

## **“The Day I gave up on being a Following Star<sup>1</sup>”**

1

In this world, nations are arranged in a single continuous continent, making up the four countries called the Great Nations.

With their territory in the east, west, south, and north, and while there are various other smaller countries, they are treated as nothing more than vassal states under the protection of one of the Great Nations.

The relative power of the four Great Nations is held in a delicate balance, and except for the newly-emerged nation of Kararagi, this stalemate has not changed significantly in nearly a thousand years.

In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, severe cold combines with steep mountains, and for both men and beasts, it is a nation that requires harsh strength. Snow falls throughout the year, and all but a few of its products are made to endure the cold. In exchange, cattle breeding, the veins of magic ore that sleep in the steep mountains, mining and handling magic ore preserve the nation's strength.

As well, the peak of the sacred mountain Pardochia is taught to be one of the dwellings of the Four Great Spirits, reigned over by the Holy Beast Odglass who holds enormous power.

At the founding of the Holy Kingdom Gusteko, Odglass gave the name “Holy King” and exchanged a contract with a spirit arts user who followed her, and since then has always been involved in choosing the “Holy King” who is the head of the nation.

The “Holy King” who leads the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko is determined, regardless of bloodline or origin, by being chosen by the Holy Beast Odglass from one elected out of the citizens to lead the next generation.

The city-state of Kararagi in the west is, compared to the other three Great Nations, a newly-emerged nation with a short history.

Until roughly four hundred years ago, the western portion of the continent looked like a powder keg of several small nations angrily eyeing each other. There was little difference in national power between any of the small nations, and, each fearing being ganged up on by the others, an unproductive era of being wary of each other continued for a long time.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘後追い星’ (following star) seems to be a reference to the arabic meaning of the name Aldebaran.

The one who put a stop to that situation was a common merchant who called himself Hoshin.

Hoshin, of uncertain identity and origin, rose in the world simply through his words and business talent and imagination, and in the end, he beat down the small countries that had antagonized each other with military force, using the magic called economic might. Not belonging to any nation, his devilish tactics nevertheless meant that there were people at the center of every nation with connections to Hoshin.

As a result, many small countries bowed before Hoshin, their position as nations was altered to being cities, and the city-state of Kararagi was born with Hoshin being the representative for all cities.

Since then, Hoshin's name became a word referring to rising to prominence, and even after Hoshin's death, many talented people have gathered to walk in the footsteps he left. As well, the city-state of Kararagi was formed into a strong country that the other three Great Nations could not easily meddle with.

The southern Empire of Vollachia holds the oldest history, and with the long-held reasoning of "Wealthy country, strong army", the nation has continued being led by its emperor.

Reigning from the pinnacle, the emperor holds absolute authority, and the government of the empire is all managed by the emperor.

That arrangement hasn't changed since the founding of the country, and the reason that the empire hasn't collapsed due to a foolish ruler is the sublime law concerning the change of rulership.

The custom is that while he holds the throne, the emperor produces children in all parts of the country, and those children contend for the position of next emperor. To a candidate for the position of emperor, failure means death, and passing through this gruesome process which concentrates the world's hatred and ugliness, a single person is chosen as the next emperor.

An attitude of respect towards this national character has filtered down to the citizens as well, and the imperial doctrine of accepting the supremacy of the powerful and a powerful emperor, is widely thought of as the natural state of affairs.

There is some interaction with other countries, but being blessed with fertile lands and a stable climate, the country is basically able to sustain itself from within, and contact with the outside is not looked on favorably. Instead, they continually embrace the ambition to expand their territory, and their ancient conflict with Lugunica has continued without ceasing.

Hence, in the southwest part of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the Barrielle domain was continually exposed to a sense of peril.

“If you can believe it, I’ve heard that his Lordship has taken a new wife.”

To the inhabitants of the Barielle domain, it was nothing more than a sarcastic topic exchanged during a break from working in the fields.

In regards to Baron Leip Barielle who managed their domain, the opinion of the local citizens wasn’t that good. Actually, it would be better to say they held a poor opinion of him.

Taxes and local laws that were lacking in consideration for the citizens. Not only was it far from being an approach that would produce friendship, it was difficult to expect people to feel goodwill towards an authority figure who seldom even showed his face.

With that much of a gap formed between the minds of the lord and the citizens, it wasn’t impossible for that to become the seed of a rebellion. In truth, several had been attempted in the last ten years.

However, for a lord that didn’t pay sufficient attention to the good intentions of his citizens, he never failed to be wary of their bad intentions. As a result, the attempts were crushed along with cruel demonstrations, and relations worsened by the day.

Because of that, while the lord’s announcement would normally be celebrated, to the citizens, it was no concern of theirs. With the baron already advanced in years, taking a second wife at his age didn’t arouse their interest.

Doubtless this second wife or whatever would simply make off with most of the fruits of their labor, and prove to be a demon who would leave them only enough supplies to survive on.

The end of lord Liep’s lifespan, and the fall of the heirless house of Barielle.

These were the only hopes of the local citizens as they lived day to day, and their first evaluation of her.

Their first evaluation before seeing the red woman known as Priscilla Barielle.

“Huh. What a dreary place, and such lifeless expressions.”

That was the first thing she said, while looking over the best field in the village and it’s owner.

A voice filled with contempt, and words spoken by one looking down from far above. Many who looked up felt anger that was difficult to endure, but were left speechless the moment they saw her.

Standing there was a red woman.

Her orange hair looked like a reflection of the rays of the sun and was gathered with a barrette, and her more-than-voluptuous body was wrapped in a crimson dress that exposed it generously. Her lightly-colored lips broke into a scarlet smile, and her eyes blazed red as they gazed back at those looking at her.

Even the fan she had chosen to cool herself with was red, so from top to bottom, she was a crimson woman.

From that sort of visual attack, it was clear at a glance that she was someone of high standing, but despite that, everyone still forgot to react.

In addition to the rest, to an extent sufficient to erase the impression given by her outlandish clothing, the red woman was beautiful.

Everyone there, man or woman, couldn't help but tremble at the beauty before their eyes.

"Why are you staring at me with those pathetic eyes? Is that not disrespectful, you lowly imbeciles?"

However, that feeling, too, was completely overridden by the woman's ongoing derisive comments. They had been slow to recognize her contempt, and though the people all held anger in their eyes, they hid it inside and lowered their heads.

The red woman's words were humiliating insults. But, simply by looking at her they could tell that her station in life was completely different from theirs. In other words, there was nothing to be gained by trying to oppose her. Just as they normally did, in the face of unfairness or discontent, they hung down their heads; waiting for the storm to pass was the best plan.

"Oh, I see. Long years of resignation have entirely stolen away your backbone, and turned you all timid, then. That means the old man must be quite a noble, then. I see he is quite good at being oppressive."

"Y... you seem to be a noble. What brings you to this village today.....?"

As she looked over the downcast faces of the locals with an expression of comprehension, she was resolutely addressed by the field's owner.

As the owner of the best field and land in the village, even if it wasn't much of a contest, he was the village representative. No one else here was suited to asking the business of a noble.

"Do not be in such a hurry, commoner. It is expected that you would be surprised when a beauty like myself visits suddenly, but I do what I want however I want, and I will not let

anyone rush me. You should be grateful for your unexpected good fortune. Just carry on glancing at my fair form from the corner of your eyes, and forget the passage of time.”

Bringing her face close to the owner’s, the red woman spoke seductively to him close enough that he could feel her breath. At that, the owner backed away, visibly flustered. He could hardly be blamed for that.

Between the owner and the red woman, the difference in age was like a parent and child, but the intense charm she was unleashing was enough to make him forget the difference in years and make a man think of a woman. To call it bewitching would be appropriate.

“Hmm, hmm…… Oh, I see.”

After unsettling the owner, the woman looked over the nearby fields as though she owned them.

While that was going on, the locals had their hands full stealing glances at her from the corner of their eyes, just as she’d said. They had no motivation to resume working in the fields and be complained at further, but no one even thought to do so.

To do something different than everyone else, and draw the attention of the red woman, was something they all feared.

“Hmm, yes. First here and here, then I suppose those two over there will do. There is little difference between any of them, so you should see it as your good fortune that they caught my fancy.”

After briefly looking over the nearby fields, the woman nodded with a satisfied expression.

Looking sharply at the owner, she grinned to see him trembling. In spite of that smile being something that made one think of malice, it was too beautiful to look away from.

“You there, commoner. You own the largest field in the village, do you not?”

“Um, yes. That’s correct.”

“I can tell from looking at your field. It’s terrible, but the land is extensive, at least. Like an old, rotten tree, you hold ambitions unsuited to the limits of your form, much like a certain lord I might mention.”

The inhabitants there slowly realized that those words, filled with contempt and mockery, were directed at none other than Leip, and their faces went pale at the disrespect.

To the domain’s inhabitants, the lord was one who looked down on them from above. To them who had become completely accepting of that idea, the thought that the red woman

held an even higher position than their lord never entered their minds. In truth, that would have been overthinking it.

