


THE TALES OF
Book XI
MARIELLE CLARAC



The Promise
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro



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Marielle Clarac



☼ Jack Pieron

A reporter for a gossip rag. A middle-aged man who appears perpetually tired.

☼ Damian

The man who made a plagiarism accusation against Agnès Vivier in a newspaper.

☼ Eric Delmer

The eldest son of the Delmer baronage. Ran away from home at 18 due to being on bad terms with his father.

☼ Valeriano

A young man who commands underlings of the Scalchi Familia. Appears uncaring.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

28 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

On the first day, it was a handkerchief with a cat embroidered on it.

The small cloth, which had been hemmed with lace, featured the motif of a cute kitty strutting away. Its long, fluffy white fur very much resembled my own house cat's. However, when I showed the handkerchief to my beautiful girl Chouchou, she mistook it for a toy and tried to scratch her little paws all over it. I hurriedly stored it away.

On the second day, it was a tiny brooch.

An enamel violet bloomed on its surface. Beautiful like stained glass, the *plique-à-jour* was slightly transparent. The flower was a light purple, had a silver stalk drawn with elegant edges, and its leaves gradated through various shades of green. It looked to be an old artifact, but it was nonetheless an exquisite product that had been made with high-level techniques.

The third day, it was a can of sweets.

Believe it or not, the can itself was even more charming than its contents. Its square shape meant that it fit well in one hand, and it was made of a matte silver that was smooth like silk. A fanciful embossment decorated the lid, featuring stars and moons around the border and a gold sheep sleeping in the center. I *am* an Aries, after all.

April had come around, and I would soon be turning twenty. Every day since the month began, a humble gift had been delivered to me. Cats, violets—the motifs were all of my favorite things.

Each of these gifts had been sent by my beloved husband, Lord Simeon. We'd promised to embark on a trip together for my actual birthday, and he'd vowed to take time off since I'd been wanting to go on a holiday for quite a while. These little gifts he was sending me were counting down the days until we could meet once more.

When I opened each box, all of which were adorned with ribbons, I was

always slightly mystified, but then my delighted heart would soar when I saw the contents.

These were all objects one could obtain with ease, and none had been custom ordered just for me. The can of sweets was from a popular shop, and the brooch was no doubt secondhand. That didn't stop it from being very pretty and of exceptional quality, so no one would take issue with a noble's wife wearing it. However, I knew right away that it had not been recently crafted. The pin had been attached to the brooch separately and was clearly newer than the brooch. These types of pieces weren't uncommon, as many stores would buy old jewelry to repair, treat, and fix up. This would increase their value, and the shops would be able to put them up for sale once more. Instead of going to one of his usual high-class jewelry vendors, Lord Simeon had opted for a more reasonably priced one this time.

Up until now, he would've had all of these items custom made by placing personal orders. Those pieces would have all been gorgeous gifts meant to be shown off with no regard for money spent. But would I have preferred something like that? I would have been grateful, that's for sure. But realistically, humbler gifts like these made me much more happy.

Just think about it! Lord Simeon found these gifts with his own two hands! I'd even checked with my family and servants to make sure, and none of them had been asked to shop for him. He'd gotten a day off recently, and he'd spent that whole day out somewhere. His excuse had been that he was visiting a friend or some such, but he'd surely been going from store to store looking for suitable gifts for me. I couldn't stop smiling once I realized!

Lord Simeon, the heir to an earldom and Vice Captain of the honorable Royal Order of Knights, really went out of his way to walk around finding gifts for his wife!

His precious feelings and earnest hard work made me nothing less than elated.

He'd probably done everything he could to think of what gifts I'd enjoy. He needed fifteen of them, after all, and that was no small feat. Just imagining this beautiful, utterly noble man creasing his brow and debating what to buy in

confectioneries and feminine stores made me go crazy with love! I was sure he'd been the center of attention in those places as well—he'd definitely caught all the women's eyes along the way. He's nothing less than Prince Charming from a fairy tale, you see. His fair skin, golden hair, and light blue eyes are all evidence of his high-class beauty. He pulls glances from people simply by standing around. Even a completely innocuous street corner turns into a stage once he steps foot onto it. His body moves with fluid, satisfying motions, exemplifying his good posture and tall, toned figure. Very soldierlike of him, I must say. But combined with his unmatched attractiveness, these features only serve to further his sparkle.

And that's not even mentioning the glasses! They make him look highly intelligent, though they also give him an air of villainy. When you put all of it together, he is the very epitome of my taste—a brutal, blackhearted military officer! You've no doubt seen characters of that nature yourself. In many stories, they stay by the main character's side, or else they become the protagonist's mortal enemy. The archetype is an intellectual with a few quirks, if you will. Not to mention they're always easy on the eyes. It's not surprising that these characters become even more popular than the protagonists themselves.

I've always loved such characters, but I never thought I'd meet one in the real world. I felt a rush of emotions the first time I laid eyes on Lord Simeon, as if I'd been struck by lightning. He was the pinnacle, my absolute ideal! The object of all my admiration was right in front of me! Living, moving!

I'll never forget that feeling.

Once I actually became acquainted with him, I found out that he was stubborn to the very end, unwaveringly serious, pure, and just a bit clumsy. It turned out that he isn't at all brutal, and his blackhearted tendencies are flimsier than you might think. In other words, he's the perfect lover for the real world. Stories are just that—stories. They're fun because they aren't real.

More than anything else, I can believe in his sincerity without question. He acts serious and earnest around everyone he meets, not just me. Some people consider that boring, but I believe it's a precious, wonderful quality. That, on top of his villainous looks, make him one-hundred-percent my type!

As for me, I'm the exact opposite. I'm just a plain woman with brown hair and eyes you could find anywhere. I have no distinct essence or defining traits. My glasses make me look more like a raccoon than someone of intelligence, and I was born into a middling viscountcy that belonged nowhere near an earldom.

Our incongruous marriage had ruffled the feathers of society, but I would say that the most surprised person of all had been me!

To think that Lord Simeon would have been the one to propose! And that he'd actually been watching me from afar for some time before that!

I'd always loved novels and theater themed around romance, but I'd never imagined it would occur in my own future. *What? Some man genuinely looking at me as a woman? No, that's impossible. I'll probably never get married and be an old maid.* I'd always thought this way, that I would forever spend my days enraptured in my dear novels, never to experience falling in love myself. Dreams and fantasies would spread out in my mind, and my favorite settings and events took the forms of novels to fulfill my fangirl dreams! That was my reason for living, as well as what I did for a living.

I have an alter ego that I can't make public as a noblewoman. I've been publishing novels under the name Agnès Vivier, even before I married Lord Simeon.

I signed a contract with Satie Publishing, which primarily produces novels and magazines aimed at women. My moderate success is something I'm grateful for. Thanks to it, I'm now not only writing romance novels for women, but I have also taken on requests from a newspaper.

When the month of April rolled around, I'd been in the middle of writing a short story collection, and the joy from receiving daily gifts was so great that I'd written those moments into the tales. Perhaps I was flaunting my love life a bit too much, but no one who read the stories would be able to figure it out, so I'd assumed it would be fine. I'd written them with the gifts lined up right in front of me, so I'd gotten plenty of references to flesh out the descriptions. Ultimately, I'd ended up having to fight with the word limit.

Despite the circumstances and my general nature, Lord Simeon and I were a perfectly happy couple. It might have been almost a year since we'd gotten

married, but I still felt like we were lovey-dovey newlyweds.

When I awoke in the morning to a new gift, I was always brimming with anticipation about what it could be. My dear husband would put on airs and refuse to hand it to me himself. Sometimes he'd sneak it into the drawers of my study, and occasionally, he even put it on the back of my cat! Hunting them down was so much fun—it was as if every day were my birthday.

Today, yet again, glittering excitement overflowed from the delivered box. If Lord Simeon was providing me with such wonderful days, how in the world was I to return the favor for *his* birthday? I knew I wanted to make him as happy as possible. *What should I do?*

As I gazed at the ever-growing pile of presents, fun ideas sprang to my mind. My twentieth spring shone brighter than any of the ones prior.

Chapter Two

To those of high status, springtime was the season for social events.

Summer would also bring people together here and there, as nobles usually threw huge balls. It was an important season for the unmarried youth because it gave them the opportunity to search for potential marriage partners.

At the tea party held by the Flaubert earldom, which I'd married into, information was being exchanged all over the place. This one family's son is this old; that other family's daughter is with a man like *that*. In this corner of our colorful garden, the flowers of chatter bloomed.

While learning the ropes of hosting next to my mother-in-law, I focused my ears wholly on the conversations around me. The more lively the exchanges, the more opportunities for reporting there would be for Agnès Vivier. You never knew what conversations hid hints for stories. Ever since my debut in high society, I'd been using rumors gathered from eavesdropping as references for my creations.

"...even though her oldest son finally came home."

"It's just too bad. She was still so young."

"Her husband, younger son, and that son's wife passed on before her, after all. She was so depressed."

"Yet she still did her best for her grandchild..."

Not all of the talk I heard was happy. While some houses had been blessed with new children born in the winter, others had endured losing family members. A noblewoman from some house had died, and another's master had fallen ill. These unfortunate incidents were spoken of too.

"Oh, right. A story by Agnès Vivier was in *Chersie* again."

Just when I was starting to relax a little, I overheard a different kind of topic. I could feel my ears perking up. *Who was that just now?!* My eyes unconsciously

scanned the area. I was excited to hear some opinions on my work.

“Yes, we read *Chersie* in my home as well. It’s starting to appeal more to women these days.”

“Agnès Vivier is quite popular among young people, isn’t she? My daughter is always squealing about wanting to read her books.”

“Oh, mother! You know *you* always read the newspaper first before lending it to me!”

“I’m just making sure that the stories are appropriate for you to read.”

“Liar! You look forward to them every week!”

Noblewomen were praising my work right before my very eyes. Just as I started to feel nervous, my mother-in-law threw me a swift glance. *Yes ma’am, I’ll be sure to contain myself. I must pretend like things related to Agnès Vivier have nothing to do with me.*

No matter how well received my stories were, I couldn’t let anyone know that I was the author. There were still many who held the opinion that women shouldn’t be writers. Members of the Flaubert household knew and accepted my secret, but it wasn’t because being an author had become an accepted profession for a noblewoman. No, they all just happened to be strangely open-minded.

Popular fiction, in particular, was usually met with harsh criticism.

“My, you all are reading such things?”

As expected, a thorny voice soon cut in. An older woman laughed sarcastically and put down those chatting amicably about my books.

“I wouldn’t think that ladies from proper houses would do such a thing. You must live in very liberated families. I wouldn’t even let my servants read such drivel, personally. Perhaps such a sense of modesty is considered old-fashioned nowadays.”

Her candid words made the other ladies pout in disdain, but they didn’t argue.

There were several tables around the party where we were able to chat in

peace, and we could even take a stroll through the garden if we so wished. This was a tea party where most anyone could do whatever they wanted...except for at the host's table. The seats there were specifically prepared for guests of high status. And unfortunately, this sarcastic woman was one of those.

Those of lower status couldn't possibly hope to counter someone so high above them. Not to mention that arguing at a tea party would be a social faux pas. Controlled by etiquette, the mother and daughter who'd been admonished by the sarcastic woman had to bear it and swallow their displeasure.

The sarcastic woman cackled nasally at them, then turned her eyes back to my side of the table. "So many people have been partaking in such lowbrow activities lately! I simply cannot keep up. A sign of the times, I suppose."

My mother-in-law smiled beautifully and responded in a sing-song voice. "Really? I think things are the same as they've always been. Those of older generations have always disapproved of the things young people do. They themselves were once rebellious, but as they get older, they start to disapprove. It was the same a hundred years ago, and that tendency persists even today."

Elegant laughter rose up from around the table. Notions of agreement such as "Indeed!" and "One day I realized just how old I'd gotten. It's horrible!" and "The phrase 'kids these days' has probably been used since a thousand years ago" rose up around us. Everyone could immediately tell that my mother-in-law was trying to change the subject and pretend like she hadn't heard the sarcasm—they all knew that she was trying to help.

I see, so she's attempting to shut the woman down in a way that's not necessarily arguing. As expected of the madam of a famous household! The sarcastic woman, who'd tried to elevate herself above the others by rebuking a shallow conversation, had been evaded so effectively that she now looked completely frustrated.

People like her did indeed exist. They always want to show how much higher they stood above everyone else, despite the fact that bringing down the mood was ultimately a show of poor manners. She was even being rude to the host, which could only mean that she looked down on Countess Flaubert as well.

Simply going by status, both women were from earldoms, but the woman was older, which was most likely why she saw herself as better. She probably felt like a “young person”—in other words, Countess Flaubert—was daring to go against her viewpoint.

My mother-in-law, on the other hand, didn’t engage with her, as fighting would’ve been ridiculous. That should have been enough of a sign for the woman to give up and back down, but instead, she changed the object of her ire to me.

“Well then, let’s ask this young person here. Miss Marielle, do you have any interest in worldly trends?”

Hmm. How should I go about responding to this?

Worldly affairs and topics to not be spoken of... Nothing is off-limits for me! As long as I get an inkling of fangirl potential, I’ll jump right in, no matter what it is! I’ll even go so far as to write them myself! The rumored Agnès Vivier is right here!

But...I can’t tell her that.

I cocked my head a bit and gave a silent smile. I then felt a knock to my knees from under the table.

D-Dear mother-in-law, what exactly are you trying to signal to me? She must be trying to tell me to answer in a specific way. But that’s the problem!

I forced the gears in my head to rotate as quickly as possible. One wrong word, and the woman would turn her scorn not on me, but on the countess.

Should I be honest about my preferences with the sarcastic woman? No, as one of the hosts, that wouldn’t be right.

I glanced at the mother-daughter pair. Both of them enjoyed my stories. It was surely fun for them to get to chat about something they liked. Trifling as they might’ve been, those moments were time well spent.

“I believe I like to partake in trends sometimes.” With my answer, I tried to maintain the essence of a young wife in an earldom. “It would certainly be a waste for me not to take a bite of something when everyone else is saying it’s

delicious. I'd have to try it for myself before shunning it and deciding it doesn't suit my tastes."

The mother and daughter nodded along. The other guests weren't reacting badly either. *That's right, a tea party should be fun!* A host's job is to ensure that all participants are having a wonderful time.

Mother-in-law didn't have any pointers to give me either, so it seemed I'd made the right choice. I gently put a hand to my heart in relief.

As for the sarcastic woman, she flared her nostrils at me, satisfied, as if I'd walked right into her trap. She seemed to be fully intent on honing in on me. I wouldn't have been bothered if it were just me that she'd be putting down, but I couldn't let her say whatever she wanted when House Flaubert's dignity was on the line. *Now then, how should I go about counterattacking...?*

My body went on guard for the second blow from the woman's parting red lips, but a voice rose up from a different direction.

"Pardon the intrusion."

A tall man appeared on the terrace, and everyone turned toward the man's pleasant voice in unison. It was plain to see that he had just departed from work, since he was still in uniform. He looked the part of a regal, brilliant imperial knight—his uniform was decorated with blue and gold against a white base.

All eyes sparkled when they landed on him. The younger ladies' cheeks flushed red, and the older women gazed at him in admiration. An already-beautiful person had suddenly appeared in a military uniform... The impact itself was practically egregious.

I understood. Uniforms in general have a unique appeal, but military ones are especially striking! Perhaps it's because they were designed for battle, but those who don them appear more reliable than anyone else. They emphasize muscular bodies and cover every inch without letting even a sliver of skin peek through, yet somehow, they still allow a man to have a sensual appeal. The saber at the man's belt just added to the grandeur... Oh, how I wanted him to pull it from its sheath and point it at me! Of course, riding crops made me fangirl the most, but being on the deadly end of a sword was still quite thrilling.

“How do you expect to keep things under control when even *you* are mesmerized?”

My mother-in-law struck yet again. Indeed, I suppose his own mother wouldn't be enchanted by him. Her attractive face, which resembled his, had taken on an exasperated look.

“There's no one more obsessed with Lord Simeon than I,” I answered. “Of course I'm mesmerized by him. What else would you expect of his wife?”

“Don't get defiant and ramble on about your husband, dear.”

“On the contrary, how can you stay so calm, mother? He's your pride and joy! Your eldest son! Doesn't that make him your eternal love? You're supposed to dote on him just as much as his wife!”

Countess Flaubert shook her head. “Look at him. He's so huge now. Not cute at all. And he's so smart that he can only respond to anything and everything with logic. Not cute at *all*. Lord Maximilian is much cuter! He's so concerned with his little rocks.”

“Earl Flaubert's research is essentially an extension of his childhood interests, after all. I also find that rather cute. But Lord Simeon doesn't lose in that regard either! His clumsiness by way of being rockheaded is just so adora—”

“For my rock-obsessed husband to have a rockheaded son, I must be cursed!”

“Ahem. If I may.”

Lord Simeon cut into our hushed back-and-forth with a cough. Was he trying to tell us that he was stuck between a rock and a hard place—his wife and his mother? His expression told me that he had a headache.

“Yes, my son, whatever could it be?” Returning her voice to a normal speaking volume, his mother waved him off. I'd been leaning toward her, and I readjusted myself in my seat.

“I simply wanted to greet our guests,” said Lord Simeon. “Everyone, thank you all for coming today. From the bottom of my heart, I welcome you. Come, Noel, you greet them as well.”

Stepping aside, Lord Simeon revealed another person hiding behind his big

body—a young boy in his mid-teens. This beautiful boy with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes resembled his mother even more than Lord Simeon. He greeted us all with a bright smile.

“Hello, everyone! Welcome to our home.”

The eyes of the surrounding ladies were sparkling once again, and this time, their affections had been captured by the smile of an angel. Noel was the youngest of the three Flaubert brothers. He’d turned sixteen at the end of last year, so he was now allowed to participate in events with adults. He hadn’t wanted to attend this one, however, so he’d hidden in a place where we couldn’t catch him. Lord Simeon had evidently found him and dragged him out.

“Well done.”

Countess Estelle, my mother-in-law, praised Lord Simeon for this. Lord Noel, in turn, glared at him reproachfully.

Lord Noel would truly debut in society this spring, meaning that he was now at the stage where he’d be searching for a partner for marriage. His actual marriage was still far off, but he would have to take the necessary measures from here on out. That was why some of our guests had brought along their daughters.

They weren’t necessarily trying to set their daughters up with him, but rather trying to get them acquainted. Most merely wanted to see if their daughters hit it off with Lord Noel. After all, a spark like that could maybe lead to something in the future. However, the youngest Flaubert had found this event obnoxious, and he’d run away.

Lord Noel was now replying brightly to the young women who were pushed by their guardians to greet him. Though he didn’t possess the same chivalry or indomitability as his brother, he won out in terms of gentleness and brightness. The ladies seemed to genuinely like him.



Though they were enthralled by Lord Simeon's coolness, a partner near their age was probably more appealing. Lord Simeon was a bit too old for these girls, and Lord Noel would no doubt grow into a gorgeous man.

This same angel, however, was hiding a pair of devil's wings and a tail! I just knew that he was thinking biting remarks about these ladies, all of whom had gone out of their way to greet him. I prayed that he would find someone who would love him despite his blackhearted, impish nature.

I tore my eyes away from the interactions between Lord Noel and the young ladies, then spoke softly to Lord Simeon. "Welcome home. You're quite late."

It was only early afternoon, so normally, this would have been too soon for him to have returned from his work. However, he hadn't come home at all yesterday. In fact, he'd worked all through the night and straight into today. This was the moment he'd finally come home, so I thought it appropriate to remark on his tardiness.

"I wanted to finish all of my work that could be done in advance," he replied. This response implied that he wouldn't engage with my light protest, and he placed his hand on the back of my chair. Though he hadn't slept at all, he looked no worse for wear. The average person would've been worn out after pulling an all-nighter, but this stiff, grand knight let no such weakness slip through.

"There was actually more to do, but the captain sent me home."

"Of course he would."

No business had occurred that was urgent enough to warrant not sleeping, yet you still worked all night. I'm glad your boss ordered you to stop.

"Why don't you go rest?" I suggested.

"I'll just end up more restless if I try to sleep now. I have work tomorrow as well, so I'll rest at the usual time."

"Then would you like some tea?"

"I may as well."

I signaled at a servant-in-waiting with my eyes; they brought out tea and a

chair for my husband. Lord Simeon removed his saber and sat down, at which point, the sarcastic woman from earlier spoke to him.

“It’s been some time, hasn’t it? I hear about your feats quite often, but I haven’t spoken to you since last year’s engagement reveal.”

“Indeed, madam, it has been a while. I’m relieved to see that you’re the same as always.”

“It’s been over a year since then, yes? My, does time fly faster as you get older. Have you grown accustomed to married life?”

Lord Simeon’s blue eyes flicked to me, and his lips widened into a warm smile. “I could say so...but I could also say that every day is still filled with new surprises.”

Knowing him, he didn’t mean this in a bad way. His gaze was telling—he was having fun. That answer, however, only served to further fuel the sarcastic woman’s run.

“Is that so? I’d expect as much.”

Her tone was conversational, but it carried a deeper, more judgmental layer of meaning. Lord Simeon’s eyes turned back to her. The atmosphere had completely changed when the brothers appeared, and it was certainly not appropriate to dig up the previous negative conversation. However, she was clearly not going to give up, and she pushed forward with no intention of changing her ways.

“We were just talking about how many young people’s minds are being poisoned by lowbrow trends these days.”

The well-formed eyebrows gracing Lord Simeon’s face raised slightly, silently asking the woman what she was talking about. She continued on gleefully.

“Don’t you find it just despicable and indecent for a woman to imitate a man by writing books? And it’s pitiful that such vulgar content is being praised and shared between the daughters of good households. But these young people don’t understand their elders’ opinions. I’d thought that the wife of House Flaubert would at least agree, but even Miss Marielle herself says she enjoys such things. How tough that must be for you!”

His question had already been answered, and Lord Simeon's eyes glazed over with understanding. He quietly lifted his cup to his lips, took a sip, and then answered with a kind tone.

"I disagree. I don't see that as an issue at all."

"Oh my! You don't mind if your wife partakes in slovenly activities?"

"I wouldn't call reading books 'slovenly.'"

"They're vulgar books. That's slovenly!"

The woman was holding back even less than before, since my husband was daring to fight back. What made things worse was that he was doing so calmly and respectfully.

"Have you ever read one yourself, madam?"

"Of course not! I would never even let one touch my hands!"

He smiled at her, as if to say, *"In that case..."*

"Then you shouldn't have any idea what kinds of things are written about. How could you know that they're vulgar without even reading one?"

The woman's voice caught in her throat at being told something so obvious, but that wasn't enough to get her to quit. "I don't have to read one to know that they're looked down upon—that they're full of nothing but boring, lowbrow content. Knowledgeable people furrow their brows at them. I've been told many a time that I should not let myself be influenced by such things."

Somehow, she couldn't see that everyone around her looked thoroughly exasperated. This wasn't the time or place to be arguing and getting so emotional, but she wanted to prove someone wrong quite badly. Didn't she hear what my mother-in-law had said earlier? This man was so smart that he replied to everything with logic.

"The ones who give bad feedback to these works are those who already do not wish to accept women's involvement in any activities. If these men wish to prove that they're better, all they have to do is work harder than women, but because they do not possess the ability to do so, they instead complain about things women do and try to bring them down. Or perhaps they're frustrated

that these women are able to do things that they cannot. In either case, their protests are masking nothing deeper than simple envy.”

“Wh-What?” the woman sputtered.

“Those who are truly capable would not go out of their way to show contempt for those they have nothing to do with. That type of person is self-assured in confidence and pride, and therefore has no need to criticize others. It is the same with dogs—when desperate, the weak ones can only bark.”

This was scathing irony to the sarcastic woman, particularly because he’d said such a thing with a kind expression.

Everyone around us was nodding. Some were even on the brink of guffawing.

“Incidentally, I’ve also read these novels that my wife is a fan of. Nothing written in them could be called vulgar. They could indeed be called shallow or unintellectual, but I don’t believe it’s a bad thing for something to be easy to read. There are even authors who demonstrate a high level of skill in their writing. Mylene Ferriere is a leading example, and Agnès Vivier is good as well.”

The doting husband strikes again, and this time, with a nonchalant face! That makes me happy, but it’s also embarrassing! Look, your mother’s and Noel’s eyes are boring into me!

I struggled a bit to maintain my composure and not let my face get too hot. I sipped my tea as if he weren’t talking about me.

“What... What a tolerant thing for you to say.” The sarcastic woman’s face was practically contorting with the effort it took to retain even a modicum of her dignity. “So even *you* are saying such a thing. You young people really do like to get your hands on shiny new things, don’t you?”

“I’m pleased to hear as much,” replied Lord Simeon. “I’m often told that I’m not interesting, that I’m thickheaded, and that I act far too old for my age, but it seems that actual older people still see me as young.”

The woman’s sardonic remarks were having no effect on Lord Simeon. Someone did end up bursting out into laughter.

“For the record, I do not believe that your opinion of popular fiction being

lowbrow is wrong,” Lord Simeon added. “But even old works that are now considered classics were mere novels for enjoyment when they first came about. They were most likely disparaged just as much. Yet they came to be considered refined, while also going out of fashion. Newly born works, like the older ones, are accepted by the current generation even without being highly praised. Those, in turn, will come to be well received with time. Things that are considered lowbrow now will one day come to be seen in a different light.”

The sarcastic woman could no longer say anything. She was only able to open and close her mouth in vain. Lord Simeon had calmly yet ruthlessly argued against her from beginning to end. Her face was thoroughly red at being told that her worldview was dated.

She couldn't see them, but the young ladies were silently clapping. They were probably very relieved by this turn of events. I felt the same, but I did think that my husband was going a bit too far.

My mother-in-law deliberately reached out to the sugar pot, took the tongs, selected a few sugar cubes, and plunked them into Lord Simeon's cup.

Lord Simeon's smile vanished from his face and he shut his mouth. The sugar was clearly a punishment from his mother. This man, who drank neither tea nor coffee with sugar, silently stirred his cup with a spoon. Only half of his tea remained, and the sugar dissolved fairly quickly. Lines formed between his eyebrows as he gulped down the saccharine tea without a word.

“He's definitely not cute anymore.”

Our guests giggled at the countess's complaint.

Aside from that small quibble, the tea party came to a close without incident.

“Ah! Finally finished.”

Released from my role of seeing all the ladies off, I returned to the living room intended for my husband and me and let out a sigh of relief. Lord Simeon soon entered, having changed into casual clothes. He'd stayed until the end of the tea party.

“Good work today,” he said.

“You too! Are you sure you don’t want to rest?”

“Yes, it’s fine. I’m used to this.”

He picked up the cat sleeping next to me and then sat down with her on his lap. Irrked at the sudden, forceful movement, Chouchou flicked her claws out. I panicked and pulled her away from him. She’d pulled a thread from Lord Simeon’s trousers. He seemed to be more upset that I’d taken her, though.

We settled things by placing her between us. She rested her head on my lap and her feet against Lord Simeon’s legs. He laughed bitterly at being treated so crudely, but he still looked happy about it. I picked up the newspaper. I’d been so busy that I’d had no time to even glance at it, but now, I finally had time to read it.

“I suppose I should say that you came home at the perfect time, despite your lateness,” I said. “Everyone was pleased when you showed up. Except for one unfortunate person, of course.”

“Unfortunate? As far as I could tell, *you* were the one being harped on.”

“But even *she* couldn’t say anything with you closing in on her in front of so many people. That kind of haranguing may be acceptable at a gathering for men, but a tea party is not the place for that behavior.”

“She was the one bringing down the mood. Why should I have held back?”

Lord Simeon was petting my cat’s fluffy belly. Most animals don’t appreciate being touched there, and many even bite their owners without a second thought. But my girl didn’t get angry around those she was used to. She squinted her eyes and spread her legs out to invite more scratches.

“Even in that case, a host should not ruin a guest’s honor,” I argued. “A little pinprick would’ve been fine, but you went all in on her. That’s why mother-in-law punished you.”

“She pulled my ear afterward.”

He gently rubbed his ear. I laughed and looked back at the newspaper.

“I was happy that you took my side though, and that you praised Agnès. Thank you very much. You were quite the doting husband!”

“I am not biased. I merely stated the truth.”

This man is serious to a fault. Chouchou meowed in retaliation when Lord Simeon pet her the wrong way, and she demanded that he try again.

Times like these, when we were lounging around without anything happening, felt so good. Lord Simeon soon regained my cat’s approval, and I read the newspaper. Up until that moment, everything really was peaceful and happy.

“Huh...?”

Our peace was shattered just a few minutes later. I gasped at the sight that struck my eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer his question. My hands shook, and I gripped the newspaper tightly. I scanned the words yet again to make sure I wasn’t misreading, but that only made the horrible truth hit harder.

“No...”

“Please hand that to me.”

Lord Simeon reached out and took the paper from me. His eyes ran down the page, and he swiftly found the source of the problem.

“Popular Author Agnès Vivier Suspected of Plagiarism!”

Even Lord Simeon’s body stiffened.

The title was a sudden and unexpected portent of things to come.

Chapter Three

It wasn't on the front cover, but took up a small portion of a middle page. The headline didn't even take up a quarter of space on the page, but it stood out nonetheless. Apparently, it was an anonymous gossip submission from a reader.

"I was shocked when I first read that novel by Agnès Vivier. The contents highly resemble those of my late family member's journal. The types of incidents, the details of how they were resolved—they all match perfectly! It's not even in the realm of just being a coincidence. No matter how I look at it, I can't see her novel as anything but an exact reproduction.

If it had been just this one case, then I would've assumed she merely had knowledge of the incident itself. Though I'd like to question the ethics of writing about another person's personal business, I'll put that issue aside for now. However, I found even further similarities between her novels and the journal. That confirmed it for me: Agnès has read this journal, down to the details, and she used the contents to write her novels.

Can something like this be forgiven? Using another person's work without permission is called plagiarism. Would a journal not count? I think it should, which would make this veritable plagiarism. I am not aware of the author of the journal being acquainted with Agnès, and therefore, I have no memory of them giving permission for her to use it. Its contents are being fictionalized entirely without permission. This is blasphemy to the deceased, as well as foolishness that brings Agnès's integrity as an author into question."

The submission criticized me harshly, point after point. I felt unable to breathe, and I clutched my hand to my chest.

I don't feel good. My heart is racing.

Have I...done something immoral?

My vision grew dark. Of course, I had no memory of plagiarizing anything. I could pledge that to God. I'd never copied another's writing exactly. However, it

was true that I'd sometimes written about other people's business—that, I couldn't deny.

Ever since I'd debuted in society as an adult, I'd used incidents, rumors, and relationships I heard about as reference for the plots of my novels. I'd never intended to copy real-life situations exactly, but it seemed that those familiar with the original tales were able to tell. That was why Agnès Vivier was rumored to be a noblewoman.

All of this meant that I was indeed writing about existing incidents, just as this newspaper submission had stated. *Is it considered plagiarism to use real-life events and relationships as references?* If so, that would mean I'd been unknowingly committing foolish acts for my whole writing career.

"Marielle." Lord Simeon wrapped his arm around my shoulders and shook me gently. "Pull yourself together."

"Lord Simeon..."

His strong voice brought my consciousness back to reality. I was so afraid, and had no idea what to do. I looked up at the face I depended on.

Lord Simeon put the newspaper under his arm, then pulled me into his lap. He held me close and gently patted my back, as if I were a child.

"I've...been doing something so immoral without realizing it." My voice almost gave out.

"Calm yourself. Do not believe an article like this."

Chouchou, who'd jumped onto the floor at some point, leaped into the chair next to us and settled there. Lord Simeon continued to sit still next to her, and I clung to him, gazing up at his face in wonder.

"But..."

"It's true that you use information you've overheard as reference for your writing. But are unaltered, real-life stories cohesive and engaging novels all on their own? I think not. If that's what you were doing, you would be no different from a reporter, don't you think?"

I couldn't bring myself to respond.

“What you’ve been doing,” he continued, “is merely using these pieces of information as *references*. As fuel for your imagination, or as nothing more than creative catalysts that help you illustrate your understanding of people’s minds and relationships. You’re creating these stories and characters entirely on your own. Isn’t that right?”

He was correct. I was fully intent on coming up with my stories on my own. *But doesn’t the fact that someone recognized my original inspiration mean that they weren’t just references?*

“Your references can often be seen in your novels, sure. Some people *have* recognized moments that have inspired your writing, but none have ever raised an issue with that, have they? All they’ve done is muse ‘Oh, she must have used *that* as a reference,’ because you didn’t write about incidents *exactly* as they happened.”

“But since people can tell at all, doesn’t that mean my writing is too close?”

After pausing to think about my words, Lord Simeon shook his head. “Recall a scene from one of your novels: The main character wore a dress that was the same color as one worn by a powerful noble girl, displeased her, and was then attacked. This situation was mostly the same as one you observed, just without the names. Would using that incident as inspiration be considered immoral or plagiarism?”

“Well...”

“You remember that, don’t you? It happened to *you*. And you were happy that you’d gotten to experience group bullying in real life.”

“H-How do you know about that?”

He was referring to an incident that’d happened right after my societal debut. I’d coincidentally worn the same dress color as a beautiful noble girl. Though the materials and design of the two dresses were completely different, I’d incurred her wrath simply by the colors being similar.

Ah... I can still see it. Lady Aurelia’s beauty, her intensity. I was surrounded by a wall of dresses, and all kinds of insults were thrown at me. I was impressed by how many words they knew; they hadn’t been receiving a high-class education

for nothing! That night was like a dream in which I got to taste what it would be like to be the heroine of a novel...

I suddenly gasped. This was no time to reminisce! “Have I ever told you about that night, Lord Simeon?”

“No. I had been watching you from some ways away. I was going to step in depending on how far they went, but nothing serious came of it. And strangely enough, the victim was *excited* by the bullying, not crying.”

“Huh?”

“I was shocked. Why in the world would you be pleased after an incident like that? That was how I first came to know you. Regardless of all that, you went on to write a similar scene in one of your novels, and I could tell that it was about that night.”

I couldn’t help but be surprised at this information. I’d known that he’d watched me from afar, but I hadn’t known that his surveillance had gone so far back. And why exactly had he fallen head over heels for her after witnessing *that*? I wasn’t one to talk, but I thought Lord Simeon’s reaction was strange.

“If you take that scene and compare it to that night’s incident, they’re definitely the same. But the events leading up to it, the characters, and what happens after are entirely different. I didn’t find a problem with it when I read it.”

“But that’s because of the way you’re looking at it. If all you knew was that an author you weren’t personally acquainted with was writing about real-life events, you might have a differing opinion.”

“The others who’ve read your works are in that very position.” He spoke with intent. “Have any of them ever raised an issue with it? Not a single one of them has, because all you did was use certain events for *reference*. It’s nothing to make a fuss about.”

I stayed silent.

“Lots of authors have used their own experiences and information they’ve gathered,” he reasoned. “You’re always going on about ‘gathering intel,’ and this is the same thing. That in itself is not something to be disparaged. What

wouldn't be allowed would be writing about existing people without their permission, revealing others' personal information, and putting them down. I shouldn't have to tell you that you don't do those things."

"Right..."

I pressed my cheek to his large chest. The warmth soothed my head.

As I let myself be doted on, Lord Simeon kindly repeated himself. "You haven't done anything immoral. Believe in yourself and your readers."

"I will..."

"Besides, Mr. Satie would never let an issue like this arise in the first place. I don't believe he's the type of person to ignore ethics." Lord Simeon was acquainted with my teacher and editor, Mr. Satie. He'd personally confirmed that Mr. Satie was a good man.

I finally came to agree with Lord Simeon. Mr. Satie would never publish unethical things just because they'd sell.

"Thank you very much," I murmured. "I was so shocked that I lost myself."

I sat up from where I was leaning against his chest and looked up. My husband smiled warmly behind his glasses, and I heard a "meow" from beside us.

"Look." Lord Simeon chuckled. "Chouchou's worried too."

"She's just jealous."

She probably didn't like that we were cuddling without her. When I stretched my arm out to pet her head, she used it as a plank to sneak her way between us.

"Now, now!" I laughed. "Don't use daddy as a springboard."

I lifted her up and comforted her. Lord Simeon held me as I held my cat. I had to laugh at the silly situation.

"Have you calmed down?" he asked.

"Yes."

Lord Simeon had convinced me so thoroughly that reason finally returned to

my mind. At first, I'd thought that he was simply being a doting husband and blindly defending me, but his logical breakdown of the situation changed my mind. He was, first and foremost, a person who was harsh on injustices, and he wouldn't even defend his own family if they did wrong. Had I made a mistake, he would have been the first person to scold me for it. *To forget about that fact, I really must have been wavering...*

That was just how shocking the article had been. Chouchou nudged me as I looked down at the newspaper, which had been discarded on the floor.

