness at that moment.

To think I'd make it all the way to marriage… *Well done, my past self! Really, good job.* But the previous me was such a jerk to have taken advantage of his unlimited access to her.

I never expected to feel murderous rage toward my former self.

Here I was, begging for a second chance, but I couldn't control my strength enough to even hold her. How was that acceptable as a man? I felt so sorry and embarrassed that I wanted a second chance on my second chance.

As I desperately held back my feelings, Cece was relentlessly adorable.

She had peeked at me mischievously from below with her thin nightgown pressed against me, tempting me immensely. It felt like my vision was spinning, and I was about to unleash my mana.

How? How can this seemingly pure and innocent person be so expressive and aggressive with her emotions? Exactly how deeply are you making me fall for you? I'm sorry, but I'm not used to this, so please give me some time. It's my first love. I can call it that, right? Since I'm falling for the same person all over again. Anyway, holding back is incredibly tough because of all of this, and my anxiety makes me look ridiculous. I'm sorry!

I'm so happy that it almost feels torturous to endure. Thankfully, I was able to regain control over my strength, though.

Cece, who captured me time and time again, effortlessly pulled me up from my struggles.

I would never forget the moment my memories returned for the first time.

As I kissed her, she called my name to confirm my existence, then affectionately called me an idiot. The image of that beautiful, beautiful person dressed in white vividly arose in my mind. Cecilia returned my love with her eyes brimming with joy and pain.

At that moment, I was certain—*I will definitely return as long as I have you.*

At the same time, it was also at that moment I felt an overwhelming sense of dread.

The thought of someone I loved so much standing next to another man—just imagining it filled me with a murderous rage. And if things went how I imagined…

Unfortunately, that unpleasant prediction came true.

The more I saw her, the more joyful memories flooded back.

Her laughter. Her anger. Her tears. Her embarrassment.

Her expressions, which I'd only been able to see again after winning her over, came rushing back to me as I remembered her generously revealing them to me.

As we grew closer, she began to show me her true self, and my love for her deepened with each encounter.

Her eyes filled with joy at seeing me and a silent plea to be closer, and her soft body leaned against me without hesitation. It was only natural that I wanted to know how far the previous me had been allowed to go and how much she trusted me now.

And then I regretted it deeply.

Her body, pure white and writhing with pleasure, let out heated moans and called my name with wet, pink lips.

The voice that uttered "No" was laced with sweetness, and despite words of rejection, her hands clung and pulled at me, begging me not to let her go.

No wonder she so turned on the previous me. I could understand the feeling of not being able to hold back in front of her. *Just how greedy was I?* The fact that she didn't recoil no matter where I touched her made me so happy, but it made me angry, too.

All right, there's one place that the previous me didn't conquer. I'm definitely going to claim that.

With that thought in mind, I kissed her, her dreamy face streaked with tears as she filled me with happiness.

I desperately tried to hold back, knowing that if our rendezvous was discovered, it would affect our future. I swallowed the blood that filled my mouth from biting down so hard, responding with the words that came back to me as she smiled faintly and blissfully.

I realized it was already a lost cause when I saw that smile.

I hadn't settled my debt of atonement.

As I was still piecing together fragments, things remained the same—being apart from her was agonizing, and I was causing her pain.

No matter how greedy I became, there was no way I could feel satisfied. She freely entrusted her body to me, a sight I had dreamed of, leading me to wake up time and again, grinning from those dreams.

Above all, every night when I made love to her, I was overtaken by fear of us having to be apart again. If I couldn't protect her due to this slight distance, and if I had unknowingly lost her…

I held power. I had a ring that symbolized our marriage, but there was only one person I needed to silence.

In order to get him to say yes and let me have her, I had to make use of that troublesome person from the neighboring kingdom.

"What did you just say?"

I kneeled in the study, repeating my request once again to Marquess Cline, his voice angry.

"I asked for your daughter's hand."

"My daughter is currently recovering. She was harmed by some fool."

He said the word "fool" in an incredibly cold voice, and I realized he was probably referring to me but also Felix, who had summoned the Fenrir. I bowed my head even lower.

"I deeply regret that, and I will ensure that nothing like this ever happens again. However, my feelings for her have not changed from before. She is irreplaceable."

As I spoke with my head still bowed, the marquess spoke in a prying tone.

"Prince Lucas, when did you fall in love with my daughter?"

"I fell in love with her at first sight when I rescued her. Even after experiencing such hardships, she never gave up and tried to protect those around her. No man could resist that strength and beauty. Please, Marquess, this cannot continue, as it will lead to terrible rumors. I cannot allow anyone but her to stand at my side. I swear with all my being that I will protect her for life. Please bring Lady Cecilia to me."

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Given the situation, I think keeping my daughter hidden any longer is impossible. Knowing you, you must've already laid the groundwork, correct?"

Impressive, Marquess. How did you know?

"Yes. I just need your signature."

As I nodded and offered the documents, he furrowed his brow. *Sorry, but I won't back down.*

"You clever little brat!"

I shrugged slightly as if to say "Whatever." He roughly signed the documents, holding them up like hostages.

"I will allow you to greet her. But anything beyond that will depend on her condition."

"Her condition?"

"I'm not a monster. If my daughter wants to be with you as you are now, then I'll allow it."

We swore our love the day we met, and by the next day, I had the Promise Mark engraved on her, so she's already mine. I found myself responding silently to the marquess, whose sharp gaze pierced through me.

Of course, I didn't say that out loud. I had a feeling he'd tear up the documents on the spot if I did that.

However, now he'd granted permission, all that was left to do was bind my beloved to me.

But as the days passed after I reclaimed her, the memories kept piling up. It didn't take long for the fear to set in. If I couldn't let her go, then I had no choice but to accept it for her sake, no matter how much I didn't want to remember since she had waited for me all that time.

Even though I understood, my heart rejected the memories that might shatter this happiness.

Please let things just stay like this, without hurting her anymore, I prayed. But perhaps that was my punishment for having tormented

her in the first place.

My wish never reached her.

The moment I heard that fool had disappeared from the guesthouse, I headed straight to Cecilia.

I knew that if they crossed paths, she would try to hurt Cecilia, and nothing good would come out of it. She'd often asked for audiences with me, claiming to love me, yet she never listened to a single word I said. She was a complete fool.

To make matters worse, she had boldly insinuated Cecilia had been intimate with Felix. It was as if she was calling my Cece a whore, and I lost count of how many times I almost erased her off the face of the earth.

The only reason I held back was because Cece treated that idiot as a guest and had been preparing for the soiree. I couldn't ruin her hard work by making her go missing.

If she hurts her, I'll repay it tenfold with scars that'll last for a lifetime.

That was my only thought in mind as I approached Cece, only to have my vision filled with hatred the moment her beloved voice hit my ears.

"It's true that after spending six long years together, our relationship came to an unfortunate end. But those six years were precious to me. If I hadn't been engaged to Felix, I might never have had the chance to be with Prince Lucas."

Precious? Even though she was tormented for six years? Even though she suffered for six years? *Precious?*

No, that's not right.

Was Felix that precious to her?

Stop thinking about it.

Was that why she kept smiling for him?

Don't remember it!

Was that why she continued standing by his side after she made a promise to me?

Shove it down! If she sees, your happy relationship will fall apart!

Malice and familiar despair surged inside of me as that final, unnecessary piece of the puzzle clicked into place, and I laughed bitterly when I could feel a part of myself give up.

I want to destroy her. I want to kill her. My beloved Cece.

I knew that projecting such heavy, ugly emotions onto the one I cherished was madness.

But even when Cece had tears in her eyes, she faced me earnestly. And because I was mad for her and her alone, all I could do was cling to her.

In the end, thanks to her, I returned to being the happiest man alive. Despite her delicate appearance, she surprised me with her strength. *How many times is she going to make me fall for her? I love her so much it's almost infuriating.*

If not for that, *I never would've realized that I had been in her heart from the very moment we met, and I somehow managed to accept it.*

But honestly, it was so pathetic that I could die just remembering it.

The first time I recalled not being able to hold back at all made me want to bury myself in a hole. I terrified her by telling her I wanted to kill her, only to cling to her, saying I couldn't let her go and begging her not to hate me.

Damn it, I didn't look like the older one here at all…

If I'd been born younger, that would've been worse. I would have been desperate to take her away because the age difference would've made me anxious.

And if I weren't older, I might not have been able to protect her in time, so being the same age was also out of the question. If anything, it was better for me to be a little older. *What's Cece's limit for age gaps, anyway?*

What the hell am I thinking? I'm such an idiot.

I hung my head in shame, trying to escape my own uselessness.

I shifted my focus and gently adjusted the covers over the sleeping Cece. I pressed a kiss onto her lips, which had started to regain their color, and whispered my love to her once more. Her face softened in a happy smile at my words, which made me reluctant to part from her even more, so I ended up pecking at her lips several times.

Before I realized it, I was already undoing the buttons I'd just fastened.

What am I doing? That's being way too greedy. *Let her sleep.*

I sighed at my own foolishness and reluctantly tore myself away from her.

After I re-buttoned my shirt, I cast a defensive barrier spell around the bed and the whole room. The setup resembled a cage, and I couldn't help but let out a self-deprecating laugh.

I'm insane.

This relentless yearning, strong enough to make me want to kill her countless times over, could never be called love by any normal standard.

Secretly wishing that when I died, it would be together with my beloved… But if that was impossible, I wanted her to kill me instead. Still, I knew that was far too twisted.

I could understand when people said my feelings weren't love.

But if it's not love, then what should I call this anguished feeling that drives me mad?

No matter how much I tried to find the answer, I came up empty.

Because I'm broken. A defective product.

I knew I had to talk about it one day. That was why I'd decided to tell her before the engagement ceremony if I returned safely from my campaign. I didn't want to have to reveal that some people born into the Herbst family could turn out just like me.

Unless Dirk had children, either my sister's children or mine and Cecilia's would eventually take up the mantle of the Herbst family's role as the royal assassins.

I thought it would probably hurt her.

She had such a gentle smile when she went to visit the orphanage. She must really love children. And yet, our child might turn out to be like me.

Although I vowed to make her happy, I felt disgusted with myself that I couldn't just give her happiness.

But that was something I couldn't change.

As long as I remained who I was, it was an unavoidable problem. That was why, even if it tore me apart, letting her go so she could marry an ordinary man to find ordinary happiness might be what "true love" really was.

All I could offer her was selfish and arrogant desire from the broken pieces of who I was.

No matter how deeply I hurt her, the only thing I felt was an overwhelming need for her to look only at me, to be mine alone. That one emotion that I can call mine and mine alone.

I forced my feelings onto her, slipped a ring on her finger so she could never run away from me. What I was doing was irrational and selfish. It was nothing you could call love under normal circumstances. But I didn't know what else to call it.

More than that, the thought of losing her because I *didn't* call it love filled me with fear and made me cling to my own self-

preservation, leaving me with no choice but to laugh bitterly at my own cowardice.

Even when I accepted being called "defective," Cece retorted immediately with an answer that saved me.

"Whether this is love or not is something we decide, and no matter what you say, I love Lukie! I don't need anyone but him!"

You're incredible, Cecilia. You always save me, again and again.

I vow to dedicate all the love I have to you, and only you, for my entire life. I vow to protect you and everything you wish to protect. No matter how painful the choices ahead may be, I vow never to abandon you.

So please forgive what I'm about to do.

How can I not be angry at the people who insulted you and hurt you, just like you got angry on my behalf?

Like you said, I can protect your body with my magic. But Cecilia, I can't protect that tender heart of yours.

"We've realized our true love, so stop clinging to the title of the second prince's fiancée and just disappear already, won't you?"

I never expected to hear those words again, let alone right in front of me this time.

And this time, it came from some idiot. Someone who had the nerve to ask me to discard my beloved fiancée and make *her* my new one. I couldn't shake the thought that something must be crawling around in her brain to make her suggest such a thing, along with the fool escorting her so tenderly.

True love.

It was probably the most beautiful, powerful phrase in the world. It was strong enough that people believed they'd be forgiven for anything as long as they invoked it.

But even if the gods forgave them, I could never forgive anyone who hurt Cece.

Could it be that, as a woman, she longs for the idea of true love? I thought, anxiously stealing a glance at me, only to see her eyes waver slightly with pain as she heard those words. In that instant, "true love" became a worthless phrase I'd never use again.

Neither that day nor tonight had her dignified presence changed. Her strength of heart was almost blinding, and I knew it came from years of effort and perseverance.

But no matter how strong she was, that didn't mean she couldn't be hurt.

I could see the wounds that hadn't yet healed. I'd even considered finding some excuse to have her leave the room.

But I couldn't do that because I knew she wasn't the kind of woman who wanted to always be protected.

I knew how hard she'd worked to make this ball, this celebration for me, a success.

When she looked at me with those fierce, shining eyes and told me she'd kick aside anyone who tried to take me away, how could I tell her to leave?

Little did I know that decision would lead to her collapse.

I regretted it more than I could bear. If I wanted everything she had to offer, then I had to be a man strong enough to protect every part of her.

No matter how much suffering I had to endure, it was nothing compared to the hell of letting her go. I clenched my fists and swore to myself that I would become a man Cece could rely on.

And I released the ridiculous thought that if only I'd been two years older from my mind with a sigh as I turned away from the closed door, trying to refocus my resolve.

Inside the suffocating room, a woman's screams and a man's angry shouts rang out. I was already sick of it when Finn whispered to me, "You're really not going to kill them?"

"That's right."

"Why not? Lady Cecilia doesn't have the slightest interest in that piece of—in Lord Felix! There isn't even a trace of affection left for him in her! Killing him won't hurt her feelings in the least!" He gripped his sword tightly, shifting his gaze from the two inside the room to me, ready to leap at my signal.

"You're right," I said.

That bastard had stood by her side for six long years, and I wanted nothing more than to kill him. I wanted to kill him so badly that it consumed me.

He had her body, her heart, and received more happiness from her than anyone could hope for. Yet I'd held back all this time.

Because I didn’t want even a speck of Felix to remain in her heart.

I wouldn’t forgive even the smallest remnant of him.

If I killed him too quickly and she showed even the slightest bit of concern for him, I might do something unforgivable to her in a fit of jealousy.

So, instead, I poured all my love into her, filled her completely with me, waited, and waited until finally, just the other day, I confirmed that she felt nothing at all for him anymore. She was utterly and entirely mine.

Seeing her pale skin flushed crimson, the bright green of her eyes shining like leaves in the rain, begging me not to hate her was perfect. Utterly perfect. I wanted to see it again. I wanted to see it over and over. As I got lost in that thought, Finn’s irritated voice pulled me back to reality.

“Quit looking so damn happy, you madman! Glad you’re happy! Would you mind sharing some of that happiness with me, Master? You’ve put me through six long years of this hell!”

“No. He kept hurting her for six years without a second thought. Then in the end, he branded her with the terror of having her efforts and her very life shattered by the unreasonable violence of his power. He made her stand all alone, barely letting her speak, trampling her pride and her heart. At the very least, he should die in disgrace, regret, and utter desolation, shouldn’t he?”

I recalled her trembling, frail figure, and blood began to drip from my clenched fists.

If it was just about killing him, I could have done it any time since I'd become a Hero.

It wouldn't have mattered if he was under house arrest in the royal villa or anywhere else. If I wanted to, I could erase him without evidence, without so much as even a whisper of his existence. I had obtained this power for her, so wiping him off the map was simply child's play.

But if I didn't get him to understand the extent of his foolishness even a little, then her efforts and struggles would be in vain, and I couldn't let that happen.

"If he really loves Cecilia, then all the more reason to teach him. He needs to know, dying alone and drowning in regret, unable to seek forgiveness from the one he loves," I said as I looked at Finn, watching as shock spread across his face.

"What?" I asked.

"N-no way, I can't believe it. My lord's finally come back to his senses. No, I'm just stunned that you actually noticed someone else's feelings other than Lady Cecilia's."

"It's all because of Cecilia," I said, nodding in agreement. And for some reason, Finn hung his head.

"Right," he muttered with a disappointed tone.

I ignored him and turned my gaze to someone else who was bowing their head even lower than Finn.

"How foolish can you be?" I honestly wanted to sigh. *It really doesn't make sense why things turned out this way.*

My priority had been making sure Cecilia would rest, so I'd simply ordered them to be taken away. I didn't think they'd put them in the same room. They probably did it to extract information. *That doesn't bother me, but why is Felix trying to fuck her? Apparently, he loves Cece, but when it comes to sex, anyone will do.*

I was slightly exasperated, and I'd slipped inside the room to check on them without them noticing me, and that was honestly why I'd lost the timing to stop him.

Felix was thrusting desperately, grunting and panting, while the woman beneath him struggled in her torn dress and screamed out. "No! Stop! It hurts! Felix, stop it! I said stop! No, no!"

"Shut up! You said you could bring down Lucas! If you hadn't failed, that woman would be mine. I'm a prince! A royal! I shouldn't have to go through this. I shouldn't have to be locked up in this room because of you! Now pay for your sins with that body of yours!"

"Let me go! I wasn't the one who said their relationship was fake or the Promise Mark was gone. That was the queen! I'd never let someone like you defile me!"

The mention of the queen made the man who'd been hanging his head jerk his shoulders.

It was obvious the queen had been involved.

She couldn't even prepare for a simple ball yet showed unusual interest in the Hero's attire. She might as well have been asking to be arrested. Her methods were so sloppy I hadn't even needed to

investigate. In fact, I'd gone out of my way to hide the evidence of her copying the Hero's attire just to avoid a bigger scandal.

"What's with that woman? Isn't there any education in her kingdom?" I asked, and Finn and the others said, "Everyone but the royal family is perfectly normal," while averting their eyes. That meant "Don't ask anymore." *Yeah, they're probably a lost cause.*

Meddling with the Hero's attire already sealed her fate with permanent seclusion, so it wasn't really relevant information anymore. But more information was always better when you were arranging for someone's quiet disappearance.

What I really wanted them to say was something else, I thought as I glanced at the lump near Finn's feet.

I looked at the man's pale face, discolored from being choked by chains, and saw the other figure beside him desperately inching forward, coughing, trying to protect their master.

"S-Stop! Don't! The marquess would never!"

"Quiet down, Niklas. Don't interfere with what Lord Lucas is doing. You should've known this would happen." Finn pressed his foot down on Niklas's chest, pinning him down, and I shifted my gaze to the figure behind him, who looked up at me desperately.

"I warned you there wouldn't be a next time, didn't I, Dirk?"

"The Fe-Fenrir was unpredictable…"

"You persuaded her to go for Howser's sake, and you took her there, playing right into his hands. You must realize by now how

wrong it was to use Cece as bait. *Again.* Or are you asking me to kill you right here and now?"

"Argh…"

The memory of her dress ripped open with blood everywhere filled my mind, stirring up my emotions. As a result, the chains tightened, and Dirk began to convulse, coughing up bloody foam from his mouth. I sighed and loosened the chains.

As I watched his body stiffen and tremble, I found myself struck by the realization that humans can die easily. It was a miracle that I'd been able to save her in time. At the same time, I cursed the powerlessness of my past self for allowing a next time to happen, softly biting my lip.

There were plenty of people who would take advantage of kindness.

Cecilia wasn't just any noblewoman. She understood all this.

But it must have been hard for her to refuse Dirk, my own brother, and the one who allowed him to take advantage of her was me and my own weakness.

If I had trained more, I might've been able to attach a defensive barrier spell to the ring before I set off on my campaign. That futile thought crossed my mind, making me mock myself bitterly.

Dirk must've had confidence in his chances, too. He even had his emblem affixed and deployed a considerable number of his clansmen.

However, what ruined it was the unforeseen appearance of a Fenrir. Something that wasn't supposed to happen.

But that didn't change the fact that he had used Cece as bait, and as a result, the thing I had feared most happened. That was why I had put him under temporary house arrest here to punish him.

After all, I have no other choice but to keep my promise to her, I thought with a twinge of frustration. I resolved to ensure there would never be a next time and infused mana into the chains, tightening them around him before making them vanish entirely.

"You should be grateful to her, Dirk," I muttered quietly, looking away from the wheezing sound.

Then I turned my gaze back to the one person I could never forgive, as if to pierce through him with my eyes.

"Ha! You dare say such things when the woman who sought me out time and time again with my mother's backing never even lay a hand on me!"

Felix's words made Lady Belloni's face contort with frustration, a pained sneer escaping her lips. I finally peeled myself off the wall I'd been leaning against.