“Well, your field will do. It is a perfectly good stepping stone to use as a basis for comparison. The owner of the good fortune of having my influence bestowed on him will be someone else. The owner of those four meager fields across the road.”

The woman was pointing at fields that, compared to the land of the large field owner, were withered wastelands. Just like the fields, their owners also looked weakly, and their entire household seemed to be getting by day to day supported by the kindness of the other villagers.

As that villager came forward and gave his names, the red woman’s eyes were colored with a bitterly cruel emotion.

It was largely with feelings of disdain, hatred, and complete viciousness that she looked down on him.

“Well, whatever. When you give water to parched grass, anyone can see the change.”

As the inhabitants stiffened as though shot, the woman looked away in boredom. Then she pointed to the parched field, and quietly said something to the man.

The voice whispered into his ear reached only him, and those around them didn’t know what kind of unreasonable demand she was making of him. They simply felt pity for him as he nodded his head like a doll.

And when she finished whispering, the woman folded her arms with a satisfied expression. Her abundant breasts shook greatly over her folded arms, and the women looked askance at the men as they couldn’t help groaning.

“I forgot to say, I am Priscilla Barielle. The new baroness of all the Barielle lands around here. Let those who are not here know as well. That I am generously forgiving rudeness like that of today, will only happen on this day when ignorance and blindness can be forgiven.”

And the woman departed, leaving words that caused the villagers despair as they returned to themselves.

Afterwards, the locals realized that the person calling herself Priscilla Barielle was the new second wife that Baron Leip Barielle had taken. They didn’t understand why she would have come to see the domain without any escort, but her insolent arrogance brought Leip’s tyranny to mind.

As well, the fact that she was a young woman led them to despair, as it crushed their hope of Leip’s age leading to his removal from his position.

It meant that they would suffer under the same cruel rulership as Leip, long into the future.

All of them held that sort of unease and fear about Priscilla's visit, and then they forgot that one month later.

...Because, in the field of the man Priscilla had selected, an impossibly abundant harvest appeared.

### 3

"Not sure what to say; honestly, that was unexpected. To see them get so attached to you, princess."

The voice was carefree, but a little muffled and thus hard to hear.

The voice being overlapped with the rasping sound of metals brushing against each other, and it being muffled, were from the same cause - the head of the voice's owner was completely covered by a pitch-black steel helmet, and he had a habit of playing with it's joints as he spoke.

He was a person with a terribly unusual outfit; you might even call it outlandish.

His head was covered with a black steel helmet, just as was mentioned earlier, but he was protected by it's strong defense only from his neck upwards. His well-toned body was covered in rough clothing like that of a bandit, and his feet were, oddly enough, wearing boots woven from leather. A shabby cloth hung from his shoulders and covered his neck, and a rough, wide-bladed sword peeked out from behind his back, hanging horizontally.

In every sense it was a collection of weird features, but there was one spot that stood out more than all the rest.

...The helmeted man's left arm was missing below the shoulder.

The man, who had a particular loss to go along with his outlandish outfit, projected an abnormal presence simply standing there. Even more so standing next to the red woman - Priscilla Barielle.

"And what do you mean by unexpected? Behold my beauty, which exceeds human understanding. Like baby birds long to be fed, it's entirely natural that the commoners should worship me, Al."

"It was just something I'd imagined on my own, but still. Here I always thought you were the type who wouldn't do anything to put more fish in the pond, princess."

"Then there would be no reason for me to welcome you. Do you not agree?"

“Now that you say it, that’s true. I guess I was mixed up.”

Accepting Priscilla’s words without complaint, the helmeted man - Al - scratched the top of his helmet with his thick right arm. He looked around at his surroundings as though curious, but his expression and mood could not be seen.

For her part, Priscilla had no reaction to her attendant’s attitude. As she continued pressing forward at a steady pace, the people around her spoke up as they noticed her.

“Ah, it’s Priscilla-sama!” “It’s the dear concubine princess!” “Long live the Sun Princess!”

As one of them noticed her, many others reacted to their raised voice and came rushing out of their houses. The villagers, all with cheerful faces, unanimously honored and praised Priscilla.

“Mhmm. Very good. You should exert yourselves unfailingly, commoners. As long as you continue to bow before my glory and follow me, I would not be so cruel as to deprive you of my compassion. Be sure not to neglect that in the future.”

Priscilla’s words weren’t said to anyone in particular, so much as to everyone there who cheering for her.

It certainly wasn’t a loud voice, but her voice had the power to penetrate and reach everywhere. At the arrogance of those powerful words, Al couldn’t help but cringe, but,

“Understood!” “If it’s for Priscilla-sama!” “Long live the Sun Princess!”

not only did the villagers not take it poorly, they readily accepted her prideful speech.

Al could only shake his head at the discrepancy between his impression of his lady’s character, and the attitude of the locals.

It was only a few days ago that the helmeted man, Al, had been recognized as Priscilla’s knight. Suddenly finding herself needing to choose a knight, Priscilla held a gladiatorial contest to meet that need while prioritizing her own preferences.

The approach of searching for a knight for a baroness, without regard for one’s origins, led to a great number signing up, and it became a truly successful contest. There, Al was judged worthy in Priscilla’s eyes, and was the man who gained the position of knight.

Their relationship was still too new, and the bonds too thin, to call them lord and attendant. During the time he’d been allowed to stay at her side, Al had been observing her carefully, but she was still a mystery to him.



Though she appeared thoughtful, she would immediately put her impulses into action. One might think that she was approachable for the locals, but then one would suddenly see an expression on her face cruel enough to freeze your blood. Even her limbs that seemed so full of femininity had a viciousness that had taken him off guard, stolen his sword, and came within a hair's breadth of sending his head flying.

As a result, even after spending several days together, his current impression was that he knew nothing about his liege.

"Look here, Al. Why are you just standing there? The commoners are terribly curious about you. Who is that very rare sort of a man standing next to a beautiful maiden like myself, they wonder."

"So why don't you explain it to them, princess?"

"Watch how you speak, Al. Even I do not know how many more times I can overlook your boorish behavior because it's amusing. You should take care not to displease me needlessly."

Just when his opinion of her had been improving a little, this happens. The good mood that had been showing on her face until a second ago had changed in the briefest of moments into the eyes of one looking at trash.

"Ah, sorry, that was my fault. Now that you mention it, what kind of attendant passes off the trouble of introductions onto their master? Sorry, sorry, forgive me chonmage."<sup>2</sup>

"Very well. I forgive you. However, I'll have you tell me later what you mean by chonmage."

The unexpected phrase seemed to have succeeded, allowing Al to narrowly escape the signs of Priscilla's displeasure. Holding a hand to his chest in relief after having confirmed that, Al explained his position to the locals - regaling them with the story of how he came to serve Priscilla, full of humor and the occasional exaggeration.

#### 4

"Priscilla-sama is a wonderful person. To me, she's the goddess that saved me, oh yes, indeed."

That was the response to Al's question from the boy who had nervously brewed tea, clearly not familiar with doing so. His peculiar wording might have been an attempt to curry favor.

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<sup>2</sup> Difficult to translate. Chonmage (a topknot) is sometimes used in place of choudai (please) in the phrase "Forgive me, please" to add a bit of humor while still asking for forgiveness. Al is also using a Japanese phrase here that shows he's not native to the other world, which is why Priscilla asks him to explain it later.

The location was the Barielle manor's lounge. Casually seated on a very comfortable sofa, Al was enjoying his break time to the fullest.

"You're really fond of the princess, so I thought you might say something like that, Schult-chan."

Suppressing a chuckle at the boy's response, Al lifted the offered cup of tea. Then, slightly lifting his head, he deftly brought the drink to the gap that formed under his helmet.

Never removing his helm, and never showing his real face was Al's consistent behavior. Being one-armed on top of not removing his helmet meant that his eating habits were rather impolite. Since it was impossible to lift his helmet with one hand while eating, he necessarily ate in much the same way as he drank the tea.

"Do my manners... does my impoliteness bother you?"<sup>3</sup>

Noticing the boy standing still and looking at him, Al asked that in a low voice while putting down his cup. Schult held his breath slightly at the question.

He was a thin boy. His skin was white, and his peach-colored hair was distinctive. His crimson eyes were not very assertive, and he gave such a delicate impression that some who looked at him mistook him for a girl. He was perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, but his body didn't look developed enough for that; he appeared only around ten years of age.

The boy who could easily be called a child was wearing a servant's outfit in black, and imitating a butler. Some people would likely find his appearance more pitiful than amusing. In truth, Al found it somewhat painful to look at Schult trying to stretch beyond his limits.

"I haven't got any education. Please overlook my lack of knowledge about proper manners. You get it, right?"

Folding his legs rudely on top of the chair, Al deliberately demonstrated his rough behavior. At that, Schult shook his head side to side while watching him.

"I, too, am uneducated, the same as Al-sama, oh yes, indeed. So, I don't feel that I'm sufficiently refined to complain about Al-sama's behavior."

"Honesty is a virtue, and being straightforward is the privilege of children. I think you're starting to get the look down, but what you've got inside isn't there yet. How long has it been since you came here, Schult-senpai?"