"But why did an article like this get published in the first place?"

Lord Simeon didn't respond. Instead, he picked up the newspaper and opened it to the page in question.

I pressed further. "If it made it into the paper, then someone really does think I've plagiarized. They claim that my plot points were very close to the contents of their family member's journal... I wonder who it could be."

"You don't have any ideas?"

I shook my head. "I don't read other people's diaries, and I don't think anyone's shown me theirs either."

"I would assume not."

His blue eyes were glinting. I didn't want to be in the way as he read, so I slipped off his lap and sat next to him.

"There's no credibility to this submission," he asserted. "I'm not saying that out of favoritism, but rather because there's no information here that seems trustworthy."

"Information..."

"That's right. Aside from the fact that they're anonymous, they should've at least pointed out which of your novels was similar to that journal."

He had a point. I glanced at the newspaper and ran my eyes over the article again. As Lord Simeon had mentioned, there wasn't anything concrete written in it.

"They're making a very adamant claim that you've plagiarized, but they don't

say which of your works the claim applies to. Usually, an example is given for plagiarism cases. How many novels have you put out by now? There have been enough that it would be difficult to ascertain which one they were referencing without a title, yes?”

“You’re right.”

“Don’t you find this strange? If I were the one making this claim, I would’ve brought evidence to satisfy naysayers. I would prove with examples that the contents of the novel and the journal were the same. Their claim doesn’t hold up since there is no actual information here, only a heated allegation.”

I nodded repeatedly as he spoke. One really did need evidence for claims of plagiarism. Thanks to Lord Simeon’s logical explanation, my mind began to work too.

“You’re right,” I said. “After reading it again now that I’m calm, nothing about it makes sense. They didn’t send the journal itself to this newspaper as proof. Even if they wanted to make the claim first, it shouldn’t have been in a letter like this. So...this submission evidently wasn’t aimed at the publisher, but at the *readers*.”

“That’s how I see it as well.”

“If it were me, I would’ve brought this directly to the newspaper instead of sending it in a letter, with both the journal and novel in tow. And if the paper found a problem with it after confirming for themselves, then I’d send in a submission. Though at that point, a reporter would be more likely to write an article for me.”

A particularly highbrow paper wouldn’t partake in content like this, but this was *La Môme*, the most popular gossip magazine aimed at the masses. They probably welcomed exclusive scoops.

“The writing is proper, so I feel that the person who wrote it must be educated. That makes it even stranger that they didn’t show proof and are only making claims. Is it merely a false submission meant to bring down my reputation?”

They probably thought that anyone who read this article would believe it

without evidence. Most people just gossiped without a care, so they'd change their views of Agnès Vivier. Bringing me down might've been their sole purpose. Perhaps they never had any intent of using evidence and merely wanted to invent a negative rumor.

Intense anger coursed through me when I realized that this article might have been written with ill intent. *Who did this?! What makes you hate me so much that you'd do something like this?!*

"I'm thinking there's another possibility." Lord Simeon's deep voice lowered my blood pressure. "Couldn't this be a fake article written by a reporter?"

"Huh?"

I looked up at Lord Simeon's face once more. He tapped the newspaper with the back of his finger. "This newspaper often deals in gossip. It gets its readers' attention with lowbrow topics. You yourself said that this could be a fabricated article."

"Ah... I see."

La Môme had its fair share of outrageous articles. Its main selling point was talkability. *That's why I read it. Indeed, I usually read it without a care. Oh no... I might have no right to get angry here.*

"I believe it's possible that a reporter wrote this under the guise of a reader sending in a submission. If so, then the reason there's no specific information is because it's all completely fabricated. They might have left all that out on purpose, so they could escape if accused of libel. They're leaving open the option to say that they merely published a letter sent to the office."

Though his words sounded logical and unemotional, on the inside, Lord Simeon seemed to be quite miffed. His eyes were cold as they glared down at the paper. They'd start to burn if he got even angrier, but for now, he looked like he was thinking of how to get revenge.

I contemplated on my own, thinking back on previous articles. "I wonder... It's true that *La Môme's* articles aren't very trustworthy, but I don't think they'd publish flat-out lies."

In their many past headlines, there had always been some degree of truth. It

was commonplace for *La Môme* to dramatize their articles to get their readers to misunderstand, but as long as you kept that in mind, you'd see that there were hardly any actual falsities in them. As Lord Simeon said, they were simply leaving an escape route open.

The reason I liked *La Môme* was that, while it presented itself as a third-rate newspaper, I could feel a proper, solid mind behind it. Just because it dealt with gossip didn't mean that it was of poor quality. The differences between highbrow papers and ones aimed at the masses were the topics they covered and the intended audience—not how well they were made. The mass newspapers undoubtedly sold more too. *La Môme's* stance on reporting was nothing more than a marketing strategy.

"When they reported on fraud, they covered it quite seriously. They don't always, as a rule, embellish topics that get people's attention."

"So what about plagiarism claims against a popular writer?"

I wondered about that too. I was only popular among a certain readership, so my name didn't mean much to the general public.

"I've only really started to get my name out there thanks to my column in *Chersie*. The average person wouldn't think much more of it than 'Oh, some author plagiarized something.'"

"In that case, doesn't that make you suspect this to be fake even more?" Lord Simeon asked.

"If it were fake, wouldn't they at least explain who Agnès Vivier is and what kind of novels she writes? If you heard that an author you didn't know plagiarized something, would you want to know the details?"

"No. I'd most likely brush it off."

"Exactly. This article alone wouldn't be enough to get people to become interested in Agnès. That's why I don't think it's fake."

"Hmm..."

We mulled this over, then simultaneously sighed. We just didn't have enough information, and we couldn't conclude anything from this submission alone.

I changed my thought process. Putting aside why someone would write something like this, it was more important to consider how I'd go about dealing with it.

"I'd like to go directly to the newspaper office and complain, but that's probably what they want. I'll try consulting with Mr. Satie first."

Lord Simeon nodded. "I agree. Move cautiously. You must not fumble and make a mistake. Mr. Satie most likely knows how to deal with things of this nature."

"Right. I'll go to the office tomorrow."

I'd been wavering so much that I hadn't even thought about how to respond publicly to the situation. I'd never thought something like this would happen. It felt like a hole had opened up under my feet, and I'd fallen right in. I wouldn't have been able to move in the darkness at the bottom of that hole all by myself, but I'd been saved because Lord Simeon was with me. He'd shown me that the hole was not so deep, offered his hand, and pulled me out.

I was grateful to him yet again. I appreciated that he analyzed everything so calmly and helped me remain level. But what made me happiest was...

"What is it?" he asked when he noticed me staring.

I put my cat down, then stretched up to kiss him. Our glasses collided with a clink.

"Thank you very much."

"What for?"

I giggled at his lack of understanding, then pulled his glasses off. Full of gratitude, I kissed him over and over—at the corners of his eyes, on his cheeks, and, of course, on his lips.

"You didn't doubt me, even a little. You suspected the article from the start and believed that I didn't plagiarize."

"But of course."

"I'm happy that you were able to say that for sure."

He wrapped his hand around my back and pulled us close again.

“You wouldn’t abandon all reason and blindly believe something, would you? You would think first about whether or not there is reason to warrant disparaging, even for family. But you trusted me.”

“It’s not merely trust—I know you’d never plagiarize. I’ve seen your personality, your will, and your pride in your writing. I’ve seen it all. It wouldn’t be fun for you to copy someone else’s writing. You would never plagiarize because you enjoy thinking of and creating things yourself.”

He took my glasses off as well. Our breaths grew close, then melded together.

“In regards to ethics, it’s as I said earlier,” he murmured. “I don’t think you’ve done anything wrong. One of your flaws is that you rush into action, but you think carefully about your novels. After reading it over and over to improve it, you complete each one with the guidance of your editor. If anything unethical were to occur, someone would notice and revise it. It would never see the light of day. It’s simple when you think about it. There’s nothing to suspect.”

Oh, how he replies with such logic, just as his mother said! It was very supportive at the moment.

I laid my head on his shoulder while giggling. His large hand softly petted me. *Does he think I’m a cat? If only I could purr to let him know how I feel.*

As thickheaded and too-damn-serious as he was, Lord Simeon really was amazing. I wouldn’t have been relieved if he’d only offered me empty words. But he told me directly why he believed in me. He proved that he wasn’t just tricking me with love. He was logical, and therefore, trustworthy. Clearly, the only choice was to be relieved when he vouched for me, don’t you think?

I also decided to trust myself. Even unknowingly, I hadn’t plagiarized anything. It was unthinkable! I hadn’t written anything to be scoffed at.

Whether this submission was just hatred, a fabrication by a reporter, or even a misunderstanding, I didn’t know, but I was determined to have confidence and take care of it. It was fine! I wouldn’t lose to someone who could only make claims without evidence.

When I steeled myself again, I heard a loud noise from below me. Lord

Simeon's face scrunched, and he groaned in pain. I looked down when I realized what happened.

Upset that she'd been thrown off, Chouchou was digging her claws into my husband's trousers. At this point, they were tattered beyond repair.

The next morning, after seeing Lord Simeon off at his usual time, I hurried to my dressing room to get ready. *I wonder which outfit I should go with today...?* There hadn't been any reporters loitering around the publishing office recently, but they'd likely swarmed the place after that article. *I'll have to go dressed as a city laborer so they won't be able to tell that I'm an author...*

"My lady, a servant from your parents' household has come to see you."

"Now, of all times?!"

My maid Joanna came in as I picked out my disguise. Had my mother sent something for me? It was a little early for a birthday gift. Ah, I should mention: today's gift from Lord Simeon was a glass pen holder in a pretty color. It hadn't arrived in a box but had instead been mixed with the writing tools already on my desk, as if it had always been there. *I noticed though! Hah!*

I reluctantly paused my dressing and headed to the parlor. In this small room, intended for meeting with loved ones, was a familiar face.

"Natalie! So it was you! It's been so long!"

"It really has, my lady. I'm glad you seem well."

This black-haired woman who was slightly older than me had become even prettier than I remembered. The freckles above her nose seemed to have faded as well. I'd always seen her working in black dresses, but the one she wore now was brightly colored, making her seem even more lovely.

Natalie had worked for House Clarac ever since I was young. There hadn't been any servants at home I could call my personal maids, so Natalie had mostly been the one to take care of me. My brother was significantly older, so she'd been the person I could confide in—like an older sister.

She'd met Mr. Satie through me and had recently quit her job so she could

marry him. They'd just moved in together. The ceremony wouldn't be for a little while, but they were essentially husband and wife at this point. This was typical for commoners; unlike in the strict, contractual marriages between nobles, commoners who married for love started with cohabitation. That way, they could break up if any issues were to arise. Divorce was very difficult and stressful, so I found this method to be logical, straightforward, and smart.

At present, Natalie and Mr. Satie were a happy couple smack-dab in the middle of passionate love. I doubted she'd come to visit because there were problems in their relationship.

I offered her a chair, and she accepted. "I'm terribly sorry for pushing my way in so early in the morning without an appointment." She had a bitter smile on her face.

I sat opposite her as we began our chat. "It's fine," I assured her. "This doesn't concern my family, does it?"

Immediately upon seeing her face, I'd predicted that she was here for a reason outside of my household. My mother wouldn't have called Natalie back home just to do housework; House Clarac might have lived modestly, but they had enough servants.

"Is it something concerning Mr. Satie?" She nodded at my question, so I continued. "Could it be about *La Môme*?"

"So you know."

"Yes. I was so busy yesterday that I wasn't able to read the paper until the evening. I'm going to take care of it today."

Natalie knew my personality even better than Lord Simeon. She shook her head with a knowing expression. "You're going to the office, right? Paul figured you would probably go to discuss this with him first."

"I am. It wouldn't be good for me to go to the newspaper's publisher first."

Paul was Mr. Satie's first name. I'd called him "Mr. Satie" out of habit since I'd first met him, but since Natalie would also take the Satie name once she married him, perhaps it would be best for me to start calling him "Mr. Paul."

“You shouldn’t, no matter what. Paul asked me to tell you not to go near the office. There are reporters everywhere.”

“I knew there would be. That’s why I’m going incognito... Oh, I know! Won’t you accompany me, Natalie? I’ll go as your maid! It wouldn’t be strange for the editor’s wife to go to the office, would it? You can be honest with the reporters if they approach you that way.”

I clapped my hands together at my brilliant idea, but Natalie just sighed. She’d clearly expected me to say something like this. She was probably thinking, *There goes my lady yet again...*

“We haven’t hired a maid.”

“You haven’t? So no one was taking care of Mr. Satie?”

“No one. He’s quite dexterous. He can take care of himself.”

“Will you hire one in the future?”

“Well, we don’t need one for the time being.”

I furrowed my brow dejectedly. “I’d really like to ask him what I should do, though. I can’t just let things be and ignore the situation.”

“I understand that, but you needn’t rush. Paul said he’d think of how to handle this. Rather than you responding on your own, your publisher should be the one to reject it publicly. I also think that would be best. We’re worried that things might take an unexpected turn if we were to let you handle it yourself.”

“Aw...”

Natalie shook her head at my pouting. She’d known me since I was a child, so she probably still saw me as a kid who needed to be supervised. *I’ll have you know that I’m an adult who’s about to turn twenty! I even got married before you did!*

I couldn’t muster up the will to push back when both Mr. Satie and Natalie were stopping me. If Mr. Satie was coming up with a plan of action, then there really wasn’t a need for me to panic. Even if I consulted with him about it, I’d probably end up relying on him, so for now I wouldn’t get in his way.

“By the way, you haven’t mentioned anything about the incident itself,” I said.

“Are neither of you concerned with whether or not I plagiarized anything?”

My inquiry caused Natalie to chuckle and shrug. “Do you want us to be worried about it? Whenever you do something bad, you always get anxious with regret and confess immediately. We wouldn’t even have to ask you about it—you would broach the subject first! The madam and I would often have a good laugh and wait for you to confess.”

I sat with my mouth agape.

“You aren’t the type of person who could plagiarize something and then pretend like you didn’t. Paul knows that too.”

Many emotions welled up in my heart. I felt overwhelmed, like I wanted to cry and laugh all at once. I rose from my seat and hugged Natalie. Her body was soft, thin, and small. It was certainly different from Lord Simeon’s. I could smell a light fragrance she hadn’t used before, amplifying the reality that she was no longer a servant, but a housewife. I was confident she would go on to support Mr. Satie as he developed his company. But her warmth as she comforted me was the same sisterly affection I knew and loved.

Chapter Four

Satie Publishing, the publisher I worked for, was located inside a shared office building that stood in a low-lying area of the shopping district. After Natalie left, I made my way to the office. I was not ignoring her warning; I didn't have business at the office itself, but *around* it.

I searched purposefully, and sure enough, a reporter sat at a nearby café. He was situated at one of the front tables, and he sipped from a coffee cup as he perused a newspaper. He was probably watching to see who went in and out of my publisher. I adjusted my hat and approached him.

"Sir!" I greeted him brightly.

"Huh?" He raised his head from the newspaper he'd been pretending to read.

He was a middle-aged man, around forty. With brown hair and olive-brown eyes, he rivaled even me in terms of boring coloration. His body was of medium build, and his face would most likely not look that bad if he cleaned it up properly, but his appearance seemed very dreary and world-weary. His shirt clung sloppily to his body, the buttons undone. I could see the unshaven shadow of a beard on his chin. He probably didn't have a lover or a wife. Regardless, he still seemed hygienic, as his shirt didn't have any dirt on it despite the wrinkles.

"What do you want, boy?" The man looked up at me from his seat.

"Do you not remember me?" I asked with the huskiest voice I could muster.
"We tried to solve that mystery together!"

"What? Who are you?"

"Come on! We met at the theater last fall. Remember? Lutin's calling card caused a big fuss, and that painting got stolen. We chased after him when he was dressed as a police officer!"

"Oh... That. Right, I think I recall someone like you. You're the errand boy, right?"

“Yes! You finally remember!”

This man scoping out my publisher was a reporter for *La Môme*. I’d met him briefly before. His name was Mr. Pieron.

There were several reporters I’d seen quite often. At least, often enough that I’d memorized their faces. And among those, he was the one most passionate about uncovering the identities of female authors. I’d figured he’d be here today, and bingo, he was. The man was a bother, as always, but at the moment, I was thankful that he’d allowed me to approach without issue.

“I don’t really ‘remember’ you. That’s what your face looks like?”

I put my hand behind my back and puffed out my chest. Reporter Pieron scoffed. It would’ve been stranger for him to have remembered my face—anyone would’ve forgotten it in that situation.

Also, I had to mentally pump my fist since he didn’t seem to be able to tell that I was a woman. At the moment, I was dressed as a boy of the town. I’d darkened my skin with greasepaint, bundled my hair into my hat, hidden my chest with a waistcoat, and broadened my back by wrapping bleached cotton around my torso. There were work gloves on my hands, and a handkerchief decorated my neck. No matter how you looked at me, I was a laborer! My backstory was that I was a boy who worked at a flower shop. My disguise had evolved through many days of trial, error, and research. No one had seemed suspicious of me on the way here, and Reporter Pieron seemed to truly believe I was a boy.

“So what do you want from me?” he asked.

“He-he! You’re on a stakeout right now, aren’t you, sir? I heard Satie Publishing is in that building, so I’ve come to investigate too.”

“What for?”

“I read yesterday’s *La Môme*. Agnès Vivier is suspected of plagiarism. That half-baked article didn’t have a conclusion to it. It wasn’t satisfying, so I figured there would be a follow-up article. In which case, wouldn’t someone be posted at the publisher? That’s what I came to see.”

“Excuse me?” His face contorted oddly. He wasn’t used to being questioned

since he was the one usually asking the questions.

I tread cautiously. I had to do this right so that he wouldn't uncover my intent and identity. "I'm glad you're the one here, sir! Things'll go faster since we're acquainted."

"Nothing'll go faster! We're not acquainted at all!"

"So? So? Have you gleaned anything? Was that article true? Has the publisher said anything?"

Reporter Pieron was forced to lean back in his chair as I inched closer to him. "Wait, wait! What's with you? And lower your voice!"

He scolded me, seeming unable to take it anymore. His voice was hushed, like he was wary of the people around him.

I purposefully widened my eyes to make it look like I'd only just noticed and then lowered my volume. "Ah, I'm sorry."

"Jeez! Who are you, anyway? One of Agnès Vivier's fans?"

"No, I don't know who she is. I don't really read books. Ah, but I read the newspaper! Specifically *La Môme*! When my boss buys it!"

"You don't even buy it yourself?!"

"That recent article about the thief who robbed a jewelry store was so intense! It made my heart race! It was like the incident was happening right in front of me!"

"Oh, really?"

His expression became obviously brighter when I brought up an actual article. I'd plotted to bring up a few to gauge his reactions, but luckily, the first one had been the right choice.

"Wait, were you the one who wrote that article, sir?"

"Yep. I reported at the scene of the crime, after all."

"Wow! So you're a really competent reporter, then! I thought you were kind of a dull one since you were bested by that thief before."

"Shaddup!"

I pulled out the empty chair next to him and sat down.

“That wasn’t just any thief,” he grumbled under his breath. “He was clearly used to dangerous work. I noticed things were bad as soon as I saw his eyes, but it was a bit late by then.”

“So that wasn’t Lutin?”

“Seems not. Didn’t they announce that a faker caused that case? That guy seemed more like killing was his main job rather than thievery. There were a lot of unanswered questions at the end—why did a guy like him show up in the first place?—but none of them have been resolved, even now.”

Hmm. As expected of a reporter, his observation skills were keen. Just as he’d said, that thief had been a member of a crime syndicate, and the incident itself had been devised by Lutin—or rather, Lutin’s master, Prince Liberto. The truth behind the case remained shrouded in mystery, but it seemed Reporter Pieron could somewhat feel it out.

I wanted to know how this keen-eyed reporter felt about that article. “I can still see that day. Infiltrating a place in search of information is so cool. The thought is so exciting, it makes me want to do it again!”

“It’s not a game, kid.”

“But you’re on a stakeout right now, right? I’ll help you! Please let me gather information with you!”

“There’s nothing for you to help me with. Aren’t you supposed to be at work? Get out of here.”

He tried to brush off this nuisance, but I wasn’t going to let go so easily. “Aw, don’t say that! Please tell me, was that letter really sent to the newspaper itself? My boss’s wife said it was probably fake.”

“It wasn’t fake. We don’t publish fake stuff.”

“Really?”

“Why do you suddenly look so serious? Don’t doubt us.”

The manager of the café was glaring at us. I had to wonder how long Reporter Pieron had been here. It definitely didn’t help that I’d sat down without

ordering anything. I called over a server and ordered a café au lait with lots of milk and sugar. Reporter Pieron ordered another cup of his coffee.

“Thrilling articles are more likely to get read. Sure, we exaggerate a bit, but we would never publish an article full of lies we pulled out of thin air. That would be fiction, not journalism. It’s not what a reporter should do.”

He seemed surprisingly serious about this. Lord Simeon had disregarded the newspaper as a lowbrow gossip rag, and I’d thought of it as something interesting to read rather than a genuine source of news. But it seemed the paper itself had dignity and boundaries of its own, as Reporter Pieron was denying the word “fake” in a shockingly sincere way.

“So that letter really was submitted to the newspaper?”

“Yes. I published it as-is. Hardly touched it.”

“You were in charge of it?”

“Yeah.”

I’d expected as much. Anything involving female authors must have been his responsibility. “I see. But I found it strange that they didn’t name any specific novels when they were trying to claim plagiarism.”

“I guess.”

“That’s why I’m curious. Maybe they’re leaving out the details on purpose, or there’s going to be more.”

Reporter Pieron didn’t offer any opinion of his own. When gathering materials, he’d cling to his targets to get any information he could out of them, but he wouldn’t talk when he was the one being questioned. I wondered if he was wary of me. He probably couldn’t spill everything to an unrelated party, but he was still engaging with me without shooing me away. It would look less like a stakeout if he had someone with him, so perhaps he found this convenient. However, his attention never strayed from the building, even while chatting with me.

I continued my avidly curious boy act. “The newspaper knows who submitted it, right? I won’t ask for their name if it’s a secret, but aren’t you going to report

on them?”

“There wasn’t a name or address, unfortunately. Letters like that often don’t have them.”

“Is that so?”

“You want to know if the plagiarism allegations are real or not, yeah? Sorry for you, but I can’t answer that.”

“So you all don’t know the truth either. I suppose you don’t have any information if that letter was all you received. That’s why you’ve come to the publisher. Could it be that you’ve already finished gathering intel for today?”

His tired-looking face scrunched up at my counterattack. He sighed and folded up the paper he was holding. “A persistent brat, aren’t you? It’s obnoxious how weirdly perceptive you are.”

“He-he! Thank you for the praise!”

“That’s not a compliment!”

My head was then smacked with the newspaper. I hurriedly pressed my hat to my head so it wouldn’t fall off.

“Do you think I could be a reporter too?” I asked.

“Aren’t you some errand boy on the clock right now?”

“I’ll just tell them I got held up at the delivery spot. What did the people at the publishing office say?”

“I’m telling you, don’t ask that. As if I’d tell you about something I haven’t even written yet.”

I see, so he’s already heard something he can write about. If Mr. Satie was interviewed, then he probably flatly denied everything. That alone wouldn’t be good enough, however. He probably asked them to verify it to clear our name.

I’d been able to glean several things from the conversation thus far. *La Môme* itself didn’t have much information. They most likely didn’t know whether or not the contents of that letter were true or false. I would’ve liked to question their ethics as journalists for publishing it anyway, but that was the nature of

submissions—they didn't reflect the newspaper's bias. That was probably why they hadn't edited it. As Lord Simeon had said, they were leaving a way out for themselves.

At the same time, they probably wanted a reaction from Agnès Vivier. She wouldn't be able to ignore plagiarism allegations. Even if the letter turned out to be nothing but false accusations, keeping silent would be the same as admitting to them, so she was sure to make a move. That might well have been Reporter Pieron and *La Môme*'s primary goal. The newspaper could pique readers' interest by publishing both sides of the story at no expense of its own, so it was probably grateful for a scoop like this.

I was starting to grasp the situation, so there was no point in dragging this conversation out. "Are you sure you don't have to go back and write your article, then? You never know, another letter might have been sent by now!" I changed the subject to try to get him to leave. "To be honest, a submission like that isn't anything more than bad-mouthing. They have to give at least one piece of evidence and name which novel they're talking about. The person who sent it in might have noticed that and sent in a sequel by now."

"A sequel? What do you think this is? A book series? Though I guess the possibility is there."

"Right?! You all might've received more information by now! Let's hurry and get to it!"

"Why are you ordering me around?" Reporter Pieron drained his coffee while muttering.

Rather than following my lead, he seemed to have deemed it pointless to continue a stakeout that might not produce results. He had to put the material he'd already gathered into an article too, so he couldn't waste much time. He'd probably figured this was a good moment to leave. I hurried after him once he paid for his coffee and left the café.

"Don't follow me. You're being a nuisance!" he exclaimed.

"I want to become your reporter apprentice! I'm in your care, Master!"

"I'm not your master, and you're not my apprentice!"

“Who pays the apprentice? Is it the master himself?”

“Don’t set things in stone on your own! I’m not paying you anything! And I’m not your master!”

We bantered back and forth as we walked toward the center of the shopping district. It was rather far, but still too close to bother with transport. The walk tired me out somewhat, as my usual mode of travel was by carriage.

We finally arrived at the newspaper publisher. The building was five stories tall, and the whole structure was for *La Môme*, rather than just a shared office space. The first to third floors were the printing factories and warehouses, while the fourth floor and up were the administrative and editing departments. The reception room for outsiders was a small office at the edge of the first floor.

The company was much larger than Satie Publishing. *Don’t look down on gossip rags, that’s for sure!* This was a proper business that boasted high publishing counts. Incidentally, *Chersie’s* publishing building was also nearby. Several publishers of various types were gathered here. Mr. Satie dreamed of owning a building in this area one day.

Reporter Pieron immediately began climbing the stairs. I naturally followed.

“How long are you going to follow me, kid?!”

“I want to become your reporter apprentice! You can just hire me temporarily, so please let me help!”

“Then go to the administrative office. They might let you do odd jobs in the factory or something.”

“But I wanna be a reporter. Can’t they hire me in the editing department?”

“Again, ask the office. I can’t do anything for you.”

“At least introduce me to them!”

“Argh, jeez!”

I’d followed him to the upper floors and forced my way into the editing department. It didn’t feel any different from *Chersie’s* publisher. Many desks were lined up, and piled on top of them were documents, books, newspapers, and other bits and bobs.

People moved between the materials, and one of them eyed us. “Hey, welcome back. Who’s the kid?”

“I have no idea, honestly...” Reporter Pieron answered with a tired voice.

I looked around the department. Though it produced outrageous articles, the office itself seemed rather proper and normal.

“Did anything get sent in today, Donny?”

“Hmm? Nothing for you, at least.”

“Not personal stuff—letters, submissions, stuff like that.”

“Ah. Look over there.”

Reporter Pieron checked the sealed envelopes he was given. In order to dodge me as I tried to sneak a peek, he held them at a height I couldn’t see and spread out the letters.

“Is the sequel in there?!”

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Hey kid, what’re you doing here?!”

A journalist who seemed to be Reporter Pieron’s colleague picked me up like a cat. Reporter Pieron finished checking the letters in the meantime. “Sad to say, none of them are it. Your prediction was wrong.”

“Aw, man!”

He put the letters down on the nearby desk and took me from his coworker. Then, he spun my body around and pushed me toward the doorway we’d just entered. “Satisfied? Now go on, get. This isn’t a place for kids.”

“Aw, come on!” Fight as I might, he wouldn’t listen, and he kicked me out. I stuck my tongue out as the door slammed in my face.

I’d say I did a great job if he was willing to show me that much! All I have to do now is wait for tomorrow’s paper.

I obediently went back down the stairs, but I hadn’t given up just yet. Leaving

the publisher behind, I headed toward the advertising agency in the middle of town. There, I requested a personal advertisement space in *La Môme*. Not a big space that shops would use, but a personal-sized one. Anyone could buy one with a little money, and they were often used when looking for people to hire, for death announcements, for seeking lost items, and things of that nature. You could even send messages to lost associates or family members, so my request was accepted without question.

My investigation was far from over.

Lord Simeon had rented out an apartment for me to hold meetings in, and I went there to remove my disguise. Then, I used a fiacre to get to the entertainment district.

The carriage stopped in front of the largest, most upstanding building on Petibon Street, which stood among the bars and gambling shops that served as playgrounds for gentlemen. This grand building greeted me like it was a noble's mansion.

It was called Tarentule, and it was the oldest and highest-class brothel in Sans-Terre. The beauty of the women; their skills and education; the shows, music, and culinary delights—everything here was first-rate. There were whispers that even nobles and members of the royal family frequented its services.

The entrance was a bit farther back from the road, and four small fountains filled the space between: goddesses sat, angels played, and maidens danced as the water flowed without pause. It was a fearsome, luxurious space. Even the Flaubert residence only had one fountain in its garden. Not to mention, the water wasn't usually running!

Many lanterns had been placed around the fountains, and they created a magical scene when their lights reflected on the water at night. It was very fitting for this place, as nighttime was when Tarentule thrived. The establishment certainly didn't pull any punches when it came to entertaining its guests—all of whom were men, might I add. This wasn't a place for women.

I climbed down from the fiacre, turned away from the entrance, and went around to the back. I made for the staff entrance while pretending to be a

servant or errand runner, and I asked for a message to be passed on.

I'd also sent a message the day before, so they let me in immediately. They might not have remembered my face, but they knew my name; I'd become a regular at this point.

They walked me to the back of the third floor, and I followed a red carpet that quietly led me along the hallway. In the prepared private room that would allow me to stay hidden from the customers, three goddesses of dazzling beauty welcomed me.

"Hi Agnès!"

"Welcome!"

"We've been waiting."

Past the door was a flowery paradise wrapped in a sweet aroma. The smiles that greeted me were giant flowers! Beautiful, lovely, and alluring—they could make anyone their prey in an instant!

"Good day, everyone. My apologies for intruding while you're busy."

"It's perfectly fine! We're usually free around this time anyway." The gentle voice that greeted me belonged to Olga, whose chestnut-colored hair was loosely tied behind her. The oldest of the three, her mature calmness and sensuality gave off an intelligent air.

"We welcome it, even! We always have so much fun talking with you," Chloe chimed in, her sweet voice bursting with adorableness. Her fluffy, wavy hair was a golden color that gleamed. Though her carefree smile gave the impression of a doted-on child, she was actually a little devil that would have you wound around her finger doing as she said before you knew it.

"We've been wondering when you'd next bring us more fun gossip." With red hair curled into tight spirals, Isabella showed off an unyielding grin. Though she acted like a big sister, she was actually the youngest of the three. She exuded both strength *and* cuteness.

These three were the greatest flowers in the garden of Tarentule—goddesses who were constantly adored by all kinds of men.

We'd met two years prior, against all odds. I'd still been in my engagement period with Lord Simeon, and the two of us had not yet fully understood one another. I'd been in the dark about why he'd proposed to me, and I'd been so sure that there'd been some sort of ulterior motive. I'd sorely misunderstood a great many things, and this had led me to believe that he would break off the engagement altogether. The ruckus had ended up leading me to this establishment, where I'd met three gorgeous flowers I'd only ever heard the names of.

I'd been elated when Lord Simeon had proposed to me once more, but the three flowers had stolen my attention away a mere moment later. *They're just so beautiful! I can't believe I'm classified as a woman just like they are. They're goddesses who have graced the earth!*

Behind me, several men chatted away quietly, and they sounded somewhat exasperated.

That incident felt very nostalgic now. After our first meeting, the ladies became very friendly to me, and they allowed me to visit them at Tarentule every so often. *I always feel so exuberant whenever I come to see them. Today's visit alone has extended my lifespan by ten years. My eyes and heart have been revitalized after having to look at a tired, middle-aged man all day. It is important for one to obtain their daily dosage of beauty—an absolute must for nutrients.*

I loftily made my way inside the room at their behest. *Ah, their skin is as clear as ever. Even their fingertips are slender and beautiful, and their indescribable scents are making me dizzy!*

"He he he he he, we know what you're worried about, Agnès!" Chloe leaned toward me like a cat when I sat down. *Ah, no, don't! What would I do if I'm bewitched here?!*

"You've come here so suddenly because of what was in *La Môme*, right?"

"Yesh..." I fumbled my words. "You're so perceptive, Chloe!"

"It's not perception. Anyone could've guessed after reading that article." Isabella rested her chin in her hands. How seductive her slightly tilted gaze was! My eyes were sucked in by her white chest. *The cleavage, oh, the wonderful*

cleavage!

“Have you done anything about it yet?” she asked.

“Um, Mr. Satie told me to leave the official response to him.”

“Hmm. So he’s protecting his author. Good job, Mr. Boss.”

“Yes, he helps me a great deal.”

While chatting away in this dreamlike atmosphere, I pulled out the snacks I’d brought as gifts. Olga poured some bright yellow tea into porcelain cups festooned with violets as we opened the box full of chocolates and baked sweets. The tea had an uplifting, refreshing scent, like a prairie blooming with flowers in the springtime. These tea leaves must have just been harvested in the spring and imported here. I wasn’t even a customer, but they treated me to the highest-grade tea without a second thought.

“But this is *you* we’re talking about here. We know you aren’t planning on letting someone else take care of it. What are you scheming?” Olga asked, a hint of playfulness peeking through her kind smile. The gentlemen who preferred her most likely couldn’t get enough of the moments of cuteness she’d let slip through as they enjoyed her calm, mature demeanor.

“I’m not quite scheming. I was just wondering if I could get ahold of the author of that letter, so I sent a callout through a personal advertisement.”

“My, how wonderful! You’ll be communicating through messages in newspapers, like in a story!”

“I’m not sure if it will go well or not yet.”

It would be one thing if this person had left some indication as to their identity, but at the moment, I had no idea who or where they were. Whether or not they would see the callout in itself was also a gamble.

“I’ll leave most of it to Mr. Satie. As of right now, it will be good enough for me just to get a response.” Though those were the words that left my lips, I did feel like the probability wasn’t low. Though this was indeed a gamble, I had a premonition that I’d elicit a reaction from the person. “I’ve actually come here for a reason. If you all have any information on this case...”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t answer that.”

This was a place all kinds of information passed through. People of all backgrounds visited here, and it was often used as a place for secret meetings. I’d asked, intent on finding a clue, but Olga shook her head before I could even finish my sentence.

Chloe and Isabella had the same reply. It was Tarentule’s rule that a customer’s information would never be leaked. I knew they’d say that, so I followed up on my words. “I won’t ask for anything specific. You can just give me anything that won’t let me identify that person.”

“That’s not it, Agnès. It’s true that we can’t speak about our customers, but we genuinely don’t have any information to give you.”

“None at all...?”

The goddesses looked at each other, each tilting their heads and shrugging. “Our customers are all men. They wouldn’t read novels aimed at women. They probably aren’t interested in the slightest.”

“And upper-class people would never admit to reading papers for the masses. Even if they actually do, they would put on airs and say they only read newspapers of their own status.”

I nodded at Chloe and Isabella’s words. They were correct. I might have been allowed to read such papers, but I’d been strictly warned to never say so in public. Personally, I didn’t think newspapers should be looked down upon just because they were aimed at the masses. They regularly had articles on politics and economics, after all. Not only that, but they covered theater, current trends, and shops that were the talk of the town. Even *La Môme*’s articles that weren’t about gossip were written earnestly.

However, impactful articles would leave the most lasting impressions, which was why papers for the masses were considered lowbrow. The clients at Tarentule sought not only economic might, but also class. Thus, they would never speak of common newspapers here.

“We’ve had clients excitedly mention your column in *Chersie* before, particularly when we mention what we like. That’s how our clientele is. They

would never bring up an unpleasant article and risk dampening our moods,” said Olga.

I couldn’t help but concede. *I suppose. Perhaps I’m asking the wrong people. So even Tarentule has times when it doesn’t yield anything...*

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be of more help.”

I shook my head. “No, I just made a mistake. Hmm... But without this, I have no leads.”

“Leads, you say? I wonder what there could be?”

“Hmm...”

“I wonder too.”

Seeing me cradle my head in my hands, the goddesses thought hard as well. Though the four of us contemplated like that for a while, the only thing we could come up with were sighs.

Ah, well. I’ll have to give up on gathering intel here. “My apologies for dropping in so suddenly and causing trouble for you all. Thank you very much for your time.” I would impede their work if I prolonged my stay, so I swiftly bid them farewell and stood from the chair. Next time, I’d be sure to make an appointment first.

“You didn’t cause any trouble. Don’t worry about it.”