"How dare you! If only you hadn't summoned that beast… That Fenrir… we wouldn't have failed!"

That was what I wanted to hear. My arm moved up instinctively.

I heard someone nearby suck in a breath and saw someone trembling in my peripheral vision. I silently conveyed "Give up" with a

glance, and as if announcing the start of an endless nightmare, I shattered the illusion magic and the protective barrier along with it.

As the fragments shimmered and faded away, I locked eyes with the two who were frozen in shock.

The woman, who had been tearfully hurling curses at Felix, widened her eyes as she looked at me.

"P-Prince Lucas! Please, save me! Felix is trying to force himself on me! Save me! Please, Prince Lucas!"

"Lucas?! Why are you here?! Damn it, Viviana, did you set me up?!"

Seeing her disheveled hair and tear-stained face as she reached out toward me… That would probably evoke a desire to protect her in most men, I mused.

But her words didn't stir a single emotion in me. I turned a cold gaze on her and ignored the panicking Felix to speak.

"I thought I might be intruding on your private time, but since it does seem like you were forcing yourself on her, it's only right that I help her."

The woman's face twisted with a grotesque smile of joy at my words, and then I called out to Finn.

"Finn. Cut it off."

"Understood."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Their hoarse voices turned into shrieks in a matter of seconds.

As the room rapidly filled with the metallic scent of blood, I performed a quick healing spell on the woman, who was staring between her legs and Felix writhing on the floor, letting out bizarre screams.

"Well, I granted your request. So would you mind answering my question, Lady Belloni?"

"Huh? Wh-what? I-I was attacked and…"

The blood drained from her face, and she trembled, staring at me as if she couldn't believe what was happening. I sighed softly.

"Lady Belloni, I heard you've done similar things back in your kingdom, haven't you? Whenever you fancied a man who happened to be engaged, you'd have his fiancée attacked by your knights, no? Unfortunately for them, they had no one to save them."

Her eyes widened when I voiced her misdeeds, her lips moving to form a silent question.

I sighed and decided to get it over with.

"There are two things I want to ask you. Did you try to do the same thing to my Cece, too?"

As I spoke, Elsa threw down a large figure onto the floor with a *thud*.

The figure was clad in the knight's attire from Lady Belloni's kingdom. He let out a groan. The woman tried to scream, but Kate drove her great sword right between his legs.

The strangled, wheezing sound that followed made Finn tilt his head curiously.

"Hey, where's Anna? I was sure she'd show up. Don't tell me I'm going to have to clean up this mess alone?"

"She's with Lady Cecilia, of course. She was gritting her teeth."

"Yes, she asked to save some for her too, Prince Lucas!" Elsa scratched the prone figure with her weapon, a raspy scream escaping from him. Finn began to panic.

"Wait. Elsa, no! He, uh… she's right, my lord! Please save a little for her!"

"Fine. Take care of the rest when we're done."

Hearing that Anna was with Cece made me feel relieved. The woman shrieked and backed away, but Kate and Elsa's faces were full of rage when they drove their weapons into the crumpled form.

"Ee-eeek! N-no, that's not… I didn't mean to!"

"You didn't mean to? You ordered these bastards to do to Cecilia exactly what they did to Count Meyer's daughter, didn't you?" Finn said.

"You said you wanted her beaten and broken, didn't you?" Kate said.

Kate's words jogged my memory. "Hey, remember you said we were going to save some for Anna!" Finn protested noisily beside me, and I looked at him.

"What did you find out about Mia on your end?"

"The queen gave her to that woman to do with as she pleased. But after too much abuse, she broke down, and she lost the child she was carrying, too."

Does true love even exist in this world? My eyes unintentionally drifted over to Felix.

Even if it was a misunderstanding, you wanted her so badly that you broke off your engagement with Cece for this woman, and now you couldn't even protect her. I'm twisted, but you're no better than me.

As I pondered this, Felix's face contorted, and he pointed a finger at me as he shouted. "Lucas! You dare do this to a legitimate prince like me?! Waaah!"

"You never learn, do you? You're worthless scum whose only talent is thrusting your hips around and running your damn mouth. And it's *Prince* Lucas. Address him properly and don't point at your betters, you insolent fool."

"Calm down, Finn. We know he's a fool. There's no point in getting worked up about it."

I explained that I didn't really care about titles or finger-pointing and that pandering to him would only slow us down. Finn batted Felix's finger away with his sword, clicked his tongue, then bowed his head.

I healed Felix's bleeding hand once more and sealed him inside a protective barrier.

Then I turned my gaze to the trembling woman.

"Now, then. I apologize for keeping you waiting. Despite your claims, you were willing to hand her over to your knights, yes? Then answer my second question."

"N-no, please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, just don't kill me!"

She pleaded with me, her face covered in snot and tears, making me tip my head to the side.

Why did she think I'd kill her when I just saved her from Felix?

"I won't kill you. I want to send you back safely to your kingdom."

Otherwise, Cece will worry.

I'd take care of the knights, but I'd make sure she was sent back to her ruined family safely using Barn. But if she continued to haunt Cece's heart, I really would want to kill her, so I wanted her to vanish from my sight as soon as possible.

"Huh? Y-you're not going to kill me?"

"That's right. So please answer my question. You said that Felix summoned a magical beast. Who did you hear that from?"

The moment I asked, Felix pounded on the barrier wall. He slammed his fist against it repeatedly in a panic, mouthing, "Don't you dare say anything!"

The woman's gaze wavered, and she hesitated as she turned to look at me. *Come on, just hurry up and answer already!* I urged.

"Kate," I said.

"Leave it to me. Finn, don't worry about it," she said.

"Are you freaking kidding me? Damn it!" Finn cursed as Kate turned toward the groaning lump and swung her great sword down with a smirk.

A sickening splatter rang out, and blood sprayed, splashing onto Lady Belloni. Her shrill scream pierced the air.

Then, a blood-soaked arm fell near her feet with a dull t*hud*. She shrieked and wailed, eyes wide as she stared at the severed limb, pleading desperately for help.

"N-no! Nooo! It wasn't me! It wasn't me; it was Felix! It was Felix who said it! He said he'd summon it to kill Lady Cecilia! He lied and said we needed to cause a commotion to save that woman named Mia! He tricked me and showed me a book on summoning spells a man had brought to use as her as a living sacrifice. Felix! It was Felix!"

"What did he say he was summoning?" I unconsciously stepped forward.

Each step I took drove the blade deeper into Felix's skin, sending blood splattering against the barrier wall. Lady Belloni scrambled backward, her eyes darting around wildly. I tilted my head again, signaling for her to continue.

I reached out toward the half-crazed Felix as he stumbled and cowered within the narrow confines of the barrier. I murmured softly.

"Please answer me. What did he say he was summoning?"

"Eeek! A-a wolf, a magical wolf! He was supposed to summon a wolf, but then a Fenrir showed up!"

"Hah."

The response I'd been waiting for made me chuckle.

I released the barrier and cast a healing spell on Felix, who was bleeding from multiple wounds and trembled as he cowered in a heap.

Then I called out over my shoulder.

"This testimony will do, right? He wanted to summon the same thing as a Fenrir, and he's definitely the one who used forbidden magic. House arrest in the royal villa is far too lenient of a punishment. There's no way he's getting a pardon. Right?"

Felix was the first to react to my words.

"Y-you! Lucas, you coward!"

"Coward? Are you saying she's lying?"

I slowly turned to face Felix, asking him again. His face lit up like he'd just grasped a lifeline.

"Y-yes, that's right! The only people here are your lackeys, so you can twist the story however you want! A testimony like this can't possibly count as evidence!"

"So what you're saying is the word of the Hero isn't enough? We need a third party?"

"What kind of Hero are you? You think taking down a few magical beasts makes you one? Don't get so cocky! Besides, who cares if Cecilia was attacked by a magical beast? She's only a marquess's daughter, and she betrayed me! It's only fitting that she was punished! I'm the rightful heir! You think you can condemn a rightful heir like me based on nothing but testimony only *you* heard?

That's why I received a royal pardon! It's obvious that I'm more important than a mere quasi-royal like you! I'm more important than you! There's no way you could ever punish someone like me! Too bad for you!"

Truly foolish and infuriating.

Apparently, he believed his bloodline to be supreme, convinced that as a member of the royal family, he was the only one who mattered. He wielded that arrogance like a weapon, slashing at her heart. And he would pay for what he did.

I'm going to crush him completely, using the same power he holds so dear, and hurt him like he hurt her.

"Well, that's what he's saying. But what does His Highness, the rightful Crown Prince Leon, think?" I kept my gaze fixed on Felix as I deactivated yet another layer of my defense barrier and waited for his response. I heard a small, self-deprecating laugh.

"Ha ha. The duke's family really are nothing but a bunch of wretches. Though I suppose my little brother is the worst of them all."

"Huh?"

Leon came up behind me, looking like he wanted to die at this very moment, and exchanged a glance with the dazed Felix, who still couldn't grasp the reality of the situation. He took a deep breath to steel himself.

Then, Leon fixed a cold gaze on him and said, "Restrain that imbecile."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The brief joy Felix had felt in that moment when he saw his brother was fleeting, because the royal knights forced him to the ground with brutal efficiency. It knocked the wind out of him, and he began to violently wheeze and cough. It was only then that he seemed to realize that Leon's order had been directed at him.

"Argh, koff… Huh? Hey! Hey, what do you think you're—"

Leon interrupted Felix's panicked protests. "Shut your mouth. This is a direct order from the Crown Prince."

Felix fell silent, his mouth hanging open in shock. Seeing his stunned reaction, Leon shook his head slightly before taking a sword handed to him by Alphonse. He placed it on the floor before me.

Then he kneeled, bowing his head low.

"Hero-Prince Lucas Theoderic. I sincerely apologize for the grave disrespect committed by a member of our royal family in this matter. On behalf of the royal house, I humbly beg for your forgiveness."

Following Leon's lead, Alphonse, Carl (who seemed to have tagged along out of boredom), and even Dirk all fell to their knees, bowing their heads low. Felix's face contorted when he saw them all prostrating.

"B-Brother?!"

"Silence, Felix! How many times must I tell you?! Shut your mouth and put your head to the floor, you fool!"

The knight pressed his face against the bloody floor, and with the sword in front of him, he finally seemed to comprehend what was going on. He began to tremble.

I looked away from him and turned my gaze back to Leon, who sighed deeply and bowed his head again.

"I deeply apologize for the actions of this imbecile. Please, I implore you to show mercy."

As I observed Leon's response, I found myself wondering how Felix ended up so differently when he had the same upbringing.

Those of royal blood were taught that Eckesachs was the sacred blade, the highest authority—one that surpassed even the king.

Weapons capable of slaying magical beasts were said to be gifts from the gods. In truth, there was a limit to what human-made weapons could kill.

To lose a sacred relic was akin to inviting ruin. Kings were replaceable. It was enough if the bloodline continued.

But there *was* no replacement for Eckesachs. Thus, the Hero chosen by the sacred weapon was placed above the royal family.

Naturally, Cecilia, who was chosen by the wielder of that sacred relic, had a high standing as well.

Seeing the crown prince Leon kneeling before me, lowering his head in an effort to resolve the offenses caused by Felix, even if it meant offering both his and Felix's heads, made Felix's eyes widen in disbelief, and he shouted angrily. "Wh-what are you doing, Brother?! A member of the royal family shouldn't be bowing their head like that! Lucas, what is the meaning of this?! What are you trying to—"

But no one answered his desperate cries. I took the sword from Finn and held it in front of Felix as well.

Then, I slowly unsheathed it.

"Y-you idiot, what are you planning?! H-hey, let me go! Stop him!"

"You didn't know, but Heroes who wield Eckesachs have the right to pass judgment on matters that concern them without consulting anyone."

There were, of course, many restrictions. I couldn't do anything that would anger Eckesachs. But there was no issue this time.

After all, he laid a hand on my companion, whom the blade recognized as more valuable than life itself. He insulted her and, worse yet, had the audacity to pose as the Hero himself.

"Wh-what are you talking about?! I'm *royalty!* You can't do that without convening the House of Lords—"

"You summoned a Fenrir, attempted to kill Cecilia, and impersonated me at tonight's ball to hurt her."

"Th-that woman! She betrayed me! She was *my* fiancée!"

"She's my companion."

Slash! The blade sank deep into the floor in front of him, silencing him instantly.

As his shorn hair fluttered to the ground, blood trickled from his nose where the blade had nicked him, seeping into his mouth. Felix let out a quiet yelp.

I pressed the blade against his broken nose.

"Aahh! It hurts! St-stop it! Stop it!"

"Cecilia is my *wife.* You saw the ring, didn't you? If not for her, the Fenrir you called a mere 'magical beast' which you summoned would've been destroyed along with this entire kingdom by my dragon."

Leon and Dirk twitched in response.

Dirk lowered his head even further as they both realized just how crucial Cecilia was to the kingdom's survival. Without her, the Hero would not have been born.

And if that Hero lost the one he swore to protect, he could become a walking disaster with a will of his own.

They had the guts to use my absence from her side to their advantage, exploiting my amnesia to hand her over to the royal guards and other men and even let her out of the ducal house.



The royal family's shield is so naïve about the reality of what it means to defy a Hero. Know this—you never touch a Hero's companion. Engrave that into the minds of those who come after you so that it never happens again.

I'll let this end here, but hurry up and get married and stop causing any more trouble, I thought, letting my personal feelings slip in.

I heard Dirk's sigh as his shoulders slumped, and knew he would never dare to use her as bait again. I slightly let up on my sword when I felt the atmosphere around Leon become heavier.

I could understand why he couldn't accept the story that Dirk told him.

The idea that his own younger brother Felix had summoned a beast to kill his former fiancée and, as a result, had endangered the entire kingdom was truly unbelievable.

He'd demanded proof of Felix's actions and intentionally relaxed the security around the palace before the soiree.

If Felix appeared, he would have to be apprehended, but now that it had happened, it seemed Leon was resolved to accept the truth.

Judging by that approach, it's clear that "someone" *from Herbst must've had a hand in this. But why would you let them out if you know they're going to cause trouble?*

"I feel for Prince Leon, but this is a rare piece of trash we've got here," Finn had whispered in my ear. It was hard not to click my

tongue at that comment, especially knowing it had led to *my* Cecilia collapsing. Despite myself, I tightened my grip again.

Well, I *did* tell him to stay out of it, and this was the result, wasn't it? I shifted my focus back to Felix.

No matter how much he struggled and thrashed, he couldn't break free of the force restraining him. The blood drained out of his face, and he trembled in fear when he realized Leon would not look up at him.

I slowly shifted my gaze down at him from above, speaking slowly to match my movements.

"A mere quasi-royal like yourself, with no rights to succession, dared to use my reputation and the name of the Hero to deceive others. You tried to hurt my beloved companion. Do you understand how utterly unforgivable that is?"

The mana that rose around me in response to my fury made the knights restraining Felix tremble, so I eased up a little.

I kept my gaze fixed on Felix, who couldn't—or wouldn't—answer. Then I turned to Leon.

"Leon."

"Yes?"

"If I told you to kill yourself right here and now, would you do it?"

"If that was what you commanded."

Felix's eyes widened and trembled even more violently as his gaze darted from the blade pressed against him to the blood-stained

floor.

"…!"

The crown prince Leon, whose status was above his, had just offered his life up to me. It seemed he finally realized that no matter how hard he struggled, that even if his father were here and he begged him for help, it would all be meaningless against me.

I watched Felix's face turn deathly pale and his expression twist in fear. Then I felt a small sense of satisfaction.

I glanced at the sword placed in front of Leon.

So he intended to take responsibility for what he did… That's more than I expected. I muttered to myself and withdrew my blade before sheathing it.

"I'm joking, Leon. Relax."

"What about this wretch's punishment?" Leon rasped.

Finn's hand tightened on his sword. I shook my head slightly, and Finn clicked his tongue in disappointment.

I've been telling you we can't, I thought, letting my gaze drift to the woman who had fainted and collapsed. *Couldn't bear it anymore, huh?*

"He's already involved with her. Even if they can't have children, supposedly they've realized their 'true love,' so he can take responsibility."

Finn glared at me with irritation. "It's a damned ugly love triangle, no matter how you look at it! I can't believe you're letting them live. You really can't stand the idea of Lady Cecilia having

anyone else in her heart, can you? If you keep it up, she's going to be scared of you."

"I'm already making a huge compromise, you know."

What's he going on about? Who could blame me? I glanced his way, and Finn gave me a look of exasperation.

"You practically *are* her whole world already. Lady Cecilia has no room left for any more compromises."

"Practically? So I have a little ways to go," I said.

"What are you getting all happy about, you idiot? That's not what I meant! Stop acting all giddy!"

I ignored Finn's complaints and turned my gaze back to Leon, who let out a resigned chuckle.

"So you want to send him far away. Are you sure about this?" he muttered softly, picking up the sword at his feet.

I shrugged and made sure Felix could hear my answer.

"Yes. I'll engrave a Curse into him. We already cut his manhood off, so he won't be able to carry on the bloodline he's so proud of. He has no value as a hostage, nor will he pose any threat to succession, so there's no risk to Bern. He'll share the downfall of the Belloni marquessate, who will have their title and status stripped and fall from grace. He's as good as dead, wouldn't you say?"

Before Leon could respond, I heard a coughing sound and turned to see Niklas help Dirk to his feet. I sighed and cast a healing spell since he was wheezing so painfully.

"Brother… To think it would end this mildly… We owe Lady Cline more than we could ever say…" He dabbed at the blood at the corner of his mouth as he spoke, looking right at me.

Are you going to tell Cecilia about this? Raising my hand, I allowed the chains that I'd adjusted to be tighter and more painful earlier to dangle in front of him.

"You really don't need to show your gratitude," I said.

"I get it! I won't say a word! Just please put the spiked chains away…" Dirk said.

"Sir, you really need to fix that personality of yours," Finn said.

"Why are you even looking a little happy that he healed you? It's creepy…" Niklas buried his face in his hands as he shook his head.

"Sorry, sorry. It just slipped out," Dirk laughed, glancing at Leon.

"A Curse, huh? What will you carve into him?"

"The Curse will forbid him from taking his own life and from ever saying Cecilia's name again. Hm… won't let him summon Fenrir again. I'm sending him away, and we don't want him breathing a word of this to anyone, so I'll also make it so he can't do that."

"By that logic, the young lady should suffer the same fate, no?"

Leon rubbed his temples as if the sight of the unconscious woman was giving him a headache. I nodded back at him, confirming his guess.

"I'll make sure to carve it somewhere no one can see on her body."

"What? Lucas, you…can do something like that?" Leon's hoarse voice said, sounding shocked. I gave another nod in reply, waving my hand over the woman.

Since Cece said she didn't want her to ever say my name again, I might as well make it so that she can't say my beloved's name, either, I thought as I quickly etched a Curse into Viviana.

Carl looked at me as I finished, his face pale. "N-no, wait. Wouldn't death be better? Carving a Curse like that onto her is branding her a criminal of the highest order! And denying Felix even the freedom to die? After you healed up every other wound on him, you still didn't give him back the thing you cut off? You're seriously terrifying, Lukie."

"Silence, Carl."

"Sir Carl, is your tongue necessary?"

"Stop it! I need it! Wait, wait! I'll be quiet!" Alphonse had sharply reprimanded Carl, and then Finn pointed his sword at him which only made Carl panic even more.

Leon looked utterly exasperated and sighed deeply before addressing Felix.

"You are hereby stripped of your royal status and will be sent to the neighboring kingdom along with Lady Belloni with nothing but your life. You are never to set foot in Bern ever again."

"What?! Why such a—"

Leon sighed once again at Felix's trembling, shocked expression. "You're beyond help, Felix. Using forbidden arts to summon a magical

beast is punishable by death. This is a natural consequence of your behavior."

"That's not—no, Brother! I didn't do anything wro—Gah!"

Felix tried to make excuses, but Leon struck him with the hilt of his sword before he could even finish his sentence. His eyes widened from the pain and shock, and Leon grabbed him by his collar, shouting furiously in his face.

"How much of a disgrace can you be?! Do you still not realize the gravity of your actions?! You used Cardinal Howser's son as a living sacrifice to feed a magical beast and tried to kill Lady Cline over a petty grudge, even though she was completely innocent! On top of that, you dared impersonate the Hero?! Do you want to bring ruin upon Bern?!"

"I-it's not my fault! It's that woman's fault! It's all because Cecilia didn't even look at me. She didn't even try to love me, and yet now she's going to be happy with Lucas! She was my fiancée for six years! But the moment I broke it off, she went wagging her tail for another man, for Lucas!"

