
Written by
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NOVEL
4
THE VILLAINESS AND THE DEMON KNIGHT

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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BONUS STORY

Chapter One

I, CECILIA CLINE, WAS REINCARNATED INTO AN OTOME game and found myself playing the role of the villainess. Several months had passed since my hastily arranged marriage to Lucas, the second prince and celebrated Hero who'd slain a dragon to become Bern's most powerful knight. We'd had quite a few problems involving my former fiancé Felix and Lady Viviana, a noblewoman from the neighboring kingdom who had ties to the royal family, but now those were finally resolved.

I was no longer the villainess Cecilia Cline, but the second prince's wife Cecilia Cline Herbst—and I was currently on the verge of dying from pure embarrassment.

The first prince Leon summoned me today.

Anna noticed how pale I was due to that time of the month, so she kindly called the royal physician to my chambers despite our busy schedules. I was grateful for her thoughtfulness, and ultimately, the doctor gave me medicine for anemia.

I was just catching my breath when Lucas arrived with an escort of knights to fetch me so we could head to Prince Leon's study together. I was surprised to see my father there, as he'd recently been appointed prime minister after Lord Mueller stepped down due to his son Thomas's scandal.

It was highly unusual for the crown prince to summon the second prince and his wife. But even more unusual was my father's presence. Even though he was the prime minister, he was still my

father, and his being here could easily be seen as him overstepping his bounds. But he was a man of strict discipline who would never act against protocol, and I found it difficult to believe Prince Leon would ever allow such a breach of conduct.

That could only mean one thing—this wasn't a personal matter, but rather one of national importance to both Lucas and me.

I couldn't think about what the situation could possibly be. Even the topic of Prince Leon's impending marriage had already been settled, so I didn't know what it would have to do with us.

As far as I could recall, neither Lucas nor I had done anything that might cause trouble. Well, *I* hadn't, at least.

I glanced over at my husband and gulped nervously when I noticed he was exuding a vaguely ominous aura.

I really hope we're not here to get lectured again…

However, I hadn't heard any reports of Lucas causing any mischief lately, whether it be during his duties as the prince or the Hero. Though, he was unusually skilled at being discreet. The only information that reached me regarding his activities as the royal family's shield always came filtered through him first, so there was no way of telling what was actually happening.

That left only his duties as a royal knight. It could definitely be possible, so I felt myself hanging my head in resignation.

Lucas had originally joined the knights to protect me; his journey had begun with that singular, simple purpose. Now he'd risen to the rank of Hero, the pinnacle of knighthood.

He even continued to serve as my personal guard in his capacity as the vice-captain of the royal guard after our marriage. Although it wasn't strictly an abuse of power, given his formal position within the knights, he also had his duties as the second prince to attend to. It caused a stir, with many calls for him to be relieved of his post from nobility and palace officials alike.

Their reasoning was simple—Prince Leon was steadily solidifying his authority. It wasn't ideal for the Hero to prioritize his wife over the future king.

And I couldn't argue against that logic, either. Ridiculous rumors had circulated that I had bewitched Lucas into becoming my puppet because he was blinded by his love for me.

I'd gone from a mere villainess to a full-fledged evil seductress in the eyes of the public. I had to fight back tears due to being unable to refute the claims, especially since Lucas's public displays of affection during our wedding and newlywed period had turned the gossip into a love story everyone adored.

"You want me, Cece. So, it's possessiveness, not selfishness. I'll have Finn and the others correct the rumors," Lucas had said in a deadly serious voice.

I threw a cushion at him in a panic and shouted, "Stop! Don't even say anything else!"

I later regretted my reaction when I realized I'd been off the mark, driven by my own possessive feelings. To save face, I pinned the blame on stragglers of the former queen's faction, which still lurked about.

Still, I was very grateful that most people now understood my actions weren't motivated by selfishness or a desire to possess Lucas.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that we'd been lectured for appearing distant when Lucas had been dealing with his amnesia, and now we were being criticized for being too affectionate!

Being a royal is exhausting…

But I couldn't allow myself to escape reality with such musings if the fate of the kingdom was at stake.

If nobility sought to exploit us and push for a new successor to the throne, factions could form against Prince Leon. That would undermine the entire purpose of my marriage to Lucas to join together one of the most influential noble houses and the royal family.

We wouldn't survive if our kingdom's military forces were splintered when Bern bordered the forests where magical beasts were a constant threat to humanity. Such power struggles might be tolerated in other nations, but not here.

The second prince's role was to support the crown prince. When Prince Leon ascended to the throne, Lucas and I were supposed to quietly leave the palace and establish a ducal house so we could support the royal family.

Our duties were clear—we were to secure our bloodline and unite the nobles.

House Herbst was the shield of the royal family and protector of the sacred blade, so the Hero must uphold the kingdom's foundation without breaking its structure.

Come to think of it, that system might very well have been why Felix had so vehemently asserted the legitimacy of his royal lineage.

It was easy to imagine how such a system could make someone like him so twisted. *Or maybe not.*

Felix had only been protected as royalty because past kings and queens had fulfilled their royal duties and fought and sacrificed to defend the kingdom and its people.

And yet, while every other royal had risked their lives in battle, Felix was the only one who grew up in comfort, never giving back to the people, lording his status over others, and mocking Lucas.

I would never, *ever* forgive him for that.

We were dealing with magical beasts. If we didn't stand as one, we wouldn't survive. That was why I'd come to the firm conclusion that conducting our lives seriously as the second prince and princess was far better than me succumbing to my desires and dying as a result.

Because of those reasons, many officials from various departments pleaded with me to convince Lucas to stop openly serving as my guard. I relented and, as a result, Lucas resigned from the Imperial Knights—at least, *officially.*

In reality, he just arranged for "Lukie," his alias when he used transformation magic, to transfer from the Black and White Knights, who were in charge of slaying magical beasts, to the Imperial Knights. It worked because Lukie wasn't publicly known among the nobles.

There was at least the formality of a simple recruitment process under the guise of supplementing personnel, though. And since he successfully passed the tests, no one from the Imperial Guard complained, since it was a merit-based system.

Sure, he's not public facing, but that was clearly taking advantage of a loophole, right? After all, he came back anyway, and even had Oliver, the former administrative assistant he'd appointed as vice-captain on his way out, assign Lukie to be a guard to the second princess!

Still, surely by now everyone in the Imperial Guard must've put two and two together and figured out that Lukie was Lucas. After all, during the soiree where Felix had caused such a commotion, Lucas stood beside me as Lukie, wearing an Imperial Guard uniform, and no one ever raised an issue with that…

And the Marshal had been drowning in paperwork after Lucas left, so he wholeheartedly welcomed Lukie back.

That made me wonder if this had been Lucas's plan from the very start—manipulate the knights and abuse his authority behind the scenes to be with me. *Just how devious can he be?*

And so Lucas remained as incorrigible as ever. But I couldn't help but wonder if his actions would raise some complaints eventually.

Not to mention, Father knew about how I met Lukie seven years ago. I had a hunch his current foul mood likely stemmed from the discovery that Lucas was still serving as my bodyguard…

I felt cold sweat drip down my back as I stood in the crown prince's study due to the absurdly tense atmosphere between my

father and my husband, who were staring daggers at each other. I glanced over at Prince Leon, who gave me a resigned smile with vacant eyes, and I clenched my fists. The crown prince should be in command of the room, so it was pitiful to see him at a total loss.

I needed to change the mood before things turned into a full-blown argument.

Just as I began to curtsey and give a formal greeting, Lucas stopped me. "There's no need for that, Cecilia. Leon, don't just stand there, get her a chair. Anna, get her a drink." Lucas quickly escorted me to a chair as he spoke, leaving me baffled.

"Lord Lukie…?" *This is the crown prince and the prime minister! I'll just be in for another lecture if I don't greet them properly!*

"You're feeling faint, aren't you? Please sit down. Marquis, I understand that you're angry, but please take a seat," Lucas said.

"I swear I'll take you down a peg today, boy. Er, excuse me…"

Wait, wasn't this supposed to be another lecture? Huh?

I couldn't believe my eyes when even Father sat down obediently. *Is Lucas actually the one controlling this room?*

I glanced around in confusion amidst Lucas barking out orders and noticed Prince Leon's attendant was looking back and forth between him and Lucas, clearly unsure of whose commands to follow. I could hardly blame him—I was confused myself!

I stared at Father, who sat with his arms crossed, waiting for me to speak. Then I felt myself being gently pushed down onto a chair.

"Please sit, Lady Cecilia." It was Kate, who had placed a soft cushion on the back of the chair and stood beside me with a blanket for my lap.

"I have some sweetened hot milk tea for you," Anna said, setting down a steaming cup on the table in front of me.

"And I brought your favorite slippers from your bedroom!" Elsa proudly held up my fuzzy slippers. And then it hit me—they'd gone *completely* overboard. They'd practically turned Prince Leon's study into my own private room!

I glanced at the slightly childish slippers with the dainty flower designs on them and felt a rush of embarrassment when I saw Father and Prince Leon doing the same.

That's not the point, though!

This had to stop. Just as I opened my mouth to say something, Lucas kissed my forehead and cast a healing spell on me.

"L-Lord Lukie?!"

Does he actually think this is our own private room?

"I know healing magic doesn't work on anemia, but it will help with your fatigue."

That's sweet of him, but the fact that he already knows about my anemia is a bit scary…

"Th-thanks… We are in front of others right now though, you know…"

"You've been working too hard, Cecilia. Your lips are pale, and I was worried. Besides, we're all family here, aren't we? And I'm right

beside you, so it's okay to relax a little."

I tried to protest, afraid of another impending lecture after our public display of affection. But his comforting words left me speechless.

How is he always so effortlessly supportive when I'm at my weakest? It's a little unfair!

The prince had graciously provided me a chair, but I still felt like it was improper to be sitting without asking permission first, so I decided to ask him politely, just in case.

But the moment I turned to ask him that, I was frozen in place by a voice so sharp it felt like a dagger had flown past me.

"Leon, you don't mind if she sits here, right? Would you like me to escort you to your seat as well?"

Eep! How are my husband's mind-reading abilities so advanced?! And that tone wasn't even a question, it was practically threatening!

His offer to "escort" sounded less polite and more like a promise to physically force him into a seat. Surely even Prince Leon would find that disrespectful enough to—

"Of course! Please, Lady Cecilia, make yourself at home!"

What in the world? The crown prince is talking to us like he's our subordinate!

To make matters worse, he gave me a pleading look that said, "Please don't curtsey to me in front of Lucas!"

I had no choice but to settle into my seat. "Thank you for being so generous, Your Highness."

Kate draped the blanket over my lap. “Here you go, Lady Cecilia. Would you like to put on your fuzzy slippers?”

“No, I’ll keep my regular shoes on,” I replied.

If only I could borrow some of Lucas’s courage. The way he completely ignores Prince Leon’s authority without a bit of hesitation is admirable…

I heard Elsa let out a disappointed sigh. Prince Leon and I both averted our gazes, feeling the awkward tension in the room. Lucas pulled me closer, totally oblivious to it all, and began issuing orders.

“Finn, I’ve already activated defensive and soundproofing barriers plus an anti-eavesdropping spell, but stand behind Leon just in case. Prioritize protecting him in case anything happens. As for the rest of the knights, I want you to stand by the windows with your swords drawn and maintain the barriers. Consider it a part of your training.”

“Understood.”

“Kate, take your position behind Cecilia. Elsa, guard the door. Barn, if you’re going to perch on the chandelier like that, can’t you at least cast some detection spells? Anna, what’s the status report?”

“The meals delivered to the room have all been prepared under my thorough supervision. Every ingredient and seasoning was taste-tested for poison,” she said.

“Good work. Cece, you can drink and eat anything you like safely. You may speak, Leon,” Lucas said.

"Why…thank you," Leon muttered, his hands balled up into tight fists by his sides.

Oh no, he's trying so hard to keep it together…

Lucas's behavior was infuriating, but at the same time, he was so competent that it was nearly impossible to criticize him.

But multiple layer defensive barriers and anti-eavesdropping spells meant that whatever we were about to discuss must be very important, so I needed to focus.

I sat up straighter in my seat and glanced at the Imperial Knights, who stood ready with their swords drawn. I felt a large hand tap me on my shoulder reassuringly. I felt a wave of relief before I knew it.

My body suddenly grew heavier as I remembered my fatigue. I let out a sigh deeper than usual, sinking slightly into the chair. Just then, Father spoke up, making me break into a cold sweat.

"Are you not feeling well, Princess?"

"I-I'm fine, Prime Minister!" I said, quickly straightening up in my seat.

I can't let my guard down in front of Father, no matter how comforting Lucas's presence is!

He was the epitome of a dignified prime minister, after all. He frowned and crossed his arms across his chest, deep in thought. The expression on his face made me so nervous that my smile felt forced and painfully stiff.

"I'm just a little tired, that's all. There's nothing wrong, really. I'm sorry for worrying you." I desperately tried to explain myself.

"There's no need to be so formal, so—"

"Prince Lucas, what is the meaning of my daughter's condition?" Father directed his sharp gaze at Lucas, freezing Prince Leon mid-sentence, leaving his mouth hanging open.

"She has anemia."

"Anemia?! What's the meaning of this, boy?! Explain yourself!"

Oh no, Father seems to have forgotten the crown prince's presence! And now it's becoming increasingly likely that Lucas and I are here for a lecture…

Father's expression seemed to say, "This wasn't part of the deal." But what did he mean by my "condition"?

I glanced at Lucas uneasily, and he sighed softly before speaking.

"Marquis—no, Father. She and I were only recently married. She may be a royal now, but she's only eighteen. So naturally, her body is under considerable strain. I understand your expectations, but I believe that's premature. I know what your wishes are, but I think it's much too soon. She's already doing the work of both the queen and the crown princess entirely on her own, despite her frail constitution. People rely on her because she's competent, but for that very reason, I ask you not to demand so much of her."

His words were calm yet considerate, leaving me feeling both flattered and puzzled.

Eighteen? Why are they talking about my age? Does that have something to do with my health? Is that why we were summoned here today?

Meanwhile, Prince Leon looked quite downcast as he muttered to himself, "Why am I even here…" The dejected tone in his voice was almost heartbreaking.

"How dare you, you insolent brat!" Father exploded, slamming his fist down on the table. "You made those vows to my daughter right in front of me, but you still haven't discussed this with her?! What have you been doing all these months since the wedding?!"

"Deepening our love for each other," Lucas replied.

Why are you boasting with such a smug look on your face?! That's clearly not what Father is asking!

To make matters even worse, he kissed my forehead and said, "As you can see." *Seriously, stop that this instant!*

"Well, that's a given! I mean, aside from that!"

It was a given that Lucas and I were deepening our love for one another.

And since Father adored Mother so much, he probably thought so too. Perhaps Father and Lucas weren't that different after all…

Still, how was I supposed to stop these two stubborn men from arguing with each other? Even Prince Leon had begun staring into space with a faint, resigned smile on his face.

As I struggled to figure out how I should intervene, I alternated between a cold sweat and sheer embarrassment. Meanwhile, Lucas

narrowed his eyes and turned to Prince Leon.

"I have also been working on tasks assigned by the crown prince. The burden of the work has kept me away from Cecilia even though we're newlyweds. My judgment to prioritize those duties played a role in not being able to meet your expectations. Isn't that right, dear brother?"

"L-Lucas! How dare you drag me into this? That's very underhanded of you!" Prince Leon snapped back to reality the moment Lucas addressed him. Although he was clearly flustered, he managed to say, "Why don't you just explain directly to the marquis?" The fact that he was paying attention to this conversation the whole time said a lot about his patience and effort, and I had to respect him for that.

"This is clearly the crown prince's responsibility. Feel free to use this opportunity to prove why you're here."

My husband is unbelievably bold.

While it seemed like he was trying to steer the conversation back toward Prince Leon, anyone could tell this involved me and my health.

And if this matter concerned all four of us without any members of the House of Lords present, and my health post-wedding had been brought up, then surely…it must be about pregnancy.

"…!"

The moment I came to that realization, my gaze locked with Prince Leon's, and a wave of overwhelming embarrassment washed

over me.

He quickly averted his eyes and hesitated a moment before speaking. “I’m sorry, but there’s something I need to confirm.”

My breathing became shallow, and my hands, which rested on my lap, began to tremble slightly.

It wasn’t entirely unexpected, after all. The royal physician had to come and check to see for himself. There was no way the crown prince and Father would ignore such an important issue.

“We’re taking precautions,” Lucas had told me after the ball. I just assumed we weren’t trying to have children anytime soon.

Stay calm, Cecilia. Stay calm!

An heir was a matter of utmost importance for the royal family, which is why our bedroom arrangements were managed by palace attendants. We’d only used the palace quarters very minimally to avoid suspicion.

Lucas had been cautious, wary that indiscreet maids might spread rumors.

Besides, Lucas had his own chambers. Let’s just say we were making *full* use of them. And thanks to his overpowered illusion magic and our own discreet maids, no rumors were flying yet. Hopefully…

We really didn’t explicitly discuss children. I plastered a smile onto my face when I realized my foolish mistake.

This discussion was probably just going to be to confirm our plans moving forward.

Be brave, Cecilia. Can't someone grant me a steel heart and a sharp mind right now?

I mentally scrambled to maintain composure and sat up straighter while I met Prince Leon's gaze with a smile, all the while feeling like I was on my way to the guillotine.

"Your quick understanding is very much appreciated. I'll be direct, then. Is there a chance you could be pregnant?"

"No. The royal physician visited me today regarding that matter, so he can provide confirmation for that," I answered firmly.

"I see. My apologies for bringing this up, then." Leon let out a deep sigh as he leaned back in his chair, clearly embarrassed. "As you know, I'm set to marry next year and take the throne."

"Congratulations, Your Highness."

Prince Leon had been betrothed to Princess Shireen from Majaar since they were children. Majaar was a desert kingdom that was located next to the monster-infested border forest, just like Bern.

Originally, they hadn't been slated to marry each other until much later. However, Lady Viviana and Felix plotted to break up my engagement with Lucas, in addition to Felix impersonating the Hero of Bern who wielded the sacred sword Eckesachs. The queen had been implicated and sentenced to life under house arrest, while His Majesty decided to retire from court affairs and abdicate as soon as possible.

Therefore, Leon's coronation was expedited, and the plans for his marriage had to move forward more quickly.

"You'll be traveling to Majaar to escort Princess Shireen directly, won't you, Your Highness? I'm sure she'll be delighted. Lucas told me the knights had undergone their extensive training and formations were already finalized. It seems everything is progressing smoothly, isn't it?"

I felt Lucas's shoulder stiffen slightly as he sat next to me when I mentioned the extensive training. I couldn't resist slipping my fingers through his teasingly.

After all, the grand excuse of selecting knights to guard the future king and queen had been Lucas' punishment for using Eckesachs for personal reasons before.

It was when Felix had visited me when I was first engaged to Lucas and imprisoned—er, *hidden away* at the Herbst estate.

And thanks to my annoying brother-in-law Dirk, who not only saved me but also delivered a well-aimed jab at my lingering insecurities, I realized I was in love with Lucas. That realization left me a tearful mess, and when Lucas rushed back from his campaign and saw me crying, he drew Eckesachs against Dirk.

Dirk, the future head of the family who was known as the royal shield, cast a triple-layered defense barrier, but it was reduced to dust with a single strike of the sacred blade. I vowed never to cry recklessly again after witnessing Lucas's terrifying display of power, though Lucas himself was the main reason for most of my tears.

News of this incident reached Marshal Weber, and as punishment, Lucas was made to spar with every knight, the marshal,

and even with the black dragon Barnabash. He won every battle, of course.

"All the kingdom's finest knights collapsed, the marshal fell unconscious, and the black dragon was foaming at the mouth. Lord Lucas was the last one standing amidst the chaos. His unwavering resolve to seize victory against even his own master proved that his strength lay not only in the sword Eckesachs but his sheer tenacity. His commanding presence left everyone speechless!" Finn had reported, showing a rare burst of excitement and joy.

I could only mutter a weak "Oh…" in response.

Honestly, hearing that the disaster was caused by my *husband* rather than an actual disaster would make anyone's brain shut down.

However, Lucas seemed embarrassed by his punishment and didn't want anyone to bring it up.

After demonstrating his power without the aid of Eckesachs and the black dragon, Lucas had been asked to accompany the crown prince on his visit to Majaar as a gesture of gratitude for his agreeing to a marriage that was sooner than originally planned.

But the thought of sending my husband, who was now hailed as the most handsome man in the history of Bern, to a foreign country filled me with nothing but dread.

He wasn't meant to be gone long, so my worries were most likely for naught…

Just then, Prince Leon suddenly bowed his head as if reading my thoughts. "I'm so sorry!"

"Wh-what's the matter, Your Highness?!"

"I hate to trouble you further after everything you've already endured, but I have a favor to ask. Could you and Lucas delay having children? I know neither of you intend to take the throne, but…it's been centuries since a Theoderic Hero has appeared. Rumors are spreading among the commoners that a bloodline blessed by the gods might inherit the throne. I think it's best for us to tread carefully for the sake of the princess we'll be welcoming into our family."

I looked at my father, who bit his lip in frustration.

And then it finally dawned on me why we were here. If several years passed after marriage without children, palace officials would inevitably begin to consider annulment due to concerns over continuing the family lineage.

Leon and his wife wouldn't have children for at least another two years, even at the earliest. Which meant Lucas and I couldn't consider the matter ourselves until even after that.

Our newlywed period was a very critical time for Lucas and me. That was likely why Father had been so insistent about us having children soon—before it became too late. And when it turned out that my "poor health" was merely anemia and not due to pregnancy, he was unable to contain his emotions.

If I were pregnant and rumors began to stir, the worst-case scenario may be having the child removed from the royal family at birth and adopted into the Cline family… That would mean I wouldn't even be able to hold my own child. I couldn't bear such a thing.

Not only that, but if the child was removed from the royal lineage and made the heir to another house, they'd never be able to return to the royal family. If something ever happened to Prince Leon's heirs, it could result in a scandal of epic proportions.

Given Bern's circumstances, Prince Leon's plea for more time was completely reasonable. And yet, I couldn't help but feel dejected at how unsettled things remained, even after my marriage.

I wasn't thinking about children at the moment, either.

As Lucas pointed out, the kingdom was currently without a queen *and* a crown princess. That left me, the second princess, responsible for managing all the duties that were traditionally handled by both of those figures.

If I were to become pregnant under these circumstances, the palace would fall into complete chaos. What's more, we wouldn't even be able to properly welcome Leon's fiancée, which could lead to serious diplomatic issues.

Luckily, thanks to Lucas's competence, there wasn't any workload left over from the period of time I was engaged to Felix for me to handle. But I certainly would've ended up working myself to death had I married Felix instead…

Prince Leon's decision wasn't a burden to me at all. What *was* a problem, however, was something else entirely.

"Did the Majaar delegation recommend that Lucas stay during the entire visit?" I asked.

"Yes. He was supposed to just greet them and leave with his knights, but they've asked him to stay for ten days. I'm very sorry to tell you this."

Prince Leon was usually so composed. Seeing him bowing his head apologetically spoke volumes regarding how he wasn't able to refuse. My gaze dropped to my lap.

The man I loved was going to be taken far beyond my reach.

It felt as though some unyielding force—Fate itself?—was trying to send me a message that said I would not be able to remain by Lucas's side, no matter how hard I tried. The weight on my chest grew heavier.

I was betrothed to Felix when I was a child and was unable to turn down the engagement. Lucas had come into my life later, so it wasn't as though I'd betrayed him. If anything, I could be seen as having betrayed Felix instead since I'd harbored feelings for Lucas for six long years. I knew the past couldn't be changed. But every time someone tried to pair Lucas with another woman, I felt like crying.

And as Viviana had pointed out before, the fact that I had stood by another man for so long was undeniable.

Perhaps this was the punishment I had to accept for turning my gaze from Lucas for those six years.

Had I done something terrible in a past life? Had I somehow become a true villainess?

Maybe I should go to the temple and pray…

"I understand. I'll tend to my duties in Lucas's absence, then." My heart ached as I forced a smile on my face, hiding behind the mask of the second princess as I clenched my fists on my lap.

Just then, a firm voice interjected beside me as a hand gripped mine.

"I have no intention of ever letting you go, Cecilia. I'll be back soon, and I'll make sure to shut down anyone trying to approach me. So don't worry about that."

Firm was an understatement!

His tone made it sound like he was already plotting something, which only worried me more. *Lucas, you're not getting away with this! No mischief allowed!*

Despite my busy thoughts, I squeezed his hand in return and smiled while my heart filled with emotion.

"Well, that's a coincidence. Because I have no intention of ever letting you go, either. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you, Lord Lukie."

The best way to avoid him being taken from me was to make it clear there wasn't even a chance of it happening.

Besides, agonizing over decisions made beyond my control was far less important than preventing my husband from acting on his grandiose whims.

But most of all, Lucas generously offered me his emotions, which was more than enough for me. His love and trust mattered more than anything else, and nothing could shake that.

I smiled brightly as I gazed into his striking golden eyes. He seemed surprised for a moment, then covered his face with one hand.

"You're so encouraging and positive, Cece. It's driving me crazy. I love it so much."

"Oh, um… Thank you?"

I think your sudden bouts of shyness are ridiculously adorable, too. However, since my father's veins are about to bulge out of his head, could you please stop pulling my hand to your lips for those little kisses?!

I struggled to free my hand, alternating between blushing from his flirtation and from embarrassment. Then I heard a cheerful laugh ring out from in front of me.

"You two certainly do make an impression. Watching you makes me want to hurry up and get married myself," Prince Leon said. His kind gaze made me break out in an embarrassed sweat as the tension in the atmosphere grew heavier.

"Well then, I suggest you go ahead and get married, Prince Leon." My father's gaze was cold and sharp enough to have Prince Leon sweating profusely at the mention of such a swift wedding.

"As Majaar has already granted permission for your wedding, perhaps you could forgo the acclimation period for the princess once she gets to Bern since it seems unnecessary. That would certainly take a burden off my daughter's shoulders. I would be honored to assist as prime minister, of course."

Lucas ignored the conversation and rose to his feet abruptly, tugging on my hand. “Well, that’s that, then. We’ll be taking our leave, since we’re newlyweds and all.”

Since we’d agreed to Prince Leon’s request, I could almost hear a faint undertone of “Figure it out yourself from here” in Lucas’s voice.

He was walking toward the door with me in tow before I knew it. Flustered, I turned around and managed a quick farewell. “Oh, um. Please excuse us!”

“L-Lucas! You know it won’t be an exaggeration to say that my marriage depends entirely on you coming along! I’m counting on you, dear brother!” Prince Leon looked rather desperate as he called out to Lucas.

“Don’t count on me.”

Lucas’s reply was curt, and on top of that, the way he waved Prince Leon off like he was a pesky insect was downright rude!

Honestly, it was utterly baffling how he could get away with such insolence toward the crown prince. *Well, come to think of it, it’s not just Lucas. The entire Herbst family acts that way…they don’t even seek royal forgiveness ever, either. Even entertaining the idea of revoking a royal decree was beyond the pale.*

Their family motto might as well have been something like “Respect yourself above others.”

They were practically an unstoppable force now, what with their wealth, power, and military strength.

"Hey! I helped you out when you asked my permission to marry before taking on the dragon, didn't I? So now it's my turn for a favor, Lucas! You'd better prepare yourself because I'm going to work you to the bone!"

"You're *already* working me to the bone. I don't mind owing you a favor, but did you even read the information I gave you?"

"I did! I did, okay?! You're just so competent, I nearly cried when I saw what you brought to me!" Leon exclaimed.

"Well, I want my peaceful newlywed life back."

I tipped my head in confusion when I heard how tearful the prince was and how composed Lucas was in response. Then, my father's voice cut through the conversation, cold as ice.

"It would be nice if you could also return my peace of mind regarding my daughter, too."

I silently prayed for Prince Leon's survival as the door closed behind us.

I was reading through a book regarding the Majaar kingdom in the royal library when someone called my name.

"Lady Cecilia. Your bodyguard has arrived." Anna's unusually subdued tone made me look up from my reading. I glanced at the wall clock. There was still more than an hour before the scheduled departure time.

"They're awfully early. But, let them in," I said as I placed the book back on the shelf.

I turned toward the knight, and my breath caught in my throat.

"Good evening, Your Highness. I came in response to your summons." The knight before me wore the familiar scarlet uniform of the Imperial Guard and dipped into a graceful bow.

I fought the urge to let out a sigh.

Why? Why are you here when you're supposed to be in Prince Leon's study? All the clerks, secretaries, and even Prince Leon's attendants are at their wits' end due to your frequent disappearances! And lately, they've been coming to me *asking where you are! And I've had to admit that you were with me every time! The way they give me that knowing look as if to say, "Oh, of course…" makes me want to crawl into a hole!*

"I understand how busy you are, so I would never summon you. You must be mistaken," I replied with a playful smile. The brown-haired knight before me let out a little chuckle, his golden eyes gleaming.

"Oh? You mean you didn't call for me?" As he spoke, his hair shimmered and transformed into a rich, darker hue like that of the sky at twilight.

The face before me blurred and reverted into its true form of pale porcelain, so stunning it sent shivers down my spine despite being familiar with it.

His golden eyes pierced through me, and a bad feeling rose up within me. My voice caught in my throat. "I-I most certainly did not!"

Why does he look so happy, like he just caught prey?

"Are you sure about that?" he murmured with amusement as he stepped forward.

His large frame blocked out the sunlight streaming through the window. His brilliant blue hair seemed to darken in the shadows. I was caught by his predatory eyes peeking out from the strands of his hair, and I truly did feel like prey before a towering beast. I knew I shouldn't try to run away, but my feet shuffled backward all the same.

The sharp sound of my heels clicking against the floor distracted me for a moment.

And in that split second, Lucas closed the gap between us, leaving me surprised.

How can he move so swiftly? Maybe my husband isn't a knight after all, but an assassin! And now he's holding me by the waist to keep me from fleeing!

"L-Lord Lukie!"

"My darling, you're as gorgeous as ever today. You look like a rose kissed by the morning dew in that dark green dress and those luscious red lips… Perfectly irresistible."

What an oddly romantic assassin.

I appreciated the compliments, but he was the one who had given me this dress and lipstick to begin with, yet the way he worded it made it sound like I was trying to seduce him on purpose. How underhanded!

He tipped my chin up, clearly intent on kissing me. *I know he's going to use that irresistible line to his defense, but I'm not falling for*

it!

"Lucas, my dear, surely you know that roses are very fragile flowers. It would be improper to touch them so carelessly."



We were in the library with Imperial Guard knights present. I silently begged him with my eyes, *"Let go of me and step back right now."*

He paused, grazing his gloved fingers against my lower lip before stopping.

"You're right. My apologies." He raised his hands in surrender, but I nonetheless felt a chill run down my spine.

Why did he give in so easily…

I was about to speak when he interrupted me with an embarrassingly poetic line.

"The beautiful rose which stands before me only bestows its rich fragrance and alluring petals upon the one who has made passionate lo—"

Don't start comparing me to a rose and talking about our lovemaking!

"C-could everyone please leave immediately? Prince Lucas has something important to discuss with me." Flustered, I raised my voice in an improper manner, yet somehow managed to give those instructions despite my overwhelming embarrassment.

My hand clamped over his mouth to prevent him from speaking any further, and I could feel the curve of his smirk beneath my skin. I glared up into his golden eyes, frustrated.

But he merely narrowed his gaze with an even more amused expression, so I hastily pressed on.

"I-I was just thinking about meeting with you, Prince Lucas."

So please stop talking in front of everyone!

Sensing my desperate plea, Anna took over. “We’ll be stationed outside the door if you need anything. Please don’t hesitate to call us.”

She quickly ushered the other knights and attendants out of the room, and my capable maids exited the room gracefully, giving me a subtle thumbs-up on their way out. I couldn’t help but feel a surge of gratitude toward them.

It was a necessary response to prevent Lucas from saying anything further.

I was grateful they wouldn’t let anyone close to the door, but at the same time, I knew they were absolutely going to eavesdrop. Worse, they’d made it so I couldn’t open the door from my side, either.

I had taken comfort in the idea that the library was a public space where people could come and go freely, thinking Lucas wouldn’t act out too much here. But now it was just the two of us…

I lamented the fact that I’d unknowingly created a private space where he could do anything he pleased, and I felt my vision darken.

“Cecilia.” He called my name in a low voice, rich with sweetness.

He brushed his fingers against my skin and scooped up a lock of my hair, sending a shiver coursing through me from the inside out.

“My darling.”

He bestowed a soft kiss upon my hair as if it were a precious treasure, and my heart began to pound in a frantic rhythm.

I was angry at my own body for betraying me and clenched my fists while I glared back at him.

This is the library. It's the library, so I absolutely can't let myself get carried away here!

"I-is there something you need?"

His eyes shimmered and narrowed slightly in the dim light before he spoke. "I told you before. I came here because you called me."

"H-huh? But I didn't. You came here earlier than the time we agreed upon," I stammered, shaking my head in confusion.

I unconsciously crossed my arms over my chest to protect myself from his prying eyes, and his amused voice fell from above, sending a shiver through me.

"You didn't call me? Sometimes I feel the urge to pluck every thorn from your rational stem, Cecilia. How wonderful it would be to pluck such a defenseless little rose."

Why does that feel so meaningful? You might not win this, but hang in there, Cecilia!

He gently ran his gloved fingers over my lips, which trembled with fear. Then his hand moved to the spines of the books resting on the shelf right beside my face, his fingers trailing across them one by one.

I nervously watched his slow, deliberate movements until his finger stopped on an old book next to the one I'd returned earlier.

He traced the faded lettering on the cover, inviting my gaze to it. The provocative gesture made my shoulders stiffen.

The book he traced with black-gloved fingers was an ancient tome.

During the celebration of his success in defeating the dragon, I had been terrified of his newly exalted status as the Hero. Driven by that fear, I'd pored over every book in the royal library.

And I learned something very fearsome indeed: The treasured sword Eckesachs was ranked even above the king.

In other words, since Eckesachs had chosen to be bound to my husband, he was effectively the highest authority in Bern.

I had spent years training tirelessly to prepare myself for the role of second princess, but I certainly never expected to be married to a man who wielded so much power he was practically a living god. A dry laugh escaped my throat at the thought.

And yet what made a Hero a Hero was likely the act of offering a cherished memory to Eckesachs, the sacred blade. I didn't know what memory Lucas had offered to it. But I did know that Lucas once told me he couldn't live without me, and he no longer had that memory of me.

From what I could tell, that offering was something essential, like wings to a bird—something you couldn't live without.

Only those who were willing to give up such a thing and prepared to fight as the Hero were able to wield the overwhelming, godlike power of Eckesachs—power granted for a sacrifice.

There's no way such power could be used forever without consequences, after all.

The merciful goddess wanted to protect humans, so she gave us the sacred artifacts. And if it were out of love, then surely out of that same love, she must have provided some kind of tie to restrain the Hero. The conclusion I reached was too terrifying to contemplate.

Still, it led me to uncover the very book Lucas was now toying with. It was a storybook entitled *The One True Sword, The Knight's Beloved*, which was oddly out of place in the royal library.

According to the story, the sacred weapon had been bestowed to the people by the goddess in order to protect humanity against the threat from the monsters. Interestingly, Eckesachs originally had a sheath. Yet in the present-day kingdom of Bern, Eckesachs had manifested unsheathed.

Why was it now lost? The cause and significance of the sheath were written in dramatic fashion in the old tome.

It said that the sword created by the goddess possesses divine power to slay the magical beasts.

As the sword wielded its power harshly against the magical beasts, the goddess gave it a warning: "*You are like a monster who could destroy the world. If you remain a blade that never loses its thirst for blood, you will one day cease to be the holy sword you once were. If that happens, I shall have no choice but to destroy you in order to heal you. Even magical beasts are living creatures that form part of this world. They are a cog in the wheel of order. Sword, you*

must reflect on your behavior and correct it. You must be a sword of protection."

In turn, the goddess took part of the sword's power and hid it somewhere in Bern. She told it to seek out the power she'd turned into a sheath.

At first, the sword didn't want a sheath and did as it pleased. But every time it bathed in the blood of magical beasts, its blade began to lose its sheen, and eventually, it began searching for the one thing that could heal it—the sheath.

However, no matter how hard it searched, it couldn't find it. The sword was created to slay magical beasts, so it could not understand the meaning of "protection."

The sword was something that took lives, and at the same time, it protected lives.

That contradiction was the essence of a sword's true nature. From that came its way of fighting and reason for fighting.

Despite its anguish, the sword continued to fight to fulfill its mission until, as the goddess said, it became rotten and useless.

The ground pierced by the blade turned black as if reflecting its own cruelty.

What was wrong with killing when it was driven by its mission?

The sword was filled with hatred at the senselessness of its fading form, unable to understand why.

But then, one day, a young knight kneeled before it and wept. "Thanks to you, I was able to keep my beloved safe. I can never

thank you enough. Please don't be so corrupted. I beg you, continue to protect us."

A frail human who cherished life gently wiped the dirty blade, which was stained with blood and rust, trying to heal it.

The knight could be undone in an instant by one swipe of a magical beast's claws, but in his gentle smile, the sword discovered its purpose and regained the brilliance worthy of a sacred treasure.

Before that seemingly "happy end," I couldn't help but be suspicious.

Could the legend of Eckesachs really just be a boys' love story between the sword and the knight, his "sheath"?

No matter how I read it, Eckesachs seemed like a male entity, and the knight who healed it with his smile was obviously a male as well.

The kingdom of Bern was praised as a knight's kingdom by other countries, so I found this theory rather amusing. And right now, that male entity was inside of my husband's body.

It felt a little odd to rejoice in the happy ending when the sword found its sheath. To be honest, I couldn't help but think just a little that I'd rather Eckesachs be evicted from my husband's body. *That's not very becoming of a Hero's wife to think! I'll have to deeply reflect on that!*

But the thought of the sword pretending to be lovers with my husband and saying, "My dear knight, please accept me inside your body" was just something I couldn't accept…

"The goddess can destroy Eckesachs if he uses his power recklessly. The knight's role as his sheath is to control and heal Eckesachs so that doesn't happen, right?"

So what happens to the Hero when Eckesachs is absorbed into his body?

And why in the world was this book in the library? Had Lukie put it there?

When I'd spoken that question aloud earlier while I was alone in the stacks, it wasn't long before Lucas had appeared.

No way, it can't be…

I covered the ring finger on my left hand, afraid of the thought that popped into my head.

Lucas let out a quiet chuckle, and my fear turned into a terrifying reality.

What's so funny? This is obviously a situation that works against me, so I need to plan my escape! After all, he said he wanted to pluck me, so protecting myself is essential!

However, as I turned my gaze toward the door to check my escape route, he tipped up my chin and made me look at the bookshelf. I felt like I might burst into tears.

"Did you find it interesting? Or was it boring?"

He hooked his finger on the corner of the old book and pulled it out at an angle to show it off, putting his wicked personality on full display.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, stubbornly refusing to admit I'd read it, averting my gaze.

The demon laughed loudly and mercilessly kept pursuing me. "Ah ha ha. I see. You don't know? Well, let me tell you, then. This is a story about the sword and its sheath, which were once separated. But then they were reunited and became lovers again. The story is modeled after Eckesachs and the Hero."

I desperately held back the urge to nod knowingly.

That was close, but I'm not falling for this, and I definitely don't think that laugh was incredibly sweet and adorable!

I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips, and he narrowed his golden eyes in the same manner. Then, he brought the book up to his lips as if he were going to kiss it.

"It's quite suggestive, isn't it? It's a holy sword, but it wants to be inside of the Hero."

My jaw dropped.

Wait, could that really mean that…?

"D-Did Eckesachs say the same thing to you, just like in the book?"

I never thought I'd have my husband stolen away from me by a sword! Seeing the golden eyes in front of me melt with happiness made me nearly cry from the overwhelming love I felt for him.

"Of course not. It doesn't matter how holy the sword is. I'd never let it try to take me away from you. You called me because you were curious after you read this, right?"

He lifted my left hand and kissed the ring with a joyful whisper, and I couldn't hold back my voice in response.

"When I call your name, is there something that connects my ring to your earring?"

"Yes. I wanted to have a constant connection with you, but I thought you might not like that, so I held back. The connection only happens when you call my name from your heart. Of course, only I can hear it, and it's only when I'm not nearby. I thought there may be times when I'm not in a position to answer you. Unfortunately, it's designed so you can't hear my voice in return. But the ring tightens a bit around your finger to confirm the connection."

I really didn't appreciate how triumphant he looked when he said that. But since I was sure there were things I should never know in the situations where he had blocked his response from being heard, I was actually grateful for this one-way connection.

"It connects us when I call you from my heart?"

The fact that he was standing in front of me must mean we were connected quite deeply.

His porcelain face smiled even more seductively in response. "You called me because you were curious, right? And even if not, if you call me with that much adoration, I can't help but come to you, my dear Cecilia."

The way he so easily admitted it and said it with a loving smile, in addition to him sweetly saying something a stalker would say, made

my body tremble with embarrassment, which easily overpowered my frustration.

Was it connected, all the times I called him before?

Like the time I woke up and he wasn't there, so I called his name out of loneliness…

Or the time I saw him outside training with the knights and he looked so dashing I couldn't help but squeal?!

Eek! It feels like I'm going to die from embarrassment! I have to cover this up!

"Would you just answer me? You're the one who put the book in a section where it doesn't belong to get my attention, so I'd notice it, right? Tell me why you did that!"

He loomed over me with a smile as I desperately tried to glare at him, but instead of being deterred, he seemed entranced.

My husband certainly was odd, getting excited over being glared at…

"Ahh, my wife is so adorable! Aren't you going to call me names this time?"

Argh, what a pervert!

"I wouldn't do such a thing! I know you enchanted this ring out of thoughtfulness. It won't connect to you unless I call for you, right? Then there's no problem at all!" I turned away in a huff, but deep down, I didn't mind the connection.

Sending him off to battle as the Hero always filled me with fear.

Up until now, my only comfort had been the long-range transmission magic through the ring, his shirts, and the Mark.