“Let’s have a nice, slow chat next time!”

The goddesses saw me off, and we headed toward the exit. Same as when I entered, we left through the back exit and walked along the staff hallway where customers couldn’t enter.

“We’re sorry we couldn’t be of help to you when you came all this way.”

“No, please don’t stress over it.”

A servant girl holding a broom bowed and made way for me. Glancing at her, Olga spoke as if she were just remembering something. “Ah, that’s right. I’ll tell you something as a gift.”

“Yes?”

“One of the princesses is getting married soon, right? Aren’t you good friends with her?”

“You mean Princess Henriette?” My reaction was a bit delayed, as I’d been blindsided by the unrelated topic. Why bring up Her Highness now?

“Yes, the princess, the youngest in the royal family. The prince of Lavia seems to be working very hard right now.”

“Prince Liberto?” The truly blackhearted prince’s unmatched beauty played in my mind. He was the next heir of the Grand Duchy of Lavia. He always seemed to be hard at work, but if Olga was bringing him up here, then it must not have been about money. “What about him?”

“He’s spring cleaning. He wants to make everything around him tidy.”

“Spring cleaning?” I flicked my eyes toward the girl with the broom. The unwanted attention made her panic, probably causing her to think she’d done something to upset us. Isabella called out to her to let her know it was nothing.

“He’s putting in the utmost effort to take care of the filth that’s entered indentureship. It seems like it’s going to become a very big deal.”

“Huh...” *H-Hmm? What is she talking about?*

I knew she didn’t mean the exact words she was saying, but the image of the prince with a scarf around his head carrying a dustcloth crossed my mind. *Oh, that actually rather suits him.* After all, I’d previously seen him covered in soot. Though the one who’d dropped it on his head had been my cat.

“He’s going to have to be very careful if he doesn’t want the dust to fall onto Her Highness the Princess.”

“Is it really all right for you to be telling me this...?”

Something was suspicious about this line of conversation. If the topic was “cleaning,” then it most likely concerned political enemies, did it not? Was the Easdale faction up to something again? I was worried that gossiping about something like this would break some sort of law.

Olga gave me a sweet smile. “It doesn’t appear to be a big secret, so it seems to be okay to talk about. We’re residents of Lagrange too. We have a right to be

worried for Her Highness.”

Ah yes, of course. But...that seems to be a front for something. This conversation didn't seem to be coming from a place of camaraderie with the royal family, but rather from their friendship with me. They weren't saying this for Princess Henriette, but for *me*, who was close to her.

Even if this wasn't illegal, it certainly wouldn't be looked well upon. Regardless, I was still thankful they told me. I said my thanks again, and we parted ways. I soon headed outside.

Spring cleaning... Prince Liberto's spring cleaning... Agh, I can't stop imagining him with a housewife's scarf over his head!

Perhaps I'd learn something by consulting with Lord Simeon. *Or perhaps I should pay a visit to the royal castle to see Her Highness?* The princess had apparently been exchanging regular letters with Prince Liberto, so she might have heard something. Not that it was a topic I could speak on. I was sure that His Majesty the King and His Highness the Crown Prince knew something of it already. The only thing I could do was listen to Princess Henriette if she was worried about anything.

My own problems came first, anyhow. I'd done what I could, so all that was left was to wait for the results.

It was late in the day; the sun was sinking, but there was still light in the sky. Looking at the clock, I saw that it wasn't time for me to hurry home just yet. I decided to stop by the department store and end the day there. I'd come all the way to town, so on the way home, I thought I might as well buy some of those sweets I'd been hearing about.

I looked for a fiacre. *I'd say I did a darn good job today!* I'd walked all over the place, so my feet hurt.

The store I arrived at was as crowded as usual. I powered through the crowds to finish up my shopping. Calling on the dregs of my energy, I trudged along, carrying a mountain of sweets, and hobbled back into House Flaubert.

Chapter Five

The next morning when I awoke, I got myself ready in a big hurry and grabbed the morning newspaper as soon as it was delivered to my room. It had just been pressed with an iron to allow the ink to dry, so it was still a bit warm.

“Ah, it’s in here!” I opened it up to find the article in question. The response letter from Mr. Satie had been published.

“What does it say?” Despite his usual disinterest in papers aimed at the masses, Lord Simeon peered over my shoulder while buttoning his uniform.

“Just what you’d expect. He says we’d like to verify the claim first.”

Mr. Satie hadn’t written an emotional response, but a calm one. He’d very politely stated that we did not believe that there was any proof to be had, so of course Agnès denied the allegations, but we also admitted that verification was needed first. If there did happen to be an issue, we planned to take the appropriate actions, including apologizing. To that end, we would like to properly verify which part of which novel resembled the journal. If the author of the submission could provide us with such, then we promised to take the appropriate measures and have a third party as witness. The response ended with a request for the sender to please contact either Satie Publishing or the La Môme Newspaper Company.

“Perfect,” said Lord Simeon. “Much more respectable than what was written in yesterday’s edition.”

“Indeed. If nothing else, with this, Satie Publishing won’t face any more backlash.”

We nodded at each other. As expected of Mr. Satie, he was able to write something that was easy-to-understand and would readily satisfy the readers. Nothing extraneous, merely nice and succinct.

“I can only hope that we’ll get a response,” I said.

“Even if there isn’t one, this will have been nothing more than mere slander.

He was able to say as much, so the public should be satisfied.”

Agreeing with Lord Simeon, I ran my eyes over the personal advertisement column. The message I’d requested yesterday had been published as well.

“To you with the white envelope. Regarding your parting gift and our documents, I would like to hold a consultation. I’ll be waiting for your contact ASAP. From A.”

I’d been conflicted about what exactly to write, and this was how it’d turned out. If only I’d been allowed to see the letter as it had been sent, I could’ve at least discerned whether the writer was a man or woman and what their status was. Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten to see it, so I’d only been able to muster this ambiguous callout.

I’d mentioned a “white envelope” because I didn’t have their name, as well as a “parting gift” in reference to their initial letter. And, after signing the message with A for Agnès, those who knew of this case should’ve been able to figure it out.

The question was whether or not the sender would see this ad. My only option was to bet on it, but for some reason, I felt like they would.

If their only goal was to put me down, then I was sure they would fabricate some sort of evidence. They’d gone as far as trying to damage my reputation by sending their letter to a newspaper. Had I been in their position, I would’ve written something that would’ve more directly altered the public’s perception of Agnès.

The letter had been written too well to assume that the writer hadn’t thought that far ahead. They’d only left out important information, but the writing itself had been well-done. They’d left a bit too much of an inconsistent impression if they wanted me to think that they weren’t intelligent.

There were several possibilities. For one, they would create a scenario that Agnès could not ignore and anticipate a chance to make contact with her. In other words, their goal was to pull out an anonymous author. Lord Simeon’s point that the letter was entirely fabricated might have been right as well. Someone who wasn’t a reporter might have been trying to trap me. In that case, they would be waiting for Agnès’s direct response, not the official opinion

from the publisher. And as such, I would think that they'd take a look at the personal advertisement column if they wanted contact from a person whose name and location were unknown to them.

Now, let's see how this will turn out.

Even if I missed the mark and didn't receive a response at all, the situation wasn't terribly dire. My only option was to sit and wait patiently.

Oh, no! I almost forgot. I wonder where it's hiding today?

"Oh, what about today's gift?!" I set the newspaper down and scanned my surroundings. "Let's see... Ah! A cute bonbonnière! This wasn't here yesterday, was it?"

I raised my voice when I saw the small ceramic candy pot. My husband, having just been about to leave the room, turned around and chuckled.

My expectations were met. The next day, a response was published in *La Môme*.

"To A. I also have things I would like to discuss with you. If you would like to answer them, then please throw flowers off of Philippe Bridge at noon today. From D."

What should I do...? This is starting to get a little exciting!

Not only were we secretly communicating through a newspaper, but throwing flowers as a symbol was exciting too, was it not?!

I knew this wasn't the time to be having fun, but I couldn't stop my feelings from bubbling up.

"Luckily, I didn't have any plans for today. Why don't I do as they say?"

I put the newspaper down and pumped my fist. It was very motivating to think that I was getting closer to the answers of who this person was and what their goal was.

All right, let's do this!

"Going somewhere?"

A voice came from behind me. Lord Simeon had emerged from the bedroom looking a little sleepy. He had a light gown over his nightclothes, meaning he'd only just awakened.

"Good morning." I flashed a smile at him. "You seem to have woken up much later than usual today. Shouldn't you be hurrying to leave right about now?"

"I don't have work today," he yawned.

"Huh? Really?"

I tilted my head as Lord Simeon took the paper from my hands. He flapped it open and scanned it. He ended up sighing, a bit exasperated, assumedly having seen the personal ad column.

"And you're going to engage with this suspicious callout?" he asked.

"It seems like things will progress this way! I don't have a choice but to go."

There was no response to Mr. Satie's announcement. As I'd presumed, this person wanted contact with Agnès directly.

"I won't go alone, of course. I'll take Joanna... No, wait. A man would be better, right? I'll have Joseph or Remy accompany me."

My husband's handsome face instantly fell at the mention of our driver's and servant's names. "Why would you rely on someone else when *I'm* here?"

"Huh? Didn't you take the day off so suddenly because you had business to attend to?"

That question only served to further worsen his mood. When Lord Simeon was angry, his pressure was that of a frozen blizzard, a scorching flame, or reverberating thunder, but I didn't sense anything of that sort at the moment. He wasn't frightening in the least, so I knew he was merely displeased. I found it rather cute, but also a bit bothersome. *This expression is more pouty than angry, yes? Is it my fault...?*

Hmm?

"Naturally, I'd feel supremely secure and reassured if you were there, Lord Simeon, but I'd feel guilty about interrupting your business. The arranged time is noon. Would that work for you?"

“It doesn’t matter what time it’s scheduled for. I took today off because I figured something like this would happen.”

“Huh?”

“As soon as I saw your callout in that column, I knew things were going to get even more hectic. I have a meeting tomorrow, so I can only be with you today, but that makes it more convenient that this person made noon their designated time.”

He went off to go change after making it clear that this was no problem for him. I was left behind, a bit confused.

Hmm... Should I say I hit the bull’s-eye? He was saying I’d caused enough trouble for him to predict something like this happening. *B-But it’s not like I’m at fault here! Right?*

So *that* was why he’d come home late yesterday. He’d already taken off work for our upcoming trip, but he took another sudden day off, which undoubtedly affected his duties. He had trainings and meetings during the day, so paperwork would have to come afterward. That wouldn’t be a problem normally, but he’d have no choice but to do it during overtime if he needed to take an unexpected holiday. He’d probably taken care of today’s work the night before.

“My lady? Is something the matter?”

The maid who brought my breakfast looked rather worried. My demeanor seemed to make her think that I wasn’t feeling well.

“I’m fine, it’s nothing.”

I laughed it off and sent her on her way. There was nothing wrong with me physically, of course. I was just trying to push down my feelings of excitement.

“Marielle?” Lord Simeon had returned. “You should’ve already eaten. What’s the matter? You don’t look well all of a sudden.”

“I’m sorry...” I apologized as he sat down.

“What for?”

“I didn’t mean to impose on you. My thought process was too shallow, wasn’t it?”

Though I didn't feel like I was in any particular danger, I'd thought bringing along a man for safety would be good enough. But that would worry Lord Simeon, wouldn't it? It was only natural for him to want to come along.

"I didn't mean to make you apologize for it." My drooping shoulders made him take on a worried expression. "You'll make me feel bad for taking a day off out of the blue if you look like that."

"But you did it for my sake. I'm terribly sorry for forcing you to do this."

"I really did not mean to make you apologize... I thought you'd be happy about it."

I lifted my head and raised my eyebrows. Conflict and slight despondency colored his gaze, and he turned his face away from me.

Did my apology disappoint him even further?! He wanted me to be happy about this? I am, you know! We get to be together all day, and more importantly, you were thinking of me!

I just felt a certain way that he forced himself to adjust to me. I couldn't be happy when I was the only one benefiting from this arrangement. *Isn't that right?*

An awkward silence befell us. Neither of us could find words to follow up with, so we ate our meal in silence.

We weren't fighting, so why was the atmosphere so unpleasant? Lord Simeon didn't seem to be in a foul mood. He seemed uneasy and unable to speak.

Our breakfast was light, so we finished it quickly. I reached out to drink the postmeal tea and noticed yesterday's bonbonnière. *What a cute decorative candy holder.* It was small enough that it could've fit in your palm. Gold leaves and flowers lined its round contours. My hand moved to it.

Still partially recoiling from the awkwardness of breakfast, I opened the lid, wondering why the bonbonnière was on the table in the first place.

"Ah..."

Though nothing had been inside yesterday, today it was filled with what looked like stardust. *Isn't this...?*

“Confeito?”

They were balls of white and baby pink, tiny enough that you could squish them with your fingers. They felt like crystals with a lot of impurities. Minuscule spikes shot out in all directions from each of them, giving the impression that one had gathered real stardust. This candy certainly looked a lot like the variety called confeito.

Real confeito wasn't this transparent, however, and the “spikes” were more of an uneven surface on the candy. They looked more like a type of flower or fruit than stardust.

Just as I was beginning to wonder whether these were edible or decorations, Lord Simeon clarified. “These are apparently called ‘*konpeitou*’ where they’re produced.”

“Con-‘pei’-to?”

“It seems to be derived from confeito. The place where it was introduced developed a unique production method, and it took on this form. It’s a sugary confection from an eastern kingdom.”

“Oh my.”

Would that be considered reverse importation? I put one in my mouth to taste test it.

“*Mmgh...* It resembles rock candy. Oh, but it’s not so tough. It isn’t very sweet either. A very well-made product.”

The texture was different from confeito as well. I’d thought it was going to be hard, so I’d only lightly bit into it, but it disintegrated in my mouth. It appeared to be a bundle of sugar, and it had a softer taste than plain sugar. *I’m surely going to eat way too many before I know it. I’ll have to be careful.*

This would be today’s gift, yes? I glanced at Lord Simeon. I could tell from his fidgeting that I was right.

A cute snack packed into a cute container. I wondered which he’d found first? He must have either picked a sweet befitting the pot, or a pot to match the sweet.

This wonderful gift gave me an excuse to restore the conversation. The awkwardness from before melted away with the soft sweetness of the candy.

“Thank you very much. The candy is so adorable that I almost feel bad for eating it. I’ll savor every bite.”

My smile seemed to soften his expression. “You like them?”

“Yes, both the way the candy looks and the taste! Sweets from the eastern kingdoms are so delicate. The flowers you gave me before were also very cutely made. The craftsmen of those kingdoms must be very particular.”

“Indeed, there are many intricacies within their handicrafts. It must be their culture to prefer detailed objects.”

“I would like to go and see for myself what kind of places they are one day... Ah, that’s not a request, by the way!”

I panicked and heartily denied any implications. Lord Simeon let out a small chuckle. “Those kingdoms are very far away, so it won’t be an easy journey. But I do hope we get the chance one day.”

“Yes, very much so. Let’s travel the world once we’ve grown old and retired from our professions. Boats will surely have become quite powerful by then, so traveling will be easier.”

“Ha ha, are you all right with the plans being that far off in the future?”

“We’re both very busy at the moment. We don’t have time for trips that would take months.”

“That’s true. Then we’ll save world travel for later on and settle for local trips for now.”

“We won’t be ‘settling’! I’m so excited for those that I can’t wait!”

Lord Simeon smiled at my energy. *I see—this is it. My husband just doesn’t want me to be downtrodden, or give in, or look like I’m not having fun. I have to let him know that I’m genuinely happy when he does things for me.* Naturally, I wouldn’t force him to do anything, and I knew I shouldn’t assume he would always go along with my antics. But he’d gone out of his way to take time off for me, so instead of complaining, I should just be grateful and pay him back with

something else.

“All right! In order for us to enjoy our trips with no regrets, we’ll have to solve the problems at hand! Let’s get ready to make it in time for noon. Lord Simeon, even if the culprit appears at the scene, you mustn’t jump out and attack them. We have to listen to what they have to say first.”

“Please don’t make me out to be some violent person.”

“Then what were you planning to do, hm?”

“I wasn’t planning anything. I was just going to apprehend them as appropriate.”

“Are you sure you know what ‘appropriate’ means?”

We got ourselves ready as we engaged in our usual banter.

I say “ready,” but Lord Simeon didn’t own any clothes that could allow him to blend in as a commoner. Frankly, he wouldn’t blend in well even if he borrowed some. It was pointless to ask him to wear a disguise when he couldn’t be seen as a commoner no matter what.

In the end, we decided to have me adjust to him. I wore a dress that wouldn’t look unbefitting of his status, and tied my hair back into a small bonnet. A parasol with fringe would prevent anyone from seeing my face unless they came too close. Joanna put this outfit together just as I’d directed.

Checking my ensemble in the mirror, I nodded to approve.

At first glance, I was refined, but there was nothing readily identifiable about me. You could find a woman who looked like this anywhere in Sans-Terre. One’s eyesight would be drawn straight to the dress and accessories, so my face wouldn’t leave an impression at all. *Parfait!*

Lord Simeon had a hat on to cover his blond hair, as it was prone to standing out, though I had my reservations about how much of an effect this would have. *He just oozes a specific aura.*

We soon climbed into a carriage and set off toward the heart of Sans-Terre. Because we had some extra time, I requested a slight detour. We soon arrived at a large bookstore.

“Are you going to buy something?”

“Yes, and I want to have a look around.”

I headed straight for the bookshelf I was aiming for. This store in particular had a comparatively large selection of books aimed at women, and as an enthusiast of the genre, I was here quite often.

However, I did have another motive for checking this place.

My heart raced as I sifted through the spines on the shelf. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness. They’re still there.”

I’d spotted my books on the shelf. I’d wanted to ensure that they hadn’t been removed.

“They wouldn’t stop selling them just because of that one article,” Lord Simeon reasoned.

“That’s what I would hope, but it’s up to the individual stores.”

People could say that stores shouldn’t sell plagiarized books, which is what I was worried about.

“I feel like they would continue selling them, since they’d be a hot topic.” Lord Simeon shrugged.

“That’s also a possibility. I wouldn’t be happy if that were the reason they were selling, though.”

I picked up one of the new catalogs from a pile on the bottom of the shelf. I decided to look for new books by checking the authors’ names and summaries.

Two women walked by. They looked young, so they must have been a pair of friends here to shop. They each picked up one of the volumes from the bottom.

One of them looked at the books on the shelves and spoke to her friend. “Oh, hey. Look at this. Which book do you think it is?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The book that Vivier apparently plagiarized. I wonder which one it is.”

Just as I was about to leave the area, my legs froze in place.

“Oh, that. Did she really do that?”

The friend looked halfway doubtful, but the woman herself seemed to believe it wholeheartedly. “The accuser said the contents were so similar that it couldn’t be a coincidence.”

“But they didn’t give any proof, and the publisher denied it.”

“Then why would they accuse her in the first place? They couldn’t have just come up with that out of thin air.”

“I guess.”

My hand holding the books started to shake. I’d finally gotten some relief, but it’d been quickly erased by a heavy weight.

“It’s too bad. I really liked her stories. It’s so disappointing to find out that they were actually plagiarized. I feel betrayed.”

I had to look down at my feet upon hearing these unwanted words. There was nothing more fortunate than an author having their works become a hot topic, but this wasn’t the scenario I’d wanted to encounter.

“Let’s go.” Lord Simeon put an arm around my shoulder and motioned for me to move. The two women reacted to hearing a voice and noticed that an unbelievably beautiful man was right nearby. Their eyes widened into round circles.

I staggered to the checkout counter, led by Lord Simeon.

“You don’t need to worry about this. You haven’t done anything wrong, so stand proud.”

“It’s not that I think I’ve done something wrong. I’m just sad that people are misunderstanding.”

“Hmm...” Lord Simeon’s voice deepened. “Let’s make the culprit regret being born.” A blue flame glimmered in his irises.

No, no, you don’t have to go that far! Though I am angry as well. Depending on the situation, I’d like to give them a good smack, but not kill them. I’d be the

one called the culprit in that case.

“I won’t kill them.” He smiled warmly at my discomfort. “I wouldn’t let them go with such a light punishment.”

Then what in the world are you going to do?!

I knew he was being serious, which was the problem. *Please stay peaceful... But that face—it’s very much like that of a brutal, blackhearted military officer! Ah, I can’t handle how wonderful my Demon Vice Captain is!*

As I was busy in the throes of my fangirling, my husband put a stop to my frenzy.

Riding that wave, we left the bookstore. Once again, we swayed in the carriage as it rolled down the streets, and we arrived at Philippe Bridge just before noon.

We told the carriage to wait for us a little ways away. I’d bought a bouquet at a flower shop, and I held it close as I parted with Lord Simeon in front of the bridge.

“Then, just as we planned.”

We could potentially cause our target unnecessary unrest if we went together right from the start. I needed them to approach me, so I asked Lord Simeon to watch from afar for the time being.

“Please be careful,” he warned. “Call me if anything happens.”

I nodded. “I will.”

This “D” person might well have already been watching us. I went to the bridge first, and Lord Simeon followed shortly after. He stayed near the streetlamp on the pedestrian walkway nearby.

Carriages passed through the center of the bridge, and there were pedestrian paths on either side of it. Many bridges crossed the Latour River, which flowed through the middle of Sans-Terre, but Phillip Bridge went south down to the upper-class residential area. That was why there were so many well-dressed people around. I blended in without issue.

A year prior, we’d been invited to a certain duke’s villa as part of the chaos

before our wedding, and we'd crossed this bridge on the way home. We had also happened upon this place during another incident, so I didn't really have good memories of it.

As I loftily walked along the sidewalk, I arrived at the center of the wide river. I opened up the light-up pocket watch that Lord Simeon had lent me to check the time. *Just a bit before noon. I wonder where this D person is...? Are they one of the people walking around me? Or are they on one of the boats passing underneath?*

I waited for the hand of the clock to move as I gulped down my impulse to scan the area. On my pocket watch, the two hands overlapped at the top of the face. Noon had come. I could hear the bells from a clock tower.

It's time.

I threw the bouquet in my hands into the river with a flashy movement so that everyone around me would notice.

The wind changed the course of it ever so slightly on its way down to the surface of the water. I watched it flow all the way under the bridge until it wasn't visible anymore.

Now, will D approach me first? Or will they give me another instruction in the paper? Just show yourself already!

Just as that thought crossed my mind, a person stopped next to me. I angled my parasol, turned to face them, and saw a well-dressed, middle-aged man gazing at me.

"Do you need something?" I was somewhat annoyed that he wasn't saying anything.

"I'm D. Are you Miss A?" His dark irises were wary. They seemed to pry into me as he spoke. *Thank goodness. It seems we won't have to use another roundabout way of contacting one another.*

"Yes, I'm A. The person you've made heinous accusations against."

His hard expression instantly cracked. "Ah... Ah, thank you so much! Thank you so, so much for answering my uncouth request! I'm truly grateful!"



He removed his hat and bowed low—lower than I would've expected—thanking me over and over again. All I could do was stare back, feeling conflicted.

He looked to be around forty, with a medium build. His brown hair, lighter than his eyes, was cut short. Frankly, his averageness rivaled even my own. He wasn't handsome or ugly, and he might have even been popular with the ladies when he was young. His accessories, including his hat and cane, were of high quality, and one could tell that his clothes had just been pressed. Everything he wore was first-rate, and his style wasn't odd for a noble.

He looked quite intelligent, but I couldn't tell what his exact class was. Perhaps he was a noble, though I wouldn't have been surprised if someone told me that he was an affluent commoner. Strange, because I could usually tell by someone's demeanor. Though he looked normal at first glance, the longer I observed him, the more my impression of him started to blur.

Hmm? Why is this happening?

"I'm so glad you're here." His voice had a sparse yet deep quality to it. "You're famous for never showing your face. I was so worried that you wouldn't come to meet me."

"I wonder... Which one of us created a situation that forced me to come out here? Don't you have something to say to me first?"

I was still entirely suspicious of him, but he looked relieved and delighted that I was here. He gasped at my stern tone and bowed his head again. "R-Right, I'm terribly sorry."

"If you're apologizing, then that means the letter you sent to *La Môme* really was a lie. You only wrote it to pull me out."

"Yes, that's right. The only thing I can do about that is apologize. I'm very, very sorry for causing you so much trouble."

"This situation goes beyond mere 'trouble.' You damaged my reputation, and it will affect my work from here on out. It could even affect my clients and lead to huge losses down the line. Do you really think an apology is enough to make up for that?"

The conversation I'd overheard at the bookstore still rang in my ears. Many other people probably believed the letter too. Even if there wasn't any evidence to back it up, and even if Mr. Satie denied it all, bad rumors could never truly be dispelled.

I would've been able to forgive this person if he'd really been mistaken and had actually thought I'd plagiarized. But that wasn't the case—he'd flat out admitted to lying and intentionally hurt my reputation for his own gain.

I'll never forgive him. Saying he merely caused me "trouble" is insufficient.

I could see a figure creeping closer to us. I was going to have Lord Simeon come running if this man flew into some sort of rage, but for now, D just continued to bow low.

My attention shifted to what he was saying. "You have every right to be angry. I will do everything I can to make up for it. I'll write an apology letter, or anything else you'd like me to do, in order to rebuild your reputation."

"If you're going to go that far, then I wish you hadn't done such a thing in the first place."

"You're exactly right... But I was at my wit's end trying to contact you. You're like an illusion that only exists within your pen name."

"Couldn't you have just contacted my publisher?"

"I did, naturally, but they declined, saying they couldn't reveal anything about their authors. The same went for the reception at *Chersie*. They said they'd take a memo for me, but unfortunately, what I have to say is something that shouldn't be heard by anyone else."

I sighed. If he was telling the truth, then he'd most likely only told my publishers he wanted to meet with me. I doubt he'd disclosed anything else. No wonder he'd been rejected—they'd probably thought he was a reporter trying to unveil my identity.

That being said, that suspicion was still valid. The possibility that this man was a reporter remained. My intuition was telling me otherwise, but I had to stay on guard.

Lord Simeon had gotten quite close by this point, and his gaze was asking me a million questions. I shook my head and gestured discreetly that he should remain on standby. I didn't seem to be in danger, so it was best to not let D know about Lord Simeon's presence for now.

As long as I was by myself, the only thing this man could glean about me was that I was a young noblewoman who wore glasses. I didn't have any features that stood out enough to be particularly identifying to someone who would only meet me once.

"First, I'd like to ask you why you wanted to contact me so badly," I said. "After that will come your name, occupation, and everything else."

"I understand... Let us go sit and relax over there." D pointed at the walkway on the opposite side of the bridge. He was right that it would be hard to relax with people and carriages constantly going by. We would also garner attention if we stood here the whole time.

So, I walked with D to the southern shore of the river. Lord Simeon carefully followed us. After crossing the bridge, we sat side by side on an empty bench. We restarted our conversation as we faced the water, which was sparkling under the afternoon sunlight.

"I've gathered up quite the list of things to apologize to you for, but I cannot reveal my identity to you for certain reasons. Please find a way to forgive me for concealing it."

I couldn't help but be enraged at him opening with a refusal. "What gall you have! How can you say that after claiming you would make up for your wrongdoings?"

"This is not only a personal issue. It extends to my family's honor as well. However, I was not lying when I said I wanted to make it up to you. I'll be sure to write an apology letter to *La Môme* and assert that the original letter was not the truth."

"Fine then. Go ahead and explain why you wanted to meet with me."

He doused my reputation in mud yet wants to avoid the same fate for his family? He was trying to act humble, but everything that came out of his mouth

was selfish. Even if he wrote an apology letter, no one would know that it was written by the same person because he would still omit his name. The public might even think that I forged it myself. As if I'd be satisfied with a promise like that!

I put the full force of my effort into not arguing with him. Instead, I pretended like I was interested in hearing him out. I wouldn't get anywhere if I only complained the whole time. The best course of action was to assume the guise of a young woman who could be easily sweet-talked and get the full story out of D.

"Of course. Agh, how should I start...? The beginning, I suppose. It was in something you wrote—the short story featured in a recent issue of *Chersie*. I need to ask you about the brooch you mentioned in it."

"Excuse me?"

Up until that point, he had clearly been hiding something, but he suddenly looked straight at me with determination burning in his eyes. He'd said something completely out of left field in a tone that could've made a passerby wonder whether he was proposing to me.

"A brooch?" I pressed.

"You wrote about one in one of your stories, yes? A small, enamel pin brooch decorated with violets."

"Er, yes. I do believe I did."

"The description was so detailed. I could vividly imagine its color, form, and size."

Where is he going with this? I couldn't at all follow his train of thought.

"To write about it in such detail, you must have had access to that object, yes? You have it, don't you? The enamel brooch!" D leaned in close out of the blue. I felt pushed backward. "Where is it? Do you still have it? You do, don't you? Please tell me you do!"

"W-W-W-Wait, please! Calm down! First, get away from me!" I made him sit back as I panicked and fervently shook my head at Lord Simeon behind us. *You*

don't have to come over yet! I'm not being attacked! You're on standby right now! Standby!

I did what I could to stop Lord Simeon from rushing toward me, and I signaled for him to move even farther away. The way Lord Simeon was positioned would make D scream if he dared turn around. *I haven't gotten any information out of him yet, so please go back to being a passerby! Go! Go back!*

Lord Simeon froze in his tracks, a highly displeased expression on his face, and slunk backward. I sighed, exasperated, and D apologized again. "Ah, I'm so sorry. I couldn't help it—please excuse me."

"To put it simply, you're searching for that brooch, correct? You discovered that I'm in possession of it from reading that story, and that is why you contacted me."

He nodded. "Yes, that's exactly right. Or, rather, I'm searching for an earring."

I couldn't stop myself from sounding annoyed. "Which is it?"

D repositioned himself in his seat to explain. "I once owned a single earring that originally belonged to my mother. She passed away last month, so most of her belongings were handed down to my nephew, who's still a child. They didn't go to me because I ran away from home long ago and only recently returned. I only barely made it in time for my mother's passing. My father, younger brother, and his wife have all already passed, so my nephew became the heir. And because I've now returned, they've made me his legal guardian."

I stayed silent. So everything that should have gone to D, the eldest, had been given to his nephew. I couldn't tell how he felt about that from his facial expression.

He shook his head. "I was the one who ran away, so there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not so vicious that I would steal away my nephew's inheritance. However, even for a son like I, my mother left behind certain assets in my name. The land I inherited has a yearly income of seventy thousand algers. They didn't use that money for anything, so it accumulated over the years. Now, it's a sum of over a million."

"That's an incredible amount."

“It is. And it will keep accumulating from here as long as nothing happens. It’s much more than I’m capable of accepting, though I didn’t bother contesting anything regarding the inheritance. However, after mother passed, an issue arose, and I had to take care of the paperwork.”

And how exactly does this connect to the brooch? I persevered through my impatience and continued to listen. This was probably a necessary explanation. It seemed he wasn’t merely searching for his mother’s parting gift.

The afternoon was pleasant—perfect for having a chat on a bench. The sunlight was warm, and there wasn’t much of a breeze. A compact steamboat for carrying cargo to the port floated by us on the river. The sidewalk in front of us was filled with parents and their children, as well as lovers. They were all enjoying a nice, quiet stroll along the river’s edge. I also spotted a beautiful man standing alone in the shadow of a tree, staring at me with eyes full of suspicion.

“In order for me to receive my inheritance, I have to go to the trustee and put it under my name. I need the earring for that. When I ran away from home after having a huge fight with my father, my mother gave it to me. She took one of the pair off and pushed it into my hand, saying that I should take it to the trustee upon her death.”

“As proof of your ownership?”

“Yes. She said she would give hers to the trustee and that I should do my best not to lose mine no matter what. I was still a naive, hot-blooded teenager back then, so I didn’t care about assets and whatnot. I only learned the value of money as I aged.”

“I see.”

“I did things like pretend to be a merchant overseas, but I didn’t end up with anything to show for it, and I returned home empty-handed. By some twist of fate, I saw an advertisement for a missing person put out by my butler. It said that my mother wanted to meet with me and requested that I return home quickly. The advertisement seemed lifesaving to me, and I went home. That was about two months ago.”

“Were you able to spend some time with your mother?”

“I was indeed. She’d grown very weak by then and couldn’t see well, but she was happy I was home. Though I was a terrible son, I was glad to be able to ease her heart in the end. She didn’t just want to see me, though. Her most pressing concern was that she was worried for her grandson, my nephew, who was going to lose his guardian at the tender age of eight.”

I nodded. I was following so far.

“I’m sure you’ve guessed,” D said, “but we’re an extremely wealthy family. If the one to inherit the house is an eight-year-old child, unruly fellows are sure to come swarming.”

“Your relatives?”

“Many of them have been pushing their way into my home. I’ve heard of quite a few of these people, but some I haven’t. I’m glad I returned; without me here, they would have sent my nephew off to some monastery or, at best, a boarding institution of some sort. Be that as it may, I haven’t been a true member of the family for over twenty years. There was some quarrel over me becoming his guardian, but I’ve managed to fend everyone off thus far.”

I glanced at the side of D’s face and saw nothing I could doubt. He really seemed to be recounting true events, so I would believe him for now. As I listened to his story, I could infer where it was going to end.

He lowered his voice. “I was able to protect my nephew and his assets, but there are some among our relatives who have sticky fingers.” D turned to me again with a face split between shock and admiration.

“So they took things from your house without permission?”

“Yes. They were crafty, after all. Not just one or two of them either. Several people stole things. Pots, frames, and even carpets, unfortunately. I have no idea how they were able to carry those out. At least for those objects, I can give up on getting them back. But I *have* to get mother’s jewelry box back, no matter what.”

“Because the earring is in it?”

“Correct. When I returned home, I gave my earring back to my mother. She put it in that box right in front of me and told me I could do what I wanted with

the contents. But even after she died, I didn't want to do anything with her jewelry, and I didn't have time, so I just left the box in her room. That's when my relatives stole it. The quieter ones took the chance while I was dealing with the louder ones."

It was a sad story, but unfortunately, this type of thing wasn't unheard of. Not all upper-class people were sensible and classy. It was common for relatives of affluent families to push their way in, aiming for assets and stealing household goods. Poor fellows steal because they don't have money, but some among the rich steal as well. There's no limit to human greed.

"Thankfully, I was able to pinpoint the culprit and get the box back, but the earring was missing. When I pressed them, they claimed to have given it to the servant they'd ordered to steal the box. As compensation, of course. They probably thought it was fine to give away that earring since it was without its mate."

"To give them a single earring as a reward after forcing them to commit a crime..." I murmured. "It's obvious that they're problematic just from the stealing, but that elevates their crime."

"It's because their parents are stubborn. The children end up not being raised correctly. The servant became upset with their frugal master and took the earring to a shop to exchange it for money."

"That's where it was altered into a brooch and came into my hands, I take it?"

And the story finally returns to the starting point. That was so long...

The brooch had been one of Lord Simeon's daily gifts to me, and there were signs that someone had altered it. *So it was an earring before. Now that you mention it, the brooch is indeed the right size for an earring.*

The shopkeeper had probably put it on display as one of their newly finished pieces, which is how Lord Simeon had chosen it as a gift for me. It had violets on it, which were my favorite—that must have attracted his eye.

"I hurried to the shop, but was told it had just been sold," D muttered. "I haven't had any clues as to its whereabouts since. But just as I was getting frustrated about being in the dark, my butler brought the newspaper to me,

saying that there was a description of the earring written in it. Your story. Can you imagine how elated I was? It was a brooch in the story, but it *has* to be the same earring. I told the newspaper publisher that you had bought it, and you know the rest. No one was able to introduce you to me, so I was at another standstill.”

“I think they would have if you’d explained your circumstances.”

“As if I could speak of my household shame to publishers and newspapers! There’s no telling what kind of articles would spread with such information. I’m a man who ran away from his family and lived a boring life for many years. I can’t boast about anything now, but I at least want to protect my family’s honor. I don’t want my nephew to become a laughingstock. He’ll have to carry the weight of it when he’s older.”

“So to protect your family’s honor, you damaged mine.”

D’s wave crashed at my icy voice. He seemed to have forgotten during his spiel that the person in front of him was the one he’d troubled. He apologized once more, looking like he’d only just remembered. “I-I’m so sorry... You’re absolutely right... The only thing I can do is bow my head and make up for it.”

“I don’t need empty promises. Please prove yourself with your actions. And as you promised previously, admit to your letter being false and apologize to the public. Then pay me a hundred thousand algers in damages.”

“A-A hundred thousand?” He gulped at my sharp response. Even his seemingly kind, apologetic face couldn’t make me wince. His dark eyes told of his shock. He’d probably underestimated me because I was a quiet-looking young woman. *Did you think I was going to concede just because you explained your reasons? Sorry to say, but things won’t go that simply.*

I continued on, adamant. “I even lowered the amount for you. That sum shouldn’t be an issue for you at all.”