I couldn't help but let out a scoff at Felix's desperate screams.

I covered my face with one hand and tried to suppress the surge of emotions rising up. A piercing scream rang out, brushing against my ears, and I realized I ended up slashing him again.

Raising my gaze, I healed Felix, who was writhing on the ground in a pool of blood. His face was smeared with tears and drool, contorting as he shouted, "Y-you madman!"

Some people just never learn.

"Sure, I may be crazy, but you're such a hopeless idiot I can't even talk to you."

"What are you…? Argh!! Ahhh?!"

"How many times do I have to say it for you to understand? Don't insult my master, you piece of trash."

Finn severed the tendons in Felix's recently reattached limbs, making him writhe on the floor again. I healed him once more and watched him tremble on the ground when I opened my mouth to speak.

"You're aware that Cecilia is the only candidate for the position of second princess, aren't you, Felix?"

"…!"

"Heh. So you're not *that* stupid. So, now that you lost her, the person who supported you and made your position as second prince meaningful, you finally realize you love her? It's six years too late for that."

Felix spat in my direction and snapped back. "Since when?! How long has it been since you've been after her?!"

"Well, that's a rude question. We first met six years ago when we were formally introduced. That was the first time I saw her, and it wasn't even as myself, but as the second prince's spare. Even so, what's wrong with striving to be worthy of her, even if I was only a spare? No one objected to my efforts to protect her while you kept hurting her. Didn't anything about that ever seem strange to you?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" Felix asked fearfully.

This guy… He really never thought about anyone but himself, I realized, clenching my fist in anger. Dirk took over and continued speaking.

"Under normal circumstances, if you ignore your fiancée as much as you did, the engagement would be annulled. You were constantly messing around with other women. And yet, the royal family would never let go of Lady Cline. Of course, they might've considered breaking it off if she'd ever reached her limit…"

Dirk glanced at me and muttered softly, "I always wondered why she never once requested to dissolve the engagement."

Leon and Alphonse looked at me as well.

Damn you, Dirk. So that's why you brought it up. Master Andreas, there's no way he let slip the promise I made with Cece, right? If he did, I'm going to break every bone in his body!

"Hm, I can't tell from his expression…" I muttered.

I caught a glimpse of Niklas covering his face. *I don't think he let it slip…*

I felt a wave of relief wash over me; then I turned to face Felix.

"Do you understand now? Cecilia tried to honor the engagement that the royal family imposed on her. You're the one who threw it away. She bears no fault in this."

Felix's eyes widened, and his throat trembled. His whole body shook as he glared at me, his eyes brimming with hatred.

"You! So that's why! When Mia tricked me into breaking off the engagement, that's why you didn't try to stop me!"

I hung my head when I heard that, clenching my fists tight. Blood dripped down, creating dark red stains on the carpet. I stared at them, struggling to contain the rage swirling within me, directed both at Felix and myself, as I squeezed out my words.

"Yes, I am the lowest of the low. I knew I could have Cece, so I didn't help. I didn't try to stop it. I'm no different from the scum who treated her so cruelly. But what do you think would've happened had I stepped in back then?"

"What?"

His response was little more than a murmur. My emotions boiled over as I lifted my head and glared at him with murderous intent.

"You've never really thought things through, have you? If I had intervened and it so much looked like the knight guarding her had feelings for her, her reputation would've been ruined! If I got involved, it would've only tarnished her honor as the candidate for second princess. The more I defended her, the more those who wanted to see her fall from grace would've spread rumors, whispered lies about her being unfaithful or damaged goods! Even if I had proven them wrong, Cece's six years of effort would've been for nothing. You never once tried to see how hard she worked, how many tears she shed in secret. You refused to see or acknowledge anything!"

I felt bloodlust and mana explode from within me at the same time as I raised my voice. I didn't bother to stop it and let it wrap around the trembling Felix.

The room fell into complete silence, no one daring to move as if frozen in place. Only the sound of his frightened breathing echoed.

"Y-you're wrong. I didn't, I'm not… I didn't do anything wro…"

"You don't know? You're not at fault? That's all you ever say. Do you really think intentional ignorance absolves you from guilt? Do you have any idea how much she sacrificed for you over these past six years? Do you even have the faintest clue how often she smiled at you, you piece of shit?!"

My temper flared so intensely that I let my own pathetic jealousy slip, and the realization made me click my tongue in irritation.

No matter how much I wished for it, as long as I remained a mere substitute, as long as I failed to gain strength, I could never stand by her side. I couldn't even get close.

I wasn't even allowed to offer a comforting word when she was hurt as she left the castle with her head lowered ever so slightly. All I could do was suppress my rage and try to subtly caution Felix. *Can't you at least treat her a bit better?*

But somehow, every time I said that, his attitude toward her only grew worse.

Yet, at the same time, though Felix constantly hurt her, he could see her whenever he wanted. He could call out to her, have her speak his name, and hold her hand for all to see, standing proudly by her side.

Envy and frustration filled my veins and left me so agonized that I nearly killed him countless times. Even if she were to spend the rest of her life with me, even if I had been there for those six years… *I can't stand it. I can't stand not being able to get back what I lost during those six years, you bastard!*

My mana responded to my emotions and began searing Felix's limbs and twisting his arms and legs.

"S-Stop! Th-that woman, she never even looked at m—Ahh, I didn't do anything wron-gahh, sto-stop it!"

"She looked at you. Do you know how hard she worked for you? *You're* the one who didn't see. You're the reason she had to be all alone that whole time!" I said, but Felix kept whining and stubbornly denying it, like a child throwing a tantrum.

If you're still going to blame Cecilia after all that I've said… If you won't own up to your own foolishness, then even if I could erase you anytime with a Curse, there's no point in keeping someone alive who only ever directs malice at her alive. It's only a disadvantage.

Just as I started to consider sealing him into a protective barrier while he writhed under the pressure of my mana, my anger was suddenly quelled by a voice—a beloved voice that rang from my earring.

She called my name softly and anxiously. Without a word, I turned my back on the others and headed straight for the door, driven by the emotions welling up inside of me.

"H-hey! What's going on, Lukie?"

"L-Lukie? Is something wrong? Did something happen to the barrier around the capital?"

Carl and Alphonse called out to stop me, and I paused in front of the door, finally remembering where I was. I turned slightly and spoke.

"Leon, I'm leaving the rest to you."

"No, no, no, wait a second! Don't just dump this on me! There's no way I'm Cursing my own brother! What's gotten into you, Lucas?!" Leon's panicked reaction made me sigh and wave a hand dismissively before casting the Curse on Felix's neck and torso.

"I was summoned. I'm heading back now," I replied shortly.

"Master, if you don't explain a bit more, no one will understand," Finn remarked, pressing his fingers to his temples and shaking his head.

I was about to tell him it was too much of a pain when Carl started causing a commotion.

"W-wait! Wait, who summoned you? Is there some kind of creepy presence here?! I'm scared!"

"I didn't know you were so easily spooked, Sir Carl. That's good information to have," Finn said with a devilish grin.

Carl went pale and ducked behind Leon.

"Not again! Stop using me as a shield, Carl!"

"Leon, you're okay with this kind of stuff, right? Then it's fine!"

"I'm—yeah, it's fine, but…"

"Don't tell me you're a scaredy-cat too, Leon," Dirk chuckled.

"Shut up, Dirk!"

"Oh? Leon too?"

"Yes, Lord Alphonse. Between you and me, Prince Leon used to…"

"F-Finn! We're going to have a serious talk later! And Lucas, don't think you can just sneak out while we're distracted! Get your hand off the doorknob and explain!"

All their eyes turned to me at once, and I clicked my tongue, reluctantly stepping away from the door.

"Cecilia woke up, and she seems anxious so I should be getting back."

"That's *too* straightforward… I've got such a crappy master…" Finn muttered with a sigh.

I tipped my head to the side, not understanding what the problem was.

"It's a huge problem," Finn said, pointing to Dirk and Leon with a slight shake of his head. Carl was still cowering behind Leon.

"Wait, wait! You were just about to kill him, Lukie! How can you switch gears like that? It's terrifying! Is something *actually* in here?"

"Carl, you're stupid enough to deserve house arrest. Well, this place *is* a noble's prison, so it wouldn't be strange if it was haunted…"

"Alphonse, you've got quite the personality yourself. Not that it matters since you're not royalty. But Lukie, as your older brother, I

can’t let that slide. Could you at least give us a bit more context?” Dirk said.

“Yeah, Lucas! Never mind how you *heard* that she is awake. But you can’t just run off to your chambers at this hour! It’s already turning into a huge scandal that you carried her out of the party!”

I nodded slightly in response to Leon. *Yeah, I guess that’s true…*

I’d already expected people to gossip when I arranged for Cecilia to stay in the second prince’s quarters before the campaign. It was a necessary part of the official process, but I knew it would stir up speculation.

“I’ll deal with that later. Bye.”

“N-no, wait a second! Look, I get that Lady Cline called you, but showing up now would only make things worse! No matter how much she relies on you, going now will just cause a scandal!” Leon protested.

Felix, who had been trembling on the floor, turned his gaze toward me and rasped out, “She relies…on you…”

The whisper made me pause and take a step back. *So he’s finally starting to understand where he went wrong?* I begrudgingly turned my feet back toward the room.

The fact that he finally realized his feelings for Cecilia enraged me, and honestly, I never wanted to tell her that. *Damn it, I hate this so much. Just drop dead on the spot, and I could give up on all of this…*

I waited for a moment, but nothing happened, of course. *Fine. Let's just get this over with…*

I turned to Felix and met his gaze head-on.

"It won't turn into a scandal. I'm going back to my own room."

"What? Why would that be? Wait, no way… did you bring her to *your* room?!" Leon exclaimed.

"Lucas, you know, this isn't the ducal house…" Dirk said.

I simply replied, "You two sure know how to make things sound worse than they are."

Sure, I guess you could say I did bring her along because I didn't want to be apart from her, but there was more to it than that.

Cece had been having occasional nightmares since the campaign.

Back when Felix broke off the engagement and hurt her, she would sometimes cry out in her sleep. I stayed by her side as much as I could until the nightmares finally stopped. But now they'd returned, and I couldn't figure out why.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think she'd be calling my name, begging me not to leave and to stay with her.

I felt terrible that Cece was having nightmares, but at the same time, I was so unbelievably happy.

When I held her to comfort her, she'd cling to me so tightly it drove me crazy. *I'm sorry, but it's the best feeling in the world.*

As I was pondering this, Felix, who had been slumping over,

suddenly burst into laughter.

Is he breaking down because he can't take it anymore? I tipped my head to the side, only for him to glare at me, his eyes glinting as he angrily spat out.

"Lucas, you *tricked* me! That couldn't have been *her!* That was no woman I knew! You must've made one of your lackeys pretend to be her! There's no way she'd ever rely on you!"

Leon and the others stared at Felix, stunned by his outburst.

Carl opened his mouth, only for Finn to instantly draw his sword and point it athim. *Don't compare me to you.*

"I'd never have *anyone* stand by my side except for Cecilia."

"No, it's a lie! It has to be a lie! She's never once shown her feelings like that! Not once, ever since we met! She's never ever raised her voice like that! Never leaned on anyone like that! She'd never show a face like that to anyone!"

Hearing Felix's anguished cries, I found myself clicking my tongue before I could even feel satisfaction.

I never wanted to show her to this bastard I despise enough to kill, and now it's making him realize his own mistakes. Damn it. I'm getting nothing out of this. Can you at least regret it to your very core already?

"No matter what you think, she is *my* Cecilia, the woman I know."

"That's a lie! There's no way! Even if *that* woman really was her, she's not the type to rely on anyone! Not once in six years has she

ever done that! So you must've forced her to come with you after she collapsed, Lucas! She's so conscious of appearances. There's no way she would have gone to your—"

Felix's rant came to an abrupt stop, and I narrowed my eyes as I leaned closer to whisper.

Yes, you were there when she heard what she said, weren't you?

"I want to go back *to your room."*

Not just go. But go back.

"Ngh, ahh!" I couldn't help but let a small smile tug at my lips, hearing his frustrated screams.

I didn't know where Felix had gone wrong. But I was certain if he'd changed his behavior, she would've gradually opened her heart to him.

Over the course of those six years, he'd squandered every single opportunity he'd had. In doing so, he wounded her soft heart again and again.

As a result, Cecilia had to stand alone to guard herself, and eventually, she gave up on wanting anything, choosing instead to simply put a smile on her face.

The one who started it, the one who ended it, and the one who kept her from ever showing her true self was all his own doing, wasn't it?

"I didn't force her to do anything. It was by mutual consent. Relax. I made sure to be discreet. You didn't notice a thing until now,

did you?" I directed my last sentence to Leon and Dirk, my back on Felix as I turned on my heel. The sound of him panting filled the room.

Then, I paused at the door and glanced back at him. "Oh, right. This will probably be the last time we ever see each other, so I'll give you one last parting gift. Cecilia has always been incredibly expressive, you know. She was like that even when I first met her six years ago."

I thought back to young Cece, clenching her fists in determination, and I couldn't help but let out a small laugh. Felix's face twisted with shock.

"Wh-why… Ahh!"

I couldn't help but sigh in exasperation at the sight of him crumbling into despair. *He screwed up from the very beginning…*

For the first time, he was looking back on his own foolishness. He had thrown it all away—his status, his reputation, and the woman he'd once adored. And now, at long last, he understood he could never get any of it back, so much that it made him want to die.

Finally, just a little, Cecilia's efforts and hardships had been rewarded.

He would live the rest of his life unable to see her, unable to ask for forgiveness, weighed down by regret that would never disappear.

***

Lucas had always been careful to uphold my reputation even when I lived in the second prince's quarters, just as he'd promised my father, although there were moments when he got a bit suspicious.

Mostly when things got a little out of hand during sex or when it looked like he was seriously considering getting married officially right then and there. I guess you could say he had a laissez-faire attitude but was also ready to use his authority to its fullest.

But overall, he'd been *mostly* proper.

Of course, I was sure not to be careless, either. Besides, thanks to some overpowered illusion magic and the covert operations of my stealthy maids, everyone believed that Lucas and I lived in separate rooms.

The fact that there'd never even been a single rumor about us proved that it was working.

So when I woke up to such a chaotic morning, it was only natural that I was a bit confused.

Maybe it was inevitable. I mean, sure, I know it's my own fault for letting him carry me out like that, but I honestly hadn't expected things would blow up like this.

After all, there'd been plenty of other ladies at the soiree who'd collapsed under his fearsome glare, right? And people faint pretty easily, don't they?

So when I had my little fainting spell, I didn't think anyone would take it *that* way, but perhaps I'd just been naïve. I inwardly laughed at myself, a cold sweat breaking out while the royal physician

in front of me gave me a troubled, strained smile before he quickly averted his eyes.

Wait, please don't look away! I almost reached out to cling to him.

But when I saw his gaze darting around suspiciously, I realized that the rumors I'd heard from my maids had spiraled far beyond what I'd imagined. I tried to keep my expression neutral as I swallowed hard and forced myself to ask.

"I'm sorry, I'm just startled. But did you just ask if there's a chance I could be…*pregnant*?" I tipped my head, feigning confusion, and I lightly pressed my fingertips to my lips to hide that they were trembling.

Calm down. Calm down! You absolutely can't let it show on your face. Just deny it calmly. That's all you need to do! But wait! What if I deny it clumsily, and it ends up creating a misunderstanding with Lucas?

"Er, well… The reason for your collapse was due to mana depletion from mental and physical fatigue. Your mana levels have mostly recovered, so there's no need to worry. But, well, considering your position as Prince Lucas's fiancée, I thought I should confirm things, just to be safe…" Seeing the royal physician stammer with a pale face made my shoulders slump. *He must've seen Lucas's death glare at the party… No wonder he was so terrified after seeing that. He'd probably be the first to suffer Lucas's wrath if something did happen to me.*

And in that case, it wouldn't just be the concerned parties; it would be a free-for-all. He might even raze the entire palace!

As I began to retreat into my thoughts to avoid this unpleasant reality, I found myself staring blankly at the royal physician's trembling hands.

"Um, may I proceed?" he asked hesitantly, causing a cold sweat to trickle down my back.

No, you may not! I wanted to shout, but with the rumors already spreading and the physician coming all the way here to check on me, I couldn't afford to deal with this the wrong way. If I messed this up, it could turn into a mortifying situation.

I plastered a thin smile on my face as my mind scrambled to find the right response, trying to figure out all the ways to deny it. Just then, Lucas entered without even knocking.

The sight of him made me let out a sigh of relief, only to be met with a harsh declaration that left me speechless.

"No tests are necessary."

"But, Your Highness… Given what happened before the campaign, shouldn't we at least…"

My shoulders twitched violently at those hesitant words. *Argh, it sounds way too familiar!*

Seeing the physician glance nervously at me, I somehow managed to maintain a strained, troubled expression as I shifted my gaze to Lucas. He looked down at me, and with that, the physician turned his attention back to Lucas.

Lucas handed him a document, gesturing for him to look at it.

I watched as the physician's eyes widened while he read it. I unconsciously gripped the bedsheet, feeling my throat tighten with tension as I swallowed hard.

After a brief silence, the physician bowed deeply to Lucas and then to me. "My apologies, Lady Cecilia. It appears that there are no particular issues with your health, so I will take my leave now."

"Thank you."

The door closed with a soft *thud,* and I couldn't take my eyes off Lucas, who turned to gaze at me.

I wanted to know why the physician had withdrawn so easily and what was in that document, but my lips wouldn't work properly. I opened my mouth to ask but then closed it. I opened it again, only to shut it once more. He let out a wry chuckle when he saw me struggling.

"Sorry for coming so late. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I replied, my voice sounding more nervous than I'd intended. I averted my gaze slightly.

Lucas placed his hand over mine gently, which was still clutching the sheets, and softly said, "Good. Can we talk for a bit?"

There was a certain resolve in his voice that sent a chill through me and made my palms grow damp with sweat.

I gave a slight, anxious nod, which was all I could muster. Seeing this, he reached out and touched my cheek, stroking it gently as if to comfort me.

"Last night's incident isn't a problem. Nothing about what those two did has been exposed, and as the physician said, the cause of your collapse is being attributed to a drop in mana from mental and physical exhaustion. It's even being rumored that the cause was that woman."

Wow, so they've shifted the blame to Viviana…

I mean, it's not exactly wrong. Plus, she's been a thorn in my side for ages.

But half of that exhaustion—especially the physical part, is because of Lucas doing whatever he pleases. I suppose she really did end up taking all the blame.

I turned what almost became a sigh into a deep breath and nodded for him to continue. Lucas tightened his grip on my hand in response.

"As I told you during the soiree, there are rare occurrences when someone like me is born into the Herbst family. We don't know why they're born or why we struggle with emotions. The only thing we do know is that we always come from the direct bloodline and end up serving as the assassins of the royal family."

"Yes," I murmured.

With those sudden words, I understood why he had spoken so firmly, making it a point to deny it in front of me back then.

Lucas must've realized that I understood because he lowered his voice and murmured softly. "Of course. I'm using magical contraception."

"I know…"

"Right…" He let out a small breath, almost like a sigh. I reached out to touch his lips, which he was trying to force into a smile.

"We're engaged, after all." The intention behind my words seemed to reach him, and I saw the corners of his trembling lips relax ever so slightly.

"Yeah, you're right."

There's no way he'd get me pregnant while we're only engaged. Especially not if he never knows when he'll have to leave on dangerous campaigns. He would never risk putting me in that kind of danger. If something happened to Lucas and I was left with his child, I'd become nothing more than a vessel for producing royal heirs. They'd never let me leave the palace, and worst-case scenario, I might even be forced to have relations with Felix just to keep the bloodline secure.

More than anything, someone who loved me so deeply would never hide something so important from me. That was why he didn't try to stop Felix when he revealed the Herbst family secret. It was so he could tell me.

It was a confession. He regretted not warning me of the risks of marrying him, and perhaps it was also a way of strengthening his own resolve.

My beloved…

Don't force yourself to smile. Don't be afraid. I'll never leave you.

I just want to know how you feel, I thought as I traced his faintly trembling lips with my fingers.

Then, when I softly called his name, he pressed a kiss to my fingers and whispered, his voice filled with anguish.

"I can't live without you."

His words were colorless. Plain, simple words that carried the truth, making his pain all the more vivid to me.

There were some things that couldn't be changed, no matter how much power he had. And if it was something like his own bloodline, he must have been incredibly conflicted.