I'll pretend not to notice how much I actually rely on them!

For someone like me, the peace of mind I had knowing I could check on Lucas's well-being was a treasure and very important if I was going to continue being the second princess and the wife of the Hero.

I wouldn't lie—it was a bit frustrating that I couldn't deny it, but as I blushed softly while thinking about all of that, Lucas let out a tender sigh.

"Is that so?" He said breathily, his voice stirring the air.

I shivered as I looked at Lucas, whose golden eyes reflected a twisted nature beneath his straightforward love. This was a clear sign that he was about to push something embarrassing onto me…

"Does that mean you want things to stay like this, then?"

"Stay like this…?" Sure, that's true, but that makes it sound like I'm begging you to stay connected all the time—like I'm the one asking for it! And I just can't accept it being worded like that!

"I-I didn't say it like that!" I said, raising my voice, and immediately, the playful smile that had been on his face vanished, and he gave me a childish look, completely lacking any charm.

Wait, I think I just did something terrible… And that was a huge mood swing!

"You don't want things to stay like this? Should I make it so we're no longer connected?" He said it with a sad little frown on his

face, making me wonder if that made him feel lonely.

I felt the ring—which was usually fixed on my finger—twirl around, and my desperate attempt to counter him simply disappeared in a cloud of panic.

"N-no, don't take it away! I'm not saying I don't like it! I swear!"

Lucas smiled softly and nodded when he saw how flustered I was, and then he tilted his head adorably to the side, pressing me even further.

"So?" He kissed my ring finger, his gaze questioning. I felt heat rise to my face, and my lips begin to tremble.

"I-I don't mind…!"

I gave him a look of silent plea, shaking my head.

"Then if you don't mind, how do you feel about this magic?"

He's pushing again… Lucas, can't you just give me a break?

"Well, even when you're not by my side, it feels like you're protecting me, Lukie, and that makes me happy!"

"Good. It can be my substitute for when I'm not around."

Argh, it's like I'm inviting his stalker-ish behavior with open arms!! And what does he mean by "substitute"? It's not about that. Now it makes it sound like I'm begging to be by his side!

"Y-you're so mean, Lord Lukie! You jerk!" I snapped, unable to hold back.

But as usual, that only made him smile happily in return. "When you call me a jerk, it's like you're saying, 'I love you.' It feels so good.

I can't get enough of it. Say it as much as you want, okay?"

Now my insults are turning into words of love? What kind of ability is that?

I wanted to complain, but if I said anything, I would just end up indirectly telling him I loved him over and over again, so it was a lost cause.

And if my words didn't work, I could just show him with my actions.

"I won't fall for that again…"

I turned my face away, trying my best to look cold so he'd get the message. *This isn't going to work on me, you pervert, Lukie!*

"Ooh, I love that beautiful look on your face, too. I love you so much too, Cecilia," he said as he lovingly caressed my cheek, effectively leaving me speechless.

By saying "I love you, too," does that mean getting angry equals "I love you" in his mind? That's way too optimistic. And it's not like I'm showing my anger because I want *him to respond in this way.*

Clearly, he and I have different definitions of what "jerk" meant, and apparently, he actually enjoyed being called a jerk…so was it a bad idea to scold him for it?

But if that was the case, how would I express my frustration? It was beginning to feel like my vocabulary was useless here.

Just then, my devious husband suddenly gave me a seductive smile, freezing me in place.

"I'm glad you're happy. From now on, when you call me, I'll know exactly where you are and what you're doing since it gets recorded in the ring. Make sure to call on me often, Cecilia."

Wait, a recording function?! This is news to me!!

"You pervert! You're a wicked, nasty jerk, Lukie!"

I couldn't hold back anymore because I simply couldn't stand it. *This feature was completely made for your benefit!*

"There's no need to know everything I'm doing."

"Sure, there is." The moment I tried to explain that I didn't want the recording feature, he clapped back firmly with such a serious expression on his face that I unintentionally gave a noise indicating understanding.

"Ah, is it…?" I hesitated, trailing off.

Suddenly, he pulled me into his tight embrace. "Eek! Lukie!"

"Of course. It's really necessary." As he said that, his strong arms, which always protected me, wrapped around me tightly as though they were clinging to me. I reached out to hug him in return, my hand resting on his back, and he let out a deep sigh.

"They're deliberately sending an envoy while I'm gone… I really don't want to go." I could hear it in his voice, and then I instantly understood why he'd implemented the recording function.

At the same time, overwhelming emotions washed over me while I clung to his knight's uniform.

A delegation had been sent from Majaar to stay here while Prince Leon and Lukie went to get the princess.

On the surface, the reason was that the king wanted to check in advance whether a princess, namely one who had hastily been married off to the second prince of Bern, would be able to lead a peaceful life there. But the real reason lay elsewhere.

The third prince of Majaar, who was famous for his good looks and being the king's favorite, was part of the delegation and he had specifically requested to meet the second princess, who had captured the Hero's heart.

In other words, the delegation was coming to try to win me over, and I was a seemingly frivolous woman who might quickly move on to another good-looking man. The thought that the annulment of my engagement with Felix had been twisted into something like that made me want to cry.

"I'll play the part of the villainess and chase them off. So don't worry, okay?" I said in a joking tone of voice. I felt Lucas's back stiffen with anger.

"Any man who comes to see you while I'm not around is scum. Don't pay them any attention. And you weren't Felix's possession. They know about the annulment. But they're calling you a villain who switched sides to join me. Dirk's spies reported that. There's nothing good about this delegation—they're coming here for the wrong reasons."

I suppose I should expect nothing less from Dirk Herbst.

He's probably enjoying this…

And I'm sure the third prince would pretend not to know about the details of the annulment to create a rift in my relationship with

Lucas.

"Maybe, but I can't just ignore them. Plus, the castle will be well-guarded while the delegation is here. My father and others will be here too. They can't just do as they please with the second princess of another kingdom."

My throat began to tremble even as I said this.

I don't want you to go…

I tried to calm the rising turmoil inside of me by burying my face against his chest.

As we held each other close, the pale green lace drapery embroidered with blue and yellow patterns that covered my white ruffled skirt brushed against Lucas's feet.

"Did they ask you to deal with their increase in magical beasts, too? Are you okay with that?"

Honestly, it was an absurd request. The rule among the nations adjoining the border forest was that each one dealt with threats on its own. Asking another kingdom's Hero to help would normally earn criticism from other countries.

Even though Majaar had many connections with other kingdoms, they couldn't treat the kingdom of Bern lightly, no matter how strong they were. Even if they were more powerful in terms of being a larger kingdom, there was no way to beat the military strength of Bern.

Majaar probably wanted to assert its dominance in the marriage alliance with Bern, and they wanted a connection with the strongest

Hero on the continent.

Please don't look at anyone else… Please come back safely!

I listened to the pounding of my heart as I prayed, and Lucas gently patted my back. "That's not a problem at all, so don't worry. If I wanted to, I could wipe measly little beasts like that off the map, along with the whole kingdom of Majaar. I'm sure they think that I'm like other men, who will be lustful after battle and touch another woman besides you. I have a plan for that." He kissed me on the temple as he said those frightening words, and my cheeks tightened anxiously instead of smiling with happiness.

The idea that he could wipe a kingdom off the map did not give me any comfort.

"Lukie, you can't just do whatever you want, you know."

"I know. But if something feels off, no matter if it's during a ball or a tea party, you can call out to me. That's what the magic is for, and that's why I'm bringing the dragon."

He really said "I'm bringing the dragon" so casually when it's the only black dragon on the continent. Did he really enslave it just so he could travel wherever he wants, whenever he wants? That's definitely something Lucas would do…

It would take a magically enhanced horse two weeks to travel from the depths of the border forest, but Lucas could do it in a single leap with Barnabash. It sounded really convenient, but I couldn't help but worry about the dragon's pride.

I felt my chest tighten when I saw the look of regret on his face, and knowing how much he wanted to protect me made my heart ache.

His eyes held a strong resolve in them, and I knew he wanted to do everything in his power to prevent something like the Fenrir attack from ever happening again.

If I call, I know he'll come, no matter where he is or what he's doing.

And we both knew how bad that was.

We weren't allowed to marry just because we loved each other. We were permitted to become the second prince and princess because they believed we could bear the responsibility.

Even though he had Barnabash, I couldn't just tell him to come back to me whenever I felt like it. Calling a Hero for my own personal reasons was strictly forbidden.

But I don't want to be apart from you. I want you to stay with me. Don't leave me behind… Take me with you.

Sometimes love so deep could bring with it unbearable pain. That was why Lucas gave me this magic. He wanted me to pour out my suffering into him and only him. He made an oath to return to me, even if we had to be apart.

So, I shouldn't be stubborn and say I wouldn't call him, and I shouldn't push him away and tell him not to come near me.

There was only one thing I wanted to say to my strong and kind husband.

"I love you, Lukie, my beloved knight." I smiled, promising I would stand by his side as his wife. His cheeks turned red, and he looked astonished.

"That's cheating, Cecilia. You're trapping me with a single word."

A cold sweat ran down my back before I could even feel happy about it.

You weren't actually planning on coming back if I called you, were you?

I needed to make sure that wouldn't happen.

"You can't just act rashly, okay? You're the most important person in the kingdom." I tapped his knight's uniform, and he placed his hand over mine.

"We won't be able to see each other for ten days, Cece." He hooked my fingers onto his tie, and I felt my eyes widen.

What are you doing? You're supposed to visit Majaar as the Hero! I can't send you off looking disheveled, especially if it's my fault.

I forced myself to be firm. "I know, but escorting the princess of Majaar is very important for our kingdom and for our future. I'm sure they've finished preparations to welcome the Hero."

After all, he was the only Hero. They were probably planning all sorts of banquets, hoping for…something.

I knew that polygamy was part of Majaarian culture, where men of high status married and protected many women. They were likely going to send other women to Bern too, not just the princess who was to marry Prince Leon.

Lucas surely wouldn't try to tarnish the marriage between Prince Leon and the princess. He would definitely be targeted if that happened, and I didn't want that.

But if I let out how I was really feeling, who knew how he'd react?

My husband was very extreme. It would be better if he just threw a tantrum and refused to go. *Maybe he could just send Lord Barnabash away so he didn't have to go?*

A massacre is out of the question!

Since we couldn't change Bern's stance against Majaar, there was no way he could miss the welcoming banquet.

We'd requested the timeline of the marriage to be sped up considerably and had to make significant concessions regarding trade tariffs. We couldn't afford to be taken advantage of any further.

I had to send Lucas off properly and keep my emotions to myself. This was crucial.

I firmly began to adjust his tie, but then he slumped over, his head drooping. My hands froze in place.

My body was too weak against his…

"Am I the only one who feels lonely when we're apart?"

Why is he acting all sweet and clingy at a time like this?

There was only one possible response I could give. "N-no, I feel lonely, too."

Argh, just when I've made my mind up about something, he overturns it so easily. And I know exactly what's coming next now that

I've responded like that…

"Then can I enjoy you a little bit before I leave, Cece?"

See?! I knew it!

I tried to shake my head no, but his black leather-gloved fingers brushed lightly over my hair, like he was touching something fragile.

"I don't want to be apart from you. I don't want to let you go."

My heart grew warm when it felt like I'd heard words that shouldn't have been spoken.

His touch was so gentle, reminding me of the quiet hours at night in bed with him. My body was so used to this that it responded instantly.

A sweet, tingling sensation spread from my ears to my neck, over my sides, and down my chest. I impulsively pressed my cheek against his hand, implicitly begging for more.

"Oh, Lukie…"

I'd reached out to Lucas without even meaning to. Once I realized what I'd done, I lowered my gaze and uttered a small complaint.

"I-it's all your fault, you know."

It was frustrating, but I knew it was because of my own desires, too. I let out an internal sigh as I tried to hide my flushed cheeks with my hand as Lucas let out a deep sigh.

"I can't stand the way you tease me, Cece."

"What do you mean 'tease'?"

I couldn’t deny it anymore, though. I was *very* well aware of what I was doing.

This morning had been so busy that I didn’t even have time to talk to him, let alone say a proper greeting. And when the crown prince summoned us, I had no choice but to go, despite Lucas telling me to ignore him.

But still, I couldn’t help but feel greedy for trying to reclaim even a little bit of time.

I had wondered if the turbulent feelings of this love would finally settle down now that we were married, and yet…

I swallowed the words I couldn’t bring myself to say and absentmindedly stared at the glittering embellishments of his uniform. Then, a teasing voice broke through my reveries.

“Hee hee. I don’t think your obliviousness began just now, my darling.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I lifted my gaze sharply to meet his golden eyes, which now held a deep darkness, like the full moon transitioning into a new moon.

“Oh, yeah?”

His twilight-colored hair, which had grown long since our wedding, drifted into my view, and, suddenly, my entire world became Lucas.

“What don’t you understand, then?”

His softly spoken words wrapped around me, creeping under my skin, and I couldn't help but be caught in them.

Even though I wanted to utter a sharp retort, the gold in his eyes, which were full of obsession, caught me in their trap, and my voice came out barely above a whisper.

"I-I'm not oblivious. I know what I'm doing…"

I couldn't stop myself as he tipped my chin upward, preparing for the kiss I knew was coming.

"You're aware that you're tempting me, then?"

His low whisper, coupled with his soft breath grazing my lips, made me unconsciously part my mouth, begging for it.

"I see."

He blinked when he saw me like that, his Adam's apple moving as he swallowed. The sight of it made me blush, and I stubbornly began to deny it.

"I-it's your fault…" I covered my mouth in a panic. Lucas uttered a joyful, almost mocking laugh in response.

"Heh… Ha ha ha! It's my fault, is it? I'm honored."

Argh, his cute laugh makes him even more perfect! But it's also infuriating!

"B-because you made me say that I'm lonely!" I pouted.

I only had eyes for him now, and he knew that, yet I'd been practically begging for a kiss! My face felt like it might melt from the

heat as I glared at him. He suddenly pulled me closer with a mischievous grin and stroked my chin.

"Yes? And?"

There it is, that curious look.

A normal husband would read the room and give his wife a gentle kiss, Lucas.

It was wrong for me to expect anything normal from him. He was a mischievous, otherworldly beauty who made my heart race.

But sometimes, I just wanted him to understand how I felt without asking. And I really didn't want him to smile so adorably in front of other women.

I feel like it's time for some education from his wife!

"You're a naughty husband, asking me like that."

Always asking is something only children did. Couldn't he act more like an adult?

I paused, flashing as innocent a smile as I could muster, making him blink in surprise.

"I see…" he muttered quietly and leaned his face in even closer.

He gave me a shy, adorable smile. "I'd like to know what it is you've realized about yourself."

Has he been getting better at being deliberately charming?! I never taught him that*!*

Lately, I felt like he'd become used to being called childish, and I felt like his methods had become sneakier and more cunning as a

result.

So why do you always want me to say it out loud? When you respond like that, there's nothing else I can do but say it! Damn it!

"I-I love you, Lukie. I want you to kiss me."

I can't believe he got me to say it. It's so cruel to make me say such things! At this point, you should say you want to kiss me, too!

I glared at him, my emotions tipping toward anger due to my embarrassment.

"Eek!"

He pulled me tightly into his arms and sealed my lips in a forceful kiss. "Mmm, nngh!"

His kiss left me breathless as my vision twisted, his golden eyes glowing with painful longing.

"Mmm, Lukie… You're so rough."

"You think I could stop at a gentle kiss when you know I have to go away?"

So you do *know what's going on!*

Oh no, now Lucas is acting like an adult on purpose! But if he's kissing me like this, then that must mean… He's trying to ease me into doing something even more adult?

"Lukie, wait!"

As I opened my mouth to stop him, his tongue slipped into my mouth as if he'd waited for that moment, gently lapping against it. I grabbed tightly at his clothes, trying to push him away.

"Argh!"

"You're so adorable, Cece."

He seemed pleased with my reaction and passionately embraced me, sending shivers all through my body.

"Mm, ahh, nngh!"

A flickering light blinked behind my closed eyelids.

I panted into his mouth as he held me tightly, trembling as I felt my body weaken. Lucas lifted me up and placed me on the desk nearby.

"Hm? Lukie?"

Dazed, I looked back and forth between his beautiful face, which held an intoxicating allure, and the ceiling above. He gripped my waist and suddenly wedged himself between my legs, pushing my dress up.

"I'm sorry, but I can't hold back. This time I'll be gentle," he whispered sweetly in my ear as he pressed his hard cock against me, kissing my eyelids gently. I could feel my face turn bright red as tears filled my eyes.

The contrast between his words and his actions was so jarring. *What is your idea of gentle, anyway?!*

It's terrifying how you're so focused on fulfilling your desires at just the right moment. Your persistence is incredible!

He could've taken me to the nearby sofa, but he deliberately brought me to the desk. *If we're going to do it, can't it at least be on the desk in your private study?!*

My thoughts were poisoned. What was I even thinking? I could never do something like this in the study!

Just as I was about to push him away, he gave me an achingly tender kiss on my lips.

"I love you. I love you, and only you, my Cecilia…" He let his love spill into my mouth like honey, and all my resistance disappeared.

"Mm, Lukie…"

His tongue tangled with mine so deeply I nearly got lost in it. I called his name, wanting to reciprocate his feelings.

He suddenly pressed his lips against me with full force, as if he could no longer hold back, and before I knew it, my panties were gone, and his heat pressed against my bare skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

You could be a magician with that mastery of sleight of hand!

"Haah, wait, Lukie! No!"

"No? You're the one who said you wanted a kiss. You said you loved me, right?"

"Y-yes, but…"

I *did* say that, but I feel like the nuance has changed since the order of things has reversed…

It felt like he was saying, "You said you loved me, so that means I can keep going, right?"

But if I denied it, it would make it sound like I didn't love him and might flip his sadistic switch to the ON position. And if I didn't

refuse, he was just going to push forward!

Ugh, my husband is so wicked. Honestly, at this point, it's almost impressive. No, this is not the time to be admiring him!

I'm not the same person who's always weak against you, no matter what!

"That's enough… It's already more than enough!"

So please don't pin my hands down on the desk like this!

"And besides, you have to go soon!"

As much as I loved him, the thought of someone knocking on the door to collect us in the middle of this was way too mortifying.

There were less than thirty minutes left. I shot a desperate glance at the clock to highlight the urgency of the matter, but he just tipped his head to the side playfully, looking amused with himself. Then he ran his tongue over his flushed lips deliberately as if to taunt me even further.

"Hehe, you said it's enough? That's so naughty, Cecilia. You knew that lipstick would smudge, but you still begged me for a kiss. So as your husband, it's my duty to respond."

I didn't know that! Excuse me for being weak to temptation!

And now he was throwing the whole "you started it" argument back on me, leaving me with no way to escape once again.

What am I supposed to do?!

"Really, though! There's no time left!"

"That's why I'm doing it."

That's not even an excuse!

"I don't want to let go. I want to stay close to you until the very last moment. I just want to feel you, Cece."

And now he's turned that weak excuse into a devastatingly sweet plea!

"Th-that's not fair!"

His eyes were filled with a maddening sense of love that screamed he needed me, which made my chest tighten painfully.

I turned my face away, embarrassed by my inability to outright refuse him. But then he grabbed the neckline of my dress and tugged it down with surprising force.

"Ahh!"

"Cece, don't turn away from me. I'm the man who loves you. Because if you do…"

I'll ravage you. The sheer lust that burned in his eyes conveyed those unspoken words, making my flushed face turn back toward him.

He's an absolute demon, putting me through something all of this and then demanding I don't look away! And yet, despite all that, my heart still pounded for him.

I couldn't tell if it was out of fear or love, but my body was trembling desperately.

And the fact that he didn't say *I want to ravage you,* but *I* will *ravage you* meant he had already made up his mind.

This is bad, I thought, my throat clenching anxiously.

He's going to push until I give in and then go all the way!

"P-please, wait, Lukie! There's no way we can do this here!" My desperate pleas only seemed to ignite a fire in him even more. He pressed his face into my cleavage and bit down hard enough to sting. "Oww!"

"This is the only chance we have to make love before I leave."

He healed the spot with magic, fading the sharp pain, then used his tongue to soothe it tenderly.

"Nngh!"

The contrasting sensations of pain and pleasure sent shivers down my spine. My body moved instinctively, seeking his lips.

He let his tongue play dangerously close to mine, teasing me until a fine thread of saliva connected my trembling tongue with his.

"Maybe I should just carry you back to the palace like this? Losing precious time will only frustrate me further, so I won't be able to hold back. It wouldn't be making love anymore. I'd devour you, and you need to be ready for that. Are you?"

His words carried a distinct weight that left me feeling completely flustered.

"Th-that would be a bit of a problem…"

A huge problem! But still, he wants to make love to me here and now?!

He chuckled softly and murmured, "A problem? I love you so much that it's a problem for me, too." Then he soothed my protests with a gentle, teasing kiss.

When he pulled up my corset, it only hefted up my breasts even more. He pressed his fingers into the soft flesh of them, which was a lewd sight.

He caressed my breasts slowly, enjoying their softness. Then he suddenly began to tweak my sensitive nipples. The slowly growing pleasure suddenly exploded, making me arch my back with a jerk.

"Don't be so rough all of a sudden…! Ohh…" I let out a moan that certainly didn't sound like a protest and shook my head at him, embarrassed by the way I pushed my breasts out toward him despite asking him to stop looking at me.

He let out a hungry sigh against my neck. "Haah, I can't stand it when you do that… I love you so much that I'm afraid to leave you, Cecilia."

Even though I was trying so desperately to hide how much I wanted him, he exposed his feelings so freely, it made my heart ache.

The muffled sounds of him suckling at my breasts and the pain of my throbbing skin showed how much he loved me, and my desire to not leave him grew even stronger.

But I knew I'd never be able to say, "Please don't leave without me," so all I could do was just shake my head.

"No, Lukie… We can't…"

His face crumpled as I cried out in a tearful voice.

He let out a sigh and shot me a firm glance as if to say, "Give it up." It was so unexpected it left me startled.

"I'm trying to ruin you. We won't be able to see each other for ten whole days, and no matter how much you beg or plead, I don't want to hear the word 'no.'"

"What?"

He's trying to ruin me?

Come to think of it, he was trying to make me give in, little by little…

"Please, Cece. I want to hear your voice calling out my name before I leave." Lucas didn't stop his movements as he looked up at me with desperate, puppy dog eyes.

"I–" I hesitated when I saw how anxious he seemed. He stretched his large body against mine mercilessly, as if telling me to bare my heart, too.

I tried to tell him to wait, but instead, what came out was a plea for the man I'd missed so dearly. "Nngh, Lukie…"

"That's right, Cece. Say it again."

The forceful way he sucked on my neck, combined with his passionate request, made my lower body tingle with pleasure, and I felt my breathing become shallow. My hips trembled, and my legs weakly parted shamelessly for him, begging to accept him.

I felt the blood rushing to my pussy as it craved his big, thick penis, making a burning sensation form in my lower belly. My body was so honest, it was almost frightening.

"Lukie, please…please!" I cried out.

"Say my name so I know I'm yours, Cece."

He had a terrifying light in his golden eyes. My tongue was numb from his kisses. I let out a sweet voice, delighted by his obsession with me.

"Lukie."

"Yes, that's right. Say it again, my Cecilia."

My voice grew more tender with pleasure, and he sighed with joy.

"Mm, Lukie…"

He gave me a kiss to praise me, and I felt my emotions swelling up until they overflowed.

"I love you! I love you, so please, don't do anymore!"

"Damn it!"

I begged him in a voice that sounded more like a scream as I squeezed our clasped hands, and he growled and cursed as he pushed his hips against me as if he couldn't take it anymore. I felt sweat break out all over my body.

"No, no! I don't want to co—?!"

No matter how long I waited, the ecstasy that I expected to ruin me and leave me in a mess of tears never came.

Huh? That's odd… I glanced hesitantly at the face exhaling seductively against my shoulder. He was blushing all the way up to his beautiful golden eyes, and he looked slightly anguished, even though he had a smug expression on his face. I was so mortified that I wanted to bury myself in a hole.



"I won't let you come yet, my beloved."

He tricked me! He wasn't even inside!

"You…are so…mean!"

What are you doing?! Why are you making me say such things?!

"Idiot, idiot, idiot! You perverted sadist brat of a prince!"

"Well, you don't have to go that far. You asked me to hold back, and I did just that. I told you I wanted to ruin you."

Okay, well, he did *say that! But I also told you not to! And why are you looking so proud of yourself for holding back?*

"Still, doing this in the library, of all places!"

That adorable pout isn't going to get you out of this one!

I smacked his shoulder with my fist, only for Lucas to beam at me. His expression changed so quickly that I pulled away in a panic.

His reaction is suspicious… He's definitely going to say something outrageous again!

"Oh, Cecilia. It makes me so happy that you've gotten used to doing things like this in places like this. It's amazing how fast you're able to—mmph—come lately."

Even though I tried to clamp my hand over his mouth, he still managed to finish his sentence.

"Th-this is all your fault, stupid Lukie!"

I've already made you take responsibility for everything, but the least you can do is at least apologize properly!

I flushed crimson and turned away, feeling him pull me into a warm embrace as he chuckled happily while he gently combed his fingers through my disheveled hair.

"Sorry. Thanks for always putting up with my greedy self. I love you, my precious wife."

His deep voice echoed through my ears.

He lifted up my left hand to his lips to kiss it reverently. "What a hopeless husband." I let out a sigh and pulled a handkerchief from my pocket to wipe off the lipstick that had smeared on him.

Then he adjusted my disheveled dress. The tenderness of his touch stirred something deep within me, and before I knew it, I impulsively reached out to him.

"I want to give you everything, Lucas. Just please go a little easier on me."

Otherwise, he'll always be the one giving to me, and I'll never be able to make it even.

I leaned against his muscular frame affectionately. I felt him tense up as he covered his face, tilting his head toward the ceiling.

"Ah, damn it. Cece, do you have any idea what you're doing to me right now?"

"Huh? Um, no, I…"

I thought I was just making a normal request. Did clinging to him in my freshly ironed dress cross a line?

"You're seducing me. Damn it, I'm just so happy! It's too much."

What was that huge sigh about? I didn't understand, but I did appreciate him holding back. After all, I was becoming more and more defenseless around him.

Still, the fact that he'd grown enough to control himself and keep things from going so far was admirable… *But that still doesn't mean I'll accept it!*

Frustrated, I pinched his cheek and glared at him.

He frowned, mirroring my expression.

"Will you stop with those adorable gestures? Because if you don't let me go, I'll have to take you right here and now."

Wait, what? Seeing him pout as I stretch out his cheek is way too adorable! No, Cece! He's deadly serious!

"N-no, you can't."

"Why not?"

He placed his hand over mine so I couldn't pull away, his deep voice tinged with irritation. I felt the color drain from my face.

Wait, no! He's pinning my hands down!

"Lukie, um, could you let go of my hand?"

I couldn't even pull away if I tried. The way he held it down meant trouble.

"Why are you so against it?"

His pupils were dilated.

Uh-oh, this is very bad! He's absolutely going to say, "Since you're not letting go, I'll have no choice but to take you now." I had to

cut him off by making the first move.

"B-because! I love you!"

"Yes, you've said that so many times…" he muttered as his cheeks turned red. I felt too embarrassed to continue.

"That's why, um…having you leave right after you make love to me feels so lonely," I whispered shyly, peeking up at him from beneath my lashes. He froze for a moment, his golden eyes locking with mine.

His handsome face blushed impossibly scarlet, and I had to inwardly clench my fists. "I-I'm sorry. I'll make sure to visit you sooner next time."

Th-that's not the issue here…

"Yeah, that's what I'll do…" he muttered.

Despite those thoughts, seeing him genuinely trying to consider my feelings made my heart skip a beat, so I couldn't bear to correct him.

That was what I loved about him—he was so serious when it came to me. Now, if only he could get his priorities straight. And honestly, saying it out loud made it even sadder.

Before I knew it, my gaze had dropped. Lucas buried his face against my shoulder.

"I really did want to fuck your brains out, you know."

My heart pounded and my eyes widened.

I thought he had learned his lesson. Surely he's not assuming he can just be sweet to me afterward, and that will solve the problem?

I began to turn my gaze on him when he said, “I need you, Cece.”

His voice was filled with such deep despair that it seized me by the heart. I squeezed his hand firmly.

“Lukie.”

“Hm?”

I love him more than anyone.

“When you come back… I-I want you to ruin me.”

I’ll do my best to make you proud, so please come back to me. Give me the right to love you when you get home.

I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

He turned red all the way up to his ears as his golden eyes. I gave him the most loving smile I could muster.

“O-okay. I-I’ll do my best to ruin you.”

Bring it on, my adorable lover!

“Hee hee. Don’t tease anyone but me, okay? Behave and just complete your mission there without any trouble.” I poked his lips mischievously, and I could see the frustration on his face.

“Damn it…I really wish I could just destroy the whole kingdom of Majaar right now…”

Oh, Lucas. Leave it to you to ruin the romantic mood with one sentence.

Chapter Two

W*HOSE MEMORIES ARE THESE?*

I stared at the translucent surface before me. It

resembled neither water nor glass, yet it seemed familiar.

There was a breathtaking, fantastical valley with a rainbow arching overhead.

Two lovers who had just made love were by the riverbank, facing an inevitable farewell.

A milky white dragon let out a roar that echoed through the heavens before taking human form, clinging desperately to the figure in its arms.

"No, don't die! Please! Just stay a little longer. You said we'd always be together if we became fated mates!"

The cry of despair was answered with a frail, weak voice.

"I'll…find…you…"

The white dragon cradled the head of its lover, which was covered with hair the color of twilight.

The moment I realized what I was looking at, I felt a weight in my arms and gasped.

The eyes gazing back at *me* were golden—a color I loved and knew all too well. My heart began to race wildly, and my lips moved of their own accord.

"I promise I'll find you, no matter how many times we're reborn! I swear I'll find you again!"

I began to tremble when I heard my words.

Whose memory is this?

My lover smiled slightly in response, and my tears fell upon their lips.

"I…love…you…"

The sound of their quiet breaths was swallowed by the droplets, and the life in my arms disintegrated into fine grains of sand. Punishment for severing our fates.

"If we choose someone else other than the mate the gods have chosen for us, we'll be punished," I said hesitantly.

My lover gave me a childish smile that filled my heart. "I don't mind, as long as it means gaining eternity with you."

In my foolishness, I had defied the law of the gods, and because of that, the one I loved turned to dust.

All I could do was stare blankly at the golden sand in my hands as it slowly drifted away in the wind.

Those who defied the natural order were not granted even a sliver of mercy.

Wander the abyss and search for your beloved for all eternity.

That was the message left behind as the last speck of my lover silently disappeared.

Just moments ago, they'd been here in my arms.

Now, their existence had been erased from this world completely.

I could only laugh at my arrogant, foolish self for being so blind because I'd never considered that a fleeting moment attaining eternal bonds would come with such hellish suffering.

"This is the punishment for not choosing 'true love'…"

Because of their long lifespans, dragons were often prone to loneliness and madness. Perhaps that was why the gods had created the concept of fated mates for us. Surely, having a predestined love would bring happiness, right?

But to claim that love chosen by one's own free will wasn't "true love"…

"How absurd."

What truth could there possibly be in any other love?

I clenched my fists so tightly that my claws pierced my palms as I glared furiously up at the heavens at the invisible gods who had stolen my beloved.

The gods did not defy or alter the natural order.

While they can't deviate, even fate can be rewritten if one pays a price equal to the weight of their desire.

That was precisely why the person I loved believed we could sever the threads of destiny, leaving this world ahead of me, alone.

If that were the case, I would gladly endure this punishment, because an eternal promise lies beyond it.

The next time I see you, I'll be younger than I am now, just as promised, and I will find you right away. And this time, I'll offer myself

pure and untouched, never standing by someone else's side but yours.

The headmaster finished confirming the donations for the orphanage, and I exchanged greetings with him. I got into the carriage and absently touched the ring.

The unsettling dream I'd had earlier left my heart restless during my visit, and I just couldn't settle my nerves.

It had already been a week since Lucas and the others headed for Majaar.

They were to check if any magical beasts had escaped the desert and entered the border forest on the Majaar side. I wondered if Lucas was already finished with the hunt.

He was making all sorts of crude requests in our conversation via the long-range transmission magic last night, so I was sure he was doing just fine.

The carriage rattled along, and I absentmindedly stroked the dull gold of my wedding ring, feeling myself gulp.

Lucas told me that if I called his name, the ring would tighten, proving our connection.

Honestly, I want to test it out now. I don't want to wait for our call tonight. I just want to make sure he's all right.

I swallowed again, hesitating.

At the same time, I realized the ring would reveal what I was doing. Nothing was happening right now. I was just lonely, and it

would be obvious if I called out to him now.

If he found out I was lonely, he would probably come rushing home to me, embracing me so tightly it would hurt. I quickly looked away from my ring, flustered by the thought.

What are you thinking, Cecilia Cline Herbst? I scolded myself. *You shouldn't be so careless.*

But even though I told myself not to call him, I still felt the urge. It was very irresponsible and selfish.

I needed to be strong. I needed to fulfill my role in his absence.

Things had improved in many areas since Lucas became the second prince.

He had a lot of power in his position, although not as much as the crown prince. The crown prince controlled the castle, while the second prince must go out into the world and be the eyes and ears of the crown prince.

He had to work throughout the kingdom to address the economic inequalities between the rich and the poor in collaboration with the House of Lords.

And Lucas had done it effortlessly, using the black dragon as a deterrent and the fastest means of transportation.

A prince who could go on inspections at any time was a huge threat to anyone thinking of trying to corrupt the government.

Thanks to that, even orphanages, which could only be built in areas with poor security, had been receiving attention, and the children's living conditions had improved.

We'd made sure to deploy officials and surveillance crystals, and long-distance communication magical tools were in place in case of emergency in order to maintain that state. Having a budget really was wonderful.

That was why I had to fulfill the role as the representative of the royal family in public while Lucas wasn't around, to show everyone we still had eyes on the situation.

But honestly, I was a little frustrated by how well he could do everything.

When I was with Felix, he wouldn't even listen to my suggestions, and that was frustrating in its own way. But for some reason, Lucas had gotten hold of those discarded plans and documents.

"By the way, Cece. I wanted to ask about this…" he had said, and by the end of the day, the plans I'd suggested long ago had been put into place. By the next day, I was called into the House of Lords for a question-and-answer session that left me sweating. I certainly wouldn't ever forget that.

After managing to answer everything, we started discussing issues to secure the budget, and just when I was about to celebrate…

"Good job getting that proposal approved. Now, next on the agenda is…"

"What?"

Lucas showed me another proposal Felix had torn apart, with dark eyes that seemed to be leaning towards something ominous. A

competent stalker who could get things done was just terrifying.

And despite his penchant for revisiting things that made him angry in the past, I found it strangely sweet when he didn't lose his focus.

He's so good at solving problems! But when he says things like that, I'm scared to leave…

"We can't increase the orphanage budget any further, Cece. Doing so might temporarily protect more children, but it's so expensive and won't provide more jobs in the long run. That will worsen public safety. Besides, we need adults who can work there to take care of the children properly. That will keep them safer. We should be trying to reduce orphanages instead of increasing them."

"That might be true, but there are some areas that are suffering from magical beast attacks because they don't have enough protection without those adults."

"Yes, that's why we need to focus on the adults instead of the children. Let's try to establish a training institution for a civilian corps to replace the Black and White Knights in certain regions like that. If we can implement it nationally instead of in just one territory, eventually, we could eliminate the need to dispatch knights from the capital. That's a long-term plan, of course, but if we're going to spend the same amount of money, I think it'll be better in the long run. Most importantly, this is something we can do immediately as I can ensure the magical beasts are kept in check. I'm not asking you to view the children as mere numbers, but we won't be able to give adequate

care to the children unless we take care of the adults who are struggling now first."

There was no room for argument. He cut me off so firmly I couldn't muster a single word in response.

Just how many dangerous regions did Marshal Weber send him to? I wondered after all the talk of struggling without proper adults around.

Even though he was fuming over old transgressions just a moment ago, he explained things flawlessly as soon as he started speaking. It was equal parts infuriating and awe-inspiring.

He had the strength to resolve anything he set his mind to, yet still said things like, "I'm afraid to be apart from you, Cece." How could I not want to make time just for him?

I wanted to say that, but I didn't even know who I was justifying it to, so I just clenched my fists and lifted my face.

"Anna."

"Yes? Would you like to stop by the temple?"

"The temple? Huh?"

I blinked, surprised by her words.

She placed a hand on her cheek and sighed deeply and meaningfully.

What's going on?

"You've been toying with your ring with a troubled expression on your face, then you'd blush over and over. I assumed you were

thinking about Prince Lucas and his mission, so I took the liberty of guessing," she said with a radiant smile and a gleam in her eye.

I quickly hid my ring out of view.

"Did I really?"

"Yes, repeatedly! I was beginning to feel jealous of Prince Lucas…"

She doesn't need to say it like that, does she?

"How adorable… You didn't even realize it, did you? Well, we're off to the temple now!" Kate said from the carriage rooftop.

Sheesh, even Kate's been dragged into it!

"N-now that you mention it, I guess I *was* worried… Please…" I tried to mumble an awkward excuse, but Anna gracefully lowered her head and spoke softly.

"I understand. I'll send Elsa ahead so you can pray in peace for Prince Lucas." She then knocked on the small window behind us.

Before I could stop them, Elsa chirped, "I'm on my way!"

I turned bright red and hid my face. "Th-thanks…"

Ahh, she saw right through me, and I can't bear it!

Anna's warm, gentle smile was too much for me. I just hoped we'd get to the temple quickly.

I spent the rest of the ride in an awkward daze, praying to stop blushing at some point. Finally, we reached the temple, and I looked up, admiring the white walls bathed in sunlight.

It had been so long since I felt that peaceful atmosphere as I climbed the front stairs. A guide dressed in white priestess robes silently indicated where I should go.

I nodded and followed her toward a side passage.

I was led inside through a small door connected to the chapel instead of the main gates, likely for security reasons.

"I'll come to fetch you in thirty minutes. Please take your time until you feel at peace."

"Thank you."

As the door gently closed behind me, I let out a sigh, then turned around to look at the statue of the goddess by the altar and kneeled before it.

It was just a dream.

Barnabash wasn't a white dragon, and the person who had collapsed was a woman.

The red chains that connected them—the twilight-colored hair and golden eyes—were all merely a coincidence, that's all. It was just a dream.

Dear goddess. I clasped my hands together tightly and bowed my head.

Please protect Lucas as he continues his crusade as a knight. Please, may my beloved not suffer during his mission. Please, please let him return safely to me.

I offered those prayers and raised my head to gaze at the statue of the goddess for a moment.

Somehow, the question that had been weighing on my chest surfaced.

"Why did I have to be reincarnated as a villainess?" I asked softly, my words disappearing in the air.

Despite knowing it had all started with an otome game, the fact remained that I was a marquis's daughter.

The Cline family was a well-known noble house in the kingdom of Bern. That meant it wasn't strange for someone like the prince to choose me as his fiancée.

The fact that I became Felix's fiancée was far more likely than me falling in love with Lucas. In fact, I could understand if someone told me that Felix was the one destined for me.

Yet fate had been twisted for some reason, and I had miraculously received a one-of-a-kind love.

And this time, I'll offer myself pure and untouched, never standing by someone else's side but yours.

Suddenly, the words the dragon spoke in my dream echoed in my mind, and I bit my lip in frustration.

If I hadn't been reincarnated as the villainess Cecilia Cline, I never would have met Lucas.

It was truly a stroke of luck for me to be reincarnated and to fall in love with him.

Thanks to Lucas, the situation had come to be as it was now after six precarious years. Our once-fleeting connection had now become an unbreakable bond.

That was why I couldn't help but regret not realizing it sooner when I thought about it in hindsight. I shouldn't have stayed by another man's side when I should've been reaching out for Lucas.

It felt like I was being scolded by the dragon in that dream.

"I didn't have a choice. I couldn't do anything about it."

Now, it was too late to change anything. By the time I realized my feelings for Lucas, my engagement had already been decided.

Lucas himself had said that he met me when he was a standin for the second prince. No matter how I looked at it, we weren't in a position to be together at the time.

All I could do was hold on to the promise we made. I let out a sheepish laugh as I recognized that I was making excuses to soothe myself. I shook my head to dispel my dark thoughts.

This wasn't the time to be depressed.

Majaar was trying to slander me and call me a villainess to win Lucas over.

And if that wasn't enough, there was even a possibility that they were plotting to kill Lucas and use me to do it.

"I'd never let that happen."

I was no longer the person I was when I was engaged to Felix.

As Cecilia Cline Herbst, I would risk everything to protect him. If things went according to Majaar's plan, I could end up ruined and cast out to the brothel…*again*.

The idea of being publicly shamed and ending up in a brothel for a second time due to an annulled marriage was a nightmare.

Something like that didn't happen very often.

What a turbulent life.

I began to ponder what would happen if Majaar had been deceived by Lucas's gentlemanly appearance and then made all sorts of demands of him, making his very short patience run out.

There was a slim chance that Majaar would be erased from the map. Lucas had said "I could erase the entire kingdom," after all.

The idea that the crown princess's home kingdom could be reduced to rubble is nothing to joke about!

I had to prevent that from happening, no matter what. I looked fervently toward the statue of the goddess before I made my way toward the exit.

The next day, I was passing time in a waiting room near the throne room until our meeting with the delegation from Majaar.

"Good day, Your Highness. I have come to offer my assistance with your escort today." The man before me was dressed in a splendid yet refined manner. He bowed in such a dramatic fashion that it seemed insincere. I couldn't help but feel a little annoyed.

What is this sense of déjà vu? Showing up uninvited is definitely something my brother-in-law loves to do…

"Good day, Lord Dirk, Assistant Prime Minister. I'd sent a letter requesting to speak with you, but you seemed quite dismissive. I was ever so sad. How is it that you're in the castle while Prince Lucas is absent? Have you had a change of heart?"

The number of missing mercenaries had been on the rise lately.