"Since I was rescued by Priscilla-sama, it's been just three months, oh yes, indeed."

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<sup>3</sup> He corrects himself here as the word he used for manners was an English loan-word in Japanese, so Schult wouldn't understand it.

Schult didn't even respond to the irony of being called senpai. Perhaps it was cruel to expect an orphan who grew up in a farming village to understand.

This boy butler Schult was an orphan that Priscilla brought back from a farm village in the domain.

When Priscilla brought the thin, starved boy back with her, saying things like "If you polish him, he'll shine," it seems that the mansion's master Leip was seriously furious, but apparently Priscilla paid him no mind.

Just like that, Schult, protected by the good fortune of having caught Priscilla's eye, was guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, and the boy was remade into a butler.

"It's hard to say if catching the princess' eye is good luck or bad luck, though."

"I'm very grateful to Priscilla-sama for being kind enough to rescue me, oh yes, indeed. If I'd continued to stay in the village, I'd have been dead and buried by now, after all."

"That's a cute picture, yep. Things like that make me feel more and more like I don't know what the princess is thinking, and make me wonder just what kinda person she is."

Her attitude seemed like one that would never be charitable, and yet she saved an orphan. On the other hand, she didn't extend her hand to everyone, and he had no idea what reason she had to take him in.

Was Priscilla actually the goddess that the locals and Schult believed her to be? Or was she a cruel witch that occasionally sent chills down Al's spine?

"Witch. A witch, indeed....."

Speaking aloud the word he'd thought of himself, he couldn't help but smile at the cliché.

The word 'witch' that was known as a taboo in this world. Al himself knew all too well how much of a menace was referred to by that word.

"Al-sama, you....."

"Hm?"

As Al was lost in thought, Schult unexpectedly called to him with an unsettled look in his eyes.

The gesture of holding the silver serving tray to his chest was terribly feminine and out of place.

"It's correct that you have become Priscilla-sama's knight, yes, indeed? You protect her. I can trust that you are her ally, can't I?"

As Schult questioned him seeking reassurance, Al closed his eyes inside his helmet.

As a way of calming the fear in his heart, the boy was looking for powerful words from Al. However,

"When you ask like that, whether I'm her ally or I'm plotting something, of course I'm going to cheerfully reply "Yeah, leave it to me. I'm the princess' amazing, strongest knight!". As a question, it's not really appropriate, ya see. Sorry, please try again."

He could tell that Schult had been hurt by his response.

Despite that, looking at that expression didn't cause any regret to stir in Al's heart.

In betraying the pure look directed at him by the boy, Al didn't hesitate for a moment. For the sake of his goal, he discards everything else. In a sense, certain sacrifices were necessary for achieving his wish.

Repeating the same mistake again and again, as he had in the past, that alone absolutely could not be allowed, after all.

"...What is this? I was wondering where you'd gotten to, and you are holding a gloomy tea party in a place like this?"

In the lounge that had fallen into silence, a beautiful voice that looked down on them from the sky intruded suddenly.

Violently opening the door without knocking, the lady of the mansion pushed inside while swinging the sleeves of her elegant dress. Folding her arms as though trying to lift her abundant chest, she closed one eye, and spoke.

"Schult. Your only role as an attache is to be there when I wish it. Missing that opportunity in a place like this is inexcusable. Spending time with an eccentric like Al is even worse. For someone like you whose only merit is cuteness, if his messiness were to infect you as well, it would simply be too much."

"Saying that's his only merit; you speak way more directly than I do, princess."

"It is a fact, and when I state it it becomes an even stronger truth. What other value does Schult have at this time? Even then, compared to the other worthless commoners, he is at least a little better. It will be necessary to take away even that merit if he continues to betray my expectations, of course."

Looking over the pair that had been conversing in the lounge, Priscilla sniffed dismissively and derided them. Al couldn't help but give a prideful wry smile, but Schult's face went pale.

"I... I'll work harder, oh yes, indeed! So... so please... don't abandon me..."

"Do not cry and cling to me, it is unbecoming. I can adore even your crying face, but relying on that pity from the start is the height of folly. I do not need a common person as my attache. Continue to show me your value."

After Priscilla cut off his trembling speech, Schult hurriedly wiped his eyes with his sleeve. His eyes were slightly reddened, but Priscilla nodded at him as he earnestly raised his head.

"That will do. If they lack the backbone to change the way they stand, then the likes of you are no better than corpses. Corpses can become fertilizer if they return to the earth, but if they stay atop the earth while being no different from the dead, nothing good comes of it. I will not have you wasting my air. Take every breath as though it were your last."

"That's a bit much... If Schult puts that much effort into breathing, he'll die of stress, y'know?"

Gently reproving Schult as he started breathing with a determined look, Al shrugged his shoulders at Priscilla.

"Princess, you're dealing with a kid. I think it'd be alright to have a bit more care and compassion."

"The uncertainty of the world rains down on everyone, adult or child, man or woman. Do hunger and starvation differentiate between the great and small? Does the curse of the plague discriminate based on social standing? All who live are equals. It is not as though we are held in an cage of iron bars, and thus trying to gain peace by letting another determine how you live is simply negligence."

"Princess?"

As Priscilla spoke those stern words, irritation bubbled to the surface of her beautiful face. Al couldn't help but take it that the irritation was related to the latter part of what she had just said.

Before he could figure out the source of it, though, Priscilla's expression changed.

"All that live are equal. ...Of course, that does not include myself."

"Princess....."

smile. As she grinned, Priscilla concluded by saying that with the world's coldest smile.

It was the mantra Al had heard her repeat countless times since he began serving as her knight.

“...This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

That was the basis of Priscilla’s confidence, and the words which most defined her existence.

Words that it would be only natural to laugh at, but somehow they had a magic that couldn’t be laughed off.

“Come now, Schult. It is exactly as I just said. Everything in this world is for my convenience.....If so, what would be most convenient for me, as I am thirsty?”

“Ah... yes. I’ll pour some tea right away, oh yes, indeed!”

“Imbecile. The contents of that teapot have already cooled. And if you are trying to tell me to drink Al’s leftover tea, it goes beyond rudeness into rebellion. I’ll have your head removed.”

“Please, anything but that! I’ll go brew more right away, oh yes, indeed!”

Cradling the pot in his arms, Schult fled from the lounge.

While listening to the small footsteps fade into the distance, Al smirked at Priscilla and shrugged,

“Princess, you really are mean.”

“A butler who can calmly do the job is fine, but having one who rushes about flustered like a child is amusing as well. If they were looking for a proper waiter, who would go to the trouble of picking up an orphan? I will allow Schult the honor of relieving my boredom now and then.”

“He’s got it rough, too..... Just by having the princess’ attention.”

“And what is rough about it? He can speak with me, and is even able to serve me regularly. This much good fortune is an honor that the men of the world would cry tears of blood for, and want so badly they could taste it. There could not be another child as fortunate as that.”

While justifying treating Schult roughly, Priscilla was implying that she sought the same degree of gratitude from Al as well.

Al responded to that greedy look with a noncommittal “Yeah, yeah.”.

“Such a rude man. It seems that you have forgotten that you nearly lost your head at my whim. ....Well, fine. So now, Al.”

“What is it, princess?”

“...How is your plotting coming along?”

At that chilly voice, Al held his breath and looked at Priscilla.

There was no mistake that she had chased off Schult, and waited until no one else was around to bring up the topic. To have a bomb dropped in the middle of a casual conversation like that was a surprise like being hit by an actual nearby blast.

If he hadn't been simulating a flow of events like that ahead of time, he'd probably have been caught off-guard.

“It's not really anything so grand as plotting. For now it's just purely getting a good look at things. So you'd noticed that I was quietly sniffing around, then?”

“My eyes and ears and all of myself are not only more beautiful than the ordinary people, they are more capable as well. Not only that, but this is my domain and my garden. If I wish to listen for the footsteps of a mouse or the wingbeats of a bug, they will reach me.”

“If you go treating everything like it's yours, your husband Grandpa Leip will cry.”

“If I make an old man like that cry, or wither away, it matters little. I don't care in the least.”

It was a relationship where one didn't expect the couple to love each other dearly, but for it to be this harsh was regrettable. However, now was not the time to be worried about the future of the local dysfunctional couple.

“If yer upset with me crawling around, then what'll ya do? Am I gonna get beaten with a whip, then?”

There was no reason for the punishment to be that light, but being thought of as rebellious was problematic, too. In the worst case, he would have to consider the option of using his trump card against Priscilla, but...

“Upset? I'm not going to throw a tantrum over you simply wandering around the house. Really, at the point that I invited a brigand like yourself inside, this sort of trifle was expected.”

However, that wariness was shown to be off the mark by Priscilla's unexpected reply.

“.....Yer... really ok with that?”

“For a man to sniff, and desperately follow my lingering scent is the natural way of things. I'm not so inconsiderate as to blame a man for following his nature and being swayed by my charm. Also...”

As Al stood bewildered, Priscilla glanced sidelong at him with enough seductiveness to leave him senseless.