It wouldn't have mattered if we could live in a world with just the two of us.

But we can't. Neither of us could escape from our roles. This engagement began because of our rules, and our future must eventually come to pass.

Unable to let me go, he must have placed his trust in me and resolved himself for my sake.

"But I thought I wouldn't be able to truly find happiness with you that way…"

You love me so much.

You remembered those insignificant words I said after the previous soiree and took them to heart.

It wasn't enough to make me happy—he wanted to *be* happy with me and earnestly considered what it meant for us to walk through life together.

My heart felt like it was overflowing, and the words spilled from my lips.

"Happiness…together?"

He squeezed my hand shyly. Then, he spoke with a heavy sigh. "If something were to happen to you, and only the child was left…"

He looked like the words themselves were cutting him, and I gently reached out for his cheek. He gripped my hand tightly, his head inclined as he took another deep breath.

When he raised his gaze again, his golden eyes glimmered with determination, a resolve so strong it took my breath away.

"I swear, I'll raise them well. I'll cherish them. I'll love them in my own way, just as I would love you. I swear I'll protect everything you hold dear, with every ounce of my being. So…"

Before he could say anything more, I impulsively threw my arms around him. He caught me effortlessly and held me tight as a wave of heat welled up in my chest, and my eyes began to sting with tears.

You've always responded to me so naturally.

You've always lifted me up with that pure strength.

I can easily imagine how much it meant for you to say that because you love me so deeply.

All this time, I'd been so anxious that you would come after me if I died. I could never ask you not to follow because I felt it, too—the desire to leave this world with you in that fleeting moment when I faced death.

But what if I had a child?

If we were no longer here, what would happen to them?

Imagining a future based on self-centered love without the resolve to face it was far too terrifying.

Luckily, there was still some time left until our official marriage.

I'd been thinking that we needed to make up our minds and decide on the best resolution for this issue before then. That was why I thought we should talk after the engagement ceremony.

That's why this time I'm going to say it myself!

"P-please marry me!"

"…"

I gave into my overflowing emotions and blurted out with trembling lips, then suddenly found myself pinned down onto the bed.

"L-Lukie?"

I tried my best, so what's going on here?!

"Cecilia."

He called out to me, holding me tight and burying his face against my shoulder, leaving me scrambling to respond.

"Y-yes?!"

"I truly love you. I'm really crazy about you. I want to lock you up, chain you down, and defile you completely. Thank you for making me happy. I'll dedicate my whole life to making you happy."

"U-um, y-yes. Likewise. I want to be with you forever…"

Wait, did he just say something terrifying mixed in there? My face flushed red, caught between the embarrassment and joy that

overwhelmed everything else as I listened to his breathless words filled with emotion.

Yet I noticed that the ears peeking through his hair had turned red. And the arms holding me tightened with every word I spoke, so I hugged him back just as fiercely.

As we both turned bright red and squeezed each other in a tight embrace, Lucas suddenly let out a laugh.

"I didn't expect you to be the one to say it first. My beloved isn't just cute, she's amazing, too."

He sat up and caressed my cheek with his large hand. I covered it with my own as I spoke.

"I told you I'd go first this time, didn't I?"

"You did say that, and I just can't win against you, can I?"

He laughed softly, joyfully, and murmured in a voice brimming with happiness, which made my chest tighten and my smile falter for a moment.

I tried to suppress the trembling sensation in my throat as I lowered my gaze, but in the end, I couldn't hold back and let my tears spill over onto his hand that was caressing me.

Once he saw me breaking down into sobs, Lucas gently and pleadingly called my name.

"Cecilia."

I looked at him through the tears streaming down my face, drawn in by his longing voice. And then, in the calmest yet most loving tone he could muster, he declared once more.

"Lady Cecilia Cline. I, Lucas Theoderic Herbst, vow to love you for the rest of my life and to always keep my promises to you. Will you please marry me?"

"Yes! Yes!" I immediately replied and reached for the matching earring that symbolized our vow of eternal love.

Now that I had promised my future to Lucas, it was like I'd exchanged vows both with his former self and his present self. *You spoil me too much.*

And here I had made up my mind and thought I'd say it first this time… *Honestly, you're so sneaky!*

But I love you and only you, my dear knight.

After he tucked me back into bed, he treated me to a long explanation of the situation, and all the emotion from before drained away.

I wish I could've basked in the afterglow a bit longer, I thought helplessly, nodding along at his explanation.

As I suspected, the queen was involved, and her punishment was permanent seclusion.

The king would not be abdicating, but due to this incident, he was stepping back from political affairs, and the timeline for Leon's marriage was being sped up. Needless to say, there were discussions with his fiancée's kingdom to that effect.

I'd exchanged letters with the future princess a few times, and she mentioned she wanted to marry Prince Leon as soon as possible,

so I knew she would agree in a heartbeat.

I'm happy for you, Prince Leon.

And the fact that Viviana was scheduled to leave our kingdom tomorrow was shocking.

Could it be because of what I said when I lost my temper? Panicked, I asked Lucas, who immediately denied it with a happy smile on his face.

"Ha ha, no, Cecilia. She took someone who was under house arrest out of the palace and, on top of that, made him impersonate a Hero. There's no kingdom that would warmly welcome someone like that. Even if she wasn't our guest, Bern still has a reputation to uphold, so we're sending her back as a form of protest by canceling her attendance at the engagement ceremony. Dirk and the others have already contacted her kingdom about sending her back. Giving her until tomorrow is less about leniency and more about Bern offering her kingdom to decide her punishment and quietly convey it to us. So, no matter how much she tries to stay, she will be out of Bern by tomorrow."

I feel an overwhelming sense of malice in the way he's talking…

Hey, doesn't everyone already know I wasn't best friends with her? It was embarrassingly obvious that we were rivals vying for your attention.

So why are you, the so-called prize, getting involved in this? What part do you want to play? Does that mean I don't have a role in this anymore?

He seemed so pleased with himself that she was leaving that I found myself making idiotic jokes in my mind. Meanwhile, he flashed me a sexy smile.

"Oh, would you like to beg again? The way you pleaded so desperately last time was so intense. I'd gladly give in."

"B-beg? No, I won't!"

Absolutely not! What are you even saying?! There's no way I'm going to recklessly use my ultimate move like that!

No, wait, that's not right. No, it is *right!*

If I use it all the time, it won't be my ultimate move anymore, right? I need to be more careful.

"Ha ha. Too bad."

What are you laughing about? You're so mean! And I love your smiling face so much that I end up thinking I don't even mind if you tease me, so please stop smiling like that! Seriously, stop smiling at me!

"Too bad? Please stop teasing me already…"

"That's an incredible weapon because even I couldn't stop it."

Oh, now that he mentions it, he's right… It's very powerful compared to the "I won't talk to you anymore!" attack, because I can't use that one when my tongue is busy…

I really don't want to use that move again anytime soon, anyway. It's too risky and puts my body and mind on the brink of death every time!

"It was impossible to stop wanting you in every way possible. Seeing your pale breasts jiggling beneath me, your small mouth, feeling your pink tongue entwined with mine… It was so perfect."

I couldn't believe he said something so obscene while deliberately crossing his legs in a provocative manner. My eyes almost wandered *there,* but I managed to resist with all my might!

What a total pervert. Stop saying such sexy things! I'm so embarrassed I've broke out into a sweat!

Enough of this conversation! I turned away sharply, cheeks flushed, and tried to climb off the bed, only to find myself back under the covers.

Wait, didn't I just get out of bed? Is it only my imagination? I blinked, looking at Lucas in confusion.

"Um, I need to go—"

"No, you don't. You've just woken up after collapsing, so I absolutely forbid you from leaving this room today. I might chain you up if you don't obey me."

He interrupted me, still obsessed with those chains.

And now some mysterious curtain of light is descending from the canopy… This is a defense barrier disguised as drapery, isn't it? Um, isn't this basically turning the bed into a cage?

It's not that he wants to keep me in the room. He doesn't even want me to leave the bed! I glanced back at the light and then widened my eyes at the strange smile on his beautiful, porcelain face. His fiercely smiling golden eyes that I loved so much now shone with

pain, and I found myself reaching out with concern before I even felt fear.

"Lukie, you said yourself—it's just mana depletion. You saved me, so you know I'm fine now, right?"

I tried to reassure him and cupped his face as I spoke softly. Lucas looked a little apologetic, his face slightly pink as he hesitantly wrapped his arms around me. Then, he inclined his head and muttered, "It was still no use even though I'm two years older…"

He's still hung up on that?!

"I'm sorry, but I'm still worried. Your mana hasn't fully recovered yet, so please just rest today. Besides, if you go to say goodbye, it might be taken as a sign of forgiveness for what happened, so neither of us should see them off."

"You're right."

I lowered my head, not wanting him to see the emotions that welled up inside of me.

I'm terrible.

Even though Lucas had already promised me, just knowing that Viviana would never see him again filled me with relief, and even worse, made me happy.

I gazed at his large hand as it played with my hair.

I don't want him to touch another woman.

I don't want him to see another woman.

I want him to look only at me.

Love only me.

Because I'd rather just kill him than let him go…

That's dark… No, it's practically deranged! But since I can still recognize that, does that mean I'm not completely lost?

But even finding comfort in that seemed a little crazy.

I used to be normal, didn't I? Did being with Lucas turn me into someone like this? But his own love is also rather intense, or rather, extremely *intense. It turns out we're pretty compatible!*

And for the first time, I understood why I'd ended up as the villainess.

I'd just uncovered the reason why I had become a villainess.

The balance tipped, and I snapped, huh? That explains why it didn't happen with Felix.

Oh, wow. It makes perfect sense.

Yikes, I'm so emotionally intense. Looks like I've got all the classic markings to stay a villainess in the future, too!

After all, our engagement will be official soon, right? And even if it's not, we're already in a de facto marriage, and we just made another vow for the future.

Someone dared to ignore my warnings, then sidled up and tried to snatch away the person I love that much! If it happened again, and if his affections shifted from a girl with intense emotions like me to a ditzy girl like her, of course, I'd want to do more than complain to both of them! I wouldn't settle for something as lukewarm as refusing to invite them to a tea party.

I'd invite her to the faction's tea party alone and crush her as thoroughly as possible. I'd shove my ring into her face. Just picturing it made me grin.

I hate the idea of becoming a villainess! But if Lucas ever fell for another woman…

I pressed a hand against my chest, which burned with jealousy, and gritted my teeth as I tried to hold back my emotions. Then, just as I took a small breath to calm myself down, something terrifying rippled through the air, sending chills down my spine.

"What—or who—were you thinking about Cecilia?" A deep voice crawled across my skin, invading my body.

His large hand gently caressed my trembling shoulders, moving slowly from my collarbone up my throat. He caught my chin softly but with an undeniable strength that left me no choice but to look up, raising my downcast eyes.

The porcelain face I saw wore a deranged smile, and his golden eyes were melting with lust as he stared me down. The intensity of his possessiveness was so oppressive that I felt my cheeks flush with joy, and I almost wanted to cry again…

How pathetic, responding like this to a total sadist! Curse my love-struck heart!

Lucas studied my reaction intently, his eyes darkening with overwhelming love as he murmured, his words thick with venom.

"I want to lock you away and devour you completely, Cecilia. That's how much I love you. I told you just now, didn't I? It's only

you."

Eek! Can you please stop reading my mind?!

He told me exactly what I wanted to hear, echoing my thoughts with even greater passion than I expected. I trembled under the sheer force of his feelings and felt his sweet poison melt away my turbulent emotions. Before I knew it, a smile tugged at my lips, and I slipped my fingers through his.

"Ever since I fell in love with you at first sight, it's always been you. My heart and body respond to no one else. I don't need anyone else so long as I have you. It's because of you that I can have this resolve," he said.

"I-I know."

"Then you know giving me that look is practically asking for it, don't you?"

"Wh-what look? I-I'm not…!"

I don't know what expression I'm making, but I'm definitely not trying to seduce him! Just as I started shaking my head, Lucas leaned in with a soft, heated gaze and whispered against my lips.

"You looked like you were ready to kill me."

"…?"

Wait, that's not a good thing, right? That shouldn't be romantic! How does that translate into asking for it? Despite my confusion, his large hand cupped my face, his lips pressing insistently against mine as he murmured.

"As if you'd ever forgive me if I looked at someone else."

"Nngh…"

W-wait!

"You were glaring at me with a deliciously twisted look that said if I ever abandoned you, you'd kill me."

"Th-that's a lie! Mm, nngh!"

I was?! What happened to my refined manners and all that ladylike training?! No way… Where did the mask of a noblewoman go?! I was just indulging in a brief, petty daydream, okay? I can't believe I let it show on my face so easily, though!

I wanted to die from embarrassment because my feelings were so painfully obvious. But instead, my beloved looked genuinely happy about it. *You're just as insane as I am, aren't you? Well, at least I'm glad that we're in this together…*

The shock of him seeing right through me like this made my face feel like it was about to explode because it was so hot, so I turned my face away to escape his gaze.

But then his lips shifted to my ear, and his words made my eyes widen once more.

"That was such an adorable expression. Please, Cecilia, just say what you were thinking earlier, okay?"

What? You're making such a merciless request right now?! Your talent for being unfair is way too high!

How can I say no when you're coaxing me with such a sweet smile on your face…? But I must! I refuse! There's no way I'm giving

in! Even if I do have a bit of an intense side, at least I have the good sense to keep my mouth shut!

I pressed my lips together tightly, trying to show my defiance. But his golden eyes met mine straight on, and I felt my neck flush red as beads of sweat began to form.

Why does he want me to say it so badly?

It's not like it's something anyone would be happy to hear. Yet the way his eyes darkened and slowly narrowed into a gentle smile made me realize he craved my love so unconditionally it nearly brought me to tears.

As he traced my trembling lips with his fingers, I gave in with a heavy sigh of resignation, my breath brushing against his fingertips.

"I don't want…you to ever cheat on me," I said.

"You can kill me if that happens. I'd deserve to die." He said those unsettling words quite casually with a content smile, leaving a light kiss on my lips.

I felt a pang of loneliness from his fleeting kiss, so I reached for the back of his neck to pull him close, only for him to do the same, slipping his fingers through my hair. The slight pull brought our faces even closer, and he gently stroked my neck.

Then, after savoring the softness of my skin, he gave me a kiss.

I followed after him when he finally began to pull away, and his golden eyes, which brimmed with desire, curved in a pained smile.

"I love you. So when you're fully recovered, get ready, because I'm going to fuck you all night long."

The depth of his feelings was clear in the tenderness of his touch, and it made my heart ache while a different kind of yearning welled up within me.

I wanted to kiss him deeply.

But expressing that desire seemed somehow improper, and the thought of him catching on embarrassed me, so I quickly deflected.

"N-no! Not all night!"

"Not all night? Oh, I see. Is that so?"

But he immediately saw through me and, with a quiet chuckle, suddenly stole my lips with a kiss so rough it felt like he was devouring me.

He kissed me so deeply his name slipped from my mouth, dripping with happiness. "Mm, nngh, Lukie…!"

His tongue entangled with mine and pushed deep into my mouth, making me reflexively push back against him, which only ended up making the kiss deeper.

Our tongues moved against each other, making lewd sounds, and a warm flush began to spread through my lower abdomen.

"Ah! Haaah, haaah…"

I wheezed as his kiss left me breathless. He pulled back and watched me with a satisfied look on his face, licking away the strand of saliva that still connected us with a mischievous smirk.

"Well, I guess I have no choice. Maybe I'll just have to use chains to keep you from running away. That way, you'll have no choice but to drown in me."

His teasing words carried a surprisingly serious tone.

What a sly, adorable man, I thought, reaching up to stroke his cheek.

"Wh-why?! Don't tie me up!"

"I want to tie you up. I want to trap you and make you drown in me."

Don't say that with such a serious look on your face while I'm tugging at your cheeks! I can't help but laugh!

I let out a soft giggle, blinking away the tears that rose to the surface, and reached out, brushing my hand against his earring, mustering up my resolve.

"I'm already drowning. Any more would be terrifying," I whispered. Lucas's eyes widened slightly. Then he smiled as if he couldn't contain his joy and murmured something terrifying.

"Don't worry, Cecilia. It's not enough yet. Try harder."

"What?"

"Catch up to me, won't you?" he whispered mysteriously, his tone filled with a strange intensity. I found myself trembling with a different kind of fear now, tears welling up again. *What on earth does he have in mind?! This is terrifying!*

I smiled back faintly, trying to hide my unease, and he let out an adorable laugh, his lips curling into a wicked grin as he finally said, "Well, I'll let it go for now."

Thank goodness, I thought, grateful he was dropping it. *No way am I digging deeper… I'm definitely not just putting it off until later!*

"Now, my beloved. Why don't you lie down and rest? Next up is the ceremony we've been waiting for. You'll help me get ready, won't you?" he murmured gently, brushing aside my disheveled bangs and pressing a tender kiss to my forehead.

How does he always make me happy so fast? I pouted in frustration and gave his shoulder a playful tap. "I'll do my best," I said quietly.

His golden eyes softened into a smile as he drew closer. I closed my own eyes, welcoming him with open arms.

"I love you, my one and only."

"And I love you too, my dear knight." His words moved me as he sealed his whispered promise with a kiss. I had completely forgotten that he was a man who always kept his word…

Chapter Six

NOW THAT THE CHAOS HAD SETTLED DOWN, I was caught up in the preparations for our engagement ceremony. And yet, there was one thought I just couldn't shake—*This is absolutely ridiculous!*

I knew that it was going to be a grand affair, considering it was the engagement of the second prince and Hero, no less. But it was still just an engagement. It was hard to believe that not only the royal castle, but the entire capital, was buzzing with excitement, decked out in festive colors.

For some reason, everyone around me seemed on edge. When I made eye contact, they'd blush and quickly scurry away as if they were avoiding me.

Even Prince Leon, whom I only saw occasionally, would just give me an apologetic expression. My father, on the other hand, seemed utterly lifeless and barely spoke a word.

There's definitely something going on, I couldn't help but think.

"Prince Leon, may I have a moment to ask…"

"I'm sorry, Lady Cline. There was nothing I could do to stop him…"

What are you talking about? Don't just tell me something like that and end the conversation with a tragic expression on your face!

"Father? Um…"

"Oh, Cecilia… Please be happy…"

I am happy, thank you very much. Why are you sniffling, Father?!

Everyone around me was hiding something, but no one would give me a straight answer.

As I scrambled about to prepare for the ceremony, more unfamiliar documents kept piling up. The preparations turned out to be much more expensive than I'd expected, and the dress we'd ordered for the occasion still hadn't arrived.

Finally, it arrived the day before the ceremony, and it was about to be revealed to me. I sighed with relief and turned to see the maids beaming as they showed me the finished gown. And I nearly fell out of my chair.

What is… I mean, I know what it is, but…isn't this a bit much, even for him?!

I know it's been hundreds of years since the last Hero, but I think you're all indulging him way too much! You shouldn't grant his every wish. However, I knew exactly why they'd done it, so all I could do was hang my head.

There was no way he'd be satisfied with simply getting permission.

With his divine beauty and carefully composed demeanor, those who weren't close to Lucas would never have imagined that he was actually a short-tempered, wicked demon. *My fiancé's true nature sounds pretty bad when put into words.* Still, he was far more

competitive and cautious than his appearance let on. *He's an expert at behind-the-scenes maneuvering…*

That's what I love so m… No, wait! That's beside the point! In other words, he's just someone who prefers handling things on his own terms.

So, just like before, he must've gone around behind the scenes to prepare everything, using his sharp gaze to intimidate anyone who got in his way. *That sounds just like something he'd do.*

He must have created a situation where there was no room for objections and then said, "If anyone has complaints, let's hear them," all while smiling faintly as he filled the room with his mana.

Oh, I can totally see it…

Not only that, but a dress like this would typically take four to five months at the bare minimum to make. So he must have arranged it far in advance for it to be ready now.

My face grew hot at that realization.

The emotions inside overpowered my embarrassment, and I felt my body burning underneath my gown.

Ahh, why does he always make me so happy?!

My heart felt like it would burst as I glared at that magnificent dress. I could practically see his smug face as I looked at it. The Hero's crest, which was sewn into the ceremonial sash, made me want to complain, despite how happy it made me feel, but… *No, I have every right to complain!*

Being this reckless, thinking no one can rein you in… Well, you're sorely mistaken!

I glared at the dress and called out for Anna.

"Anna."