I wrote and asked if he knew anything about it, but I only received a terse reply saying he knew nothing and that he couldn't be bothered to visit the castle in Lucas's absence. It had caused quite a bit of trouble for the attendants and my father because of it!

He gave a mischievous smile in response. "Oh, well, I thought I'd check on my poor little sister, who was left behind by my brother. But it seems you're doing quite well!"

I could hear the glee in his voice. *I've got such a spiteful brother-in-law…*

"There's no need for you to worry. I communicate with Prince Lucas every night, and I'm so busy that I'm practically begging for help. I don't even have the time to feel lonely. So could you please do your job as well?" I asked, my voice growing stern.

Dirk put a hand to his head. *That's right. You should be reflecting on that!*

"You get calls from Lucas every night?! I can't contact him no matter what I try. Don't you think that's a bit unfair?"

Never mind, he's not reflecting on it at all. He's acting positively jealous! Sheesh, how desperate is he to talk to Lucas?

Even though it was clear Lucas was ignoring him on purpose, I couldn't decide whether I should admire Dirk's persistence. I thought probably not.

But he'd been left behind, too, and he hadn't even gotten any calls from him.

Wait, hold on.

If he hasn't been able to contact him, then…

"In last night's message, Prince Lucas said things were going well and that he'd return tomorrow at the earliest. Did you receive any notice from the administration?"

After all, the nobles should've been notified of the prince's return, right?

Well, they should have been, but knowing Lucas, who embodied the very essence of unpredictability, I couldn't help feeling uneasy.

Dirk's eyes widened in genuine surprise.

What's with that reaction? Don't tell me it's another reckless escapade!

"That's news to me. I'm sure even the prime minister, Marquis Cline, hasn't heard anything about this."

Of course my husband is going to try coming home without telling anyone!

I had to stop him.

I felt the color drain out of my face as I hurriedly glanced over at Elsa. I was about to ask her to send a message regarding the matter when a sharp voice cut through the air.

"Are you sure things are going well, Your Highness?" Dirk's usual carefree attitude had vanished, replaced with an icy glare and a stern voice. My blood ran cold, and I nodded in response.

"I'm certain of it. Prince Lucas did say he would come back."

I thought maybe he didn't have to meet with the prince anymore, but then a question arose in my mind. He didn't say that

things had gone well with the hunt. *So how had they gone then?*

"That's rather vague. Where did Lucas say he was 'coming back' to?" His tone shifted cheerfully just as the heat within me rose again.

"Well…"

"Heh. Let me remind you of something, my dear little sister. Leon hasn't contacted us since he was sent to Majaar. It's not his decision to come back whenever he wants, and he knows that. So, think very carefully. What did Lucas say he was coming back to?" He spoke deliberately with narrowed eyes, and I clenched my fists to suppress my embarrassment.

"M-me…" I suddenly realized something. "Wait, does the envoy have something to do with the missing people? Is that why Lucas…?"

Did he find evidence? Is he pretending to be on a campaign but planning to secretly return to Bern to catch him? He would definitely do that…

I covered my mouth and looked at Dirk, who shrugged.

"Who can say? You should know as well as anyone that the Egrich Empire has been attempting to slay or capture the Fenrirs. They're up to something with those strong beasts. Then, they suddenly started trading with Canaan, a territory belonging to the third prince of Majaar. And shortly after, unidentified magical beasts began to appear in their kingdom. I think the missing people are connected to that."

"In other words, the Egrich Empire is backing the third prince of Majaar, and he used their help to create more magical beasts?"

That must mean the third prince had something he wanted so much he would even betray his own kingdom by creating magical beasts, humanity's sworn enemy. The prize was surely the throne, but the crown prince was in the way.

Yet the third prince chose to leave Majaar and not seize the opportunity to get closer to Lucas. Instead, he decided to come to meet me.

Lucas, the one true Hero, had been dispatched to deal with the magical beasts, so there was no way the campaign would fail.

What if the campaign was just a delay tactic, and his real plan was to try to get his hands on me? That would make sense.

He could use me as a hostage to threaten Lucas or perhaps even force his half-brother, the crown prince Islan, off the throne. But we were not in Majaar. We were in Bern.

I had my own bodyguards. I had a Promise Mark and a sacred vow to protect me. Regardless of whether he planned to attack or seduce me, it would be a feat to even touch me. Surely, he knew the chances of success were slim to none.

"Still, why would the third prince decide to come to Bern in the first place?"

I understood it up to that point, but did he really have to make me go into detail and embarrass me like that? It was so mean.

I glared at Dirk, who grinned widely at me, prompting goosebumps to rise up on my flesh.

I just know he's going to say something nasty…

"Exactly. Even though I understand all that, I still can't figure out what his goal is. I was chatting around here and there and I couldn't help but say I thought it was a shame for the newlyweds to be apart for so long. Anyway, that's why they asked me to come be your escort today. Our dear princess seems to be quite popular."

He's the one who orchestrated this whole thing!

Even though I wanted to understand why, there was no reason for him to act all cute, putting his finger on his lips! Dirk was using me as bait once again.

Fine, if that's how it is, then I won't hold back, either.

"My dear, *capable* brother-in-law…" I said with a demure smile. I'd never called him that before, and I saw the color drain from Dirk's face for the first time.

"Y-yes, what is it, sister-in-law?"

"You know, there's something Prince Lucas said to me since the Fenrir incident." I stood up, expecting him to understand immediately.

"A-are you talking about the person who came to see me? Honestly, I was ready to kill the emissary before they even arrived! But I thought maybe my cute sister-in-law could handle it for me…"

Lucas *had* scolded Dirk about the Fenrir incident, too. Fear flickered briefly across his face as he remembered what happened. How badly had Lucas threatened him? Yet despite it all, he was using me again for bait with the third prince, and the hell he'd wrought in his fury was now left for someone else to deal with.

There was no reason for me to hold back anymore. I passed by Dirk, who was bathed in a cold sweat. I turned once I reached the door and gave him a charming smile. "'Any man who comes to visit you while I'm away is scum. Don't bother with them.'"

"Huh?"

"Prince Lucas said that, so I'll have to try my best to make sure you'll have less trouble since I'm your sister-in-law."

"!!!"

"Well, take care!"

Then I remembered one more thing I wanted to say. "There's no need to do anything special for you or the envoy. And once Lucas finds out about this, there'll be no saving you," I told him before I closed the door.

"Argh, I need to write my will before Lukie comes back…" Dirk yelled, sounding oddly gleeful at the thought of seeing Lucas again.

His voice irked me, and I turned toward my capable maids.

"Anna, can you handle this for me?"

"I'll get in touch with Finn as soon as possible."

Finn would definitely be with Lucas and Anna would be able to confirm tomorrow's schedule.

"Thank you." I nodded to her, then shifted my gaze to Kate, who was casting a defensive barrier spell on the door. "Kate, make sure Lord Dirk isn't late for the audience."

"I'll use the binding spell that I honed against Lord Barnabash!"

Dirk must've come to escort me today because the Majaars were spreading rumors about me being a villainess, and he'd wanted to see how they'd react with someone who looked so much like Lucas at my side.

I wasn't planning to stand next to anyone but Lucas. If Dirk wanted to make some grand entrance, he could do it alone later. It was important to distribute the risk, after all.

That said, it was very convenient that Kate knew binding magic as a means of restraint. I thought it would be nice to be able to use it myself someday, and I called out to Elsa as she perched on the window frame.

"Wait, Elsa. How many people did Lord Dirk bring with him?"

This was Dirk we were talking about, after all. I was sure he'd instructed the living swords, the Lebensklinge, around the throne room and, at the same time, assigned someone to guard me.

"You're clever as always, Princess Cecilia! I heard he brought twelve elite guards as backup!"

"Anna, can I borrow three of them??"

Please advise me, capable maid, I thought as I faced her, only to feel awkward when I caught her giving Kate and Elsa smug looks.

"Heh heh, as expected, I'm the best. The basic arrangement is three per group and nine in total, with a reserve team. Let's assign three fast tracking experts to Elsa. As long as they return before the audience is over it, it shouldn't be a problem," she said.

"I see. Then Kate, can you tell Lord Dirk that I'll borrow three?" I asked.

It would be a problem if something unexpected happened, and I was short-handed. I needed to confirm this with the future head of the royal shield, though.

Of course, I'll let my maids do the negotiating.

"Yay, Lady Cecilia relies on me, too! All right. You heard what she said, Lord Dirk."

Did…Kate just share our conversation with Lord Dirk, who was still locked in the other room?

I was strangely impressed by how efficient House Herbst was with their reports.

Just as I was marveling at this, a panicked voice came from the door. "Understood. But who cast defensive barriers? I can't get it undone!"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Hee hee. Shall we go? Your goal is to question the guild mercenaries and find out the location where the unidentified magical beast corpse was found on Bern's side of the border forest. Even though Lord Barnabash's mark makes it less likely that you'll be attacked, if you feel it's dangerous, you should turn back right away," I said, glancing at the mark on Elsa's left hand. It resembled the Promise Mark.

It wasn't a Promise Mark, but a symbol that seemed to make whoever touched Elsa smell the scent of Lord Barnabash. I thought

back to the first time we noticed it.

"Hee hee, I'll chase down any magical beast who touches my Elsa to the ends of hell and tear off its limbs!"

Apparently, it was a sort of tracing spell to locate any offenders who may harm her. The thought of Lord Barnabash laughing so ominously was terrifying. The life of a dragon's companion probably wasn't very easy.

Still, having the scent of the strongest magical beast of all, the black dragon, surely made things a lot safer.

Recently, as I had been talking things over with Anna and the others, Lucas had overheard and asked, "That sounds good. How do you do it?" The room fell silent.

And in the midst of the silence, Lord Barnabash had been a hero.

"Didn't you already carve a Promise Mark or something on your partner? Are you seriously thinking about going as far as taking precautions against magical beasts' romances? Magical beasts are basically always hostile to humans, you know. Even the old man and Sigelinde were trying to kill each other at first. You're not dealing with beastmen here, but your possessiveness is getting really gross. Ow, ow, ow! Stop it! Let go! You'll break my horns and my neck while you're at it!"

I couldn't believe he said that the Hero of Bern, our national treasure, was gross.

"I see. I thought it might be something similar to a Promise Mark, but it's just a written emblem placed on the skin with mana. You'll need to make it more intricate to ensure it stays there," Lucas had said.

"Argh, my horns are cracked, damn it! That's some impressive strength you've got there! Eek! I get it, it's because of love, right? I know, I know! So don't just erase that deeply meaningful mark I've placed on my sweet Elsa!"

After that incredibly scary and embarrassing conversation, I'd fled into my bedroom, trying to avoid the warm gazes from Finn and the maids. And, of course, that night, I made sure to place the pillow right in the middle of the bed.

By the way, Barnabash said, "We're not dealing with beastmen here." Does that mean the beastmen, who were now extinct, wouldn't be affected by the Promise Marks that were made according to human logic?

I was protected by two spells from Lucas. One for desires, a Promise Mark, and the other, defensive magic which protected me against attacks.

But if a beastman without hostile intent were to attack me, would neither of those spells activate?

The question made me feel uneasy.

"I seriously just want this to disappear. That damn Barnabash is extraordinarily creepy," Elsa muttered, bringing me back to reality. She

scowled as she tried to rub off the dragon's symbol on her hand with her sharp nails. I hurried to stop her.

"Elsa, please don't hurt yourself like that. Besides, that mark will protect you in the border forest, so I need you to hang in there," I pleaded.

"All right…"

Her reluctance was so obvious. *It's true that having a mark placed on you without genuine feelings attached might be unpleasant.*

I gently clasped her hand and cast a healing spell. "And don't ever cross the border into Majaar, even if something's on the other side. Promise me."

"I'll definitely promise you that, Princess Cecilia!"

I felt a wave of relief as Elsa bowed toward me excitedly, still standing on the windowsill.

"Just be careful and take care," I called out at the exact moment as Anna shoved Elsa and—wait, she *shoved* her?!

"E-Elsa!!"

She fell headfirst!

"Go on, stupid cat. Come back once you remember how to respond properly," Anna snapped.

"I'm a capable cat! Off I go!" Elsa retorted as she adjusted her position in mid-air.

Cats were incredible.

Something about the way Anna said, "Go on," felt a little off, but perhaps it was my imagination.

"Anna, that…"

"Let's go, Princess Cecilia," she interrupted.

Argh, I can't scold her when she looks so cheerful about being the first-in-command. She's so intimidating!

Kate, on the other hand, looked proud to be second-in-command. She was very skilled at asserting herself when Elsa wasn't around…

"Very well, let's go, then," I said, resolving to rely on all three of them equally in the future.

The chandelier sparkled in the sunlight, casting a gentle, bright light across the throne room.

The king beckoned me forward, so I took two steps from my father and smiled at the envoys.

"This is the daughter of Prime Minister Cline and the second princess of Lucas, Cecilia. She's overseen the welcoming feast and made it absolutely splendid. I hope you'll enjoy tomorrow's festivities."

The king's booming introduction made me tilt my head in confusion.

Why did he introduce me as the daughter of the prime minister first and as the princess second??

The king kept glancing over at Father, and I couldn't help but wonder if he'd said something while Lucas wasn't around… Not to

mention, he made it clear he's not involved and shouldn't be expected to do anything.

The king was enjoying his retirement but had been dragged out of it to take Lucas's place. No wonder he was in a foul mood.

He'd been carrying the weight of the crown for decades. I just wished he'd stop glancing at his watch like he was eager to clock out for the day.

I took a deep breath, feeling the piercing critical stares, and placed my hand over my chest before curtseying. Once I felt focused, I delivered my speech.

"I welcome the young leaders who are a shining beacon to the kingdom of Majaar to Bern from the bottom of my heart."

As I raised my eyes, I heard a familiar voice respond.

"Long time no see, Lady Cecilia."

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Prince Akeem." I stood up straight and plastered a smile on my face as I turned toward him.

He had bright, copper-colored hair and sun-kissed, deeply tanned skin. He wore a long white coat. It was adorned with metal accessories and intricate embroidery, which brought out the color of his skin.

He was Akeem Asad-Jabeel, the third prince of Majaar, known for the striking good looks he'd inherited from his mother. She was a captivatingly beautiful princess from the Canaan tribe, and the king of Majaar doted on her.

I'd met Prince Akeem once before when I was still engaged to Felix.

He greeted me with a familiar smile. "I see your olive-colored eyes are as delicious as ever. You're still quite the fairy princess, young lady."

"Delicious"? Normally that would be rude to say to a princess of an allied nation. Yep, the general of the gigolo army has definitely come to seduce the villainess Cecilia.

Considering Akeem's mother hailed from Canaan, which was famous for its olives, I suppose I couldn't exactly complain. He was very clever, using compliments I couldn't easily object to.

I returned his smile before speaking. "Why, thank you. But I am married now and have become the second princess, so I must politely decline such compliments, Al-Mabus."

He may think I'm beneath him, but calling me "young lady" was also against the rules.

"If you wish to be treated as the envoy Al-Mabus, you'll need to try again," I said sharply.

Akeem blinked in surprise.

When we'd met before, I was engaged to Felix and had simply stood quietly beside him. That image of me must've stuck with him. But I was a "villainess" back then, too.

Well, actually, my role as a villainess only truly began after I was engaged to Lucas. But I felt like a rather inconspicuous villainess, seeing how overwhelmingly naughty Lucas was.

Thanks to him, I was a far more capable person now.

Don't mistake me for the fairy princess you once thought I was.

I wanted the joy back that I felt as a child when I didn't realize the mocking intent behind that nickname. Back then, I just thought it was cute.

Prince Akeem seemed very confident with his own looks, but unfortunately for him, my husband was one of the most handsome men on the continent, if not *the* most handsome.

Of course, I thought Canaanites, with their sun-kissed appearance, possessed a vibrant kind of beauty that was undeniably striking. But I was subjected to an otherworldly gorgeous face every day—so intensely beautiful it seemed to gnaw at my insides. I could only muster a "So handsome!" and leave it at that.

Just a little while ago, I was facing a mirror image of that very face in a heated exchange, so I couldn't help but think of beauty as something frightening right now.

As for the weapon you proudly wield, it's honestly not all that impressive compared to the royal family of Bern.

I observed how Prince Akeem stared beyond my shoulder with an expression of clear disbelief.

"Could it be…? What is Lucas Herbst doing here?" he blurted out.

Dirk, who'd been chatting with Father, turned toward him.

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Highness, after you've come all this way. I am Dirk Herbst, the older brother of Lucas. He's away on

an important errand, but I'm truly grateful that you've come all this way, Prince Akeem."

As I expected, he opened with a sarcastic remark. And he repeated "all this way" twice.

When did he even come in? His timing was impeccable.

And he had headed straight to Father, the prime minister, immediately after arriving.

Father's expression became grave after he spoke to Dirk.

Nothing happened to Lucas, did it?

I tried to calm myself by touching the ring, and I was surprised when Dirk unexpectedly stepped in front of me as if to shield me.

I thought he was going to shake hands with Prince Akeem, but then he pressed his lips against the back of the prince's hand!

"As I've heard, you are truly beautiful, Your Highness."

"Pardon me, but I'm not into that sort of thing!"

Is Dirk flirting *with the prince?!*

Am I just in the way?

Prince Akeem swatted away Dirk's hand. I took a few steps back toward Father. He lightly patted my back, still wearing a stern expression, and I felt my heart grow lighter.

The way he worried about me was so similar to Lucas. Perhaps it was because the two of them are so alike. I suppressed a laugh. Prince Akeem, who was still completely repelled by Dirk, sneered.

"Lord Dirk, while I may have teased your sister-in-law, that was simply too much! I didn't expect this kind of jest to be aimed at me!"

Uh-oh, he's really angry. Well, I can't blame him. Dirk's jokes are always so forced they feel completely humorless. And they're honestly kind of creepy!

But Prince Akeem was guilty of crossing the line with cruel jokes, too.

Don't you dare act like you're so high and mighty!

I wanted to voice my thoughts, but then I remembered I had to behave like the second princess of Bern, and like Lucas's wife.

"Oh, Prince Akeem. Although you may have been joking, *I'm* not the person to joke about such things. I'm not the type to lead anyone on. Plus, Bern has its own customs, which are different from those of Majaar. Since you've come *all this way*, the least you can do is enjoy yourself."

Um, wow. Dirk is relentless.

Not only did he imply that he shouldn't flirt with women as a joke, but he also made it clear that the Majaarian way of things wouldn't work in Bern. Then, he implied if Prince Akeem needed a man, Dirk would be happy to provide one!

He was really shining like a star today.

I never realized how much power sarcasm had. It was draining the confidence right out of Prince Akeem's face.

I don't think I'll ever be able to pull off that level of sarcasm, nor do I want to! Honestly, if that kind of derision had been directed at

me earlier, I might be lying on the floor, totally unconscious.

But why was Dirk being so aggressive? Had something really happened to Lucas?

Prince Akeem had a sharp glare on his face now. As I quietly observed him and Dirk, who stood looking poised as ever, Father whispered in my ear.

"Stay calm, Cecilia. Do not let your emotions show on your face. You're about to hear some bad news."

My skin prickled beneath my dress.

"All right." Although my throat felt tight, I managed to respond and focused on keeping my pulse steady, trying not to break out into a cold sweat by concentrating on my ring.

"Ha ha. Ah, I see. You wouldn't lead anyone on? Perhaps that spirit of things makes sense, considering your kingdom is so respected for their knights. Or perhaps it's because you're siblings? It's truly admirable how you stay loyal to just *one* person." Prince Akeem briefly glanced at me when he said "just one person," implying a reference to Lucas. I fought to maintain my poker face and then forced a smile.

"Oh? That's an odd way to put it. We've received no reports of Lucas doing anything other than his mission."

Prince Akeem's lips curved into a faint smile in response to Dirk. Something about his smug smile made me inwardly irritated, but I put all my effort into returning a polite smile. Then he beamed brightly.

"I've only met him a few times, but there aren't many men like Lucas Theoderic Herbst. His lineage and title—and his strength and

his appearance make him the ideal man. Princess, I'm sure he gives you whatever your heart desires. You must be the happiest woman on the continent to be loved so completely by such a man." Prince Akeem's eyes shone with envy as he averted his gaze, and a shiver ran down my spine.



"Yes, I am very happy."

Whatever my heart desires…

Prince Akeem held his king's favor, yet he still fell short of the first prince when it came to strength. The crown prince was close to his own age and backed by most of the tribal leaders in the Majaarian kingdom. No matter how hard the king tried, Prince Akeem couldn't secure the crown.

There was nothing strange about him wanting Lucas's backing, since he was the continent's strongest knight.

It was probably true that the crown prince had invited Prince Leon and Lucas to the royal palace to entertain them, and in part, Akeem had likely come as a special envoy to gain something in return.

He was also probably probing into Lucas's amnesia, and from there he must've deduced the conditions needed to turn him into a Hero and thought by winning me over, he could gain Lucas as well.

If he could secure the backing of the Hero, who possessed a power even greater than the king of Bern, he might be reconsidered for the position of crown prince.

Akeem wasn't a fool. There was no way he genuinely believed he could simply seduce me in such an obvious way. I didn't understand where this conversation was going and tried to think things through. But then Akeem let out a heavy sigh, his copper-colored hair flickering like flames.

"Ha ha. I suppose so. I hear you're irreplaceable to Prince Lucas, aren't you? And it's truly a difficult topic to bring up to his wife,

but it seems that my brother, in his thoughtfulness, feels that Prince Lucas should be soothed from the exhaustion of his campaign."

The words were very unpleasant to my ears, and a terrible thought crossed my mind, which made my chest feel tight.

"Soothed…?"

"That is an awfully considerate thing to provide for my brother since he's a *newlywed*."

Dirk spoke up, clearly not wanting this conversation between me and Akeem to continue, and to smooth over the question I'd blurted out, but Akeem was like a fish hooked on bait and turned his attention to me.

"Well, it seems this was quite a shocking matter for a lady who truly cares for Prince Lucas." He spread his arms wide, wearing an apologetic look on his face. Basically, he was saying I didn't love Lucas but simply *cared* for him. I gritted my teeth to hold back my anger. But then, I widened my eyes, feigning shock, only for someone else to speak up before I could.

"Prince Lucas is a truly magnificent knight, so it's only natural for people to adore him." It was a voice from the group of well-dressed men in the envoy, joining in with Prince Akeem's sarcastic remark.

I let out a little sigh. "Yes, my husband *is* truly a wonderful person."

His skills surpassed those of any other knight, and it really did overwhelm me. Some days, it even left me at my wits' end…

The envoys from Majaar must have gathered information on him before leaving. They had to be well aware that they could never handle him in combat.

You didn't target Lucas, but me instead—you chose someone far weaker to manipulate, right?

I cast a critical glare toward Prince Akeem, and his expression suddenly faltered. But his smile quickly recovered, although his eyes were ice cold. That immediately confirmed my suspicions—he wasn't after Lucas at all.

Then, a chilling fear gripped me.

Most people would simply lament and give up if they couldn't obtain something, but rarely—*very* rarely—someone would think, "If I can't have it, I'll destroy it so no one else can, either."

But if the crown prince and Lucas had become friends during his time in Majaar—although it was hard to imagine Lucas becoming close with anyone in a kingdom he had no interest in—then Prince Akeem's chances of becoming the crown prince would be lost forever.

In that case…

"A knight who defeated a black dragon in half a day wouldn't feel exhausted from campaigns against ordinary magical beasts—not even a divine beast. Unless, of course, he was forced into battle constantly with no rest. That would certainly wear him down."

And before that happens, you're planning on doing something to Lucas so you can aggressively negotiate with me?

The conclusion froze me with fear and made my heart ache.

The suffering of Eckesachs, which was written in the old tome, flashed through my mind, and suddenly I felt suffocated, my temples throbbing.

It's fine. It's going to be fine. After all, he's the strongest knight. He's the Hero.

But that reasoning was hardly enough to calm me down. In fact, the contradictions in my own words made me feel frustrated, but I couldn't help but let my anger seep into the glare I shot at Prince Akeem.

Father gently patted my waist again, bringing me back to reality.

You can't let him shake you. They're trying to make you slip up, so you have to remain calm. I touched the cold ring on my finger and tried to maintain my composure, but Prince Akeem's mocking laugh threatened to destroy it.

"Ha ha. Yes, that's right." His smile reeked of dark desire, far from one of happiness, sending a chill down my spine.

I gritted my teeth and forced a smile, just for the prince—who was more like a demon in the shape of a prince—to cut at me with words sharper than any blade.

"I used certain channels to obtain information about the cost of absorbing sacred artifacts into one's body. Apparently, such power comes with a restriction that requires constant healing. And considering he can control dragons, it's natural that a creature so far from human would need such a restraint. But it seems that after returning from the campaign, Prince Lucas collapsed. Lord Dirk, I

assume your delay was due to the message you received from our kingdom?”

“Wh-what?”

Lucas collapsed?!

The shocking news made my vision waver. I wanted to hear that it was a lie, so I turned to Lord Dirk. He just glanced at me and sighed. “You really have a cruel way of putting things, Prince Akeem.”

“What? I thought it was only fair to tell the lady so she wouldn’t have to welcome us in the dark.”

“…!”

The blatant confirmation was far from what I’d hoped to hear, and it pierced my heart like a dagger. I barely held back a scream of disbelief, but my lips trembled as the blood drained from my face.

How did a prince of Majaar, who didn’t even possess a sacred artifact, know about information that was so similar to the tome in the royal library?

I knew that there was a sacred artifact in the Egrich Empire, but no one there could use it. Even if they had a similar book, no one should know this kind of information. Once I realized that, I clenched my fists against my dress.

But none of that mattered for now.

What mattered was that this infuriating man with a sneer on his face—this monster—knew something had happened to Lucas, my Hero.

"You know what will happen if he isn't healed, don't you?" I asked him hoarsely, his copper hair swaying like a flame.

"Ha! Ha ha! I'm surprised! It seems the princess truly loves her hero, after all! I would have been ready to help if the information I brought had made you tremble, but I see no proposal was needed. I'm glad I got that confirmation," the prince boasted smugly, and I desperately suppressed the impulse to question him, focusing on my thoughts.

The so-called "proper" approach was just a façade. As Lord Dirk predicted, the target here was me. More precisely, to do something *to* me, and then they would plan to dispose of Lucas.

I shouldn't fall for the provocation, knowing their motive. I shouldn't sit at a negotiation table and do what this man wanted me to do.

But what if I refused and Bern lost its Hero as a result? If something happened to Lucas, the treasured sword would also be lost, and if we were unable to defeat the magical beasts that threatened our kingdom, Bern would collapse, and its people would die.

I knew that was why Lord Dirk and Father were struggling to find a response.

In that case, it was clear that I had the authority to make the decision, and I could risk my life for Lucas.

"Did you receive that information from the Egrich Empire? I hear you are acquainted with someone who holds a sacred artifact, but it seems you haven't thought about what happens to someone when

they learn the knowledge about these artifacts but aren't recognized by one. Is that why there's been an increase of magical beasts in Majaar?"

"Are you saying the increase is because I learned the truth about the sacred artifacts? That's impossible."

I thought about the Egrich Empire and the person who possessed a sacred artifact. The cost of acquiring such knowledge and the rise in magical beasts. All those points connected in my mind, and based on his flustered reaction, my suspicions were confirmed.

Prince Akeem was certainly connected to the Egrich Empire, but he hadn't been taught anything more than what he'd just mentioned about the Hero. But he was definitely connected to the missing mercenaries.

That was why, despite me showing concern about his newly gained knowledge, he confidently denied it and said my theory was impossible.

In that case, I could use my advantage of being the Hero's wife and extract an answer. After all, I couldn't bear the thought of my beloved's life being in the hands of such a cowardly man.

"Impossible, you say? Then, it seems you know nothing about how truly great my husband is."

Lucas lost his memory because he absorbed a sacred artifact into his body. How could Prince Akeem be so sure there wouldn't be any impact on others? When I called Prince Akeem on that, he hesitated for a moment.

"I do know. More than you do." His eyes were cold, and he made it clear I had no choice but to take a seat. I took a deep breath.

He wanted to talk to me now that he'd seen how I reacted to the news about Lucas, but I could tell he was also interested in learning about the influence of sacred artifacts.

However, right now, I needed to confirm the most important thing. I turned to Lord Dirk.

"Lord Dirk, did you hear it directly from my husband?" I gently caressed the ring on my left hand. Dirk's eyes narrowed slightly as though he was impressed with me.

"No, it wasn't a message from Lucas or the kingdom of Bern. It was from a knight of Majaar, saying Prince Leon asked him to contact us. Are you all right?" He gave me a subtle look as if to say, "That's all it was," before I smiled at him and touched the ring again.

Then I turned to Prince Akeem, who was watching me closely and gave him the sweetest smile I could muster before bowing gracefully.

"I welcome you to tomorrow's banquet. The flowers in the garden are in full bloom this time of year, so we will open the terrace. Al-Mabus, I would be honored to hear what you have to say about my beloved husband."

I would sit down with him, but I wouldn't let him have his way.

I was determined to get the answers I needed and find out exactly what he had done.

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The lamps, trimmed in brass and inset with colorful glass, cast dreamy reflections onto the decorative water jars.

I was with Leon at the banquet, welcoming us to Majaar. The venue had a completely different atmosphere from Bern, and I thought Cece would be delighted by the décor.

Just then, Leon called out to me. "Lucas, I introduced you before, but let me officially acquaint you two again. This is my fiancée, Princess Shireen. Shireen, this is Lucas, the pride of our nation and our current Hero. He's going to be your brother-in-law, so I hope you two get along."

Shireen had dark brown wavy hair tied up neatly, and her eyes were a clear blue like the sky I saw when I rode on Barnabash's back. She nodded happily to Leon before turning to face me. She wore a beautifully tailored dress from Bern, most likely a gift from Leon, and stood with perfect posture, a result of years of royal education.

There was no unpleasantness in her blue eyes as she looked at me, unlike the other nobles I'd been speaking with. There was even a hint of affection, perhaps because she'd just been introduced as my future sister-in-law.

Cece had been exchanging letters with her, and she was right—it seemed like Shireen was very in love with Leon. There was an earnestness about her that I didn't see anywhere else amidst the power struggles of the Majaarian royal family.

Cece was looking forward to her marrying into Bern's royal family, so I took a step forward and placed my hand across my chest, making sure I greeted her properly as Cece would want me to do.

"I am Lucas Theoderic Herbst. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Sister-in-law."

She gasped in admiration at my knightly bow. "Oh my! Princess Cecilia told me all about you in her letters, but you're even more impressive than I imagined! The Majaarian attire you wear suits you perfectly, with that dark hair of yours. You look just like a bandit king straight out of a fairytale! I can understand why Prince Leon would be worried about you being a source of envy for others."

Bandit King? She must mean a noble villain, one who only punishes people for their misdeeds.

She was properly trained to be a queen, so she would know what my real duties were, being from House Herbst. There was no way she didn't know about the killings I'd been involved in. *Oh, I see. She's already been told what my role will be to the royal family.*

There was another reason why I agreed to take on Majaar's request to slay magical beasts, apart from pushing their marriage forward. The kingdom of Majaar bordered the Holy Egrich Empire.

Egrich, like Bern, worshipped the goddess as their main deity, but they were infamous for their intense discrimination against those who followed other gods.

Majaar, on the other hand, was a kingdom that united many tribes scattered across its vast desert, and they'd become the Egrich Empire's sworn enemy.

The marriage alliance between Bern and Majaar was likely to ease Egrich's harsh stance against Majaar. While Bern worshiped the goddess as its primary deity since we possessed a sacred artifact,

along with our proximity to the depths of the border forest, its faith was more strongly directed toward the Heroes who wielded the artifacts.

That was why Bern focused its efforts on slaying magical beasts and signed peace treaties with neighboring countries that didn't possess artifacts, even though it was adjacent to the border forest. The agreement was simple: Bern would deal with the magical beasts that emerged from the depths—beasts that were otherwise nearly impossible to defeat, under the condition that those other nations didn't invade.

This marriage between Leon and Princess Shireen was part of that political strategy.

Majaar had been spared from invasion by Egrich thanks to the surrounding desert, but the frequent border disputes had been a persistent problem.

It was during one of those disputes that the third prince, Prince Akeem, son of the king of Majaar, made several visits to its territory of Canaan and offered a business deal to the tribal chiefs there.

The details of the deal weren't anything significant.

He traded for some silk, textiles, precious metals, and magical tools—nothing too special, but they were sold at a rather high price. That should've been the end of it.

But then something unexpected happened—carriages bearing more goods than the deal had indicated were brought into Akeem's territory—And Akeem was in conflict with the first prince, Islan, who was vying for the throne.

Bern was keeping a close eye on the power struggle for the throne in Majaar, especially since Princess Shireen, the first prince's sister, would become our crown princess.

For this reason, the spies working for House Herbst were curious about what was being transported and contacted Dirk. At the same time, reports had come in from the guild that no one had returned from their mission to Majaar and Egrich. I was tasked with visiting Canaan, disguised as the mercenary Lukie to investigate.

In kingdoms like Bern, there was no need to involve the entire nation in hunting magical beasts; instead, they hired mercenaries specializing in such tasks.

Likewise, it wasn't usual for mercenaries to go. They were lucky if their body was found, but most of them disappeared without a trace.

But in this case, it was odd that mercenaries who had entry records for both countries went missing on a relatively simple campaign.

"It's too many people. There's no way that many deaths could happen in Canaan. There are much fewer beasts there, thanks to Bern."

When Dirk had come to bring me reports, he agreed with me.

"That's right. Something's definitely not right here. Some kind of good is being transported from Egrich. There's no doubt the third prince is up to something shady. After all, when the princess was

attacked by the Fenrir, the Fenrir itself said that the Egrich Empire had been attempting to capture it."

Dirk deliberately brought up an unpleasant topic and sighed dramatically as he looked at me. I thought he was trying to be annoying, but I asked him just in case.

"You think they might be bringing in magical beasts? Canaan is known for having beastfolk living there at one time. Should we investigate?"

"Now that you mention it, isn't the third prince famous for being descended from a beastfolk family? Seems like he's up to no good, so I'd rather not ask the newlyweds to handle it. I'll leave the decision to you, Prince Leon," Dirk said.

"Dirk, damn you… Lucas, can you take care of this?" Leon groaned.

"Under certain conditions," I replied.

"Arrrgh… You two certainly are brothers. Every time your conditions are so ridiculous, I don't even want to hear them."

I used the black dragon Barnabash as transport during my duties, and after traveling between Canaan and Bern a few times, I discovered that what had been transported was the frozen carcass of a magical beast, a vánagandr. The blood from the beast was being used in experiments to turn people into beastmen.

Missing mercenaries and beastmen made from vánagandr blood, eh?

Leaving something like that unchecked would no doubt cause harm to the people of Bern as well.

As expected, the third prince and his faction, who lacked the necessary knowledge or strength, had begun releasing the failed experiments in the desert. And for some reason, some of them reached the border forests, perhaps because their mercenary instincts had been so deeply ingrained in them.

When a report came in about the remains of unknown magical beasts, Leon had sensed the danger. He accepted a request from Majaar to team up with the first prince, who wanted to claim the throne.

If the third prince's inhumane actions came to light, Majaar would be condemned by other nations. Egrich would most certainly use it as an excuse for war and attack Majaar.

And since Bern would have the crown princess from Majaar, we'd face criticism and, at worst, be dragged into the war as well.

My goal was to handle the situation without casualties while securing evidence of the beastmen in order to prevent a war.

That was why the princess referred to me as a "good" villain.

Naturally, such tasks were easier when there were people within the government who cooperated, and Princess Shireen must be one of them.

I glanced over at Leon, who nodded slightly. Princess Shireen gave me a soft smile.

It made sense for her to support her brother's claim to the throne in order to protect her position as the future queen of Bern. But it was clear to me that she wasn't doing so to support her brother but rather to side with Leon himself.

According to Cece, the princess wasn't fond of the polygamist culture in Majaar. That's why she was looking forward to being married in Bern, where monogamy was the norm.

It seemed like her brother Islan had a harem full of women, and it didn't appear that they were very close.

Still, the fact that she used the term "Bandit King" as a way to tell me she was on our side proved that she was very clever. I was quite impressed with her. Meanwhile, Leon had a troubled look on his face.

"Shireen, I did ask the other royal women not to speak to Lucas out of respect for his wife. So please don't say anything that could lead to a misunderstanding."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You two seem to be so close that I just got a little jealous. And as for the princesses, I can handle that with my power, but I'm no match for my brother." She glanced briefly over at the first prince, Islan, who was talking to some other nobles nearby. I sighed inwardly, realizing he was probably the one sending women to me.

"He's on our side. He's thinking about his own position, after all." Leon seemed a bit uncomfortable about working with the first prince, and I shrugged in response.

"I'll let you handle it."

People who spoke like that were untrustworthy, and conversations with them were usually a pain. I made it clear I wouldn't be siding with them, and Leon heaved a sigh.

"You only act like a good brother when it's convenient for you. He is a bit troublesome, so I figured you two wouldn't get along. I'll try to intervene as much as possible, but please be patient."

I've tried being patient.

"Stop looking at me like that. I already said I'm grateful for your help, so knock it off," Leon replied with a glare.

Before I could respond, Princess Shireen lightly patted his arm.

"Prince Lucas and Princess Cecilia have helped us a great deal to arrange our marriage. I was anxious, but everything seems to be going smoothly now. I'm very relieved. Thank you so much. I'll do my best to support the royal family of Bern from now on, so please take good care of me."

I let out a quiet chuckle as she told me she'd do her best to be of help to Cece, then placed my hand over my chest and bowed again. "My wife is looking forward to seeing you, Your Highness. I'll make sure to escort you safely to Bern, so please don't worry."

It seemed like they would have a good relationship, so this made my trip to Majaar worthwhile.

I really wanted to go home, though.

I hid those thoughts behind a smile but then noticed Princess Shireen gently placing a hand on her cheek, giving me a troubled

look.

"You're really wonderful… This is so difficult…"

She tipped her head to the side. The first prince had noticed the conversation was stalled and came over to us. "Shireen, cheating isn't good."

He came over, bringing a woman along with him. The princess let out a sharp sigh, her gaze icy.

"As if you're one to talk."

"Hey, this is one of my wives, so it's not cheating. I've given her the honor of entering the harem. But there's no such culture of polygamy in Bern, is there? You should watch how you speak. It troubles me. You should be careful not to be cast aside," he said casually, causing Princess Shireen's temple to twitch.

Leon seemed flustered and quickly interjected. "Islan, I came here because I need to take Shireen back with me. I'm the one who has to work harder so she won't cast me aside! By the way, let me properly introduce my brother. This is the second prince, Lucas."

Leon probably didn't want to deal with a spat between siblings. *Still, don't drag me into this. And when is he going to work hard?*

I reluctantly bowed to the prince, who held out his hand without hesitation.

"Are you cousins? You don't look enough alike to be true brothers. You've got such a beautiful face. It's almost a waste on a man. It's hard to believe you're the Hero."

I felt his hand touch my jaw, and he said something quite rude. I could hear the Majaarians around us laugh quietly.

It felt as though they were mocking the kingdom of Bern, and my guards began to tense up when the atmosphere turned sharp.

The first prince had played along with Leon's words well.

Leon was trying to take a humble stance, considering he'd come to ask for the princess's hand, but there was no reason for us to be treated like this.

Even if I were to confront him and demand an explanation, the prince would just make excuses and say it was a compliment.

I see he's the type of person who's annoying to deal with because he doesn't look like he has bad intentions when, deep down, he does.

Well, I don't care what they think of me. But Finn is lurking around here somewhere, and he might make a move. I think I should at least reject his hand on my face.

But suddenly, I was saved by an unexpected figure.

"Hey, where's my crappy master? I'm starving! Can I go hunting in the desert for a—Hey, what are you doing?!"

Barnabash suddenly flew in through the window and flicked Islan's arm with his fingers, almost like he was flicking him playfully in the forehead.

"Who's this guy with the weak face? I'm talking to him first, so you can wait!"

Despite just using his fingers, this was a dragon we were talking about, so it packed a lot more punch.

Islan was sent flying back with a loud *thwack* and landed on his arm. His face twisted in pain as he yelled out, "Wh-who are you?!"

He probably broke a bone, but he didn't scream. I had to give him credit for that. But acting tough was meaningless against a dragon.

"I think there's something big out there! Sandworms don't *look* good, but they're really juicy when you roast 'em up," he said to me.

"I see…"

He ignored Islan's question entirely. I sighed as I reached out to try to silence Barnabash, who was excitedly chattering away about food.

The Majaarian guards were naturally getting riled up since their prince had been injured. If they drew their swords at Barnabash, they would inevitably have to face me and Leon as well. Even our guards began to grasp their swords.

A tense, potentially deadly atmosphere at a banquet meant to welcome us and celebrate the union of our two kingdoms was bad news. And it would be very embarrassing if Cecilia found out. I grabbed Barnabash's face and tried to calm things down.

"I know it's impossible to teach you common sense, but you can at least greet everyone."

"All you have to do is sear the outside and—Ow, what are you doing?! *You're* the one with no common sense! You'll crush my face

with that stupid strength of yours!”

He was so damned loud.

“How about I crush your core instead of your face?”

“All I have to do is greet them, right?! Fine! Hello everyone! I am Barnabash, the black dragon!”

I pulled my hand away from his face and turned to Islan, healing him.

“I’m sorry. This is the dragon I’ve tamed, but he doesn’t understand manners yet. Please forgive him.”

“I wasn’t even rough with him! I handled him like I would an ant! Why are you so offended? Ouch! Your fingers are digging in! Stop grabbing my core, it hurts!”

“Shut up.”

Things were about to get complicated, but I didn’t care.

“Well, it hurts! You can’t even talk like a normal person when your mate’s not around! Honestly, I’m a dragon, you know! First you tell me to say hello, then you tell me to shut up. You’re the one with no common sense!”

Barnabash crouched at my feet as he muttered to himself while Islan looked at him in astonishment.

“A dragon, you say?”

I reached out to him, and he stared at my hand, pale-faced. It was only natural he’d be afraid after he saw me silence a black dragon with my bare hands. I pulled away and moved to a different spot with Leon.

"Stand up, Islan."