“Well...” D fidgeted. “You have every right to ask for damages. A hundred thousand isn’t unreasonable. But I’m not in possession of much money I can use at the moment. I can’t access my mother’s inheritance, so I can’t even pay you ten thousand, much less a hundred.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“The earring... I mean, the brooch. I would like to buy it from you and then pay you the damages after I finish accepting the inheritance. Would that be all right?”

I took a second to pretend to think, then nodded. “Understood. That will be fine.”

“Thank you very much!” His face took on a relieved appearance as he wiped sweat off of his forehead. I couldn’t tell if he was sweating because of the emotional effort or because it was quite hot.

I still didn’t fully believe him, and I hadn’t let down my guard, but I didn’t let those feelings show. “I don’t have the brooch right now, so let’s meet again tomorrow.”

“Er, might I be able to visit your home right now...?”

“No.”

He recoiled a bit at my flat response. *Why are you surprised? You won’t even tell me what your real name is. I could never take you to my home.* And even aside from that, there were too many untrustworthy statements in his story. I wanted to break from him and discuss it with Lord Simeon.

“Would the same time tomorrow be acceptable? We’ll meet here again, and after you check if my brooch is what you’re looking for, we’ll go to my publisher together. I would like Mr. Satie to approve of your apology letter.”

“Yes, I’ll do that. Tomorrow, then. I really am sorry about everything.”

After D agreed to my conditions, we both stood. He offered me a deep bow, then walked in the opposite direction back to the bridge. He paused on his way to the other bank, turned back to me, and removed his hat.

He then set off again, this time for good.

I still had my doubts about his story, but he seemed sincere about being apologetic—he’d kept up that front until the end. I didn’t feel that he was being contrite just to trick me. However, he was indeed lying. Whether it was to protect his family’s honor or for another reason, I didn’t know.

D was quickly lost in the crowd of people coming and going. When I could no longer see him, a tall person quietly came to stand next to me.

Chapter Six

Lord Simeon and I walked along the sidewalk as if we were enjoying a stroll. I quickly summarized D's tale. He seemed troubled. "In other words, the brooch I bought for you caused this."

"Yes. He took his time telling me a very emotionally charged story, but that's what it comes down to."

Lord Simeon stopped in his tracks. I had to stop too, as my hands were wrapped around his arm.

"Lord Simeon?"

"It's my fault..." He was mumbling to himself. His complexion was pale as he gazed upward. The light seemed to have left his eyes.

"Lord Simeon?"

"I brought calamity upon you..."

"Er..." *Well, I can't exactly argue with him on that.* "You didn't know this would happen, and neither did the shopkeeper. There was nothing anyone could do about it."

My words of comfort didn't seem to reach his ears. Lord Simeon looked like his knees would buckle at any moment. "If only I hadn't bought it... I knew I shouldn't have bought an object of unknown origin. Every person who sells objects with jewels in them has a dark side."

"That's a stereotype. It's rude to many people. There are all kinds of reasons people might give up their possessions. Sometimes, they've merely grown bored of them."

"I caused people to doubt your integrity," he lamented. "The one you should feel contemptuous of is me."

I scoffed. "That makes about as much sense as blaming a chicken for a tasteless quiche just because it laid the egg."

“I was trying to celebrate your twentieth birthday, but it turned out to be a curse. Like that witch who cursed people because she wasn’t invited. I’m the same.”

“Is the chicken the one pulling the pumpkin carriage now?!”

“That’s a different story.”

His face returned to its previous expression after our banter. So he *could* hear me. I reached up to smack his tall shoulder, hoping that the gesture might calm him down. “We were just unlucky. Please don’t worry about it. And this could actually be an interesting turn of events, depending on how you look at it. Perhaps it could be good reference material for me.”

“You’re still under suspicion of plagiarism, you know.”

“D promised he would write an apology letter, and I trust Mr. Satie to do the work. Things will be fine, trust me. The rumors may linger a while longer, but they’ll be forgotten in no time.” I told Lord Simeon these things, feeling like I was trying to remind myself as well.

The original letter didn’t disclose any specific information, and it was nothing more than a baseless claim. The most it could do was mild damage. It was just as Lord Simeon had told me before. Besides, since it had been published in a gossip rag, people would naturally doubt its validity. People who enjoyed my works would feel they were betrayed, like the woman at the bookstore had. But the readers who passionately supported me wouldn’t believe such a thing so easily. Or at least, that’s what I wanted to believe.

The reality was, I was still anxious about it, but I decided to stand proud. I hadn’t plagiarized anything. There was no truth to D’s letter, so there was no need for me to be afraid. The only thing I needed to focus on was doing my best to write more fun novels. If I continued to pen even more engaging stories, the readers would follow.

It’s all right. I won’t lose.

“You’re saying you could use this as a reference, but would a situation like this even work?”

“It very well might. Considering the parts D left out, he’s still hiding

information.”

I moved forward and pulled Lord Simeon with me. A butterfly fluttered in front of us, followed by a boy of about three years old who was chasing it. *Such a fast child! Surprisingly fast!*

The boy didn't seem to notice that the ground ended right in front of him, and he was dangerously close to the river's edge. Before I could stop the boy, Lord Simeon stooped to the ground and caught him. The child looked up in wonder, then his face twisted, as if he were about to cry. *It seems that three years old is too young to understand the charm of a brutal, blackhearted military officer.* Lord Simeon was visibly hurt by the shaking child.

The boy's mother ran over, teary-eyed for a different reason. *Being a mother must be so hard. Good work today, madam.* Lord Simeon watched the boy run back to his mother.

I continued with my analysis of the previous situation. “He intentionally didn't name himself, but his tale was more than enough to figure out his identity. ‘D’ stands for ‘Delmer.’ That man is most likely Eric Delmer.”

“Delmer? The baronage?”

As expected of Lord Simeon, he knew of them by name. If one was part of noble society, they were bound to have heard of that family, even if they'd never interacted with them directly.

He put his hand to his chin. “I did hear that the baroness passed away recently.”

“As did I. The husband and younger son's family had already died, so she was raising her young grandson by herself. It was talked about at the tea party as well. The eldest son finally returned after cutting off all contact for many years, but the madam didn't have much time left, and she passed away right after they reunited.”

“That matches with the man's story.”

“Perfectly, in fact.”

There was also the advertisement that his butler had put in the newspaper.

The names of both House Delmer and Eric had been written on it. That advertisement had actually been published in all of the major papers, so surely I wasn't the only person it'd left an impression on. That must have been why news of the eldest returning had spread.

"You know that House Delmer is wealthy, right, Lord Simeon? The eldest was eighteen when he ran away. That was about twenty years ago. He should be nearing forty by now."

"The man did look about that age." Lord Simeon nodded.

"The second son took over the baronage after his father passed away," I continued, "but both he and his wife died in a carriage accident. Their son was three at the time, like the boy from earlier. He became the baron at that age."

"Indeed, I remember hearing about that. So it's House Delmer..." Lord Simeon's sculpted side profile seemed satisfied. He glanced up, searching the empty sky for memories. "Then that man is the eldest who returned—Eric."

"That's how it should be, if, of course, that man was the real Eric."

Lord Simeon turned his light blue eyes back to me. I gave a small shrug. "D's tale was undoubtedly about House Delmer. But he never said the name himself. It's just a story that we can theorize about. We have no proof that he's actually Eric."

"You're right about that."

"There's still so many missing pieces. He wouldn't tell me his real name, but he told me his story in such detail. It's basically the same as revealing himself. He either thought I wasn't a noble, or he doesn't know about the nobles' grapevine."

Society wasn't a mere playground. It was a place to exchange information, put names to faces, and meet new people or potential marriage partners. People connected with each other, creating a complicated web. Acquaintances would tell each other about famous families, even if they'd never made contact with them directly. A person who really knew about noble society wouldn't tell such a story when trying to hide their identity.

"I'm dressed like this today, and I didn't change my speech or demeanor at all.

Do I not come across as a noble?" I could feel my confidence leaving me a little.

"No, as long as you don't go on and on about fangirling, you look like a perfectly acceptable noblewoman." Lord Simeon answered me with a serious face and an ambiguous response. *So I don't look like a noblewoman with that stipulation...* But I hadn't spoken of fangirl wiles today. I'd only sat quietly.

"He tried to pull me out of hiding with his fake letter," I mused, "but he kept bowing to apologize once he actually met me. It's admittedly noblelike of him to not care about some author's honor, but a person who was truly like that would still feel arrogant even after apologizing. It's things like that—they're all contradicting each other."

"Hmm."

"The longer I observed him, the more his way of speaking came apart—it became rougher and rougher. Would that be because he lived among commoners for many years after leaving noble life at a young age? I could understand that if he had left at an earlier age, but by eighteen, he should have learned the basics of etiquette. Was he not able to rid himself of the habits gained from living among commoners? Or is it that hard to return to a previous world once you've left it?"

I lined up all the things that had seemed out of place as I'd spoken to D. Lord Simeon seemed to know what I was trying to say, and he didn't have any rebuttals. He believed me.

"They're all little inconsistencies that could very well have explanations. But I trust my intuition: D is undoubtedly related to the Delmer family in some way, but he isn't Eric himself," I firmly declared.

Lord Simeon didn't argue. He looked to be in even deeper thought. "If so, then who is he? A stand-in for Eric? Perhaps a servant pretending to be the real thing?"

"I considered that as well, but I don't think that's right. He didn't feel like a servant, but that's just my personal observation. I could be wrong."

"No one can belittle your observations. We have close contact with those who work as servants, so if you don't think he is one, then he probably isn't. Which

would mean...that man slid into House Delmer pretending to be Eric. He's using every method he can to obtain the earring to prove his identity. Did he have contact with the real Eric? Was the man able to be so convincing because he heard the story directly from him?"

"But the baroness was still alive when Eric appeared. Eric would have looked different after twenty years, and her eyesight wasn't good anymore, but I don't believe a mother would mistake a stranger for her son."

"That depends on how he approached her, but my own mother would never mistake someone for me."

"From what I've heard, she dearly loved her grandson. She would have loved her own sons the same way."

"In other words, Eric himself is in House Delmer, and D is working with him?"

He and I looked at each other and sighed. We could come up with as many theories as we wanted, but we were missing the most crucial bits of information. We needed more.

It would be harder for us to head back if we strayed too far from the bridge, and our carriage was waiting for us at the shore, so we turned back the way we'd come.

A dog jumped in front of us this time, its leash flopping every which way, no human at the other end. After playing with us, it bounded toward the road, and Lord Simeon exhibited skilled reflexes. The dog's owner came running, huffing and puffing. They safely secured the dog and then went back to walking. People and animals alike were enjoying the spring afternoon. Even an empty walkway provided a pleasant experience.

"I can't get out of tomorrow's meeting no matter what, so I won't be able to accompany you. Please don't leave on your own," Lord Simeon implored.

"I won't."

"I'll research House Delmer on my end as well."

"Thank you very much. I have to be careful about returning the brooch—I do not want the baronage's inheritance to end up in the hands of a fraud. But I

suppose I'll have to return it eventually... It's unfortunate. I quite liked it." *Lord Simeon went out of his way to find it for me, after all.*

He responded with a bright voice out of nowhere. "Then why don't we go to Bijoux Carpentier now?"

"Huh? Now?"

We'd been walking slowly because we were talking, but Lord Simeon picked up his pace—at a speed I could keep up with, of course. We hurried to the bridge and the riverbank.

"We still have plenty of time. It would be a bore to head straight home. We'll shop at Bijoux Carpentier... No, let's have something designed and made for you. I'll give you something much better than a faulty brooch."

"You don't need to be so self-conscious about that! You've already given me so much."

Lord Simeon continued on despite my protests. "Something small, enameled, and decorated with pearls would be good. Why don't we throw in diamonds as well? Or would you prefer rubies and peridots, as they're cuter?"

"You're not listening!"

"The color of gold doesn't fade over time, but silver would serve as a better base for warding off curses."

"You really are worried about it! I like the simple feel of the brooch. I don't need anything fancy. And let's eat before we shop—I'm starving!"

I brought my husband, who was on the verge of a rampage, to a stop. The hand on the clock had drifted well past one, and we were both very hungry after all the excitement. Our driver probably was as well.

We left the glittering river behind, intent on eating a delicious lunch together.

The next day, I went to the same place with Joanna in tow.

"He doesn't seem to be here yet."

I sat down on the same bench past Philippe Bridge. Today, like yesterday,

there were many people enjoying nice walks along the sidewalk. D wasn't among them.

The clock indicated that there was only a bit more time until noon. He should have been here by now.

"He led my lady in circles at his leisure, and then he's late to his own meeting. What a bothersome man he is!" I'd explained most of the situation to Joanna, so she knew what kind of man he was. As such, her assessment of him was severe.

I tried to calm her down. "He's still not late yet."

"He should have come early! It's terribly rude of him to arrive barely on time."

"Something might have happened to him along the way. Let's relax and wait a little longer."

Having learned from yesterday, I'd gone ahead and brought my own lunch. Opening up the basket that our chef had provided me, I treated myself to a personal picnic. I'd told him not to prepare anything too fancy, but inside the basket were several types of pâté, cheeses, and strawberries in place of a salad, as well as a small bottle of wine. Joanna and I could both handle our alcohol, so this much wouldn't be enough to get us drunk. Lord Simeon, on the other hand, should never be allowed to put this to his lips. Especially, might I add, not while out in public. Though at home, I did wish he would drink as he pleased.

Our chef's special-made pâté was so delicious that I got lost in my meal for a good while. By the time I finished eating and was cleaning up the empty wine bottle and basket, D still hadn't appeared.

"He's a little *too* late at this point," Joanna huffed.

"Indeed." I was focused on the clock myself by then. The long hand was well past the bottom of the face and was climbing its way back up. I was anxious for him to show up already.

"Is it possible he had no intention of coming at all?"

"I doubt it," I said quietly as I glanced around. "I'm only here because he asked me to be. I'm not looking for anything in return. I haven't given him any

money or items, so the only thing I'm losing by being here is my time. *He's* the one who would be hindered by not showing up."

"But perhaps the whole story about the brooch, or earring, was all a lie, and he was just trying to uncover your identity." Joanna was whispering frantically in my ear.

I shook my head. That couldn't have been it. "Lord Simeon would have noticed if that man had followed me after we parted. There weren't any articles about me in today's paper either. Besides, the tale he told me hadn't come out of thin air—it was very obviously about House Delmer's situation."

Joanna appeared very confused at my words. "Maybe he gave up because he couldn't pay the damages, or he didn't want to..."

"I only included that part to gauge his reaction. I told him upfront that I would wait until he acquired his inheritance, and this year, he'll receive seventy thousand more algers on top of the million already in his possession. There's no way he would give up just because I asked for a hundred thousand."

"Then perhaps he wasn't pleased with this choice of time or place."

"I specifically designated the same time and place as yesterday. It's not such a complicated request that he could get it wrong."

We were both looking back and forth through the crowd, searching for anyone who could have been our man. Though there were a lot of people, no one was making a commotion anywhere, so we should have been able to spot D if he were nearby. He would arrive by either crossing the bridge or walking along the sidewalk, but Joanna and I couldn't find him no matter where we looked.

"Something unexpected must have happened to him. It would be all right if he were simply late, but there could be a situation that's preventing him from coming at all."

"What will you do in that case? You aren't going to wait until sundown, are you?"

"Hmm... If he isn't here by one, then let's go directly to the Delmer manor."

It was bothering me that I'd just been abandoned half-heartedly. But I did have my suspicions about his identity, so it should have been fine for me to approach him from my end.

We decided to wait just a bit longer for him. One o'clock passed without him showing up, so I steeled my resolve and stood up. "Let's return to the carriage. We're going to House Delmer."

"Yes, my lady!"

Joanna picked up the lunch basket and stood. We headed toward the bridge to get back to our carriage, which was waiting on the other bank.

We only made it a few steps out before someone called for us from behind.

"Wait... Please, wait... Mrs. Vivier!"

I spun around in shock at the strained yet familiar voice. It was D. He was stumbling toward us from the direction of the residential district.

There he is! I quickly noticed something was off. He appeared to be injured, as his gait was uneven, and he couldn't run. Though he was wobbling back and forth, I could tell he was doing his best to get to us as fast as possible. Looking closely, I saw that his clothes had been dirtied, and he wasn't wearing a hat, revealing his disheveled hair. The closer he came, the more dirt and blood I could see on his face. He was a little too beat-up to have merely fallen and scraped himself. *He looks like he's going to collapse any second now.*

And then he did. I grabbed my skirt and ran toward him. "D!"

I crouched down next to him and examined his face. It was even worse up close. There were large scratches on his cheeks, and blood was dripping down from his scalp. He'd clearly gone through something worse than a little fall.

He was still conscious, and he winced as he lifted his head to look up at me. "The earring... Did you...bring it...?"

"It's right here!" I halfway yelled, beginning to feel myself panic. "I have it, so please calm yourself. We need to treat your wounds first. Where else are you injured?!"

"Sh-Show it...to me..."

“Don’t move! Stay still. We’re going to take you to a doctor now!”

I turned to tell Joanna to call for the carriage. Suddenly, a sharp pain struck my wrist. I looked back down and saw D gripping it with all his might, either trying to steady himself or prevent me from leaving.

“Show it to me...” The expression on his face could only be described as ghastly. His bloodshot eyes were drilling into me. *What on earth happened to him to get him to this point?*

Overpowered, I gulped and used my other hand to pull the small case from my pouch, then opened it up in front of his eyes. His demeanor had me worried—would he die if I’d brought the wrong thing?—but his face lit up once he saw the brooch.

“Ah...!”

“Is this what you were looking for?”

He released my wrist. “Yes, this... This is it! Thank goodness...!”

Thin tears welled up in his eyes. All the tension left his stricken expression, and he flopped to lay on the ground, apparently exhausted from having to hold up his torso. He let out another hoarse whisper. “Thank you... Please take that to...Eric...”

His voice trailed off, and I couldn’t hear the last few words. He finally lost consciousness. Once his eyelids were closed, he stopped responding to my calls.

Joanna yelped. “D-Did he die?!”

“Don’t say something so ominous. He’s alive. Or at least...I think he is.”

I pulled off one of my gloves and held the back of my hand near D’s mouth. I could feel his breathing. *Good, he’s not dead.*

We could be relieved for the moment, but there was no telling what would happen in the long run. The first order of business was getting him to a doctor.

I was finally able to get my order out to Joanna. “Call for the carriage to come over here.”

“You’re going to stay, my lady? I can’t leave you alone...”

“Well, we can’t leave D alone either. The police might find him.”

The people around us were already looking on curiously. Most of them passed us by, but some stopped to stare. One of them could have called for the police, so I thought someone should be near D to explain.

“Please, just go.”

“All right...” Joanna agreed reluctantly and hurried off toward the bridge.

I kept watch over D and thought about what could have happened to him. *Was he attacked by robbers on the way here? Maybe he fell while running, hit his head, and scraped his cheeks... But that wouldn’t have resulted in wounds this bad. The only thing I can think of is that he was violently assaulted, or perhaps he fell from an extreme height. I can only hope that his injuries aren’t fatal...*

Someone came to stand next to me. I wondered whether it was one of the onlookers, so I looked up, then almost screamed. This person, who’d walked straight over to D’s side and was kneeling next to him, was *La Môme’s* own Reporter Pieron.

Is this where we reunite?! What a coincidence!

“Damian,” he grunted. “Hey, what the hell happened?”

D wouldn’t awaken no matter how much we called for him. Reporter Pieron looked at me. His olive brown eyes were shrewdly prying into me.

I shook my head, pretending I knew nothing. “I’m not sure what’s going on. This man just collapsed right in front of me while I was on my walk.”

“You weren’t just passing by—I know that much. You were waiting for him.”

“Me? Why would I be?” I adopted an indignant expression so that he wouldn’t notice my reflexive gulp.

He wasn’t fooled, unfortunately. “Don’t play dumb. You’re Agnès Vivier, aren’t you?”

“Huh...?”

“You met with him yesterday, after having contacted each other through the

ads in *La Môme*. What, did you think I wouldn't look through the ads in my own newspaper? I make a point of checking every issue, through and through. As if I'd miss your obvious signature."

I didn't know how to respond. The words just wouldn't leave my mouth. So *he's not here by coincidence. He watched us yesterday too. He was here today because he knew that we'd meet here again.*

Agnès Vivier's face had been revealed to the one person it shouldn't have been. I could feel my heart pound faster and faster in my chest. *What should I do? Do I keep playing dumb? He can't have already figured out my real name and address yet, right?*

"You made some kind of deal with him," Reporter Pieron continued.

I tried to change the subject. "Do you know this man? You called him 'Damian' just now. What's your relationship with him?" I asked pointedly. *Take that! I'm not going to lose my composure—not in front of you!*

Reporter Pieron seemed a bit ambivalent about my question. His face was as tired as usual, and he had clearly visible stubble. I took this small opening to stab further.

"You two were working together, weren't you? You were trying to trap me from the very beginning! So that initial letter wasn't just a fabrication—it was something much more sinister! In that case, I'm not going to just take this in silence. I'm going to take you to court after consulting with my publisher and *Chersie!*"

"No... Hang on a second!"

"So this is how *La Môme* goes about doing things, is it? This is none other than a crime, I'll have you know! Don't go thinking that you're allowed to do as you please all in the name of journalism. This will serve to uncover your true nature—the way you all will go to any lengths to obtain your goals! I'll let the whole world know that your company stomps on the honor of innocent citizens. Let's see how it reacts. Do you think readers will continue to support *La Môme?*"

"Jeez, you're one scary woman! I can't believe you said all of that with a

straight face! I'm impressed, but you need to calm down for a minute."

Reporter Pieron was hurriedly trying to push me back as I closed in on him.

"Hold your horses. I'm not here for that. Sure, I was anticipating Agnès being here, but let's put that aside for now. As you said, I know this guy. That's why I want to know what happened to him."

"I'm the one who should be asking that! He finally shows up after being late for our meeting and then goes and collapses. I'm at a loss for words."

We fell silent at the same time. Both of us glanced down at the unconscious man below us.

"We're gonna have to get him to a doctor first..." Reporter Pieron grumbled.

"I had my maid call for our carriage." I turned toward Philippe Bridge. The carriage had been waiting some ways away, so it would take time for Joanna to return. Traffic had picked up in the past hour too, so the bridge was congested with carriages.

D, or rather, Damian, was as still as a stone. Anxiety and panic pierced through my chest. I was worried that we were racing against time.

"Hey." Reporter Pieron got my attention. "What did you show him earlier? I'm not trying to report on any of this. I just want to know."

I hesitated for a moment. "I have something very important to him. We were meeting so that I could return it."

"Something important? Inside that purse of yours?"

"The real one is somewhere else. Let's just say that this object is important for retrieving it." I faked an explanation since I didn't know how much I could reveal.

The reporter furrowed his eyebrows, clearly contemplating my words. *Oh, when he makes this expression, he looks a little... Just a liiiittle handsome. Maybe. It's too bad he goes back to being some old man when he opens his mouth. His speech is very refined, though. He doesn't have a rural accent. I could tell that he was a very articulate person, despite the occasional rough word. As expected of a reporter—even one that worked for a gossip rag—he was intelligent. If he would only dress a little nicer, smooth his hair down, and*

shave his five-o'clock shadow, he could potentially be classified as handsome for a middle-aged man. What a waste. Not that I care, though.

We spent what felt like forever waiting for Joanna. I nervously turned back to the bridge many a time, as did Reporter Pieron.

Several men soon approached us. *They probably aren't officers, just passersby checking on the fallen man.*

When Reporter Pieron looked over at them, a black-haired man in front spoke. "Hello there. Terribly sorry for the trouble. He's one of ours."

"Excuse me?" I blinked.

"Surprising, isn't it? We're very sorry. He's a bit ill... We tried taking him to a hospital, but he caused a fuss and ran off."

"He's ill?"

I looked from Mr. Damian to the black-haired man. *I think "injured" is a better descriptor for him than "ill."*

The man knelt down by Mr. Damian's side and looked him over. I gauged the man to be around thirty, and he was quite handsome. He didn't have the delicate beauty of Lord Simeon, but a more masculine allure. His face was chiseled, his skin was lightly tanned, and a short beard covered his chin. His stylish clothes gave off an even more fashionable impression. I wondered why Reporter Pieron—who was wearing a similar ensemble—looked shabby by comparison. Was it the difference in their builds? The black-haired man was quite tall and muscular.

"Ah, he really is injured. No wonder, since he jumped from the second floor."

"What do you mean?" I asked, shocked. "Why would he do that?"

"Could you not talk so loudly, please? This isn't something for the public ear. He's ill, as I mentioned. Up here." The man spoke quietly while pointing to his head with his index finger. Was he saying that Mr. Damian had a mental illness? "He's quite delusional. You may think that you're talking to a normal person if you don't know him, but everything he says is utter nonsense. He causes trouble everywhere he goes, so we figured it was about time we collected him

from his home and put him in a hospital. That's when he ran off."

Both Reporter Pieron and I stayed silent. So everything Mr. Damian had said was a lie? Everything he'd told me yesterday was part of a delusion? I couldn't be satisfied with that, and I didn't think that was true.

I was about to tell this man that I thought *he* was the one spouting nonsense when Reporter Pieron roughly grabbed my arm with a tight look on his face.

The black-haired man shook his head. "Again, we're terribly sorry for the ruckus. Our carriage is waiting over yonder, so we'll take him from here... Oh, and by the way—" He looked at me as his two companions took Mr. Damian away. The man's blue eyes searching mine sent chills down my spine. "You have something of his, yes? Would you be so kind as to return it?"

"Huh?" Had this man heard what I'd said earlier? I pressed my pouch close to my chest on instinct. *This situation is getting dangerous, isn't it? These men are after...*

"He probably said strange things about that object, didn't he?" the man asked. "He took it from his home. We really should get it back."

"You say it belongs to him, but at the moment, it is mine. It used to belong to him, so he asked if he could buy it back. Regardless of what you say..."

"In that case, we'll buy it back for the appropriate price. Please state any amount you wish."

"I can't do that without his permission. Shouldn't you be more concerned about Mr. Damian than this object?"

There were many people around us, so these men couldn't do anything unreasonable. There were just too many witnesses. Or at least, that's what I hoped.

Reporter Pieron retained his firm grip on my arm. His wariness of these men seemed extreme. *They must be relatives of House Delmer going after the inheritance. Have they finally resorted to violent methods? No matter how much they want the family's assets, they can't just... No. This has happened before, and it will happen again.*

“Let’s save this conversation for after the man’s wounds have been treated. I’ll give you my contact information.”

“Hmm...”

Behind us, Mr. Damian was being hauled away. I was worried about that too—where in the world were they going to take him? *There’s no way they would kill him...right? Right? Don’t tell me that was the plan all along!*

To the relatives aiming for House Delmer’s assets, the young baron’s legal guardian was the most obstructive figure. That was why they were taking Mr. Damian away...maybe. *Er, wait, wasn’t Eric the legal guardian? Huh? In that case, what are they doing now? Is Mr. Damian pretending to be Eric right now?*

The more I found out, the less I seemed to understand. But even if Mr. Damian was supposed to be someone else right now, I felt like giving these men the brooch was the wrong choice.

The man sighed. “Then, I’m sorry to make you travel, but could you come with us? There seem to be things we both need to discuss in detail.”

“Indeed...”

Joanna was going to arrive with the carriage soon. *These men won’t do anything absurd once they find out I’m a member of the Flaubert family, yes? I should call for Lord Simeon... Oh, wait. He said he has an important meeting he can’t miss today. I can’t contact him. Can I rely on my father-in-law? Would it be all right to get such a gentle man involved in this? Or perhaps my blood brother would be better. He may be a garden-obsessed man, but he can work when he needs to.*

As all the possibilities ran through my head, the black-haired man turned on his heel and motioned for us to move. The moment I tried to tell him that our carriage was coming, Reporter Pieron yanked my arm even harder. “Run!”

As he shouted, he began sprinting, my arm clutched in his hand. I had to run alongside him to keep from being forcibly yanked. “Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Run like your life depends on it! There’s no guarantee that you’ll stay alive if you follow those guys!”

“What?!” I glanced back and saw the black-haired man chasing after us. His two companions had their hands full, so it was only him.

I was sure that I couldn’t outrun him in this dress. Reporter Pieron must have known that as well, but that didn’t stop him from sprinting straight into the bridge’s oncoming traffic.

“Whaaat?!” I screamed as we cut in front of a rushing carriage. *This is practically suicide!* The carriage’s horse whinnied, and the driver shrieked. The horses around us also neighed loudly.

We’re going to die! We’re going to die here!

The sounds of carriage wheels skidding and hooves clattering made a cacophony around us. The only thing I could do was run desperately. If I fell here, I would be hit for sure. Stopping and being flustered would only be dangerous, so my sole option was to run to safety. *Hey, wait, isn’t that our carriage?! It’s too late to go back to it now, though!*

Whether by miracle or Reporter Pieron’s godly skills, we made it farther down the bridge without being hit. *I can’t believe this... Who would even think of doing that?!*

Even our assailant couldn’t keep up. The man stood alone on the other side of the rushing carriages.

Reporter Pieron didn’t stop running for even a second. He headed straight for the riverbank. *At this rate, that man will be able to cross over to this side eventually. We have no way of escaping. What should we do?* My lungs were already giving out, and my gasps were painful. I wasn’t sure I could make it to the end of the bridge.

Reporter Pieron seemed to be in a similar state, and he slowed down once we reached the middle of the bridge, then halted entirely. I clung to the guardrail and tried to catch my breath, but an arm wrapped around my back without giving me a chance to. The reporter forcefully slung my whole body over the guardrail. *Wait?! Whaaaaat?!*

I didn’t even have time to resist. He kicked at the rail without even a smidge of hesitation and leaped into the air beyond it. We fell down toward the flowing

river.

A sound tore out of my throat. I squeezed my eyes shut and curled up my body. The next moment, I fell on top of something, then rolled off it.

“Oooooow!” I hit one hard thing after another, and I was finally able to let out a proper scream. *It hurts! It really hurts! But I’m alive, and there doesn’t seem to be water around here.*

There was a clamor around me. Raising my head and opening my eyes, I saw that we were on top of a sightseeing boat. We’d fallen onto the fabric sun cover, then rolled off. The cover had broken from the impact. We were currently next to the boat’s seats, and we could see the sky between the fallen curtain and the rods that held it up.

“What’s wrong with you people?!” A crew member weaved between the shocked passengers to get to us.

I shrunk back at being yelled at—I couldn’t muster an apology. Reporter Pieron, who had been similarly recoiling from the fall, placed himself in front of me as a shield. I looked beyond the boat. We’d long passed under Philippe Bridge and could no longer see it well from here, but there was someone on top of the bridge, watching us.

We’d escaped. *But was it really necessary for us to go to such lengths just to run away? We didn’t have to sprint off just because it would have been dangerous to follow that man. All those stunts were way more perilous!*

Reporter Pieron was apologizing as he rubbed the places he’d been hit. He looked like nothing more than a tired, middle-aged man.

Chapter Seven

We endured the bewildered stares of the people around us on the boat while making ourselves small in the corner. All we could do was wait for the boat to arrive at its destination. We'd damaged some equipment by boarding in such a reckless way, so they were charging us reparation fees in addition to boarding fees. Reporter Pieron told me he'd pay for all of it, but he most likely wouldn't be able to.

"Why did we run away like that? We could have just said we wouldn't follow him." I quietly complained to him. He was just gazing at the scenery past the river. My body still hurt from bumping and rolling into things. *I'll probably have bruises.*

"That would've worked if we really had been just passing by, but those guys know we're involved with Damian. They wouldn't have let us just leave, even if we'd tried."

"Do you know who they are?"

"I've never met them in person, but..."

I could tell Reporter Pieron wasn't just blankly staring off into the distance. He was keeping watch for anyone chasing the boat. Those men must've really been dangerous.

"What kind of people are they?"

"Well... Don't ask."

"I have to. If you're telling the truth, then I've been roped into some kind of dangerous chaos, haven't I? Don't I have a right to know?"

He let out a long sigh and placed a hand on his head as he answered. "I can't talk about it here. I'll tell you after we get off this boat and settle down somewhere."

The other passengers nearby were staring at us inquisitively. I had to change

the subject. “What’s your relationship with Mr. Damian?”

“We knew each other back in the day. He’s a comrade I used to work with when I was young.”

“So this was your first time meeting with him after that long?”

“No, we ran into each other recently by coincidence. I only just found out that he’d returned.”

The word “returned” made me recall Mr. Damian’s story. “He said something about doing sales overseas.”

“Sales, huh?” Reporter Pieron laughed ironically. I could tell that the type of business he’d been involved with wasn’t very respectable.

“Were those men involved in the ‘sales’ somehow?”

He didn’t answer, which told me all I needed to know. Those men definitely weren’t relatives of House Delmer, so who were they?

“Did you know that Mr. Damian wrote that letter and published it intentionally?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t. He’s good at mimicking handwriting—I couldn’t tell it was his. I would’ve asked him directly if I had noticed.” Reporter Pieron whispered the last part. It seemed Mr. Damian had acted of his own accord. “I want to know why he needed to contact you so badly.”

“I can tell you what he spoke of to me, but we’ll have to save that for another location as well.”

“Right.”

We both closed our mouths and spent the rest of the ride in silence. Reporter Pieron remained wary of our surroundings, which put me on edge as well.

Joanna and our driver must have been worried sick. I wondered if the driver had noticed when I’d passed in front of our carriage. The two of them were probably blue in the face by now. I felt bad, but there was nothing I could do except apologize wholeheartedly when I saw them again. I wondered if they were going to report to our home that I was missing. *They’ll certainly contact Lord Simeon. Urgh... I ended up bothering him in the end. I hope his meeting’s*

already finished.

Once we land at the dock, I'd like to call for a fiacre and hurry home. I want to let everyone know I'm all right and tell them not to call Lord Simeon. We probably have to be careful from here on out, though. As bad as it would be for my identity to be revealed to Reporter Pieron, I must avoid letting those men find out anything else. All they knew at present was that I was some featureless young woman. I needed to be cautious—they could not find out that I was a Flaubert.

The boat reached its final destination. The passengers climbed off, with Reporter Pieron and I bringing up the rear. As expected, Reporter Pieron didn't have enough money to pay off all of the charges, so I had to pay for the damages. *Honestly!*

"What will we do from here?" I asked. "Is there somewhere we can go?"

"I wonder. We can't let them know our workplaces or homes at all costs."

"Them...as in our assailants? Are they here right now?"

He stopped me from peering around. "Just assume that they are. We took our sweet time running away, so they're still on our trail for sure. They might have gotten here ahead of us."

"What...?" *Does that mean we're still in danger? Shouldn't we call for help?* "Should we go to the police?" The men surely couldn't do anything if we were in a police station. It would also be possible for us to contact my home.

Reporter Pieron rejected my suggestions. "No, the police won't be of any help. A high-class girl like you wouldn't know, but it's commonplace for them to be bribed and provide aid to lowlifes. People working for those guys are everywhere. It'd be like jumping into a den of wolves."

"That's terrible. What should we do?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. Just keep walking. We can't stand still here."

He motioned for me to keep going and led me aimlessly through the crowd.

"Why don't we go to the royal palace?" I suggested without missing a beat.

“And do what? As if they’d let us in.”

“No, we’ll be fine. I have connections. I can guarantee that they’ll protect us. Not even those men could have allies in the palace, could they?”

Reporter Pieron stared straight into my eyes and heaved a rugged sigh. “I don’t know about that. But, well, aside from the grand duke’s palace, I’d like to believe they can’t do as they please in Ventvert Palace.”

The grand duke’s palace?

“The problem is, how do we get there? We’re surrounded by people right now, so those guys won’t do anything to us, but they’ll come running as soon as the crowd thins. I’d bet we won’t make it to the royal palace.”

Ventvert Palace was located at the very back of the nobles’ residential area, way to the north of central Sans-Terre. The foreign embassies were located along the way, but the area would be quiet, with fewer shops. It wasn’t like our current location, which had people all around. Reporter Pieron had a right to be concerned.

“Then why don’t we have someone from the palace pick us up?”

“You can ask them to do that? Just who are you? You look like a noble, but you seem to be someone much higher than that.”

“Don’t you go digging into me. This isn’t the time for that.”

He and I were comrades who’d run away together, but also natural enemies. I scowled at him—I wasn’t going to let my guard down. Reporter Pieron shrugged and pulled back, which I hadn’t expected. “Right, let’s just get to safety. It’s not realistic to have the palace come to us. How are you going to contact them? We need to hide from our pursuers for the time being.”

“So...they really *are* around here?”

“Wanna test ’em?”