"Yes, my lady. Since adjustments will be necessary if your figure changes, I'm afraid we've asked Prince Lucas to refrain from visiting at night."

Ohhh, so that's what's been going on.

No wonder he was avoiding physical contact. I knew something was off. It was simply unheard of for him not to even suggest nighttime activities.

Even though he would hold me tight and kiss me passionately, suddenly, he'd lean back and start panting heavily. *I didn't understand why, and I honestly thought it was a bit creepy…*

I thought he might be ill. But I'm glad I didn't ask now…

He hadn't touched me for so many days that I got lonely and started clinging to him myself. He didn't push me away, but he would freeze up and grit his teeth with his eyes shut tight. I got so anxious that I finally asked him, "L-Lukie, is it…bad if I get close to you?"

"No, not at all. It's fine. Go ahead," he said and pulled me close. I was so happy that I clutched onto him. And yet Lucas pressed his face into the pillow and kept mysteriously muttering things like "I'm so happy… I could die… You smell so damn good… I could die."

So that's what it was. Now it all makes sense.

I did feel a little bad about it, though.

But still, this was a completely separate issue.

"When is Prince Lucas available today?"

"Your anger is divinely beautiful… He's free just about now," Anna said.

"Then could you let him know that I'll be stopping by?"

"Certainly, please wait a moment… He says that would be fine."

That was fast! It must be Finn. It's amazing how convenient it is when the servants are all in sync. But please stop looking at me like that, with that smile that says, "Don't ask me anything." It's terrifying! I won't ask, okay?

As I walked to the door, I glanced back at the dress.

It was more elegant than the one I wore before, and in a color, I knew all too well.

But there was something on the dress that shouldn't be there for an engagement ceremony. My cheeks almost softened into a smile, but I caught myself and straightened up before marching into Lucas's study.

"Excuse me, thank you for your time! How are you doing, Prince Lucas?"

"I'm in a wonderful mood now that I can see you, Cecilia. But tell me, what's made you come all this way with such sparkling eyes? And could you share with me who you crossed paths with on your way here?"

As I stepped forward to greet him, he took my hand and effortlessly pulled me into his arms. His elegant and swift

counterattack left me blinking in confusion.

Huh? What does he mean, 'Who did I cross paths with?'! I stared up at his face, bewildered, and gasped.

His pupils are dilated… Why?! What on earth happened?!

"I-I didn't cross paths with anyone!"

"Are you sure?"

My confidence wavered with that question.

"W-well, I was only thinking about seeing you, so I wasn't really paying much attention to my surroundings…"

I mumbled that I was just too caught up in being mad at him and that I was sorry for being so careless, but then I saw his expression soften and the anger in his eyes melt into something unbearably sweet.

I don't get it!

"I see. Well, in that case, it can't be helped."

He gave me a gentle smile, and I let out a relieved sigh, only to have my cheeks flush bright red when I caught Finn and the others whispering to each other.

"So, who'd she really pass?" Anna asked.

"It was a noble bachelor on his way back from a meeting," Finn answered.

"He saw Lady Cecilia with her cheeks flushed and was about to greet her, but a royal knight got in his way. That's why she probably didn't see him," Kate explained.

"So she literally only has eyes for Prince Lucas!" Elsa gushed.

Wait, so there was someone else? I really didn't even notice.

This makes it sound like I'm openly admitting that I can't see anything except for Lucas! On top of that, it's like saying I'm looking forward to the ceremony tomorrow! Ugh, this is way too embarrassing!

I felt unbearably self-conscious under the warm, knowing looks of the bureaucrats in the study who likely helped Lucas with his scheme, and I shot a furious glare at the beautiful man who smiled merrily nearby, who only deepened his smile.

What are you so pleased about?!

"What's the matter, Cecilia? Was there something wrong? I've been keeping my schedule free waiting for you, so I was just thinking I might have to come see you myself."

So it was deliberate, after all!

Of course… There was no way the dress would've arrived the day before the ceremony by chance. *You were definitely hiding it somewhere, weren't you?*

You knew I'd come rushing over to demand answers after seeing that! How very considerate of you to make time just for this!

I forced my trembling lips into a smile and let out a low laugh, gritting my teeth as I muttered under my breath, "Oh, you naughty little Hero…"

He tipped his head slightly, a mischievous glimmer in his eyes. *Why do you look so happy? Kick all these people out so I can*

interrogate you already, damn it!

"Prince Lucas, if it's not too much trouble, may I have a few moments of your time?"

"Of course, my beloved. I'd gladly give you every second I have."

Ugh, I don't need that much! It sounds like there's some dangerous implication behind that, too, so can I just pretend I didn't hear that? But naturally, I couldn't say any of that out loud.

I stared into his overwhelmingly gorgeous face, his smile making it impossible to refuse. I somehow managed a feeble, "Well, um, thank you…"

I can't back down now! As I tried to muster up my courage, he suddenly pulled me in close.

The strength of his grip lifted me onto my toes, leaving me with no choice but to lean into his arms. My heart started pounding wildly as our faces came close.

W-wait, don't tell me… You're not going to start spouting some nonsense about this being your personal territory just because we're in your study, are you?!

Sure, maybe everyone here is among your closest aides, all practically family, but still!

Please keep your distance as we agreed! I pleaded silently with my eyes, but Lucas merely laughed softly, his breath warm against my face, and grasped my chin.

Nooo, stop! Please!

"P-Prince Lucas, er…"

Oh no, he's really getting closer! Don't lean your face in like that!

"What is it, Cece?"

Oh, now you're calling me by my nickname. What's that supposed to mean? Oh, I see what you're doing here, you sneaky little…!

"L-L-Lord Lukie! There's…something I need to ask you!"

"What is it? Oh, I forgot. My fiancée is so shy, isn't she? Everyone, leave us."

Don't say it so deliberately like that! And why does it sound like you're hinting that you're about to kiss me?!

No, we're not doing that! Absolutely not! So please, everyone, don't look away with such flustered expressions and quietly slip out… Someone, please stop him!

I shot a desperate look at the retreating backs of the bureaucrats, only to freeze as a chill ran down my spine.

Panicking, I turned back to Lucas, meeting his golden gaze straight on, only to feel a deep, scorching heat inside my core. I began to tremble.

"Looking at someone else while in my arms and teasing me like that? You're so naughty, Cecilia…"

"…!"

Uh-oh, I might've just pressed the wrong buttons!

"Maybe it's time I show you just how long I've been holding back and just how much I've been waiting?"

"Wha—?! Lord Lukie?!" His whispered words felt like smoke curling around me, searing my throat as my breath hitched. Then, Lucas roughly grabbed me by the hand.

He reached for the door at the back of the study without even looking at me and abruptly called out to Anna.

"Anna."

"Yes, Master?"

"Any issues?"

"None at all, as long as you take tomorrow into account," she answered. "I doubt Lady Cecilia's measurements will change overnight," she muttered under her breath, leaving me stunned.

Wh-what does that even mean? Sure, I've changed size a bit since the last time they measured me, but that was only because my underbust went down a size…that's not the point!

That's not the issue here! The content of this conversation is the problem!

I shot a desperate look at Anna and the others, only for three of them to give me apologetic smiles, and one to give me a thumbs-up.

"It's all for tomorrow, Lady Cecilia," Anna said.

"We want you glowing, with radiant hair and skin, Lady Cecilia!" Kate said.

"The bewitching body of a woman well-loved!" Elsa gushed.

Ugh, I get what you're saying all too well! I can't even retort!

And Kate's not stopping Elsa from cheering me on! This is the first time I've ever seen that!

"It's the last lap! It's our duty as maids to cherish our mistress's happiness…" Anna added with a grin that only made her words less believable. *What do you mean, last lap?!*

"I'll return by nighttime."

"Understood, Master."

Ignoring me completely, Lucas ended the conversation, and I glanced between him and Anna and the others, leaving me blushing furiously and drained of color all at once.

No way, did he say "nighttime"?! It's early afternoon! That's way too long, and why isn't anyone asking my opinion on this?!

Betrayed by my own maids… *No, it's more like they sold me out willingly! In the end, I'm the only one who can protect myself!*

I turned to face Lucas as he opened the door and started to lead the way.

"W-wait, Lord Lukie!"

"Yes?"

What do you mean by "what"?! Are you seriously acting like this is normal? Wait, the back of the study…isn't that?

My heart pounded as I raised my voice, trying to stop him from opening the door.

"Why does my engagement dress… have a cape and a veil attached to it?"

"Because it's a wedding," he replied nonchalantly as if I were asking a ridiculous question. My body froze, and heat slowly crept up my face.

"Wh-wha…?!"

I knew it!!

He looked down at me as if to say, "And what about it?" *Stop looking at me like that! My face is turning even redder now!*

"I-I thought it was supposed to be an *engagement* ceremony!"

"It was, initially. But since this is supposed to be a sort of formal introduction of me to other kingdoms, the number of guests has grown to be about the same as a wedding, right? So there's no need to make any major changes in terms of security and all other arrangements. Plus, after some idiots pulled that stunt at the soiree, I figured we should officially sign the marriage certificate and exchange our vows now. This way, no one will dare think of belittling you. And they wouldn't dream of trying to replace you."

I couldn't help but think of Viviana and the last thing I heard her say… *It's not my fault that I'm thinking about her right now!*

Seriously, even after she's gone, she's leaving such a shadow behind. What a troublemaker. I found myself pointlessly escaping from reality when Lucas shattered my illusion with a soft laugh as he closed the door, snapping me back to the present.

"You were the one who said it, Cecilia."

"What?"

He loosened his grip on my waist, and I heard the lock clicking shut behind us. My gaze shifted to the small daybed meant for naps, and I unconsciously took a step back, distancing myself from him.

He deliberately removed his jacket and tossed it onto the nearby chair when he saw me retreat.

I watched him loosen his cravat and let it fall to the floor. *What are you doing? Stop that! Pick it up! Calm down!* I tried shaking my head to send a silent message, but he just kept smiling, his face even more breathtakingly beautiful as he unbuttoned his vest and approached me.

After removing his cufflinks, he unbuttoned his shirt one at a time. Realizing I could no longer retreat with the bed right behind me, I began to panic, and he slowly reached out a hand toward me.

"You said it, didn't you? You asked me to marry you."

"…!"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

His fingers grasped my chin, and with that pressure came his words, laced with a smile so intense it made my extremities tremble.

No way! There's no way! Yes, I did say that, I did, but… But I didn't think he'd actually move the schedule forward by a whole year just because of one sentence! No, you must've planned this all along! There's no way such a pure white wedding dress could be made in under a month!

I gathered my courage to squeak out a tiny protest. "I-I did that, but…the dress…"

"Marriage was always a given. There's no way I'd let anyone else have you, so of course, I had it made beforehand. I admit it was wrong of me to do it without consulting you, but I tried to match the design of the dress your mother wore at her wedding. Don't you like it?"

I felt my cheeks grow even hotter and raised both hands to cover them, letting out a cry.

"How do you know that?"

My ridiculously perfect fiancé, who could casually prepare my dream dress, showed a slightly apologetic expression and offered an answer.

"You talked to the marquess about it a long time ago, remember?"

Mother!!! I vaguely remembered having a leisurely conversation about it over tea when the engagement was first announced. *You were spying on me the whole time?!*

I'd been so flattered when she said, "You're so lucky to have someone like Lucas as your fiancé. He's such a gorgeous, top-tier catch. I know it won't be for a while, but after the engagement ceremony, we'll have the wedding! I can't wait!" And then the conversation casually steered toward dresses. *I see now. What a masterful move! I didn't notice at all!*

Although I was inwardly praising Mother in my shock, Lucas deepened his smile and reaffirmed his stance.

"That's why tomorrow is our wedding."

"…!"

"It's already been formally approved by the House of Lords and announced both domestically and abroad, so the procedures are practically the same. We'll have the ceremony, sign the certificate, and make our vows. There's nothing to worry about, Cecilia. Okay?"

"O-okay…"

Can you please stop pressuring me with that smile? That "okay" just now was terrifying!

All right! I won't throw a tantrum now that everything's ready, so please just stop licking my ear!

"I'm so glad. I've been waiting so long for this. I can't wait to exchange vows with you while you wear your veil, Cecilia!"

"L-Lukie, ahhh…wait!"

He pulled me into his arms, holding me so tightly that it left no room for escape, his voice trembling with happiness as he spoke, making my resistance melt away.

My feeble protests meant nothing. The sticky, wet sound of his tongue in my ear sent a jolt straight to my core, and I quivered from the heat. My knees almost gave way, and I frantically tried to push against his chest with weak hands, only to accidentally touch one of the loose buttons, making his shirt open even further.

It looked almost like I was the one revealing his body, and when I glanced up at Lucas in shock, his golden eyes smoldered with desire and curved into a smile. The instant I saw that my face flushed.

"I-it's not what it looks like!"

My hand seemed drawn to his familiar warmth, and I almost pressed not just my fingers but my entire palm against his chest. Panicking, I quickly pulled my hand back and pressed it against my trembling lips. Lucas looked down at me, his eyes like molten gold as he leaned in.

"Don't provoke me. It's been three weeks, and I'm barely holding it together. If I have to do this without getting you wet enough, it's going to hurt…a lot."

"…!"

Uh-oh, this is really bad. His tone of voice has already changed, and the content of what he's saying is pretty crazy, too.

But I guess this is what happens when we don't do it for three weeks… Especially when we've been together constantly for that time.

He's been waiting almost a month for me to recover. It must've taken a lot of patience, and I'm really grateful for it! But please, can't you just hold off until tomorrow? Surrender, my demon knight!

My legs trembled from apprehension and fear as he gazed at me lovingly. Affection filled his entire face before he said something truly twisted. "Oh, but I guess I don't have to worry about you not being wet enough. Because it seems like you really liked me licking your ear. Your body is so honest it's incredibly adorable…"

He pushed up the hem of my dress and pushed my knees apart, deliberately stimulating me between my thighs. He pulled my panties in between my lips, making me want to explode from embarrassment.

"S-stop, Lukie!"

"No, I won't let you go. I can't hold back anymore."

That was a quick refusal! And stop licking me already!

He yanked my face up to look at him while he pushed a finger inside my mouth. He teased my tongue with it, and when I tried to escape, he replaced it with his own thick tongue, kissing me so passionately I could barely breathe.

It was forceful and a little violent, yet it felt so good. But most of all, it made me feel incredibly *wanted*. And that made it impossible to resist him.

I swallowed our mingled saliva without a bit of disgust, and he watched me with a captivated gaze. His hands roughly reached for my dress, making me reflexively push back.

"Mm, nngh… Ahh! No, don't pull on the dress! It'll rip."

"Then take it off."

"N-no, but this…"

"Take it off."

He's not listening at all! Seriously, just stop for a second! We're right next to your study! If anyone comes in after such a long time and finds us doing this, well, it's way too risky, especially since the wedding is tomorrow!

I shook my head frantically, desperate to try to make him understand, but he just tipped his head to the side, glancing up as if in deep thought.

No! Don't give me that look! It's adorably distracting!

"So what you're saying is, you *want* me to tease you?"

"What?!"

What are you saying? That's certainly a new interpretation!

"All right, leave it to me." *Well, that's way too optimistic! I didn't ask for help undressing! Stop unhooking my dress like it's some kind of magic trick!*

"Eep! No, wait! Lukie, stop! I said, stop! Don't you dare take it—Eeeek!"

He yanked my dress down with unbelievable speed in one swift go.

That's my dress, my only defense right now!

Just as I reached out to catch the fabric slipping off my waist, there was a loud *tat!* His glossy black leather shoes stomped on the hem of my skirt.

I froze in shock at the cruel way he twisted his shoe on the cloth as if to torment me. The fabric began to crumble away like dust, and I felt my throat begin to tremble.

Getting it torn apart and having it stabbed through with a dagger on the wall was terrifying enough, but this is really something else!

I still reached for the dress that now had a gaping shoe-shaped hole, but then my trembling fingers were lifted up by his large hand as if to say, "Forget it and just look at me."

I hesitantly lifted my gaze to meet his. He slipped my fingers into his mouth, licking them noisily and then grinning as he bit down on them—hard. The fear made my body react faster than the pain did.

He never took his eyes off me as he gently pushed the now-unwearable dress down my body.

I stood there helplessly as he undressed me, leaving me in nothing but my undergarments in the bright room, the daybed behind me. Shame welled up inside of me.

I felt my entire body burning red as I desperately tried to cover myself with my arms, wanting to stop him, only to be left speechless by what he said next.

"Cecilia, I'll only ask this once," he whispered. His dark, dangerously golden eyes drew near like he was about to kiss me. My legs weakened, and I clung to his arms, which supported me as I looked up at him.

"Ah!"

"Do you want to obediently take off your panties and corset and get on the bed yourself, or would you rather me fuck you right here, standing up?"

"Huh?!"

What? What kind of choice was that? And are those seriously my only options? That doesn't change the fact that we're doing it in the room that's meant for afternoon naps! I'd like to say no to both!

I felt the blood drain from my face as he placed a gentle kiss on my lips before giving me a lighthearted threat.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll put up a proper defensive barrier for either option. But if we do it standing up, you know it could be unstable, right? So I'll tie up your hands and suspend you. Just try not to get the carpet all soaked, okay?"

"…"

How does one "try" not to do that?! And tie me up and suspend me? He's saying it like he's being considerate, but his idea of consideration is simply mad! I'm definitely not some kind of masochistic girl who'd be grateful for that level of consideration!

This pervert is really going too far this time!

I wanted to glare at him, and so I really did—but then I heard the deliberate sound of his belt being unbuckled.

Then he grabbed my hand and guided it downward. He'd gotten hard, and he made me touch it. He forced me to grip it, and once I realized just how big it was, I inwardly screamed and froze as he whispered a new threat in my ear.

"Cecilia, with the difference in our height, if we did it standing, I'd probably lift your entire body off the ground every time I thrust up into that tight little hole of yours. I might even end up pushing deep into your womb, but don't let that break you, okay?"

His grin was full of twisted desire, causing my vision to blur and warp.

It's *too* real… *I might cry! This is seriously bringing me to tears!*

I can't! Whether or not I break is entirely up to him. I don't have any say in it!

They say people show their true colors when they're pushed to the edge, but Lucas shows his when he holds back too much. I knew this already, but he's a complete sadist!

As I heard the shattering of my last shred of resistance, his words left me so terrified that I couldn't even speak. All I could do was tremble. He smiled wryly and whispered, "Do you not want to?"

His voice was gentle to the point of being suspicious, which still made me shake my head.

Because I have no other choice!

"I see. Then, to make it easier for my shy little Cece, how about I narrow it down a bit more?"

I foolishly clung to that last bit of hope and thought, *No way! A sadist with a soft spot. The contrast is too much for me to bear!* I stared at him, desperate for salvation.

He lifted me up only to plunge me back down into hell, the demon shattering my last bit of resistance.

"Five."

"F-five?" I repeated, not understanding what he meant.

He scooped up my hands in his with a sweet smile.

"Four…three…"

Huh? Wait? What… Why chains?!

Confused, I looked at him to ask why he was suddenly binding my wrists, but then my arms were suddenly forced upward. I was now literally suspended, swaying on my tiptoes.

"H-hey! Why are you…?!" I shouted.

"Two…"

Argh, why is ignoring me?!

He kept ignoring me, hooking his finger into my bustier and teasing the tip of my nipple that peeked out with his tongue. He glanced up, watching my face carefully.

"You like it when I touch you here, don't you?"

"Mm, stop… ahh…"

"You're already so wet…"

I shook my head, embarrassed at having my breasts exposed in the brightly lit room. Lucas's tongue flicked lightly over my sensitive nipple. His other hand rubbed my panties, spreading the growing wetness around.

My growing shame only heightened the pleasure I felt, my obedient body responding instantly to his touch. As a moan escaped my lips, Lucas lifted his head from my chest and smiled as if telling me it wouldn't be the last time.

"Nngh, ahh… L-Lukie!"

"One…?" His sweet, tender voice sent a shiver down my spine.

My heart was pounding out of control as I shook my head frantically, pleading desperately.

Why am I the one begging when he's the one threatening me? I scolded myself. *Don't think about it. Just don't think!*

"I-I'll take it off. Please, Lukie. I'll take it off. I'll go to the bed… Please, I just want to go to the bed!"

He tipped his head slightly, his eyes narrowing.

"You'll take it off?"

"Yes!"

"So you'll go over to the bed yourself and spread your legs wide for me?"

What?! Since when did that obscene task get added?!