“People in uncertain positions like yours can’t survive without trying to find a safe harbor. If I were to blame you for looking to the left and right to be certain of things, it would be as foolish as telling a bird not to fly.”

“.....”

“A mercenary swordsman who I have known only a few days. To believe that he has already given me his loyalty with all his heart... to believe that would be the foolishness of a dreamer. It would be a tremendous show of unreason.”

As Priscilla ended her annoyed speech, Al softly let go of the wariness that had been controlling his body.

At the very least, there were no lies in what she had just said. Since she’d thought about it enough to come to that conclusion.

“.....Here I was so sure you’d say ‘Comparing myself with others is disrespectful. All the lot of you need to do is look at me and have your vision stolen away by my glory.’”

“None fear turning the eyes of others away from themselves more than those with no belief in themselves. I have every confidence that I am the greatest in the world. Hence, that sort of anxiety has no hold on me.”

Pulling a folding fan from her cleavage, and opening it with a snap, she continued “Also”,

“There is no doubt that I am the most beautiful gem in the world, but that one is superior is only understood properly when there are other jewels to be compared to. In order to grasp how wonderful I am, it’s necessary to compare me to the ordinary masses. Your walking about, too, in the end is nothing other than a roundabout compliment that confirms my greatness. What do you think, is that not a masterpiece?”

“.....Yeah, that’s a masterpiece.”

Despite concealing her mouth with the opened fan, Priscilla couldn’t completely conceal her smile. As she spoke of her own unbridled arrogance, Al paused a moment, and agreed.

Priscilla didn’t point out that faint hesitation. She understood that it would be meaningless to do so.

And Al was shaken, to the extent that he didn’t grasp Priscilla’s understanding.

It was a shock. One that made him feel as though he had been struck in the head.



The girl standing before his eyes, barely of age herself, looked like something other than what she had before.

What on earth did she resemble...?

“Priscilla-sama! My apologies for taking so long, oh yes, indeed! I’ve brewed more tea!”

“Too slow!!”

Before he could find the answer he was thinking deeply about, Schult opened the door and came flying into the room.

Priscilla’s angry voice greeted him, and Schult fearfully set out the tea with unsteady hands. Priscilla sat down on the empty sofa next to him, brazenly crossed her white legs and waited.

And while gazing at his terribly unguarded mistress and the red-faced boy butler, Al sank again into deep thought.

## 5

Al grimaced in an unseen scowl at the smell wafting through his helmet.

This was the second time he had come in to the study, and it evoked the same emotions as before.

The bad air of a room with insufficient ventilation, and the unique smell of antique books. He thought that he’d become used to the combination, but when the smell of cologne used by someone trying to hide their body odor was mingled with the incompletely-hidden smell of the master of that room, it was another story.

As a result, the study had an air that people hesitated to enter without need.

“You’re late.”

With his enthusiasm already whittled away by the foul smell that greeted him, Al was further disheartened by that joyless voice. He’d been reluctant to move his feet this direction from the start, and now his motivation had fallen below zero. If the one he was meeting was one that would forgive rudeness, he’d have long ago escaped through the door behind him.

However, the person before his eyes was not so lenient as to forgive such an action as humorous.

“You’re late.”

The repeated rebuke, entirely unchanged from earlier. The hoarse voice conveyed contempt and insult, and sought an commensurate response from the disheartened Al.

Not content simply with blaming him, it would not be satisfied without crushing his will. Such a heartless man.

“You’re I...”

“I’m terribly sorry. What with the mansion being so vast, when I’m summoned suddenly, I end up checking here and there all over the place. Were you saying something just now?”

Deliberately speaking over top of the third rebuke, he was rewarded with an ‘tsk’ full of undisguised ill humor.

Somewhat more relaxed after that reaction, Al once again looked squarely at the master of the study.

He was an old man seated at an ebony desk, with the room’s bookshelves to his left and right. He’d been told his age was close to seventy, but his energetic body held the youth of someone in their fifties. His expression, and his ambition-filled eyes, lent themselves to that impression, and his unbowed back and honed build also made him look like quite an individual.

In opposition to that appearance, however, his harsh, self-centered, arrogant personality was a fatal flaw.



The old man's name was Leip Barielle. The lord of the Barielle Barony, and master of the Barielle manor who had taken the Red Woman, Priscilla, as a wife. In formal terms, as the companion of the one that Al had offered his sword to, this was someone that he should respect.

In truth, Al didn't think of him as the least bit worthy of that respect.

"It seems you are accompanying 'that woman'<sup>4</sup>, wandering about the domain daily."

"When you say 'that'...?"

"...tsk. 'That woman' means 'that woman'. My wife, Priscilla, of course!"

"Indeed. Oh, I just wanted to be sure. My mother taught me that when they stop calling each other by name, it's proof that the love of a couple is growing cold."

As Leip grew irate, Al gave an appropriate answer, while sticking out his tongue on the inside.

"I hear you're a gladiator, but do you have any memory of your parents?"

"Hey, it's not like all of the gladiators in Vollachia are thrown into the arena right after they're born. There's actually a lot more thrown in there that got into debt after growing up, or who were criminals. Well, the end result is that you end up getting cut apart by someone your age who fought their way up from the bottom."

"Hmmf. It seems like just the sort of scenery the savages in the empire would like. I can just imagine their poor taste."

It was a rare occurrence, but Al found himself agreeing with the prejudice that Leip spat out.

His days as a gladiator were something that, honestly, he didn't like to recall.

Fighting with his life on the line in the battles held seemingly every day, competing for glory or testing his strength didn't agree with Al's nature. Having barely escaped with his life, he was now able to spend his days like this, in relaxation.

"Well, enough about you for now. It's about Priscilla. What do you think about how 'that woman' is wandering about the domain every day, doing as she pleases?"

"She's quite an inquisitive one, is what I think. She's a little different from the image<sup>5</sup>... ah, the way I thought someone connected to a lord would spend their time, yes. She does seem to get a great reception from the locals, though."

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<sup>4</sup> In a more literal translation, Leip is just calling Priscilla 'that'.

<sup>5</sup> 'Image' here was another instance of Al using an English word, then correcting himself to something the locals would understand.

“A great reception, is it? Hmmf, they’re simply curious about her. It just happened that ‘that woman’s whim and sudden idea brought bounty to a field. Just with that, the peasants are treating ‘that woman’ like the god-dragon. I understand it well enough, but there are limits to that sort of nonsense!”

As he slammed his fist into the desk, Leip was grinding his teeth in anger.

It was likely her popularity with the locals that had set off his mood. Al, who was accompanying Priscilla day after day and travelling around the domain, could imagine that much. Setting aside the matter of Priscilla, Leip’s reputation in the various villages was poor; to the extent it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it rock-bottom.

‘He couldn’t have been called me here to listen to him whine, could he?’, thought Al in disbelief.

“Not that I’m trying to stand up for the princess, but the incident with the field might not have been a spur-of-the-moment thing. No matter which village we head to, the princess always produces the same result. Everywhere, no matter the condition of the soil. Well, I agree it’s hard to believe she has that kind of discernment.”

“It’s foolishness to think it’s discernment. What ‘that woman’ brings is something more repulsive. If not for that, why do you think she’s rumored to be ‘The Bloody Bride’?”

Al had shrugged his shoulders, but when he heard the alias that Leip mentioned, he stopped moving.

At that reaction, Leip showed the ugly smile of one who has finally gained what he sought.

“The Bloody Bride” was a derogatory name that followed Priscilla, who now went by the Barielle family name.

Priscilla was a maiden of not yet twenty years of age, but though she was now Leip’s wife, it wasn’t her first marriage. It was her eighth.

Also, of the seven in the past, every one of those marriages had failed. The cause was the death of her companion - in other words, Priscilla had piled up the experience of being separated from seven husbands by death.

Her companions’ deaths, in war, from illness, or by accident, were not from a single cause, and while Priscilla had been suspected of involvement in all their deaths, nothing had come of those suspicions as she made her way to where she was today.

As a result, her existence was famous, amongst those who knew of her, as the “Bloody Bride” who brings ill fortune. The reason that men continued to seek for her despite this, was

that Priscilla was beautiful enough to make them forget the rumors of bad luck. That, too, was ironic.

However, Al didn't think that Leip fit into that pattern.

One reason was that he was an old man who's lust had long since dried up, but more than anything was that Leip was not crazed and blinded by Priscilla's charm. That was clear from the way he avoided her, and his bearing just now.

In other words, the old man had some other goal in marrying Priscilla.

And that reason was...

"If she wasn't a candidate for the upcoming Royal Selection, who would take in a trickster-woman like that? She thinks she can get away with anything just because she's got a nice face. That event where she made you her knight was more of the same, wasn't it."

".....I must say, you're speaking quite bluntly. Don't you worry that I might pass this on to the princess, and sour your relations?"

Not only speaking crudely, Leip revealed his crude motives without hesitation.