"Hey, he…he looks totally human! Can I communicate with it?"

I couldn't help but notice Islan's strange excitement as he took a step forward, ready to talk to Barnabash.

He's probably worried about how useful he can be compared to beastmen blood… But didn't he just forget how easily a dragon hurt him?

"Hah. Islan, it's true that divine beasts can communicate and take on human forms, unlike magical beasts. I think that's just a characteristic of theirs. I think the reason some magical beasts don't take human forms is that their instincts as hunters are too strong. They see humans as prey, so they stick to their original forms."

"But…"

"Also, Lord Barnabash here is a black dragon. He's on a different level compared to Fenrirs, even among divine beasts. Don't mistake the two," Leon said.

"You may not know this, since you returned to your harem right after our initial audience, but when Prince Lucas introduced me to the black dragon, I had the honor of greeting him in his true form. He even promised to let me ride him in Bern. That black dragon is the strongest monster in the world, and now you've had the privilege of meeting the one who commands him. Show some respect as a prince of Majaar," Princess Shireen said, prompting a sigh from Leon.

Islan continued to stare at Barnabash.

Well, considering that Barnabash was hiding his horns outside the castle lately, it did look like he was human at first glance. I looked over at him, only to be met with a glare.

"Why are you looking at me like that? The blond guy's right. Don't compare me to a Fenrir! Those beasts take pleasure in tormenting their prey, not eating it! They get bored quickly and don't even finish their food. Talk about terrible manners! When I decide to eat my prey, I go all the way and even suck the marrow out of the bones!"

I knew he was being serious, but that really wasn't helping the situation at all.

I let out a sigh and waved my hand to indicate I was done, but Islan, who had just been lectured on the eating habits of magical beasts, gasped.

"Prince Lucas, vánagandrs don't take on human forms?"

"I've never heard of such a thing from my master, but I have less experience than him. In the years I've spent hunting magical beasts, I've never seen a Fenrir or vánagandr take human form. As the prince just learned, Fenrirs torment their prey and speak to them. As for vánagandr, who are mutated forms of Fenrirs and are more savage, I highly doubt they take on human forms since they consider them food."

Whether a beast could take a human form or communicate didn't change the fact that they saw humans as food. They just had a different way of killing and eating them.

Humans and magical beasts are incompatible. That's why binding, or enslaving, magic was created to control them, and the sacred artifacts were dispersed.

Islan probably thought maybe he could use those artificially created beastmen for combat, just like Akeem did. That's probably why he'd been searching for people who could use enslaving magic. Otherwise, he wouldn't have left his half-brother to fend for himself like this.

Yet, I couldn't trust a person who asks such questions, knowing that Cecilia was attacked by a Fenrir.

It was a hassle, but I decided that I'd have to quash any schemes now to prevent Cece from coming to any harm later.

"I've heard that there's been a considerable uptick in magical beasts here in Majaar lately. I understand your concerns, Your Highness. Don't worry. I'll do everything in my power to ensure that my sister-in-law can live in Bern peacefully."

But it's not for your sake. So don't get in my way, I thought as I smiled at Islan.

How many days had it been since I began exploring the border forest? It felt like an eternity.

I released a spell to scout the area and aimed my blade at the beastman-like creature in front of me.

"Want to…go…home…"

It showed a bit of human awareness just as it was about to pounce, and I couldn't help but sigh softly.

"Do you want to go home?" I wanted to go home, too, I inwardly replied to the beastman. Home to my wife.

He charged at me, drool dripping from his spasming mouth. I kicked off the ground and dodged his claws.

And just like the other beastmen I defeated, I stuck a dagger in its neck.

If it were a human, this would've been a fatal blow. But since it had the blood of a vánagandr flowing through its veins, the creature's body had become far more resilient, and a normal blade wasn't enough to kill it.

I cursed under my breath at the unexpected difficulty of it all and timed my movements for when they began to stagger from the lack of blood flow to their brain. I used the hilt of my dagger as my target and kicked with my whole weight.

I felt the beastman's neck snap, caused by the force of the blade driven into it.

I scanned the area. There were still six more beastmen left, and I had four daggers remaining in my baldric.

Even if I used one on each of them, I'd come up two short. But I wasn't thrilled about the idea of returning covered in the blood of three creatures.

Just then, I felt a slight shift in my barrier back in my room at the Majaarian palace. A human was entering without permission.

"Tch, not again. Why does he keep sending them to my room?" I muttered with annoyance.

Why did people always interfere with my relationship with Cece? A deep, dark emotion roiled in my stomach.

About a year ago when Felix's punishment to strip him of his title had been decided, I went to Marquis Cline to ask for Cecilia's hand in marriage.

Even though the engagement had been decided by royal decree, I needed to show that I cared deeply for her. But since Felix had brandished his authority and used it to hurt her, the marquis was reluctant to have his daughter marry into the royal family.

When I expressed my intent to marry her, he greeted me with a cold stare.

"I see. I understand your feelings, Vice-captain. But I want my daughter to marry someone who can protect her no matter what."

Although he recognized my skills as a knight, he knew that even with my status as the second prince, I couldn't protect her from higher powers.

If I wanted Cecilia, I had to do something to prove that I could protect her—something that would make the marquis agree to us being married. And the fastest way to win him over was to show off my status as Hero since I now wielded the same amount of power as the king.

I thought if I went and slayed a vánagandr, which was only something a Hero was capable of doing alone, and brought back its

core, I'd be able to silence the marquis.

After I did that, I finally got what I'd longed for—Cecilia—but I never imagined that Egrich would make use of the vánagandr corpse I'd left behind. I wanted to hold my head in frustration.

I was in a rush to get back home, but I just assumed if I left it, other magical beasts would eat it. But now I wanted to murder my past self, who'd just carelessly chopped it up and left it there.

I shouldn't have worried about the proximity to other countries. Even if it had been discovered that the vánagandr had died from human influence, there was no way they'd know who did it. I should've burned the body entirely and reduced it to ash.

If I'd done that, they wouldn't have been able to create those beastmen using a vánagandr's blood. I wouldn't have had to endure the unpleasant stares full of fear and envy. And I wouldn't have to endure strange women sneaking into my room, calling me a monster behind my back and trying to make it a reality.

More than anything, I wouldn't have been separated from Cecilia like this for almost ten days!

I could barely control my irritation and put too much force into my kick. The heel of my boot sank into the head of the beastman who attacked me from the side.

The impact shattered the ground beneath me, and the remnants of its head flew apart like a crushed watermelon.

I clicked my tongue again at the bloody splatter on my pants, then slammed my palm against the creature's chin, closing its mouth.

With the other hand, I drew a dagger and drove it into the back of its neck with my full force.

"Argh!"

I tried to let go of the dagger's hilt and turn away from the fallen beastfolk, but then…

"Home…"

For some reason, the beastman reverted to its human form on the brink of death, and I froze on the spot.

Fenrirs, vánagandrs, and dragons… They were divine beasts, not magical, because only a sacred artifact could kill them.

There was no way a human body could contain something like that without any consequences and no way to reverse it. Even if I knew the cause, there was nothing I could do for him now.

That was why I could never let them get to Bern.

If Cecilia saw the condition of those who were turned back into human form, she would suffer. She was raised to care for people and would agonize over not being able to help them.

She would probably hide and cry all by herself. Breaking her heart without calling me.

I won't allow that, I thought as I gripped my dagger tightly.

I couldn't stand it if someone else made her cry, and the thought of those six years when I couldn't even wipe away her fallen tears made my insides burn with anger.

I'd finally reached a place where I could touch her without worrying about who would see us. If she was going to cry, it should

be in my arms, clinging to me. And if anyone tried to come between us, I'd erase them, no matter what.

"That's why you need to die here."

Did he sense that my frustration had turned into malice?

One of the beastmen who'd been measuring the distance between us panicked and followed his instincts, turning to flee.

I threw my dagger toward the back of his neck and kicked off the ground.

I kicked in the hilt of my dagger deeply, killing him instantly. Another one howled behind me as his body fell.

"Argh…!"

The sound of a scream echoed through the trees, and I heard the flapping of wings as birds urgently took flight above us.

I dodged the beastman's wild swipes with his claws and quickly distanced myself. The next thing I knew, a mercenary beastman who'd rushed into attack picked up his fallen comrade.

"Arrgh, haah!"

I watched as the beastman rubbed his forehead against the body as if in an apology before suddenly opening his mouth wide. I threw a knife to prevent him from biting it.

"Yipe!"

The dagger sank into his jaw, and I sighed inwardly as I drove another dagger into him while he shook his head violently in pain.

Vánagandrs didn't usually travel in groups. But since they were all gathered in the border forest, maybe they'd once been part of a mercenary team. Showing sorrow before trying to eat their remains… were human emotions being converted into the urges of a magical beast?

If that was the case, then I should bring that red-haired bastard before these beastmen, since he was the reason why I was here…

"That's a strong possibility. Should I leave one alive?" I thought about how to get back at him while striking the hilt of my dagger with my fist, causing a small spurt of blood.

I wiped my hand and looked at the remaining beastman when suddenly a large black hand appeared from above. The claws were as large as a man's arm, and they stabbed into the beastman's back, crushing it immediately.

The beastman's body slammed against the ground with an ear-splitting rumble, and blood and bits of flesh splattered onto my clothes and shoes.

I thought maybe I could keep the women away if I got dirty enough, but I knew Finn thought fabrics like this were a pain to wash, and he would be angry. So, I tried not to get *too* much blood on me.

"Haah… What are you doing here, Barn?"

Even if I told Finn that it wasn't my fault, he knew I'd been frustrated lately, and he'd never believe me. I wiped the bloodstained fur off my stomach and questioned Barnabash, who now shrunk and took human form.

"You crappy master! What's with that sigh? You're the one who's been whining about wanting to go see your mate and sleep with her, right? I even went out of my way to steal her nightgown for you!"

"I didn't ask you to do that. Finn did."

"Huh?! But you were about to kill any woman who came into your room, so your servant begged and cried for me to do it! So that's on you! Anyway, just because your mate said you shouldn't come back doesn't mean you should lose sleep over it. You're a grown man! Bwuh?!"

"Shut up," I said, throwing Eckesachs in its dagger form. It barely missed him as he dodged it.

"Hey! You nearly sliced my chest open! I'm a dragon, you know! If a sacred artifact pierces my core, I'm done for!"

"She didn't say that."

"Huh? You almost killed me, and that's all you have to say to me?!"

He was as loud as ever.

"She didn't tell me to stay away."

I glared at him and surrounded him with several daggers, making my intention clear that he was never to bring that up again, or I would kill him. He went pale and froze, then raised a hand.

"What is it?"

"You're too scary… It looks like you're not lacking when it comes to physical strength, so why don't you use the sacred artifact on these beasts? You could kill them all and leave immediately if you did that."

He pointed to the fallen beastmen, and I let out another sigh.

"I can't."

Eckesachs was only meant to be used on magical beasts that humans couldn't defeat.

Even if my opponents had mostly turned into beasts, they were originally human. Using Eckesachs to defeat them could make the divine power inside of it run wild and cause my body to break down. The old texts warned against using such power recklessly.

It was a bit of extra trouble, but it still didn't change the fact that I was killing them. It did sting that I could no longer use it as a threat against Dirk. I didn't really need to use Eckesachs to kill.

I thought about how to be careful not to misuse Eckesachs in the future, and also not to forget to burn the corpses of magical beasts I killed, when I noticed the last beastman, who'd been cowering in fear from the dragon, begin to back away.

"Barn!"

"Sheesh, you really work me to death, you know! All right, all right."

I called out to Barnabash, and he swiped his large tail against the beastman, slamming him against a tree trunk.

The sound of the solid trunk snapping and the way his body twisted as it was crushed confirmed he wasn't moving anymore. I exhaled, relieved that it was finally over.

"All done. Hey, you've got a regular sword hanging from your waist, too. Why even bother aiming for their neck with daggers? You

could've just sliced their heads clean off with that sword."

He complained about the unnecessary effort as he swung his blood-soaked tail around, and I quickly shielded myself with a defensive barrier to protect myself against the chunks of flesh that rained down.

"It's because they were originally innocent humans."

Well, I wasn't sure if they were innocent or not, but decapitation was execution, and they shouldn't die that way. Plus, if I had to behead this many people, I'd be soaked in blood all the way to my underwear. And I really wanted to avoid that.

"Hmm, I thought you were just crazy, but I guess that makes sense. Must be the influence of your mate. Humans are so complicated and troublesome. Ugh, my tail's all dirty because of you. Elsa's gonna be so disappointed in me. I wanna bathe, so I'm heading back! The day after tomorrow, I need to take Leon, that blond guy, and his wife Shireen, and her brother Islan back to Bern, right?"

"Right. The guest rooms are in the east tower. When you go there, avoid the north corridor since it's not visible from the banquet hall. I'll explore the border forest on Bern's side one last time before I return. I'll leave the day before."

I'm dirty because of you too, you know. I was slightly impressed that a dragon would even care about something like that. I brushed the dirt off my stomach and realized something. My sister and Finn always said cleanliness was crucial for getting people to like you, so should I really go back like this?

I was going to race through the forest so I would be sweaty and get even dirtier. I'd get covered in blood even more if I encountered more magical beasts. But if Cece rejected me because I was dirty, well…just imagining it made me want to die.

There was nothing positive about this situation.

"Ugh, I can't believe you're using a dragon like a hunting dog, and now you're going for a final check? Wait a second, what's going on? There's this dark, evil energy coming from your feet and a *ton* of concentrated mana. It's freaking me out! I swear, that was the last of 'em! Anyway, there's no way a vánagandr or anything else could get into Bern because it's my territory now. A black dragon's territory! And even if these guys are counterfeits, they're still magical beasts. I know the laws of the jungle better than you, so nothing's gonna happen to your mate already!"

I nodded at Barnabash's oddly comforting words and exhaled deeply. "You're right," I nodded.

All that mattered was that I could hold her in my arms again, whether she was afraid of me or disliked me.

I promised I would return, so there was no other. I looked forward to the only woman who could fill my heart and then turned sharply on my heel.

"You're back."

As I approached the door to my guest room, there was a familiar face there, just as I expected.

If he was here, it was most likely because there was a woman inside the room waiting for me.

In Bern, a king was only allowed to have one queen to prevent disputes about the line of succession. Mistresses were useless parasites, threats to the legitimate queen.

If I were to have sex with anyone other than Cece, it would lead to divorce at the very worst since we didn't have children. Why would I ever want that?

I'd finally been able to dominate Cecilia's heart. I felt my fists clench with frustration, vowing never to let Cece worry unnecessarily about such things, especially since she was finally mine.

I understood cultural differences. I could acknowledge that they had their own beliefs and acted accordingly, and I wasn't going to tell them to change their thinking.

But despite my repeated insistence that I would only ever be with Cece, why did they keep trying to force other women on me and act as if Cece was betraying me?

It was exhausting. If he wouldn't listen, why couldn't I just kill him already?

"What do you want, Prince Islan?" I shoved down the malice and clicked my tongue, raising my hand that held a certain object I'd brought back from my hunt. Leon, who stood next to Islan, froze.

"L-Lucas, what are you doing, holding a magical beast's head?!"

The blood dripping onto the floor was a clear sign that it was the real thing.

I ignored Leon, who had begun to panic and tried to enter the room, but Islan gave me a mocking expression as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"You're being even more provocative than usual, Hero. Is this really how the owner of the sacred blade behaves?" He gestured toward my blood-soaked shirt, so wet it had fallen off my shoulder. He was hinting that I shouldn't come back dirty.

I sighed in response. "I'm sure you don't know, but my kingdom's sacred artifact has a habit of picking and choosing its prey. And no matter how many times I tell you that I'm busy, you never believe me, so I brought you back proof of my hunt."

It was a mere magical beast from the Majaar Desert. No need for Eckesachs. The sand had slowed us down, but it was a good training experience for the knights I brought with me.

I was certain it would be useful for future negotiations, especially since they wanted information about the Hero and to confirm that Eckesachs didn't work on beastmen, but of course, I wouldn't tell them that.

"If you keep bothering me, I might just bring back one of your half-brother's failed beastmen's heads instead," I threatened.

Islan muttered quietly, "So you found out about that, did you?"

Leon's face went pale. "Islan… Did you bring a woman into Lucas's room again?!"

"That's how we treat our high-ranking guests here. This is Majaar." He spoke with an arrogance that was far too straightforward,

challenging me as if to say, "And don't forget it."

"So if I'm a high-ranking guest, does that mean I can do whatever I please without any complaint from you?"

"Lucas, no! You were invited here as the Hero!"

"You're too stiff, Leon. They say Heroes are fond of women, so what's the problem?" Islan asked with a shrug. He didn't seem to understand why Leon was so flustered. My brother certainly understood the broken parts of me.

I'd done plenty to make sure that he understood, even if I had to force him.

"Your own sister told you not to send women to my room, so of course, Lucas's wife wouldn't like it either."

"Shireen loves you, that's why. And if we consider the benefits to our kingdom, it's only natural to want to form connections, don't you think? I hear the princess is very well-educated. If something happens, it shouldn't be a problem. My half-brother takes responsibility for all the women he courts, after all."

I remembered when Felix had been involved with various women in the past, and Cece quietly cleaned up his messes without complaint. Since Cece's engagement with him had been broken and she'd married me instead, this seemed to imply to Islan that she could easily switch her affections to another man—Akeem, no less. Leon's face turned pale.

In Majaar, a woman under the protection of a man was expected to be forever obedient to him. It may seem to someone on the

outside that Cece was some kind of villainess who only married me after Felix had discarded her because I had replaced him as the second prince.

But for her to be seen that way from an allied nation's prince…

Leon probably hadn't realized how much the arrogance of Bern's royal family had negatively affected Cece's life.

I quietly stared at the pool of blood on the floor. There was nothing else for me to say.

It was Islan, who'd lived without much knowledge of what "madness" truly meant, who spoke.

"That's how it is. The Hero always says he's exhausted from his hunts, so this time, I picked one who provides very good service to soothe him. I guarantee you won't hear any complaints. Go ahead and enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself? How considerate."

"…!"

When he finally spoke the words I'd been waiting for, Leon gasped and covered his face with one hand.

I couldn't care less about the problems in Majaar. In fact, he went so far as to claim that my intervention was helping him by eliminating a problematic figure, even though he knew he was targeting the one and only wife of the Hero!

And he was saying that Leon should also turn a blind eye to the sacrifice of a single Majaarian.

I made sure to confirm multiple times that I had Islan's permission to do whatever I wanted first so I could throw it back at him later.

"Haha! Finally! All right, Leon. We're in the way, so…"

Islan slipped an arm around Leon's shoulder as he signed in resignation.

I opened the door and called out to Finn. "Finn, start with one of her feet. Don't make a mess of the room."

"Yes, my lord."

A moment later, a dull cracking sound echoed, followed by a ferocious scream.

"Ahhhh!"

"Huh?" Islan stopped in his tracks, letting out a dumb noise.

I ignored the terrifying gaze slowly moving towards me and coldly stared down at the figure writing in fear.

"Good evening, impolite lady. I'm very sorry for doing this right after we met, but I've been running around all day, separated from my beloved wife, and frankly, the stress is just unbearable. I couldn't bring myself to be gentle, so I wanted to avoid it, but I'm relieved to hear that you've consented to this already."

"Argh, my foot! My foot! P-Prince Lucas?!"

It probably hurt. A dislocated ankle hurt, after all. But it wasn't broken, and whether it stopped at this or not depended on whether Islan intervened. I tossed the monster's head in front of her.

"Aaghh! Eeeek!"

"Can you be quiet? I'm tired."

I made it clear that next time it would be worse, and the woman, who had been screaming and crying, widened her eyes.

"Wh-why?"

I recognized her face. She was one of the women who'd argued with Finn in front of my room a few times. She had tried to mock Finn and said he was nothing but a mere servant who shouldn't get in her way. She even tried to get him fired. I'd intervened and tactfully stopped her after I remembered Cece had told me not to misbehave.

I wondered if this woman thought I had some kind of interest in her because I "protected" her from Finn.

The unpleasant memories regarding Mia resurfaced and I glanced at Finn, who saw the dagger in my hand. He shook his head.

"My lord's actions are not wrong. The one at fault is the one who kept persisting despite being refused. So please, don't scar your face!"

He read my thoughts with just a single dagger in hand. Impressive.

"Do you think Cece would dislike it?"

"I don't think she'd mind a scar on your face, but she'd definitely cry. If you came back with a huge scar because your misleading good looks caused a misunderstanding, and she ended up heartbroken, how do you know you won't destroy this entire country?!"

"I don't."

For now, I'd be satisfied to wipe out the entire Majaar royal family and the members of the harem, too.

"See? This is why you should stop before Princess Cecilia has to intervene and you get embarrassed again."

"…"

He was referring to that argument with Felix. I wished everyone who was there could just forget it. But Cece was so cute when she said she only wanted me.

"That face of yours is one of the few things you have going for you, plus it's a weapon. Worst case scenario, Lord Dirk could completely ruin Princess Shireen's position, and that would add even more stress on Princess Cecilia. For her sake and for Prince Leon's, you should stop."

"For her sake… That was very convincing, Finn."

Dirk would definitely cause trouble if it came to that. Leon gave a thumbs-up while covering his face.

I didn't want to burden Cece with even more problems. So reluctantly, I tossed the dagger toward the woman rather than at Finn.

"Hey, I thought you said not to mess up the room?" he exclaimed.

"Eeeek! I'm sorry! Please forgive me!"

Finn deliberately lowered his sword to deflect the dagger I threw, purposely letting it scrape dangerously close to the woman's

tear-streaked face. She screamed and complained the whole time. I merely shrugged, but then a voice called out from behind me.

"H-hey! What the hell are you doing, Prince Lucas?"

It's about time. It took him that long to react to his concubine being treated so roughly?

"Isn't it obvious? You sent me someone whose service provides for whatever I need, right?"

"What?"

What did he find confusing about that?

I casually tossed another dagger in the air while Islan turned to Leon for an explanation.

Leon was clearly uncomfortable and spoke with a pained look on his face. "Islan, you told Lucas he could do whatever he wanted with her."

"Yeah? I said that. I sent her to his bedchamber, but not to be harmed!"

Not necessarily!

Problems were guaranteed when you had sex with a woman whose background you didn't even know. *Don't try to drag me into this convoluted situation.*

Even though I couldn't get hard from anyone but Cece, would he take responsibility if she ever found out I was in the same room with another woman?

"My brother…"

"Anyone who barges into his room other than his wife is trash, as far as he's concerned," Finn continued as he picked up the sheath of his sword and tapped it against the woman's shoulder, dislocating it with a *crack!*

"Ahhh! My shoulder! It hurts! Please stop!"

"I thought she would have no complaints, but she sure is loud. Should I crush her throat?"

I tipped my head to the side, and the woman began to sob while Leon covered his face with both hands.

"My brother is such a demon… At the very least, use your hands, damn it."

"I'd say I'm being pretty lenient in regards to handling an intruder, Prince Leon. I'm restraining myself since we're here in Majaar. If I were allowed to deal with things the way I normally do as the royal family's shield, she'd be missing at least one wrist and an ankle by now, and she'd be bleeding out," Finn casually replied.

"Wouldn't a normal person at least ask whose orders they're acting on first?"

"A dislocated shoulder is nothing. Honestly, this visit is mild enough for an assassin that we could even serve tea and snacks. You must've said something to my lord before he left, right? Well, thanks to Princess Cecilia, at least the room stayed clean."

"He's right. It could be worse," Leon agreed with a shrug, much to his own lament.

Finn gave the woman's shoulder and ankle a quick press to put them back in place.

"Eek! Oww, ohh!" The woman's body jerked violently before slumping to the floor as she quietly sobbed in relief.

I sighed. *Don't just fix someone without permission, especially when you use Cecilia as leverage,* I thought as I cast a healing spell on the woman.

I held up a dagger and addressed her loud enough for Islan to hear.

"My wife is incredibly precious to me. I constantly think about how I can stay in her favor and how I can ensure her love for me doesn't waver. I avoid doing anything that might upset her at all costs. But most of all, I've decided to never forgive anyone who would do her harm, either directly or indirectly."

Saying those words out loud felt like opening a dam and letting the stagnant, murky emotions I'd pent up inside the pit of my stomach gush out.

No matter how many times I was torn away from her, I would always find my way back to Cece.

Her very existence gave me the strength to hold myself back. Yet, there was no benefit in tolerating those who would try to harm her.

In fact, even showing them the slightest leniency only invited them to try to snatch away what I held dear. The mere thought of her

vibrant green eyes losing their sparkle filled my heart with fury, making my chest ache painfully.

At the same time, I felt a sense of despair that etched itself upon my skin. I gave a bitter chuckle. *So, they finally see me as dangerous, huh?*

It was only natural. Who would grant immense power to someone who desires nothing more than to protect a single person? Someone who couldn't even bear the thought of their beloved's heart wavering for another could turn their hatred onto the world at any moment. Power like that could destroy with such ease.

They would think of me as a monster, a broken being parading around in a human body.

Surely no one could continue loving someone like that.

"P-Prince Lucas? Your neck… No, your whole body is covered in wounds!" Finn's anxious voice snapped me back to reality, and for some reason, I laughed out loud.

Mana poured from me, swirling like vines as it spread. It wove black, thorny patterns which stained my skin.

This was decreed by the goddess, a constraint imposed upon those who wielded sacred artifacts. It was a warning not to abuse their power recklessly. And it was a symbol of honor, granting the privilege of dying by the hand of my beloved.

The room fell silent as everyone stared in shock at the markings covering my left side, which bore an uncanny resemblance to curses that were carved into criminals who had committed atrocious deeds.

The broken monster, consumed by an endless yearning for the one they loved, manifested the deathly patterns on their body, effectively tightening a noose around their own neck.

And so I had become a perfect monster now, even in appearance.

My love with Cecilia would be put to the test as I was summoned by the goddess.

These markings were proof of my love for her.

But for Cece, they were proof that she loved a monster. I wondered how she would react to them.

I glanced around the room, my gaze settling on the pale woman who was desperately trying to escape. I sighed.

"Eek! No, stay away, you monster!"

"How dare you speak that way to my prince?!"

"That's enough, Finn."

This scene felt oddly familiar as I stopped Finn, who was bursting with anger to the point where it clouded his judgment.

"Then I'll heal you!"

Finn unleashed an intense healing spell, making the air in the room ripple with its force. My shirt fluttered in the surge of magic that surrounded my body.

I waved a hand to dispel Finn's magic. "Stop wasting your strength. You still have a job to do. Besides, this is the goddess's will. It cannot be healed by human hands."

“Wh-what does that mean?”



"It means I'm fine. It won't affect me unless I do something foolish, just like a curse."

Right now, it only made me look hideous.

I glanced at Islan, eager to bathe and prepare for my journey back to Bern.

"I trust this makes it clear why I need no one but my wife. I also believe I've made it clear that you are never to do this again. Now, will you kindly take her away? And don't send another woman in her place."

Islan's face twisted with frustration.

"Are you sure this isn't some kind of transformation magic?"

He's suspicious because he knew I was disguised as Lukie, hm? Would showing him how useless transformation magic is be enough to convince him?

"As I said, this is the goddess's power. Transformation and illusions cannot undo it."

To prove my point, I activated my transformation magic. The magical barrier that formed my appearance as Lukie absorbed into my skin, but as soon as it touched the markings, something sparked, and the pattern even appeared on top of my transformed body.

Leon covered his face with his hand and sighed once he saw the markings emerge even through my transformation. "It really can't be fixed. Honestly, just seeing you covered in wounds would've been better than this." He muttered under his breath about what he should tell my wife and Dirk and sighed again.

I sighed in return. “Finn.”

“I don’t think she’ll be disgusted, but I do think she’ll be quite shocked. But I think it’s more likely that she’ll lecture you instead of crying, right?” he said.

“That’s not what I was going to say! Go get me something I can hide my face with.”

“I can get you a mask, but what if Princess Cecilia asks to see you without it?”

“I’ll show her.”

There wasn’t any other choice. But I’d prefer to wait a while so I could mentally prepare for that first.

“I figured. You’re hopeless when it comes to her.” Finn shook his head in exasperation.

“Shut up,” I clicked my tongue at him.

Islan watched from the sidelines and piped up, “Prince Lucas, this may be inappropriate to ask, but…what will you do if she’s repulsed by you now?” His voice was concerned, and his gaze was probing. The question made a wave of anger surge inside of me.

I encased the entire room in a defensive barrier, ensuring no one could escape.

Leon realized what I was about to do and quickly surrounded Islan with a barrier of his own.

“Leon! Why are you trapping me?!” Islan shouted, panic in his voice.

"Because of this idiot! Islan, if you value your life, you need to apologize to Lucas right now and swear never to pull anything like this again! Lucas, calm down!" Leon snapped back.

"I *am* calm. I was taught to always stay composed when killing someone, to avoid leaving behind any evidence."

I heard the sound of the woman collapse as she began to foam at the mouth. I let out yet another sigh and turned toward Islan, who was still trapped within the barrier.

"Prince Islan," I said.

"Wh-what is it?" he stammered, his voice trembling.

"It seems you've forgotten that I am the Hero of Bern. No one from Majaar has any right to meddle with my wife."

"I-I'm sorry! I swear, I won't push any other woman onto you or interfere again! I was just trying to be considerate, that's all!" he blurted out hastily.

But there was a slyness that lingered in his narrowed eyes that sent me over the edge. Without hesitation, I shattered Leon's triple-layered defensive spell and seized Islan by the neck, lifting him into the air.

"Argh!"

As his feet dangled, I tightened my grip to ensure he couldn't escape.

"Lucas, please let him go!" Leon pleaded.

"You gave the third prince some unwelcome advice before he left for Bern, didn't you? Well, let me make one thing clear. The only

man who can touch Cecilia is me. And as long as I refuse to let her go, she'll remain mine forever, even if she is repulsed by this form."

She knew better than anyone that she couldn't choose anyone but me, not with the Promise Mark which bound her to me.

"So don't even think of taking her from me again," I growled. Islan's face twisted as if he'd just swallowed something bitter.

"I-I get it! Let me go!" he gasped.

"Do you really? Because if not, you're going to end up like this." I exploded the head of the magical beast to illustrate my point, reducing it to dust. Islan's weak struggles signaled his surrender.

I released him abruptly, and he tumbled to the floor in an undignified heap, coughing and gasping for air. His terrified eyes stared up at me as though he were looking at a monster, and suddenly, I couldn't hold back my feelings anymore.

"If you people would just stop meddling and let me live peacefully with her, it wouldn't have to be this hard," I muttered under my breath.

I never wanted to end up like this.

I was fully aware that being a Hero wasn't just some grand, noble thing. If I didn't have this power, I couldn't keep Cece by my side. So, I didn't care if people called me a monster.

But it's their fault I ended up like this! If Cecilia despises the way I look, I swear I'll raze this country to the ground!

"Your problems are mostly resolved now. I've taken care of the magical beasts, so you shouldn't have any trouble for a while. I'm

going to rest briefly and leave tonight. You'd better uphold your end of the deal if you want to overthrow Akeem and take the throne."

Islan flinched under my gaze but managed to nod. "Y-yes. The ball is tomorrow night. We'll meet up again in Bern the morning after!"

I sighed at his pitiful desperation and turned to Leon and Finn. "Leon, I've already told Barnabash to bring everyone to Bern."

"R-right. I forgot we were supposed to ride with the black dragon. Though, I'm not sure how Shireen will react to that…" Leon trailed off, clearly nervous.

"Just tell her later. It'll be fine."

Leon's acrophobia would probably be the only problem.

"Finn, keep things under control for a while longer. The news about today's commotion will spread soon enough. If I stay in my room, there won't be any problems."

I was sure the woman would tell everyone I was a monster. Akeem would definitely use that information to stir up trouble in Bern.

My idiot of a brother would realize I was planning on returning and try to coax Cecilia into agreeing to Akeem's invitation. She would be ready to sacrifice herself for others. She'd likely accept, thinking it would minimize the damage and prevent the breakup of Leon's engagement.

Akeem would probably try to extract the truth from her in private.

He might be a fool, but he had the power to make his ambitions come true.

But fools were the most dangerous when they were careless. I would let him think he was winning for a while. That would be the best way to protect Cecilia and keep her safe.

I locked eyes with Finn. *Disguise yourself as me and make Akeem believe I'm still in Majaar,* I told him with telepathy.

"Understood. Leave it to me." Finn said, bowing deeply.

I turned away and headed for the bath, my jaw clenched tightly.

The world granted power to those who wished to protect, only to strip it away once they grew too strong. It created a perpetual cycle of longing for power.

What an irrational system, I thought bitterly, discarding my tattered shirt and clenching my fists.

The marks would fade to some extent once I was back by her side. But I had no idea how long that would take. If she rejected me, I would cling to her, as pitiful and pathetic as that would be.

I slammed my fist into the mirror, and her words came rushing back.

"When you get home, I want you to ruin me."

Cecilia had always believed in me, always waited for me.

For her to say something like that confirmed that she wouldn't call out to me, not unless things were dire. I lowered my gaze to the shattered mirror and hung my head.

I touched the unresponsive earring in my left ear, which hadn't reacted since I got to Majaar, making sure it wasn't broken and sighed.

Cecilia would play her role well and try to take care of things alone. Her resolve to endure hardships without asking for help made me admire her, but it also infuriated me.

"Just call for me already."

If she wouldn't use the link between the ring and the earring, revealing the true nature of it would look like it was just a childish prank.

"I'll completely ruin you when I return," I said.

But I want you to desire me just as I am, I thought as I glared at the marks etched into my skin.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT DAY, I HAD ANNA AND THE OTHERS HELP ME prepare for the party in luxurious fashion.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Please come this way."

I thanked Anna as she took away the cloth that protected my dress from getting dirty while she put on my makeup. With Kate's help, I stood up and made my way over to the mirror.

"Since you have such long eyelashes, I wanted to highlight your eyes and keep the rest subdued to keep in line with your dress's color scheme. What do you think?"

I admired myself in the mirror, tugged on the dress slightly, and twirled around to check my back.

I'd chosen a dress made of lustrous purple velvet for greeting the guests.

It was an off-the-shoulder design with a heart-shaped neckline edged in black lace. It was a bit sexy. The accent jewels were also black, and the dress had a gradient of purple to deep navy at the hem.

Jewels and embroidery scattered across the fabric like stars in the night sky, giving it incredible impact.

I'd originally planned for a lighter-colored dress, but since I never wanted Akeem to call me a fairy princess again, I decided to quickly change into something more fitting for battle.

He'd specifically chosen to come here during Lucas's absence, so

I had to show him I was ready to fight.

"It's absolutely stunning. Do I look stronger than usual?" I asked my capable maids, beyond pleased at how the dress had turned out. They all dropped to their knees with such a loud thump it nearly startled me.

"Divine! The ultimate beauty!" Anna declared.

"Elegant! The pinnacle of allure!" Kate added.

"I've never seen you look so intimidating! Barn said since Prince Lucas isn't here, now you can put your enchanting cleavage on full display!" Elsa said.

"Oh, um. I see. Thank you."

I was surprised that Elsa was the one who actually answered my question, but I was also oddly impressed when she shifted the blame to Barnabash and began fending off Kate's attacks.

Should I offer her advice on her growth or simply wait and hope for more progress? This one's a tough call.

Lucas knew about this dress, of course. It was impossible to hide anything from him, and my safety would be in danger if I tried. I had made it a point to pick it out and buy it in front of him.

Of course, he warned me not to wear it when he wasn't around…

"How do you like it?" I asked him when I first tried it on.

"You've been favoring more mature dresses lately, Cece. Honestly, it drives me wild."

"Well, since you're so tall, I thought I should pick something more—um, Lukie?"

"Even though you're still not fully bloomed, you look ravishing. It suits you so well. So very well…"

I was surprised when he sighed and came closer, pushing me against the wall as he peppered me with compliments.

He spoke to me in a serious voice, his pupils blown and his expression earnest. I couldn't help but shiver.

"It suits you *too* well. The contrast of your pale skin and that black lace will make people want to reach out and touch you, despite the Promise Mark. Don't wear it when I'm not around for your own good."

"For my own good?"

Of course, I would never do such a thing because I was a good wife.

No one would want to end up turning redder than the hand-spun crimson carpet in the ballroom after being humiliated by rejection. But I'd also have to protect myself from being showered with compliments and groped by my husband all night.

Please stop coming up with new intimidating tactics like complimenting me until I cry…

Since Felix had tried to kill me after the Fenrir incident, I'd been warned to steer clear of potentially dangerous situations, so I was curious about what kind of punishment was waiting for me when Lucas found out I wore this dress in public.

Still, I wanted to make it clear that I didn't go *looking* for danger.

The first time it happened, my fiancé's family asked for help, and I couldn't refuse. This time, I was simply fulfilling my duties as the second princess.

The kingdom of Bern couldn't just leave the news of their Hero collapsing unaddressed.

If they said something like, "Send this person if you want more information," then all I could do was sit down to negotiate and take measures to mitigate the risks.

More than anything, when I found out Lucas had collapsed, I felt I had the right to know why, but I didn't think my reasoning would reach him when he only wanted to protect me.

I wouldn't ever compromise when it came to Lucas, so I wouldn't cancel the party. But thinking about how he was definitely listening to me through the ring now made me shiver.

That was why I chose a place on the terrace, easy to enter and exit from the venue. No one would think of it as a secret meeting spot, and it would be harder for anyone to eavesdrop there.

"By the way, was it all right to specify the terrace?" I asked, and Anna and the others nodded emphatically.

"No problem at all. It's not a closed-off area like a restroom, and we can place the Imperial Guard in front of the glass doors for deterrence. There aren't any annoying nobles nearby, so it will be easier to defend if things get rough."

"And thanks to your choice of location, we've already dealt with pests on their side. We've completely rehauled our defensive measures based on the previous experience."

"According to Barn, most of the Fenrirs fled to the Majaar side due to Prince Lucas's threats! No magical beast can cross the barrier he set around the capital, too. If anything gets through, it'll just be a normal beast. Either Barn or Prince Lucas, probably—Oof!"

I was about to nod in relief when I heard, "Shut up, you useless cat!" and "Why don't you grow up already?"

There was a dull thud. Elsa's voice warped, causing me to stiffen in shock.

I hadn't seen the two of them working together like this in a while. Plus, Elsa had gotten so strong.

No, this is not the time to escape reality!

Anna and Kate must've attacked her from each side, because Elsa's body was bent sharply in an elegant curve.

"Um, Elsa? Are you okay? You're alive, right?" I asked cautiously, casting healing magic.

Elsa slowly gave me a trembling thumbs-up, still on the ground.

"H-hey, I'm making progress, little by little."

I really admired how positive she was.

You know, I don't think Kate was talking about making progress in terms of toughness!

"Well done, Kate. She doesn't seem to get it, but should we try

going back and forth for a while?" Anna asked.

"After all the training you and I have gone through, we should confirm whether our attacks work on divine beasts. Plus, with Princess Cecilia's healing magic, we can probably revive her. What do you think, Princess?"

I couldn't do anything but listen to their conversation in fear, but then they suddenly asked me a question. *What do you mean, what do I think?*

There's no way I could agree with this torturous proposal like, "Yeah, that sounds like a great idea."

What would they do if they couldn't revive Elsa?

"Anna, Kate, please calm down. If anything goes awry, I'm counting on you to spring into action. I need you to conserve all of your strength. Plus, if Elsa's right and the intruders are Barnabash and Lucas, then at least I can feel more relaxed."

I couldn't help but let my true feelings slip out, grateful for their concern.

I wanted to know just how serious the situation was when they'd said Lucas had collapsed. When I had asked, I called his name, and the ring on my finger tightened.

Then I confirmed with Dirk, who said the message hadn't been from Lucas directly.

It made sense that Finn hadn't dispatched the message because he would be busy with Lucas. But it was impossible for Prince Leon not to send word about something so important to our national

security. That meant this was a message from Lucas to get information out of Prince Akeem.

Prince Leon probably figured Prince Akeem would be dealing with Dirk or my father, not me. But Akeem didn't want to take on seasoned veterans like them, so he chose me.

It was just as my sharp-tongued brother-in-law had predicted. Dirk must've thought I'd slip up if Akeem underestimated me as the fairy princess. Honestly, I wished Dirk would stop using me as bait…

Besides, according to Anna and the others, Finn was one of the best fighters among the Lebensklinge. If anyone tried to wear Lucas down, he would gather evidence against them and then make them disappear in a very dishonorable manner.

He knew the most painful methods for nobles, as expected of someone who had Lucas's protection. *Honestly, the way he handles things is terrifying…*

Since Finn's inaction must be because Lucas ordered so, it was highly likely that the information coming from Majaar that he had collapsed was a lie.

Part of me wanted to believe that, of course, but another part of me wanted to cast aside my pride as a princess and run to Majaar right away to check on his safety.

Regret washed over me—I should've just been honest and said I wanted to go with him.

That regret continued to haunt me as I changed into my purple dress.

If he really did return, he would find me right away.

"If you're wearing this dress, is that a signal that you want to spend the night with me? Let's do it, Cece."

I could almost see him reaching out to me with those golden eyes, flashing with madness and obsession.

I remembered Lucas telling me he wanted to ruin me, and my lower stomach clenched.

I was scared of it.

His kisses left me breathless. The unforgiving caresses meant to push me over the edge.

Yet I didn't hate the idea of seeing him obsessed with me, and only me.

In fact, I might even—

Just as those thoughts were about to cross my mind, Anna and the others took off their aprons, and I straightened up, putting a smile on my face.

"The goddess of love is as merciful as ever today. I shall do as our mistress commands," Anna declared.

"The goddess of love is as delicious as ever today! I shall stand by with all my strength," Kate asserted.

"I hope Prince Akeem gets blown away by the goddess of love's sensational body!" Elsa said.

"…"

She'd rendered everyone speechless.

What would happen if I blew away a prince of another nation? Perhaps since he was notified beforehand, hopefully, it wouldn't turn into a diplomatic issue.

The thought that I was being protected, even from afar, made me feel strangely happy. I couldn't help but smile.