You cruel demon! You twisted knight! I cursed him silently, but I reluctantly nodded with flushed cheeks, knowing I had no choice.

"Y-yes!" I stammered with embarrassment.

His golden eyes grew dark with intensity, leaving me speechless.

"And how exactly are you going to do that?"

"H-how?" I mumbled weakly.

What does that mean? I stared helplessly at his handsome face, which was twisted with both lust and beauty. His gentle smile contrasted with his words as he gestured to my bound wrists, then asked me a question as if he were talking to a child.

"How are you going to take it off when you're chained up, my beloved?"

What are you even talking about? You need to unchain me, obviously! And I opened up my mouth to say so, but what came instead was a bunch of insults. *I can't take this anymore!*

"You…you pervert! You have a rotten personality! You're the one who tied me up!"

"Ah ha ha. You're so defiant it's irresistible. I love it when those angry, teary eyes look at me like that. I want to bite those flushed cheeks of yours, Cecilia. You're too adorable. Thanks for getting me all worked up."

He chuckled happily, his blissful expression momentarily making me forget my anger so much so that I stared at him blankly.

I'm glad you're happy, but why are you thanking me? I'm angry, you know! Oh, is it the insults? Was it wrong to call him a pervert? Does that make it sound like I'm complimenting him? Well, if that's the case, how do I even start explaining that it's not a compliment?

I was overwhelmed with confusion, yet I found myself calmly thinking, *What's the best way to make this clear?* when he suddenly reached down, grabbed my panties, and ripped them apart with a single hand.

"Ahh! No, wait, Lukie!!"

It was a trap all along?! I was so mad I couldn't help but yell at him! Why do I always turn into such an idiot around him?!

For some reason, I just couldn't keep up my guard around him. His teasing always made me respond so honestly, and he knew it. *He's such a jerk, but I love the way he looks at me when he's teasing me*

as if I'm the only one who matters… No, stop it! What am I thinking?! I scolded myself, utterly dismayed by how frighteningly in love I was with him.

I inwardly lamented and tried to distance myself, but the magical chains around my wrist bound me completely in place. I stumbled, my toes catching on the edge of the plush rug.

Lucas gently caught me, blowing a warm breath in into my ear that made me quiver.

"Ahh!"

"Lick it, Cece."

"Nngh, mm…"

I gasped at the sudden sensation as he dragged his tongue down the back of my neck, then shoved his rough fingers inside my mouth. While one hand was busy teasing my tongue, the other massaged my breast, eliciting a heated sigh that he rewarded with a kiss on my cheek before slowly pulling his fingers out of my mouth.

He brought his fingers, glistening with my spit, to his own lips and licked them thoroughly, getting them even wetter before lowering his hand to my panties, which were so ripped they were about to fall off at any moment, and lightly pressed his fingers against my hidden clit.

He massaged it gently with the pad of his fingers, sending a deep, pulsing ache through my lower belly. My entrance tightened, growing wetter as a tingling sensation crawled up my spine, making me arch back violently.

I pulled on the chains again, and they glowed to stop my attempts at resisting. The growing pleasure spread through me, making me call his name as if I were pleading.

"Nngh, no… Lukie! L-Lukie!"

"You're so greedy, Cece. You really love it when I touch you directly, don't you?"

He spread my thick lips apart, exposing my sensitive clit. As he slid his middle finger inside me, he teased my clit with his fingernail, pushing it up from below. I couldn't help but tighten around his finger because it felt so good, making me blush a deep scarlet.

"Ah, no, wait! It's too much! Please, Lukie! Wait! Nnngh!"

"It sounds like you're begging me for more when you deny me with that sweet voice, Cece. You love it, don't you? Not just on your adorable little clit, but you want me to stroke you on the inside more, don't you? You're so good at begging."

That's not it at all! I'm not begging you! Why won't you listen to me?!

My frantic protests were cut off as he slipped another finger inside, rubbing insistently against my sensitive spot. I felt my legs tense up in response.

"Ah, no! Don't! I-I'm going to come… No!"

"I love that look on your face. Look at me, Cecilia. I want to see it all."

He cradled my limp body carefully, making sure not to put too much pressure on my arms.

The strength in his grip and the way his lust-filled face licked along my neck sent a shiver down my spine as if he were whispering, "One more time."

I panicked and struggled to call out. "Ah, ah… N-no, stop! Lukie, Lukie, wait! I just came! I came, so please, no more," I desperately pleaded, but why was he smiling, and why were his fingers still moving inside?

"Mm, I can feel you clenching around me, squeezing my fingers like it feels so good. You're so cute… My one and only Cecilia…"

He pulled my face close, and he called my name softly and sweetly as we kissed.

As I responded to that kiss and his voice, he soothed the inside of my pussy by caressing me with his fingers. My body, which had already reached a climax once, remembered how to respond to his touch and began to greedily embrace the pleasure he gave me.

As his fingertips thrust rhythmically inside of me, his palm pressed against my swollen clit. Suddenly, my body broke out into a sweat as I neared my second orgasm.

"Ahh, mmm! Don't, don't! Not like that! Not so hard!"

"Mm, even your sweat tastes sweet. Watching your pale body tremble like that is so naughty and beautiful at the same time, Cecilia… The more you come, the sweeter your voice, your face, and your pussy feels. Let's go for one more round, okay?"

N-no way! If this keeps up, he'll never stop!

His all-too-familiar demand made my face contort, and I shook my head frantically. *No, I can't take it! I can't go another round!* But of course, seeing me like this only fueled the sadistic glint in his golden eyes, making them look terrifyingly dark.

What is wrong with him? He's obviously enjoying it even more because I'm trying to resist!

I was determined not to give in and gritted my teeth to stifle the moans which threatened to spill out. I rubbed my thighs together, trying to resist him, but…

"Ahh, nngh! No, ahh!"

Since I was suspended, I couldn't stand steady on my legs, so instead, they spread wide open, inviting Lucas's fingers deeper inside as I moaned, heat rising to my face. And this only made the sadist gleefully move his fingers even harder. *What am I supposed to do?*

He stuck out his tongue teasingly and latched onto my hardened nipple with a loud suckling noise. The squelching sound of his fingers thrusting in and out of me filled the room, making my insides clench, and my legs tremble. I felt the slow trickle of my juices run down my leg, and a sweet shudder ran down my spine when I saw a faint puddle on the rug. Then, I felt the blood drain from my face.

N-no! He said I can't make a mess!

"N-no, stop! Please! Lukie, Lukie, I'll take it off, I'll go to the bed! Oh, your fingers… No, I'm gonna come! I-I don't want to! Stop being so mean, you jerk!" But those desperate words were exactly

what this sadist, who had already waited three long weeks, wanted to hear.

"Hmm, so my fingers aren't enough for you? You're so cute when you beg, Cecilia. It makes me so happy to hear my beloved asking so sweetly. You're still pretty tight, so I'll try to put it in slowly, okay?"

"Ah, L-Lukie!"

Without warning, he grabbed me under the knee and lifted one of my legs with merciless strength, making me gasp.

He spread me open, rubbing his pulsing cock against my dripping slit, and just as I started to protest, Lucas leaned down and pressed his lips against my own. My protests turned into breathy pants as his tongue danced with mine.

After he got his length thoroughly wet with my moisture, he gripped my arm tighter, pressing his hot body against mine until I heard a wet, squelching noise as he slid inside, causing my knees to buckle.

"Mm, nngh! Ahh! Ah, n-no, Lukie! No, stop! You can't!"

"Haah… Gods, you're so wet and tight… I barely put the tip in, and you're already squeezing your pussy around me… Does this angle feel good? Your body is so honest when it comes to naughty things, Cecilia…It makes me so happy."

"N-no, I didn't… Ahhh!"

He groaned with satisfaction as he slowly pushed in deeper. I could feel every inch of his shaft invading my sensitive body. It felt too

big for me to bear, making me tense up and my breathing shallow.

"N-no, it's…t-too much! I can't!"

"Don't hold your breath, Cecilia."

"Haah, haah… It's…so hard…s-so big… I'm scared, Lukie!"

"Stop turning me on like that. You're so adorable… Breathe out, okay?"

He showered me with gentle kisses across my face to soothe me, and my protests slid back down my throat into my belly.

Even though he was forceful, I realized that I was starting to find pleasure in his roughness. And that made me want to cry. *Honestly, I have no desire to stop him! I'm supposed to think this is cruel, but!*

The height difference between us was just too much. I couldn't plant my feet, and every time he moved, it felt like I was being impaled. Fear and a thrilling shiver coursed through me simultaneously, and the more I exhaled, the more aware I was of his presence inside me, stretching me until every ounce of my being was focused solely on Lucas.

Every time his hips moved, the sticky, wet noises grew louder, and my body responded, squeezing him, *asking* for more. I bit my lip to hold back, only for Lucas to press a kiss against it to stop me, only to make the pleasure spread more until my body trembled.

"Haah… ahh, Lukie!"

"Mm, Cece… My Cecilia!"

He clutched my exhausted body tight, calling my name feverishly, and the way his unyielding arms held me made my heart ache with the sudden urge to touch him.

"Lukie, please take these chains off. I want to hold you…"

"Damn it, don't tempt me like that. It drives me crazy…" His eyes narrowed painfully at my words, and with a small click of his tongue, he unfastened the restraints.

The moment I wrapped my arms around his neck, I let out a huge sigh of relief, and he hugged me back fiercely, pouring his desire into our kisses.

"Mm, nngh…"

"Ahh, damn it. All we're doing is kissing, and I can feel you squeezing me. You're so tight… I'm sorry, Cecilia… It's going to hurt a bit more, so take a deep breath."

He exhaled deeply and licked my wet mouth, gripping my chin to urge me along.

"Wh-what? Why?"

I have a bad feeling about this… No, a terrible feeling!
Frightened, I tightened my hold around him, shaking my head slightly, and then…

His fingers pressed against my clit, rubbing it enthusiastically. "Breathe out," he ordered gently.

You're such a demon today!

"Ah, Lukie, no! Ah, no, no, don't move your hips! If you do that, I'll come…! I'll breathe! I'll breathe, so…!"

"Good girl. Then breathe out, nice and slow. One more time," he whispered softly into my ear. I forced my shallow breaths into a long exhale, my breath grazing over his skin.

A shiver ran down my spine to reward me, and pleasure surged through me. I arched my back and neck as he pressed his lips against mine, and he murmured, sounding anguished.

"I love you."

"…!"

"I love you so much it hurts, Cece. I'm about to lose my mind. You can be mad at me later. Just let me love you right now."

His words made my heart ache, and before I knew it, I let out a sigh along with a flurry of insults.

"What's wrong with you, threatening me like that?!"

I would've refused even if he had asked me in a straightforward manner. But to lure me in with such obvious bait, only for that bait to be his real intention, and then to drag me into this act… *You have a really twisted sense of humor, Lucas! I'm mad right now! That was unforgivable!*

"You idiot, Lukie! You're so mean! Rotten to the core! You pervert! Demon! Insatiable beast!"

"Insatiable?"

Wh-why is he blushing? I didn't praise him. Not in the slightest!

His response to my torrent of insults was completely wrong. *Why are you getting so shy?! It's too adorable, damn it!*

I stubbornly turned away from the reality that I, too, had started to blush. Then, driven by my impulse, I grabbed hold of the back of his neck, which was slick with sweat. *Apologize, you bastard!*

"Just tell me from the start and stop beating around the bush!"

"Ow, ow! I'm sorry! I apologize! I got all worked up because seeing you all flustered and trying not to give in while you came was so erotic and cute that I couldn't stop myself! I'll take any insult you hurl at me, my beloved."

I'll give you credit for apologizing so straightforwardly. But you're being too honest. Did you just say that I'm erotic and cute when I try not to give in?!

That's not a compliment! And to deliberately embarrass me and enjoy the sight makes you a pervert! It's unforgivable!

"You stupid, perverted Lucas! If you understand, then stop yourself!"

"Sorry, but I can't stop!"

"What? Why?"

Apologizing sincerely and then denying it just as earnestly?!

I was completely thrown off by his refreshing behavior, and the words I'd been about to hurl at him somehow turned into a feeble acceptance of his actions. *What kind of technique is this?*

I stood there half in a daze, and he sighed.

"I'm sorry, Cece. But you probably don't even realize it yourself. You respond to everything I do, and the more emotional you are, the more it's like you're telling me how much you love me with your

gaze… It's truly unbearable for me. It's no wonder you turn me on so much. I'm using considerable restraint today."

What?! This *is considerable restraint?!* My eyes widened. I thought he was simply relentless, but if that were him holding back, I'd really prefer not to find out what the alternative looked like…

And the idea that this endless cycle was partly my own doing just made me want to cry. *Technically, it's all because of this stupid love of mine, but what am I supposed to do about it?*

I lamented with flushed cheeks, glaring at Lucas with frustration.

"I-it's not my fault! It's your fault, you idiot!" I said impulsively, but the lack of conviction in my words was basically telling him I loved him, making me flush with embarrassment.

There are so many other things I want to say! Why is this all I can ever come up with?! I screamed inwardly, and he looked at the ceiling for some reason. "You pack a serious punch."

Huh? Even that weak "you idiot!" had an effect on him? I really don't know what he's thinking.

Well, if it worked, I guess that's fine.

As I stared at him, he furrowed his brow.

"Cece, do you really get what I'm saying? If you keep turning me on like this, even I have my limits, you know."

He gave a deep, frustrated sigh. *I don't think I'm in the wrong here! Why do I have to be the one to hear that? Maybe it came out sounding a bit weak, but I'm still very mad!*

"What, are you saying I don't understand?!" I tightened my grip on his arm and glared at him fiercely, forgetting the situation entirely.

His golden eyes wavered with a ferocious gleam.

"You're unintentionally turning me on, and you have no idea, do you? Fine, I'll make you understand."

"Huh?"

His voice sounded almost violent. It was something I'd never heard before. My eyes widened, and in the next instant, he yanked me forcefully toward him. My vision blurred.

An obscene squelching sound erupted from our point of contact, our skin slapping together.

Not understanding, tears welled up as my vision distorted, and a sharp gasp escaped my lips.

"Haaah…?"

He pulled me into a tight embrace, letting out a crazed laugh when he heard the incoherent noises coming from my trembling lips.

"I love you, Cecilia. I love you so much I could break you. I want to kill you. That's how much I love you."

He whispered a love laced with bloodlust into my ear, filling my chest with a satisfying happiness that scorched my brain.

He held me tightly as he thrust violently into me. A quiver coursed through my core, and sweet screams burst from my mouth as I responded to his unhinged love.

By the time I realized those were my own moans, my body was

already trembling with an orgasm.

"Ahh, ohh! I'm comin—nnghh, mmm, ahhhh!"

I trembled with happiness from his love, my inner walls quivering as tears spilled down my cheeks from the overwhelming pleasure.

As my strength began to drain from me from the intensity of the long climax, I felt a sharp bite on my shoulder. *Argh!* The stinging pain brought my fading consciousness back into focus.

He gently brushed through my hair with his fingers, soothing me as I sobbed and gasped for air.

"Look over there, Cece," he whispered softly.

"What…?"

I obeyed and turned my gaze to the side, only to see my reflection in the glass. My face was shamelessly lost in pleasure and lust.

My hair was a tangled mess, and my tear-stained face looked pitiful. But no matter how I looked at my reflection, I saw a woman who was completely and utterly in ecstasy, intoxicated by the love she received.

Who…is that?

My lips trembled as I mouthed the question, the woman in the reflection mimicking me. When I shook my head weakly, hers also swayed from side to side.

Large hands caressed my trembling body, soothing it. The man in the glass looked down at the woman with tender eyes and said,

“That’s you, Cecilia, when I make love to you. Do you see now how much you return my love now? Now do you understand why you drive me mad?”

It felt like my blood was boiling inside my veins.

I dropped my head sharply and caught sight of the sweat trailing down his neck, seeping into the space between our chests. The realization that this was the genuine expression of our love made my heartbeat pound in my ears and my breathing become irregular.

“No, that’s not…”

“It *is* true.”

Despite my weak denial, my face still wore an expression that begged for more. But I was unable to accept that, unconsciously denying it.

He brushed it off so easily that my face burned even hotter.

I tried to hide, but he grasped my chin firmly and tipped it upward.

Understand that we are making love, his golden eyes urged me. My mouth quivered under his piercing gaze.

“Nngh, no! Don’t look at me!”

“I am looking at you, my Cecilia. I’m the one who found you and brought that out of you. You belong only to me, Cece. Of course I’ll look at you. I have that right.”

He caressed the ring on my finger with a smug grin, slipping our fingers through each other as if to say so.

“Th-that’s cruel…” I said quietly.

He gave me a slightly apologetic look, and his tone turned sincere as he apologized.

"I'm sorry. That was mean of me. But you're so beautiful."

"N-no, I'm not! That l-look on my face was…"

There was nothing beautiful about it. All I saw was a shameless desire to be consumed by love, to be broken by it. I finally understood what he meant when he said I was only encouraging him every time we made love, and I wanted to disappear.

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I shook my head, and he gently pressed his forehead against mine.

"I'm the only one who's ever seen that side of you, aren't I? I'm the only one you could ever show that side of you."

Dark obsession flickered in the depths of his golden eyes, sending a sweet shiver running through me. Even so, understanding and accepting were two separate things. My lips trembled as I struggled to speak.

"Yes, but…! But…!"

"But, what?"

"B-but…"

He chuckled softly, the sound of it sweet and warm, encouraging me. When I turned away, too embarrassed to bear it, he suddenly shifted me in his arms and sat us both down on the bed. He reached up and stroked my cheek.

"You're just too precious. Are you embarrassed because you came because I suddenly pushed inside? Or is it because my words

turned you on? The way you clenched around me when I whispered… Argh, I thought the pleasure would completely sweep me away."

"S-stop it! Don't say things like that!"

"I will. You need to be aware of this, or I might actually end up breaking you," he said with a soft sigh, and I found myself pinned down with an unmovable strength as he explored my moist depths. The sensation that welled up inside me made me cling to his neck.

"Ahh, nngh! Lukie! Mm!"

The instant my body convulsed and reached its climax, he murmured something under his breath. My face turned bright red in an instant.

"Ugh, damn it. Today's really crazy. You're coming from just the slightest movement. I want to plow into you and make you cry until you're a mess. Maybe I should just ruin you so thoroughly that you can't be satisfied unless I'm inside of you…"

Th-that's bad! I think he's halfway serious about this! What do I do? If that happens, I won't be able to attend tomorrow's wedding!

As he rubbed his forehead against my shoulder, I tensed up, searching for the right words to say.

"You wouldn't like that, would you?" he spoke softly.

"O-of course I wouldn't!" I wanted to shake my head emphatically to show how serious I was, but I could only manage a slight gesture.

"Yeah, I thought so," he said quietly, and then he showed me the most adorable expression I'd ever seen. "It's hard for me too, you

know."

"Huh?"

What is he talking about? What does he mean by that?

I anxiously brushed a hand over his hair and widened my eyes in surprise when I saw that he was blushing. He turned his face away from me.

Wait, what? Hey, you know I can still see your other ear, right?

"Damn it… I'm so embarrassed. I thought I'd be fine if I came once, but because I was holding back, you teasing me made me lose all my self-control. But we're getting married tomorrow, and I've been waiting for this day for so long… I've been holding back this entire time. What am I supposed to do now…" His murmured confession made my heart beat wildly.

You've got to be kidding me! Why is he suddenly acting so cute and vulnerable? What am I supposed to do with that?!

Overcome with the urge to embrace him, I hugged him tightly and he stiffened in response.

"Cece, please don't tease me now!"

"I-I'm not teasing you!"

"Your insides are clenching—ow! You're pulling my hair, Cece!"

Why do you have to go and ruin the moment like that? Give me back the butterflies in my stomach!

Seeing that his hair had grown so far down his neck that I could pull it now, I suddenly felt the passage of time. I couldn't hold back the trembling of my heart. Tears overflowed from my eyes.

"…!"

"Cece?"

"H-hey. When did you start thinking about marrying me?" Even my voice trembled as I tried to deflect from my feelings.

He began to lift his face from my shoulder, so I hastily tightened my grip around his head. He stilled and then spoke with a hint of hesitation. "Do I have to tell you?"

"Yes, please. I want to know." I tightened my arms around him, and he hugged me back, hard. And for some reason, he prefaced it with a warning.

"Fine, but promise me that you won't tell anyone."

"Huh? I won't."

"Okay, good. Um, it's probably childish. Ah…"

Why is he sighing? Is it really that serious? A bit of fear crept into me, making my heart race.