An omnibus was stopped nearby. I let Reporter Pieron pull me onto it. Once I was in an empty seat, the bus departed. No one followed us in, but the reporter was worried about the carriage that was following us.

“Three guys hurriedly got into that one, and now it’s pursuing us. It’s probably

them.”

“Really? It could just be a coincidence.”

“I’d be overjoyed if it were, but I know these types of situations. Just watch—they’re not going to leave our side.”

It was just as he said. Our omnibus didn’t stray from its set path and took its passengers to different parts of the town. Sometimes it would turn and go down a different road, but that carriage continued to trail behind us.

“Where should we get off?” Reporter Pieron muttered to himself. “We’ll be forced off once the bus reaches its final stop. I’d like to disembark somewhere decent.”

“We need a place where those men can’t follow us, right?”

“And a place where we can hide.”

“That won’t be easy...” I watched the scenery go by. The omnibus was passing near the theater district. I could see the national theater.

The theater district...? Oh, I know!

“Let’s get off at the next stop! I have an idea!”

I whispered my plan into the reporter’s ear, then hopped off the bus at the next station. We hurriedly made our way down the road lined with theaters of various sizes. Three men got off the pursuing carriage at the same stop.

Passing by the national theater, as well as a large, famous one called Théâtre d’Art, we went deeper into the district. The building I was aiming for was a small one of only four stories. The walls were made of a reddish-brown brick, and a staircase was next to the entrance to the first floor. A small signboard stood in front of it.

This was a theater where you could see plays for a cheap admission fee—the Neighboring Moneylender, it was called. Though on the outside it didn’t look much like a proper theater, once you went through the entrance, the auditorium was right there. A tiny stage was positioned at the back of the narrow space, which couldn’t even hold fifty people, and there was a nondescript door next to it.

“Ah, I’m so sorry!” A bright voice greeted us. “The next performance isn’t for another...”

The person cleaning between the guest seats raised their head to look at us. I rushed to the back area without a word.

“Hey!” said the person. “Wait, aren’t you that little lady?”

“Pardon me!” I yelled behind me. “Could you lock the entrance, please? It’s an emergency!”

“Can we really just barge in like this?” Reporter Pieron sounded utterly confused. He probably couldn’t hear the fuss coming from outside.

It was break time for this theater at the moment, so patrons wouldn’t be going in and out. No one came in after us, and nothing happened for a while after that.

However, a little later, the back entrance of the building quietly opened up. A man and a woman tiptoed out, carefully scanning their surroundings, then swiftly made their escape. They’d thought that no one would see them in that empty alleyway, but two men appeared from the shadows of the next building over. These men left some distance between themselves and the couple before giving chase.

I watched all this happen from the space between the curtains of a window on the second floor. “I wonder if this will work...”

“Well, if you’re asking me, no. There were *three* people chasing us. One of them’s still here.”

“Was he left behind as a guard?”

“It’s possible.”

Reporter Pieron watched the scene next to me. He was wearing a frilly shirt that could have belonged to a noble from long ago, along with breeches that ended just beneath his knees, as well as white socks. These were supposed to be made of silk, but his were made of cotton. They only had to *look* expensive from far away, so they were actually made from cheap materials.

Surprisingly, the stage costume he was borrowing suited him. His usual

tiredness was diluted quite a bit when he changed into clothes that weren't so wrinkled. If only he would shave and do his hair, he would look many times more appealing. It was unfortunate—he didn't seem like he would.

I'd also borrowed a costume and was currently dressed as a shepherd. This theater was only staffed by men, so the sizing was off. I'd had to roll up the sleeves of the jacket twice over.

The person who'd taken my place was the smallest man in the theater, but even then, it would only be believable for a short time. I would have also liked to believe that the reason he hadn't padded his chest area was purely for comfort.

"Little lady, you leaped in here with a scary look on your face. You're up to something again, aren't you?"

A thick voice came from behind us. We turned away from the window. In the middle of this closet filled with costumes in a wide array of colors, a man with short, curly hair was standing with his arms crossed. This was the troupe leader, Mr. Bruno. He was roughly around Reporter Pieron's age, but the differences between their appearances and impressions were staggering. He was about as tall as Lord Simeon, and his toned muscles could be seen even under his clothing. The eyelashes of his wide eyes were long, giving him an all-around "thick" impression. He'd seemed a bit exasperated at my sudden appearance, but he'd aided us without asking for details. He was a deeply compassionate person from the bottom of his heart.

The Neighboring Moneylender had been my preferred theater from back when I'd been single. It couldn't compete with Théâtre d'Art or the national theater—it was merely a small auditorium on the outskirts of the district—but its actors' skills were on par with any of its competitors. Their main selling point was comedies, and their plays had many times made me laugh until my stomach hurt. Whenever I needed a pick-me-up, I came here. I was sure that the theater's other patrons felt much the same. Every time I went, it was a full house. It had many regulars, and while it wasn't as if I attended every day, the staff remembered me nonetheless and always welcomed me with open arms.

Today, I hadn't come as a customer. I'd instead made a ridiculous request,

and they'd still accepted me, same as always. I could only be grateful.

"I'm very sorry for causing trouble for you all. Will those two be all right?"
Worry was seeping from my voice.

"The men chasing you know what you look like, right? They'll run back as soon as they figure out Luca's a man." Mr. Bruno chuckled.

"They'll figure it out as soon as they get a good look," Reporter Pieron grumbled, dispirited. He seemed to be remembering the men who'd stood in for us. They'd gotten carried away and had put on very heavy makeup, so the chasers would surely be shocked when they caught a glimpse of their faces.

We'd asked those actors to change into our clothing and run away, pretending to be us. Once they pulled the pursuers far away enough from the theater, they would reveal themselves. Reporter Pieron and I would run away in the meantime... Or rather, we would observe the situation a bit longer before deciding to do so. At the moment, it seemed we couldn't give anything the green light just yet.

We moved to the next room over, which was a break room for the actors. As messy as it was, it was a good place to sit and have tea. In order to maximize the space, there weren't any chairs or tables—rather, a part of the floor was raised with a cloth covering it to encourage removing one's shoes when sitting on it. We settled there and began to talk.

Mr. Bruno studied Reporter Pieron. "You're that reporter from *La Môme*, aren't you? You came to do an article on us one time."

"Yeah, thanks for that," he grunted in response.

It seemed the two were acquainted. *I see, so he's done an article on this place before.* Articles on entertainment were another selling point of mass newspapers, so that wasn't surprising.

Having skipped introductions, we gave a short rundown of the situation to Mr. Bruno. I needed to exchange information with Reporter Pieron as well.

"To sum it up, he submitted that letter to *La Môme* in order to get in contact with me about the earring. He had to do it that way because he's not the real Eric. The thought of explaining his situation to the newspaper or my publisher

must have been psychologically taxing on him. He didn't know which of them could uncover that he was a fake, so he wanted to have as few people involved as possible."

"Eric?" Reporter Pieron raised his eyebrows. "Just how much do you know?"

We were relaxing with the tea and light meal that had been provided to us. Judging by his tone, he seemed to know about House Delmer's circumstances.

"I knew Mr. Damian was talking about House Delmer immediately. He may not have mentioned the name, but anyone would be able to figure it out with how much information he gave me."

Reporter Pieron blinked at me.

"He also never told me his name, but his position in his story was that of Eric. I figured out that was wrong, however, because—excuse my frankness—Mr. Damian did not seem like a noble. So he was either Eric's representative or assuming the guise of him. From what I can tell, the latter is seeming more and more plausible, don't you think?"

Reporter Pieron continued to chew on a baguette without answering me. Perhaps he had a penchant for cleanliness, but he was eating with impeccable manners, making sure not to drop even a single crumb.

I went on. "If that's the case, then I have to question how and why he was able to trick the baroness, Eric's mother. Still, let's put that aside for now. This is what I think: Mr. Damian knows the real Eric, who told Mr. Damian about his upbringing. Eric then gave Mr. Damian the earring. Mr. Damian took it and made his way into House Delmer. Right before he gained access to Eric's inheritance, the earring was stolen."

"Oh my! So some higher power was watching him." Mr. Bruno laughed.

"If he were the real Eric, he should have been able to take care of the inheritance proceedings without the earring. But because he's a fake, he has no other way of identifying himself. That was why he was desperate to get it back."

This was the most prominent reason I thought Mr. Damian was a fake. If the real Eric were able to take care of the paperwork, things would have been much simpler. The trustee hired by the late baroness would be able to confirm Eric as

the real eldest son. That was why Eric was not present in this story. Or, at the very least, that he had not returned to House Delmer.

“That’s all I have to say. Now it’s your turn.” I signaled to Reporter Pieron that the ball was now in his court. “Are you working with Mr. Damian?”

He stayed silent but had a strained expression. Then, he let out a sigh, as if he’d given up. “I suppose I am. I was the first one to find that advertisement searching for a lost person.”

When the baroness was still alive, her butler had put out a call for Eric through an advertisement. It had been published in every single newspaper. Reporter Pieron had seen it, and he’d told Mr. Damian about it after they’d reunited.

“Eric is our mutual acquaintance.” Reporter Pieron was looking off somewhere far away. “As you read, he was apparently some noble boy at one point.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s dead. Has been for a long time.” After speaking softly, he silently placed his cup onto the tray. “I guess I have to tell you about how we met now, huh? When we were still very young, we were up to no good together in Lavia. Stealing, swindling, stuff like that.”

I understood why he looked uncomfortable. *I see, so that’s the kind of “sales” they did. I wonder if his experience back then plays a part in his reporting activities now.*

“We were around twenty at the time. We did a bunch of things, all the while pretending to be brave. Ah, I should mention, we didn’t kill anyone. We never went that far, but, well, it’s still not a past to be proud of. There were plenty of dangerous encounters because we lived like that. Eric was done away with after making a blunder.”

“Done away with?”

“It means he was killed,” Mr. Bruno informed me.

So the real Eric sank to criminal activities, and then he lost his life...

“After that, I immediately chose to wash my hands of that world. I came back to Lagrange, but Damian was against it. Apparently, he kept up that lifestyle after we parted.”

I listened, feeling somewhat shocked. Though Mr. Damian was somewhat suspicious, he didn’t give off the impression of an evildoer who’d committed crimes for many years. Had I been thoroughly fooled? A swindler—a fraud, in other words. Mr. Damian must have been a true professional.

Reporter Pieron pulled at the hem of his sleeve. “Seemed he finally came to his senses in his old age, though. He realized that he wouldn’t be able to die a respectable death doing what he did. It took him a long time, but he finally came back to Lagrange.”

“And met with you once more?”

“Yes. We hadn’t met in over fifteen years, but we knew each other as soon as we saw the other’s face. It was so surprising. I was excited that he was still alive. I never thought I’d see him safe and sound ever again, so I was genuinely happy. We didn’t exactly know each other for the right reasons, but to me, he’s an old friend. He even said he was done with that lifestyle, and I figured I’d help him out as much as I could. There was just one problem, though—he’d brought troublesome baggage with him.”

A bad feeling slowly crept up on me. I could tell where this story was going. “You say you were ‘criminals’ in Lavia. That means you were part of a crime syndicate, doesn’t it?”

Reporter Pieron’s eyes moved from his ink-stained hands to my face, his expression filled with both shock and admiration. My shoulders fell. I’d hit the bull’s-eye. “I figured it out while you were talking. This has to do with the Scalchi Familia in Lavia, doesn’t it?”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you know that name.”

I didn’t know about it half a year ago. Last autumn, I’d been thrown right into the midst of Lavia’s prince’s plan, so I’d happened upon this truth against my will.

Within Lavia’s long history, what had begun as an autonomous organization

changed its disposition, becoming the Scalchi Familia of today, a crime syndicate. To the public, they presented themselves as proper workers, but they were engaged in all kinds of wrongdoings behind-the-scenes. Had they been a typical band of criminals, they could have been eradicated, but at present, they had connections with many powerful people in Lavia—in both the political and economic worlds. The grand duke had his hands full trying to deal with them.

Prince Liberto's plan had involved trying to strip even a little of the Familia's power away. I hadn't heard about what'd happened after that, but I was sure that they hadn't eradicated the syndicate completely yet.

"Now I understand why we can't rely on the police. The Familia surely has insiders all over the place. Lagrange and Lavia are right next to each other—it wouldn't be a wonder for them to have their hands in this pot. We don't know what will happen if we're caught by them, so I understand why we had to run away so quickly."

"Er, yeah..."

"What's this about Mr. Damian's baggage, though?"

Reporter Pieron recoiled at how quickly I was moving the conversation along. Meanwhile, Mr. Bruno was verbally marveling at having heard about the Familia.

The reporter fidgeted in his seat. "Well, y'see, I was nothing more than a low-level hoodlum, so it didn't matter when I left. But he was a member for a long time. He climbed the ranks and got to mid-level. At that point, he couldn't exactly leave as he pleased. A lot of information had made its way to him, so they wouldn't let him quit, even when he wanted to. If he wanted to be insistent about it, they'd do away with him...or kill him."

"Yet he still ran away?"

"Yeah. That alone would've been enough for them to send thugs after him, but he also took an important syndicate document with him."

"An important document? Why would he do that?"

"He called it a good luck charm. If need be, he could use it as a bargaining chip

or an incentive for the upper echelons on this side to protect him. He was trying to weave a safety net for himself.”

Protection... Indeed, that seems better than just hiding. Sneaking into House Delmer may have been a way for him to get in contact with powerful nobles as well. “Do you know what’s in that document?”

“To keep it simple, it was a roster. The organization’s little friends were all nice and lined up on its pages. And the kinds of deals they made were also spelled out.”

“No wonder those men seemed to be doing all they could to get it back.”

“That’s right.” Reporter Pieron shrugged.

I made eye contact with Mr. Bruno. Though Mr. Damian had taken that document to protect himself, he’d ended up putting himself in even more danger. He’d even gotten caught before he could put it to good use. *No, wait. Perhaps it would be more useful now? That black-haired man... He was curious about the deal I’d made with Mr. Damian. He probably can’t kill him, since he doesn’t know where the roster is.*

In which case, the next target will be me.

Of course they would chase us to the ends of the earth! *Jeez! This is more than I can handle! Help me, Lord Simeooooon!*

At this point, I wanted help from wherever I could get it. My life was in danger without anyone to protect me. “Perhaps I should have just given him the brooch right then and there without running away...”

“Do you think those guys would have been satisfied with just that?”

“They wouldn’t, I suppose...” They wouldn’t have believed me even if I told them I didn’t know anything about the roster and was an unrelated party. And even if they *did* believe me, they’d probably just kill me since they’d have no need for me anymore.

I put all my brainpower to work. The first thing I needed to do was contact Lord Simeon. That was the only way Reporter Pieron and I would be saved.

Mr. Bruno seemed to take pity on us. “Why don’t you two hide here for the

time being? The men will probably think you've left if you never come out. The one keeping watch here will have to leave eventually."

I shook my head. "We can't do that. You all will be put in danger. They're sure to come into the building once they get suspicious. There's a high chance they'll resort to heavy-handed methods. It would be one thing if we were outside in a crowd, but we're indoors right now. They could kill us all if there's only three of us."

"Could happen," Reporter Pieron agreed. "We can't underestimate them. They'll go to any length to accomplish their goals. And since they've already found Damian, there's a possibility that they know about House Delmer too. We have to take care of them before they head that way."

I gasped hearing the panic seep through his voice. *That's right! The people of the baronage are in trouble too! I can't believe I didn't think of that!* It was probably naive of me to think that the men wouldn't do anything in a noble's manor. An eight-year-old boy was the only member of the Delmer family left, so there were tons of ways in. The servants alone wouldn't be enough to protect him.

This is bad. We don't have time to sit around!

"Mr. Bruno, I'm sorry again for causing such trouble, but could you help us just a little more?"

"Of course, little lady. We're already involved, and we could never leave our favorite, cute, bespectacled lady in danger. Tell me what you need." Mr. Bruno knew just how much danger we were in after listening to our conversation, but he'd agreed to help without thinking about it. He winked at me with his long lashes and made a fist. "If they come in here to attack you, we'll attack them right back!"

"No, that's dangerous! They really won't hold back!" They were sure to have guns, not just blades. I had experience at the barrel end of a gun! No matter how muscular Mr. Bruno was, I couldn't let him fight. *Let's leave the fighting to Lord Simeon. He's stronger than any foe out there. His subordinates consider his strength inhuman, and people say there's no person out there who can match him!*

On a more serious note, if we couldn't trust the police, then our only option was to rely on the army. They wouldn't respond to personal requests, but my husband could use his position. Though he was in a different division, he was still a member of the land troops, so they wouldn't brush him off.

Once he found out I was in danger, he would come running to my rescue, no matter what it took. Perhaps Joanna had already gotten in contact with him, and he was searching for me. The best course of action was for me to ask for help directly so that he wouldn't have to run around in vain.

The first thing I asked of Mr. Bruno was tools to write a letter—it would be sent to Théâtre d'Art nearby. Even if the watchguard saw it being delivered there, he would probably deem it unrelated. I knew the manager, Mr. Blanche, and once my name was in play, he was sure to assist. I'd met because of a case related to the Familia anyway. I would have him alert Lord Simeon.

The large Théâtre d'Art was a place for social exchanges. There were reserved seats for nobles, and even the royal family would come to visit. It wouldn't be strange for one of its workers to head to the noble residential area. I entrusted the letter to them with the intention of using the fastest and least suspicious method of contact possible.

One of the Neighboring Moneylender's staff took the two letters—one for Mr. Blanche and one for Lord Simeon—and ran to the Théâtre d'Art. He returned in no time and reported Mr. Blanche's consent.

The two men who'd served as our standins also returned. As planned, they'd revealed themselves to the chasers after leading them far enough away.

"We told them we were helping you two elope," Mr. Luca squealed. "The looks on their faces! We made them think you two weren't here anymore!"

I scrunched up my face. "Elope? I would've preferred someone younger and more handsome. More specifically, someone who wears glasses and looks good with a riding crop. I would never go for such a tired-looking old man!"

"Well, sorry for being tired," Reporter Pieron said in his gravelly voice. "I would've preferred an adult woman with more sensuality. And what's this about a riding crop?"

“Why, I never! Do you not see this wedding ring? I am a fully grown adult!”

“That’s a wedding ring? I can’t believe someone like you is a wife... Wait, how old are you?”

“I’m going to be twenty in a week!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

The time at present was three in the afternoon. I wondered how long it would take for the letter to be delivered to Lord Simeon and for him to come to our rescue.

We couldn’t wait until nightfall. We needed another plan.

Chapter Eight

Sundown was almost upon us. It was the time when the people filling the town would start on their journeys home. However, it was also when the theater district became more active. Those who wanted to see evening shows would gather—the carriages moving along the streets would let off ladies and gentlemen dressed to the nines in front of large venues. Bright music flowed through the now-lively area.

A strange group caught the eyes of everyone around them. Clad in eccentric outfits, they played their pipes and drums in a line walking down the street.

“Gather round, everyone! Good work to the fathers coming home from a hard day of labor! To the fellows out to play tonight, we have something you might like! Why don’t you all stop and take a look? We’re the famed Neighboring Moneylender, and our theater resides along this lamplit road!”

Mr. Bruno’s speech resounded throughout the plaza. His thick, masculine form was positively bursting out of his dress, and passersby couldn’t help but laugh at the sight.

Tonight, the troupe’s auditorium was closed, as they were going to perform outdoors. They were in front of the national theater, showing off their tricks like street performers. Though they mainly worked as actors, members of the troupe had many talents, like tumbling, juggling, and pulling flowers from hats. They effectively managed to get people to stop and watch, and once enough onlookers were gathered, they finally began their main event—a short play.

Tons of improvised lines were thrown into this comedy, so the original course of the story was thrown way off into depths unknown. Not even the actors themselves were sure where it was going. As chaotic as it was having the performers do whatever they pleased, that was the most engaging part. Though they seemed to be a mess at first glance, they were actually perfectly in sync, and the audience was driven to laughter every ten seconds.

Reporter Pieron and I were in the performance as well, and we were situated

behind the main characters in supporting roles. He had on black attire that covered every part of him except for his eyes, like an assassin from a storybook. Signboards had been placed on his front and back, like a sort of jacket. Actors would occasionally come at him and forcefully bring him into the story, making the viewers laugh at his pitiful state.

As for me, I was extremely busy handing the performers their props—I would bring them out and take them away. I was still dressed as a shepherd, but I had a fluffy, curly wig on my head as if I were also a sheep. For some reason, they'd also dressed me in angel's wings. Everyone was wearing outlandish costumes and had thick makeup on, so I didn't stand out, and the audience didn't look at me.

However, I could feel *someone's* gaze on me.

Looking out into the crowd as I bustled around, I noticed a few men here and there who seemed different than the rest. Though they looked the same as those around them, their stares were much more intense. They were tracking my every movement, not as observers but as monitors.

There's more of them now than there were in the afternoon! They didn't give up—they just called for backup! As expected of the Familia. It was terrifying being tailed by them. I could tell they would do everything in their power to keep me from getting away.

The black-haired man was there too. His eyes were glued to me, and he would grin every time our eyes met. *Urgh, he absolutely knows it's me. Not that I would've expected this outfit to be able to throw him off, and not that I was trying to in the first place!*

We'd come up with this plan after thinking about how to protect ourselves while we waited for help to come. We also had to consider how to ensure that the troupe would stay safe. Staying indoors would have ended up being more dangerous, so we'd decided to go out into the open ourselves before they boxed us in. The men wouldn't be able to attack us in a crowded place, especially if most eyes were on us. That was how we'd decided to kill time.

As Mr. Bruno and his mates worked hard, I anxiously waited for someone to come to our aid. Where would they come from? The main street? Or perhaps

the other direction? I kept watch in all directions for anyone who might have seemed like the right person. *Lord Simeon doesn't know that we're outside, but he'll be able to figure it out once he comes near, right? He wouldn't go straight to the auditorium and end up confused because no one is there, right?*

I waited, all the while trying to keep my panic in check. *It'll be fine. Believe in Lord Simeon. He wouldn't miss me, particularly not if he's nearby. I'm sure that in time, his elegant, dependable form will appear from behind the audience...*

Just as I thought that, the back of the crowd began to stir. *Is it him?!* My heart leaped with anticipation.

The person who split the audience made the smile vanish from my face. It wasn't Lord Simeon. The hat adorning his head was the type shared by the military and the police, but the color and insignia were those of the police.

What? He's the one you called for?!

Ambivalence hit me—I'd gone and assumed that the military would be the ones to come to my rescue. *I suppose I don't mind as long as someone saves me, but... Well, perhaps Lord Simeon was being conscious of those in charge of this area and asked the police to help us.*

This should have been fine, but unfortunately, the police attacked members of the Neighboring Moneylender for some reason.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" The actors raised their voices in protest at having their performance interrupted.

"Who allowed you all to cause such a fuss here?!" yelled the police. "This isn't your venue—it's a public road!"

What?! So they're here to micromanage instead of help?! The five or six police officers rounded up the actors into one spot and rushed the audience off. Seemed they'd only come to disperse the crowd.

Mr. Bruno stood his large body in front of me to protect me. "What's the big deal? We're in the plaza and not in anyone's way. Street performers come here all the time. Why are you targeting us?"

"We received complaints that filthy thugs were making an unsightly fuss

around here.”

“Excuse me?!” Mr. Bruno yelled with a booming voice.

The officer just cackled without backing down. “You know you aren’t fit for a place like this, yes? Just look around at all the ladies and gentlemen who are coming from those carriages there! Such high-class folks wouldn’t stop to watch third-rate actors from the outskirts of town. They’d just scrunch their faces up and wonder what kinds of fools you are. They asked us to rid the place of you immediately.”

Oh, come now! It might not have been the most refined performance, and it hadn’t been in a theater that noblemen would attend, but everyone knew that this district had a theater like this too, didn’t they? Even the national theater didn’t always have affluent people in attendance. The prices of the nosebleed seats were cheap, so commoners could attend as well. It wasn’t a place exclusive to a select few.

The people who’d been watching just now had been having fun. Street performers came to this plaza all the time. The sight might have been unpleasant to those who’d come here to put on airs, but it wasn’t as if the performers had been bothering them directly. Those nobles could have just walked away.

Also, I wasn’t a fan of how this man was speaking to us. He was a commoner himself, so he had no right to look down on anyone!

Ah, wait, this isn’t the time to be getting indignant. I’d almost forgotten the situation we were in. I hurriedly scanned my surroundings.

The performance had come to an abrupt stop because of the police butting in, but the situation itself was pulling eyes from around, so perhaps it wasn’t all bad. Those standing in the center of it all were the police themselves, so the Familia couldn’t possibly do anything, could they? *Would it be correct for me to consider this a lucky break?*

However, people who were worried about getting involved had left the area, which had lowered the number of bystanders. And of course, the black-haired man and his lackeys were still around. *Maybe we’re in trouble after all!*

The police paid my flustered self no mind as they rushed the troupe back to their theater. “Disperse, disperse! We’ll put you all in cells if you make any more of a ruckus! Go back to that pigsty where you belong!”

“Shaddup! You’re the pig, you tiny mustachioed bastard!”

While wincing at the screaming match, I did my best to barge in. “P-P-P-Pardon me, but please calm down and listen!” I had to do what I could to tell the officers what was happening and ask for help. But after wedging myself between all the huge bodies, I ended up being thrown backward. I prepared myself for impact against the stone walkway, but someone’s hand stopped me.

“Th-Thank—” My words froze in my mouth.

Right next to me was an unbearably masculine beauty. Beneath the black hair—the ends of which flicked upward—blue eyes and a smile beamed down at me.

I shrunk back slightly, then turned my eyes toward the police officer I’d wanted to ask for help. I didn’t have to call for him—he was already looking at me.

He was very much looking at me.

He wasn’t glaring by any means, but he also didn’t seem worried at all that I’d been thrown back. His gaze was calm, as if he were merely confirming something.

Then his eyes moved away, back to the actors at hand. He turned his whole back to me, didn’t turn around again, then began pushing Mr. Bruno and his men back.

I gaped at the sight. That was when Reporter Pieron’s words came back to me—the police wouldn’t be of any help. The Familia had their hands everywhere.

It can’t be! These weren’t just police out on patrol! I immediately opened my mouth wide to shout for help, but it was blocked by a hand before I could make a sound. The man behind me restrained me and prevented me from speaking. Struggling against him proved futile, as his body covered mine with ease.

At the edge of my vision, I could see that Reporter Pieron had thrown off his

signboards and was desperately trying to make his way over to me. Unfortunately, men were on his tail as well. Both of us had expertly fallen into the enemies' trap.

"Shh..." A low voice whispered into my ear as I struggled. A chill ran down my spine when I felt the man's breath.

That was when I heard the whinny of a horse.

"Ugh!" A single moment before, my captor had been relaxed, but he suddenly let out a shocked sound.

The small crowd that had been surrounding us yelled and ran off in all directions. Something had appeared behind them, which had then pushed through the space—a wildly running horse. The silky, black maned beast stomped its hooves on the stone pavement and charged toward us. The man behind me panicked and lightly pushed me away, making me fall forward. The horse sped off behind me as I steadied myself.

Following it came several other military horses, many of them carrying people clad in white uniforms. *There's no mistaking it—this is the Royal Order of Knights!* They began attacking the men who were trying to take Reporter Pieron down. Though they were members of the Familia, even *they* knew they didn't stand a chance, so they pulled themselves from the reporter and ran. The knights tried to give chase, but the men skillfully used onlookers as shields and splintered off. People would get hurt if the knights tried to force their horses into the crowd, and they were too late in dismounting, so they weren't able to capture the men. Passersby were too shocked at the sudden incident to move. The police were standing around staring at the knights, mouths agape.

All the energy left my body, so I crumpled to the ground. *With this, we're saved...right?*

Unlike the thunderous sounds from before, the new hoof sounds that approached me were soft. The horse was huffing from all the excitement as it trotted over. As I looked up, the person atop it looked down. Their large body soon enveloped me.

"Marielle, are you all right?"

“Lord Simeon...” The warmth and scent I was so used to wrapped around me. When I saw his worried gaze, my eyes welled up with tears. The last string that was holding me together seemed to snap. “Waaaaah, Lord Simeooooon!”

He held me closer, petting my head front to back. It seemed the wings on my back were getting in his way. My head was also quite fluffy at the moment because of the wig. *My apologies for wearing such an outfit to our touching reunion.*

“It’s all right. Everything’s all right now. I won’t let anyone come after you anymore. Are you hurt? Are you in pain?” His kind, reliable voice filled my heart with relief.

I answered him through many sobs. “I’m not hurt... Ah, wait. I bumped into a lot of things when I fell.”

“Fell? From where?! Where are you hurt?!” Lord Simeon’s facial expression changed instantly as I remembered all the places I’d hit.

I tried to tell him that it wasn’t anything serious, but a figure in the crowd behind him caught my eye. The black-haired man still hadn’t run away. He was staring this way with a hand on his head, looking exasperated.

I knew I wasn’t in any danger as long as Lord Simeon was next to me. My tears stopped in favor of anger. I tried again to let Lord Simeon know what was happening, but the item in the black-haired man’s hand stole my attention, causing me to scream.

“Marielle?!”

“M-My pouch!”

The man was holding a cute, lace pouch unbefitting of him. I searched my back, flustered. *I hid it beneath my wings. When did he steal it?!*

“That man!” I yelled. “He stole my pouch with the brooch in it!”

Lord Simeon looked to where I was pointing. The black-haired man had already turned on his heel and was running away beyond the crowd.

“No...” Even more energy left my body, making me feel as though I was going to collapse onto the ground, this time not from relief but from shock and

discouragement.

“Don’t worry about that now, Marielle. Tell me about your injuries.”

“They’re not bad. I just have a few bruises. But the brooch...”

Lord Simeon was gazing at my dejected form. He put both of his hands on my cheeks and moved me to face him, then wiped my tears away. “Your safety comes first and foremost. Nothing else matters. Let’s just be glad that I made it in time. I’m so relieved... I didn’t think this would happen. I really should have gone with you.”

I shook my head since I could hear the regret in his voice. “You had such an important meeting. And who would have predicted that things would turn out like this? I never would’ve dreamed the Scalchi Familia was involved. I really just thought it was only about House Delmer’s assets.”

“As did I. I had people look into House Delmer’s situation.”

“Oh my, so you did... Wait, that’s right! House Delmer!” The line of conversation made me remember. I hastily told Lord Simeon that the family might be attacked, but he calmed me down.

“I know,” he said. “I had someone head to their residence as soon as I read your letter. You don’t need to worry.”

“Ah... Th-Thank goodness...” *I shouldn’t have expected any less from Lord Simeon. He doesn’t cut corners.*

My body had experienced waves of shock and relief one after the other, so I was out of energy. I knew I couldn’t remain on the ground, but I was recoiling from having run around anxiously ever since early afternoon. I felt like I was going to pass out.

Lord Simeon didn’t force me to stand and instead bundled me in his arms. Hard-won relief piled on top of the exhaustion. I buried my face into his shoulder, wanting to be spoiled. His kind hands patting my back felt nice, so I wrapped my arms around his neck to spoil myself even more.

An annoyed voice came from elsewhere. “Are you two done yet?”

Well, excuse me! I’m finally getting to enjoy Lord Simeon’s existence! Also, I’m

exhausted!

I puffed out my cheeks and turned to look. Reporter Pieron was standing nearby, having stripped off his black head covering. *Oh, good. He seems to be unscathed. If only he had been so kind as to leave me in peace.*

“There’s a lot we need to talk about,” he continued, “but before that, you two need to know that you’re looking like quite the assembly here. From an outsider’s view, it looks like a dangerous, grown adult is making merry with a little boy.”

Huh? I furrowed my brows, but then quickly realized what he was referring to. I was still dressed as a shepherd. *I must look like a member of the troupe wearing a fluffy wig and fake wings!*

I pulled off my wig and undid my hair, letting it flow down my back. “L-Look! I’m a woman! Lord Simeon is not a dangerous adult who’s into little boys!”

“M-Marielle.” Lord Simeon’s voice was strained.

“It still looks bad, even if you’re a woman!” exclaimed Reporter Pieron.

“How?!” I yelled at him. “Though it may be true that someone as plain as me doesn’t suit a beautiful person like Lord Simeon, it wouldn’t look *bad!*”

“Face reality, already! You should know better than anyone that you’re just some brat without a trace of sensuality!”

“Who in the world could say something so blunt?!”

“Marielle, stop that.” Lines were forming Lord Simeon’s forehead.

The knights had finished shooing away the crowd by then. They came over to us as we bickered. I could see Sir Alain among them, Lord Simeon’s aide. My husband had brought him along with five others.

“Vice Captain, what should we do with the police officers?” Sir Alain asked Lord Simeon, who looked over.

The police officer with the tiny mustache withered and stiffened under Lord Simeon’s eyes of ice.

Sir Alain eyed the officer dubiously. “I heard a bit of what you were saying.

These men are suspicious, aren't they?"

"Ah, yes!" I asked Lord Simeon to let me down onto my own two feet. "These police are working for the Familia! They pretended to be on patrol, but they were actually helping those men out."

"I knew it." Reporter Pieron rubbed his head. "The timing was just too suspicious."

"Really?" Mr. Bruno chimed in. "They're working for the bad guys too?" He glared at the police officer, who had made himself very small.

"No, we were just here because of the complaints..." His voice was barely audible.

"State your name and rank." Lord Simeon didn't interrogate the officers here, opting instead to just take their names. After all, we didn't have any proof that they were really working for the crime syndicate. We couldn't waste our time with them, so we sent them home. Lord Simeon was sure to find out what their relationship was afterward, and he would give them a proper punishment.

I sighed. "I was worried about what would happen, but it seems things worked out."

"Is everything fine now?" Mr. Bruno asked. "Will they come back to attack you?"

Most of the troupe members were striking the stage set. The wings on my back were heavy, so I took them off and handed them to one of the members. "I believe you all will be fine now, especially since they stole the brooch already."

"You don't have to worry about us, little lady. We've dealt with their types before, so we're used to it. Let's go on back to the theater and change. Your husband came to get you, so you have to head home, right? You can't go dressed like that."

We all left the plaza en masse at Mr. Bruno's orders. As we headed toward the Neighboring Moneylender's building, Sir Alain whispered to me. "These guys sure are incredible, aren't they?"

“Why do they all talk like that?” Second Lieutenant Mirbeau asked as well.

Now that he’d mentioned it, I had to wonder for myself. The whole troupe spoke femininely—was that just the style they were going for?

“Are you all right, Marielle? You can ride on one of the horses if it’s hard to walk.” Lord Simeon seemed to be focused on worrying about me so that he wouldn’t have to think about the rest of the situation.

“It’s not that bad,” I said with a wry smile. “Um... Ah, right! What about your meeting? Did I interrupt you in the middle of it?” I remembered that important tidbit as I tried to think of something to talk about.

“I suppose it would count as being in the ‘middle’ of it, but it was about to end.” Lord Simeon didn’t sound worried in the least.

“So I *did* interrupt you...”

“No, it was better this way. This incident actually had to do with what was on our agenda, so I was allowed to deploy the knights right away.”

“Huh? What do you...?”

Lord Simeon picked me up and placed me on the back of a horse as I wavered. *Oh, you. I told you I was fine.*

“It must be hard for you to keep up with the men’s pace, yes?”

Leading the way was Mr. Bruno’s troupe, and they could all take very big strides, even in their dresses. I’d been having to jog to keep up.

“I’ll tell you in detail later, but the knights were deployed at His Highness’s order.”

“His Highness?” I had indeed been wondering why the knights had come. Their duty was to guard the royal family and the palace, so they typically weren’t deployed for affairs not pertaining to them. The only exception was when His Majesty the King or His Highness the Crown Prince ordered them off somewhere. Apparently, this incident had been deemed one of those special cases.

Lord Simeon continued his explanation. “We were deployed partially because of how urgent the situation was, but also because this incident seems

intertwined with one of the items on the meeting's agenda, as I said. I was told to bring you to the palace after getting ahold of you."

"What...?" I couldn't hide the disappointment in my voice. *Can't we do that tomorrow? I'm already down for the count today.*

It couldn't be helped—that was an order directly from His Highness. After changing and thanking the theater troupe, I promised I would repay them monetarily at a later date.

"You don't have to do that." Mr. Bruno smiled.

"Please let me do this. You had to halt your performance because of us. We prevented you from making money, so it's only right for us to supply you with the difference."

Lord Simeon nodded. "It's just as Marielle says. I also promise to pay you for the trouble we caused."

"You two are so formal." Mr. Bruno chuckled as he saw us off.

We left the theater and set off toward the royal palace, dragging—I mean, *taking* Reporter Pieron along with us.

"Why do I have to go too?" he grumbled.