"Heh. That's right. I'll be fine, even if Lucas doesn't return, as long as I have all of you here."

I smiled at the three of them, who now wore the Hero's emblem and had weapons hidden, and they all responded with cheerful smiles.

"If Prince Lucas hears about this, Majaar will be destroyed in shock, Princess Cecilia." Anna smiled quietly.

"Prince Lucas's magic has been protecting you for seven years. He's the strongest on the continent, so since we're Princess Cecilia's guards, we should focus on offense rather than defense." Kate said with a shrug.

"We'll beat that red-haired bastard!" Elsa gripped her weapon, clearly fired up.

I smiled wryly and shook my head. "That's not very polite, Elsa, although I understand where you're coming from. But that's my role."

I told myself not to wish for Lucas to return, yet I still wished for it. How selfish and foolish of me.

I cast aside such shallow wishes and decided to focus on what I needed to do.

Majaar had done something to our people and to my Hero. And I needed to gather proof of it. With that decided, I smiled again at my

three capable maids, and we all made our way toward the party.

The lavish banquet hall was filled with a gentle hum of music and laughter, kept at a level just low enough not to interrupt the conversation. I moved gracefully through the space, my dress swaying as I navigated the crowd.

I exchanged greetings with people from various administrative departments, trying to create the illusion that everything was just fine before I made my way toward the terrace where I could view the rose garden.

"He's already waiting for you, Your Highness." I nodded lightly at the guard who bowed his head upon seeing me, then took a deep breath before I approached the glass doors.

As soon as I stepped out onto the terrace, the scent of roses mixed with an unfamiliar fragrance, enveloped me. Cedarwood, jasmine, and a hint of spiciness—the scent was both stimulating and strange. I found myself breathing a bit more shallowly as I called out to the man who was looking out over the garden.

"Have I kept you waiting?"

I stood beside the chair that had been prepared for me, carefully keeping my distance. Prince Akeem glanced over at me.

"No, you're right on time. I never mind waiting for a woman, especially if the woman in question is more beautiful than any rose here." He lifted his glass as though asking me if I'd drink. I shook my head slightly, and he smiled with amusement.

That confident grin was almost too much for me to bear. It could be mistaken for sarcasm if he wasn't careful. I countered by frowning slightly with annoyance.

He knew how to play up his handsome features to the max, but unfortunately for him, he wasn't my type.

"You're quite good at this, aren't you? Last time we spoke, you mentioned you didn't care for roses without thorns."

I hadn't forgotten what he'd said to Felix when we first met: *"You've chosen such a boring woman. I don't like women I can easily handle, but I am curious to hear how someone as forgettable as your fiancée will fare in bed."*

Thanks to that conversation, Felix asked me to come to his room that night. Of course, I firmly and clearly refused, saying I was too busy managing the event.

You didn't like me, remember? I shot him a cold look, and after he briefly widened his eyes, he laughed out loud.

"Ah, yes. I might've said something like that. But a rose is much more attractive when it has hidden thorns. Almost tempting enough to pluck. Though if I were to do that, I'd do it properly. Now, sit down for a moment and send your maids away."

Ugh, how tiresome. Should I just sigh in response? No… I quickly caught myself.

Prince Akeem tapped on the table, urging me to sit. I saw Anna, who stood by my chair, stiffen her shoulders slightly as she glanced at me.

This is bad. She's trembling with anger, and although it's subtle, I can tell she's biting her cheek to hide it! That's an interesting tactic…

Anna was always so professional, but she was clearly at her limit. I nervously glanced over at Kate and Elsa.

They were supposed to be standing calmly, but their hands were loose at their sides, ready for action. Elsa's posture was completely off—her palm was facing down and her thumb pointing out. Not like a maid whatsoever!

I could already imagine the excuse if someone asked me about it. "She just has a strange habit of making odd gestures…" That would be a tough one to explain to the prince of Majaar!

I had no choice but to take matters into my own hands.

"Anna, don't bother with the tea. This won't take long," I said to her, clearly signaling that I wasn't interested in Prince Akeem's flirtations. I wanted her to know I was relying on her, and gave her a small smile as I whispered, "Stay calm."

She stopped biting her cheek!

"Yes, Your Highness. We'll go ahead and assume our roles as your bodyguards now. Please call *me* once you're finished speaking."

After helping me sit down, she purposefully drew a hidden dagger and placed it at her waist, kneeling in front of me, her head bowed as she spoke. I couldn't help but let out a faint chuckle.

As usual, Anna implicitly told the other girls to keep serving me as my attendants when she said to call her first if anything happened. It was always so reassuring to have her around.

Just stop doing things to Kate or Elsa.

"Thank you, Anna. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"We'll be waiting for you to call on us."

After I spoke to Kate and Elsa, they nodded in unison, their faces pale, and nodded like proper maids before vanishing to avoid Anna's gaze.

Wow, they're really intimidated by their boss! I thought, very impressed.

As Anna began heading toward the rose garden instead of the terrace doors, Prince Akeem raised his voice in surprise.

"Bodyguard? The emblem she's wearing seems to be the Hero's emblem. Could it be the Lebensklinge, the living sword of House Herbst? I heard they were the strongest group in Bern, but I can't help but feel uneasy to think that three maids are the bodyguards of the second princess of Bern."

Akeem turned toward the knights behind him as if seeking their agreement.

"I mean, they're maids!" one of them replied with mocking laughter.

My blood began to boil.

"I'm not worried about it, but you seem to be the one who's feeling uneasy," I replied coldly, glaring at the knights. The one who had mocked us lost his composure.

"What do you me—Argh!" Before he could finish, he grabbed his sword hilt and collapsed to the ground, unconscious and foaming at the mouth.

Oops! Who did that? Well, whoever it was, they didn't hold back!

It wasn't like I was being anything other than respectful to Akeem as my guest of honor, but it was absolutely unacceptable for him to think that he had the right to insult the second princess of Bern just because he was the prince of Majaar. I didn't like being mocked, either.

I'd dismissed my own maids, so it was only fair to have the other unnecessary people around him leave as well.

"My *maids* are very competent, I assure you."

Far more than the fools standing behind you, who haven't even become knights.

I briefly glanced at the knights, who were flustered and murmuring, then smiled at Prince Akeem and mimicked the gesture he'd made of tapping the table with his fingers.

Anna immediately vanished, understanding my silent cue.

At the same time, there was a disturbance over by Prince Akeem's knights.

"Wha—?!"

"What in the world?"

One by one, the knight standing by the door fell to the ground.
Hm, who would have done such a thing? I certainly don't know!

I wonder if someone kicked them from behind. They fell in a position to make them look like they were groveling before me.

Overwhelmed by a massive strength, they were forced to kneel, completely losing their dignity as knights. So pitiful…

Well, at least this way they'd be leaving soon.

"Prince Akeem, it seems your knights are unwell. Perhaps it would be better if they retired to their rooms to rest."

"…!"

I smiled and pointed at the glass doors with the tip of my closed fan, clearly saying they were of no use and should be dismissed. Akeem frowned and gave an awkward, sheepish laugh.

"I see. I guess they're capable, after all. Stand down, men."

"But Your Highness…"

One of the knights who was still on all fours shot a frustrated glare at Anna while reaching for his sword, and his breath hitched.

No one could attack a phantom.

Although they could clearly see her, they were unable to recognize her as a target. Faced with an opponent who could take their life at any moment, the strength drained from their hands as they stood there in stunned silence.

When I saw the knights completely lose their will to fight, I called out to Anna.

"Anna, I'll call you back later."

Anna gave a brief glance at the knights, bowed her head quietly, and then disappeared with the breeze flowing behind her.

In the blink of an eye, the event that felt like a fleeting dream passed, and the terrace fell silent.

Anna's malice as an assassin had been steadily rising. I was beginning to think this wasn't about just guarding me anymore.

I looked at the knights, who were drenched in sweat and shaken by the realization that they could be killed at any moment. I almost felt sorry for them.

If they learned from this, perhaps they would stop underestimating people by appearances. Many around me tended to strike back when attacked, so it was a small mercy they were still alive and leaving Bern soon…

As I watched the knights carry their unconscious comrades away, I felt eyes on me.

Now the real game begins.

I tightened my grip on my fan and met the gaze of the man before me.

"Let's talk," I said, giving him a gentle smile, and Prince Akeem covered his face with his hand, his shoulders trembling as he laughed.

"Ha! Ha ha ha! I see now why the Hero holds you in such high regard! I'm more eager than ever to break you now, Cecilia Cline."

He called me by my maiden name as if I were divorced, all while professing his fondness. It only made me hate him even more.

"It seems you liked the wine from Bern. By the way, I'm not Cecilia Cline. I am, and always will be, Cecilia Herbst until the goddess calls me. If you're too drunk to talk, I shall take my leave."

I'd blame the wine for his mistake, but this was the last time I'd tolerate being called by the wrong name.

It was painful not to get any information about Lucas, but this conversation with Prince Akeem was supposed to be on equal terms.

Besides, I couldn't stand the way he was belittling Lucas, who had chosen me.

As I stood to leave, Prince Akeem raised a hand, signaling for me to wait.

"I'm sorry. Don't be so cross. I've been eager to hold such a beautiful flower in my hands, and it seems I've drunk more than I expected while I waited for you."

Honestly, I could ignore how light his apology was, but he said I came right on time, didn't he?

Could he stop blaming others? And that tone! Why does he sound so much like he's trying to seduce me? It's repulsive.

Do Majaarian women really swoon over this sort of flattery? No matter how handsome he is, surely there's a limit. I'm sure they're just smiling politely out of obligation since he's a prince.

Not to mention that he keeps hinting at wanting to get closer. Does he not know about the Promise Mark?

"I see. Then please take care not to drink too much in the future. I hope you understand that flowers have the will to bloom.

Don’t treat them as if they’re easily plucked. If you reach out too carelessly, you might prick your fingers on hidden thorns.”

If you approach me with that attitude, you’ll be blown away and find yourself in an embarrassing situation, I implied, and Prince Akeem’s light brown eyes narrowed into a mischievous grin.

Did something in my warning make him laugh?

“The will to bloom, eh? You’ve changed quite a bit since I last met you. Let me speak plainly. If it weren’t for the Promise Mark, I would’ve taken you to bed already.”

I’m starting to get a headache.

Why does he think he’s more worthy of me than Lucas? And what happened to my consent, which he never asked for?

I was sure he didn’t even consider the possibility that I would turn him down, which was why he was being so cocky. But to say, “I would have taken you to bed already”?!

It sounded like he was implying that only he could touch me, and anything else was impossible.

“That’s something no one else can ever do, not even you.”

I said the words, but deep down, I felt a cold shiver run up my spine, and my lips trembled slightly as I spoke.

A phrase from a book I’d read in the library flashed through my mind:

In the land of Canaan, it is said there once were beastmen there who possessed the same powerful physique as magical beasts yet shared the same intellect as humans. While this has faded with time,

traces of beastmen blood still run through the Canaanites, and for this reason, they have been long favored by the rulers of the Majaarian kingdom.

Barnabash had remarked, "It's not like you're dealing with a beastman."

The Promise Mark reacted to base desires. It was a magic formed to respond to human emotions. Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for anyone, whether it was Prince Akeem or not, to touch me.

But what if it was a beastman?

Perhaps such a creature could bypass the Promise Mark and its protective magic?

The words from the book, Barnabash's comment, and the current situation all clicked together in my mind and sent a cold sweat running down my spine.

I stared at Prince Akeem, and he slowly smiled.

"Do you really think that's true?"

A mocking expression appeared on his fierce face, and his voice was filled with both amusement and malice, almost daring me to respond. I couldn't hold back anymore, and my voice trembled.

"What did you do to the people you took?"

The Egrich Empire was trying to capture magical beasts, and something had been brought from there into the land of Canaan, where descendants of beastmen lived. And there were a high number of missing people.

The deduction that followed was chilling enough to stop me from speaking, but I desperately blurted out the question I'd thought.

The expression on his face shifted from mockery to a grin filled with dark desire, whether it was because my question was amusing or because he was satisfied with my fear.

"Ceceilia Cline, it seems as though Felix did not appreciate your cleverness, but I quite like it. You're direct, and it's easy to answer you. But since you've done so well so far, I want to hear what you think."

He leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. He'd abandoned even the pretense of respect now, his posture now one of entitlement as he leaned forward and waited for my response. I bit my lip in frustration.

I felt nauseous but forced myself to muster the courage to move forward, telling myself that forgiveness wasn't an option.

"The people of Canaan weren't originally beastmen. They're mixed between beastmen and humans. There's no way of knowing how beastmen originally came about…"

"That's true. And?" He shrugged casually as if to say, "So what?" and I felt a flood of uncontrollable anger and fear explode inside of me.

"Humans don't just turn into beastmen by ingesting a magical beast, do they?" I slammed my hands on the table and stood up, glaring at the man before me as sharply as I could.

He had kidnapped people and used them for experiments.

I wasn't sure how he did it, whether he used the flesh or blood of magical beasts, but he had forcibly injected *something* from them into his captives in an attempt to turn them into beastmen.

There was no way such an experiment could succeed.

I could only imagine that those poor people had lost their reason and intelligence, who couldn't control themselves, and were more like beasts than humans in the end.

"You turned those who are supposed to protect us from beasts into beastmen. How could you do something so vile?! Don't you have any conscience at all?!"

"You never know if they'd become beastmen or not without trying, right? Besides, it's a proven fact that injecting Canaanite blood alongside substances from beasts prevents any physical deterioration. I was merely assisting the experiments out of the goodness of my own heart. And honestly, why do you care so much about the sacrifices of a few strangers you've never even met?"

"Because it's wrong! Releasing those poor, beastified people into Bern is reckless! What if they had reached our kingdom? Do you know how many people might've died because of—"

My voice rose in fury, only for me to gasp.

A realization had hit me, and it was something I desperately didn't want to acknowledge. My vision swayed, and my knees buckled. I clutched the edge of the table for support as I stared at Prince Akeem and shook my head.

"No, it can't be…"

It can't be true! It can't be!

He wouldn't force Bern's Hero to slaughter his own people!

I frantically stared at him, willing him to tell me I was wrong. My gaze fell on his coppery red hair, which glinted faintly in the light. My heart hammered in my chest, and the suffocating pressure in my chest made it hard to breathe. Prince Akeem's shoulders shook with amusement as though telling me to go ahead and collapse.

"Ha ha ha! Looks like your thorns have fallen off! Who would've thought the news that your beloved has slaughtered to his heart's content would be so shocking? You're surprisingly cute when you're shaken, Cecilia Cline. You're just my type."

"You made him…kill?"

You turned my beloved Lucas into a beast?

He became a knight to protect people, yet you forced him to use his strength for something so cruel? Did you push him to the brink until he collapsed?!

"That's right. Bern's Hero truly lived up to his title as the strongest. I heard he didn't look much different from the monsters I created once he was drenched in blood. I'd hoped the beasts would kill each other off, but naturally, his skill as a knight prevailed. He wiped out almost all of the man-made beastmen in no time. Of course if it were me, I wouldn't have even bothered with such a task. I certainly don't want to look like him!"

The torrent of the unforgivable truths hammered into my mind, every blow threatening to overwhelm me.

Yet the need to know what had happened to Lucas burned stronger than my despair. Words spilled from my lips of their own accord.

"What do you mean, look like him? What happened to him? What happened to Lucas?"

"Half of his body from head to toe is marked with black markings, like he was branded with the curse given to grave criminals. I heard it's so horrific that even a woman sent to his bedchambers screamed 'Monster!' and fled. Bern's most handsome knight is now unrecognizable. How utterly tragic."

"Black markings?"

"Oh, you didn't know? It seems your Hero was too ashamed to share that detail with the woman he loves. Understandable, though. After all, who wouldn't be afraid of being cast aside for another man, like Felix was? Although I must say, that's the outcome I was hoping for when I came here."

He sneered at me and I clutched the table until my knuckles turned white. But his next words drained even that faint strength.

"Dying alongside the one you love the most… Isn't that such a beautifully tragic end?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The sword is a gift from the goddess. Basically, the Hero harbors a divine entity within him—far too much for any mere mortal to bear. Now, whether that's true or not, why leave such a dangerous force unchecked? An enslaved dragon must die with its master. They

should be slaughtered, so they don't threaten me when I become king."

Slaughtered.

It wasn't a word I was used to hearing, but a word you should never use when referring to human beings. Suddenly, I remembered something Lucas said before.

"The only one who can kill me is you."

We were like two wings of the same bird. We'd become even more indispensable to each other—now, more than ever. Should one of us be lost, we might survive but our hearts would surely die.

Prince Akeem said power needs a source of solace. If he destroyed me, Lucas's sense of solace, it would be difficult for Lucas to continue being the Hero. He needed to destroy me so he could kill Lucas.

"You're not fit to be a king!"

I backed toward the door slowly, raising my voice frantically. The prince, drunk on his own desire, shrugged carelessly.

"Well, that's not for you to decide. And it won't be long before *you* find yourself unfit to be the princess."

I had to escape. I turned to call for Anna and the others, but just then, a dull *thud* echoed from the forest beyond the railing of the terrace. And it happened three times.

"What was that?! Anna? Kate? Elsa?!"

I turned my trembling voice toward the garden where the strange sounds came from, another heavy blow reverberating through

the air. A tree farther off in the distance shook violently.

The noises were of a one-sided fight. And as the rustling of leaves grew louder and closer, cold sweat dripped down my temple.

"They've finally arrived. It seems the rumors of a strong scent drawing them in were true. Are the Lebensklinge not very skilled at monster hunting?"

"What?!"

I couldn't imagine that Anna and the others could be defeated. Sure, they had barely managed to survive during the Fenrir attack. But unless something even stronger than a Fenrir appeared, they should be all right.

I strained my eyes, peering into the darkness. Then, above the roses, a pair of full moons floated into view.

"Your Highness, choosing the terrace was the right decision. It's quite the romantic setting for a rendezvous." His words were chilling, crueler than anything I imagined. As he spoke, a black mass appeared on top of the terrace railing.

I gasped.

Eyes burning with a golden flame of malice peeked out between messy strands of dark brown hair. I could only see glimpses of his dark skin.

A bloodstained leather breastplate was barely visible beneath the blackened, tattered cloak he wore, which looked to be made of some kind of beast hide or other ragged garment, I couldn't tell

which. The left side of his face was obscured by a mask made of leather tucked beneath a black hood.

The overwhelming, terrifying presence of his mana filled the terrace in an instant. It was so intense I couldn't imagine it was human in nature. I stumbled backward, my legs finally giving out.

"Ahh!"

I collapsed onto the ground with a thud, my gaze frozen in shock, fixed on the terrace floor. A shadow loomed over me like the grim reaper. I was no longer capable of running, so all I could do was look up with fright, lips trembling. The ragged hem of his cloak brushed against the floor.

The dark beast crouched down to eye level with me. And he dropped a single black rose from beneath the folds of his cloak.

"Good evening, my lady with the amber hair."

His low voice was heavy with both rage and desire, and it curled around me like smoke, making sweat spring upon my skin.

Why had I never thought someone more powerful than Anna and the others could appear?

His presence was so overwhelming I was unable to even make a sound. Then, I heard Akeem's calm voice. "Wow, I finally made one who could speak." He tipped his head to the side as he rose from his chair.

"You see, I said earlier that the beast would stabilize with Canaanite blood, didn't I? When a beastman's body stops deteriorating, three primal instincts rise to the surface. Instincts that

are natural for beasts and humans. We can provide for hunger and sleep, of course. But the third—lust—well, that's beyond our ability to control. And since you've spent many lonely nights being separated from your husband, surely you'll be able to satisfy him."

His words were despicable and cowardly.

I couldn't hold back any longer, and his name escaped from my lips.



"Lukie… Lucas! Lukie!" The ring on my finger tightened and pulsed with warmth, just as a black-gloved hand covered mine.

"The moon is beautiful tonight," he murmured.

I couldn't tear my gaze from the worn black leather. The weight of his love, cruel but earnest, descended upon me. As I realized the meaning of his words, my throat tightened with regret and anguish.

The glass terrace was in full view of the ballroom. If a beastman attacked me here, I'd never be able to stay by Lucas's side. That was why Akeem had lured me here, knowing the consequences.

The man before me understood that danger and knew I would come to be alone with Akeem. That was why he told me things had gone well, so he would be coming home. Because he already knew.

"It's so unfair. You knew everything, didn't you?"

He'd given me hints. But my emotions were a tangled, anguished mess.

I choked back sobs as I released a strangled mix of rage and excitement. A firm hand gripped mine, stopping me.

As much as I despised myself for being thrilled at his touch, I couldn't deny it. I heard a satisfied voice coming from the cowardly prince as I trembled.

"Perhaps you should've married Felix. The strongest knight on the continent, bound by some foolish, monogamous love, now has to defend his wife who gave herself to a monster. What a pitiful sight. But don't worry—if the Hero snaps under the strain, I'll take you in."

Now that he had said what he wanted, Akeem turned to leave. Just as I opened my mouth to utter a sharp retort, a strong hand pressed against me and sealed my lips.

He nipped at my earlobe with his teeth, his tongue teasing the curve of my ear. I threw my head to the side, determined that I wouldn't react to the stimulation.

"Stop, let go!"

I don't want anyone else to see me like this but Lucas!

I pushed against his shoulders angrily and turned my face away. But he pulled me into his cloak and cradled me with a strength that felt less like an embrace and more like I was being held captive.

Then a soft, apologetic kiss brushed against the lace on my back. "All of you…belongs to me."

"…!"

The realization that my true love had returned made tears stream down my cheeks.

"Well then, it would be rude for me to stay, so I'll take my leave. I'll send someone to fetch you once the ball ends. Enjoy yourselves."

"Wait!"

Akeem must've figured I'd given up resisting.

When I tried to call out to stop him, but the hand on my head tightened, silencing me.

"Mmph!"

I saw the glass doors shut quietly in my peripheral vision. They shimmered briefly, warped by his usual defensive barrier spell, along with an illusion spell to obscure the view of the terrace from the ballroom. Akeem vanished from sight.

At the same time, the brown hair fell over my face, darkening into a beautiful twilight-colored hue. The beast-like texture of the right side of his face shifted until it became smooth as porcelain.

There was magic hiding us, but we'd escaped notice from anyone. Finally, relief set in, and I became keenly aware of the person in front of me—the one I'd longed to see so desperately.

I felt my entire body relax as I was surrounded by his familiar, soothing scent. He sensed my surrender, and thankfully, the beast with the beautiful eyes caught me in his arms.

"Haah, finally!"

"Mm, ahh, nngh…!"

He kissed me so intensely I could barely breathe, as if he craved even my breaths. Meanwhile, he placed me gently on his cross-legged lap so I wouldn't get dirty.

The sharp contrast between care and the arms that frantically sought me stirred something overwhelming inside of me—a surge of emotions I couldn't contain. I bit down hard on his tongue.

"Oww! That hurt!"

"Don't touch me! How dare you… You could you do this to your own wife?!" That was probably the first time I'd ever expressed my anger this openly.

I clenched my fists and pounded on his chest, yelling louder with each blow. He froze, clutching his bloody mouth.

Then for some reason he hastily unclasped his cloak, wiped the leather breastplate with it, and casually tossed it aside. I glared at him.

I didn't say that because I don't want to get dirty!

"Let me go, I said!"

"I can't do that!"

What do you mean, you can't?! All you have to do is let me go!

His voice quivered like he was frightened, but instead of apologizing, he just stubbornly refused. *How selfish can you get?!*

Just because your cute behavior usually melts my resolve doesn't mean you can get away with this! Besides, wearing that mask only makes you look more intimidating! I definitely don't think it makes you look kind of cool or anything!

"Who are you?! 'The moon is beautiful tonight'? Well, looking up at the moon and whispering sweet nothings beneath its glow is something I reserve for only one person! The one I love with all my heart. Do you have any idea how worried I've been?!"

Say you're sorry then, and tell me you're home already! I told him through my teary eyes, but his golden gaze just darkened ominously.

Why are you *angry?!*

"And who is this person you love so much?" he questioned.

You know who it is!

You're trembling, afraid that I'll leave you, but now you lower your voice into a growl and dare to ask me that?! If you're so concerned, how about you show some humility instead of playing dumb?!

Fine. If that's how you want it, I'll give it to you straight!

"The person I love has hair the color of twilight and eyes as golden as the sun. He's the strongest knight in the kingdom of Bern, and he's also the absolute meanest one!"

I threw decorum out the window as I raised my voice. His previously dark eyes widened, the golden depths shimmering in the terrace's light.

"I see."

That's all you have to say? And don't tip your head, acting all confused like you don't know who I'm talking about! Fine, then! I'll spell it out for you and make you regret ever asking!

Feel the shame, Lucas Theoderic Herbst!

"He's a sore loser, childish, and always teases me for his amusement."

"I see."

Why are you looking away? You know I'm talking about you!

"But he's pretty cute, too. He was so happy when I confessed my feelings to him that he actually cried. We met when we were children, but even back then, he decided he wanted to marry me."

"I-I see…"

Hmph. The least you can do is feel a little remorse.

Lucas couldn't even hide his bright red ears even with his head bowed. They were fully exposed since he had his hair tied back. *Just give it up and say what you need to say already!*

"It's someone who works so hard and has saved so many people. He's a truly wonderful man. That's why I didn't call out for him, no matter how scared I was. Because if I had, I wouldn't have been able to hold back how much I missed him. I'd have ended up crying and begging to see him. That's why something like this—a reunion like something out of a dream—shouldn't even be possible! P-Please, have you seen my beloved husband?!"

Just give it up already and say, "I'm home, Cecilia."

I whispered his name with trembling lips, trying to coax him into it, but Lucas just let out a pained sigh and rested his forehead on my shoulder.

"I'm home, Cecilia. I'm so sorry for scaring you. I'll apologize as many times as I need to and explain everything. Just please don't say you don't know me anymore."

"You idiot! You better apologize! I missed you so much, Lukie!" I clung to his broad chest even as I chastised him. "Lukie, Lukie…"

"I love you… I love you, Cecilia. I missed you so much. I wanted this for so long."

"I love you more than anyone!"

He answered every time I called his name, and tears streamed down my cheeks. He kissed them away. His tender kisses left me shuddering between quiet sobs.

I reached out to the earring on his left ear, but his face shifted slightly. He turned away, trying to hide the markings that extended from his jawline to his neck beneath the mask. I glared at him. He was clearly trying to stop me from touching the magical emblem.

First, he worried me to death with this undercover mission, posing as Lukie to thwart Prince Akeem's schemes. And now he was trying to dodge the issue entirely?

"Lukie."

"Yes?"

He planted another effortless kiss on my neck, but I gritted my teeth and yanked on the ribbon that secured his mask. His hand held the mask in place, and he pulled away in a panic.

"W-wait, Cecilia! I need to mentally prepare myself!"

"No, you don't."

You think that's what you need to prepare for? Well, I needed to be prepared to be embraced by your beastly alter ego! And you know how uncomfortable I am when anyone other than "Lucas" does things to me!

"Er, right. I guess, um, I mean, I *am* glad that you're so assertive, but I really do need to prepare myself. Finn says it's pretty shocking, and I feel like I need a bath first because I'm dirty."

What is he, some kind of shy maiden?!

His eyes darted around aimlessly, clearly flustered.

Despite being happy with my quick response and all that time we spent kissing and expressing our love for each other, he was clearly worried I'd reject him after seeing the marks on him. But honestly, he was adorable and totally unfair.

There was so much I wanted to ask him, but after all he'd been through the return to me, I wanted to spoil him, too. Right now, it was my duty as his wife to be the bigger person.

"All right. Now let me see just how dirty you are."

"Yeah, let's—wait, what?!"

He rose to his feet before he comprehended what I just said. I placed a firm hand on his chest and gently but firmly pushed him.

He didn't budge, of course, so I said, "Sit down, darling."

He collapsed onto the chair with a thud and stared at me in stunned silence. I lifted the hem of my dress, propping my knee between his legs with a sly smile. His eyes widened in shock.

"Wait… What's that white thing under your dress? Wait, are you kidding me?"

His gaze darted between my face, my dress, and the faint glimpse of my white garter belt. I suppressed a laugh as I began to undo the straps of his breastplate. He finally snapped back to reality and tried to stop me, but I gave him a meaningful look.

"Cecilia, I ran all the way here. I'm drenched in sweat."

"All the more reason to take it off," I said sharply, but my hands froze.

Wait, he ran all the way here? Did he check for any signs of beastmen from the border forest on the Majaar side all the way to Bern?! Just how ridiculous is his stamina, anyway?

If he goes full beast mode, I'll be left half-dead! I need to get him a bit tired first…

I steeled my resolve and reached for the buttons on his black shirt, clearly chosen for its high collar that would conceal the marks. But before I could unfasten them, he caught my hand.

"Wait—does it hurt?" I asked.

"No, it doesn't hurt. It's just, well…the stagnant parts inside of me have risen to the surface, that's all. It's nothing to worry about."

"What stagnant parts?" I glared at him for an explanation, even more worried than before.

He blushed all the way up to his ears, looking as if he wanted nothing more than to avoid this question. He was adorable, but I wasn't letting this one go.

"Lukie, if something like this has appeared on you, does that mean your body is affected in some way?"

"Sort of, but I can endure it, so…"

Why is he panicking? And that's not the point, anyway!

"You can endure it, so what??"

"Cece…?"

The anxiety I'd bottled up for so long suddenly erupted, and my voice came out colder than I'd anticipated.

I knew Lucas was strong.

I also understood that I wasn't much help and that I was his weakness. That was why I didn't want to be a burden anymore. Even when he wouldn't tell me things, I accepted it as a necessary evil so I could stay by his side and support his approach.

But if he was going to keep secrets like this, I couldn't accept it anymore.

"Do you have any idea how I felt, hearing that you collapsed from someone else after all I endured to support you?" My voice trembled, and he sat up straighter in his chair.

"I'm so sorry, Cecilia. It's all my fault! Please don't suppress your cries. You'll hurt your lips…"

He hastily pulled off his gloves and reached out to me, but the sight of his concern made my cheeks quiver.

He's so quick to notice my pain, so why can't he care for his own body? The thought infuriated me, and I couldn't stop the words from spilling out, even though I knew I shouldn't.

"I'm crying because it's *you!* Who else am I supposed to cry in front of?!"

"Me! I'm sorry. Me!"

"They told me you collapsed from working too hard, and on top of that, that red-haired good-for-nothing prince tried to use me to kill you! Then my husband, who somehow came back alive and well, is hiding things from me like it's no big deal! How can I not be worried?!"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

"You should know the fear of being the person you love dying and being left behind better than anyone!"

I knew it was something a knight's wife should never say.

I understood that Lucas had done everything in his power to prevent a tragedy like that this time as well. I knew his kindness didn't deserve this kind of response.

I deliberately chose those words because I never wanted him to hide something that could cost him his life ever again.

He drew a sharp breath.

"…"

His warm fingertips gently brushed aside my hair that stuck to my tear-stained face.

"I love you so much."

I couldn't bear the tenderness of his touch, so I blurted out those words as if to excuse myself. His golden eyes softened with sweet, overwhelming emotion.

"I know. I love you too. More than anything. Nothing else matters to me."

He pulled me close and murmured words of love instead of apology. As I let myself sink into his arms, the next thing out of my mouth was an insult. *Honestly, what's wrong with me?!*

"How can you just smile like nothing happened? Tell me you'll never do anything this reckless again, even if it's just a lie!"

"I'm sorry. I was just so happy thinking that maybe you can't live without me anymore." He looked so positively blissful it was absurd. I raised my hand to swat at him, but he didn't flinch or even move to avoid it. His eyes were steady and brimmed with an unshakeable resolve.

"But I can't promise you to stop, no matter how much you beg me or hate me for it. This is my duty and the reason I'm alive. I'll keep doing the same thing, no matter what. I'll eliminate anyone, even if they're innocent if I have to."

That's why he killed all the victims of the experiments.

It was a declaration of intent, a vow. His words echoed the past he'd once confessed to, of being a faithful, murderous puppet who had almost been cast aside afterward.

To Lucas, protecting the kingdom, its people, and me wasn't just fulfilling his duty as a knight. It was his very reason for existing. It was the ultimate purpose that justified his continued survival. And anything that threatened that purpose—whether it be innocent victims forcibly turned into beasts or not, was simply an obstacle to be cut down.

The harshness of the life he'd chosen left me feeling paralyzed. My lips trembled, and he must've misinterpreted my reaction as fear of him because his golden eyes narrowed with a dangerous glint.

"Cecilia, why are you crying? Why did you stop touching me?"

He unclasped my crooked hairpin as he spoke, letting my hair fall loose. He gathered a strand and wrapped it around his fingers,

pulling it just hard enough to get my attention.

It didn't hurt, but the message was clear—if I showed even the slightest bit of fear or tried to pull away, he would know, and he wouldn't allow it.

It was a threat not to run and a plea to stay, to keep loving him despite everything.

His first true confession of the weight he bore as a knight made my heart ache painfully. I abandoned my intent to hit him and instead wrapped my arms around his neck, snapping back. "It's because you're being mean! How am I supposed to hit you when you talk like that?"

I pressed myself closer to him, making sure he knew it wasn't his bloody path I hated. He blinked in surprise, a faint blush coloring his cheeks behind the mask.

Why is he so adorable even with that mask on? He's so infuriatingly adorable despite being such a ruthless demon.

"It makes it harder for you to hit me, huh? That's a pleasant surprise, but it's a bit disappointing."

How is it disappointing?

"Shouldn't you *not* want to be hit?"

Is he trying to get hit on purpose? The thought made me hesitate, and he gave me a sheepish look.

"I've said it before, but you're the only one who can sway my emotions, Cece."

"What?"

"As Felix said, I've done far more than you know, and I've never felt any aversion to killing. That's how I was built. I didn't feel a thing, even this time. It was just something that needed to be done."

He said it so casually, like it truly meant nothing. I clenched my teeth, and his callused hand gently cupped my cheek to stop me.

"But you're different, Cece. When you look at me like that, I realize that what I've been doing all this time isn't right. I know I'm a monster. That's why I want to make sure you never have to make this face again. I'll do better next time. That's why I'll take reckless risks as many times as I have to and drench myself in blood if it comes to that."

But even when his eyes filled with sorrow, my chest swelled with pride, so overwhelming it made me want to scream with love.

"Lukie, you're not a monster! Do you have any idea how many people's lives you've saved this time? You're a brave and wonderful Hero who protects Bern. Please never, ever say something like that about yourself again!"

I pinched his right cheek hard, and he couldn't help but laugh.

"Ha. Ha ha! A great Hero? That's an exaggeration, don't you think? Maybe I do want you to hit me. I want you to think about me all the time, about how you hit your Hero. I'm so obsessed with you, Cecilia."

His voice was filled with a mix of obsession and love as his gaze pierced straight through me. I swallowed hard.

That sweet word “obsession” didn’t come close to describing the depth of his emotions at all. I respected his determination to stay on the right path, but the means he used were so dark and twisted that I felt an immense weight of responsibility.

Ever since I’d sworn myself to him, it felt like Lucas had started revealing all the parts of himself he used to keep hidden.

The fact that he was using even his warped tendencies to entangle me so thoroughly made me realize that his love was so deep and boundless it was sometimes terrifying. And yet at the same time, I found myself wanting to satisfy him completely, wondering what I needed to do to give him everything. That thought scared me, too.

There was no way out, no escape route. I had no choice but to go forward.

I found myself worrying if my feelings were truly enough to satisfy him. Just as that unease flickered through me, he averted his gaze. He covered the black emblem on his neck with his hand, his expression a mixture of shyness and frustration, and what he said next surprised me.

“Well, I knew this would appear if I moved too far away from you. A sword needs its sheath nearby, or it becomes too difficult to live…” His voice grew quieter as he reached the end of his sentence. My heart swelled with such happiness I thought it might burst.

When I’d read those ancient texts, I thought Eckesachs’s sheath had referred to the knight chosen by the blade.

But judging by what Lucas had just said, he had become one

with the sword, and the sheath was…me?

And a sword's sheath was indispensable. If they were separated for too long, the sword would fester with unhealed pain and loneliness until it broke down entirely. That was what the texts had said.

"Wait, so…you got these marks because you were lone—"

"Please don't say anything else."

He quickly covered my mouth before I could finish. His face flushed a deep red, looking like he was angry. I blinked at him, my gaze drifting to the strange marks on his neck.

Could this tattoo-like emblem that so boldly declared he was no ordinary person really have appeared because…he missed me? That must be impossible…

"Lukie…"

I placed my hand on top of the one he was using to cover my mouth and gently moved it away. Then he used that hand to cover his face, like he was hiding behind a mask, his voice tense with discomfort.

"I know. I know how childish I'm being. Just please don't say anything more!"

"I was worried about you."

He puffed out his cheeks a little, and I thought, *He's like a sulking child. It's adorable, but let me talk already!*

His golden eyes shimmered with frustration as he let out a resigned sigh.

"Haah… My wife is really too cute for her own good. What is it now?" He hung his head dramatically in defeat, but I wasn't about to let this chance slip past me.

"Did you know that sometimes rabbits hide their illnesses and suddenly die out of nowhere? That's why people started to think they died from loneliness."

"…"

I pushed his dark hair away from his face with my fingertips and locked eyes with him as I explained. His silence told me he didn't understand, so I tapped him on the nose and said, "Were you terribly lonely without me, my cute little bunny?"

"B-bunny?!"

The shock on his face was too much. *First a child, now a bunny rabbit?!* I couldn't help but stifle a laugh and compose myself enough to continue.

"I missed you so much I couldn't stand being apart from you," I confessed. My voice trembled as I let out a shaky breath. "I'm so glad we're finally together again."

His eyes opened wide, then softened as they melted into a sweet, affectionate gaze.

"I missed you, too. So much it almost broke me," he murmured.

He undid the top button of his shirt as if to prove a point, revealing the dark pattern that trailed from his neck to his collarbone and shoulders. I gently traced my fingers over it.

"It doesn't hurt, right? No pain at all?" I asked, relief washing over me when he quietly accepted my touch.

"It reacts to emotions and spreads sometimes, but it doesn't hurt right now," he said, shrugging silently. Then he turned his face away shyly. I couldn't help but stare at him.

"Honestly, I thought it would be a good deterrent against women, but it might even be a little *too* effective. Now that it's spread to my face, some woman even looked at me and screamed, 'Monster!' That jerk told you about it, right? Anyway, even though I know you accept me how I am, I wanted to at least be clean when I touch you. I'd die if you found me repulsive," he muttered, his cheeks red and his voice tinged with anguish.

He really does sound like a shy maiden, I thought, completely stunned by a glimpse of purity I saw from the combination of his flushed cheeks and shy expression.

Come to think of it, he did mention something about silencing troublesome people before he left. *Could these marks be a part of that plan? And, of course, just saying his name proved the connection between us was vivid and real. Speaking of that, though…*

"How much did you show her?" I blurted out the least important question first and immediately regretted it, though I couldn't hide my annoyance. He looked startled as I leaned toward him. "Lucas. Just how much of your body did that woman see?"

"Um, just my upper body. I knew she was sneaking around in my room, so I deliberately got messy during my hunt. I brought back

a severed head of a beast and was completely soaked in blood, and then, well…I did some stuff until she broke down crying and ran off."

Yikes, talk about brutal. I couldn't blame her for reacting that way.

"Wait, did you take off your shirt on purpose?"

I couldn't believe it. He wouldn't even let me pick out my own dresses, yet he deliberately took off his shirt in front of some strange woman?!

"Um, yes. Cece, are you mad?" He then started to make excuses to placate me. "The beast's head wasn't from a beastman or anything, I swear!" But that only fueled my anger and jealousy. I grabbed both of his cheeks harder than I intended and kissed him. Hard.

"C-Cece, what…"

I pushed my tongue into his mouth, which was parted with surprise, just like he'd taught me. I entangled my tongue with his, making sure he understood exactly how angry I was. His arms hesitantly circled around me as if tentatively seeing if he was allowed to touch me.

The faint, unsure contact both made my heart ache and made me even angrier.

I climbed onto his lap and tugged his dark head closer.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, but eventually, I pulled away and pressed a final, gentle kiss to his lips. His golden eyes clouded with desire, wavering with anguish.

As he opened his mouth, likely to apologize, I silenced him with a finger against his lips.

"I'm sorry," I spoke softly. "I want to respect your feelings, but I'm far more jealous than you realize. I can't stand the thought that you'd show a stranger what you won't even let your wife see."

He froze, staring at me as if he'd stopped breathing. I took his hand and let out a deep breath before guiding it to me. I placed the fingers on the ribbon that held together the back of my dress.

"Then how about we take off our clothes at the same time?"

"What?" He stared at me in disbelief, his wide eyes apparent even behind the mask. I couldn't meet his gaze as I looked down and haltingly tried to explain my desire to see his face.

"I-I know you might not like that. But I thought maybe it might distract you a little. Is that…okay?"

I always resisted, but it wasn't because I didn't like what we did together. It was just because I was painfully shy. I could never say no to anything when it came to him.

If I could give him all of me, I would. Deep down, I wanted to give him everything, and I wanted all of him in return.

Please accept my selfishness.

You were the one who gave me the right to comfort and support you.

"Lukie," I began to plead, but he placed a finger on my lips, silencing me in the same way as I had done before.

"Damn it. I can't believe I'm falling for you all over again. Fine."

He leaned his forehead against my shoulder and took deep, deliberate breaths as if to steady himself. I patiently waited while he breathed in and out.

"All right. Let's do it."

I suppressed a smile, suspecting he was trying very hard to be composed. I slowly stretched my hand toward him. The moment I moved, he flinched and pulled me into a tight embrace, holding me as though he were frightened.

"…"

I let my hand gently slide through his sleek, dark hair. He looked at me hesitantly as I loosened the ribbon tying his mask and leaned in to kiss his mouth.

"I love you."

Don't be afraid. I won't leave you. My kisses trailed from his trembling lips to the black markings that snaked along his neck like the vines of a rosebush. Finally, I took off his mask.

His hair fell forward, brushing against my fingers. I tucked the locks of his hair behind his ears, and in the process, my hand brushed against the cool metal of his earring, and then my gaze returned to his face.