But his next words almost made it stop.

"When we first met."

"What? When we first met?" I repeated, confused.

He looked embarrassed and half-desperate as he continued. "Not when I became a knight. When we first met, when we made that promise. It's only natural to think like that when you're in love, right?"

"What? You mean six years ago?"

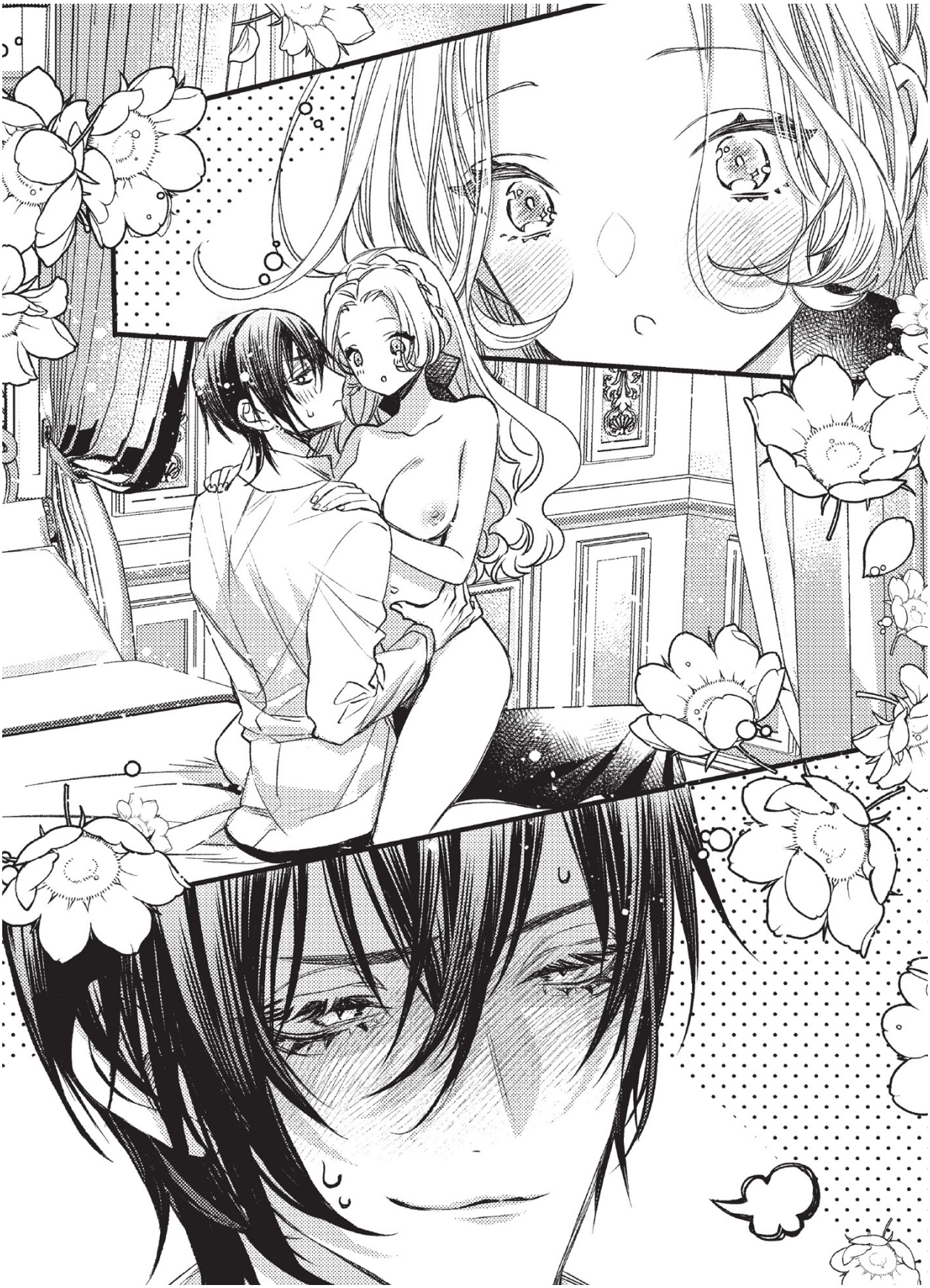
"Will you stop making me say it? Yes, six years ago! Damn it, I didn't want to admit this!"

His face flushed a deep red as he buried it against my shoulder again. I was so shocked that it made my body feel like it was melting.

I thought of the boy who nodded back to me when I told him I would strive to become the kind of princess he would protect.

I knew he had fallen in love with me back then.

But I was Felix's fiancée at the time, and I was formally introduced to him as such. So surely there was no way he thought of marrying me all the way back then. As that thought crossed my mind, my gaze settled on a scar close to where my hand rested, and my vision blurred.



There were countless scars all over his body. And there were many books on royal etiquette on his shelf. And…books on the rights of succession.

"But I…was Felix's fiancée…"

"So what?" he interrupted me sharply, looking up at me with a hint of anger.

I spoke in a trembling voice, afraid to believe it. "But I was his fiancée…"

"I'll say it now because it's over. But I was also considered as a potential fiancé for you back then. But I had almost no chance. So while I learned royal etiquette, I prepared to become a Hero as a backup plan. If the worst happened, I thought I'd beg to have you betrothed to me instead. But I decided to make you mine that day. So now you *are* mine."

His face was still bright red, and he looked like a defiant, smug child. *So it started with wanting something just because you couldn't have it?*

The thought made me laugh, and I muttered softly, "You really are such a child."

"A child?!"

"Yes, you're adorable."

"Adora—nngh, that's why I didn't want to tell you!"

His angry, crimson face filled me with a love so overwhelming that every cell in my body seemed to rejoice.

I claimed his lips, savoring the surprise in his golden eyes as I whispered my love to him.

"I love you. I love you so much, Lukie."

"I love you too. That's why we're getting married. Please promise me you won't tell anyone about this. It's too embarrassing." His mortified expression made me giggle again.

Then, trying to mask the fear that still lingered in my heart, I kissed him again and whispered, "Hey… Will you make love to me?"

"…"

He tightened his arms around my waist, and I felt him growing harder inside of me. I gasped, my breaths hot and ragged.

As his beautiful face shifted from surprise to almost anger, I turned my face away, taking a small breath, feeling a flush spread across my skin. Even so, I wanted to make love to the one who held my heart completely.

"C-can I be the one to make love to you this time?" I asked hesitantly.

"Huh? What does that even mean?"

I ignored his bewildered response and shifted my position, moving my hips just a bit to gauge his reaction. His face had regained its normal color but now flushed deep red again.

"Wh-what's going on? Is this a dream?"

Seeing that innocent expression on his face bolstered my courage, and I lowered my hips a bit more.

"Ahh, mmm… Lukie, my knight. I love you. I love you so much."

"Y-yeah, I love you too, but um, wait… Hold on! I'm gonna come…!"

Just as I was about to move again, his hands clamped down on my hips. Left with no choice, I kissed him once more as if swearing an oath.

When I felt his lips tremble ever so slightly, a wave of affection washed over me, almost making me want to cry. I slipped my tongue in softly, just like he taught me, only for Lucas to push his tongue against mine in a sudden burst of passion, toppling us both backward onto the bed as he still held me tight.

"Mm, ahh! Nngh?! Lukie?!"

"Wait…just give me a second. My head's about to explode. What if I die from happiness?!"

Hearing him mumble those words as he hid his face against my arm made my cheeks relax into a smile.

"Aren't we getting married?" I asked.

"We are." His reply was so quick that I couldn't help but giggle softly. Then he whispered gently.

"I swear my love to you."

Those words made the fear that had lingered inside a corner of my heart grow just a little smaller. "And I swear my love to you," I murmured in return, placing a kiss on his lips.

So please forgive me, I pleaded silently, the words caught in my throat.

"True love."

That was a phrase everyone who yearned for love in Bern wished to hear once in their lifetime.

Those words were spoken during wedding vows, and they had captivated me ever since I was a child.

When those words were spoken to someone you deeply cared about, to the one destined to be by your side forever, they became something to carry in your heart for a lifetime.

But for me, who played the role of the villainess, those words became something else—something that would linger in my heart for life in a completely different way.

The first time it happened was when the heroine, Lady Mia, said it. *"Even if you are Felix's fiancée, our love is true love,"* she proclaimed proudly.

I remembered how her gaze was fixed firmly on Felix as she said it. I'm sure that at that moment, she thought it was true love.

She defeated me, the villainess, with those words, and I made an unceremonious exit from the stage.

But the "true love" between Lady Mia and Felix crumbled easily after they were banished to the royal villa.

The second time, it was Lady Viviana.

She boldly stood beside an impostor of the one I loved and declared, "I've found my true love!" with a happy smile.

Her words were so light-hearted, but even so, that scene and her words struck me deeply.

I couldn't help but think, *Why?!*

After all, the otome game should have ended already.

My role should have been over, so I should no longer have to deny anyone's "true love." Yet, I still couldn't forgive her for insulting the one I loved. And so, I crushed her "true love" with all the force of a villainess's malice.

That was when I wondered if the phrase was really so weak.

Was it really something so fragile that it shattered easily when I, or anyone, denied it?

Neither of those instances could be called true love, or so I told myself. But still, the words had pierced my heart like a thorn, refusing to be dislodged.

If I utter those same words, would Lucas end up leaving me, just like what happened to them?

The phrase "true love" had become a phrase cloaked with fear for me, something synonymous with breaking up.

Of course, I didn't truly believe that just because we exchanged vows at our wedding that Lucas's heart would grow distant.

If anything, the moment the words "break up" came out, that would be the end. Or rather, *my* end. An invisible cage. Recently I've been into red—so maybe a cage made up of scarlet chains. Either way, I'd be trapped in there forever.

I'd be trapped in a cage, and I'd slowly, slowly be killed.

But that didn’t mean I didn’t trust Lucas.

If anything, I trusted him enough to give him my life if he asked for it. I could confidently say that there would never be another person I’d vow my love to.

That was precisely why I didn’t want to offer him words I couldn’t believe in.

The day of our wedding was bright and clear, without a cloud in the sky.

I stood before the entrance of the grand cathedral, bowing my head slightly as I took a small breath to steady myself. I’d been polished and primped to perfection all morning, spending hours to achieve this finished look.

My hair was swept up elegantly with a Juliet veil draped over it, pinned in place with pearls and white flowers.

The dress had a lace neckline and sleeves as if to declare that only my husband would ever see my bare skin. It was a grand, classic A-line gown made of pure white silk satin, adorned with delicate white embroidery.

The lace cape, embroidered in the same fashion, was something only used in royal weddings. A special item reserved for such occasions.

The emblem embroidered on the sash extending from my left shoulder wasn’t that of the royal family, but of the Hero. It was a

mark that signified that this marriage had not only the royal family's approval but showed the Hero's own will and desire.

I'd heard it was introduced in the past after disputes arose when a Hero's companion was of low status. It was a symbol meant to declare that no one could ever object to the one the Hero had chosen as his companion.

That was why I had to act in a way that would never bring shame to this emblem. I clenched my hands hidden in the folds of my dress out of nervousness, when a hand reached out and took mine. His fingers tipped my chin, urging to me to look up at him.

Honestly, he's so gorgeous… I thought with an inward sigh. Of course, I thought that every time I saw him. He was truly too handsome for his own good.

Lucas wasn't wearing the Hero's attire in white today. He was wearing the formal attire of the second prince. He couldn't wear white, or else it would clash with his bride, after all. Even a Hero would take such things into consideration.

And thank goodness he did! If we were both in white, I'd lose to him! It would be terrible if people couldn't tell who the bride was. Well, not that I stood a chance anyway, considering how the second prince's formal wear suits him so perfectly!

He appeared for the preliminary greetings in a deep navy ceremonial outfit that looked like his knight's attire, adorned with a sash embroidered with the Hero's emblem, a crimson cloak wrapped around his shoulders, and his hair swept up. The noisy crowd instantly fell silent.

I thought it was amazing how he could command the room like that, but it secretly made me frustrated as his bride.

When I reached out to sweep his bangs behind his ear, he responded with a gentle smile.

This hairstyle exposed more of his ears than usual, meant to show off his earring.

Apparently, it was to indicate that there wouldn't be an exchange of rings during the ceremony, but all it really did was highlight his stunning looks. I gazed back at the gold arc glinting in his ear.

Then, Lucas squeezed my hand gently and spoke.

"Are you nervous? Your fingers are cold."

"Maybe a little."

"It's unusual seeing you get like this, Cece."

"How rude. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event! Of course I'm nervous!" I felt a bit pained that he didn't understand how I felt and turned my gaze away, hearing him let out a small chuckle.

"You're already swearing a vow to me? It makes me so happy that I want to kiss you right now, Cecilia." His words drew my gaze back to him.

As I flushed at the sweetness in his softened eyes and tipped my head in confusion, he chuckled again and leaned in to whisper softly.

"Because it's a once-in-a-lifetime event, right?"

"Yes, but…"

Why is it that he's always trying to unsettle me?!

Realizing his words were the same as a vow to never leave me for the rest of our lives, I felt my already flushed cheeks grow even hotter.

As I tried to glare at this wickedly handsome man, he slid a white-gloved hand gently over my flushed cheeks and let out a happy chuckle.

Ugh, he's just too good-looking, damn it. That smile combined with his perfectly styled hair is unbearably charming!

My legs almost trembled from how gorgeous he was. *Get it together, Cece!*

Despite my frustration, the warmth from his hand began to thaw the coldness, even loosening the tension in my heart.

I grasped his gentle hand in return and spoke quickly, embarrassment evident in my voice. "K-kisses come later! We have to sign the marriage certificate first and exchange our vows!"

"Following protocol?"

"Yes, exactly!"

His golden eyes narrowed a bit, looking at me intently. As I tried to avert my face, his grip on my chin tightened.

He traced his thumb softly under my trembling lips, whispering words of love in a low, deep voice that sent shivers down my shoulders.

"You're beautiful. So beautiful that it's hard to believe. There's no one in the world more beautiful than you. I swear my eternal love to my Cece, the goddess who makes me the happiest man in the world."

"Th-thank you…"

Stop looking at me and talking like that! I swear, his good looks were a lethal weapon.

And the way my maids were speaking breathlessly behind me was incredibly distracting!

"I-it's so e-e-motional…"

"This scene is so, so… I m-must not let my nose bleed!"

"Goose… My dear goose… Thank you! I cannot wait to roast you!"

I have no idea what they're talking about…

The doors were about to open, so I prayed they'd get back to their professional selves. *Please!*

I refocused, and though I tried to express my gratitude, Lucas's hand remained firmly on my chin. I tried to turn my head to meet his gaze, but he just flashed a sexy smile and made me instinctively draw back.

"Imagining red marks scattered under that white dress of yours drives me wild."

"S-stop saying things like that!" I said.

"We agreed that the number of marks corresponds to the

number of times I can make love to you tonight, remember?"

He's going to kill me! He's planning to kill me on our wedding night—if I can even call it that! Does he have any idea how many marks are on my body?!

He'd taken back control of me the night before, being considerate yet so persistent he wouldn't let me go.

"I never agreed to any such thing!"

"I held back when I left those marks, you know. Can't you just let me have my way tonight?"

"Absolutely not!" I replied, and his gaze grew heated.

He whispered a plea, causing me to nod weakly in return. I felt ashamed at my lack of resolve. *The power of a beautiful man's plea is just too much…*

What should I do? Even though we're finally getting married, I might not live to see tomorrow!

As those thoughts ran through my head, Finn whispered from behind us, "It's time," and Lucas lifted my hand for a kiss.

"I'll be waiting," he said with a soft smile, then let go. I felt a pang of loneliness as I nodded firmly with resolve.

I looked toward the end of the crimson carpet as the doors were thrown open.

Light streamed through the colorful stained glass, casting a path straight toward the pedestal beside the archbishop.

As a symbol of leaving behind my former life and dedicating my life and soul to the royal family and my partner, the bride was

supposed to walk alone to her groom. My parents watched over me as I let out a small breath, lifted the hem of my white lace dress, and stepped onto the crimson carpet. Lucas waited for me at the end of it.

After what felt like an endless ordeal of kneeling, listening to the legend of the goddess and the royal family's history, which was enough to test anyone's patience, I finally stood before the thick paper on the pedestal.

I knew this already, but…we're really getting married!

Come to think of it, Lucas has always used his authority in the strangest ways… No, wait, he's always been like that!

I remembered how he'd once wasted his money and power to buy an entire brothel just to make love to me, and I couldn't help but feel the urge to slump forward as he led me to the marriage certificate.

After he signed with a flourish, looking perfectly content, I followed suit, writing my own name.

This would be my last signature as Cecilia Cline in this lifetime. From now on, the villainess Cecilia would be no more.

Meeting Lucas had been a miracle. My heart ached with the intensity of that realization, and the final stroke of my pen quivered slightly.

I set down the pen with trembling hands and blinked away the tears that gathered in the corners of my eyes. Then, I inwardly apologized to Lucas.

I love you.

I trust you.

So I'll swear it properly, in my heart. I pledge my love only to you.

So just this once, forgive me for telling you this lie. Please!

I suppressed the fear that threatened to break free at the thought of the solemn vow I was about to make and focused on the marriage certificate, which began to glow faintly as the archbishop recited the ceremonial spell.

"Lucas Theoderic Herbst, and Cecilia Cline Herbst."

Hearing my new name alongside the brightening glow of the paper made my heart skip a beat as I gently knelt down.

The words spoken by Lady Mia and Lady Viviana flashed through my mind. Clenching my fists, I looked at the contrast between the crimson carpet and my white dress.

"I make this vow with all my love…"

My throat felt bone dry from the nerves, and I struggled to form the words. But just as the archbishop's speech continued and the hand holding mine squeezed tightly, I unconsciously glanced up.

"Do you swear that this love shall be your one and only?"

One and only? Not true? Before my brain could fully process the word, a hot, prickling sensation tickled my nose.

My sight and hearing seemed to glaze over as the archbishop gave Lucas a look of exasperation before turning to look at me with a gentle smile. The small gesture was my undoing, and my tears wouldn't stop.

How far—how far are you willing to go to protect me?! How much are you willing to break your heart for my sake? Changing the ceremonial words is unprecedented! You're wasting the Hero's authority on something like this!

Despite those thoughts, when I caught a glimpse of his relieved, yet tender, gold eyes peeking down at me, I swallowed down the hot lump in my throat and squeezed his hand back.

It all began with a simple promise.

That childish promise was what kept me going when I thought I was walking alone. When all along, he'd been right beside me. And now, in this moment, he stood before me, ready to pledge his vows. The reality of this miracle and the strength of the love that made it happen blurred the crimson carpet beneath me.

I watched my tears fall softly onto the fabric, answering with a trembling voice, yet filled with unyielding resolve.

"I swear that this love shall be my one and only."

"I swear that this love…shall be my one and only…!"

I swear to you—

"You may now seal your vows with a kiss."

Lucas gently pulled me to my feet.

He dabbed at my tears with a handkerchief, and when I looked up with tearful eyes at the man who was now undeniably my husband, I caught the glimmer of heat in his eyes, and my cheeks flushed.

What are you thinking?! This is a wedding ceremony! I'm grateful for the vow change—it moved me deeply—but still! We're surrounded by representatives from all the neighboring countries!

So please, I'm begging you! Get through this ceremony quietly and behave yourself!

I desperately tried to communicate this with my eyes, but he merely smiled serenely and pulled me close without a word, cradling my waist and head.

No, stop! I'm begging you! Please stop! I shook my head frantically, but he simply laughed, a mischievous glint in his eyes. Then he whispered playfully, "We're just following the protocol, right?"

My face flushed crimson as he silenced any objections with a declaration of love.

"I love you, and only you, with all my heart, my Cece."

"Mmph!"

This is so mean!

Not only did he turn my own words against me, but he even called me by my nickname. And to top it all off, he kissed me with tongue at our wedding!

There was no way I could push him away or possibly refuse. I tried to hold out, suppressing sounds, but my mouth helplessly opened under the intensity of the kiss, only allowing him deeper. It was no longer a chaste kiss sealing our wedding vows but something far more passionate.

As our kiss stretched on, my father shot to his feet, causing Prince Leon to scramble to calm him down. The archbishop signed softly and began performing a blessing miracle to buy us time. It was really too kind of him…

Thus, the solemn wedding ceremony was filled with an unexpectedly warm atmosphere.

When we finally stepped out of the cathedral, greeted by the cheering crowds, I waved to them with one hand while Lucas brought my other one to his lips.