The Royal Selection - the great event that was rocking the Kingdom of Lugnica. In place of the royal family that had been wiped out by illness, the dragon that would choose the new king had brought about the trial that would open the way to the future. Leip was the man entrusted with the care of the prophecy plates where the future of the kingdom was written, so he held information about the Royal Selection even before the royal family was sick.

And striking quickly, taking Priscilla (who was eligible to be a royal candidate) as his wife, he intended to grasp power over the entire country by placing her on the throne.

It was an obvious plot, and a conclusion that anyone who knew Leip could come to. But, to hear the man himself speak so openly of it. Did he not imagine the possibility that Al, in a show of loyalty, might draw his sword for Priscilla here?

Looking at Al as he sat shocked, Leip let an ugly smile twist his mouth.

"You wouldn't do anything so foolish, I hope? Nothing befits a mercenary more than ruthlessly seeking his own benefit. You who were raised as a gladiator would never throw your life away for a cheap emotion like indignation."

".....You understand that quite well."

Moving the hand that had been touching his sword hilt, he feigned non-hostility.

“However, in that case, what is it you wish? Frankly sir, I think what you’re doing is impressive, but I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help with it.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Originally, someone working for me was supposed to be in your position. In truth, at that assembly of crude individuals, all of the top four except you were under my control.”

“Oh my, a fixed race.”

“And that, too, came to nothing due to that woman’s whim. I need to keep ‘that woman’ surrounded with people who see things my way. I’m sure you understand why.”

If Priscilla’s impulsiveness couldn’t be accounted for, then at the least, in order to correct her course, she needed to be surrounded with those who could be predicted. It was the natural way of things. In that case,

“What about the servant, Schult? That kid is another one that the princess collected, isn’t he?”

“I’ve already given that brat the same talk I’m giving you. Luxury that one could never have as an orphan; the promise of that bought him to my side without a second thought. In the end, ‘that woman’ can’t read people any better than that.”

“Hmmm.”

He recalled Schult speaking proudly of working for Priscilla. Having said that, he didn’t think much of it. Putting oneself first was the instinct of living things. If loyalty was a result of being treated well, then it was natural that one’s feelings would lean more towards one that treated oneself better. Al was no exception to that.

“I understand what it is you want of me, sir. With that, I’d be pleased if we could talk about how I’ll be treated and how I am to act in the future.”

“...Hehe. That’s right, that’ll do fine. Not to worry, I won’t make you regret it. Of course, the same goes for Priscilla. For the sake of my own wishes as well, that woman needs to remain healthy. ‘That woman’, the brat, and you too, all the lot of you need to do is receive happiness under my leadership, after all!”

As Al accepted his suggestion, Leip let out a good-humored, throaty laugh.

At that loud laughter, Al whispered “Sorry, princess” to the mistress he had decided to betray.

...Even at that emotional moment, the phantom of Priscilla in the back of his mind was grinning victoriously.

A knight calling himself Gilian Endymion visited the Barielle domain.

A handsome man, with a fearless countenance and a dignified look. His shining blond hair sparkled in the sun, and although he was slender, the gorgeousness of his well-toned body was different from Al's rough form. His well-tailored knight uniform brought out the young man's charm, and even an untrained eye could tell that the treasured sword hanging from his waist was not the work of an amateur.

From top to bottom, a true and superior knight - that was the impression given by the young man called Gilian.

"He's the third son of the Endymion household. As his two older brothers assist his father with administering their domain, he, who has a talent for the sword, left on a journey to gather martial fame as a knight. Today, I have imposed on him to spend the time with us."

Saying this, standing beside the handsome young man and introducing him, was Leip Barielle himself.

And obviously, the old man would not be introducing the guest to Al or Schult. Directly in front of Leip, gazing unconcernedly at Gilian, was the Baroness, Priscilla.

"I understand what you have said about the commoner, but I do not understand your intention in introducing that sort of man to me. I am sure you haven't lost your senses to the point where, as would be appropriate for one like yourself with few years remaining, you intend to give me another man."

"Don't be foolish. Who would let go of a beautiful wife like you? Think of today as being about his hope, and just a little bit of my thoughtfulness."

"To be thoughtful, that's so unlike you."

From the way Priscilla sniffed, it was clear she had no intention of believing Leip's request. Although Leip maintained his composure on the outside, one could almost see that he was biting his lip on the inside.

However, before Leip exploded, Gilian slowly came forward.

"My humble apologies for this sudden visit, and for rudely imposing on you."

It was an elegant gesture, and the kind of low, smooth voice that made women swoon. Gilian knelt before Priscilla.



"However, ever since I heard the rumors of Priscilla-sama at the Barielle domain, I have been looking forward to the day that I could meet you. Truly, I feel that you are the incarnation of beauty from above."

"Oho. You do know how to speak properly, then. My beauty is indeed not of this world. And despite that, the contradiction of having come down to this world - truly, I am a sinful woman."

As Gilian continued to string together flowery words, Priscilla, in high spirits, glanced towards Al. Standing behind her and fulfilling the duty of an attendant, he shrugged his shoulders instead of giving a wry smile.

"Very well. I will allow you to touch my skin, and offer a knight's respect. Understand well that this is happiness beyond your expectations."

"Yes. My humble gratitude."

Speaking harshly, Priscilla lightly extended her hand. Gilian took the white fingers as though handling a fragile thing, and performed a knight's greeting by kissing the back of her hand.

And if that had been the end of it, it would have been like nothing more than a scene from a fairy tale.

"And so, old man. The man you brought has passed my first inspection, but what are you looking for after this? You said something about thoughtfulness."

"It's a simple thing. Day by day, I'm busy with official work, and cannot accompany you as you travel about the domain. To have you going here and there alone has always bothered me."

"Although he's little more than a jester, Al is there, and if I brought you along you would simply be in the way. I have no intention of babysitting you. There was really no need for this."

In response to Leip choosing his words carefully, Priscilla refused to show him any mercy.

A vein stood out on Leip's forehead, long since abandoned by his hair. But, despite that, the old man managed to keep a smile on his face.

"Don't say that. It's just that today, I wanted to give you a nice-looking young man for what I make you endure day by day. He's a gentleman to the ladies as well. I'm sure you'll find him interesting."

"You may be hoping too much of me, but I'll do my best to live up to it. Priscilla-sama, if it's acceptable to you, please allow me the honor."

In place of Leip, who was nearing the limits of his self-control, Gilian himself took up the request.

Leip was one thing, but in Gilian's case, there was nothing unnatural about his sincere attitude. Thinking deeply, Priscilla tilted her head from side to side, and glanced at Al.

"Well, why not. Rather than always looking at a clunky iron helmet, it might not be bad to spend the time looking at the face of a man who is not hard on the eyes. Consideration is a virtue, indeed."

".....Yes, do that. Sir Gilian, please take care of my wife."

"Yes! Even if it costs my life."

It was a slightly overdone, theatrical way to say it, but Priscilla enjoyed it all the more for that.

Gilian had brought his personal ground dragon - an outstanding, famed steed with a blue hide. The excellent ground dragon, which most likely had a pedigree, further pleased Priscilla's eye for beauty.

Guiding his ground dragon expertly, and straddling the dragon together with Priscilla at her insistence, Gilian flashed his white teeth and gallantly rode away from the front of the mansion.

"They've finally left. Damn her for making me go through that song and dance. She's a detestable woman."

And, watching the pair leave, Leip spat that while letting his shoulders relax. Al let out a small laugh at the speed of the change, and then he looked towards the direction that Priscilla had disappeared to.

"Gilian Endymion, huh. So he's another of your pawns, then?"

"Of course. However, the amount of effort I've put into that one is different than the others. Deliberately depending on the distant Endymion household, I've spent a long time preparing him. Compared to the fighting tournament where they don't ask where you're from as long as you have skill, the labor I've put into hiding my connection with him is quite different."

"You always go all-out in your plotting. On that point, I honestly admire you, sir."

"Hmf. With the way you're involved in this, you're no different. ...Follow me. We'll speak about the reason I introduced Gilian and 'that woman', and our plan for what will come."

Pointing with his chin, Leip returned towards the mansion, swaying the sleeves of his robe.

While following him, Al suddenly stopped and turned back towards the direction where Priscilla had disappeared.

Of course, she was nowhere to be seen.

## 7

Discussion of intrigue was always done in the study.

If one were to guess, perhaps it was something that Leip was fixated on.

Breathing through his mouth due to the foul smell he wasn't used to, Al idly thought about that.

"Even in my office, the walls may have ears; this study alone is safe. It's the room that our Barielle family has prepared for holding secret discussions in for generations, after all."

The change in his expression should have been hidden by his helmet, but Leip shrewdly picked up on Al's thoughts and responded to them. Having come here, the old man's mind had been sharpened.

This was in no small part due to the fact that the starting date of the Royal Selection, the stage where his wishes would play out, was fast approaching.

"Over at the capital, things are probably getting fairly serious now, I'd guess."

"By this point, the royal castle is in an uproar. They must have long since known perfectly well that the king and his bloodline couldn't be saved. Ignoring the problem, and continuing to put off worrying about the continued existence of the kingdom has resulted in this. That incompetent lot; they understand nothing!"