The markings spread across his cheek, forming a pattern of vines blossoming into a large rose. They were stunningly beautiful but almost unnerving, like a lingering shadow of pain.

He was the only vessel of a sacred artifact in this entire world.

There was no one else to teach him how to control or wield its power, no one to turn to. These markings might as well be the manifestation of his internal struggles. The thought that he was tormented weighed on me. I reached out to cradle his face in my hands.

The firm, rough texture of his skin beneath my palms suddenly reminded me of his title. The Knight of the Blue Rose.

Why did Lucas get a nickname like that?

He was as striking and elegant as a rose, of course, but was that enough to choose such a name for a knight?

Before I could dwell on that thought, his dark lashes lifted and revealed golden eyes that glimmered as though they held all the light in the world. His eyes were focused solely on me.

All my doubts vanished, leaving me with warmth rising in my chest.

"I think you're even more handsome now," I murmured.

"You've got to be kidding. I've been agonizing over this." His cheeks flushed, shocked.

I couldn't help but stifle a laugh. "I'm serious. It's like the proof of your love for me. And that makes me love you even more. Welcome home, darling. I've been waiting for you."

"I know. I'm home, my beloved wife. I'm so sorry for making you worry."

This time, his embrace was unabashed, and I clung to him tightly in return.

I'm on the verge of being utterly overwhelmed by my husband's passionate kisses!

It had been so long since I'd been in his arms. His lips poured out his affection for me, making me let down my guard. We'd already been kissing for several minutes now.

It's been a long time, and his arms are holding me tighter and tighter!

"L-Lukie, maybe it's time to…mmph!" The moment I tried to stop him by opening my mouth, his tongue immediately darted in, gently teasing the underside of mine.

Saliva began pouring from my mouth, and an inexplicable sense of shame rushed through me as though he was tonguing somewhere far more intimate. I tried to turn my head, and finally, his thick tongue withdrew, leaving me gasping for air.

"Haah, nngh!"

He licked a trail of silver thread that dripped down my lips, and I shuddered, gulping as I fought to steady my breath.

Lucas let out a heavy sigh, too, before adjusting his grip and cradling the back of my head.

"Your tongue is so sweet. Don't stop me yet, Cece. It's been ten whole days. I need to make up for lost time."

What kind of request is that?! I'm already light-headed and oxygen-deprived!

"W-wait, I'm still catching my—mpph!"

His relentless tongue probed, licked, and sucked, going beyond anything that could be called just a mere kiss. A tingling sensation rushed down my spine, and I couldn't stop myself from arching my back reflexively.

He seemed to interpret that as encouragement—or maybe an opportunity—leaning further into me and pressing on with even greater intensity. Tears welled up in my eyes.

I can't anymore… There's a limit to my lung capacity, you know! I'm really going to pass out!

Desperate to convey my distress, I patted weakly on his shoulder and tried to turn my face away, but he just whispered, "Only a little longer. Please, Cece. Just a bit more." His relentless pleas left me no escape.

But in the face of his persistence, I finally steeled myself.

If escape doesn't work, then I'll just have to push forward!

"Oh, so that's how you plan on getting away."

Still pressed against him, I pushed back with all of my strength and managed to break apart from the kiss. Lucas was startled and pulled away. I gasped for air and tried to glare at him through teary eyes, only to be pierced by a smoldering, golden gaze lit with burning desire. A cold sweat broke out across my skin.

This is bad! Did I just provoke him? My mind raced. *Wait, he's only supposed to make up for the kisses we missed out on before, right?*

Surely he won't count everything else we do at night as part of that repayment…would he?!

"I-I'm not running away!"

In fact, running away wasn't even on my mind. Of course it wasn't. Still—doing this *here,* of all places?! I quickly tried to pull myself together, realizing that my corset was already loose. I pressed my exposed back against the armrest of the chaise to hide it. Lucas's beautiful, porcelain features melted into something utterly seductive.

"That's right. After all, it was you who came onto me tonight. You dressed up so beautifully, stealing my gaze away from that bastard Akeem. There's no way you'd run. Not when you look this stunning. The contrast between that bold, sultry purple dress and your innocent, bright green eyes make my head spin."

His voice was smooth as velvet as he traced his fingers along the hem of my gown.

His hand slid higher along my leg as he spoke, pulling my dress up with it. His fingers slipped beneath the white garter belt on my bare thigh, leaving me blushing.

"U-Um, well…"

I wondered earlier why Lucas hadn't laid a finger on Akeem despite exuding a palpable, ferocious malice. It struck me as being

unusually restrained on his part, but now I knew why—it was this dress.

Though I'd inadvertently kept him from crossing any lines with Akeem, I hadn't exactly spared myself from danger. Not by a long shot.

I'd worn this to make him notice me, but I certainly didn't intend for things to escalate *here!* I shook my head as if to deny it.

"Remember what I said before? Any man who comes to see you when I'm not around is scum, and you don't have to pay attention to them. I know you couldn't avoid meeting him at the audience, but why did you entertain him at the party in the dress I specifically asked you not to wear in public?"

The sharp edge in his voice, coupled with the jealousy that oozed from his eyes, sent shivers throughout my body. I was embarrassed to feel a pulsing heat deep inside of me.

"I-I'm sorry…"

Is it fear that makes me tremble? Or the shameful feeling of anticipation that's filling up my chest?

I wasn't sure if it was the fear or an indecent thrill that gripped me, but I pressed a hand over my pounding heart and managed a shaky apology. Lucas's grip on the backrest tightened with a creak.

"You wore it on purpose, didn't you?"

"…!"

His low, barely contained anger vibrated in my ears, leaving my breaths shallow. As he leaned in closer, I instinctively shrank back,

only for him to tilt my chin upward, forcing me to meet the blazing fire in his eyes. I was held captive by his burning jealousy.

"My dearest, who did you want to break you?"

His words were deadly serious, but there was longing in his gaze. It was unfair to ask such an obvious question.

I'd been so desperate for him to say he missed me, and now that he had, my foolish heart clung to the idea of closing the gap between us, even as my fear fought to keep me grounded.

If I admitted it out loud, there'd be no going back. Just like I told him before when he came home, I'd be his to ruin. I knew that, right now, he would make love to me so completely, so devastatingly, that I'd forget where I even was. Nothing would exist outside of him.

I had to deny it. I couldn't let him win like this.

But when my lips finally moved, they betrayed me. His name slipped out like a prayer.

"You, Lukie."

Who else would it be? The one I longed for was right in front of me. How could I possibly resist the man I loved so deeply that it hurt?

"Yours is the only love I need. Only you…"

The moment I answered, he descended on me like a wild beast, kissing my lips with a ferocity that stole my breath away.

"Mmph!"

He pinned me against the chaise and ripped off my dress without hesitation. His hands gripped my chest, squeezing hard enough to reshape my breasts as his fingers teased my sensitive

nipples. I gasped as he yanked down my panties, his wrist brushing the Mark on my abdomen. The friction ignited a spark that left me trembling as his fingers found my hidden, aching nub below.

"Ahh, wait! Lucas! My stomach feels—aah!"

The touch I'd been longing for left my body aching, and I felt a throbbing heat inside of me.

Feeling my body reacting even more than I'd expected made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Lucas's tongue traveled ferociously down to my hips. I reached out to cling to his dark blue hair, and I called out to him.

"Wait, Lucas!"

He laughed softly, a strained, wicked sound.

"Wait? After calling my name, looking so needy? After showing me a body so sensitive, it breaks my reason entirely, and you want me to wait? You must be joking."

He saw right through to my desires, leaving my cheeks burning so fiercely I thought they might catch fire.

I should have wanted to make love to him, but I pushed him away. He knelt in front of me, begging me to let him make love to me. I was so embarrassed I turned my face away from him. He clicked his tongue and then buried his face between my legs. He lapped at me with the tip of his tongue and began flicking my nub with the edge of his finger.

"Ahh, stop, wait! Lucas, please!"

As I writhed in protest, the arm beneath my legs shifted, spreading them wide apart.

I could no longer close my thighs no matter how much I struggled. My balance was precarious as I was perched on the edge of the chaise, and my attempts to twist away only left me clutching desperately at the backrest for stability.

"Lucas, this position is—wait, what are you—ah!!"

It was almost like I was begging to be ruined, putting myself in the perfect position to surrender my body to him. Despite how long it had been, it was beyond mean to make me do it in a place like this. I looked up at him, and what I saw next made my entire body freeze.

Lucas tore at his clothes with one hand to get them out of the way, actually ripping them apart. He even tore off his belt with brute strength.

He carelessly tossed the belt aside and slowly unzipped his pants. He took out his swollen erection from his underwear and started stroking it in front of me.

"What do you think I'm going to do?"

His large hand stroked his intimidating cock as he smirked, licking his lips like a true sadist. My body began to tremble.

Uh-oh, this is bad!

The demon knight has really returned! It's about to get cruel in here!

What should he do?! If he puts that huge thing inside of me right now, I'll definitely lose all reason!

He'll make me feel so good I'll break. It'll feel so intense I'll die! No, more like unbearably overwhelming, and I'll definitely say something incriminating in the process. Won't this make things even more complicated in the future?

Ugh, I have to avoid that.

"Lucas, it's been so long, and it's too big… No…"

I didn't want to run away, and I didn't mind if he made love to me, but couldn't he at least make it smaller for once?

Fear and agitation made my mind foggy.

Yet, extrapolating from past experience, I could easily imagine what lay ahead. I foolishly begged him to wait, completely forgetting just how much in love I was. Little did I realize, my husband knew my body so well and craved to devour me completely. This was just what he had expected.

"Don't you want me to put it in?" he asked seductively in a breathy voice, and I managed to nod as I gripped the chair tightly.

"I thought so," he muttered with satisfaction as he put his lips on my garter belt. "Then let me give my wife exactly what she wants."

He smiled gently and spread one of my legs wider and fixed it in place while he placed my other one on top of his throbbing heat.

"Huh?"

The chair creaked softly, and a bright red chain wrapped around the back of my spread-eagled legs and wrists as my hands held onto the chair.

He kissed the inside of my thigh, gazing at my pussy while he smiled ecstatically, commenting on how I looked.

"You were all closed off just a moment ago, but now your pussy's all twitching and wet. Your body is so obedient."

He teased me because of the difference in the reactions between my mind and body and restrained me as if to say that he wouldn't tolerate any resistance.

The situation was so unbelievable that I couldn't help but blink repeatedly.

What is this heat I feel through my stocking?

I wiggled the toes of my white stocking. I felt something twitching and wriggling under my foot, and at the same time, Lucas let out a soft gasp, making tears blur my eyes.

"It's even more stimulation than I thought it would be."

"No way…"

I'm stepping on him! Lucas's cock is underneath my foot! How in the world did this happen?!

I flushed as red as a lobster, turning my face toward the source of all evil, and he smirked devilishly at me.

"It's so nice… I'm so turned on right now. I've been holding back this whole time. I can do it as many times as you want. Just tell me when you're ready."

As soon as he said that, he stuck his tongue out toward my clit and started gently rolling it over my nub.

"Ah? Mm, nngh…"

A sweet numbness ran through my waist, and my legs twitched, and the moment I stepped on his dick again he let out a hot moan. "Nngh!"

I shook my head. "I-I'm sorry!"

"You're so kind, Cecilia. It's okay. Don't worry about me and focus on what I'm doing to you."

He slid his tongue inside me, and my hips jerked off the chair.

"Eek!"

I wondered if he felt my pussy tighten around his tongue—or did he feel it when I lightly kicked him?

My perverted husband praised me with such happiness that I wanted to bury myself in a hole.

"Haah… That's right. Keep going."

What is going on?! Hey, I never agreed to this!

"Hmm, nngh, mm!"

It was so shocking I couldn't even find the words to stop him.

He skillfully lapped at my clit, which was so sensitive I had to grit my back teeth to endure it. My body was accustomed to the way he licked me now, so it responded exactly how Lucas wanted.

As the pleasure spread, I rubbed his penis with the bottom of my foot and tickled the tip of it with my toes, stimulating it.

"Ahh, mm!"

"Haah, that's incredible! Don't tease me like that. Mm, rub me harder on the bottom, Cecilia."

I'm not teasing you, and I'd never do that!

"No, no!"

I shook my head and tried to pull my leg back, but he obviously had no intention of stopping, so he mercilessly grabbed my ankle and forced me to touch his hot cock.

Then he inclined his head once again and licked my clit with the tip of his tongue, pushing the erect bud upward, and the pleasure that ran through my hips made my legs stiffen.

"Eek! Ahh, no! Wait, I'm going to cum!"

"That's okay, Cecilia. Haah, just keep stepping on me, and I think we can cum together."

Nooo! That's not good! Not good at all!

"No, nooo! Lukie, Lukie, please! I'm going to come!"

He licked me insistently with his slick tongue, and pleasure rocked my body as I endured it. But then he suddenly changed the angle and sucked on my clit hard, making me jolt from the intensity.

"Eek!"

Sparks flew in front of my eyes as waves of ecstasy spread throughout my body.

I spasmed with enough force to kick him, and he rubbed his forehead against the Promise Mark on my lower belly.

"Nngh!"

His large back shook, and my mouth trembled as I felt warmth on the sole of my foot.

Who's panting like that? I quietly turned my tearful eyes toward Lucas in disbelief.

His eyes were like melting pools of gold.

"Haah, haa… I can't believe I actually came from that. That was incredible, Cecilia," he said dreamily, then removed the clasps from my garter belts which held my stockings in place, slowly pulling the damp fabric off my legs.

He tossed the sticky stockings aside and kissed the top of my foot as if pledging his loyalty. I shivered from his hot breath that felt like it would melt me.

"I love you, and only you."

"…"

His wet tongue lapped my skin, and as he told me he wasn't satisfied, tears finally wet my cheeks.

"Lukie, Lukie, please wait!" I desperately shook my head and pled with him, sobbing. His long eyelashes rose, his golden eyes piercing me.

"You're not ready yet, are you? I can wait. When you are ready, I won't listen to you saying no or wait tonight. I'm going to ruin you, just like you asked me to."

His restraint was easily surpassed by pure desire, making me tremble.

What should I do? I did ask him to do that, but now he's made a complete mess of me!

"B-but not here…"

"There's a table and a chair. It's fine. And you said you weren't going to run away, right?"

You're trying to fulfill your desire to do it on a table?! My husband is such a pervert…

But no matter how I replied, he always persuaded me in the end. I glared at him with teary eyes, thinking about how stubborn he was, and my sadistic knight's pupils widened as he gave me an evil smirk.

Then he reached down and placed a finger on my pussy.

"Nngh, ahh?!"

Until now he'd just teased my honeyed folds with his mouth, gently and carefully. But before I even knew what I was doing, my body started moving instinctively.

It felt like I was overflowing with juices, gushing like a spring. My inner walls clung to his finger as if begging him not to go, reluctant to miss even the faintest of sensations. Sensing this, Lucas took a deep breath like he was trying to suppress his excitement and turned a fierce, burning gaze on me.

I spread my legs wider as he gently pushed his finger in, up to the second joint.

I want it. I want it deeper. Please give me more. I want it hotter and thicker. I want you to love me all the way to my depths.

The moment my mind was filled with those shameless, lustful thoughts, the desire I pretended not to have a moment ago—he pulled out his fingers.

"Ahh!"

The force was strong, but not enough to make me come. My body trembled as my sensitive pussy throbbed with need.

"Wh-what? Why?"

I gripped the chair and cried out in frustration.

Lucas had been quietly observing me, and he raised his head to give me a gentle kiss.

But that soft, sweet kiss pissed me off, so I impulsively clamped my lips tight in denial. He gave me a sheepish smile.

"Why, you ask? I was wondering what to do with your remaining thorns of reason. I became incredibly curious about what you'd do if I didn't remove them with my own hands. You know what I mean right?"

"…"

Just say you want me already.

His beautiful face, hidden by his own selfishness, would put an angel's to shame, and it made me cry.

"What?"

So that's why he said, "I knew it" at the beginning…

You played with my clit and left me soaking wet with pleasure. Then just as I wanted more, you teased me with your fingers and

immediately pulled out.

You knew I wanted to. You were going to push me until I begged!

Now you're just being selfish!

I wanted to tell him that, but then the pattern carved into his left side caught my eye, and I could no longer complain.

He gave me a self-deprecating smile when he saw my gaze, then suddenly released me from the magical chains.

"Ten days was too long to go without seeing each other. Honestly, I was so hungry for you that I didn't know what I was going to do. That's why you have to hold the reins tightly, okay?"

"…"

Although he was controlling me, he desired not only my body but also my heart. My cheeks flushed with joy.

Then the lonely beast who *pretended* to be obedient placed my foot on his cock once again. He licked his fingers, slick with my wetness, and then carefully taught me what to do next, although I couldn't see much through the tears.

"I've always wanted to dirty this smooth, white skin. Now we can do it at the same time."

This time he's going to do it with my bare feet and come all over them…

It never ceased to amaze me how perverted my husband was and the lengths to which he'd go just to make me beg him to fuck me.

He was especially capable of combining his hobbies with practical benefits.

I tried to redirect that skill into something else, and then, as a ridiculous afterthought, I made a snarky comment about how this was the result. I frantically looked away from my heart pounding because of my exposed hand.

Then, with a steely resolve in my heart, I slid off the chair and onto Lucas's lap, sinking my teeth into his patterned cheek.

"Mmm…"

"C-Cece? Huh? Wait, what? You're too cute!" His voice trembled with surprise, so I must've really shocked him.

I glanced at the cheek I'd bitten. The pattern had given me courage, and it was definitely fainter than when I first saw him tonight.

I took a deep breath. "I can really take the reins tonight? I want to make love to you with my whole body. Can we save the dirty stuff for next time?"

"Yes. Please make love to me."

I thought I might've worded it wrong, but my heart couldn't help but flutter at the sight of my cute husband, whose face was completely flushed as he muttered, "I love you so much."

"I-I'll do my best."

Maybe we could just forget about everything else, like how we were on a chair out on the terrace, and just make love, I thought, hugging him back in return.

Lucas has been holding back for so long, so I really doubt he'll just want to make tender, sweet love!

I wanted to come. And I'm the one who told him to make me come.

That's why I wanted to cover my ears at the filthy, obscene sounds that mixed with the dull, slapping sounds of skin against skin.

I leaned back, my body reaching its peak, and a hand reached out to my jiggling breasts, pinching my hard nipples tightly.

"Eek, no! Lukie…"

A tingling sensation reached my brain at alarming speed, and I tightened around his penis, which was still hard. He laughed feverishly against my shoulder, enjoying how tight I was.

"What? Again?"

"…"

A dangerous voice sent shivers down my spine.

I held my breath, and the brute who made me speechless suckled at my neck as he went over the rules, then I burst into tears.

"You weren't going to try to say no, were you? Cecilia, you're going to take the reins and treat me nicely, right?"

"Ugh…"

In the end, it was Lucas who chose to bend me over the table as he pinned my arms behind my back from behind.

He took away my right to say "No," "Stop," and "Wait," and now I was quite breathless.

Surely you didn't come all the way here to force me into a position that makes me beg for everything!

I've had enough of your pushy attitude!

"Now, Mistress. What should we do?"

"I-I just came, though…"

"Yes, it was warm and felt amazing. Every time you told me you loved me, your pussy squeezed me so tight, and it made me so happy. And?" He gave me a soft smile and spoke in a gentle voice that was designed to make me melt.

He nuzzled his cheek against my hair like a child, and the sweet gestures he revealed in front of only me made my heart pound.

Even still, my body was at its limits, and if I pushed it anymore, I had a feeling he'd ruin me to the point where I'd be too embarrassed to make eye contact with him, so I pled with him desperately.

"Please don't… I just came."

He narrowed his blazing, golden eyes at me.

"Don't do it? That's definitely something," he whispered in a low voice, and suddenly my heart leaped with fear and faint expectation.

He scooped my hair off my neck, then kissed my bare skin.

"Ahhh!"

"In that case, when is it acceptable to my mistress to do it? Before you come? After you come?"

Uh-oh, there's no way my husband can be stopped when he starts asking these questions! And since I know he can't hold back, every possible answer I give him will lead to a scary outcome!

"Lukie…"

"I'm listening. I promise I'll do anything. Give all of you to me… and only me."

Even though I knew he must've waited for the right moment and was fully prepared to take all of me, he begged me so frantically that I couldn't keep saying, "Let's just be done." So I just trembled as his large hands reached out to my breasts again.

He kissed me with a terrifying sweetness as his callused fingertips massaged my flushed, hardened nipples. I pushed my hands out across the table with all my might.

"Mm, that feels so good… Nngh…"

I remembered how intense it was the last time I said no and hastily pressed my lips in a tight line and shook my head. He let out a sigh and then chuckled.

"You're so adorable that it's almost annoying."

Normally, I would've been angry to hear that, but not today. I was filled with such strong emotions and desire that I didn't feel the slightest bit angry.

Love me more. I want to hear you longing for me even more. I want to feel that you're here with me.

My heart yearned for Lucas, and it drove me to do everything he wanted.

The quivers in my hands that supported me as I leaned across the table gradually spread through my body, and I pressed against his hands that fondled my breasts. He called my name, pressing his teeth against my neck as if telling me what to choose, and replied by panting shallowly.

"Cecilia…"

"Nngh, ahh! This is…before I'm coming…!"

He pulled his teeth away and then sucked on my neck as if to praise me. I arched my back from the sweet sting of his possessive mark on my body as he tweaked my nipples firmly.

"Now I'll give my full attention to you."

"What?! Ah, wha—Eek!"

He kneaded my hard nipples, and the intense stimulation made me jerk wildly against the table. I turned toward him with tear-filled eyes.

My demon knight was done pretending to be obedient and kissed the corner of my mouth while he massaged my breasts, laughing with delight.

"This is before you come, right? Your insides are getting hot and starting to swell again."

What a pervert! It's like he's declaring an infinite orgasm loop!

"Ah, no! Wait, Lukie! I'm scared!"

The complete lack of remorse in his greediness made my skin crawl.

The corners of his mouth curled up into a smile at my careless remark, which I blurted out because of pure instinct.

"How many times have you said that, Cecilia? Does that mean you don't need the reins?"

His fingers gripped at my waist, and then they pressed beneath my belly button. Every time he rubbed against me, wetness flowed down my inner thighs.

The pleasure was so intense that I couldn't even let out a cry, and the moment I tried to writhe out of his grasp, he pressed against me with even more force and the heat in my lower belly exploded without even giving me time to register it.

"Ahh, no, it's coming out!"

A lewd gushing noise reached my ears, and the sound of my juices splashing onto the terrace floor made my eyes widen with disbelief as the warm liquid ran down my legs. Lucas let out a feverish sigh as he pressed into me harder.

"You're squirting with pleasure, Cece. You're so adorable. Your naughty side has finally come out."

The pleasure was so strong I could almost mistake it for pain, and the shame of having made a puddle in a public place like this was so intense it felt like my entire body boiled.



"Ahh, mmm!"

Should I scold him for being so mean, or should I beg him for help?

I trembled from confusion and agitation, and my demon knight gently reached out his hand and told me to fall.

"I'm sorry that you're feeling embarrassed, but you said I could ruin you. I won't let it end like this."

My vision was completely distorted, and I unconsciously reached out to escape my endless orgasms.

I tried to crawl across the table for relief, but I felt him pin down my arms so I wouldn't run away. I desperately shook my head and begged for mercy.

"Lukie, Lukie, please forgive me! I'm too scared to come! Ahh, I'm scared… Nngh, I'm coming!"

"You just have to get used to that fear, my beloved wife."

What's with those mental gymnastics?!

You might be a knight who gets used to fear, but I'm a lady! I can't identify with that advice at all!

"No, I can't! I can't, Lukie! Nnghhh!" My vision flashed as his thick cock slammed in and out of my trembling body, making me come over and over again.

I tried to turn away but then heard heavy breathing over my shoulder. He wrapped his arms around my stomach and held on tightly, and I inadvertently squeezed him tightly in return as he pounded into my hips.

"Nngh, the sight of you moaning with your head thrown back is so erotic, Cece. If you call my name like that, it'll make me beg to come inside of you!"

"Ohh… You're so deep… You can't be so rough with me, Lukie… It feels so good I can't stop coming. Lukie!" I cried as I begged him to stop, and then suddenly, his throbbing length slid out and stopped at my entrance.

"Nngh, ahh!" My body burned from the sudden loss, and my brain commanded me to beg for more.

But my devilish husband understood me even better than I knew myself, so he proposed a new training method in a gentle voice.

"You want to come? I'm so happy you told me. I'll only keep going if you say the magic words though, and they start with 'I.' From now on, when you want to come, you're going to say, 'I love you.'"

"What?!"

That doesn't even make sense!!

"Please, Cece. Say you love me."

"…"

Now he's acting cute?! Uh-oh, this is bad, and my heart is pounding wildly from his drastic swing from devil to angel…

If I do what he says, I'll have to tell him I love him every time I come!

I can't do that! I'm afraid it might awaken my overly sensitive instincts!

"I-I can't."

"Heh. You can't, huh?"

But refusing only made my demonic husband smile even more, and he grabbed one of my legs, making the table creak.

No, that's terrible! That was a trap!

"W-wait, I'll tell you! I'll tell you I love you!"

He thrust into me hard, holding up my thighs and spreading them apart as he slammed into me, making my thighs tremble.

"Ahhh, haah!" My brain felt searing hot. My mouth hung open from the non-stop spasms of my orgasm, saliva dripping down from the corners.

I gritted my teeth and begged.

Shame doesn't help me protect myself, damn it!

"I love you! I love you so much, Lukie! Ah, I love you so…please come inside me!"

"Nngh, that's so good… I love you too, Cecilia. I'm so happy I just wanna fuck you more."

He sweetly begged me to do it again, and my infuriating body squeezed him tightly in pleasure as tears streamed down my face.

It's not over after all…

"Lukie, you're going to break me! Please don't touch me like that, ahhh!"

"You're about to come just from me touching your tits, Cece… Nngh, I can't stand it!"

When I pleaded with him, he just flipped me over onto my back and kissed me passionately, like he couldn't hold back.

"Cece, Cecilia…"

"Mmm, ohh… Lukie!"

His loving kiss made all the longing and pleasure inside my body mix together. Frightened, I reached out and clung to his neck while he sighed with anguish.

"Even if he had just imagined doing this with you, it would've driven me mad with fury, Cece. You're my Cecilia, my only Cece, so stop resisting me."

His words of desire for me alone made me burst with joy, and I blurted out words of protest as my heart pounded.

"Please, wait…"

"You're kidding—you're still resisting?" He opened his eyes wide and then made a frustrated, pouty face. Then he reluctantly—*very* reluctantly—stopped moving, so I gently stroked his cheek.

The dark, silky hair that fell over his divinely beautiful face…

His eyes a bewitching gold, like a moon in the night sky hidden by clouds and descending to earth… *He's the strongest and most elegant beast in the whole world.*

Sometimes I wondered if I were merely dreaming that I was the only one Lucas wanted. That was why I was a little scared to see him again after we were separated. I imagined he'd find another beautiful woman and say, "I was mistaken."

But every time that happened, he would ask me how I felt with a look of concern on his face.

That's how I knew I was the only one he loved.

I never knew that being so satisfied with happiness could be so painful. I hoped he felt the same way.

Lucas waited for me with a furrowed brow and an unusual ferocity, so I stroked his earring before wrapping my arms around his neck. Then I hesitantly told him how I felt.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you that I love you. Actually, well… There are a lot of things I want to say to you. I want to take everything you give me, but it feels too good, and it hurts. Can you wait until I'm at least able to breathe?"

It seemed like I told him to do it a lot, and I was so embarrassed I thought I was going to die, but as I trembled with shame, the demon knight squeezed me more tightly.

What if he's not going to stop? I thought as I looked at him fearfully, completely dumbfounded.

"It feels good, and you want to take everything? Um, I'll stop, so…I really hope…you can breathe soon… My beloved wife," he said shyly, covering his flushed face with one hand. Seeing him do that shot me right through the heart, making me blush just as much as he was.

You're so cute and unfair!

"Um, are you okay? I'll wait for you."

"Y-yes, I'm fine. I'll wait and do my best."

I had no idea what I'd do my best about, but at this point, I felt like I'd done enough.

Despite thinking that, my mouth said it anyway, and I ended up gently clasping his hand.

I loved him no matter what, and even though he was forceful and he had me wrapped around his little finger, every action of his was filled with love, so there was no way I could ever stop.

I pressed my face against his neck, and he said, "Tell me when you're ready." I gazed at his hair to try to encourage myself to keep going.

Love and tenacity are the key points in the bedroom, Cecilia!

"L-Lukie…"

"Kiss me."

"I'd love to."

"Lukie?"

"Yes?"

"Please make me yours…"

"That's a good girl. I'll do my best."

But that back and forth brought about even more hell…

***

I felt my mind rapidly resurface from the deep abyss as the sensation of a soft hand gently caressing my cheek and the delicate pressure of lips against mine brought me back to consciousness.

It was as though a pure healing magic had filled every inch of my body, only for a weight to settle on my chest.

The sweet scent of her hair wafted through the air, and her tiny ear pressed gently against my skin. She seemed to be checking my health, and the impulse to hold her tight surged within me, but I held back—waiting for the right moment to open my eyes.

As I patiently waited, I heard Cece let out a small, relieved sigh, and that's when I slowly opened my eyes.

It had been a long time since I slept that well. I recalled sleeping in Cece's bed for the first time, driven by the longing to feel her presence, and smiled at her delicate face, which peered at me with a hint of concern.

"Good morning, Cecilia. I've missed you so much."

"Good morning, my husband. Hehe. I love that the first thing you said is that you missed me. Wasn't I in your dreams?"

Her eyes, which had been so full of warmth, widened in surprise. Then her long eyelashes fluttered as she laughed, the sound of it clear like a bell tinkling.

She had the most beautiful eyes—light green, like leaves floating in dappled sunlight.

Her amber-colored hair glowed like a refreshing rain falling under a clear sky.

Seeing the person I'd pined over for ten long days made my chest tighten, and before I knew it, my honest feelings slipped out of my mouth.

"I dreamt of you every night. It made me want to meet the real you even more. I want to feel like it's not just a dream. How about a good morning kiss, my beautiful wife?"

I gently twirled a strand of her hair around my finger as her lips flushed a deep red like apples.

"Y-you were awake?"

"Wasn't that a kiss to wake me up?"

It was impossible not to wake up with a smile on my face when she touched me like that. Her kisses usually only came when we were making love or when I was pretending to be asleep.

I wanted to see her face, so I asked again, and her delicate eyebrows furrowed slightly.

"Did I wake you up?"

Oh, I love you so much. I just wish I could lock you away from everything and everyone.

I reached out toward her pale body with that overwhelming impulse.

"No, I told you—I missed you so much I couldn't stand it. I woke up because I wanted more than just a dream."

"More than a dream? Ahh!"

I pulled her close and positioned her on top of me. I slipped a hand into her silky hair, pulled her closer for a kiss, and she exhaled a sexy moan.

"L-Lukie, this position is a little… I-it might drip out, and I could get you dirty…" she shyly muttered as her hand moved toward her

center, and there was no way I could back off after that gesture.

My wife was so earnest and yet so incredibly sexy. It was the best.

"Thank you for tempting me in a way dreams can't even compare to, Cece."

"Ttempting?! That's not what I was doing! What kind of dreams were you having, anyway?!"

Her flustered, adorable face twisted with confusion as I traced the curve of her waist, hips, and thighs, just barely brushing her sensitive skin with my fingertips.

"Mm, Lukie… Don't touch me like that."

Did she feel me skimming over her hardened nipples?

Her mouth was slightly open as she moaned, and I saw her tongue quivering as if it were begging for a kiss.

Every time I told her goodbye when we spoke during the long-distance transmission magic, Cece would hesitate for a moment. I never knew what she wanted to say, but I did know she must've felt the same thing I did.

I know I might be too hopeful, but after last night, maybe she'll grant me at least a kiss.

"I said, 'I want to touch you' in my dream, and you kissed me back," I said.

I moved my hand from her leg to her chin, gently holding it as I stroked her lips with my thumb.

"…"

“But every time I tried to kiss you, I woke up. I feel like this might still be a dream. What do you think?” I tilted my head, asking as I pressed for a kiss, and Cece’s brows furrowed deeper.

Then, she lowered her hips, and the wet heat between her legs brushed against my firm chest as her trembling hands rested on me.

I could hardly contain myself as her flushed face, still partially hidden behind her disheveled hair, managed to utter the words I’d been waiting for.

“D-do you mind if I get you dirty while we’re kissing?”

It was even sexier than I’d imagined.

“Not at all. In fact, I’d love to make you even dirtier aga—”

“Wh-why do you have to say it like that?” she asked harshly, covering my mouth with a soft cloth.

I looked up at her as she blushed, clearly recalling the night before, and my chest tightened with affection. I was about to laugh, thinking it was another pillow, but then a faint scent stirred my senses.

Her eyes widened in realization, and she quickly removed the cloth from my mouth, folded it, and hid it behind her back.

“Stay still if you want a kiss.”

She turned her face away in an attempt to hide her little secret, flustered. I couldn’t resist sitting up and reaching out to her.

“Cece.”

The bed creaked and she stiffened, her face tense as she tried to move away. As she shifted, a drop of something white dripped from

between her legs onto my now-hard cock, and she blushed furiously.

"S-sorry, I'll clean it up," she muttered as she searched for something besides the piece of cloth she'd been hiding, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of joy.

"You don't have to wipe it up."

"B-but…"

"It's all because I'm the one who came inside you in the first place, plus we're going to take a bath, aren't we? Kissing comes first."

"Y-you don't have to say it like that. Honestly…"

I pulled my wife, whom I'd just defiled, toward me and smiled at her so those pretty green eyes wouldn't know I was thinking something very dirty.

"If I behave, you'll kiss me, won't you? I need to feel like I'm truly back home, my beautiful wife."

"You're so unfair, Lucas…"

I took her by the chin. She furrowed her brow as she continued hiding the piece of cloth behind her and carefully set it aside. I was fairly sure that it was one of my shirts.

Then she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"I love that about you."

"I think you're pretty unfair too, Cece," I whispered as her lips grew closer to my face, making the heat in my body impossible to control.

My plans for the day after this were quite significant. It was something that could affect the future. But most of all, I wanted to crush the man who'd caused my Cece so much pain.

Just having her gaze at me and breathing right here seemed to push all the rest of the world away, and everything else started to feel less and less important.

She said she was lonely and had worn my shirt to sleep.

I wasn't sure why she'd left it on the bed, but once I knew it, I couldn't stop myself from kissing her. In fact, I wanted even more.

Knowing that was enough to make me aware of the burning desire inside of me, so I pleaded with her as I craved her lips.

"You're the one who's teasing me."

Under normal circumstances, she'd pout and say, "I did not!" and stop me from kissing her. But my shameful plan was blown away by just one sentence from her.

"M-mm, was I…being that naughty?"

"No, it was perfect."

I couldn't win against her.

The way her soft cheeks relaxed into a relieved smile was far too cute, and I couldn't bring myself to care about anything else. I would kill any man who criticized my naughty wife.

"Nngh, mmm…"

Her tongue trembled as it tangled with mine like she was trying to call my name, and heat spilled into my mouth.

I was inwardly thrilled that her body could now orgasm just from my kisses, but I craved more and pulled back, only to press my lips onto hers again, over and over.

"Hehe. Are you still dreaming, Lukie?"

"If this is a dream, then I want to stay asleep forever."

She's so cute… But I have a bad feeling about this.

Her soft, dreamy gaze had sharpened, and as she looked at the marks on my face, I could see the clarity in her eyes. She was trying to wake me up. This wasn't good.

"The marks on your face are gone, but there are still faint traces on your chest. You really overdid it, didn't you?"

Her expression told me we could no longer pretend this was a dream, so I tried to adjust the direction of the conversation.

"I'm fine, and it'll disappear as long as you're with me. Let's keep—"

But now her eyes glowed earnestly, and she interrupted me before I could finish my sentence.

"In that case, if we're going to be together forever, we need to handle this properly. Knowing you, you probably sent Prince Akeem to go back and check on me and had Dirk arrest him for you, didn't you?"

"Yes."

She was just too smart.

I slightly averted my gaze, only to have her gently cup my cheek

and bring my gaze back to her.

"That reaction… Lukie, did you bring someone from Majaar along to Bern to resolve things?"

It was troubling that my wife could read my thoughts, but it also felt amazing. I could answer anything when she questioned me like this.

"I did."

"Is it Prince Islan, Akeem's rival?"

"Yes."

Islan would most likely give me permission to do anything I wanted to Akeem, as long as it stripped him of succession rights—and as long as I didn't kill him, of course.

I continued before she could interrupt me again. "Akeem went too far. He harmed the people of Bern, so it's only right that he should receive his punishment here."

It was a sly way of putting it. I knew she wouldn't object to me destroying Akeem despite how kind she was.

"Receive his punishment here?" As I expected, her breath hitched in her throat, and anger began to boil in my stomach. I clenched my fists beside my legs.

Why does she always want to save everyone? He tried to destroy you, Cecilia! He tried to tear you and me apart!

I bit my tongue to not show how angry I was. Her gentle, yet firm voice reached my ears.

"Let me be there, then. I'm involved in this, too."

Seeing the intense determination in her green eyes sent a shiver down my spine. She showed no sign of backing down, no longer fearful.

"All right. Let's go take a bath. We need to change."

"Okay." She nodded, and I lifted her up. I peeked at her thoughtful face as I carried her to the bath.

Akeem wasn't a man worth saving, but I was weak to Cece's pleas. If she begged me to save him, I might end up getting killed.

The marks on my chest throbbed as if to warn me not to make a mistake. I tried to distract myself from her warm hands on top of the marks and opened the bathroom door. I gently stepped into the warm water as I clutched her tighter in my arms.

I couldn't let her go.

I was well aware that I had dragged her down this bloodstained path where there was no turning back.

Even if the ground she trod on was soaked with blood, Cece was the one who said she would give me everything.

I'll accept it if that's your choice, my beloved. You'll mourn the part of me stolen by the goddess and give me all of your despair.

"It's like a maze inside the nobles' prison, isn't it?"

"Even though it's a prison, the rooms are kept clean because of their high status. However, they're carefully separated to prevent escape. From the outside, no one knows where the rooms or trial

chambers are to ensure that no one can come to help them. Be careful, though, this place is a little dark."

He may have been our prisoner, but he was still royalty from another kingdom.

I couldn't bring everything to an end inside the prison, just like with Felix. As we walked toward the judgment chamber within the Blue Prison, I explained to Cece that Akeem was facing off against Islan and the others.

"I also destroyed the testing lab in Canaan on my way back. I left the evidence—the vánagandr—somewhere they can't reach. There shouldn't be any more experiments, or at least not right away. I also brought Leon and Princess Shireen along so the king of Majaar can't make any moves to try to save Akeem."

"Prince Leon and Princess Shireen are here?"

Her face lit up with a bright smile, and I nodded while pulling her hand.

I'd made the right decision, bringing them both. I explained the situation while we walked down the dimly lit hallway. Just as we reached the hidden door, a man called out to me.

"You're late. Hmm, that doesn't look like what I'd heard. They said you had markings all over your body. How'd you heal that? Ouch…"

Dirk smiled cheerfully and waved, but I ignored him like he was just a decoration and quickly pushed him aside from the viewing window as I pulled Cece close to me.

"See? They're right there."

"It really is Princess Shireen. I'm glad she's well. I know this isn't the right time to say this, but thanks for keeping her safe, Lukie."

"You're welcome. She's looking forward to speaking with you when this is over."

I smiled back at her as she expressed her gratitude to me, but then of course Dirk had to interfere.

"I feel like I've lost a bit of hair from the stress you cause me… Lucas, you're heading back to Majaar, aren't you? Because if not, you're going to have a lot of trouble explaining why you brought Leon and Shireen back."

He knows what I'm planning and is trying to give Cece hints. He's so irritating.

I was going to tell her later, but since he spilled the beans…

I thought about strangling Dirk and was just about to string him up when Cece squeezed my hand tightly.

"Are you going there again?"

"I knew it."

Dirk grinned at Cece's impeccable timing. She had an anxious look on her face. I simply nodded.

"Once this is over, we'll be escorting Islan and the others back. I'll have to stay a bit longer this time to show the Egrich Empire that Majaar has the backing of a Hero to ensure that they never do something like this again."

That was why I'd captured Fenrirs along with the vánagandr as evidence and placed them along the border between Egrich and Majaar.

Even if they wanted to take them back home with them, it would be impossible. I had surrounded the area with triple-layered defense barriers. They were likely watching, trying to figure out our intentions.

I made sure they would understand what kind of end they'd meet if they ever laid a hand on the Hero's beloved again. I would crush the divine beast they'd longed for right before their eyes, turning it into dust.

I noticed a hand reaching toward me while I thought about marking the ones watching to kill later when I reported back.

"Are you handling this alone, Lord Lukie?"

Cece gently stroked my cheek, where the emblem had been. I felt a bit shy. It was as if she were implying that I was going to be lonely without her again.

"Heh. Well, I've already done so much there's no way they'll try to burden me with much more. Don't worry."

Islan might try something, but the women wouldn't stand for it.

Also, I wouldn't go anywhere without Cece again. There was no way I would leave her behind. I swore we'd be together forever.

I smiled at her wavering eyes, concealing the desire that swirled in my chest as she smiled back gently at me.

"I understand."

I'd gazed at that beautiful smile of hers for six years now.

It was the smile of a lady, crafted from strength, built with determination to become a princess. A smile that covered her suffering with a mask of grace.

If one didn't look closely, they wouldn't notice the small tremble at the corners of her mouth. My smile deepened at the sight.

If she wanted to have me all to herself, I wouldn't call her out on it now. I would let her think only of me and let her heart waver for me and me alone.

I wished I could be bound to her forever, I thought as I drew her slender body closer.

"Do you still feel the same about standing by my side?"

"I do."

I returned her strong gaze with a simple, "I see."

There was no point in any further delay, so I reached for the door handle.

The moment I pushed the door open, filthy words reached my ears.