"Aren't you worried you'll be attacked if we part ways here?" I chided. "I believe it would be better for you to be protected at the palace."

"I guess."

I was riding on Lord Simeon's horse, while Reporter Pieron was paired with a different knight and riding on the back of that horse. *Oh, it seems he knows how to ride.* A person who didn't know how to ride at all was better suited for the front, as the swaying in the back was difficult for a beginner to navigate. But Reporter Pieron maintained his position, moving in tandem with the horse's pace.

Lord Simeon glanced at him briefly, evidently determined that he was fine, and then told me to hold on tight. "We're going to go faster, so bear with it for just a bit longer."

After that long day, the sky was finally about to lose all of its light. Night

would be upon us by the time we reached the palace. The knights galloped through the streets filled with people and carriages.

Chapter Nine

We entered through the palace's western entrance, Bonheur Gate, which was the closest gate to the Royal Knights' residence. As expected, we went straight there instead of to the main palace.

"Oh, you're back." Captain Poisson and His Highness the Crown Prince greeted us when we arrived at the back meeting room.

The captain was around the same age as Reporter Pieron. Though he was also a middle-aged man, Captain Poisson was the complete opposite of the reporter—very cool. His uniform was as worn-out as always, but that didn't diminish its charm. His body proportions were different too. His tall, toned body, which was common for soldiers, didn't give away his age at all. I wouldn't have minded pretending to elope with an older man like him...as long as it was just an act, of course.

"So you were able to save her. That's good." Prince Severin nodded in approval. He wasn't a fighter himself—though he was tall, he was also slim. He was the same age as Lord Simeon, but with a different sort of beauty. His countenance carried both youthful exuberance and mature calmness, which made the hearts of all kinds of women flutter. His refreshing, dignified appearance was that of the perfect young man, which made me wonder why he happened to have been born under the star of misfortune.

Suddenly faced with *very* high-ranking people, Reporter Pieron was frozen at the door to the room. Sir Alain forcefully pushed him inside. His Highness and Captain Poisson peered at him curiously, as commoners wouldn't typically enter a place like this.

I stepped in front of His Highness to greet him. "My deepest apologies for causing such trouble. I thank you for aiding us."

"Right, well... This is *you* we're talking about here." His reaction was rather ambiguous. "I can no longer be surprised at any of the incidents you find yourself embroiled in. For now, I'm just glad you aren't hurt. Nothing is wrong, I

presume?”

“Nothing, Your Highness. I only have a few bruises. My most pressing issue right now is my empty stomach.”

“Marielle,” Lord Simeon softly warned me.

But my stomach has been rumbling for so long now! You can't expect me to stand in front of His Highness with a growling beast in my belly!

“It *is* about time for a meal,” Prince Severin mused. “I’ve been dealing with an empty stomach myself while waiting for you.”

“Then let’s all eat together!”

“Marielle!” Lord Simeon warned again.

Captain Poisson cackled gleefully. “We can prepare the same meals that we knights eat here,” he offered. “Or would you prefer to eat in the palace, Your Highness?”

“A meal doesn’t need to be anything extravagant. I don’t mind eating here,” Prince Severin replied. “We have things to discuss anyway.” Sir Alain and the other knights retreated to eat in the dining hall, leaving me, Lord Simeon, and Reporter Pieron in the room with the captain and His Highness.



“Could somebody please understand how I feel about being left alone with people of such high status?” The reporter tugged at his sleeve.

“You don’t need to be so afraid. His Highness and the captain are both very kind people,” I said. “Lord Simeon, on the other hand, is a demon vice captain.”

My husband took offense to that. “Who are you calling kind? The captain is your type of blackhearted too, you know.”

“Hmm? Hmm? Did you say something, wittle Simeon?” Captain Poisson was cackling even harder now.

“Please stop making those gross noises!” Lord Simeon turned back to me. “I will be upfront about this: The captain is very calculating and does not miss a thing. He is also a middle-aged man who loves mischief and is always up to no good. He causes trouble for all of his underlings, no exceptions.”

“Why so boring? Such common words are like mosquito bites. Can’t you say something more *impactful*?”

“I...will leave that to the expert on words.”

I jolted backward. “Huh? Me?! Um... Words that would heavily affect an older man...? Like ‘has an old man smell’?”

“Augh!” The captain took visible damage.

“Oh no...”

Prince Severin nodded in Reporter Pieron’s direction. “Hey. That one took damage as well.”

The meeting room’s table was large and rectangular. His Highness sat at the head. Captain Poisson and Lord Simeon sat on either side of him, facing each other. I sat next to Lord Simeon, followed by Reporter Pieron.

Prince Severin and the captain were still gazing at the reporter very curiously.

“So who is he?” the prince asked.

“This is Reporter Pieron from the *La Môme* Company. Do you read newspapers, Your Highness?”

“Sometimes I look over them, but I’ve never heard of this ‘*La Môme*.’”

“It’s a gossip rag,” Lord Simeon cut in coldly.

Reporter Pieron didn’t get angry—he simply let the words flow over him. His complexion was pale.

“So a paper for the masses, then. Hmm. I’d like to read one sometime.” Prince Severin smiled.

My ears perked up. “Oh, then I actually have one right h—”

“Marielle!” Lord Simeon covered my mouth with his hand.

Reporter Pieron looked at me skeptically as I protested. “You’re talking pretty comfortably with His Highness the Crown Prince. Just who *are* you, honestly?”

I locked eyes with Lord Simeon. With the reporter here, we couldn’t exactly hide anything, so I figured there was nothing I could do at this point but reveal it all.

“I should also ask who this knight is,” Reporter Pieron continued. “He seems to be your husband? ‘Lord Simeon,’ who’s high ranking in the Royal Order of Knights and friends with His Highness...”

“We would like you to introduce yourself first,” Captain Poisson cut in. “Why were you with Marielle? We don’t yet know the circumstances surrounding your presence.”

As much as he liked to fool around, Captain Poisson was a shrewd man. He probably sensed the tense atmosphere between us and Reporter Pieron.

I had only been able to write a rough explanation in my letter, so they naturally wanted to ask us for the details. They were probably utterly confused as to why a newspaper reporter was with me.

Captain Poisson grinned. “Ah, I suppose you’d like me to name myself before I ask, wouldn’t you? Pardon me. I’m Albert Poisson, Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Nice to meet you.”

“And I am the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange, Severin Hugues de Lagrange. It is a pleasure to meet you,” His Highness followed, playing along with the captain’s teasing.

Reporter Pieron cowered even further at these playful introductions. “H-

Hello... I'm... Er, my name is Pieron, from the *La Môme* Company."

"Are you unable to properly name yourself? *What Pieron?*" Captain Poisson relentlessly jabbed at him. *Now that you mention it, I don't know his name either.*

Being the center of attention seemed to make the usually impudent reporter sweat. "Ah, yes sir, my name is Jack. Jack Pieron."

"Okay then, Jack. Ha ha, don't be so nervous! We're the same age, and the rest of 'em are younger, so there's no need to be so stiff, right? Relax!"

"Ha ha ha... As if I could possibly relax."

Captain Poisson probably heard that last whisper, but something like that wouldn't be enough to make him upset. On the contrary, his face showed that he was fully intent on poking fun at Reporter Pieron because it was amusing. *I wonder if this is how he usually bullies his subordinates. Lord Simeon must be a victim too.*

I was beginning to feel a bit sorry for Reporter Pieron, so I explained the situation myself. Our meals were brought to us in the middle of the conversation, so we talked as we ate. For dinner, the knights were having baguettes and pâté, onion soup, and a chicken, vegetable, and bean stir-fry. The meal came with a dessert of cylinder-shaped cake that had chocolate and fruits embedded in it. *So even soldiers eat sweets. How cute.*

"A hidden roster from the Scalchi Familia, hmm?" After my explanation, Prince Severin fell deep into thought.

Captain Poisson had finished his meal early and was savoring the chocolate cake. "My, my, you always seem to find yourself in the middle of an incident somehow, don't you? Simeon, you don't like sweet things, right? Give me that."

"I would like to give it to my wife instead of a mischievous old man, so I will decline."

I smiled at my husband. "I appreciate the offer, but I don't think I can even finish mine, so please give yours to the captain."

Captain Poisson wasted no time getting up from his seat to steal the dessert

from Lord Simeon's plate. Lord Simeon, in turn, took the baguette I couldn't finish from mine. As it turned out, a soldier's meal was too much for me.

I went back to my tale. "Lord Simeon, I forgot to mention this to you as well, but I learned something along the way. Now that I think about it, this may have something to do with this case..."

I hinted at my point since I wasn't sure how much I could reveal in front of Reporter Pieron, and sure enough, Lord Simeon guessed what I was getting at and nodded. "I will ask you about it later, then. The foremost matter is whether or not the Delmer baronage is in danger. I dispatched people to guard their manor, but did the men from the Familia say anything about it?"

"No, I wasn't able to talk to them much. But they took Mr. Damian away. He may have already ended up telling them where the roster is, as well as the baronage's circumstances."

I glanced at Reporter Pieron. Though he'd said that Mr. Damian wasn't a good associate, he'd also mentioned that he was an old friend, so he was surely worried about what had happened to him. At the moment, the reporter was looking downcast.

I also had heavy feelings when thinking about Mr. Damian. Though I hoped he was all right, it was hard to stay positive, particularly since he'd already been injured. It was also scary to think of the worst-case scenario—considering what he'd done, he would be reaping what he'd sown, but I still didn't want someone I'd spoken with to suffer.

Reporter Pieron silently ate his food without joining the conversation. As I'd noted during the day, he was very clean when he ate. His hands were moving very fast, so he must have been quite hungry. His plate was almost empty.

Prince Severin turned to him. "Mr. Pieron, do you know where this roster is?"

"N-No sir, I do not." He answered with a nervous voice after the prince of his nation asked him a direct question. "He only showed me a bit of the roster when we spoke about it—nothing after that. Once Damian entered House Delmer, I only communicated with him through letters, not in person."

"Letters, hmm? So you were in contact with each other." As expected of the

prince, he caught it.

Reporter Pieron's face hitched as he silently cursed at himself.

"That would mean you helped this Damian person assume the guise of House Delmer's eldest son, yes? And since you remained in contact with him afterward, you planned to get your hands on the inheritance together."

Reporter Pieron stopped eating. The prince's words were making him blue in the face.

Hmm... "Your Highness, let's save that topic for later," I said. "Right now, we need to discuss the location of the hidden roster."

"Indeed. Pieron, you may not know everything, but tell us what you do know. If you were cooperating with Damian, then you should be able to theorize where he held his trump card, the roster."

The reporter let out the breath he was holding now that we had circled back to the main topic. He still couldn't meet the prince's eyes, but he answered carefully. "Knowing Damian's personality, and considering the situation, he can't have left it far away. I believe it's somewhere in the Delmer manor."

"As I thought."

We all began contemplating the matter.

"Our only choice is to go investigate for ourselves," reasoned Lord Simeon. "This isn't an issue that we can just leave alone. Let us go tomorrow."

"Certainly." Prince Severin pursed his lips. "If we find it first, then the Familia won't go after the baronage anymore."

I pushed my plate away. "I hope we can find it... Oh, we could also pretend we found it to trick them, like at Mauge."

My opinion was met with wry laughter from His Highness. "That's true. But we're also after that roster for real. I'd like to find it no matter what."

In the end, Lord Simeon decided to go to the Delmer manor with his subordinates the next day. His Highness ordered Reporter Pieron to accompany him. The reporter looked thoroughly reluctant, but he was unable to defy Prince Severin.

As soon as we finished the meal, Reporter Pieron was encouraged to rest for the remainder of the day. Until tomorrow, he would stay in an official residence, which contained a small underground room that could be locked. He would most likely be able to sleep well, though we could only hope that he'd accept not being able to come and go as he pleased for his safety.

After watching Reporter Pieron get taken away, His Highness called us to attention once more—we began another discussion over post-meal coffee and tea. "Now, on to our private matters. You probably have an idea of what it's about already, don't you?"

It seemed the prince wanted a more detailed explanation. I nodded and answered him. "I hinted earlier that I heard Prince Liberto is doing some sort of 'spring cleaning.' I'd assumed it regarded his political enemies, but it appears to be about the Familia instead."

When Olga had told me about it at Tarentule, I'd been reminded of the Easdale faction, and I'd completely forgotten about the Familia. Though Lavia opposed the Easdale faction, they wouldn't be able to purge it. After all, the faction was indeed helping to protect Lavia in the first place, and at their helm was the current Grand Duchess. Prince Liberto wouldn't refer to her as "filth to be disposed of."

No, this filth, which had recently become more powerful in Lavia, had to be the Scalchi Familia. Their namesake and the head of the Familia had passed away last year, but their higher-ups had inherited the organization, so it continued to function as it had before. Even now, they were still in control of Lavia's underworld.

"The whole thing seems to be a deep-rooted issue within Lavia. I was told that it has been a struggle for them to try and eradicate the Familia. Letting them gain more power will only endanger Lavia's citizens even more, and it could end up affecting the grand duke's family as well. Day by day, they're becoming more of a force to be reckoned with. Prince Liberto must be hoping to nip them in the bud so that they won't eventually overtake the entire Grand Duchy."

The Familia most likely already had political influence if they were colluding with societal figures. There was a possibility that their members had already

infiltrated powerful places, which was why Prince Liberto wanted to rid his kingdom of them.

“Apparently, this information has already been reported to Lagrange,” I said. “Since you said this topic is related to the meeting you all had today, you must have received a message from Lavia about it, correct?”

“That’s right.” Prince Severin nodded. “We received a warning that the Familia’s resistance is growing stronger. Who told you this information?”

“My goddesses.”

“There? Hmm.” His Highness looked ambiguously satisfied. Perhaps this topic was particularly classified? Olga hadn’t made it seem so when she’d spoken of it. As expected of Tarentule’s information web.

I tilted my head as I voiced my concerns. “But why was *this* the moment the information came out? If the grand duke’s family holds a big celebration for the prince’s engagement while the Familia is causing trouble, isn’t there a high chance of them being targeted there?”

A strange silence befell us. I realized something before anyone could answer me. “Wait, is that what the prince is aiming for?!”

“I...would hope that he wouldn’t be willing to use Henri as a decoy.”

His Highness didn’t deny the possibility. So Prince Liberto was intentionally rousing the Familia to get them to target him? *But that’s...* Even if he were able to catch some members at the celebration, he’d only be catching low-level pawns and not top brass. Did that mean he had a plan that ran deeper? Olga had said this would become a large issue. Could it be big enough to turn all of Lavia on its head?

Prince Severin struck the nail in the coffin after seeing my expression. “Don’t speak of this to anyone else, no matter what. If this plan of his fails, Henri will suddenly be widowed.”

“Are you not going to put a stop to such a dangerous plot?”

“Marielle,” Lord Simeon rebuked with a stern glare.

I unwillingly closed my mouth. Try as I might, I just couldn’t acknowledge this

plan when thinking about Princess Henriette. *She's been looking forward to her wedding day for so, so long!* I knew how anxious she was, as I'd spent many days with her. She would finally get to wear her bridal outfit after spending hours upon hours gazing at it, and she would exchange vows with the person she loved. If she were to be knocked from the peak of happiness down to despair, what would happen to her?

Even worse...what if she gets involved?

"Don't make that face," Prince Severin soothed me with a kind voice. "He's an ardent strategist, that one—he won't be bested so easily. He has all of the tools to win at his disposal. Also, on our end, I don't just plan to watch from the sidelines. You don't need to worry, and don't let Henri know of this either."

"You're not going to tell her?"

"I'll meet with Liberto, then tell her what's necessary. For now, this topic is strictly confidential. Understand?"

"Yes sir..."

Lord Simeon patted my back. I wondered if this was what they'd discussed at their meeting today. So Lavia and Lagrange were making plans together. My only option was to believe in Prince Liberto's toughness, as well as His Highness and His Majesty's commandeering skills. *It will surely be fine... It's not as if this is a sink or swim bet they're making. They have a clear chance of victory.*

I bowed my head. "That was an impertinent remark of mine. My deepest apologies, Your Highness."

"All is well. As this is the situation at hand, I'd like to gather as much information on the Familia as I can and retrieve the roster this Damian person stole at all costs. I'm sorry, but could you brainstorm just a bit more for me? The brooch that got you into this mess—it was an earring before, yes? Isn't it possible that that's the key here?"

I pondered his question. *Perhaps Damian didn't need it to access the Delmer inheritance... What if it's the key to the hidden roster? Is that really possible...?* I'd thoroughly examined the object so that I could write it into my short story, and I'd memorized its design and structure. No matter how I looked at it, it was

a mere pin brooch. It wasn't shaped like a key. *What if "key" means something else here, like the "key" to an exchange? In that case, Damian was lying about exchanging it for the inheritance. Would he have actually received the roster instead? But if that were true, then he wouldn't have hidden it—he would've given it to someone. Who would that be?*

Hmm...

I told Lord Simeon and the others everything I could theorize from what we knew currently, allowing us to rethink whether or not the brooch was really related.

Captain Poisson put his hand to his chin. "Doesn't sound like it's related at all."

I folded my hands together. "Before we can decide that, we first need to check if there really is an inheritance that the Delmer baroness left to a trustee."

"I'll be the one to do that," Lord Simeon affirmed. "I'll be investigating the Delmer residence anyway, so it shouldn't be hard to figure out."

His Highness nodded. "It didn't seem like that reporter, Pieron, was hiding anything. There probably wouldn't be a reason for him to hide information related to the roster."

"I agree," I said definitively. "Most likely, neither the roster nor the inheritance are important to him. He would have told us if he knew anything."

The best course of action for us was to consider these two situations—the roster Mr. Damian stole and the Delmer baronage's inheritance—as two separate things. Perhaps it was only coincidence that both of these situations involved Mr. Damian, and the sole reason he'd contacted me was the inheritance. Though of course, that still left questions. He'd successfully infiltrated the Delmer residence as Eric, so he surely hadn't had any problems living his life during that time. Why would he willingly go into town and endanger himself? He should have prioritized concealing himself and thought of a different method to obtain the inheritance. Why had he gone out in public knowing that he was being hunted?

Though there was an endless sea of questions, there was a limit to how much we could glean at the moment. We decided to wrap things up for the night, investigate the Delmer manor the next day, then reconvene once we had results. His Highness returned to the palace, and I was finally allowed to go home. I followed Lord Simeon to the parking space where our carriage was waiting.

“What a long day...” My voice was giving out.

The shining stars awaited us once we stepped outside. The afternoon had been quite warm, but tonight, the wind was chilling.

“I’m exhausted. I want to sleep already...”

Lord Simeon patted my head with the hand I wasn’t clinging to. “You said you fell from somewhere and got hurt. How are your injuries?”

“They don’t hurt as long as I don’t do anything strenuous.”

Sure enough, I’d found several purple bruises when changing earlier. My mother-in-law was certainly going to scold me for doing such an unladylike thing as jumping from a bridge.

Lord Simeon wrapped his arm around my back. “Rest up and recover at home for the time being. More than anything, I’m glad you’re safe. I couldn’t help but worry when I saw your face.” He pressed his cheek against my hair.

“I’m sorry...” I whispered.

“I received a report stating you’d been kidnapped, then your letter was delivered just as I was leaving the meeting. I was shocked and relieved in such quick succession that it felt like I was being blown around in the middle of a storm.”

“Really, I am so sorry.” *Ugh, the only thing I can do is apologize... I knew I’d worry him. Joanna and the others must be feeling the same way. I’ll have to apologize to all of them... Wait, is this really my fault?*

“I’m well aware that this time, you were only involved by force majeure,” said Lord Simeon. “Perhaps I should have predicted it.”

“I already told you back in town—no one could have predicted any of this. So

there's no need for either of us to fall to self-loathing over it. Don't you agree?"

"You may be right."

We looked at each other and laughed. *That's right, we're victims here. We should just be happy that we're together right now.*

"My lady! I'm so glad you're all right!" Once we arrived at the carriage, we found that our driver had been antsy waiting for us. He was overjoyed and teary upon seeing me.

"You were the one to come pick us up, Joseph? You must be exhausted! I'm so sorry."

"Not at all, my lady! I'm the one who should be sorry. I couldn't do anything, even though I was the one to accompany you in the first place."

"Nonsense, you didn't do anything wrong. *I* was the one who had you wait so far away. There was nothing you could do."

"But I was so worried about what to do... I was utterly relieved when I heard that you were okay."

Ah, he's beating himself up over it too. I was sure to have the same conversation with Joanna once I arrived home. I might have been a victim, but I was truly sorry to have inconvenienced everyone.

After Lord Simeon and I pacified Joseph, I got in the carriage, anxious to get home.

"Are you not going home, Lord Simeon?" He'd walked me here without any of his belongings, so it seemed he wasn't to return just yet. I'd asked him to escort me since I was lonely and disheartened, but he looked ambivalent about going back to our manor.

"I...hadn't been planning to," he said, "but I'm worried about you going home alone. I have to tidy a few things up and then retrieve my bag and horse. Do you mind waiting?"

"I don't mind. There's no need to rush, so please take care of what you need."

"Understood. I'll be right back. Joseph, I'm sorry to make you wait longer, but I won't take long."

“Yes sir.” Joseph smiled.

I watched Lord Simeon jog off the way we’d come, then I shut the carriage door. I lay down in the seat since no one was watching. *Ah, I’m so tired...*

As soon as I began to relax, the exhaustion came onto me at once, along with a strong sense of sleepiness. *I don’t want to get up...* I began dozing off. *I want to go to the Delmer baronage tomorrow as well, but will I be able to wake up in time? I could ask Lord Simeon to wake me, but something tells me he’ll leave me behind while I oversleep. I’ll ask Joanna to wake me up no matter what...*

I wondered if we’d be able to find the roster. *Where could Mr. Damian have hidden it? And how much do the staff at the Delmer manor know? And Mr. Damian himself... There’s nothing I can do, but I’m still worried about him.*

My thoughts gradually blurred into each other, and what began as a nap became actual sleep. I faintly noticed the carriage moving, so Lord Simeon must have returned, but my eyes wouldn’t open. Once we arrived home, Lord Simeon would probably carry me inside. *I may as well let him... I’m just so tired, after all...*

The sway of the carriage only deepened my slumber. I could vaguely feel the speed of the vehicle rising, but my eyelids remained shut. I slept comfortably until the carriage came to a complete stop. My consciousness only returned once a hand shook my shoulder. *Ah, it’s quiet, and the vibration of the moving carriage has ceased.* I could tell through the haze that we’d arrived. I yawned and managed to shake off the drowse enough to stand up.

You usually carry me! Why did you wake me up? I pouted as I stood from my seat. But as I put my hand on the doorway to leave, I came to an abrupt stop.

The person standing in front of me was neither Lord Simeon nor Joanna.

His face seemed to put him at around thirty, and his eyes were shrewd. *I recognize him. I think he’s...one of the Familia members who attacked us in the theater plaza.*

“Could you get down from there already? We don’t want to do anything unnecessary either. Come on.” His tone let me know he was threatening me, which confirmed my suspicions.

A chill ran down my spine. All traces of sleepiness vanished from my mind.
What's going on? How did this happen?

What stood behind the man was clearly not the entrance to the Flaubert mansion. Though it was well-made, it was compact. Upon closer inspection, it was a building I was familiar with. *Why am I here? No, before that, where's Lord Simeon? And Joseph?*

I couldn't see anyone else in the vicinity, but I could sense them all around. It was only natural, since this was Sans-Terre's largest shopping district. I was back in town.

"Hurry it up!" the man shouted at me.

I didn't want to disembark, but it seemed like he was going to pull me down by force if I didn't oblige. I steeled myself, pulled up my skirt so I wouldn't step on it, and put my foot on the small ledge of the carriage. The man outside didn't offer me a hand. *Well, what a gentleman he is. Though I suppose that's fine, since I don't want him touching me!*

I carefully lowered myself so that I wouldn't slip, then looked around. It was nighttime, but my surroundings were bright. The lights of lanterns all around us were reflecting off the water, creating a mystical scene. Mixed in with the sound of the four small fountains was soft music that seemed to be coming from the show hall.

I wasn't allowed to look for very long before the man pushed me toward the entrance. The person standing in front of the door politely bowed and opened it.

"Go in," the man behind me ordered.

Past the door was a hall. I could see large vases filled with live flowers and a red carpet. There was another person waiting inside, who also politely greeted us—an elegant-looking person dressed as a butler.

Um, I know him...

He didn't look surprised at me entering through the front door, even though I usually came in through the back. He said "welcome" to me in his work voice. I silently passed by him. In this establishment, the workers' creed was to pretend

not to know each customer, and they wouldn't raise a fuss no matter what.

That's the only reason he's ignoring me...right? There's no way he doesn't recognize me. He should have already remembered my face by now... I think.

I couldn't be positive, but I wasn't able to check either. I made my way forward and was forced into double doors to the right. *I remember this feeling. His Highness Severin was with me back then. A foreign ambassador awaited us that time. What's waiting for me tonight?*

We went up a flight of stairs and into a private room on the second floor. The man's footsteps didn't waver—he knew where to go. He walked straight forward and knocked on the door of his destination.

A voice responded to him from inside. I'd heard this voice before too.

The man opened the door and jerked his chin at me to go in. This rude gesture soured my mood, but I kept my head up and stepped inside.

I'd been here before, so I wasn't surprised at the decor. The room was furnished with only the highest quality items; rare set pieces from foreign kingdoms were placed all around. The strange scent, different from perfume, seemed to be that of fragrant wood, also from another kingdom. The floor had a high-pile carpet, and below the fancy chandelier was a couch for comfortable sitting.

On it was...

"Welcome!" A beautiful woman was attending a guest, who was apparently awaiting me. She greeted us with a bright voice.

And her guest was, of course, the man with black hair.

Chapter Ten

How on earth did he manage to kidnap me from the royal palace, of all places?

My head was filled with nothing but questions. Lord Simeon might have left my side for a moment, but Joseph had been with me and the carriage. And in order to get where we were now, the assailant would have had to pass by the guards at the gate. Besides, getting *into* the palace grounds was harder than getting out of them. The gate wouldn't be opened for anyone unless they stated their identity and business. Of course there wouldn't be any easy access to the royal palace.

It can't be... Are there confidants of the Familia in Ventvert Palace as well? And they let these people in? How horrible!

I'd known the Familia was a dangerous crime syndicate, but this let me know that I still didn't fully understand its scale. Just how wide was their reach to even have infiltrated Lagrange's royal palace?

I stood still, feeling very nervous, in front of the black-haired man. He was calmly sitting with crossed legs, and the entertainer was snuggled up next to him. *Look at him, reclining as if he doesn't have a care in the world! How fitting!* This masculine person who reeked of danger suited this high-class brothel perfectly. *Urgh, why must I get ideas for fiction from a situation like this? I went and thought this scene would be perfect for a painting! This isn't the time, me!*

"I'm sorry to bother you when you must be tired. Go on, have a seat. Let's have a nice chat." The black-haired man gestured to an empty chair. "Ah, no need to worry. I don't feel like hurting you right now. I truly just want to chat. That's why I chose Tarentule. The workers here would take their clients' secrets to the grave, but they would never allow an incident to occur within the shop walls. Their whole schtick is having a place where customers can play in peace, right? They've hired all of these muscly guards too. I booked a room so that we could rest easy while we talk. So relax."

He laughed while looking at the woman at his side. She smiled beautifully back at him and stood up to offer me a seat. *You're acting like you don't know me, but I can trust you, right, Olga?*

Had the man chosen her because he knew she was my friend? I wanted to believe it was a coincidence, but it was hard to think that he could have booked one of the greatest flowers without an appointment. I was really beginning to fear the power of the Familia.

I softly lowered myself into the chair. The man who'd led me here stood by the door, probably to guard it. Olga lightly rubbed my shoulder from the side. That gave me a bit of confidence, since it felt like she was telling me I would be all right. Indeed, if anything were to happen here, Tarentule was sure to report it. Olga wouldn't abandon me. That wasn't the type of person she was.

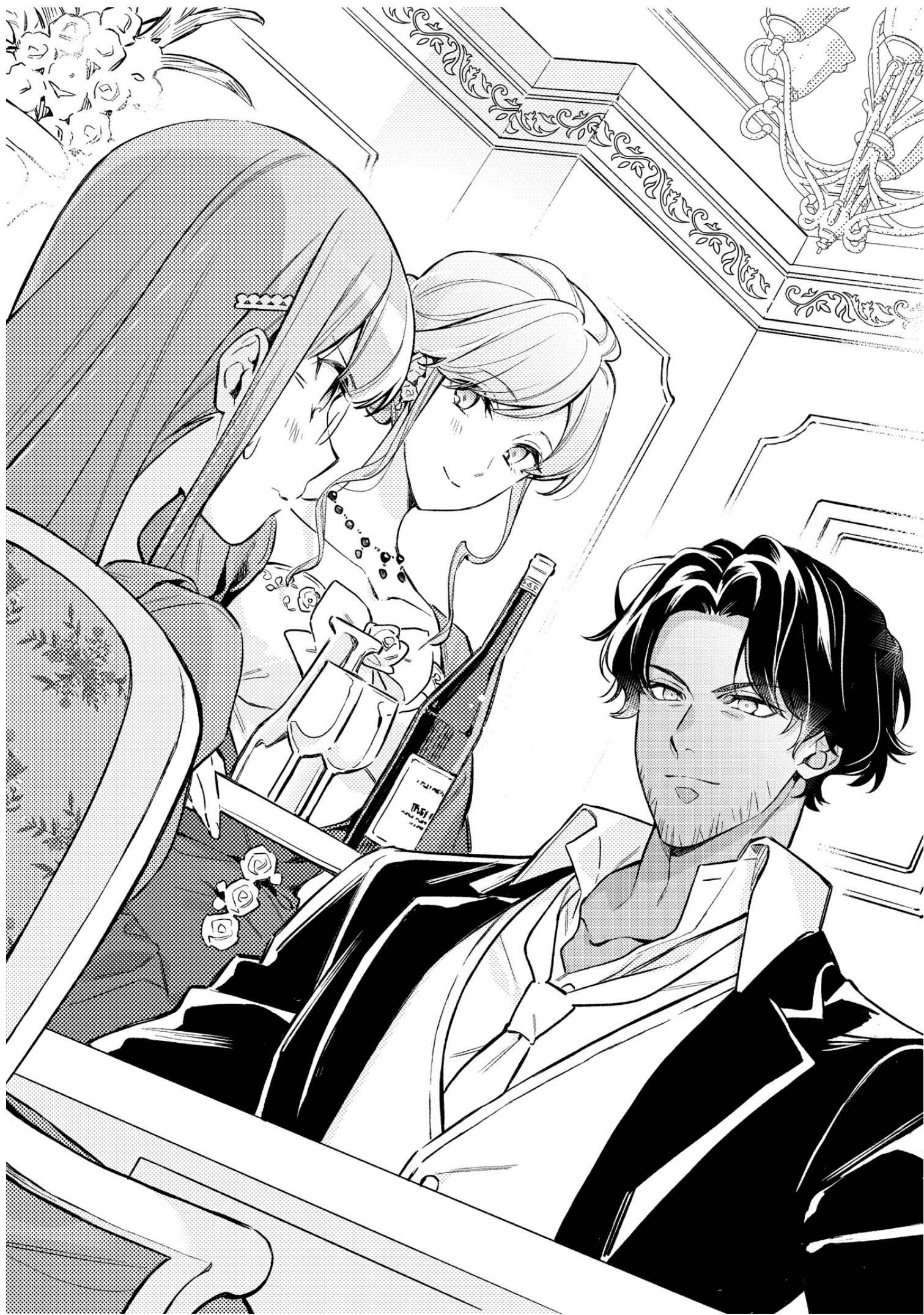
I took a deep breath, then glared at the man before me. "What happened to my driver? Is he safe?"

"Yes, yes, of course. He's perfectly energetic. I just had him put to sleep for a bit. Once he wakes up, I'll be sure to have him treated with the finest care." The black-haired man spoke loftily. I didn't know how much I could trust him, but at the very least, the worst outcome had been avoided. That was enough to offer me a bit of relief.

"Where's Mr. Damian?"

"You're worried about him too? How kind of you."

Olga, who had disappeared behind the partition screen, came back holding a tray bearing a thin bottle, a water jug, and two glasses. She stopped in front of us and tipped the contents of the bottle, which was clear with no carbonation at all, into the glasses. It seemed to be alcohol, but neither wine nor champagne. There was even ice in the glasses. She poured enough of the liquid to cover the ice, then followed up with water. Finally, Olga squeezed some precut lime slices into the glasses, lightly mixed them, and offered them to us. *It looks to be a refreshing drink... I wonder if it tastes good.*



The black-haired man picked up the glass in front of him. “Damian’s a bit limp right now. We didn’t torture him or anything. He jumped out of the window on his own, then got hit by a carriage as he ran off. He injured himself so badly that we couldn’t torture him even if we wanted to.”

“Is he conscious?”

The man heaved an exaggerated sigh. “He’s opened his eyes a few times, but he isn’t in any state to talk. We figured he would die if we were too rough with him, so now we’re stumped since we can’t do anything. That’s why we’re asking you.”

“Asking me for what?”

Olga had placed a glass in front of me as well. It wasn’t round with a stem like a normal wine glass, and there was an intricate pattern etched onto the surface.

The man put his glass to his lips. He didn’t gulp it down, just took a normal sip. However, he froze for a second, then put the cup back on the table, never to pick it up again. Though he side-eyed Olga, her smiling expression didn’t change.

“What are you asking of me?” I demanded. “I don’t have any information to give you.”

Is there something in that drink? Even if there isn’t, I don’t want alcohol right now. I didn’t reach for my glass.

“Well...” The man turned slowly back to me. “From the looks of it, you weren’t given the roster.”

“Roster...?”

“Do you know what I’m referring to?”

He’d heard my reflexive whisper. I hurriedly denied it.

“No. As I said, I have nothing to offer you. All I’ve heard is that Mr. Damian took something like that. The person who told me didn’t know where he hid it either.”

The black-haired man sighed again. “Then I’m really sorry about all this. I

didn't mean to get an innocent person involved. It's all his fault for doing such odd things."

I stayed silent.

"Ah, and I'll give this back to you." He sounded like he was remembering something. "You seemed to have made some sort of deal with him, so I thought a hint to the roster was in here. I'm sorry about that."

What he pulled out next was my pouch. He casually held it out to me, and I timidly took it from him. When I peeked inside, I saw that my wallet and the brooch case were both still present, and the brooch was indeed inside its case. Relieved, I looked back at him.

"We don't have much time, so I'll get straight to the point." His voice was languid. "That husband of yours will come breaking down the door if we wait too long. Knowing him, he'll find some minuscule trace that you're here and will pinpoint your location with precision, so I'll have to hightail it out of here pretty soon. So allow me to ask you: please find the roster for us."

I couldn't answer him immediately. Not because I was surprised or scared, but because I was exasperated. I had to narrow my eyes at him. "For *you*?"

"It's not like we can just waltz into the baronage ourselves."

As I'd expected, they knew about House Delmer. I gripped my pouch, thinking he was threatening me.

"We would've already snuck in and stolen it ourselves if we knew where it was. But searching for it would take too long. We couldn't possibly do that."

He was right. If total strangers searched the house up and down, the neighbors would notice. Nobles and the rich were often targeted by thieves, so they had more security measures than commoners. If outsiders were spotted in the manor without servants around, they'd be reported immediately.

"You guys are going to search for it too, right?" he asked. "So just give it back to us when you find it."

"And you think I'm going to listen to such a request?"

"It would be a problem if you didn't." The man still spoke in a carefree tone,

and he even snickered at my brusqueness. “It belonged to us in the first place. It’s not so strange to ask for it back. Are you intending to steal a stolen object?”

Urgh, he has a point... I vigorously shook my head to rid myself of any thoughts of agreement. Though he was making logical sense, there were things that morally could and could not be asked of me. This man had no right to negotiate with me in the first place.

He cut me off before I could tell him as much. “We’ll be keeping your driver until you find the roster. We’ll give him a nice room, food, and even throw in women too. Relax, he’ll be treated just right.”

I gaped at him.

“We’ll give him back in exchange for the roster. How ’bout it? Very humane plan, don’t you think?”

Ah, so this is the Familia. They thought nothing of evildoing and spoke of it as if it were simply a fact of life. They threatened people with expressions that could even be mistaken for kindness, and they would surely have no qualms about stealing a person’s life away.

“Make sure to let your husband know too,” he went on. “Tell us through the ads in the paper when you find it. *La Môme*’ll do.”

Just how much did he know? I almost wanted to start being defiant. “In that case, you need to return Mr. Damian.”

“And why’s that?” His blue eyes widened. “He has nothing to do with you. There’s no need for you to save him.”

“I have something to ask him. He also needs to fulfill his promise to me. It wouldn’t be good for me to lose him now.”