Getting worked up as he spoke, veins began to stand out on Leip's forehead. Leip, who was nearly indignant enough to burst a blood vessel, had revealed the prophecy about this matter just a few days ago.

Talk of the death of the king had spread through the town, and the higher nobles were beginning preparations for the Royal Selection. In truth, all of their initial movements were more than a step or two behind Leip.

"Making pawns of those you used to hate; haven't you come to enjoy that?"

"I used to think that I would. Instead, looking back at how I was treated by those incompetents, I've simply become more displeased. The Sage Council, indeed. Why, it's nothing more than a club for doddering old men chosen for nothing more than the standing

of their house and their age. The head incompetent Miklotov, the insufferable idiot Bordeaux, I'd like nothing more than to toss them out and let mabeasts feast on their entrails."

"My, you are angry."

Even if he'd turned the conversation that way himself, it was rather boring to listen to someone else's inner hatred.

While giving a noncommittal reply, Al looked toward Schult, who was cowering in a corner of the room. The boy didn't appear to know the reason he was here, his face was pale, and he had been keeping his head low.

"That's enough for now about the dunces in the capital. It's a waste of time. More importantly, at last it's time for the long-awaited Royal Selection. I need to talk to you about that."

"You've already made the announcement that the princess is a candidate, haven't you?"

"Obviously. Firstly, it's necessary to let them know that what was written on the dragon stone is true. To prove that a candidate can cause an emblem of Lugnica to shine, you see. Originally, I'd hoped to have Priscilla take to role of making it shine, and declaring her to be the first participant in the Royal Selection, but....."

Leip stopped speaking for a moment, with a bitter expression.

"At the place they announced the prophecy, one of the upper-class nobles made the emblem shine. My single miscalculation was that there was a candidate already there."

"Heh. That's quite a lucky guy. So who was it?"

"Duchess Karsten... Crusch Karsten. A mere woman, shamelessly carrying the position her father ceded to her. A savage madwoman with the sword, famous as well for being an eccentric followed by a bizarre retainer. What was the emblem thinking, choosing her? .....Of course, the moment Priscilla has been chosen, there's no point worrying about that."

In response to a heartfelt sigh, Al couldn't help but agree and give a wry smile.

Candidates for the Royal Selection were able to make the gemstone of an emblem, handed down in the Kingdom of Lugnica, sparkle. Finding the five who fulfill that condition, and having them compete for the throne, was the content of the Royal Selection.

It was just that much about the selection criteria for those candidates was still unclear. At the moment, things they had in common, their bloodline, even their blessings didn't seem to explain it.

"By the way, sir, how'd you find out the princess is a candidate?"

“.....I have no obligation to tell you about that. I may have spoken a little too much, but don't go poking your nose into things. All you need to do is follow my instructions.”

“.....As you say.”

As Leip moved to cut off the conversation, Al meekly stood down.

When Al showed that he would quietly do as he was told, Leip let out a long breath through his nose. Then the old man clicked his tongue at Schult, in the corner of the room.

“How long do you intend to do that? I've gone to the trouble of making time to speak to you. If you have time to sit there cowering, show me that you intend to contribute at least a little.”

“Y, yes... My apologies.....”

Leip sat behind the ebony desk in the back of the room, and Schult stood directly ahead of him. Seeing that some books taken from the shelves were piled up on the floor, Al plopped himself down on top of them.

“I don't intend to needlessly drag out this discussion. Let's get to the point. ...It's about Gilian; I intend to have him act as Priscilla's knight.”

“Wait, wait, hold on a minute there. If you do that, what happens to me?”

Raising his hand at Leip's statement, Al inquired that while calling for a pause.

“It's because that I'm treated as the princess' knight that I'm being allowed to stay at the mansion.”

“Don't be concerned. I won't be stooping to having you thrown out. I don't let go of valuable pawns, and it would be troublesome to have you silenced, as well. It won't be as the knight, but I'll make up some position for you at the mansion. There's no need to worry about it.”

“I'm not that worried about that point, but what meaning is there in going that far to replace her knight? Of course, it's probably important that he's one of your pawns, sir.”

“That's a simple matter. The people love picturing a master and servant with a knightly knight as the servant. Since things have turned out such that someone who is not of the royal family will be taking the throne, the support of the citizens will not be unconditional as it has been up to this point. The simple, foolish citizens need an easy-to-understand image they can get worked up about.”

At Leip's fervent words, Al raised his eyebrows in unusual interest.

In other words, it was a public relations strategy. Preparing an eye-catching knight and princess, he altered their ease of acceptance from the moment they were first seen. Since the candidates would be contesting between themselves in the Royal Selection, it would turn into something with an influence that could not be ignored. It might be called excessive attention to detail by some, but...

"I honestly respect your willingness to doing anything that will even slightly improve your chance to win."

"I'm not sure I like the way you put that, but whatever. As the people's image of a knight, there should be no complaints with Gilian. Priscilla, too, if we're only talking about her looks, is easy to recognize as one that draws the eye to a rather disgusting extent. My advance preparations are rock solid."

"Ah, there's just one little problem."

It would be raining on the parade of an old man as he was gloating, but Al held some doubts about the strategy he was so proud of. While being subjected to a displeased glare, Al fiddled with the fittings of his helm.

"Will the princess go back on her own decision, then? At an event she opened herself, I was chosen as her knight at her own direction. I'm not sure she'd change her mind on that."

"What, is that all? Don't worry over such little things."

Dismissing Al's concern with a sniff, Leip continued while tapping on the desk with his finger.

"A knight who's easy on the eyes, and an eccentric man in a steel helmet. There's no question about which one a woman would pick. Or are you confident that women would prefer you over Gilian?"

"Yeah, I guess not. In a flirting contest, I'd lose every time. Not just that, even in a swordfight, I might not be able to beat him."

"Then there you have it."

Nodding in satisfaction at Al's pathetic answer, Leip leaned back, making the chair creak.

With that, he more or less understood the old man's plans. Indeed, he felt it was all something he could nod and agree with. It was just that...

"Ah, umm....."

Unlike Al, who could see the rationality of it, there was Schult, who had been keeping quiet, but now timidly raised his hand.

“What. Do you intend to cast aspersions on my thoughts as well?”

“No, not at all! I, uh, well... well, about Priscilla-sama.....”

While cowering beneath Leip's harsh glare, Schult gulped and continued.

“You won't do anything cruel to Priscilla-sama, indeed? In order to make Priscilla-sama the queen, sir.... In order to do that, you've thought of many things, yes?”

“.....Is that all. Don't bother me with your nonsense. I've stated my goal countless times. Since Priscilla is necessary for it, why would I harm her?”

Leip tsk'ed at Schult's childish worry, and spat back that reply.

“Preparing the path for that woman to arrive at the throne is my role. Indeed, even if she were to decline the Royal Selection, I would force her to participate. Think of yourselves as having the same duty.”

“Well, with the princess' personality, there's no way she'd turn down the Royal Selection.”

She'd never back down from a fight, and indeed, never hesitated to boast that everything in this world belonged to her. If a country would become legitimately hers, she'd do it as though there were no other choice.

Without knowing it, as he imagined Priscilla's mad dash for the throne, Al smiled.

“Is that so, indeed. Th... That's good, oh yes, indeed...”

Schult, too, held a hand to his chest in relief at Leip's reply. Even though he'd switched sides for Leip for the payment, he still hadn't forgotten his gratitude to Priscilla for taking him in. Priscilla would take the throne, and he would be rewarded. To him, it was the best possible outcome.

However, the relief the two of them felt

“She's a difficult girl to control, but once I use a curse to turn her into a puppet, she'll do as I wish. With a doll on the throne, the country has all but fallen into my hands.”

was shattered by Leip's next words, as he explained the final step of his plan.

“...Huh?”

Unable to breathe, Schult let out a hoarse voice.

The old man let a vicious smile twist his face, and shrugged at Schult's reaction.

“What, could you not hear me? That girl’s troublesome willfulness is in the way. I was able to overlook it before the start of the Royal Selection, but now that the importance of every single action is increasing, I can’t let it be. Once her debut at the royal castle is finished, I’ll take away her will and make her my puppet.”

“.....Is that really something you can do so easily?”

“I’m sure it’s beyond imagining for the two of you. In this world, there are many demands for unimaginable dark deeds. I long ago made connections with a handy fellow who acts as an intermediary for a ‘shaman’.”

Rather than being the stuff of dreams, Leip’s plot was a realistic one. Through cursing her by a shaman, he’d take away Priscilla’s will. This, too, was likely realistically possible.

“Tha...that’s not what you said, oh no, indeed!”

Unlike Al, who was able to calmly accept the facts, Schult’s voice cracked as he spoke out.

“Sir, you’d do nothing to Priscilla-sama, that’s what you said, indeed!”

“I never said I wouldn’t do anything. I said I wouldn’t harm her. If that woman isn’t uninjured, she can’t hope to take the throne. Hence, I’ll do nothing to take away her health. What’s the problem?”

“If Priscilla-sama stops being Priscilla-sama..... then what point.....”