"Islan, you bastard! How dare you sell me out! You have no right to strip me of my succession rights! That must be why you came all the way to Bern, isn't it? If His Majesty knew you were treating me like a criminal, do you have any idea what would happen to you?"

"Silence, Akeem. You have no right to an audience with His Majesty nor to plead with him for help. You're the one who was selling out Majaar. What would you have done had those beastmen ruined

our kingdom because you let them get out of your control?" Islan demanded.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! I was doing just fine! There's no way someone like you could understand my plan! It must've been that prince from Bern—that monster of a Hero who put you up to this, wasn't it?!" Akeem yelled as Finn and Anna both pointed swords toward his throat. Cece's shoulder twitched.

Her gaze hardened when she looked at the crossed blades at Akeem's neck, and I saw a dangerous light in her eyes. I wondered what was making her so angry.

"I'm sorry for the delay. It seems you just told him about the charges, Prince Islan."

"Yes. I told him he was stripped of his succession rights and sentenced to life imprisonment. Is this your wife, Prince Lucas?" Islan's eyes briefly flickered to Cece, who stood beside me, and his face went slightly pale.

I raised her hand respectfully.

"This is my beloved wife, Cecilia."

"It's an honor to meet you, Prince Islan."

Cece curtsied gracefully, and Islan gazed at her in awe. Meanwhile, Akeem looked stunned to see her. He probably wondered how she was unscathed after being violated by a nasty beastman. He leered at her with filthy eyes.

Just as I shot a glance at Finn, signaling him to put Akeem in his place, Anna pressed her blade to his neck.

"…!"

She must have cut him fairly deep because Akeem went rigid, and his face turned pale as it pressed against the floor, like he was about to be killed on the spot.

I sighed quietly at his terror.

Considering how he was acting, he might have been tortured a bit while I was with Cece.

Akeem had insulted my lady, after all. He was under Anna, Kate, and Elsa's watch, all of them exuding malice.

I wouldn't hand over Akeem, but I would leave the job of cleaning up the delegation to the three of them.

I looked away from the prince, who was biting his lip in frustration, and took Cece to meet Princess Shireen, who had a bright smile on her face that looked quite out of place.

"Princess Cecilia! I hope you've been well. I've been looking forward to seeing you!" she gushed.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Princess Shireen, although it's regrettable we had to meet under these circumstances. I'm so glad to see you again."

The princess seemed visibly emotional as she grasped the hand Cece placed over hers as if to apologize.

"No, it's we who have caused you suffering on account of my half-brother's cruel actions. There's nothing for you to worry about, Princess Cecilia. I am truly sorry."

The princess lowered her head with teary eyes, and Cece quickly reassured her. “Please, Your Highness, stop.” Her voice was filled with urgency. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

It pleased me greatly that Cece would have another ally inside the royal castle. I was worried things might become strained due to Akeem, but it didn’t seem like there were any problems.

The princess seemed more regretful than the actual parties involved, I thought as I glared at Akeem, who seemed unable to suppress his resentment.

“How are you still standing? Did you deceive me and tame the beastman?! How are you standing there so calmly, Cecilia Cline?!”

He thought of Cece as a villainess, and that’s why he had resorted to breaking her dignity.

Most people didn’t care whether facts lined up with rumors or not.

He wanted the beastman to tear her to pieces and ruin our relationship.

The plan was likely to have her branded as a villain by those around her, making it possible for Cecilia to stay in Bern.

The schemes of those in power were truly ruthless and relentless.

Marquis Cline had been right when he said that a mere second prince couldn’t protect her. A power beyond that was required to shield her from such a person—an absolute power that could be called *monstrous.*

I knew better than anyone that my lack of hesitation to kill was unnatural. But it wasn't something that could be fixed, and if it were, perhaps I'd no longer be able to protect those I wanted to, so I didn't even try to change it.

Except she'd been targeted particularly because of that monster. I wondered whether she would continue to want to be protected by such a power.

I suppressed my surging murderous intent along with the questions running through my mind as I clenched my fists.

I turned to shield Cece from the man groaning on the floor and faced him directly.

"How many times has it been now, Akeem Asad-Jabeel? Despite being locked away like the criminal you are, you still continue to insult the princess of Bern. You must truly want to die."

I addressed him without a title, and his eyes widened in shock.

"Y-you! That hair… You're Lucas Theoderic Herbst, aren't you?! No matter how much a Hero you may be, it is the height of disrespect to address a foreign prince without a title!"

He was completely ignoring his own behavior, of course.

If he were more self-aware, he probably wouldn't have done something like this to begin with. At least this made it easier to punish him.

"I believe your half-brother had previously informed you that your succession rights to the throne were revoked, but it seems you conveniently forgot. That's why you could only come up with a plan

that was bound to fail. Well, no matter. Prince Islan, I plan on slowly killing him. Is it a problem if we cause a mental breakdown in the process?" I didn't look away from Akeem as I said that to Islan, and I heard a sigh.

"Haah… Leon said it's better not to anger the Hero. I'd like to say that it's fine, but the king has requested that even a man like this remain alive since he has royal blood."

Tch. I can't break him.

"Is that so? Breaking a limb or two should be fine, then."

I suspected that Islan and the king of Majaar still thought their position was superior to Bern's. There might be a need to rein them in.

"What should I do with the sword, Prince Lucas?"

"Nothing yet. There are witnesses right now."

I thought it was best not to take a dirty approach in front of Cece. Besides even if I did break his bones, we could always use healing magic on him later.

We could also carve an invisible curse on him that would ensure he'd never speak again.

I refused the sword Finn offered me and summoned chains in my palm. I watched as Akeem trembled.

"Y-you're no Hero! You're just a monster, like everyone said! You easily killed beastmen without even a second thought, despite the fact that they used to be human. You wield the power to destroy the world so carelessly! Do you really think someone who should protect others

should be so savage?!" Akeem shouted, looking desperate for help. I was about to sigh but froze when I heard Cece's voice.

"Protect others?"

Islan, Shireen, and even Leon all looked away, rejecting Akeem's pleas for help. Meanwhile, Cece was the only one who calmly, quietly stared at Akeem.

The fool seemed to finally realize that no one would stop him and shamelessly raised his voice at her.

"Princess Cecilia, please stop your husband! You're the monster's companion, but surely you must feel a duty to protect us humans! If you feel even the slightest guilt for ignoring the warning I gave you despite my generous offer to marry you, please have mercy and protect me!"

Her green eyes widened in shock.

I felt a chill when I saw the strong emotions light up in her eyes, and at the same moment, Akeem reached out toward her as if to claim her as his own.

I felt the anger rage inside of me.

I bit my tongue so hard it drew blood. I clenched my fist, gathering my reason through the pain, frantically holding back the desire to kill him.

"How dare you say that in front of me, Akeem?"

I couldn't believe he had turned to Cece for help. How could he be so bold?

"Have you forgotten what you tried to do? What you should be doing now isn't begging, but rather, apologizing!"

If he didn't want to die, he should apologize right now.

I used my magic to form chains that tightened around his neck, torso, arms, and legs as if to make sure he understood.

"Stop! Please stop him, Your Highness! He's mad! Even if he calls himself a Hero, you never know when he'll start using that terrifying power to destroy everything! What's wrong with just trying to protect myself from a monster like him? From destruction? Your job as the princess is to protect the kingdom. Surely you understand that?" Akeem screamed, his face tear-streaked and pitiful as he collapsed to the floor, still pointing at me and pleading with Cece for help.

Then, my merciful goddess finally smiled.

"Yes, I understand well. Because I have things I want to protect too."

"…!"

Someone inhaled sharply.

It was like time was going in slow motion. Akeem's twisted face gradually shifted.

"So you're going to help me?"

I'll kill him!

A moment of hatred seized me, seeing the man so full of joy as if Cecilia had given him a lifeline. Her warm hand vanished from mine.

As her amber-colored hair swayed gently while she moved, I finally realized she was stepping away from my side.

"Cece?"

The name of the person I cherished more than anything slipped from my lips as I tried to call her back.

"Please stay there, Lukie. And don't try to stop me."

She glanced at me briefly, dodging my outstretched hand as she took a step toward Akeem, turning her beautiful face toward him.

Pain shot through the left part of my chest. I realized that the patterns were spreading over my skin, burning me. Even though I should be clinging to her, I couldn't move at the first sign of rejection.

"Anna. Draw your sword and help him to his feet."

"Yes, Princess."

Everyone silently watched Cece's every move while Anna and Finn pulled Akeem up, his face contorted in pain and humiliation.

"Hey! Kneel before our princess!"

Akeem clearly wasn't pleased to be on his knees.

He acted as if he had already been forgiven, and she didn't rebuke him in the slightest. Instead, she raised her delicate, pale hand with a graceful motion, causing his tightly clenched lips to crack open.

"If you truly have something you want to protect, then you must throw yourself into it and accept any criticism. That's why I will never help you!"

Smack!

The oddly clear sound of a slap echoed throughout the room.

Everyone could only watch in stunned silence as Cecilia slapped Akeem across the face, none of us able to process what had just happened.

Even Akeem seemed completely baffled by what had just happened, and the question that came from his mouth was delayed.

"Huh…?"

The walls were magically reinforced, keeping any sound from leaking out. A moment of silence followed.

"Why?" A trembling voice broke the silence.

"Why is it that when he fights and comes back covered in blood and torn to pieces, you call *him* a monster? Why does no one see anything but his power?"

Is she holding back her anger, or is she struggling not to cry?

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her delicate, shuddering back, forgetting to even breathe.

"You say he's mad and that one day he'll turn his power on us. But why are you worried about something that hasn't happened when he's protecting us *now?* Why not acknowledge that we could have had far more casualties if not for him? He hasn't even hurt you! You couldn't even handle the beastmen you created and had to rely on Lukie's power to deal with them! How dare you act like a victim when you're the one who's behind the destruction in the first place?!"

She cried out in anguish on my behalf.

The pattern burning against my chest seemed to fade in response to her words, and the strength drained from my clenched jaw.

"The power can't be given without a sacrifice. And even when it's given, it can't be used without full mastery. That's because he's always striving as a knight. Risking his life to keep others safe, so that everyone can live in peace. Shouldn't those who are protected by him also make an effort to support him? Yet once the dragon was slain, you say he's dangerous. If he's no longer needed, then who's committing the atrocities? Even if he tries to destroy the world in the future, and even if everything you say is true, I'd never worry about the world again! I'll never forgive someone like you, who hurt the person I love most and tried to treat him like a disposable tool. How dare you ask me to forgive you?!"

Why did Eckesachs choose someone who's only devoted to one person? I'd often wondered that.

No matter how necessary it was to slay magical beasts, the risks were far too great. That's why I thought it was all to strip away their precious memories and cast him into hell—to make him destroy himself, all alone.

Yet it seemed that the one who was chosen was Cecilia. The goddess must've believed I wouldn't misuse my power if I had Cece by my side.



What a merciful goddess. She teaches us that there are those who can love monsters, even as they are. All that's left is to make her accept it.

The light in my heart trembled while everyone watched with bated breath, lowering their eyes in thought after Cecilia's outburst.

Akeem, with eyes widened, finally moved. He rushed to embrace her, raising his voice.

"Wait! Your hand will swell. Besides, it's my right to slap him, not yours! If anyone's going to hit him, it's me!"

"Lukie, you had to go on a hunt that you didn't even need to because of him! You're so kind, you'll probably go easy on him so that he doesn't die! But we have the right to judge him in Bern, don't you? Then let me hit him again, even if my hand swells!"

I always thought she'd been very patient, having endured six years with Felix, but she was far more headstrong and assertive than she appeared. Maybe she was even more headstrong than I thought… after all, I totally wasn't expecting her to slap Akeem. I was both concerned for her reddened hand and shocked at the sight of seeing another man take Cece's first slap.

She turned her gaze to mine, close to tears. Heat began to rise in my throat, and I wiped away my rational thoughts.

"Damn it, Akeem! Why do you get to be the one Cece slapped first?! Get away!"

Akeem stared at me in shock while I kicked him, and then I kissed Cece's palm, which was already red. I focused on healing it

with all my strength. I could hear Islan's stunned voice and Leon's desperate tone in the background.

"Are you really upset that she slapped him and not you?"

"Lucas, that's too reckless! Wait, wait! Finn, Anna! Stop it, hold on! What did you just put on your fingers?!"

I hugged Cece to calm her down and glanced at Finn and the others, who were practicing swings with brass knuckles.

"Isn't it obvious? We're stepping in to deal punches in place of Prince Lucas and Princess Cece, who are too busy bickering and flirting. That's what we're here for, right?"

Finn replied to Leon with feigned nonchalance, then sent heavy gusts slicing through the air, clearly overflowing with malice.

"Finn, Anna. Don't kill anyone and pretend like it was a mistake," I said.

"Tsk. Fine, then." Finn clicked his tongue. He certainly had a short temper. Well, at least he wouldn't kill anyone in front of Cece.

"Lucas, please stop it."

I ignored Leon's loud pleas and watched Anna and the others bend down in front of Akeem and announce the order for the punches.

"The punishment for making Princess Cecilia's hand swell really should be the death penalty. Instead, I'll slap you with an open hand first." Anna said.

"Her swing and the sound of it was truly remarkable. I'll use that for reference, and as second in line, I'll punch you hard with all my

might," Kate declared.

Finn followed her. "Hm, good grip, good snap. I'll go ahead and slap you with all my strength."

"If we're raising the bar with every blow, he'll die from the Cath Palug's full power…" Elsa noted.

"Hm, this is the true nature of the shield of Bern's royal family. They're pretty reliable people, Leon." Princess Shireen patted Leon's arm comfortingly when she observed the maids and their intent on delivering deathly blows to our prisoner. I couldn't help but admire her perceptiveness and flexibility.

Then, Cece, who'd been clinging to my chest, stepped in to stop the maids.

"D-don't! Anna, Elsa! I'm first, so wait until I'm done here!"

"You still want to keep going, Cecilia?! You've never even slapped me, though!"

It seemed like she hadn't given up on slapping Akeem some and was trying to calm down.

I frowned and met her gaze, silently telling her, *No more touching and no more getting close to him.*

She glared at me angrily.

"Lucas, didn't I ask you not to stop me? And stop asking me to slap you because I'd never slap you like I did him!"

I couldn't help but feel disappointed that she'd gone back to calling me by my full name. I thought maybe there was some way I could still ask for a slap.

"Hey, why is your lip cut? Anna, wet a handkerchief and bring it over here!"

"I have it right here, Princess."

Cece began freaking out over a minor injury that would heal on its own and didn't even hurt anyway. I quickly swallowed my words and decided to be quietly submissive.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt at all."

She gently applied healing magic, and I smiled back as she wiped the blood with the damp cloth carefully.

"Are you sure you're feeling well? You want to head back to the room?"

Fine, I'd let her spoil me in our room.

"Sure, let's go back."

My heart felt light and pounded as I pulled her closer, but then the man I'd deliberately ignored let out a mocking shout.

"Wait! Prince Lucas! The princess is hiding something from you! She's only acting kind because she feels guilty for betraying you!"

What's he saying? Now that I think about it, I haven't really made him suffer yet. Maybe I should put an end to him, at least for now.

As I stopped something must've clicked for Cece because she suddenly went rigid.

"Cece?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

She turned her face away, trying to hide the tears welling in her eyes, and a dark emotion stirred in my chest.

I understood there were things I didn't know, even with most of the information coming from the ring. I knew it wasn't wrong to have secrets. I'd just have to wait for the right time, expose the truth, and use it to bind her to me.

I wouldn't tolerate this bastard knowing something that made her so upset. She only made that face in bed, surrounded by protective barriers, begging for me to love her!

"You know what he's talking about, don't you?"

"N-no, I don't…"

I forced her to look at me, but she avoided my gaze. I couldn't hold back my anger anymore.

"Cece, stop pretending nothing's wrong! Don't try to run away."

"Th-there is…something, but…"

Her long lashes quivered fearfully, and her normally bright green eyes darkened. Her pale skin flushed against her simple, apricot-colored dress, and she clasped her hands across her chest, begging me not to ask any more questions.

I gave her a look of displeasure and gritted my teeth. Akeem laughed like he'd been waiting for this moment.

"Ha ha ha! It seems the Hero is deeply in love with the princess, but can he forgive her betrayal?" His cruel laugh echoed as he

delighted in our misfortune, and his red hair swayed like the flames of Hell.

He raised his hand and pointed at Cece, who trembled. Then he casually tapped it against his chest. Everyone else tilted their heads at Akeem's behavior, but then Cecilia and I immediately realized what he'd just implied.

"…!"

I yanked her close as she trembled, hiding her flushed face against my chest, then bound Akeem with magical chains.

"Ugh! Ha! So even the Hero knows about it, and you're protecting her despite that! How kind of you! The princess will want to help me, won't she?"

"Akeem Asad-Jabeel, shut that filthy mouth of yours now."

Her body clearly bore the marks I gave her last night. After all, I'd forced her to beg me for it, and she'd said, "Please comfort me, dear husband."

Since she would be embarrassed for anyone else to see them, I'd concealed them with illusion magic—making them invisible to Akeem and everyone else.

However, he didn't know that I was the "beastman" from the night before.

He'd probably thrown out the accusation in an attempt to threaten us.

Even if it was me, I knew that a lady like Cecilia wouldn't want her private life to be revealed in front of others. And she *shouldn't*

want that.

However, Cece was acting strangely for some reason.

I tightened the chain around his limbs, pinning him in place, and then glanced at Cecilia in my arms.

"How does he know? Not even you know that, Lukie…" she whispered, and then she looked at Anna and the others. The three of them quickly shook their heads.

"We never spoke of it!"

"You were never seen!"

"We never forgot to put it away! After we pretended to be blown away by Prince Lucas last night, we went back to the room before the two of you and put it in his closet—Arrghh!"

Anna and Kate kicked Elsa in the head and stomach, sending her flying into my defensive barrier.

"Nooooo, Elsa! If a mere kick from a human can render you unconscious, then I still can't make you my mate!"

I ignored the exaggerated lament of Barnabash as he caught Elsa while she collapsed and instead returned my gaze to Cecilia, who was trembling and lowered her head.

Things weren't lining up.

There was no doubt that Akeem was trying to blackmail her somehow, but why did she just whisper, "How did he know?"

That meant that the secret she protected wasn't the beastman attack.

It was something else—something not even I knew about. And something to do with my closet. Akeem had pointed to his chest. Did that mean…

"My shirt?"

A flush broke out over her entire sweet, adorable body.

"…!"

I saw the shirt this morning that I usually wore to sleep in. But Elsa had said she returned it. So then…

"Did you use more than one of my shirts?"

"N-no, that's not it! It's just…!"

Her eyes glistened, and I couldn't stop the smile that crept onto my face as she bashfully shook her head.

"It's not? Well then, I suppose if I check all the shirts in my closet and smell them, we'll know for su—mmph!"

"No! Lukie, please stop!"

I gave her a slightly mischievous look, and she quickly covered my mouth.

She's being so frantic…

I quickly changed my approach and decided to act more receptive, leaning in and lowering my brow as if sharing a secret.

"Hehe. Cecilia. Tell me."

I tipped my head as if to kiss her, calling her softly, and she gulped, her hands gently pulling me away.

She pressed her face against my chest and whispered quietly. “I couldn’t sleep without you by my side, and you weren’t here, so I… borrowed…it to hold in your place. Please don’t hate me!” She grabbed my shirt tightly, and my heart swelled with happiness. A deep, insatiable desire to be wanted by only her surged inside of me. It was a hunger that could never be satisfied.

My dear, beloved wife wrapped even the darkest parts of me in her unconditional love, and she was infuriatingly adorable.

Will she ever realize just how insanely jealous I am?

She would probably say it wasn’t an invitation. But maybe this time, she actually knows.

“Hmm, a substitute?” I teased her, and her eyes sharpened dangerously.

“Do you think it could even come close?”

Her grip on my shirt tightened, and my face flushed.

“I certainly hope it wouldn’t.”

“Of course it wouldn’t!” she said angrily with flushed cheeks. I couldn’t help but find it adorable how she was completely unaware of everything, including seducing me.

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

“I-I’m glad you understand.”

As I gently pulled her closer, her body tensed, and she looked down, embarrassed.

I looked down at the back of her slender, pale neck. The marks from last night stood out, sending a shiver of excitement down my

spine.

"I want to do something, Cecilia."

I wound a lock of her hair around my finger, deliberately pulling back the words I needed, teasing her a bit. She shook her head softly.

"Later."

Of course, now wasn't the time.

"Fine. Later."

Your bashful response was just too cute for me, Cece.

I'm glad she wanted to make love to me, too. I would hug her tighter than ever when we got home. I wanted to fuck like beasts.

I basked in the joy of how smoothly things were going, when I heard a frustrated click of a tongue.

I reluctantly pulled away and turned toward Akeem again.

"I forgot about that. Don't get mad."

"Forgot? You're really good at pissing people off for a Hero!"

"The feeling's mutual. Now, I take it you don't regret your actions?"

I tightened his chains and forced him to the floor, careful not to kill him.

"Argh! Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Don't worry. I won't ask you to lick my boots. I'll just rip your legs off."

I wrapped the chains around the joints by his hip and added smaller, barbed chains below.

"Huh? W-wait, what are you talking about?! Stop! Stop!"

"Didn't I make myself clear? I'll heal your wounds as I go to make sure you don't lose too much blood. If your limbs get torn off, I'll reattach them. I'll keep doing it, over and over, until you grovel on the floor and apologize."

Akeem quivered from the increasing tension of my chains, crying pathetically. Yet, to my disbelief, he shifted the blame for his crimes onto the one I loved the most.

"Argh, oww! I was wrong, all right! Your Highness, I was wrong. If your husband can forgive your infidelity, surely you can pardon me! After all, you seem unharmed! The beast was surprisingly gentle on you! But look at me, I'm groveling! Please spare me!"

The room went silent from the venomous weight of the word "infidelity," which dripped with contempt despite his pleas for mercy.

I can't believe it…

Was he implying that she had been raped by a beastman? I glared back at the shocked stares of Islan and the others and pulled Cece closer.

Her slender body didn't resist my embrace. Instead, she seemed to offer me solace. That only deepened my frustration with myself for letting things get to this point.

"I'm so sorry. I should've revealed the truth sooner," I said to her.

"Don't apologize. You've done nothing wrong, and there was no infidelity. Because the one who came to me was you." She didn't seem

bothered at all. In fact, she continued in a teasing voice. “Although I was a bit scared, I knew it was you because your eyes were still the same color.”

I hugged her tightly.

“Why does my eye color even matter, though?”

I knew this wasn’t the time to be asking that, but her attempts to calm me softened my anger. Her laugh sounded like tinkling bells, resonating in my chest.

“Hehe. When I first met you, they made quite an impact on me.”

“You mean my eyes changed color back then?”

Come to think of it, I’d been so shaken when I saw her that my transformation spell had faltered. My shoulders tensed as I remembered that. I hesitantly gazed into her bright green eyes. Her expression lit up when she realized what I was thinking.

“They were the most beautiful golden eyes I’d ever seen, my knight.”

“You have to be kidding me…”

I was stunned by the revelation and could do nothing but lower my head in embarrassment. I knew she liked my eyes, but I never imagined it started from such a ridiculous memory. I wanted to crawl into a hole, I was so embarrassed. *No, now’s not the time for that! It’s all his fault!*

I exhaled sharply and turned a deadly glare on Akeem.

“Hey, scum. That beastman you’re talking about was me.”

"Wh-what? I saw her being taken! How could the princess, who welcomed relations with a beastman, be forgiven by her husband, the Hero?! Wait, what?"

Even as he pleaded for his life, Akeem couldn't stop insulting Cece. *Does he want to live or die?* I shifted forms in front of him for effect.

I glanced at Finn, my ever-attentive aid, who instantly knew what I was thinking. With one swift motion, he hurled the mask at Akeem's face.

"Oof!"

The sharp crack rang out as the mask collided with Akeem, leaving him writhing on the floor.

"Cece willingly came to me because she knew it was me. I'm the only one who's *ever* touched her," I said, transforming into Lukie.

As Akeem's eyes darted between me and the mask, realization dawned on him. I tipped Cece's chin upward to display her, only for her to shyly push back. I couldn't help but grin.

"I-I didn't welcome relations! Don't say things like that! Plus, I can't do it with anyone but Lucas! I'm afraid of it anyway, and ever since he came back—Er, I mean!"

I let down the transformation spell and pulled her toward me by the waist, her shoulders shaking with anger as she glared.

"Well, I'm back now. So can we do it?"

"I didn't mean it like that! I was about to say how you wouldn't stop trying to kiss me in public!"

Even though she was rejecting me with her words, my heart felt light since she'd clearly shown relief when I transformed into Lukie.

It was like she was saying we can do more than just kiss as long as it was somewhere other than here. She was so adorable.

I grinned at Cece as she furrowed her brow and pushed against me.

Suddenly, Akeem's face flushed red with anger as he shouted, "You conniving bastard! This was all a set-up, wasn't it?"

The audacity of his claim was met with stunned silence from everyone in the room.

Finn broke the silence first. "How dare you…"

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" Anna said.

"He's really intent on denying responsibility," Kate agreed.

They all looked down at Akeem like he was a cockroach.

"Judging by this atmosphere, the scumbag said something really stupid, didn't he?" Elsa asked, regaining consciousness.

"That's right, Elsa. This scumbag who's lower than scum seemingly only thinks about scummy things. He's just layers and layers of scum, so don't get too close, Elsa!"

Barnabash had no sense of tact and piled on, mocking the foolish man even further.

Akeem's face turned bright red from being insulted by the dragon, and then to make matters worse, his half-siblings added to it.

"Did you hear what the idiot said, Brother Islan?"

"Why are you dragging me into this, Shireen?!"

"While you foolishly kept pushing women onto Prince Lucas, hoping to secure the throne, this younger brother of mine was acting even more foolish and almost harmed Princess Cecilia. Please, as an act of gratitude toward Prince Leon, Prince Lucas, and my beloved Lady Cecilia, consider lowering the tariffs in Bern, Islan," Shireen said.

"You… Don't you think you're being too biased toward Bern? You haven't even married him yet! Didn't I tell you we'd discuss this later?"

It seemed like Akeem could no longer endure the humiliation and disparagement. He let out a groan and tried to lift his head.

"Damn it! Aaaarghhh!"

A familiar figure pierced his tongue with a needle, forcing him into a position that had him licking the floor.

"I believe that will suffice, my lord. People like him feel the sting when they're humiliated more than someone beneath their station. Leave the rest to us. You and Princess Cecilia should go back home now."

Finn bowed his head, his icy gaze hinting at the patience that had finally run out. Anna followed his lead.

"Indeed, it's unpleasant for Princess Cecilia to hear such vulgar words. Please let us take care of this."

Kate and Elsa knelt beside Akeem, their pleasant smiles carrying a clear implication: *Get a room.*

I nodded and acknowledged their silent message. “We don’t have all day, after all.”

I still needed to speak with Marquis Cline, and frankly, the more time I had with my beloved, the better.

“Do you have anything else you’d like to say, Cece?”

“No, as long as he’s punished appropriately,” she answered without turning around, her tone of voice surprisingly firm.

She didn’t turn around and stood with straight posture, declaring she wasn’t going to help him.

Akeem was shaking like a leaf.

She was clearly angry. In moments like these, Cece would inevitably lean on me more, which meant I’d cherish our alone time more than usual.

“Well then, Prince Islan. Please make yourself at home in the room we’ve prepared for you. We’ll see you later.”

Finn subtly prepared the implements of torture, and I sent him a pointed look that said, “Don’t kill him,” before shutting the door behind us.

Chapter Four

AFTER AKEEM WAS SENTENCED, DISCUSSIONS MOVED forward at a dizzying pace.

My father was absolutely outraged when he heard how Lucas and I were exposed to such danger.

Since we had Prince Islan's presence here, strengthening our position, the increased tariffs against Bern were removed in exchange for accelerating Princess Shireen and Prince Leon's marriage, and the original contract was restored.

As for Majaar's king, who doted on Akeem, he would soon face his nation's assembly. I had a feeling Prince Islan would inherit the throne sooner than he expected.

The marriage between Princess Shireen and Prince Leon was scheduled to proceed as planned and seemed to have gained unexpected momentum thanks to Shireen's cooperation with my father. I pretended not to notice Leon buried under piles of wedding-related paperwork, his eyes dull and lifeless.

Shireen was beside herself with joy to be finally marrying Leon. As someone who knew the happiness of being with someone they truly loved, I couldn't help but wish Leon all the best, even if it meant some hardship.

Of course, I'd never suggest forcing a surprise wedding like Lucas did with me.

At any rate, the turmoil had finally settled down.

Prince Akeem had committed a forbidden act of experimenting on humans, and he was handed back over to Majaar at their request to maintain his royal dignity.

However, he was returning to his home country without both his legs.

He'd been raised as a protected and cherished royal, and now he would spend his life completely dependent on others. He would feel nothing, but every waking moment, he would be reminded of his inability to stand on his own. Would someone as prideful as Prince Akeem accept a life where he had to be "protected" and taken care of like that? I had no idea.

Although his royal dignity had been preserved, the psychological torment was surely a calculated cruelty. I had no doubt a certain knight was the mastermind behind it all. Not that I'd ever say that out loud, of course.

On top of everything, Akeem had to return to his homeland, clinging helplessly to a black dragon alongside the very brother he tried to usurp and the very person who punished him. Dangling in the air like that with an immobile body sounded like a terrible fate.

He should count a blessing he escaped with his life. Besides, he should spend the rest of it in penance for his crimes against the beastmen. I only hoped he could endure it.

As I watched Barnabash fade into the distance, I murmured softly, "Return safely. I love you with all my might, Lu…"

I only slightly moved my mouth, and his full name went

unspoken.

The dragon carrying Lucas and the others disappeared into the blue skies toward Majaar and didn't turn back. Why had I expected anything different? I felt a pang of regret as I pressed my forehead against the window.

I felt a small sense of relief mixed with a deep emptiness because the ring didn't tighten. That meant it hadn't connected to him. I let out a sigh and turned away from the window.

I walked to the center of my room, and my gaze fell on the door leading to our shared bedroom.

Since Lucas was gone, it remained locked for security, which meant I couldn't enter his adjoining chambers, either.

Although I knew he wouldn't return for some time, the stark reality weighed heavily on me.

I reached out for my own bedroom door to shake off the suffocating loneliness I felt, only to have it slammed shut by a gloved hand.

"Even despite everything, you're too careless to be left alone. You really need to work on your vigilance."

"…!"

I heard a deep voice and felt a leg thrust between mine from behind. A muscular arm wrapped around my stomach, as hard as armor.

"Do we need to have a thorough discussion about this?" He pressed his lips against the nape of my neck as he spoke, then blew

out a ferocious breath. I let out something that sounded very much like a moan, even though I was scared.

"Ohh…"

Why are you here, and why are you threatening me with such a sweet voice, almost like you're praising me for being alone right now?

Even though I knew in my head that this shouldn't be happening, my body immediately grew warm, and my heart pounded in his embrace.

I was so happy to be alone with him again, but just then, we suddenly heard a sound in the hallway, and I hastily grabbed his arm.

He wasn't supposed to be in my chambers, and it would definitely cause a commotion if anyone saw him.

I have to tell him to stop!

"No, we can't do this here… Let go, Lord Lukie! What are you even doing here?"

The beast ignored me and sank his teeth into my skin as I desperately tried to maintain my decorum as the princess.

The pain from his bite turned into a sweet throbbing sensation as a tender moan escaped my mouth when I tried to scold him.

"Ahh, ohhh!"

"A woman like you sighing alone by the window is like asking to be kidnapped."

"N-no, don't say that…" I shook my head, wondering why he was talking about kidnapping, and he nipped at the back of my neck again and sucked hard as if telling me to understand.

"Your skin is so soft, I might just eat you up…"

That sweet threat sounded like it was full of heat that made its way up to my brain, finally making my feelings spill out.

"If you keep going, people will hear… Put up a barrier…"

My heart cried out how much I missed him, transforming into tears and spilling down my cheeks.

I begged him not to stop, my cheeks wet, as he hugged me tightly while his twilight-colored hair fell over my eyes.

"Can I take this as an invitation?" His gloomy face and dangerous, molten golden eyes came closer, but my lips were sealed before I could even reply.

"Mm, ahh! Lukie!"

He yanked the top of my dress down in between breathy kisses, digging his gloved fingers into my exposed breasts.

Then he roughly pulled up my dress and tugged on my panties. His large hand forced its way between my closed legs, making me stiffen in shock at the cold sensation.

"Damn it," he cursed, biting the finger of his glove and tearing it off, a violent gesture I'd never seen him do before. My lips trembled with pleasure at the sight of him so openly and urgently needing me.

We'd exchanged reluctant goodbyes just moments ago, and I definitely saw him riding Barnabash off to Majaar. There was no way Lucas should be here.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to tell him not to go, and my feelings were overwhelming right now, so I couldn't bear to push him

away, either.

"Cece. My Cecilia…"

He called my name longingly and lovingly, finally tearing away the last bit of my reason.

I didn't care if I was dreaming.

I'd do anything if I could feel him and keep him here with me. With that thought in mind, I put one hand on the door and spread my legs wide for him.

Then, with one hand, I spread my already-soaked lips and turned my head toward him, begging. "Please, Lukie. Give it to me."

The moment those words left my mouth, he grabbed my trembling waist and pressed the tip of his cock between my legs.

He stroked my wet lips with his hardness, as if he were simultaneously praising me for being prepared for him already and urging me to get even wetter. My belly ached, and my juices dripped down obscenely.

"You're so wet I can't even believe it, Cece. Touch it." He grabbed my hand and made me hold his stiff cock. I blushed at the feeling of my wet, slick juices on it.

"B-but…"

"Your cute little hole is sucking me in right now, Cece. You're about to come, aren't you? You want to be mine, don't you? You're so cute…" He praised me in my ear, and I lifted my hips to give him easier access, planting my feet on the floor.

"Please Lukie, please…"

Then he thrust the tip of his throbbing dick inside, and in an instant, I broke out into a sweat and a shock of pleasure ran down my spine.

"Eeek, ahhhh!"

"Nngh, I can't believe it…"

I pushed on the door and tried to endure the ecstasy coursing through my body while his fingers dug into my waist.

"Argh, I only have the tip inside, but you're squeezing me so tight I can't believe it," he growled, breathing heavily onto the back of my neck.

"Nngh, Lukie… I'm going to come again! I want it…"

I was about to ask him to give it to me deeper when he covered my mouth with his hand.

"Mmph? Nngh, Lukie!"

"Wait, that was too intense."

Too intense? That's not a compliment, is it?

When he asked me, "Is this an invitation?" I thought that meant he wanted me, too. Had I misunderstood him because I missed him so much? My cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

But my body was greedy.

My pussy squeezed him tightly, telling him not to leave me.

"Ahh, damn it! Wait!"

His honest reaction was so overwhelming I couldn't contain myself. I burst out into sobs.

"Hahh…"

I was wrong after all! Why did you let me get the wrong idea, then?!

I panted into his palm and clenched my hands against the door. And then, as I turned around so he wouldn't stop…

"If I put it all the way in, I won't be able to hold back. I'll come. Is that okay?"

My eyes widened, and I froze when I heard him say that, his face buried against my shoulder.

What on earth did you just say, my darling husband?

"…"

I wondered what he was thinking when I fell silent.

He tightened his arms around me and whispered in my ear, "Well, I was so happy that you asked me. I never thought you'd put it in like that, and the way you came was just too cute. I can't hold back. In fact, um… I'm going to come right away, and I know I'm going to come inside of you. If that happens, I'm sorry."

He was apologizing to me, his face flushed like a child's. I couldn't help but stare at him in a daze.

Lucas is just so sweet…wait, that's not the point!

I couldn't believe that was the reason. Not to mention, I couldn't even think straight, knowing that he'd been holding back this entire time. It hadn't even crossed my mind.

Now that I thought about it, this was bad. Very, very bad. No

matter how you looked at it, this was nothing short of a disaster.

If he came inside of me right here and now, I'd have to go clean myself up. But even asking to go take a bath in the middle of the day would be the same as admitting my husband was home, and he, well… There was no getting out of this!

There was no going back now, either. His head was already inside of me.

I have to brace myself.

Though, how was I supposed to respond? Could I really just tell him, "It's okay if you finish quickly. Don't worry about it!"

As I battled with those swirling thoughts, Lucas's frustrated voice broke the silence. His brow was furrowed, and his tone carried a hint of wounded pride.

"I know it's probably totally ridiculous, but I can't help it because I love you. So please tell me it's okay, Cecilia."

His golden eyes sparkled with emotion, his cheeks flushing a deep red. Then, there was an oddly satisfied expression on his face, and I felt heat rise up in my throat.

Aw, what a sweet man. I'd do anything to be loved by you.

Tender emotion swelled up in my chest, and I gently cradled his flushed cheeks while I leaned back to give him a kiss.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and I lifted my hips to draw him closer. Then I repositioned myself.

"Please do whatever you want with me. Love me however you want, my darling husband," I murmured.

"Damn it! I love you so much I feel like I can't even win anymore!" he groaned through gritted teeth. He pulled me into a fierce embrace, his face bright red, muttering curses under his breath. I didn't understand.

Even though the bed was just a turn of the doorknob away, Lucas was unwilling to even waste that little time, and he made love to me so passionately I couldn't even move afterward.

He carried me to the bathroom, cradling me in his arms, and I was surprised to see that a hot bath had already been prepared.

I couldn't stop myself from glaring daggers at him when he tenderly tried to wash me as though nothing had happened. Surely, no one would blame me for that.

After our bath, he dressed me in a simple dress and patted my damp hair dry with a towel. He placed me on the sofa and planted a kiss on my hair. He seemed delighted by the fact that we now shared the same scent.

It was such a gentle, peaceful moment that I finally blurted out the question that had been nagging at me all night.

"Lukie?"

"Yes?"

"I know it's a bit late, but…what are you doing here?"

It was a quite belated question, and I felt my cheeks heat up as I gazed at his beautiful porcelain face. His gentle eyes widened in surprise before softening into the familiar molten glow.

"Why do you think?" His eyes seemed to say, *"You already know, don't you?"* Then, he tucked his hair behind his ear, exposing the silver earring in his left air.

The next thing I knew, the ring on my finger tightened and grew warm. My entire body flushed, and I froze.

"…!"

Could it be because I called him? No! That can't be!

There was no way that simply calling his name from the heart could summon him like that. Besides, I hadn't even finished saying his name and the ring didn't react at all. Unless, he could control the way it reacted?

"W-was there something you needed? What about Prince Islan and the others?"

I sensed the conversation was about to take a dangerous turn, so I quickly redirected it. Lucas's lips curved into a mischievous smile.

"I sent Islan and the others back to Majaar without me. I had Dirk go with them, so there shouldn't be any problems. I told them I had something important to take care of at home and that I would join them later."

He lightly traced my breasts as he said "at home," and my belly clenched, trying to suppress the flames that threatened to erupt.

"A-and have you finished your task yet?"

"Not quite. I have a little more to do."

Although his gaze *looked* tender, the sweetness in his tone was laced with something a sweet poison. It made my heart pound with a

dangerous, thrilling anticipation.

I lowered my gaze to avoid his eyes, which only seemed to draw me in, and accidentally blurted out a question I shouldn't have.

"Then tonight…"

"I'll stay in Majaar. As much as I'd like to skip it, I have to make a formal appearance."

His response felt sharp as a knife, dashing my hopes as if he had snatched away a ripe fruit he'd dangled in front of my face.

"Of course."

What else did I expect? Get a grip, Cecilia. You already knew this was how it was going to be.

I couldn't tell him not to go, and I couldn't even ask him to take me with him.

I clasped my hands tightly on my lap and plastered a smile on my face. "Don't work too hard, okay?"

Lucas gazed at me for a brief moment, and for some reason, his smile deepened. "You're right. I'll be careful."

However, his golden eyes held a mixture of both love and worry for me. His easy acceptance of our separation unnerved me, and I was unable to understand why he would respond so readily to such a serious question.

His response was appropriate for a prince and a Hero. Mine was not.

Yet something felt wrong. Lucas wasn't the kind of man who let me go so quietly. I'd never once escaped unscathed when faced with

that look of his before.

I had to believe the "business" he had to tend to back home was me. But if that were true, why was he acting so dismissive?

A wave of uncertainty and confusion washed over me, and I instinctively tried to pull away from him slightly.

But then his hand was at my chin, tipping my face toward his. His thumb brushed my bottom lip as he leaned in closer.

His touch was deliberately holding me captive, making my body tense. The devilish smirk that spread across his face only deepened my unease.

"Tell me, Cece. Why were you going to your bedroom when it was still light out?"

"…!"

He knew exactly what I didn't want him to ask. Worse yet, he already knew the answer.

Yet he feigned ignorance as he stared at me with those crazed eyes, demanding for me to explain. *He's so wicked!*

"I-I was just sleepy, that's all."

Like I would ever admit that I was planning on clutching your shirt in place of you! Absolutely not!

"Oh, I see. Well, I *was* rather rough with you last night."

Argh, now he's steering the conversation in an even worse direction…

"Y-you've got that right! You wouldn't even let me go until I passed out! That's why I need a nap!"

I tried to turn my face away, hoping to regain some semblance of dignity, but Lucas only laughed. It was a soft, endearing sound.

"Ha… Hahaha! I can't believe you still say things like that. You're so adorable, Cece."

He propped his elbow up on his knees and rested his chin on his hands, leaning in to gaze at me. A chill ran through my body, freezing me in place when I saw the look in his eyes.

His face was too beautiful to be real, and it harbored a dark desire—a demonic gleam, like he wanted to destroy everything.

I must've said something wrong. I knew that much, but I couldn't figure out which part was the mistake. I couldn't apologize or correct myself.

"That thing in the bedroom really helps you sleep, huh?"

At first, it felt like he was just mocking me, but then he pulled away from me. When he stood up, a surge of fear washed over me.

Then it hit me—His nonchalant behavior about going to Majaar, acting like our interaction was over, all because I drew a line and didn't go any further.

It was all my fault—my words and my actions had caused this.

"I told you, it could never replace you!"