The man massaged the thin hairs on his chin as he contemplated this, then rolled his eyes. “You’re such a Goody Two-shoes. He’s not worth saving, but you can’t let him go just because you talked to him for a little bit. I like that about you, but it also makes me jealous. I feel bad for your husband.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Well, whatever. We’ll be satisfied as long as we get the roster back, so I

accept your terms.” After being surprisingly agreeable, he stood up, walked over to me, then bent down to bring his face close. “Don’t even *think* of trying anything funny. I know you’re a respectable person who has nothing to do with this, so I won’t do anything to you as long as you bring the roster back to us. The Familia profits *because* good citizens exist, after all. That’s why you shouldn’t willingly step into the mud. Go live in the pretty, peaceful flower garden where you belong.”

His words were dripping with irony, yet strangely, I couldn’t feel any discomfort when I stared into his eyes. I saw myself reflected in them, which had a brightness that didn’t match the situation. Behind his eyes, he seemed to be having fun and was slightly mischievous. It made me think that we could’ve even become friends if we hadn’t met this way.

Of course, I knew that was impossible. He was a member of a dangerous crime syndicate. No matter how friendly he might have been acting, he was intimidating me to stop me from doing anything he didn’t want.

“Thank you for the warning,” I sneered, “but you didn’t have to say it. I’m a mere woman who can’t do anything.”

“A mere woman, huh?” His laugh held a deeper meaning to it. He straightened himself up, then walked to the entrance.

I called out to him. “At least tell me your name if you want me to contact you afterward. What should I call you?”

“Come up with one. A dreamy one, preferably. Like, ‘the man I spent a passionate night with.’”

“You wouldn’t recognize yourself, since that couldn’t be further from the truth. How about ‘the Lavian man who is good at Lagrangian’?”

“There’s too many of those out there. I still wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“I agree. So tell me your name.”

The man turned around with his hand on the doorknob. “Persistent, aren’t you? Do you want to know that badly? It’s hard being a popular man.”

“Indeed, I think you’re a wonderful person. Only in the face department, that

is.”

“Everything else about me is wonderful too, you know. Why don’t I tell you all about me at a later date?”

“I would love to hear about you. Please come to the military’s interrogation room sometime.”

Maybe I’d bested him, or maybe he was simply done with me by that point, but he just shrugged. “It’s Valeriano. Just V is fine.”

He then left, taking the other man with him. I hurriedly said one last thing to him as he walked off. “Remember, you promised you wouldn’t hurt Joseph! He’s also an unrelated party!”

He didn’t answer, just glanced at me and grinned. Olga and I were left behind in the room. I released the breath I’d been holding due to nerves. My throat was dry. The glass with condensation dripping down its surface was tantalizing.

“You can drink that.” Olga’s voice was velvety as she watched me. “There’s no drug in it. It’s just normal alcohol.”

I picked up the cool glass and gingerly put it to my lips, a bit afraid. *Hmm, it doesn’t seem to have much of a flavor? It has a citrus scent and is a little bittersweet.* I almost thought it was plain water, until the burning sensation at the back of my throat told me it was definitely alcohol.

“This is quite strong.” I lifted my eyebrows.

“Quite? Or ‘very’?” Olga giggled.

“Indeed. You diluted it, but it’s still...”

“Oh, no. I didn’t dilute it. This here is also filled with the same alcohol.” Her slim, white finger pointed at the water jug.

“Huh?”

“The only thing diluting it right now is the melting ice, so it’s mostly the pure thing.”

“Why did you do that?”

Her beautiful figure was dripping with sensuality, but her voice squealed with

mischievous. “I thought he was going to put on airs and drop it all at once. He seemed like he wasn’t being cautious, but he was actually extremely suspicious of his surroundings.”

My mouth fell open. *M-My goddeeeess!* I wanted to praise her divine beauty more than ever. *No, I will, right now! I’ll get on my knees. You pretended like you didn’t know what was happening, but you were actually trying to help me! Thank you so much!* I did, in fact, slide down from the chair to the floor. I knelt there.

“You don’t have to do that.” Olga laughed as she pulled me up.

“So Tarentule isn’t under the Familia’s control?” I asked desperately.

“We’re not under *anyone’s* control. Though we do pay taxes, Tarentule’s dignity isn’t so flimsy.”

Ah! So wonderful, and so very cool! Such a slender flower, yet so strong and sturdy!

“We treat our clients right no matter who they are, as long as they pay and play by the rules. We don’t mind if they use our secret meeting room either, because we’d never leak their secrets. Tarentule’s code is absolute, but that doesn’t mean we’re heartless. If we find out our dear friend is in trouble, we’ll try to think of ways to help.”

“Thank you very much!”

She changed the subject, though I remained overwhelmed. “But I ended up not being of any help. I wish he would’ve been the kind of man who downed his whole drink in one go to impress a woman. Then I would’ve at least been able to lessen his decision-making skills, if nothing else. It’s too bad.”

I glanced back down at the glass, picked it up, and sat back in my chair. “Is this that strong? It seems stronger than wine, but I wouldn’t think someone could get drunk off of just one glass.”

“That’s because you have tolerance, Agnès. You don’t seem to realize it, but you’re probably a heavyweight.”

“A heavyweight?”

“But don’t get too complacent now. Drinking too much is bad for your body, even if you don’t get drunk.”

“Yes ma’am...”

I took another sip because the chilled texture and the refreshing citrus flavor were so good, but I put the glass down after that and asked for water. Though the taste of the alcohol resembled water, it didn’t quench my thirst. I wanted water more than anything else at the moment.

“I can’t believe you’re being targeted by the Scalchi Familia.” Olga poured me some water. “What in the world have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Hmm...” I gulped the new glass down. I wanted to at least tell her what was public, but since this ordeal seemed to be connected to Prince Liberto’s plan, I couldn’t be careless. “I’m sorry, I’m not allowed to say anything about it.”

“I see. That’s fine, then.” She backed down without question and didn’t let her curiosity get the best of her. I respected that very much.

“I promise that I’ll tell you about it if I’m ever allowed,” I said. “And I’m sorry to ask more of you, but could you call for the royal palace? They’re probably searching for me again.”

“I can, but then you’d be missing the one who came to pick you up.”

A stir in the hallway caught my ears, as if responding to Olga’s remark. Footsteps rushed toward the door, which was thrown open without a knock.

“Marielle!”

The voice I wanted to hear most made me jump from my chair.

“See? There he is,” Olga whispered.

I ran toward Lord Simeon and jumped onto his wide chest. He held me tight.

“Lord Simeon!”

“You’re all right! Ah...!”

His embrace was starting to get painful. He stroked my hair, then stroked my cheeks to make sure I was fine. The worker who’d led him here bowed in the doorway and left.

“Thank goodness...” Lord Simeon was shaking slightly, which let me know just how much I’d worried him. My words caught in my throat, and tears lined my eyes.

Olga spoke from behind us. “You arrived sooner than I expected. Did you know she was here based on witness reports? It’s impressive that you found her at night.”

Lord Simeon looked up at her, with me still in his arms. “What was happening here? I didn’t think Tarentule would lend a hand to kidnappers.”

“All we did was entertain the guest that booked this room through proper means. For some reason, he knew Agnès was acquainted with us, and all he told us was that she’d be coming. We didn’t do anything to her.”

“What an excuse.”

“Lord Simeon,” I pleaded. “Olga has nothing to do with this. In fact, she even tried to help me!” I hurriedly pushed Lord Simeon back—he’d been about to approach Olga in a rage.

He shook his head, looking dissatisfied. “I can only assume that they’ve been working with the Familia from the start. This is the only place where this fragrant wood is used—I could smell it on the letter.”

“Letter?” I turned to Olga since I wasn’t keeping up. She cocked her head, not knowing either.

“What letter?” I looked back at Lord Simeon.

“When I returned from retrieving my belongings, the carriage was no longer there. The guard at the gate said it had departed a while back. I rushed home upon hearing that, but as expected, you weren’t there. Both Joseph and the carriage were nowhere to be found. I tried to leave again to search for you, but *this* had been wedged through the gate.”

He let go of me, put his hand in his pocket, then handed me an envelope that was slightly smaller than standard. I pulled a message card out of it.

“I’m going to borrow your wife for a bit. Please take your time coming to get her.”

That was the only thing written. No penned name, nor any identifying patterns or seals. *How was this enough for Lord Simeon to figure out that I was at Tarentule? He said there was a scent, but...* I put the card to my nose. Only then was I able to smell the very faint aroma of wood. I showed it to Olga, who nodded after wafting the scent toward her nose.

“Yes, it’s the same wood that we use here, but I can guarantee you that we aren’t involved. As rare and expensive as it is, we aren’t the only ones who have it.”

Lord Simeon furrowed his brow at being denied so flatly. I told him that I’d fallen asleep as soon as I’d gotten in the carriage, then requested that he explain further.

“According to the gatekeeper, a knight had been assigned to guard you. That was why he let the carriage through without questioning it.”

“And which knight was that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. The gatekeeper said it was too dark to tell, so he didn’t check properly. He only determined that they were a knight based on their garb, and since they were exiting the premises, he didn’t feel the need to be cautious about it.”

“So that knight was a fake, then?”

“I would hope so.”

Even Lord Simeon couldn’t say anything for sure. He couldn’t fully deny the possibility that a knight was working for the Familia. I hoped that they were an imposter, but if the Familia really did have the knights in its palm, then the issue was much bigger than just me being kidnapped. The knights guarded the king, after all.

Lord Simeon said he would report this to his superiors and conduct a thorough investigation of the inner workings of the Royal Order. It most likely wouldn’t stop there either—everyone who worked in the royal palace would probably be subject to investigation too. This was a massive situation, which made me realize just how serious of a problem the Scalchi Familia really was. It made me even more worried about Prince Liberto, who was taking them head-

on, as well as Princess Henriette, who would inevitably get roped up in all this.

Regardless, we'd learned their *modus operandi*. The culprit had pretended to work for Lord Simeon and told Joseph that he'd wanted us to head home first because he was busy. The Familia had threatened and bound Joseph after departing from the palace, and then they'd overtaken the carriage. They must have had allies waiting for them outside.

Olga then spoke some biting words with a smiling face. "So the security guards at the palace made huge blunders, then. It's already bad enough that there's a mole among them, but they even let a faker infiltrate the palace. You should probably revise your own workplace's crude actions before coming for mine, don't you think?" She turned her back to Lord Simeon and sat down in one of the chairs.

"You...really aren't involved?" he asked weakly.

"All I can do is deny it verbally. There's nothing I can do about you doubting me. I can go on and on about Tarentule's honor and rules all I want, but you still wouldn't believe me." She threw more daggers at him, sounding like she wasn't worried in the least. "Would you like to investigate us as well? I'm so sorry to add more work to your pile!" She'd thoroughly quieted Lord Simeon by that point by indirectly saying that he shouldn't waste his time.

"U-Um..." I glanced at my husband's stiff figure and tried to calm things down. "It's all my fault, isn't it? It's my fault for worrying you. This just *had* to happen right after all the ruckus during the day, so you must be stressed out, Lord Simeon! I'm so sorry for causing all this trouble. Olga, it's all my fault, so please forgive him."

I bowed my head to both of them as I apologized. It was only natural for Lord Simeon to react this way. I'd gone missing right after he'd found me the first time, so his emotions must have been torn to shreds. No one could blame him for becoming suspicious of everyone after having been thrown around so much.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Agnès," Olga said soothingly. "It's not like you ran away on your own."

"But I caused so much chaos. I'm sorry for always doing this."

Lord Simeon heaved a sigh and softly shook his head. “No. You’re a victim here. I’m sorry, I let the blood rush to my head, and I went too far. I apologize.” He gracefully bowed to Olga.

I patted his back, then led him to the table since he had to be exhausted from running all the way here. “Let’s take a breather and brainstorm. I’m fine, as you can see, but Joseph is being kept somewhere. We have to save him.”

“Joseph was captured?”

I poured a glass of water for Lord Simeon. He must have been thirsty since he tipped the whole thing into his mouth at once. He then choked on it.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

“Th-This is...”

“What?! But... It can’t be!” I snatched the glass from Lord Simeon’s hand as he continued to choke violently, then downed the rest of it myself.

It was alcohol, not water.

Oh nooo! I’ve made a mistake!

“Oh my!” Olga giggled without a care in the world. Had she noticed that I’d grabbed the wrong jug? She certainly hadn’t said anything!

“Lord Simeon apologized!” I begged. “You should have told me!”

“Oh no, I wasn’t trying to be mean. You said he was stressed out, so I thought it would be good for him to relax a little.”

“But he can’t drink alcohol!”

“Does his body not agree with it? Do we have to call a doctor?”

“No, but...” I glanced over at Lord Simeon, who was still hacking. Making a quick decision, I had Olga leave the room, asked her not to let anyone near, and had the room locked for good measure. *With this, I should be able to protect my husband’s dignity.*

“Marielle...” He sounded sad.

“Yes?!” I whipped around and hurried over to him.

He embraced me tightly yet again. “Marielle... Marielle... Marielle...”

“Yes, I’m right here! Everything’s fine.”

“Marielle...” Lord Simeon pressed his cheek to mine like a child while calling my name over and over. “Don’t leave me... I can’t live without you...”

“I’m right here,” I murmured as I stroked his hair. “I won’t go anywhere anymore. I’ll be by your side forever, Lord Simeon.”

“I finally found you... I was so relieved that you were safe...so why did you leave again? No more... Don’t go anywhere anymore!”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for worrying you. I’m really, really sorry.”

His weight pushed both of us to our knees. *At this rate, he’ll probably fall asleep, as per usual. Even he would catch a cold sleeping on the floor.* I turned my eyes to the couch, wondering if I could lead him over to it, but Lord Simeon mistook that action for me trying to leave, then squeezed me tighter.

“No! Don’t leave!”

“I’m not going anywhere. Lord Simeon, why don’t we go to the chair? Isn’t it cold here on the floor?”

Trying to get him to stand just made him shake his head fervently. *Oh, this spoiled child! What should I do now? I know this isn’t the time, that we’re in quite the dire situation right now, but he’s just so cute, I can’t take it!*

I let him rest his head on my chest and kept stroking his hair.

He started sniffing. “It’s... It’s because I’m such a pathetic man that I couldn’t protect you. I’m the one who bought that blasted brooch in the first place. You wouldn’t have been put in danger if I hadn’t. It’s all my fault. I brought calamity upon you!”

“You’re still upset about that? I told you, it’s not your fault. The brooch suits my tastes to a tee, so I am happy that you were able to pick it out for me. Please don’t talk about yourself like that.” I knew it was futile to reason with a drunk person, but Lord Simeon retained his memories even after being intoxicated. I continued, knowing that he would remember my words. “It shouldn’t have been a problem for you to run back to the palace for a minute.

Joseph was with me. Yes, they tricked us, but I don't believe that's grounds for you to get depressed. No one could have predicted it."

"I didn't predict it... It's my fault..."

"If you're going to say that, then what about me? I fell asleep, blissfully unaware of my surroundings, then was kidnapped. Don't make me say it! It's so pathetic, it's embarrassing."

I took his face into my hands and made him meet my eyes, then knocked our foreheads together. Our glasses clinked as a result, which hurt slightly. *That's fine. Maybe the pain will make him more lucid.*

"Keep it together, Lord Simeon. You're very easy to fangirl over when you're like this because it's so cute...but this isn't the time to be depressed." I stared straight into his light blue eyes without letting go of his face. *My feelings should be able to get through our respective glasses.* I put emotion into my gaze and continued. "There's a lot to be worried about right now, but here's one to start with: Marielle is very, very cold here on the floor! She wants to sleep in a proper beeed!"



“Right...!” Lord Simeon’s eyes, which had been half closed, popped open. He jumped up, forcefully hauling my body into his arms. I pointed at the next room over when he looked around to find a bed. After practically jogging into the room, he gently placed me on the giant bed that was smack in the middle of it.

“I can’t sleep without you, Lord Simeon. I’d be so lonely. Warm me up.”

“Right!”

“I won’t be able to feel your warmth if you leave your coat on. Let’s take it off, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Take your shoes off too. And leave your saber over there. Don’t forget to remove your glasses as well.”

Lord Simeon obediently followed all of my orders one after the other, then held me as he lay down. As soon as the silk covers were draped over him, he began snoring. *Whew... I made it.* I’d grown used to him under the influence at this point. I praised my abilities.

His sleeping face without his glasses made him look a bit younger. I patted his golden hair once more, then kissed his beautiful forehead. It seemed we would be spending the night here. I wanted to properly ask Tarentule if we could, as well as contact our home, but my eyelids were so heavy I couldn’t keep them open any longer. *It’s late, after all. My exhaustion and drowsiness have hit their limits. The bit of sleep I managed to get in the carriage wasn’t nearly enough.*

I snuggled up to Lord Simeon and closed my eyes. Silently apologizing to Joseph, I let myself fall to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, after spending the night at Tarentule, we visited the Delmer manor, just as we'd planned. The mansion we arrived at was festooned with the season's flowers.

I'll tell you about the events leading up to this moment. To put it simply, we contacted several places after we returned home, prepared ourselves, then set off once more. Lord Simeon got depressed again, and I had to apologize because it was my fault—me having trouble consoling him once again was another secret interaction we had as husband and wife.

Olga had aided us by contacting our home beforehand. Starting with my mother-in-law, everyone in the mansion had something to say about the fact that we were departing again right after getting home. *It's an emergency, mother-in-law! I'm sorry!*

Lord Simeon tried to tell me to stay home, but sweet-talking him and saying that I'd feel the most safe by his side was enough to secure my victory.

We made the trek to the far-south Delmer residence along with five members of the Royal Order of Knights and Reporter Pieron. I peeked out of the window after someone alerted me that we were approaching the manor, and I just had to gasp in wonder.

"Oh my... It's wonderful!"

Underneath the bright spring sky was a manor covered in flowers. Around this time, every home's garden would be blooming, but the Delmer manor's blooms didn't stop at its garden—they covered the entirety of the grounds.

The first thing that caught my eye was a tall tree that reached the manor's rooftop. Its thick branches had yellow flowers lining them. These were acacias; they were popular in Lagrange, and you could find them just about anywhere. Tons of these small, cute flowers that looked like pom-poms bloomed around the manor.

As we got closer, I could see many other types of flowers as well. Purplish-red, elegant magnolias; pretty pink camellias with delicately shaped, overlapping petals; pure white spireas with willowy branches... *Ah, and that tree that has clusters of adorable flowers hanging from it like earrings must be from a foreign kingdom.* The lilacs, on the other hand, were still readying their buds.

The brick wall that surrounded the manor only went up to one's waist, and it was topped with a fence structure. As I passed through it while heading toward the manor gate, I gazed at all the flora. Some plants were sticking through the bars of the fence, happily welcoming those walking by.

However, most impressive were the wisterias covering almost half of the manor's walls. An endless number of bluish purple calyxes hung from the vines crawling up the sides of the building. They were still buds for now, but they'd surely become a sight to see once they bloomed. It made me want to visit again in about ten days.

"It's so wonderful! Beautiful, like a picture book!"

No matter how far we walked, there were flowers blooming. The beauty of the baronage almost made me forget about why we were there. I wanted to capture the scenery somehow, whether through pictures or embroidery...and I lamented that I had skills in neither. This was the type of information that I wanted preserved through a visual medium, not writing. I wished for the warmth and gentleness of the breeze to remain in my eyes forever. Photos wouldn't save the colors, so the only viable option was paintings. *Should I pay an artist to paint this for me? I would have to get the head of the manor's permission first.*

Opposite myself, who was completely enthralled by the sights, Reporter Pieron was leaning against the other door of the carriage with his arms crossed, looking wholly uninterested. His newsboy cap was tilted down on his head to cover his eyes, and he wasn't moving an inch, leading me to wonder if he was thinking or napping. Had he not slept well last night? Perhaps he hadn't been able to relax in the palace's official residence. I had questions I wanted to ask him, but his demeanor told me not to approach. I decided to focus on enjoying the floral landscape instead of forcing him to talk.

The royal palace had informed the baronage of our arrival, so servants were waiting near the gate for us. Once they opened it up, our carriage, surrounded by six knight steeds, passed through. Beyond that gate, I would have to gasp in amazement once more. If the outside of the manor was brilliant, then the inner garden was sure to be filled to the brim with flowers!

This was what I'd thought, but the real thing surpassed my wildest imagination by leagues. The garden of the vast manor grounds was elaborate, like a natural hill and field. Unlike the usual Lagrangian garden, it wasn't manicured from top to bottom. It was an Easdale-style natural garden. A path spread out under a rose arch, making one feel like they were traveling between all the vegetation of various sizes. Slim trees had been planted here and there, giving the impression that wild bunnies could leap out at any moment. Though the atmosphere led one to think that the whole scene was entirely natural, the different flowers had all been placed very strategically. The tall ones were positioned in the back, while the ones with short stalks were in front. The color combinations were also applaudable.

If Gerard were to catch even a glimpse of this paradise, he'd probably scream in exultation. I'm sure that at this very moment, my greenery-obsessed brother is meticulously tending to our parents' garden. I hope I'll be able to bring him here sometime. I'll have to ask the owners of the manor.

Our carriage came to a stop, and the doors clacked open. After being guided outside by Lord Simeon's hand, I was hit by yet another wave of shock.

"Wow... How can this be so wonderful? It's amazing! These are so adorable...!"

This residence didn't pull any punches. The road became a roundabout around a grand fountain that had flower beds at its sides. A small path extended from that roundabout, with the entrance to the manor standing at the end of it. The three-step staircase that led up to the doors looked like flower beds with stepping stones set in them. Short wildflowers were clustered all along the path. *Look, there are so many of my favorite violets there too! I've never seen so many growing in one place!*

"Aaah, so cute...! How nice... This is so nice!"

The location was nothing short of a fairy-tale land. It could have been where fairies or a good witch lived. I savored my steps up the short staircase.

Lord Simeon, whose arm I was borrowing, whispered, “I see, so this sort of thing... I hadn’t thought of something like this...”

I’m not asking you to replicate it or anything! I don’t believe elements like these could be incorporated into the Flaubert mansion’s carefully curated garden.

The Delmer manor’s entrance opened before we arrived at the door.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” greeted a man who was probably in his sixties. His clothes indicated that he was a butler. Maids were on standby behind him. “I am House Delmer’s butler, Moran.”

“My name is Simeon Flaubert. My apologies for the sudden request.”

The military officers seemed out of place within this flower-laden, fairy-tale house. The manor’s workers all seemed distressed by the large men following behind Lord Simeon. Though this butler was putting up a professional, calm front, I could see nervousness floating in his deep blue eyes.

My husband pushed his glasses up with his finger. “As we said in our announcement, we would like to investigate this manor. Will this momentary disturbance be acceptable?”

“Yes sir...” Mr. Moran fidgeted. “Er, where in particular will you be investigating? Every room?”

“Eric’s room first,” Lord Simeon answered after a short pause. “If we don’t find what we’re looking for there, then we’ll search elsewhere.”

“Understood. Would Master Eric happen to be with you...?”

The servants here most likely didn’t know that “Eric” was a fake. I looked up at Lord Simeon, who gently shook his head. “I’ll tell you everything after we investigate the room.”

“Yes sir... Please, come inside. I shall guide you there.” Mr. Moran moved to the side to let us through, and we stepped into the manor.

In contrast to everything outside of it, the inside of the home was very much

that of a normal noble's house. Though it had enough to satisfy the image of a nobleman's manor, there weren't any special luxuries or extra decorations, much like my parents' home. Past the front doors was the foyer, and to either side were hallways of rooms. On the first floor were the reception hall and the parlor, while the second floor had private rooms for the residents, as per the typical structure for this type of home. The atmosphere of the place was peaceful, not especially vibrant, and I could tell that the first floor was not used often.

Thinking back on it, I'd never heard of House Delmer holding any balls or tea parties before. House Clarac had never received an invitation from them, much less House Flaubert. Neither of my families had ever invited the Delmers either. The Delmer family had lost its members one after the other, leaving only their aging baroness and her young grandchild behind, so they most likely wanted nothing to do with extravagant parties. Looking at it that way, the dreamlike flower garden outside suddenly started to seem very lonely.

Speaking of which...where is the current baron anyway? He was apparently only eight years old, so I didn't expect him to come out and greet us, but the current situation had me worried. The boy had lost both of his parents at an early age, and the grandmother who'd raised him had also recently passed away. Those facts alone were sad enough, but the uncle who'd become his new guardian hadn't returned home either. The young baron was surely feeling desolate.

"This is Master Eric's room."

Mr. Moran let us into one of the rooms in the western wing of the second floor. The room had muted colors and no exorbitant furnishings. The chest and writing desk were old and seemed like they'd been used often. A bed was placed along the wall, and a large window that let in plenty of light faced the doorway. I could see a wash of yellow outside of the window glass—the acacia tree from earlier. This was the perfect room for viewing the blooms from indoors. I crept toward the window to marvel at them.

Something small moved between the drooping flowers. *Oh, a squirrel! It must live here in the garden. This really is a fairy-tale land!*

Though I was distracted yet again by the outdoors, Lord Simeon immediately got to work sifting through the room.

“Is this the only room Eric used?” he asked Mr. Moran.

“Master Eric also used the library in the eastern wing for work.”

“May we search there as well?”

“Of course, sir. We only ask that you refrain from leaving the rooms in disarray as much as possible.”

“Understood. I’ll tell my subordinates to be careful.” Lord Simeon wasn’t one to be haughty without reason, so he agreed to Mr. Moran’s request without showing any signs of displeasure. The servants here must have been anxious upon hearing that the military was coming to their home. Mr. Moran looked relieved that Lord Simeon wasn’t going to look down on them.

My husband sent his subordinates to the library, then began searching Eric’s room alongside Reporter Pieron and myself. We closed the door behind us, letting only Mr. Moran stay, then explained the situation to him.

Lord Simeon wasted no time. “Are you aware that the person calling himself ‘Eric’ is a fake?”

Mr. Moran kept his eyes on his feet, but he didn’t have any trace of surprise on his face. “Yes sir.”

“Who else here knows?”

“No one, sir. The late madam and I were the only ones who knew.”

“The baroness knew as well?” Lord Simeon’s face looked surprised, and I know mine did too. *She knew he wasn’t the real Eric? Doesn’t that mean she accepted him into this house as her son...?*

“It’s quite a long story, so I will try to keep it as simple as possible.” Mr. Moran finally raised his head. “The madam knew right away that the man wasn’t Eric. She hadn’t seen her son in twenty years, so of course his face would have changed, but she felt something was amiss when she spoke with him.”

Indeed, that’s how it would be. There’s no fooling a mother. Mr. Moran probably watched Eric grow up during his childhood as well, so he wouldn’t

mistake him either.

“After hearing who he really was and why he’d come to this family, the madam decided to accept him. I was the only member of the staff who’d met the real Eric before. Everyone else was hired after he left, so no one would find out as long as I kept quiet. The madam allowed that man to live here as ‘Eric’...but she asked that, in exchange, he would protect Young Master Lenny.”

Lord Simeon appeared to be calculating in his mind. “So she made a deal with him?”

Mr. Moran nodded, but he did not look bitter about it. “Yes. Their deal held firm because it was mutually beneficial. Their relationship was not cold, however. Master Eric... Ah, I shall call him that for convenience’s sake. Master Eric worked earnestly to keep up his end of the bargain.”

I recalled how Mr. Damian had looked when I’d met him by the Latour riverside. He hadn’t seemed like he’d been lying when telling me his circumstances. He’d spoken as Eric, yes, but aside from that, everything else might very well have been true. The reason he’d been running amok to retrieve the earring for the inheritance might not have been just for the money. I’d run over his tale in my mind many a time by this point. Mr. Damian most likely had not put himself in danger by leaving House Delmer purely for his own gain.

“He left, saying he’d found the person with the earring and was going to buy it back.” Mr. Moran lowered his voice, a hint of sadness ringing in it. “But he hasn’t returned, and he hasn’t contacted us even once. Is he all right?” He didn’t seem to harbor any ill will toward Mr. Damian—he was truly worried for him.

I took a step back and eyed Reporter Pieron in my peripheral vision. He was pretending to be disinterested, only looking to the side silently, without even having removed his hat. But on the inside, he couldn’t have been calm. Mr. Moran glanced at him too but didn’t question who he was. Instead, he waited for Lord Simeon’s response.

My husband took a breath. “To be frank, the situation is not good. When we saw him, he was injured, and he was taken away as soon as he passed out. We know what kind of people the abductors are, but we haven’t pinpointed his

location. My wife heard of the state he's currently in—he is apparently unable to speak properly.”

“Oh no...”

“Things aren't looking good at the moment. The men who kidnapped him are criminals. We don't know what they'll do to him. Excuse my honesty, but please be prepared for the worst outcome.”

Mr. Moran turned his eyes away, his expression tightly strained. His breathing thinned as he tried to suppress his trembling. “He...once told me he may not return one day. I believe he was aware of the danger.”

“Did he warn you of something?”

“Yes sir. He told me that if the worst were to occur and he didn't return, then I should contact someone named Reporter Pieron, who works for the *La Môme* Company, and ask them to help take care of the young master.”

Lord Simeon and I turned to Reporter Pieron at the same time. Mr. Moran seemed to understand why we did and looked as well. “Are you Lord Pieron, sir? Master Eric said you are his old friend. Did he ask anything of you?”

When Reporter Pieron found himself at the center of attention, he had to take a deep breath. He pulled the brim of his hat down even farther to hide his face. “No. He didn't tell me anything...though I know what he was thinking. Someone with decent status and knowledge would be the only person who could help protect his nephew from their greedy relatives. But rather than me, I think this man over here would be a better fit for that.” He gestured toward Lord Simeon.

“So you wouldn't become the young master's guardian?” Mr. Moran asked in a weak voice.

“What good would a lowly newspaper reporter do? I'm on the opposite side of the spectrum from nobles. Wouldn't someone from House Flaubert be able to find a good fit? Why don't one of you introduce someone to this family?” Reporter Pieron clapped his hands together as if he'd had a stellar idea. “Oh, I know. I'll write up a nice article for you all about a courageous eight-year-old baron who's doing his best to protect his family. If I make it out that his

rapacious relatives are crawling out from the woodwork to steal his assets, readers are sure to pay attention to it and sympathize. You guys have already had a lot stolen, yeah? Stories like that are my bread and butter. Those pesky relatives won't be able to do anything rash if the whole world is denouncing them. That's about as much as I can do."

Mr. Moran grew silent, and his expression darkened.

A moment of silence befell us, which Lord Simeon cut through with a refined voice. "Let us discuss this matter another time. If push comes to shove, we will be sure to introduce someone suitable for this house, but first, we need to focus on the issue at hand. This is more urgent—and more dangerous. Please cooperate with us for the sake of the baronage."

"Y-Yes, of course!" Mr. Moran seemed to snap back to his senses.

"Eric's real name appears to be 'Damian.' What should we call him?"

"The other servants here don't know the situation, so for now, we should use Eric."

"Very well, then. Eric ran away with an item that is essentially proof of a certain crime. We believe he hid that item somewhere in this manor. Do you have any idea of where it might be?"

"Well... No sir. He never told me about anything of the sort."

"It's apparently a notebook with a black cover."

Lord Simeon glanced at Reporter Pieron, who obliged. "It's about this big, the size of a diary. Small, but decently thick." He held up his hands to demonstrate. It appeared to be roughly the size of one of my novels. "I didn't get to see what was written in it, but Damian said it's a roster."

"A roster..." Mr. Moran's brows furrowed deeply, and then he shook his head. "I'm terribly sorry. I haven't seen it."

"Hmm." Lord Simeon nodded, then scanned the room once more.

Our only option was to keep searching. I also turned from side to side, trying to find anything that resembled a black notebook. My eyes kept getting drawn to the bookshelf. Though Mr. Damian wouldn't have hidden the roster in such

an obvious place, several of the spines were black, so Lord Simeon began pulling them out. I searched the chest and drawers in the meantime, as well as underneath the picture frames on the wall. *Many novels feature safes hidden under paintings, but of course they wouldn't exist in real life.*

Reporter Pieron and Mr. Moran joined in the search. We checked beneath the bed, under the mattress, inside the pillows, and even in unthinkable places like inside the vase and under the carpet. Yet we couldn't find anything even remotely similar to the description of the roster.

I sighed. "Then perhaps it's in the library? It wouldn't be strange to find a book there."

Lord Simeon agreed with me, but Reporter Pieron seemed to have other ideas. "I wonder about that. Damian wouldn't leave it in such an open place. I think it's safe to rule out any easily accessible locations."

I placed the book that was in my hand back on the shelf. "They say it's best to hide a tree in a forest, you know."

"When the Familia are involved, they'll cut down every single tree if they have to. He knows that better than anyone, so he wouldn't leave that thing in a place within their reach."

"Then would it not be in this room? It would be somewhere else?" Lord Simeon asked.

"I'm not sure... The last time I worked with him was twenty years ago, so he may well have changed, but he was the type of guy who left things important to him nearby."

Wouldn't that be this room, then? We all looked around as we contemplated it. That roster had been Mr. Damian's lifeline. He could only have relaxed if it were in a place that couldn't be seen, but also in a spot he could quickly access. However, no matter how much the four of us searched this room, we couldn't find it. Mr. Moran would know if there was a secret safe as well, so if he wasn't naming one, then we could only assume that it wasn't in this room.

"He especially wouldn't leave it around clumsily with all the sticky-fingered relatives around." Reporter Pieron was muttering to himself as he stalked

through the room.

Lord Simeon and Mr. Moran pulled out all of the drawers and turned over the chest. I bent down to check under the bed—not the floor, but to see if anything had been stuck to the bottom of the bed itself.

As I tried to put my head underneath, Lord Simeon stopped me. “Things like this should be left to me.”

“Can you fit under there? I think I’m more suited for something like this.”

“It’s high enough for me to slip underneath. Your dress might get caught.” He somehow managed to get his upper body beneath the bed, but he emerged empty-handed.

Even going through the desk, chair, and furniture resulted in nothing. Lord Simeon came to a conclusion after learning that every inch of the room yielded naught. “No matter how the roster is hidden, we won’t be finding it this way. I can only think that it’s being kept somewhere else.”

“And where would that be?” Reporter Pieron’s back cracked as he stood up. “Do you expect us to search the whole damn manor?”

Ignoring the reporter’s exhausted tone, Lord Simeon spoke to Mr. Moran. “We’re going to need more hands on deck if we’re going to widen the scope of our search. Would you be able to ask the other servants for assistance?”

“Yes sir. I will have every person possible help.”

We left the room. The military officers who had been checking the library reported that they hadn’t found anything either. As Mr. Moran began asking the maids for help, I declined to accompany Lord Simeon and instead went down to the first floor entrance to head outside. *The inside of the manor is probably best left in the hands of the servants. I think it would be good for me to change my perspective by investigating outside. I don’t just want to walk in the garden, I’ll have you know. As fascinated by it as I am, I’m more concerned with the roster... It’s true!*

Reporter Pieron trailed a ways behind me, perhaps because he didn’t want to be inside anymore. He seemed to be trying to catch up to me.

“You’re checking outside?” he asked. “Did you figure something out?”

“Not necessarily. It’s just that the servants would know the inside of the manor better than we would. There wouldn’t be a point to outsiders prowling the place when we don’t even know which way is what.”

“I guess, but you shouldn’t be out here alone. You don’t know where the Familia has their eyes planted.”

“Oh? Are you worried about me?”

He shrugged and looked up at the garden trees. The magnolias, the acacias, the wisterias on the walls... They’d all grown to the point that one had to tilt their head back to see their tops.

“All of these trees are splendid,” I mused. “They were probably all planted long ago.”

I didn’t get an answer from the reporter.

“I wonder whose idea it was to have the garden this way. The late baroness? Or maybe the previous baron?”

He still didn’t respond. He didn’t seem to be looking for the roster but was instead staring up at the flowering trees. I figured I would leave him be and brought my attention back to my search. In a previous experience, an object I’d been looking for had been buried underground. However, the object this time was made of paper—even if it were sealed in a can, it wouldn’t be safe from water damage unless it was guaranteed to only be buried for a very short period of time. Thus, Mr. Damian wouldn’t have hidden it there.

In which case, it’s aboveground. Does this manor happen to have any weather boxes? I started walking back toward the house to examine around it, but I noticed a figure watching me from the shadow of a tree. A small head was poking out from behind the trunk, and another person’s body that was too big to hide was behind them. *That’s...a child and a maid? They must be Lord Lenny, the current baron, and his sitter.*

Having made eye contact with me, Lord Lenny fidgeted for a moment, then approached.

I bowed and greeted the small baron. “Good day to you, my lord. Thank you for allowing me into your home.” As young as he might have been, he was still the head of a noble house. “My name is Marielle Flaubert. My deepest apologies for causing such a ruckus in your manor.”