I felt his kiss on my knuckles and glanced up only to see his golden eyes glimmering with happiness amid the flower petals dancing in the air.

He wrapped his love around me tightly as if to say he would never let me go. I clasped his hand in return, pouring my love back into him, only for my knight to gaze back at me with a look of mad devotion.

"With this, you're truly, finally, *my* Cecilia. I'll love you devotedly for the rest of my life, engraving myself upon your very soul. Prepare yourself. I'll never let you go. Not for all eternity, my beloved."

Um, I get what you're saying, but could you not put it like that?

It sounded terrifyingly ominous. No matter how hard I tried to interpret it, it felt like he was trying to carve some horrible curse onto my soul. *Did agreeing to his marriage vow mean I'd consented to that curse?*

No, wait, hang on a second. I stared up at him, my cheeks twitching, and he narrowed his eyes, leaning in with a low murmur.

"You did vow I would be your one and only, didn't you?"

"Y-yes…"

"Good."

Why is he smiling so sweetly? Was that just a threat? Your pupils are still dilated. It's terrifying, so please stop!



I guess I really agreed after all!

That's something you should've mentioned beforehand!

Flustered, I looked up to meet his gaze, glaring at my towering husband, only for him to flush slightly.

Why is he looking so happy when I'm glaring at him?! Fine. If he thinks I'm just going to be kept at his mercy forever, he's got another thing coming!

"Husband."

"Yes, my dear wife?"

His ears were red. Despite just cursing me to an eternal union, the mere word "husband" had him blushing. *How could he be so adorable?!*

As I turned to face him, I recalled that moment six years ago.

The distance that once separated us was no more.

I was proud of the woman I'd become. Well, I was a bit of a mess lately, but I still managed to keep the promise I made to him and stood here today.

All the struggles and hardships were worth it as long as I had him. I'd been captivated by him from the very beginning. Even curses would feel like blessings if I could be with him every day.

I smiled softly and gazed at the strong, beautiful man before me, and he tilted his head curiously.

The light glinted off the golden earring in his left ear, inviting me to reach out.

I stretched out my hand and smiled at its radiance, pledging my eternal love to him.

"In our next life, please be the younger one," I said.

"No way."

His face flushed, and he intertwined our fingers as he pouted. As he grumbled back at me, he pulled me closer with the hand I couldn't hold onto six years ago. Overwhelmed by a surge of love, I found myself smiling through tears as I welcomed his kiss.

Surely, I was born into this world to meet you. I'll rely on the chain you bound us together with and find you again in the next life so I can love only you forever, my knight.

Bonus Chapter:
Cecilia

"YOU KNOW I CAN'T TAKE THEM OFF, SO WHY DO THEY get thicker every time I call your name?!"

Every time I said Lucas's name, the magic chains binding me would thicken and weigh me down even more in response. Frustrated, I smacked them against the sheets and buried my face in the pillow.

After we got married, I really did end up not being able to leave this room…

The maids were all excited and eagerly lectured me on the duties of a new bride, insisting tonight was our "real" wedding night. I foolishly took their words to heart and told him, "Please, do whatever you want to spoil me."

That was my first mistake.

I ended up in a state where I couldn't think about anything but how good it felt as I agreed to his every request. So when I finally woke up two days later and saw the chain attached to my ankle, I was utterly speechless.

"You said I could bind us, remember? You told me you wanted to drown in me and be chained to me. We're both on vacation anyway, so what's the problem? Let yourself drown in me completely, my beloved wife."

This is genuine captivity, isn't it?! You're kidding me! I didn't agree to this at all! I was just about to refuse him outright, but the

moment I opened my mouth, he flashed a crystal filled with images at me, smiling calmly.

"Want to see proof? I was so happy I recorded everything."

I froze in the face of that terrifying threat and stammered, "N-no problems here. Don't worry about me…" and promptly bowed my head.

I swear, he is such a perverted sadist! You recorded it just because you were happy it was our first official night as husband and wife?! There's no way I'm letting you show me what I looked like in bed. Never!

I hugged the pillow tightly as I remembered the humiliation, the faint scent triggering a pang of loneliness and anxiety.

"When are you coming back, stupid Lucas?" I complained out of sheer frustration and suddenly felt a tug on my ankle that yanked me upright.

The chain, which had been so thick it almost seemed to say it wouldn't let me go, slowly reverted to its usual slender form. I hastily slipped on my indoor slippers and my thin robe as I dashed to the door leading to the outdoor bath. I flung the door open and spotted him there, shirt in hand, shaking water from his soaking-wet hair. I sighed in relief.

He must've just finished bathing. Steam wafted gently from his broad back in the cool night air. I opened my mouth to call out, but he turned around first.

"You promised not to leave the room, Cece." His deep voice cut through the air, the look in his eyes freezing me to the spot. I straightened my back and forced a defiant smile on my face.

"Welcome back, husband. I was worried about you, so when the chain returned to its usual size, I came to greet you. Aren't you happy?" I glared at him, and he approached me with a soft laugh.

He took a bath, which means he must've been in some messy fight.

I clenched my jaw at the unusual sharpness of his aura. His gaze was still tinged with traces of bloodlust, locked with mine.

"Thank you, my beloved wife. I'm so glad you wanted to see me so badly. It makes me want to take you right here, right now. Or did you come out hoping for just that?" His teasing voice along with the firm grasp of my chin made me push my hands against his chest. I felt his heartbeat, but couldn't help but register his warmth, and my words came out as a weak murmur instead of a protest.

"You're not hurt anywhere, are you?" The tremor in my voice must've surprised him, because when he tried to pull back I stood on my tiptoes, pressing my lips against his. I dropped my gaze to avoid his widened golden eyes, only to have him pull me close and pour his love into my mouth.

"I love you, Cecilia! I'm sorry I made you worry." He tenderly caressed my cheek, his eyes soft and gentle now. I reached out for the glimmering earring, still wet from the droplets cascading down from his hair, only to give it a firm squeeze.

"If you really mean it, then stop changing the chain without telling me and then disappearing on me! And you're still smiling! Apologize properly!"

"Ow, ow! I'm sorry! I sincerely apologize! But I didn't want you wandering outside while I was gone, and you looked so peaceful sleeping I didn't want to wake you." He whined about the pain, but the smile on his face was playful. He kissed our clasped fingers, and I let out a deep sigh.

Why is he so happy when I'm scolding him? Is he actually a masochist?

"Really? Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?" I traced a healing sigil over his body just in case. As my mana gently shimmered around him, he sighed and gave me a sweet smile.

"It was too weak to even call it sparring, so don't worry. But since you broke your promise and left the room, I deserve to punish you, right?"

He turned toward the bedroom, tugging my hand to lead me there. I followed Lucas obediently but narrowed my eyes as I snapped at him.

"I apologize for not keeping my promise. But when I woke up all alone, *chained,* my heart nearly shattered from the thought that my beloved left me. Who was the one who made me so anxious I had no choice but to leave, Prince Lucas?"

He knew that I couldn't sleep on nights when I knew he'd be going out to fight, ever since the campaign. That was why he left

without saying anything this time, and why the chain's form changed to keep me safe every time I called his name.

"I understand that you were worried, but my feelings are hurt!"

Lucas blinked in surprise, then his expression melted like molten gold as he offered me an apology with a smile.

"I'm really sorry, Cecilia. It was on purpose, but I do feel bad."

His face and words never match up, do they. Wait, it was on purpose?!

I stared at him, stunned, my mouth hanging open. He gazed back at me, his eyes filled with love, a faint blush coloring his cheeks as he whispered blissfully.

"You started relying on me unconsciously. It's like you can't even function without me now!"

The words filtered through my ears and registered in my mind, making my heart race out of control. I could feel the heat spreading across my body, turning me bright red as tears welled up.

"You! You wicked, sadistic idiot Lucas! Sit down on the bed this instant. We need to talk! I'm going to set you straight once and for all today!" I shouted.

But he only chuckled softly. He tugged on my hand, pulling me down onto the bed with him.

"Eek! L-Lukie, stop it! I'm trying to talk to you!"

I fell on top of him, my hands braced against his firm chest as I tried to wriggle away. But he gently lifted the chain that bonded us,

and placed a solemn kiss on it, pleading with a remorseful, desperate expression.

"Drown in me, Cecilia."

"…"

"I know I'm awful, that what I'm doing is unforgivable. Even so, I'm begging you. Drown in me even more. Love me until you're mad enough to want to kill me."

I'll use any means necessary if it's to be loved. Please accept that.

Despite the arrogance and cruelty in his words, the raw sincerity of his plea made my throat burn. I swallowed back the urge to cry from happiness and intertwined my fingers with his around the chain and smiled softly.

"I love you enough that I don't mind being tormented by you, my sweet husband. So if you're feeling uneasy, just say you want me to hold you close, okay?"

I want you to rely on me too. I may be inexperienced and just barely able to stand beside you, but I'll take on everything you give me…

I leaned in and kissed Lucas when I saw his stunned expression. I held onto the edge of my robe's sash and lightly brushed his lips with the dangling end before looking away and loosening the knot. My face burned with embarrassment, but I still traced my fingers over the name inscribed in the Promise Mark that peeked through the opening,

trying my best to convey that I belonged to him. His eyes darkened with frustration as he murmured his love.

"Damn it. Every word you say makes me feel like I'm going to die from happiness. You're driving me mad, making me fall even more in love with you, Cecilia! I'm going to make you regret ever treating me like a child!"

Come here, you adorable little thing!

He ignored my weight on his stomach and suddenly sat up, biting on my lips and sliding his fingers along the crease of my bottom. His fingers found their way inside and I clung to him.

As I responded to him, I offered back all the overflowing emotions I felt.

"I'll never regret it, so don't let your insecurities hold you back. Just carve yourself into me deeper…"

Bonus Chapter:
Lucas

STARTING TODAY, THERE'D BE A THREE-YEAR AGE GAP between me and Cecilia.

That thought alone was enough to make a birthday I'd never cared about before feel joyous. I accepted the glass she offered me in our room, thanking her and sipping the drink with a content smile.

She couldn't help but giggle when she saw my reaction, and her words made me freeze momentarily.

"Hehe. You're in such a good mood, Lukie. It's adorable. I mean it. Happy twentieth birthday."

Adorable?

The one who's adorable here is you, Cece, with your hair done up so that I can see the nape of your neck. "Adorable" is not something you call a twenty-year-old man.

"Thanks."

I held back the urge to mutter, *I'm three years older than you now,* and made sure not to let my deflated spirit show in my voice with my careful response. She gave a me a soft, sweet smile in return.

"You're three years older now."

"Yeah," I answered right away, and her big, bright green eyes widened. Once again, she shyly murmured, her cheeks turning pink.

"You're just so adorable." I wanted to hang my head in defeat.

Maybe it was meant as a compliment, but I only felt shock and disappointment. I took a big gulp from my glass, trying to deflect from my frustration.

She tipped her head to the side.

The adorable one here is without a doubt you, right?

"Lukie, can you drink a lot of alcohol?"

Guess not.

"I'm not sure if I can drink *a lot*…"

I've never been drunk, at least, I thought as I gulped down the rest of my drink a bit more aggressively. She whispered in a small voice.

"I kind of want to see you drunk."

What the hell? Why does my wife want to see me get drunk? Wait, because she thinks it would be "adorable," huh?

I smiled, noticing the opportunity, and offered her my empty glass with a gentle expression, not letting my desire show.

"You're adorable. Truly adorable, Cecilia. Can I kiss you? Please tell me I can."

"Ahh, stop it! Lukie, please let me go! I, no more! I-I can't! Stop with your fingers! N-no! Nngh, Lukieeee!"

When I curled my fingers inside her and moved them just right, her walls tightened around me as her body arched on my lap. Her soft, round breasts bounced against my arm, and when one stiff

nipple brushed against my skin, her inner muscles squeezed around me again.

As I felt her wetness seep out between my fingers, I slowly pulled them out.

I watched as she trembled slightly, hunched over, and I knew she'd just come again. She was on the verge again, and the realization stirred something wicked inside of me, so I tightened my grip on her, whispering softly.

"Why would you say no? I've been doing everything I asked, haven't I? You said you wanted lots of kisses, so I kissed every part of your body. You said you wanted me to make love to you slowly, so I did. I've been so gentle, pampering you this whole time, haven't I?"

As I ran my tongue along her back, trailing up to the nape of her neck which was slick with sweat, I whispered softly that this was what she had wanted. Hearing that, Cecilia shrank back, curling up like she wanted to hide.

Her ears which peeked through her amber colored hair were flushed bright red with shame, and her gaze fell shyly to the floor. The sight made me want to tie her up and ravage her delicate body right then and there, but I held back the urge as I waited for her response.

"Y-yes, but you said you wanted me to let you spoil me as a gift…"

"Oh, so you're saying I've been too gentle with you? Fine, I'll try harder. So please, give me a reward, okay? Please, Cece."

"What?! N-no, wait! Eek! Please don't put anymore fingers inside! It's not that I'm unsatisfied! I just…I just came! I've been coming nonstop! I'm a total mess, so please just kiss me and nothing more. Please, I'm begging you, Lukie!"

Gods, she's so damned adorable when she's crying, all embarrassed about having to say that she's coming. Like hell I'm gonna stop. You're the one who wanted the "adorable" me to make love to you, Cece. So now you have to take responsibility for it.

It's not that humiliating if I think about how no one else will ever see me like this, I reasoned to myself. *Just like you did after drinking that apple wine, pretending like none of this ever happened. You'd probably get really mad if you found out that I'm not actually drunk. But you're not pushing me away seriously because you think I am, and that's perfect!*

I did drink several glasses of strong liquor, and I was definitely more than a little aroused, though. *Sorry for tricking you, but let's just call it even.*

"Can I kiss you? Oh, thank you, Cece. I'm so happy. Hehe. As thanks for being so sweet to me, I'll give you more than just a kiss, okay?"

I grinned warmly and warned her that this wasn't over yet. Her breath caught in a shuddering gasp, and as her wet lips parted slightly, I leaned over and kissed her greedily, my tongue intertwining with hers.

I made sure the sound of my fingers moving in and out of her were even louder, teasing the tight space inside, and watched as her

body turned crimson and she let out a stifled moan into my mouth.

"Nngh, ahh, mmph!"

I wrapped my arms around her trembling body to try to hold her still, then I pushed my fingers in as deep as they would go, until the base of them pressed against her pulsing honeypot.

"Haah, n-no, I can't! Lukie, I can't! It's too much! Something's coming out…"

"Just feel it, Cece. I want you to lose yourself over and over again, until you can't think straight. Show me what it's like when you break down completely just from my touch."

Even as she shook her head, trying to refuse, I coaxed her to surrender to the pleasure. I gently caressed the entrance to her womb that pressed back against my fingertips and felt her entire body arch upward as she burst into tears.

"Mmmm!"

At the same time, a wet spray splashed against my palms and her hips bucked obscenely, shaking uncontrollably.

Her body had been arched for so long, but now it suddenly went limp, slumping onto me, her shoulders shaking with heavy breaths.

I slowly combed my fingers through her hair, fixated on her flushed face. I scooped up her limp body, still dazed and teary-eyed, and gently lay her on the bed.

She gasped and looked up at me with trembling eyes. When I caught her delicate wrists and pinned them down against the sheets,

her slick, dripping entrance trembled around me as I eased myself inside. Her moist, pink lips moved silently.

"L-Lukie, wait, I'm comi—!"

The soundless voice made me smile with pure happiness.

"Hehe. Did it feel so good you couldn't even scream? You squirted so hard you soaked my pants. You're so naughty and adorable, Cecilia. Make sure to remember how it feels when you come like that."

Her slender body quivered with each slow thrust and her head shook from side to side, silently saying that she didn't want to come anymore. I smiled gently at her, refusing to let up.

I placed her legs on my thighs to push in even deeper, shifting until I brushed against the spot at her core. A tiny squirt of liquid splashed up from our point of contact.

"N-no, don't look!"

Panicked, her slender fingers reached down in an attempt to cover it, so I tweaked her taut nipple between my fingers, causing her to arch her back in response. I bit down lightly on her throat, making her moan and stop resisting.

"I want to see you come on me. Don't just ruin my pants. Make a mess of *me.* Got it?"

As I stroked her cheek and murmured my wish, her eyes glazed over with tears as she glared up at me. Then, in the next moment, she sighed softly in defeat and tapped weakly at my shoulder, her lips parting ever so slightly.

She's begging for a kiss. It looks so good.

"You don't want to show me? Is it that embarrassing?" I asked, amused by the discovery.

She nodded adorably, tears spilling over her flushed cheeks. Seeing her struggling to withstand the embarrassment made me even harder. The small twitch of my arousal made her quiver, her body convulsing as she grew even wetter.

She flushed a deep scarlet, every inch of her body out of her control as she wrapped her trembling arms around my neck and kissed me. With a voice that was barely a whisper, she professed to me the greatest love I could ever know.

"Y-you jerk… Lukie!"

"Ha ha, what an incredible way to beg for it. Well then, I'll make sure to live up to your expectations, my beloved. Don't worry, I'll fuck you so good you won't have the chance to feel embarrassed. So go ahead. Let yourself go and completely drench me."

As we kissed and I thrust into her, our tongues intertwined so closely I could almost see our breaths. She reached orgasm in no time.

When I pulled away and felt the warmth pooling beneath her navel just as I hoped, her trembling body weakly clung to me, as if pleading for me not to look. I couldn't help but smile.

"Sorry, but I love you. Please don't run away from me."

The moment I chased after her tongue, which tried to retreat with a sob, she bit down sharply, her teeth sinking into my flesh.

My eyes widened with shock, and I could see her vivid green eyes shining fiercely with an intense love that utterly captivated my heart as her amber hair cascaded onto the sheets.

"If you're sorry, then don't do it!" she protested, and I felt a smile spread across my face.

Ahh, you really are the one. The only flower who can endlessly save me, yet at the same time, utterly ruin me…

"So you're saying you want me to go even harder, huh?" I licked my lips which were stained red from her bite and murmured in a deep voice. Her face turned pale.

Was she trying to run? Her fingers were weak and shaky, caressing the sheets. I let out a deep chuckle.

"Seriously, you're just too adorable."

Since she'd gone to the trouble of turning me on, I might as well try it out.

"It's okay. You can bite me as many times as you want. Tear into me if that's what you want to do." I spoke softly, manipulating my mana to coat my shaft with small, firm knots that wouldn't injure her inner walls.

Her sensitive body instantly sensed the change and as she arched, sweet, heated moans spilled from her mouth before a violent orgasm.

"Ahh, haah! Ohh!"

"Ha ha ha… You're incredible. Your spasms inside are so intense it's making me want to plunge even deeper and ravage you even

more.”

I suppressed the overwhelming urge with a shaky breath and watched as she let out a trembling sigh of her own, quivering as she shook her head weakly. Her core was becoming slicker with every pulse. Her desperate attempts to stop me only made me smile softer with affection. I shook my head in return, reflecting my blood-stained tongue in her wide, desperate eyes, pushing her further to the edge.

As I thrust my slick hips against hers, wet sounds filled the room and tears brimmed in her eyes again.

She pressed her hips back into mine as if pleading with me, parting her lips to invite me once again.

My dear wife, you’ve got way too much potential to be a wicked girl. That was so sinful I nearly came just from watching!

“You begging for a kiss means it doesn’t hurt anywhere, right? I’ll be sure to stimulate every inch of you, so let yourself feel all of it until you’re ready to die from the pleasure, Cecilia.”

Despite my frustration, I flashed her a grin, pretending I still had everything under control and declared that I’d crush her with my embrace. For some reason, Cecilia’s gaze softened, and she stared up at me with a dreamy expression. Her lips formed words meant to convey her love…

Huh?

“You’re so adorable when you act childish”? *Like hell I am! You’re not getting away with that!*

The next morning, as I casually lined up the small cushions near Cecilia's pillow, she adorably lashed out at me.

"You're such a pervert, stupid Lukie! You're seriously a perverted demon!"

"But you were the one who made a mess of the sheets, Cece—Ow! Hey, is that how you're supposed to use them? You're not supposed to throw them, you know? Ha ha ha!"

"My arms are too weak to swing them at you! It's your fault, so hurry up and take me to the bath! And next time don't give me so much. Take it a little easier on me. And don't look at me so much."

She spread her arms open to welcome me, her face flushing a bright red. I couldn't stop the heat from rising in my own cheeks.

You make me much too happy. Maybe it's okay to be a bit childish after all.



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