I stood up in a panic, desperately searching for the right words to say despite the tightness in my throat. Lucas tipped his head to the

side like he was deep in thought. Then he revealed a shocking truth that left me speechless and my mouth hanging open.

"I didn't say this before, but you fell asleep while I was still inside of you last night."

"What?"

"I must've gone too hard on you, but every time I tried to pull out, you called out my name, and so I ended up staying like that until just before sunrise. You came several times in your sleep. It's no wonder you feel tired."

"You're lying!"

That's why he asked me if anything hurt when I woke up, and he took such good care of me!

To make matters worse, I was the one who kept him from pulling out… I didn't want to know that.

I'd even asked him for it earlier. And I didn't want him to pull out then, either! My face burned with embarrassment, and I almost cried as I covered my cheeks with my hands. But Lucas pouted at me for some reason.

After everything he's done, does he really have some problem with this?

"It's true. But even after making love to you for so long, I'm still not satisfied, Cecilia."

He really emphasized "not satisfied" just now.

We'd spent so much time together since last night, so what was wrong? Was it not enough for him? Was he really not happy with it?

I stood there, stunned by his bombshell, while he walked over to the glass doors leading to the balcony. Then he turned and pierced me with his gaze.

"My sweet wife, I love you more than anything. Even your annoying rational side."

Whoosh!

My body trembled from the contrast of sweet words and malice in his voice. Then, the glass doors behind Lucas and the door to my bedroom opened at once.

I wasn't sure what was happening, when a dark voice called out to me.

"I said I wanted to be by your side. I told you I didn't want to be apart. I even said no matter what happened, your place was by my side, forever. I said I wouldn't let go of you. I've said it over and over."

He wasn't yelling at all. He was speaking calmly, but his voice was full of despair.

Despite his words, his golden eyes were filled with an unyielding resolve and shattered the chains that had kept me thinking that I needed to stay here because I was the princess.

"I'll do anything if it means I can be with you, Cece. Anything."

And with that, black magical patterns that looked like vines crawled up Lucas's neck, slowly consuming him.

"Lukie!" I watched in frozen horror at the sudden transformation, and I instinctively rushed toward him.

It was so terrifying I couldn't believe it was the goddess's will. I reached out to Lucas's skin and activated a healing spell, desperate to stop the patterns.

My voice trembled as I pleaded with him. "Why is this happening? Stop it! Heal! Disappear!"

But the black patterns began to feed on his blood and started turning red.

"…!"

His golden gaze, once filled with love, twisted in pain as he gasped for breath.

"No, I don't want this! This is too cruel!"

Why had the goddess done such a thing? What had he done wrong?

If she was going to take him away, why had she given him this power in the first place? How much pain and suffering had he endured? He wasn't the kind of person who deserved to die like this.

"Cecilia…"

"Lukie! Please don't take him away. Please!"

Don't take him away? What am I even wishing for?

I'd sworn to stay with him, to be happy with him no matter what. I would never give up on him, even if the goddess reincarnated me again.

I'll never let anyone else have him!

"He's…he's my knight! I'm the one who's supposed to heal, so stop meddling with him!" I hugged him tightly with all my resolve and poured all the healing magic I had left into him, trying to resist the goddess's chains.

As I'd almost spent all of my magic, the patterns began to shimmer with a rainbow-colored light. They sparkled as though cleansing a sin, and I watched in awe as the pattern floated off his skin and dissolved into particles of light.

All that remained now was his beautiful face, glowing like a pearl.

He suddenly took off his clothes. I couldn't help but give him a puzzled look when he bared his muscular chest to me.

"Lukie?"

Had he misunderstood and thought I invited him again?

"That was amazing… The pattern that was always over my heart is finally gone, thanks to you!"

No, that wasn't it… But that doesn't matter now.

"It's gone?" I placed a hand over his chest in disbelief.

There was nothing beneath my hand but smooth skin and a strong heartbeat—no black marks in sight.

I let out a sigh of relief and pressed my forehead to his firm chest, hiding my trembling lips and feeling them quiver.

"You're the one who made it disappear, Cece," Lucas whispered softly.

I made it disappear.

But making it disappear and removing it were two separate things.

The symbol was the will of the goddess, a chain that binds the Hero. Something no one could interfere with.

The patterns reacted to his feelings, so even if I was his "sheath," there was no way I could remove it impulsively with a healing spell.

"Sheath…"

A sheath always exists alongside the sword and is a being that heals the sword.

I widened my eyes and stared at Lucas. I saw a will so powerful in his golden eyes that it made me feel a sense of awe.

"The only one who can heal the sword is the sheath that the goddess has recognized. The sword cannot leave its sheath to go to another country again. Don't you agree, Cece?"

We should always stay by each other's side.

That was when I finally understood the meaning behind all his efforts lately. He had prepared options for me that I couldn't have chosen myself.

"Honestly, you're like a child. It's just a shirt."

There was no comparison between Lukie and his shirt. There was no need to open the bedroom door for something so trivial.

I tried to express my annoyance from all the teasing, responding

with a sarcastic remark.

Then, my husband, who was unbearably selfish yet endlessly strong and kind, turned a deep shade of crimson.

"I know. I was keeping you close," he muttered softly, almost sulking, and my chest swelled with affection.

I knew if I took a step forward, everything else would be easy. My feelings overflowed uncontrollably.

"You idiot, Lukie! This is madness! I told you not to act on your own!"

"I know it was wrong, and I did it because you told me to, Cece. Otherwise, I would've turned Majaar into a wasteland in no time."

Well, that's just terrifying!

"Still, you shouldn't risk your life like that!"

"I wasn't. I didn't plan on dying, and you made the patterns disappear, remember?" he replied casually as if it were nothing. I couldn't find the words to respond.

Just as I was about to vent my boiling anger, I felt it drained from me.

"Cecilia, you told me 'Don't let other women touch you.' And I can't do it with anyone but you, so only you can heal me, right?"

"Y-yes, I said that, but…"

Surely the goddess doesn't count as another woman, does she?!

"It's not just because of your healing. It's a perfectly legitimate reason to take you without any worries."

He said it firmly with a serious face, and I was left speechless. The only person who would speak so calmly to say that taking his wife away to preserve his life from the goddess was Lucas.

"Can I really help you?"

"You're my greatest weakness, yet you're also my greatest strength. I've always said that I can do anything as long as I have you. How many more times should I answer before you tell me what I want to hear?"

Can I hug you now? He tilted his head and asked softly. Finally, I began to cry.

After using the sacred artifact's power in every battle, he always accepted the inevitable consequences and was ready to face death alone.

Even if he didn't have his arms outstretched to me, if the choice was between him or the world, I would always choose him.

I'd never hesitate to cling to you if I could be with you forever!

"I want to be with you… Take me with you!"

I ran into his arms.

"Of course I will."

He wrapped his arms around me and held me close.

I touched his earring and reached up to kiss him, unable to stop myself. His golden eyes widened in surprise. Then, he blushed all the way up to his ears. I couldn't help but feel thrilled by his innocent reaction.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and traced my fingers down it playfully.

"I've been holding back for so long, but I finally said it out loud. You spoil me so much, my husband."

"Hah. Who's the bad one now? You're the one who demanded it of me."

"Demanded?"

What did I demand?

"In the library, after we made love, you said you didn't want me to leave so soon. This time, I've kept my word. I've made sure I could take you without worry."

He said it with a look of wanting to be praised, and my chest tightened uncomfortably.

With one unexpected sentence, my yandere's growth had taken an unexpected turn!

Now that there was no choice but to follow him, I couldn't believe I was about to cause so much trouble for so many people because of that incredibly personal remark.

Should I pretend to forget it and ignore him?

As I silently sweated, Lucas let out a frustrated voice.

"Seriously, we've only been able to stay together for a year, but everyone keeps getting in the way. I won't tolerate being separated anymore. I'll have to come and kidnap you as the Hero! We're still newlyweds!"

I couldn’t hold back the small laugh at his adorably bad temper.

“Oh, you’ll come and kidnap me? You’re not a Hero, you’re a thief!”

He could disguise himself at will, after all.

Come to think of it, there was a dashing bandit king in Majaarian fairytales. I glanced at him, his golden eyes sparkling like a child engaging in mischief.

“We can fly there. There’ll be no need to worry about getting caught.”

My hair was tousled by the wind coming from the flapping of wings.

I held my hair down and turned toward the balcony, where I saw my three maids on Barnabash’s back, waving at me and giving me a thumbs up, signaling everything was ready! The smug looks they gave me almost made me want to cry.

I was so convinced by them pretending to fly off to Majaar that I’d completely forgotten that my husband was a man of action.

I had a feeling that no matter how this turned out, he was going to kidnap me regardless.

In Barnabash’s hands looked to be my things, but given the size of the luggage, it probably contained half of my closet. Anna, Kate, and Elsa were clearly excited about dressing me up for the Majaarian events. But how long were we going to stay there?

I hadn’t thought about that…

With a hint of anxiety, I waved back to my maids and the dragon, then mustered up my resolve as I smiled at Lucas.

"Being whisked away on a dragon… That's incredible. I never ever want you to leave. I want to always be with you, my beloved Hero."

I kissed him again, pouring all my feelings into it. When I pulled away, our eyes met, and Lucas's golden eyes were filled with love. Then he glanced away and spoke in a sharp voice.

"Well then, Father. Now that I've obtained Cecilia's consent, I trust you're fine with me taking her away?"

"What?!"

Suddenly, his arms tightened around my waist, and he lifted me up in a flash. He hopped up onto the balcony railing. Overwhelmed by emotion, I threw aside all lingering hesitations and clung to his neck. I turned my face toward the door with teary eyes and swallowed nervously. *Ah, I knew it!*

"You think I'll just watch you take her away and happily send her off with a smile, you brat?! And don't call me Father when you're perched on the railing, ready to leave at any moment! And why is your shirt open?! You're the second prince, you should at least have more decorum than that!" Father looked at Lucas with disdain.

"Ooh, what a muscular chest. Ahem. Cecilia, since you're his wife, you should fix his shirt for him." Mother, on the other hand, casually pressed a hand on her cheek and gave me some wifely advice.

Then, for some reason, I saw Prince Leon, who had his back turned to us with Finn behind him, and Princess Shireen, who was blushing. The sight almost made me break down in tears.

What a humiliating, chaotic scene… Again.

"F-Father, Mother! I'm so sorry for causing trouble…"

When did they even get here? It felt awkward to ask.

As I hastily tried to fix Lucas's shirt and offered an apology, Father turned his stern gaze not on me, but directly at Lucas.

"My daughter is a disciplined woman, befitting of her status as the second princess. She's far too responsible to ever consider leaving the kingdom for just one person."

"I'm aware of that," Lucas gritted through his teeth.

"However, she did choose to follow you, Prince Lucas. I hear as long as Cecilia is with you, there's no problem regarding the markings that appear on your body?"

"Correct. She is my one and only, my true love."

"I see. Well, then. I suppose I have no choice but to accept this, then."

I was growing increasingly uneasy as I watched the scene unfold quietly.

My father let out a heavy, sorrowful sigh. "Cecilia."

"Y-yes?"

Heroes were indispensable in the kingdom of Bern. Since there was no other solution to deal with the life-threatening emblem on

Lucas's body, it was imperative that I remained by his side.

The second prince and his wife, who were meant to support the crown prince in Bern, would now end up leaving the kingdom whenever the former was needed elsewhere. And that would certainly cause trouble for the prime minister.

All because I was emotional and said something I shouldn't have…

I glanced over at him cautiously.

That was when I noticed the green eyes, darker than mine, swirling with complex emotions. I felt my breath catch in my throat.

"Father?"

"I don't regret raising you with the rigorous education required to prepare you for being the second prince's fiancée. You've become a splendid second princess."

The softness in his expression and gentle tone of voice carried a hint of regret, reminding me how he'd initially refused Felix's proposal of engagement. Those painful memories of the past came rushing back.

Many people had mocked my efforts, but I persevered and refused to be consumed by bitterness, focusing only on what lay ahead.

It was tough. There were moments when I wanted to abandon everything and stray from the path laid out before me.

Even so, it was my choice to move forward. I was grateful to know that there were people who supported me along the way.

"I owe everything to you and Mother. You gave me so much."

"All we did was show you the path, and you made it your own. Every achievement you have is a result of your own hard work, Cecilia," Mother smiled.

"Indeed. You're my pride and joy. Yet, after all those struggles, why did you choose a man who's suffered as much as you have? Lucas, you don't deserve her."

My heart swelled with warmth at my mother's proud gaze and my father's dramatic sigh of resignation.

It must have been painful for them to watch my struggles, too. Perhaps they regretted me marrying into the royal family.

I wanted them to know that the strength to walk this path came from the strong, kind man who had always stood beside me.

"I take great pride in being Lucas's wife. That's why I'll continue to ensure that neither of you, nor anyone else around us, regrets this."

"I agree that Cecilia is too good for me. But I have no intention of letting her go. I'll work to become a man worthy of her."

Startled at his words, I exchanged a glance with Lucas.

His golden eyes softened into a smile, and he said, "I love you," leaving me helpless to stop my face from turning bright red. His unwavering devotion, even in front of others, was something I deeply admired.

Responding in front of my mother and father is embarrassing, but I have to try!

"I-I love you too," I stammered, my voice barely above a whisper. Father widened his eyes in surprise and then stroked his beard with amusement.

"Hrm, I see. Well, as a father, it's frustrating. There's no way this could've happened with that worthless bastard. Being with a scoundrel for so long must've sharpened your judgment."

Worthless bastard… Is he talking about Felix?! Father, that's not proper at all!

"Marquis, while Felix was indeed a bastard, calling him worthless might be a bit much."

Oh no, Prince Leon's covering his face! Wait, does he also think Felix is a bastard? No, focus! Focus! I need to fix this!

"I grew up watching how much you cherish Mother!" I blurted out, trying to steer the conversation away from Felix and flatter my father instead.

His eyes gleamed.

"By the way, Lucas. Are you aware of my daughter's ideal man?"

Lucas froze at the sudden question, and I felt a cold sweat run down my back.

"I am not."

Lucas swallowed nervously, and my father grinned, pressing on with delight.

"I see. Well then, let me tell you. Her ideal man, the person she wanted to marry, is me."

F-Father, that was when I was a child! You're exaggerating!

The sound of gritted teeth echoed loudly.

Why are you so upset, Lucas? That was way before we even met, and he's my father, for goodness' sake!

As I worried over Lucas's loudly grinding teeth, Father, who'd looked smug a moment ago, let out a dramatic sigh.

His emotional highs and lows reminded me of Lucas.

"I always thought she would be devoted to me. When she met some nobody and decided to study healing magic, I was terrified. Even while engaged to that scumbag, she threw herself into her studies, always following in my footsteps. Until one day, her gaze shifted to the second son of a duke, an irritating little brat of a knight who'd started making a name for himself. I wasn't the one who noticed it first. It was my wife."

He's talking about what happened after the demon fox attack! I thought I was acting like I always did, but she noticed? Mom's terrifying…

I shuddered at the thought.

"Which is worse, the nobody or the scumbag?" Leon muttered.

"It has to be the nobody. Not knowing someone's background is still better than being an outright scumbag. There's no contest." Shireen offered her own opinion, leaving me teary-eyed.

I agree with you, Shireen, but the scumbag you're talking about is actually Leon's younger brother!

"Yeah, you're right. A scumbag is the lowest of the low…" As Leon's eyes grew dark, I began to panic. Before I could act, I felt a piercing stare and instinctively looked up.

Lucas's eyes were glowing with such intensity. Now, it was my turn to gulp.

"The reason you studied healing magic was because of me?"

"Y-yes, you could say that."

"You *could* say that? It's true, isn't it?"

Wow, he's really hung up on this being about him.

"Yes! Because I couldn't stop thinking about when you hurt your hand!" I snapped back a little, annoyed at his persistence. My face blazed as I lowered my head.

He gently pressed my face to his chest, shielding it.

"I see. You simply wanted to heal me. I have such a kind wife."

As he pulled me closer, his whisper brimmed with desire, making me want to cry.

This was undoubtedly an attempt to use kindness and healing to corner me into agreeing with him. *Even after all that last night, he's still not satisfied? I'm going to be in danger tonight!*

I trembled, overwhelmed by both shame and fear. Then, a firm voice filled the room.

"Cecilia had shut her heart off so completely back then that it was hard to believe she'd marry a prince one day. That was why even after that scumbag called off their engagement, she didn't marry Lucas because it was the king's decree. She accepted because she

believed he would never make her unhappy and that he truly wanted her. That's why we're here today to see her off. Lucas, please protect our one and only daughter."

I was overwhelmed with emotion when I heard my mother's heartfelt plea, my vision blurring with tears.

I'm so happy…

Just then, Lucas spoke in a low, stern voice. "Of course. I promise to bring her back no matter what and to love her with all my heart for the rest of my life."

"…!"

He bowed deeply while still holding me, and then it hit me—he had just made a knightly vow. I couldn't stop crying.

He didn't care that I was making his shirt wet. He just held me tighter, cradling me in his arms to comfort me. I frantically tried to stop crying and overheard my parents' dangerous conversation, which dried my tears instantly.

"Darling, remember when you said you'd punch Lucas and hand him divorce papers if he ever said something like 'I'd die for her' and leave Cecilia alone? Looks like my bet that he wouldn't say such a thing was correct."

"Hmph. How did you know that brat so well, Claudia?"

Are you jealous, Father?

"Because you and Lucas are very similar. He found someone he could truly spend his life with, just like you. Besides, she *is* our daughter."

"You're right."

Mother, I'll take notes on how you subtly manage Father while gushing over him!

Unfortunately, it seemed like Lucas also took a direct hit. After all, by saying that, Mother basically declared him to be my ideal man. The intense, smoldering gaze from above was almost too much to bear.

"She'll be happy no matter where she is with Lucas. Do send her off like a proper father."

"Ugh… Listen, brat. You'd better hunt down anyone who dares approach Cecilia with bad intentions and skewer them with your sword!"

Wait, what kind of parting words are those?!

My father's declaration scared me a bit, but Lucas gave a firm nod.

"I will."

"It's fine as long as no one traces it back to you," Prince Leon muttered, hanging his head in defeat.

"Don't worry. That's my specialty. The report is on your desk, Leon. Draft a protest letter to the Egrich Empire."

"Right, that. It's their fault this mess started in the first place and why I've suffered so much. They meddled with Bern. They'll have to pay the price."

Perhaps Leon's fatigue had reached its breaking point. I was taken aback by the faint, dark glimmer in his eyes, which was rather

unusual for him.

"Oh, so that's why Bern is known for its knights. It's said that picking a fight with them means being pursued to the ends of hell," Shireen remarked, nodding solemnly.

"Our family motto is, 'If someone picks a fight, you always win it,'" Father said.

"I'll remember that, Prime Minister."

Why is Father promoting violence in front of the crown princess?!

Come to think of it, I always ended up taking fights head-on, too. Is that why?

As I reeled from the shock of this newfound revelation, Finn stood beside Lucas while Barnabash flew back toward the railing.

"Let's go. Hold on tight, Cece," Lucas stated.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and turned once more to look at my parents.

They gave me a firm, reassuring push forward when they sensed my lingering anxiety.

"Cecilia, right now, you are free to love with your whole heart. Please be as happy as you possibly can," Mother said.

"It's all right. The condition was that if you made this choice, we would see you off with a smile. Prince Leon has agreed to this. That's why Princess Shireen is here too. Don't worry about anything else. Just believe in him and follow," Father declared.

I always thought I shouldn't show emotions as the prince's wife.

Choosing to follow my heart felt like trampling on my parents' wishes, at least to some extent.

To be told that wasn't the case…

Those words broke the chains that bound me. Encouraged by them, I clung to him with all my strength once more.

"Yes, I will never let go of this love. I'm going now…with all my heart!"

As the royal castle quickly grew smaller in the distance, I turned my face forward and looked up at the endless blue sky.

Spotting the pale moon that lingered above, I gently squeezed Lucas's hand.

"Thank you for letting me say goodbye to Mother and Father, Lukie. It might sound strange, but it gave me the peace of mind to fly away."

After I thanked him, my husband gave me a sweet smile.

"I'm glad. Now we can do all sorts of things without having to worry."

"L-like what?"

All sorts of things?!

I thought we were just going to Majaar to say our piece and then come back. Surely he wasn't planning on acting on what Father suggested…even with my ability to heal the emblem?

I wasn’t sure what to say back to his meaningful statement, so I just swallowed my doubts and nodded nervously.

His golden eyes glowed in the sunlight, narrowing into a mischievous smile against the bright blue sky. The sight of it made my heart race.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that he could hear my heartbeat since we sat so close together, and I found it difficult to meet his gaze properly.

“Wh-what is it?” I asked hesitantly, unsure whether I should tip my chin up or avert my eyes.

“Your heartbeat’s so loud. Are you hoping for something?” he teased, whispering in my ear. My face instantly flushed a deep scarlet.

“Wh-what? No, I’m not!”

“You’re not expecting anything?”

“N-no…”

“Well, I am. This is our first trip together, after all.”

As he said that, his molten gold eyes drew closer, and he pressed a soft kiss on my forehead.

He teased me for expecting a kiss while not giving one, yet he also made it clear how much he was looking forward to being with me. That thought filled me with such joy that it outshone my embarrassment.

I couldn’t help but smile through my flustered happiness as I felt the warmth lingering on my forehead. I was annoyed at being so

affected and tugged at his sleeve, retaliating by planting a quick kiss just below his lips.

"My dearest and most wonderful husband. I'm so happy to be going on this journey with you."

I gave him a loud smooch, making his cheeks turn pink.

The confident smirk was replaced by a flustered, slightly frustrated look. I couldn't help but feel smug at having thrown him off.

"Not on the lips?" he muttered.

"I can't reach them from here. Were you expecting something?" I lightly touched his lips with my finger, pleased my prank was a success. My beloved husband gave a small nod, and I couldn't help but laugh at his adorable reaction.

"I was. A lot."

How straightforward.

"Cece, I'm begging you. I'll lean down. Please, just one more time."

So quick to beg…

I couldn't deny that I was feeling a little excited too, which made me feel mischievous.

"Hehe. What should I do?"

Thanks to the barrier Lucas put around us, we felt no more than a soft breeze, even at high speeds, and there was no danger of falling. Even so, the warmth of his arms supporting me spread through me as I glanced up at the sky, which was darkening into twilight.

It was almost unbelievable that someone wanted a kiss from me this badly.

His golden eyes narrowed, melting into something utterly intoxicating, more brilliant than any gem.

A wave of possessiveness surged within me. I leaned in closer to peer into his eyes. His hair was untouched by the wind and cascaded softly down around us, creating a world of just the two of us.

"You're all I need. Stay with me, always." The words slipped out of my mouth as I was overwhelmed by a feeling of possessiveness.

And just like that, those molten gold eyes widened, returning to their round, full-moon state. I started to retreat, thinking perhaps I'd been too emotional.

"You can't just leave me hanging after saying something like that, Cecilia." His low, threatening tone reached me as his hands cupped my head, immobilizing me. As he looked into my eyes, he licked his lips.

From heartfelt to zero restraint—*Lucas, you have zero intention of ending this with just a sweet kiss!*

There's no way I'm letting you make me breathless mid-flight!

"Come on, hurry up," he coaxed with his mouth open. It was clear he wanted a deeper kiss. I reflexively shook my head.

But then his attention shifted to my corseted breasts.

He nibbled at me. His tongue flicked against my skin in an obscene manner, and I shook my head furiously.

This isn't a kiss! This is not what leaving you hanging means!

"Ah! W-wait! No!"

His breath was hot, brushing against my skin as his tongue darted out, grazing me.

He latched on, sucking hard enough to leave a mark, his golden eyes softening into a sweet haze as he gazed at the imprint of the love he left on my skin. I desperately pleaded with him, my voice trembling and eyes welling up with tears.

"Lucas, please. If you don't stop, I'm going to say something I shouldn't. You have to kiss me first!"

I surrendered my body for him as I begged for more, at the same time afraid of where that might lead. I whispered, "Please kiss my lips." The moment I said that, my husband froze.

"R-right, a kiss. The kiss comes first. Of course." He turned bright red, and the realization of what I'd just said dawned on me. My own face burned just as brightly.

"N-no! I wasn't suggesting anything else! I want to kiss you, just not here!"

"Ah. So as long as it's not here, you're fine with what comes after the kiss? Cece, you've been quite bold lately. Will you be spoiling me tonight, then?"

That's not a compliment!

Ugh fine, if you think I'll let you have the upper hand, you've got another thing coming to you, Lucas Theoderic.

"Let me spoil you right now, dear husband," I declared with a bright smile.

I began unbuttoning his jacket, and his face lit up like a child about to receive a gift.

"Don't you dare say something knightly like 'stop' all right?" I teased, sliding my arms down his sides.

That's when it dawned on him, and the joy on his face froze.

"W-wait, what are you doing?!"

"Oh, my dear, sweet Lukie. I'm spoiling you, of course!" I said, grinning as I wiggled my fingers.

His shoulders jerked slightly, a shiver running through his muscular frame. Oh ho ho! Victory was mine!

"D-damn it, you tricked me…"

As Lucas slumped in defeat, I silently celebrated—only for a powerful grip to seize my waist. His golden eyes glinted dangerously as he gazed at me.

"Laugh all you want, but don't come crying to me later regretting it!"

"Wha—mmph!!"

His lips claimed mine before I could react. Not one to back down, I pressed my fingers into his sides.

"Mm, ha! I won't lose!"

You're so adorable, but you're not going to win this one, Lucas!

Ignoring the little voice in my head asking, *"What are we doing?"* I focused on getting laughter out of him.

Every time I tickled him, his shoulders jerked, and my fingers brushed against the hard ridges of his sides. His breaths came out ragged, hot against my lips as he stifled his laughter.

"Ha… Ugh, ha ha!"

The moment I realized how this situation resembled something much more intimate, Lucas murmured softly, "I love you, Cecilia."

"What?!"

This was supposed to be a playful game. How did it turn into this?!

"D-don't say that now!" I shook my head, signaling that that was off-limits.

But his hands tightened around my waist, pulling me closer.

"Haha. Don't say that? Ugh, Cece. You can be so unfair sometimes! I love you so much it drives me crazy!"

His ferocious passion poured from his lips into me, setting off a quiver that rippled through my body. Desperate for more, I called out to him.

"Mm, Lukie…"

"Ahh… Every inch of me belongs to you, Cece. You've claimed me, and there's no way I'd ever tell you to stop. Haah…"

Even as he confessed his overwhelming, yet depraved feelings for me, the kiss he placed on me was unbearably gentle.

Unable to hold back, I let the hands that had been resting at my sides slide around his back. It was my way of surrendering.

"I give up…"

Somehow, he always managed to completely turn the situation around with just his words.

I'd come dangerously close to begging him, but instead, I clung to him and muttered, "Lukie, you're so unfair."

He let out a long sigh, rested his forehead on my shoulder, and replied, "Who's the unfair one here?"

The sorrow in his voice was palpable, but I refused to budge.

"It's you, Lukie."

"No way it's me."

Oh, it's absolutely you! How is it not unfair to use tricks like that?!

"It is you, Lukie!" I raised my voice, overwhelmed by embarrassment, and he pressed his forehead against mine.

"Why?"

He may have sounded blunt or even cold, but his golden eyes glimmered with unmistakable love.

I truly couldn't help but love the way he always wanted to listen to my feelings. Unable to hold back, my thoughts spilled out before I could stop them.

"I-it's not enough just to say it! I want to love you properly, deeply, forever… You made me feel this way, so you're the unfair one here, Lukie!"

"I see. That might be true."

Might?!

"It *is* you, Lukie!"

I refused to back down with a huff, and he let out an adorable laugh. His voice was filled with his twisted love, conveying his feelings so earnestly it made me break out in goosebumps all over my skin.

"Haha. Honestly, I'm trying to make you fall and ruin you completely, so why do you make it so easy by responding like this?"

Excuse me? Make me fall?! That's a terrible way to put it, Lukie!

Wouldn't it just be better to say we were in love? Though, if we could simply love each other like normal people, I doubted he'd feel the need to go to such extremes.

Is that what he means by making me fall? In that case, he's not wrong. I'm falling for him bit by bit, every day.

As I made silly comments in my head to escape this terrifying realization, he intertwined our fingers.

"My Cecilia…"

The way he said my name was calm and soothing, but the way his thumb traced the ring on my finger was undeniably sensual. One hand slid from my waist to my shoulder, his fingers combing through my hair before pulling it aside to expose my neck and collarbone.

I tensed under his touch, and he leaned closer without kissing me.

His gaze burned into my skin, but he didn't make a move to touch me.

Instead, his hair, soft as twilight, brushed against my shoulder as if by accident, and I couldn't resist. Even though I knew I shouldn't ask, I couldn't help it.

I asked him to stop with tears in my eyes. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Say it again. Tell me again that you only want me and that you'll always stay by my side," he murmured.

"What?"

I stared at him wide-eyed, stunned by his unexpected request.

He lifted my left hand and pressed a kiss against my ring, his voice slightly shy as he explained.

"From now on, I'll be able to touch you whenever I want. You'll always be by my side for the rest of our lives. I won't ever let you go. You promised to accept me, no matter what. I want to hear you say it again."

"…"

This is bad. There are so many things I want to object to, but I can't deny the most important one. And that's very bad.

What do I do? What was once only something that occurred at night is clearly becoming something more!

A cold sweat trickled down my back as I glanced at his golden eyes, filled with hope, pleading silently for my answer. That breathtakingly beautiful expression nearly stopped my heart.

This is what it means to be overwhelmed, isn't it?

He was very skilled in getting me to obey him.

"Y-you really are so unfair…"

The words slipped out, filled with frustration and love.

I tried to complain, to fight back, but I couldn't even make a sound or an expression.

My cheeks burned, and with no escape, I gave in. "I am the wife of Lucas Theoderic Herbst. Of course I only need you. Staying by your side and healing you is my right and privilege. I'll do anything for you!"

The moment I declared this, his golden eyes sparkled, capturing the light and my heart with it.

"You always surpass my expectations, my love. You make me fall for you over and over again."

As he tipped my chin up with his fingertips, I reached up to press my fingers against his lips, stopping him with a smile.

"I said I'd do anything, but not right now."

"That's unfair! Damn it. Is it because you'll want to do more?" he pouted with an adorably exasperated look.

I leaned in close and whispered against his lips, "Because you're going to shower me with affection tonight, won't you?"

If I spent too much energy now, I might collapse by the time we reached Majaar.

I absolutely can't let that happen!

Hiding my desperation, I watched as he blushed sweetly and nodded, his enthusiasm making my heart ache in the best way.

"Y-yeah, I'll make sure to cherish you all night long. I'll do my best."

You don't have to try that hard! But I was unable to say that aloud. Instead, I found myself agreeing instead, my face as red as his.

"Yes, I'll look forward to it, too."

"Hah, I'm so happy… I can't wait for what's to come."

What exactly is he expecting?! I was too afraid to ask, and I watched him turn his glowing smile toward me.

"Let's enjoy this together."

His golden eyes shone with a strong determination, and I squeezed his hand in response, my heart filling with warmth.

"Yes, always together."

I would live my life beside him no matter where it took us, beneath this vast sky.



Bonus Story

M*Y HUSBAND IS VERY POPULAR.*

He was popular even when we were engaged, and even after we exchanged vows and matching rings symbolizing our lifelong bond.

Women still couldn't seem to resist him despite our cementing our union. They were drawn by his unparalleled beauty and the commanding strength he displayed while wielding his sword. They flocked to him, entranced.

"I'd give anything just to see him once… Or forever, if I could."

I completely understood, truly. After all, I was his wife, yet here I was, peeking at his training sessions from a corridor overlooking the courtyard, trying not to get caught.

"Ah, even watching him instruct the other knights is breathtaking."

"How can someone so beautiful be so strong? The way his lustrous hair flows… He's the perfect Knight of the Blue Rose!"

"Just once, I wish he'd offer me a flower."

Listen, I get it!

His calm, composed demeanor while giving precise instructions was so different from how he was in private. It made my heart race. Over the past year, he'd grown taller, his shoulders broader. His knight attire suited him even more now.

It was like he was born to be a knight.

As I listened to the excited chatter of the young ladies nearby blushing and giggling, I found myself silently agreeing. My gaze drifted to Lucas, who had just called an end to training. The knights promptly lined up in response.

His dashing looks befitted his dramatic title of Knight of the Blue Rose, and he enchanted everyone around him. Even now, as he left the training grounds surrounded by his escort knights—most likely there to protect from his many admirers—I couldn't suppress a frustrated complaint.

"There's quite a crowd again today."

I sighed deeply. Anna and Kate, who stood nearby, responded with sympathetic expressions on their faces.

"The number of onlookers has been increasing lately," Anna noted.

"Ever since Prince Lucas became the Hero—or rather, ever since he married you and started spending more time at the castle—the opportunities to see him have increased," Kate added.

Before, he'd been away for days at a time on campaigns. Now, thanks to the black dragon, his travel time was minimal, and his campaigns were over in a flash.

I'd expect nothing less from our nation's idol—er, I mean, Hero.

I knew it couldn't be helped, but I wished he wouldn't attract more admirers…

I gripped the handrail and hung my head in frustration. Elsa flashed me a cheerful grin.

"It doesn't seem like they actually want to marry Prince Lucas or fall in love with him! Judging by the way he looks at anyone other than you, he thinks of them as nothing more than dust in the corner of a room. They're too scared and know better than to dream too m—Ow!"

"Manners."

Kate promptly smacked Elsa's outstretched hand, which had been pointing at the group of ladies. Elsa clutched her stinging hand with tears in her eyes as I forced myself to respond.

"…I see."

Dust.

In other words, not even human. Something to be cleaned up and discarded if they cause trouble?

Was his intimidating glare at the party after his campaign not just a bluff, but a clear message of intent?

Not letting them even entertain a dream… What a cruel way to make his point. And yet, knowing that he saw me as his one and only filled me with joy.

I never want to lose him. Although I might scold him for being rough sometimes, deep down, I know I could never truly stop him.

I want him to always look at me and only me. If only I could be the only one he offers a flower to. But such selfish wishes will only bring pain.

Even today, I'd come sneaking around to watch him, worried by the growing number of admirers.

That behavior made it seem like I wasn't satisfied with him.

How unbecoming and arrogant of me.

I was about to hang my head again when I locked eyes with him.

The moment our gazes met, Lucas turned toward me, his golden eyes steady and sure. His movement caused a wave of cheers to rise from the maids around me, but I didn't share their excitement.

Stay calm, stay calm. Right now, I'm not the prince's wife. I'm just a random young noblewoman.

My clever maids had used transformation magic on me. My hair was now a rich blonde, my eyes a deep brown. Even my facial features had been altered to look completely different.

There was no way he could recognize me at a glance in this huge crowd.

If he did, it would mean he would realize I'd been spying on him.

Desperately holding my ground, I forced a smile like the other ladies. Lucas's lips moved slowly.

"Cecilia, do you think you're hiding?" he whispered.

"…!"

He knows!

Hearing him unmistakably say my name made my heart pound wildly, and I felt my face flush a bright red.

"No way… Already?!" Anna went pale.

"Two months of magical training, wasted in an instant." Kate hid her face to stifle tears.

"As expected of Prince Lucas. His senses are as sharp as a beast's when it comes to finding his mate. No, sharper than any beast!" Elsa's eyes sparkled with admiration, although saying he was sharper than a beast didn't sound like praise to me.

This is so embarrassing!

I staggered backward as Lucas's cold, focused gaze melted to one as sweet as candy.

The stern line of his mouth softened into a playful smile, and the statuesque features that usually showed no emotion during training came to life.

Even the knights began murmuring at his obvious shift. Lucas took his coat from Finn and headed toward the corridor leading to the garden.

"I'm going to the garden!"

If he catches me here, I'll be mortified!

Determined to avoid that at all costs, I turned on my heel and fled like an embarrassed child into the garden, where vibrant roses bloomed in abundance.

The hem of my dress brushed against the grass and flowers with a faint rustle.

I'd somehow made it into the garden without being caught. As I walked around briskly, my gaze landed on a radiant rosebud, and I

stopped in my tracks.

Come to think of it, there was a young gardener who once gave me a rose.

Lost in thought, I stared at the neatly trimmed hedge just above my line of sight. A gentle breeze suddenly swept past, and the petals began to dance around me.

The gentle breeze carried no answers, yet it comforted me. I strained to sense any presence nearby, but of course I couldn't.

I traced the petals of the half-bloomed rose with my fingertips.

"Honestly, how do you always know where I am?" A pouting voice escaped my lips.

"Ha ha. Do you really want to know?"

His deep, soothing voice, which I loved so dearly, answered from behind me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

A shadow formed over the bushes, and then a single orange rose gracefully extended toward me from behind. My heart pounded wildly in my chest.

Perhaps the reason Lucas could find me so effortlessly had something to do with my ring. It wouldn't come off no matter how thoroughly I washed my hands, even with soap.

The orange rose symbolized "I'm fascinated by your charm."

Oh, how suggestive!

Maybe he tracked me down with his extraordinary senses like Elsa said… Like by my scent.

The instant that embarrassing possibility crossed my mind, an enticing voice brushed past my ear. Heat surged through me, blooming beneath my dress.

"A rose in full bloom gives off a lovely scent, Cece."

"It is blooming beautifully, isn't it?"

This is too *suggestive! Sorry I ran from you!*

"Yes, it is. Will you accept it?"

"Thank you, Lord Lukie."

I accepted the rose, which already had its thorns meticulously removed.

When I cautiously turned my blushing face to glance at him, his dark hair brushed against my bangs.

Then, his lips pressed a light kiss into me, and his golden eyes locked onto mine, pinning me in place.

"…!"

I wanted to protest, *"Not here!"* but the possessiveness glinting in his eyes in contrast to his gentle kiss overwhelmed me, and my tongue faltered, trembling.

"Ahh…" The small sound that escaped my lips wasn't a protest but an involuntary moan, like I was begging for more. In return, I received a kiss filled with fervent, unabashed desire.

"If you make me happy only to run away again, I'll take you on the spot next time."

"Mmph!"

He saw through my anxiety and instead of comforting me, conveyed how much he liked it with a biting kiss, melting away the ugly feelings in my heart effortlessly.

"It's because of you! Because you're called the Knight of the Blue Rose!"

"Huh?"

His golden eyes widened in surprise at my childish words, and he blinked at me with a baffled expression.

"What are you talking about?" He looked completely shocked, and the frustration built up inside me.

"You didn't know?" I couldn't help but snap at him, glaring up at his face, which was very close to mine, with irritation.

For someone so admired, shouldn't you be more aware of your popularity?

"People call you that behind your back. You're very popular, you know!"

"…What?"

His handsome face twisted like he'd swallowed something bitter, and I almost laughed at how unexpected it was.

"You really didn't know?"

"Nope. Why do they call me that? It doesn't sound like a compliment at all."

Oh, right. He's been with the knights since he was ten.

His divine beauty often overshadowed everything else, but comparing a knight to a flower probably didn't sound like praise to him. I watched him blush and felt my heart lighten.

I'm so easy, I thought, a sheepish smile crossing my lips as I laughed softly.

"You really have no idea why they call you the Knight of the Blue Rose?"

I wanted to tease him a little because he was so cute when he pouted. I never expected that my casual comment would lead me to a sweet truth.

"No, I don't. You're the only one I've ever given a rose to. I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea. Noblewomen are so petty, giving me that nickname just because I didn't give any to them." he muttered, clearly misunderstanding the situation.

I wanted to say that all nobles were petty, but this wasn't the time.

"You've never given a rose to anyone else? But the first time you gave me one was after we got engaged. That doesn't line up with the timing of your nickname. Other than that, the only roses I'd ever received were from a secret admirer or the gardener…"

The image that came to mind was of tattered black gloves, much like the ones grasping my waist. My heart began to race.

The young boy had comforted me with a strong voice, praising my efforts and said, "Now all that's left is to bloom beautifully."

When was that? After meeting Felix, when I'd fled to this very garden near the training grounds, unable to bear that hollow feeling of not being acknowledged by him!

I stared at Lucas in disbelief, and my dear husband, his face dark with murderous intent, confirmed it for me.

"Like I said, the rose from that day is now blooming beautifully and radiantly, isn't it?"

It was like he was saying Felix's words had no power to hurt me. His gaze was both threatening and protective, but I couldn't help but tremble.

Please don't let your anger resurface. Give me a moment to savor this new memory of you instead.

"That would make me very happy… But um, after that, I worried that the kind gardener who encouraged me might get in trouble for picking a rose without permission. Do you know what became of him?"

He shrugged casually at my timid question.

"Who knows? Maybe he pinned the blame on that royal idiot and slipped away without any trouble. Felix was handing out flowers left and right to ladies back then."

"Now that you mention it, Leon did warn him not to take flowers from the garden without permission…"

The revelation made me hang my head. *This is no time to feel moved!*

"See?"

"See what? Lukie, Felix would never pick a flower himself."

"Even scoundrels give out roses. Whether they're gardeners or knights, if they're in love enough, they'll take one or two roses for themselves."

The shameless confidence in his tone, devoid of any regret, made my chest tighten in a strange mixture of relief and sorrow.

"That's why they call you the Knight of the Blue Rose."

I wanted to tell him how much I adored him. I wanted to rewrite the unspoken memories of the past. I reached out for his worn leather gloves, slipping my fingers through his. His reply dripped with anticipation.

"Was that a compliment or jealousy? Or maybe you were trying to tempt me?"

You're so sly and adorable. Always wanting to know how I feel.

"Ha ha. What do you think, my knight?"

I tightened my grip, and his expression grew sharp and determined.

"You're tempting me."

As straightforward as ever. It was this honesty that turned my concerns into joy.

I brought the rose to my lips, kissed it softly, and held it up to his mouth to create new memories with my beloved.

"Then here you go, Knight of the Blue Rose."

“What a splendidly beautiful and sweet rose, just like you, my lady. Thank you for the generous gift. May I return the favor?”

With a smile, I knew he understood my wishes perfectly. I stood on my tiptoes and replied, “Yes. I’d love that.”



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