As Schult spoke in a trembling voice, Leip leveled a displeased glare at him. The cruel color that began to show in his eyes was proof that he was beginning to weigh the usefulness of the boy in front of him against his displeasure.

“Quit trying to look innocent, boy. You’ve already been drawn in by the reward, and betrayed that woman. You’re no longer in a position to be concerned about her welfare. Or is that it? Have you fallen for her charms? To be overcome by the seduction of a whore, completely shameful for a boy..... Well, then.”

Leering disgustingly, Leip stood and leaned over the desk, bringing his face close to Schult’s.

“If you want to have your way with her, I’ll allow it after she’s taken the throne. I don’t know what you see in that clump of flab, but you’re drooling over her, aren’t you?”

“...”

Unsurpassed disrespect of women and humiliation of Priscilla.

Schult’s face went bright red at that statement, and his delicate arms reached for Leip.



However, Leip avoided him with ease, and instead struck him in the chest with a short tube that was on top of the desk. With a cry of pain, Schult tumbled on the floor of the study.

“To raise your hand against me, the master of the mansion; this is the problem with all the ill-mannered wild dogs these days.”

Leip, who had just mercilessly struck a child, looked down at Schultz as he writhed on the floor.

Leip’s movement just now had a sharpness unexpected from someone nearing seventy. A long-held, unfulfilled ambition was capable of filling a body with vitality to this extent.

“Now you will burn to death. Your innards will char, and you’ll blow smoke from every hole in your body. I’ll accept the sight of your miserable condition as recompense for your disgrace.”

Pointing the tip of the short tube in his hand at Schult, Leip put the punishment into action with the look of one crushing an insect.

The intensifying mana made the air in the study shimmer, the manifested destruction overtook the young body, the being known as Schult changed to dust in the inferno....

“.....What’s the meaning of this?”

“The ball suddenly came my way, so yeah.”

The moment before Schult would have been burnt to ashes, Al’s sword was unleashed, aiming for the short tube. Instantly dodging the sword swinging up from below, Leip’s face twisted in annoyance.

“What reason is there for you to protect that child? All you need to do is watch quietly. You understood that was the position you agreed to, did you not!?”

“If you get that angry, you really are going to bust a vein, sir. Yeah, actually, I’m not sure either why I did that, though.....”

In the face of Leip’s rage, Al joked as he spoke his honest thoughts.

Even he didn’t understand why he’d moved to protect Schult. Thinking about it rationally, it would have been best to use what Leip was saying to his own advantage.

Despite that, Al had now protected Schult after his objection to Leip, and had turned the old man hostile.

Why, what for, he didn’t know.

“Al-sama, you.....”

From behind Al, who was playing the fool, Schult looked towards him as he groaned.

“Schult-chan, if it hurts, it’s alright to cry, ya know? I’ll keep it a secret.”

“Al-sama... you like Priscilla-sama too, right.....?”

“.....”

Ignoring Al’s teasing, Schult spoke as though he’d had to wring the words out of himself.

And the moment he heard those words, a shock passed through Al’s entire body.

Letting out a long, long sigh, Al understood.

“Ah, man, I’m so dumb. ....How did I miss something so simple?”

With that realization, he was able to explain all of his confusion up to now.

“You’ve realized your judgement was clouded? If so, move out of.....”

“I get it. I finally get it. I was being stupid. I shoulda seen it right away.”

Tilting his head to the side, Al shrugged while kept his one-handed grip on his sword.

“There’s no way I could happily plot together with an old geezer who can’t see how sexy and cute the princess is!”

“...You...fool!!”

Immediately after his curse, Leip pulled out one of the desk drawers with his left hand and threw it at Al. Hacking that apart with his sword as it approached, Al kicked the books at his feet towards Leip and shouted.

“Schult! Get outta the room right now! I’ll handle the rest!”

“Ahh..... gh, understood, indeed!”

Grimacing in pain, Schult ran with great effort to the door, and left the room without looking back. That was a good choice. However, Leip mocked that choice.

“How completely foolish the pair of you are! Why do you think I only called the two of you to the study? All the other servants in the mansion are my supporters. There’s no question what will happen to the boy now that he’s left the room!”

“Very prudent of ya. But, ya never know, right? If I were to take you hostage.....”

“Surely you don’t think you can restrain me so easily, youngling. In my younger days, I was nothing to scoff at on the battlefield. My war record is no less than that of Bordeaux himself!”

The fighting spirit emanating from Leip as he roared was proof that this wasn’t a bluff.

The short tube the old man held was a ‘metia’. It’s effect was most likely raising the power of the user’s magic - a simple effect, but because of that, there was no countermeasure.

Comparing that to his own fighting strength, Al quickly judged that he was at a disadvantage. In other words,

“The conditions are met. ...No need to hesitate in playing my trump card.”

“You idiot.....”

“I won’t deny that. It’s nothing personal. Your luck was bad. ....Nah,”

Halting his words there, Al continued with the echo of a cynical smile in his voice.

“...Your stars were bad.”

“.....!”

Right after he finished speaking, Leip threw away all pretenses and raised the short tube, unleashing his magic.

Conveyed from Leip’s palm, the mana passing through the tube gained overwhelming power. The strength of the magic emerging from the end of the ‘metia’ had swollen to over five times it’s normal level.

That magic landed a direct hit on the torso of the iron helmet that had been speaking nonsense, bending his body backwards and exploding in the center of it. The shelves were covered with the awful stench of a human body being burned by the intense heat, and the flesh, blood, and organs that had been blown apart.

The bodiless helmet and sword clattered to the floor, and Leip looked over the terrible scene with an air of boredom.

“What sort of trump card was that? What nonsense. Honestly, all of it, nonsense.”

Cutting across the blood-soaked study, Leip began to leave the room. There was only a tiny chance, but if the boy that ran away managed to meet up with Priscilla, it would mean trouble. He needed to find him right away, and finish him.

Thinking that, he extended his hand towards the study’s door knob.

“...Your stars were bad.”

“.....!?”

Leip was speechless for a moment, then looked behind him.

When he did, he saw a man standing there with his back to Leip. He was a one-armed man wearing a steel helmet, and gripping a sword in his hand...

“Huh? Where’d.....”

“Go~a!!”

With no interest in listening to the fool’s voice, Leip cast his magic through the short tube and burned him to death once more.

The unleashed flames scorched the man, and the speechless steel helmet once again shattered.

The floor of the study was once more stained with disaster, and Leip backed away, unable to grasp the meaning of the situation.

“Wha... what was that? What just happened.....”

Realizing that he was shaking, Leip took a deep breath. His forehead was covered with cold sweat. While roughly wiping it away with his sleeve, the old man looked up and tried to make sense of it.

“...Your stars were bad.”

Once again, the man’s voice was heard.

## 8

“...Your stars were bad.”

He heard it. That voice struck his ears again.

“Huh? Where’d you go?”

Before his eyes, the man who had lost sight of his enemy looked left and right. Then the man turned about, and when he noticed the man seated behind him, he quickly readied his sword again. However,

“Oh, hey. You’ve run out of steam. From the way it looks... I’m the attacker now. Ah, I see. You’re pretty unlucky, too.”

Speaking as though with sympathy, the man squatted in front of the disheartened old man.

The drooling old man didn’t so much as look up at the man’s face.

“You were so energetic until just a second ago, but you’ve started looking your age all of a sudden. I don’t know how many times we’ve done this, but ya haven’t given up after a few dozen, have ya? Well, there’s no way to know, o’course.”

“...ll me.”

“Huh?”

The voice was like a whisper, and the helmeted man tilted his head.

So that the man would hear it, the old man shakily raised his head.

“Please... kill me.”

As though it might be his only salvation, the old man earnestly sought it.

At that appeal, the man’s shoulders dropped as though he had recalled something unfortunate.

“That’s too bad. Just because someone can’t grasp sexy cuteness, people can’t come to understand each other, after all.”

Standing, the helmeted man lightly shouldered his sword, aiming for the old man’s neck. Then, the blade swung in a deadly arc, and the old man’s head sprayed blood as it flew through the air.

At last, the old man’s nightmare...

“...Your stars were bad.”

did not end.

Leip’s hair was in complete disarray, and his eyes were sunken, as Al brought him out of the study.

Speaking deliriously and drooling, the old man had entirely lost his mind.

“Still, even I feel kinda bad about this, what’s up with that?”

As he dragged the old man’s heavy body along, Al was mildly repulsed at what he’d done.

Rendering him powerless without killing him, and while it could be said that, taking the long view, rendering him powerless truly was the best option, exactly how did this differ from Leip’s own plot, in terms of cruelty?

“Well, the sense of guilt is different between a crappy old guy and a young beauty. When you look at it that way, it feels better.”

While quickly imagining up something to justify himself, Al carried on towards the mansion’s entry hall. With no one to depend on, Schult could only flee to the outside of the mansion, but,

“...Al-sama!”

At the entry hall, as Al approached the great staircase that connected the first and second floors, a voice called to him from below. Looking, he saw many of the mansion’s servants, and Schult standing before the door. In addition, beside him was...

“It seems you have been causing quite a ruckus while I was away.”

Having returned with her knight in tow, Priscilla arrogantly stated that with her hand on her hip. Looking up at Al on the upper floor, she sniffed and pouted.

“Come now, Al. How long do you intend to be looking down at me, is that not rude? Come down right now, and explain exactly what happened while I was away.”

“Ah, gotcha. I’d come down if I could.”

“Your reply seems to convey no intention to move at all.”

As Al joked around at the top of the great stairway, Priscilla winked at him and forgave his insolence. However, an infuriated man interrupted that exchange between master and follower.

“Please wait, Priscilla-sama! That helmeted man, does it not appear that he has done something to Leip-sama?”

“Hmm? Ooh. Now that I take a closer look, it is that old bag of bones that Al is dragging around. What is this, then? Did the old man there finally despair over his own idiocy, and hang himself?

Priscilla's response to what Gilian had pointed out was indiscreet. Gilian was aghast, but Al smiled wryly at her attitude while lifting up Leip.

"Nah, he ain't dead. Well, his body isn't dead. But somehow his spirit just suddenly died."

"Sudden death, is it? Well, he is that age, after all. It is something that happens to old trees."

"You can't mean to allow him to pass it off with that kind of explanation!"

Priscilla was trying to look like she would accept it, but Gilian protested fiercely. He stepped in front of Priscilla, drew the knight's sword at his side, and pointed it towards Al on the upper floor.

"You are fellow with a truly suspicious appearance, but having heard that you were Priscilla-sama's retainer, I have overlooked it until now. However, it seems now that you were a villain that should not have been overlooked. You've treated Leip-sama barbarously."

"Like I said, he ain't dead."

"Nevertheless! I will not allow you to direct your poisoned fangs against Priscilla-sama. From now on, I will take on the role of protecting Priscilla-sama!"

The vociferous Gilian was a knight of justice, and he looked the part. On the other hand, due to his own looks and the half-dead Leip, Al looked like an outright villain.

The hall was full of servants holding their breath and observing the situation. Having said that, likely the only one that was truly concerned for Al was Schult. The other servants were all Leip's supporters, so even if he did manage to make it past Gilian, the outlook after that was fairly grim.

The conditions for his trump card were not met, either. 'Well now, how will this turn out', worried Al.

"It would seem you have grasped your disadvantage. Then stand your ground as I cut you down. I don't know what sort of vile plan you had, but I will protect Priscilla-sama's safety from this point on. May her days be full of unchanging serenity, and the path she follows blessed!"

Gilian, all fired up, began to step forward, intending to charge at Al with his sword without further delay.

But, just before he could take that first explosive step,

"Unchanging days of serenity, is it? ...How dull."

Priscilla spoke in a terribly bored voice.

And with the “Crimson Sword” she drew from behind her, she struck down Gilian with a single swing.

“Wha...!?”

Crying out in shock at the unexpected cut, Gilian fell down on the steps with a serious wound on his back. Rolling his body face-up with her foot, Priscilla brought the point of her sword to the nose of the panting handsome man.

“Here I was wondering what kind of sweet talk you would use to sway me, but you prove to be a boring man not only along the way but when in the spotlight as well. On top of that, you will give me unchanging days of serenity, you say? Here we see the epitome of a commoner’s thinking.”

“What do...you...”

“What value does the same thing as yesterday hold? An unchanging thing is simply tiresome. Always show me something new. If you are unable to do that, then at the very least, become a corpse, rot away, become dung, and disappear from my view. Fool.”

To the man who was fond of himself, Priscilla mercilessly sent a shower of cruel words.

What the red woman in front of his eyes was saying, surely Gilian understood less than half of. And before that changed, his chance to reach understanding was forever taken away.

“Wha.....”

Gilian’s body, lying fallen on the stairs, suddenly spouted flames. For the handsome man called Gilian Endymion, the burning heat of the flames spreading from his wound would allow no escape from their fiery embrace.

With his throat seared, Gilian was unable to even scream as he burned.

“Princess, maybe it’d be better to put out the fire before the mansion catches on fire?”

“Idiot. It is a flame born of my sun-sword. Obviously, it will ignite only that which I have chosen.”

Her logic was incomprehensible, but Gilian’s flames did not spread to the rug on the steps. Having confirmed that it somehow seemed to be true, Al was amazed by Priscilla’s unconventionality, despite himself.

Incidentally, sometime during that, the crimson sword she had been holding had once again disappeared from view.



“Well, it’d be pretty dumb to be surprised by the princess’ magic tricks after all this. More importantly, what are you gonna do about all this, including the burning guy?”

“No matter how many times one smells it, the odor of a burning person is displeasing. You lot, clean it up at once.”

At Priscilla’s instruction, the servants moved without hesitation, rapidly cleaning up Gilian’s entirely charred remains. Observing this, Al came to a conclusion. That was...

“Well, princess, you saw through the old guy’s plans long ago, then?”

“From the beginning, he made no secret of his intention to use me and seize power in the nation. Given that, it was trivial to imagine how he would proceed. Before one feels annoyance at the insect buzzing around one’s ear, it is only natural to take away the insect’s wings and legs.”

“You’re too much. He was out of his league.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of the old man’s long-held ambition being treated as the antics of a clown and dancing in the palm of her hand.

It goes without saying that she held the hearts of the people, and even in the mansion, there were none who were truly his allies. His sole ally that hadn’t been seized by Priscilla had now been burnt to a crisp.

When you think of it that way, perhaps he was happier losing his sanity while still holding his ambitions.

“By the way, if you had your revenge planned out in that much detail, why didn’t you say anything to us? We put on a weird little act because of that.”

“You have no talent for that sort of thing, I can tell at a glance. Schult is the same. You both get visibly flustered every time you look at me. You have no idea how hard it is not to laugh.”

“Ah, um...P, Priscilla-sama.....”

As Al and Priscilla carried on their friendly chat, with Leip tossed onto the steps, Schult arrived below them. When Priscilla folded her arms to emphasize her chest, Schult faltered, uncertain where to direct his gaze.

Perhaps he intended to apologize for having once joined a side that intended to betray Priscilla. However, to do that, failing to choose the right words could lead to calling down her wrath.

If it goes poorly, I'll have to back him up, is what Al was thinking while feeling a bit concerned, but...

"I'm glad you're unharmed, oh yes, indeed. ...I...I was worried....."

"Mhmm."

Looking at Schult, whose face was messy with tears, Al was amazed by his own foolishness.

How much nonsensical common sense had he tried to force on the heart of a child barely ten years old, and then gauge the situation based on that?

Hadn't he just seen a pitiful old man decide what this and that was without trying to actually see it for itself, and suffer a lonely fall without anyone to come to his aid?

"Schult, you are just so adorable. Very well, I give you permission to get my dress dirty."

"Oop."



Priscilla pulled the sobbing Schult into her embrace, then, with a pleased expression, wiped his face clean with her dress. Then, with the dizzy young man still sandwiched between her breasts, she turned towards Al.

“Well, isn’t that an enviable position.”

“It is an obvious thing to say, but you were wise to choose me. My compliments.”

“If it’s a choice between an old guy and a sexy-cute girl, you chose the girl. Anyone would do that. I do that, too.”

“Your forthrightness does not displease me. Well now.....”

Priscilla looked down at Leip, who lay blank-eyed on the ground, and snorted softly.

“How very, hmm, pitiful it is that my husband of convenience has lost his ability to rule his domain. In this state, the future of the Barielle domain is endangered. Since it has come to this, it seems unavoidable that I take on all authority as the representative of the household. Is it not so?”

“Carrying on the will of your beloved husband, and doing your best in the unfamiliar role of steward, like a good wife. The blind actions of a beautiful girl; it’s a scenario that invites tears, ain’t it? I think I might cry.”

“How very droll of you.”

“You too, princess.”

The well-matched master and servant laughed together, and looked satisfied that, for the moment, the affairs of the house were in order.

And that left Schult, still caught wide-eyed between Priscilla’s breasts. Taking the boy’s head with both hands, Priscilla mussed up his hair, and spoke.

“Well now, whatever is the matter, Schult? You should laugh. I, your favorite person, am in a good mood. You do understand what an attendant should do in that case, yes?”

“Y..yes. I understand, oh yes, indeed!”

At Priscilla’s directive, he straightened his back, dutifully got his breathing under control, and laughed loudly.

Forcing his face to smile with his hands on his cheeks, and using a voice so loud that it was cracking.

“Hahahahaha, oh yes, indeed!”

“That will do. With that finished, you do know what I will wish for next, yes?”

For me to go brew fresh tea, oh yes, indeed!”

“Mhmm!”

Drawing a fan from her cleavage and opening it with a snap, Priscilla descended the stairs. Al followed her, and Schult walked with them, still laughing.

“I’m terribly pleased. This will do. After all...”

Listening to the voice of the laughing girl, Al realized why he had chosen her.

It was nothing, really. A simple matter. Nothing more than that he had, once again, been captured by this girl’s charms.

“...This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

The End.