“Hello...” The young baron shyly greeted me. He was nervous about talking to a stranger, but I could tell that at his core he was a bright and curious child. His chocolate-colored eyes sparkled as he watched me and Reporter Pieron.

The maid, who appeared to be younger than me, spoke kindly to him. “Young Master, do you remember what you’re supposed to do when you greet someone?”

The young boy blushed. “I’m Lenny Delmer.”

Oh, how cute! He seems so pure. His light brown hair is curling around his head, and his cheeks are rosy. What an angel!

“Um... Mademoiselle...” Like most children from good households who were educated, he tried to refer to me respectfully.

Hm, what should I do? I shouldn’t encourage a baron to refer to me incorrectly. It’s because he’s a child that he should be taught properly. But still...it would feel strange for me to correct him and say that I should actually be called ‘Madame’ because I’m married. Hmm...

I knelt down to meet the boy’s eyes. “Believe it or not, I’m a married woman. But I would be happy if you called me Marielle instead of ‘Madame.’ May I ask that of you?”

His young face broke into a smile as he nodded, but then he whipped around in a panic to ask the maid with his eyes for approval.

“She’s asking you herself,” said the maid. “So let’s call her by her name, Young Master.” A very young but mature maid—she must have been his tutor as well as his sitter.

The small baron turned back to me. “Thank you very much. Please call me ‘Lenny’ as well.”

“Are you sure?” I inquired with a smile.

“Yes!”

“Oh my, I’m honored, Lord Lenny.”

“Um, and this is Ninon!” He introduced his maid as well. To him, his servants were surely precious family members. Their expressions told me as much.

“Ms. Ninon, then. It’s very nice to meet you. This old man behind me is Mr. Pieron. He may seem a little scary, but he’s really nothing more than a tired old man.”

“Really? Aha ha!”

Though Lord Lenny and I seemed to have hit it off, Reporter Pieron didn’t draw close—he merely watched from afar. Lord Lenny didn’t appear to pay him much mind, as he most likely thought the reporter was my attendant.

“Lady Marielle? Are you Uncle’s friends?”

“Hmm... Well, Lord Eric asked us to come visit his home.”

“Uncle went somewhere yesterday, but he hasn’t come home yet. Did he sleep somewhere else?”

It was only natural for the young baron to have questions. I internally debated how to answer. I couldn’t possibly tell him the truth, but I also couldn’t give him any false hope. *What should I do?*

“Your uncle won’t be able to come home for a while because of important business. But he’s very worried about you, which is why we’re here. We’ve come to help so that he can come home sooner.”

“Huh?”

Urgh, please don’t ask too many questions, Lord Lenny! I tried to change the subject. “It seems your uncle came to this home recently, but that was the first time you met him, right, Lord Lenny? Did you know that he was your father’s brother?”

“Nope.” He shook his little head. “I don’t know much about father or mother... Grandma used to tell me about them, but I don’t remember...”

Oof! Maybe that was a bad topic. The boy’s sad eyes made me fret, but he

went back to smiling before I could come up with a plan to reverse course. “I didn’t know about Uncle at first, but now we’re friends! He protects me from my scary relatives, and he plays with me!”

“Oh my! He does?”

“When he’s not busy, we go on walks together! And, and, he made a nest box for Pookie!”

“Pookie?”

Just as I started wondering if he was talking about a pet bird, Lord Lenny took me by the hand and started walking. “This way!”

He stopped and pointed at the acacia tree that reached the roof of the house. “Up there!”

Ah, I see. It was the same tree I’d seen that squirrel run up earlier.

“Is Pookie the name of a squirrel?”

Lord Lenny seemed overjoyed that I’d asked. “Uh-huh! He’s my friend! Pookiiie! Come here! I have walnuts for you!” As he reached into his pocket, he called up to the tree.

After he said Pookie’s name a few more times, a tiny animal with reddish brown fur darted down the trunk of the tree.

“Wow!” I marveled. “He listens to you. What a good boy!”

“Right?” Lord Lenny laughed triumphantly.

The squirrel jumped into his hand, seemingly having been well trained by walnuts. It wasn’t afraid of humans at all, and it stuffed its cheeks without a care. It didn’t bite down on the nuts, most likely intending to take them back to its nest before eating them. Its cute cheeks grew wide as it stuffed walnuts in its mouth.

“So your uncle made that nest box for him?”

“Yeah. It got knocked down by the wind and broke a while ago. All the food Pookie had in there fell too.”

“The box...” I gazed up at the tree with yellow flowers. “It...fell?”

“Uh-huh. You can see it from over here!” Lord Lenny moved under one of the branches and pointed straight above.

Following his finger, I spotted a wooden box nestled in the tree. It was so high up that a person wouldn't be able to reach it just by stretching out their arm, and it seemed to be fixed to the tree with wire. The acacia tree itself wasn't so thick, meaning its branches were even thinner. Climbing it wouldn't be a safe idea, so whoever had placed it there must have used a ladder.

The squirrel Lord Lenny had been petting ran back up the tree, probably to stash away the walnuts. We watched it enter the nest box.

“How wonderful! Your uncle made that?”

“That's right. He's very good with his hands. He told the maids he would climb the tree himself because it's too dangerous for them.”

“How kind of him!” Though he *was* still an identity-stealing faker. Or perhaps that was precisely why Mr. Damian had to keep a good relationship with the people of the manor. Mr. Moran had also said that his relationship with the baroness had been warm. Perhaps Mr. Damian hadn't been acting and truly cared for this little baron. I could only hope that he would return for Lord Lenny's sake.

Also, I wished for Joseph's safety. Though I'd been told he wouldn't be treated badly, I was still worried. I wondered how Mr. Damian and Joseph were doing at the moment. *We're going to find the roster, then get in contact with that man who called himself Valeriano to get them back... Can we do it? We haven't even done the first thing yet.*

I stopped in my tracks just as I was about to sigh. I looked up at the nest box again, then over at the building. The branches got in the way of my view, so I stepped back from the tree. *That window... That's Eric's room, the one Mr. Damian used. You could see the yellow flowers from there... Just the flowers? I saw that squirrel run through the branches. Doesn't that mean I could have seen the nest box as well?*

I walked back under the tree to look up at the box. Upon a second look, it seemed a bit big for just one squirrel. *But I can't tell from here. The branches prevent me from seeing all of it at once.*

“What’s wrong?” Reporter Pieron had come over, evidently feeling that I was acting strange.

“Mr. Pieron, could you climb this tree for me?” I pointed at the box.

“Huh?” His eyebrows shot up. “Why do I have to? There’s no handholds, and the branches are too thin. There’s no way.”

“I see. Then it really would require a ladder to get up there.”

“What’s going on? This isn’t the time to look at a squirrel’s nest. Besides...”

“Look there. That’s the room we were in. You can see this spot well from that window.”

Reporter Pieron looked confused when I cut him off. But then, he gasped. “No way...”

“Mr. Damian is the type of person who leaves important things nearby, yes? He probably wouldn’t be able to relax if he couldn’t easily access what he’d hidden, so the roster would have to be somewhere he could always keep watch over...but also a place that couldn’t be guessed by anyone else.”

“Yeah...” We exchanged glances and nodded at each other.

“Lord Lenny, I’m sorry, but please excuse us for now. Let’s chat later, all right?”

The young baron was staring at us curiously, but I apologized, grabbed my skirt, then ran toward the front door of the manor. *The first order of business is to tell Lord Simeon... Ah! He’s right at the entrance!*

“Lord Simeon!”

“Did something happen?” His face instantly hitched upon seeing me. He, Sir Alain, and another of his subordinates ran to meet me. It seemed the rest of them were still in the manor.

“The roster! Did you find it?” I asked, skidding to a stop in front of Lord Simeon.

“No, not yet. But do you remember that acacia tree we could see outside of the window in Eric’s room? I’m going to go investigate it just in case.”

My words caught in my throat with my mouth hanging open. I had been just about to quickly report my finding to him.

Lord Simeon didn't notice a thing and continued. "If the roster is being kept in a place that can be constantly monitored, then it's either in that room, or it's in a place that can be seen from the room—including that tree. Acacias are green-leaved trees, so they block things from view well and are suited for masking objects...such as box houses for birds. I thought there could be something like that hidden there."

This... This... This maaan...!

All of the tension left my body instantaneously, without even a word slipping from my lips. *How in the world did he notice that without even checking it up close?! As expected! Indeed, that's my brutal, blackhearted military officer! Your clear, sharp mind is wonderful! But stiiill!*

"Marielle?"

I...wanted you to praise me.

My crestfallen shoulders seemed to make him uneasy, while Reporter Pieron's gaze of pity stabbed thorns into me.

Chapter Twelve

When Sir Alain gingerly came down from the ladder, nest box in hand, there didn't seem to be anything amiss with it. However, upon closer examination, we saw that the front of the box had an entrance hole for wildlife, and the back had a sort of latch. When the latch was unlocked, the back face of the box opened like a door.

"There it is."

The double back was made to hold a book, which was about the size of a small journal. It was wrapped in wax paper, and we pulled it out.

"This was clearly done on purpose," I noted.

"Yeah," Reporter Pieron agreed. "Even the Familia wouldn't have been able to find it."

That's right! The one who found this elusive object was none other than I! Isn't that incredible? Didn't I do a good job?

Though...Lord Simeon also discovered it.

When we peeled back the wax paper, which had been carefully folded to conceal what was inside, a notebook with a black leather cover appeared. Lord Simeon flipped through it, then nodded at the rest of us. "It's the roster."

"We did it!" I clapped my hands together, excited. *It doesn't matter who found it—the point is, we retrieved the roster! That's one problem solved. Now we can move forward!*

However, at the same time, other questions arose.

"Hey! That hurts!"

Sir Alain screamed, and a high-pitched squeak pierced through the air. I looked over and saw a squirrel clinging to his hand. *Squeak! Squeak!* The sound was loud and sharp. It must have been very angry.

"I'm not taking your food!" Sir Alain yelled. "Aaagh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I

understand already!”

The squirrel was now biting him because he was still holding the nest box. Small as this animal was, it was resolute.

“Pookie, no! Stop it!” Lord Lenny, who had been silently watching the adults, came around to try and stop his friend. He pulled the squirrel from Sir Alain’s arm, held it close to his chest so it wouldn’t jump away, and tried to pet it. He then looked nervously at Sir Alain. “What are you going to do with that?”

“I-It’ll be fine. We’ll put it right back where it was.” Sir Alain put the nest box on the ground and rubbed where he’d been bitten. A squirrel’s teeth are so strong that they can split fruit from trees, so the bite surely hurt even though he was wearing gloves. And since squirrels were desperate when protecting their food stores, Pookie wouldn’t have held back. I could only hope that the bruising wouldn’t be too bad.

I knelt down to look at the box, which was very well crafted. Lord Lenny had said Mr. Damian was good with his hands, and he seemed to be right, as the build of the box wasn’t that of a layman’s handiwork. Perhaps Mr. Damian had experience building things. The top of the box had a roof to protect it from the elements, and the opening, which was carved into a circular shape, had been filed down to dispel potential hangnails. Above the hole, the word “Pookie” had been written. Upon closer examination, the name hadn’t been painted on. Rather, it’d been seared into the wood framing, seemingly by a metal spit. The whole thing was quite elaborate.

Rushed by the ever-squeaking squirrel, Sir Alain took the nest box and started back up the ladder. The squirrel jumped out of Lord Lenny’s hand in response. Lord Lenny peered dejectedly down at the ground.

“Lord Lenny?” I asked gently.

“Did...uncle hide that in Pookie’s box?”

“Ah... Well, yes.”

This angel of a boy’s eyes glanced at the roster, then glazed over with tears. “Maybe he didn’t make it for Pookie, but to hide that.”

Every potential response caught in my throat. *Oh no... Lord Lenny genuinely*

understands what's happening. I was hit with a strong wave of regret. We hadn't hesitated at all to do this in front of him, thinking that an eight-year-old child couldn't possibly realize the implications. *We shouldn't have done that. We've gone and hurt him. Even children are observant and can understand complicated things. We shouldn't have assumed he wouldn't.*

"I'm sure it was both." Lord Simeon knelt close to eye level with Lord Lenny as I wavered. He spoke in the kindest voice he could muster. "He had an important reason for hiding it, so he asked Pookie for help. Not just that, but he built the nest box very carefully so that Pookie wouldn't get hurt and could hide from the rain. There's no doubt that he was thinking of both you and Pookie."

Lord Lenny didn't respond.

"I'm very sorry that we took the nest box apart without asking, even though we were in a rush." Lord Simeon bowed his head to the young baron and gave an honest apology. He patted Lord Lenny's head as the boy's face filled with ambivalence.

Reporter Pieron took a few steps forward. "Your uncle... Ah, I'm his old friend. Your uncle doesn't do things for no reason. If he really only wanted to hide the journal, then he wouldn't have bothered making such a sturdy box. It must've taken a lot of time for him to build it—if he really didn't care about Pookie, then he wouldn't have gone through the trouble."

Lord Lenny looked up at him with a very straightforward gaze, and I could see that Reporter Pieron almost wanted to run away from the pressure. But he buckled down and managed to give Lord Lenny an awkward smile.

"Will it help uncle?" Lord Lenny asked as he looked back at the roster.

"Yes," Lord Simeon answered. "We've been searching for it in order to aid him."

"Will he come home now that you found it?"

Lord Simeon was unable to immediately respond, and he took a moment to think about it. If he lied just to pacify Lord Lenny, then he could end up hurting him in the long run, so he chose his words carefully. "We don't know yet. I promise we'll do our best so he can come home, but right now things are up in

the air. I apologize for not being able to give you a definitive answer.”

“That’s okay...” Lord Lenny just nodded without complaining. He took the hand of his maid next to him. “I’m the ‘head of the household,’ and I have to protect my home. So please, help my uncle.” Underneath the feelings of dissatisfaction and loneliness, he did his best to raise his head. Though I felt sorry and wanted to console him, I had to praise him for his diligence.

Lord Simeon smiled at the small baron, who understood his position. “We will. We will do our utmost.”

We put our message into the advertisement column of *La Môme* that same day, and it was published the very next morning.

“To V, who presents himself as a lady-killer. We found what you were looking for. Come retrieve it.”

I wasn’t the one who’d come up with this message. Frankly, I would never write something so pointed because it would make me worry for the safety of the two hostages, but Lord Simeon had other ideas.

The day after, we got our response.

“To the young lady who looks very cute when she’s asleep. Would you go on a date with me to the art museum? Today, at one in the afternoon, let’s meet in front of the goddess. From, V.”

Though I had no way to prove it, I couldn’t help but feel that the man knew the previous message had been from Lord Simeon, and now he was purposefully trying to get a rise out of him. Lord Simeon’s eyes cooled below freezing point as he read the message.

I wonder why... I feel like I’ve seen a similar interaction before.

“One in the afternoon is when the museum is most crowded. There will probably be more people than usual since today’s a holiday.”

“That’s probably what he wants.” Lord Simeon threw down the paper and began to prepare by placing his saber on his belt and donning his gloves.

“Could we have the museum close on short notice?”

“That wouldn’t be impossible, but then our opponents also wouldn’t be able to enter the place.”

“Ah, that’s true.” I was worried that the many civilians around us would become involved. But my husband was right—shutting down the museum would prevent the Familia from being present as well. *Hmm.*

Lord Simeon picked up his bag, then walked swiftly to the door. As I’d expected, I couldn’t ask him to take me with him, so I walked alongside him but stopped at the door.

“Marielle.” He turned around right before the doorway.

“Yes?”

Lines were forming on his pretty forehead from displeasure. “Please go get ready... I’ll come get you later.”

“Huh?” My head wasn’t keeping up. “Get ready? I’m going to the museum too?”

“Yes.”

“Are you all right with that?”

He sighed, letting me know that he was doing this against his own wishes. “I am not, but that man specifically appointed you.”

“Huh...”

“I’m going to arrange a few things at the palace, then will return around noon. Please have lunch first.”

“All right... Got it.”

Lord Simeon rode off dashing on the horse that’d been prepared for him. I watched him go, feeling odd. *What’s going on? Something’s off. No, very off. Off, off, off! He’s usually going on and on about how I shouldn’t go to dangerous places. I have nothing but questions—he knows something I don’t. Does it have something to do with the questions I’ve been stewing in since a few days ago?*

I gave up pondering it, then went up to the second floor and changed into comfortable clothes I could move around in easily. After waiting for a while,

Lord Simeon came to pick me up, just as he'd promised. He had also changed his clothing. We climbed into a carriage and set off toward the town.

The carriage arrived at the museum just before one.

This museum building had once been used as a vacation mansion, so it was very large and its grounds were vast. Before the front entrance was a plaza, filled with people here to visit since it was a holiday afternoon. A line was forming for those who wanted to go in. If we waited in line, we wouldn't make it in by one o'clock, so Lord Simeon had us use the staff entrance. He'd contacted the establishment beforehand, so we were allowed inside immediately.

"Now that I think about it, this is our first time coming here together, Lord Simeon."

Inside the museum, tons of large artifacts were on display—so many that it was said one couldn't explore the whole place in a single day. It would take time to be able to enter the more popular rooms, but we were aiming for a single spot, so we made a beeline for it without even a glance at the other exhibits. I felt somewhat disappointed as we passed by the various displays. It was my first time here with Lord Simeon, so I would've liked to take my time looking around. This wasn't the moment for that, I knew, but perhaps we'd be able to return another time.

"Noel informed me that I shouldn't pick art or science museums because they would bore you." Lord Simeon offered me his arm, and he held a small, wrapped item in his other hand. Though no one could see what was inside, the size and shape told of it being the roster.

"Oh my, did he now? I happen to like these places, particularly the exhibits on ancient cultures. I'm very interested in how mummies are made. They pique my curiosity to no end!"

"I'm not sure how I feel about my wife getting distracted by mummies when I'm out with her."

We just so happened to be passing by the ancient civilization area. There wasn't a section on mummies, but statues and grave goods found in tombs from the same culture were on display. I was extremely curious about objects

left behind by people of the past from faraway kingdoms with completely different religions and cultures. All of it was very fun to imagine.

I didn't stop in front of this room, however, because I'd been thinking of a different civilization. "Lord Simeon, I believe we've taken a wrong turn. The statue of the goddess is in the other direction." I tugged at his arm, but he shook his head.

"No, I believe it's this way."

"What do you mean?"

It seemed this wasn't his first time coming here—he knew his way around and looked confident. "You're thinking of the goddess of beauty, yes?"

"That's right. Isn't that the first one anyone would think of?"

"Yes, it's the more popular one, so it's more likely to be where visitors will gather. We wouldn't be able to meet our target in a place like that."

"I suppose you're right." I only realized it now that he had mentioned it. *That's true. There's always people at that exhibit. When there's too many people, the staff will have them move along quickly. Today is surely the same way.*

"So we'll be meeting at another goddess statue? Oh...they're right nearby."

Lord Simeon nodded and began walking again, pulling me along. "Though he said 'goddess,' he didn't specify which one. It's a petty trap. The correct one is most likely this way."

With the deities of various religions glaring down at us, our footsteps resonated as we progressed further. This was a popular area, but most of the guests were flowing into the mummy room. The room before it was filled with funereal objects and small statues, and it was empty enough that we could take our time looking around.

Among the items, the man we were looking for was standing in front of a statue of a winged goddess. He was tall, with black hair and stylish clothes that made him look like a ladies' man.

Valeriano stared straight at Lord Simeon. The corners of his lips slung upward.

“Oh, come on. It’s unromantic of you to bring a man to a date.”

“I am not going on a date with you.” I let go of Lord Simeon’s arm and stepped behind him. I wanted nothing more than to cling to him to show off, but that would only obstruct him.

“I wanted to laugh at you two for going to the wrong statue, but you chose the right one. Not cute at all.”

Lord Simeon’s brows were firmly pointed downward. “Had we been mistaken, we would’ve only made you wait longer. Such a boring prank.”

“Just looking at your face makes me want to lead you in circles.” Valeriano looked as lofty as ever. He had an uncaring grin on his lips. Though this man was nothing more than a third-rate villain who wasn’t worth being one of Lord Simeon’s opponents, his blue eyes admittedly held an unyielding incisiveness.

“You’ve led us around enough. Did you really need to use such roundabout methods of contacting us?” Unfazed by the man’s demeanor, Lord Simeon let the anger seep into his voice.

“You really can’t blame me! We’re desperate over here too, you know. One mistake and we’d be in big trouble.”

“Then just go die. Honestly, you’re nothing but a bother.”

Lord Simeon... Is it really okay for you to be so blunt? Don’t forget that we have hostages on the line here!

“See, you guys would be stumped if I died too. Though maybe fancy nobles like you wouldn’t be bothered by losing just one or two servants.” Valeriano finally brought out the threat we’d been expecting.

Lord Simeon only scoffed at him, and Valeriano continued. “Seems your comrades are hiding around the facility, but I’m not here alone either, just so you know. Your servant isn’t the only one I’ve taken hostage—all of the customers in this building are too. Maybe you could consider the artifacts to be hostages as well. It wouldn’t be good if those just so happened to break.”

His hand had been in his pocket the whole time. He quickly pulled it out and gestured toward the statue of the goddess behind him. The statue itself wasn’t

in a case, but rather freestanding so one good push and it was done for. Artifacts in similar states were located in several spots around the museum.

I glanced up at Lord Simeon silently. His cold expression hadn't changed, which made it seem like Valeriano's threats weren't affecting him, but he was most likely calculating the situation in his head. The two men stood in a deadlocked stare, neither giving in.

Just as I began to think the transaction wasn't going to get anywhere this way, Lord Simeon sighed. "Bring the two hostages here. Then, we'll give you this." He held out the package in his hand for Valeriano to see.

"Aren't you just going to attack me as soon as you get the hostages? That's a little too disadvantageous for me."

"Did you not just inform us that all of the guests in this building are hostages? I even brought my wife, as you requested. I won't be able to leave her side to chase after you. Disadvantageous? There's nothing *but* advantages for you in this situation."

"That's how it appears on the surface, you mean. But I wonder..." Valeriano whispered. He didn't fully believe Lord Simeon. I couldn't blame him, as my husband wouldn't only be satisfied with the rescue—he couldn't simply let the Familia go. But if he'd said that, the discussion wouldn't have progressed. I began to understand why I'd been brought along, so I stayed quiet. It was best not to get in the way.

I scanned the room we were in, just in case I would need to protect myself. *I wonder if there's any place I can hide so that Lord Simeon could chase the man without worrying about me. The best course of action would be to hide in a lockable room, but there's no such place nearby. Let's see, a good place for concealing my body... Perhaps one of the mummies' coffins? They're on display in that room over there, I believe. Y-Yes, I'm curious, but I might get cursed. I'm not serious about this! I promise!*

The men continued to talk as I tried to shake the fantasies out of my head. Valeriano was in the middle of saying something. "Could you leave it right there? Let's both stand away from it as we wait for the hostages to be retrieved."

Lord Simeon hesitated for a moment. “Very well.”

Valeriano stepped away from the statue; Lord Simeon placed his package in front of it. They stood equidistant from the roster and returned to their staring contest.

“Okay then. I’ll give you back your servant.”

Valeriano raised his hand, causing a person to step out from the shadow of the stone sculpture. Joseph walked forward, blue in the face, with a man from the Familia latched onto his arm. His shaking was visible from where I was standing, but he seemed to be walking all right. I was relieved to not see any injuries on him. However, the other hostage was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Mr. Damian?”

Valeriano heard my whisper. “I didn’t break my promise. I’ll give him back too... However...” His final word made me incredibly anxious. “Allow me to preface with this: we didn’t torture him. I already told you that his state was so bad we couldn’t. It was unfortunate, but there was nothing we could do when he was like that.”

“Huh...?”

“Seemed he didn’t land softly when he fell from the window. It’s really unfortunate. We went through the trouble of capturing him, yet we weren’t able to get anything out of him. Can you imagine how frustrated we were? That’s why we had to rely on you guys. Sorry!”

My legs were shaking—the words caught in my throat. I leaned against Lord Simeon without realizing it, then hurriedly separated myself so that I wouldn’t get in his way. He caught me with his reliable arms.

Lord Simeon tightened his grip on me. “Where is he?”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you where the dead go, should I? We can’t exactly dig a grave for him on our side, so I’ll leave that to you. Well then, as promised.”



Valeriano signaled again, and Joseph was released. They shoved him forward lightly. He passed nervously by Valeriano and managed to hobble over to our side.

“M-My lord... I-I-I’m...”

“Are you hurt?” Lord Simeon put a hand on Joseph’s shoulder.

“N-No... No sir...”

I left my husband’s arms and reached out to Joseph, who was finally free after two and a half days in captivity. His beard had grown, his hair was messy, and his complexion looked terribly worn out.

I could only imagine how terrified he was. I wanted to get him something warm to drink and a place he could rest. “You’re safe now. We’ll get you home.”

“There... There was someone else... H-He stopped moving, then was taken away somewhere...”

I couldn’t respond to Joseph’s teary voice—I was only able to rub his rounded back.

Valeriano watched us out of the corner of his eye as he walked over to the statue and picked up the parcel. He opened it and made sure it was the roster promised, then spoke with a bright tone unbecoming of the atmosphere. “Thank you all! Apologies for the trouble. We’ll take our leave here, so don’t have your little hidden friends come after us, please. None of us want to make any more of a scene than this, so just let us go.”

Lord Simeon didn’t move. I’d thought he was going to do something after confirming Joseph’s safety, but he merely stood and watched Valeriano and his lackeys leave.

“Vice Captain!” Lord Simeon’s other subordinates, who had all been pretending to be museum-goers, approached. Sir Alain ordered them to take care of Joseph.

“Are the preparations complete?” Lord Simeon asked.

“Yes sir. Every order has been given.”

“Very well.”

Hmm...? There wasn’t a hint of worry in their voices as they stood and talked without chasing after the Familia.

“But is this really the right course of action?” Sir Alain continued. “Didn’t you agree to let them go?”

“They would’ve been suspicious had I agreed too readily. It’s kinder to assist them to the very end.” In contrast to his previous aura, Lord Simeon seemed to be enjoying something. A brilliant smile decorated his face—one of a brutal, blackhearted military officer that made my soul tremble.

Wait, that means you have something up your sleeve, doesn’t it?! Huh?! What is it?! Are you going to arrest Valeriano after all?

“Lord Simeon?” I asked.

He ignored my suspicions and gave out orders to his comrades. “Alert the staff and have that room closed off.”

“Yes sir!” His subordinates ran off.

That was when he finally turned back to me with a kind smile. “Would you like to go see?”

“See what...?”

Leaving Joseph in good hands, Lord Simeon led me outside the room to another space—not toward the room he’d just specified, but in the direction of the museum’s exit.

“I believe we’ll be able to see it from here.”

He walked to a window in the rest area by a staircase. *I think just below us, on the lower floor, is the entrance to the museum. If he’s looking there...*

When I went to stand by him, I heard a screech.

“Thaaat eeevil sooldieeer!!!”

Valeriano’s voice could be heard from below.

“I told you to just let us go!”

Oh my...

The plaza out front was filled with uniformed men. Not only knights, but also police officers, who my husband had requested aid from. All the bystanders had been evacuated. The plan had apparently been to capture the Familia right before they left the building, rather than deep inside it. *But didn't Sir Alain say they were going to let them leave? It doesn't look like that's the case.* Valeriano and his lackeys were being attacked from all sides.

"Are you going to arrest them all?" I inquired.

"I ordered my subordinates to go in with that intent."

"With that...intent."

Members of the Familia were captured one after the other. It seemed Valeriano himself also wouldn't be able to escape with that many knights around him, but right before Valeriano was pressed to the floor, someone in the crowd threw something that spewed smoke, then two or three more of the things. Screams of confusion rose up as the plaza filled with smoke.

"A smoke screen, then." Lord Simeon was still composed.

"One of his lackeys hadn't been captured yet."

"I predicted this would happen."

"I hope none of the bystanders get involved."

"The Familia members don't have time to take any of them hostage. They have their hands full just trying to run away."

Smoke was rising up to the window we were looking through, and eventually, we couldn't see anymore. Other people in the room had also come over to the window to watch, so Lord Simeon took me by the shoulder and led me away.

"You purposefully let him escape, right? Then why bother ambushing him in the first place?"

"I'll tell you the details later. Let's go back to where we were before." He put a finger to his lips to quiet my questions. It seemed he was being cautious of any straggling enemies in the vicinity. Understanding that I wouldn't be able to get an explanation here, I closed my mouth.

Sir Alain greeted us when we returned to the room with the goddess statue. “Vice Captain, we’ve secured the area.”

“Understood. Marielle, wait here with Joseph. I’ll leave a guard with you.”

I shook my head at Lord Simeon’s kindness. “No, I need to see it with my own eyes. Please, let me accompany you.” Sir Alain and the others also tried to tell me that I didn’t need to go, but I felt I had to get some closure after having come so far. I hadn’t been able to do anything for Mr. Damian, after all. I didn’t want to end this by turning my eyes from the truth.

Lord Simeon, his subordinates, and I went into the closed-off exhibition room. Several large statues were the first things we could see. Built in the shapes of people, their faces and heads had been shaped and painted. The body portions were wrapped in cloth to represent the dead, and inside of them, sure enough, actual cadavers had been discovered. In other words, these were coffins. Many of these beautifully decorated coffins, which had been parting gifts for the deceased, stood around the room. Some of them were lying on the floor, while the rest were standing along the walls. Once a person stepped into this room, they were surrounded by coffins.

In all honesty, it was an unsettling sight.

The case in the center of the room was laid out on the floor like the coffins, and something was lying in it. Its legs were out, both arms were crossed over its chest, and its skin was covered by bandages up to its head. The shape of the body could be clearly seen, as everything was wrapped tightly, right down to each of the fingers on its hands. The whole body was cleanly put together, without a defect to be seen. It was so perfect that it was hard to believe that it had maintained this appearance for several thousand years.

“Urgh... I’m not good with things like this...” A knight grew pale and hid behind his colleague.

Despite the popularity of this exhibit, sometimes there were those who didn’t want to partake. Putting coffins and corpses on display was certainly questionable. Many reasons were given for doing so, such as the value of history and the admiration of ancient cultures, but I felt like the person on display would have a thing or two to say about it if they could speak.

We all entered the room of mummies and closed the door behind us. Lord Simeon looked around at all the coffins. They were all supposed to be empty... Supposed to be.

“Our only option is to open up each one and check.” Sir Alain sounded uncomfortable.

“I don’t believe it’s one of the ones along the walls. It’s probably one on the ground,” another knight said.

“Ah... You’re right. Why in the world would they put him here? What a sick joke.”

“I wonder if they came to the museum before it opened and hid him,” a third knight chimed in. “They shouldn’t have bothered. Why couldn’t they just bring him out?”

“But wouldn’t someone have found him that way? Still, this is going too far.”

“Those guys are horrible.”

The knights kept chatting, but no one took the initiative to search the coffins. Everyone appeared to be uncomfortable with the situation. Of course they would be. In addition to having to open coffins, we were in a peculiar room.

Only Lord Simeon’s expression didn’t waver. He walked toward one of the coffins on the ground. Sir Alain hurriedly went to support him. My husband ordered the rest to search the other coffins, which finally encouraged them all to move.

That was when it happened.

“Waaah!” The knights shrank back as they shrieked.

Lord Simeon and I whipped around. The reason for the commotion was readily apparent: one of the coffins had wobbled.

No one had touched it yet, but it was rattling on its own. Listening carefully, we could hear moans coming from within.

Isn’t that...?!

“Gyaaah! It’s the curse of the mummyyy!”

“I remember that story! They say that those who hear it will die one after the other!”

“Nooo! I’m sorry, don’t curse me!”

“Hide behind the Vice Captain! He’s probably resistant to curses!”

“Yeah, I think the curse would get scared and run away from him!”

These honorable royal knights were making a fuss as they scrambled backward. Lord Simeon made sure to give each of their heads a good smack as he walked toward the wobbling coffin. “Lieutenant, wait over there.”

“Yes sir!”

Lord Simeon and Sir Alain put their hands on either side of the coffin and carefully lifted the lid. Though it appeared to be made of stone, it was actually wood, so the two men had no trouble removing it. As everyone swallowed with dry mouths in anticipation, the inside of the coffin was revealed.

What we saw...was not a cursed mummy animated in anger.

“He’s alive!”

The atmosphere made a complete one-eighty, and cheers rose up from all of us.

His limbs were bound within the coffin, which was so narrow that he couldn’t move.

Mr. Damian was blinking at us with open eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

At the end of all the fuss outside of the art museum, only a few of the low-level underlings had been captured. Valeriano himself had made a clean escape. Lord Simeon didn't appear upset about it when he received the report and instead opted to order his subordinates to take away the men they'd managed to capture.

Though Mr. Damian was thoroughly limp, his life didn't seem to be in immediate peril. He was put in the same carriage as me and Reporter Pieron, and we set off to the north for the royal palace. We were able to drop Joseph off at the Flaubert mansion along the way. I went into the knights' residence with the others.

"You're back. Well done."

Once Lord Simeon and I were let into the meeting room, His Highness Prince Severin and Captain Poisson were waiting for us. Mr. Damian and Reporter Pieron were resting in a separate room. Our first thought had been to have Mr. Damian's wounds tended to, but they weren't as bad as we'd assumed.

Lord Simeon bowed. "We were able to complete the operation at the expected time."

"Indeed." Prince Severin gave a faint smile. "You went through a lot as well, Marielle. Good work."

"Thank you..." I spoke cautiously. "But isn't it about time you finally explain all this?"

Lord Simeon glared at me from the side. *Sorry to say, but you all have made me wait for so long. It's time you fess up!* My husband coughed to clear the tension.

"What was the meaning of all this?" I demanded. "It appears the intent was to let Valeriano go from the beginning, but why? Did you all make some sort of deal with the Familia behind the scenes?"

“No,” His Highness answered. “We did no such thing.”

“But that’s the only way this could have happened. If nothing else, then a deal had to have been made with Valeriano alone. Which would mean that the whole debacle at the museum was a sham!”

“Hold on! Calm down, Marielle.” Prince Severin tried to cool my nerves as I closed in on him. “I’ll explain everything. To start, take a look at this.”

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hand. At first glance, it seemed to be a plain white one, but there was a sigil on the corner. He handed it to Lord Simeon first to inspect, and then he gave it to me.

“What is... Huh?”

“Thank you for your cooperation. Except for you, Vice Captain. Get cursed. - Angelo”

The message stopped all the words in my throat. Before I could comprehend the whole thing, my mind processed the name it was signed with, which stood out the most to me.

Angelo...? Isn’t that name...? And this sigil—it’s Lavia’s!

“Don’t tell me that Valeriano is actually...”

“Correct.” His Highness nodded at my prodding gaze.

When I looked over at my husband, he also nodded with a crease between his brows, then pulled another letter from his pocket with the same sigil. “The night you were taken to Tarentule, this letter was delivered to His Highness.”

This envelope contained a longer message—something better suited to be called a letter than the first. In it, Angelo spoke of a secret mission assigned to him by Prince Liberto in which he would infiltrate the Familia. He’d also signed this one with “Angelo,” but he’d added his other names: “Emidio Angelo Cialdini.” He’d most likely thought that Prince Severin wouldn’t know who he was with just the one name, because that was the one Lutin had requested I gift him with.

So it was Lutin after all! The phantom thief who is infamous in many kingdoms, known for being a genius of disguises! But at the same time, this man

was, confusingly, an intelligence operative for Lavia who reported directly to Prince Liberto and did a variety of work for him. Being a phantom thief was only one of his jobs—he would make scenes around the globe to distract the public and conceal many truths.

I knew this information because I'd become acquainted with him during previous incidents, and by this point, we might as well be considered friends. A different sort of relationship had been forged between him and Lord Simeon, and while they seemed to be on absurdly bad terms on the surface, they sometimes cooperated with each other.

This time, Lutin had sought help from his side. He'd switched places with one of the members of the Familia and chased after Mr. Damian, who'd stolen the roster, but Mr. Damian had gone and snuck into House Delmer, then contacted me. Casualties to citizens of Lagrange were on the horizon, so Lutin had asked Prince Severin for assistance. All this information was written politely yet somewhat jokingly in his letter, and it perfectly represented his mischievous, fairy-tale thief self.

Ah... Now that I think about it, the feeling I got from Valeriano was that of Lutin himself. Bright and playful, hiding a sharpness without letting his guard down. Why didn't I notice? I even saw his eyes up close!

This revelation also answered why I had been taken from the palace so easily. We'd never figured out which royal knights had been involved, so I'd assumed that they had to have been fakes who'd snuck into the palace. *That seemed like a huge deal, you know! But that man can infiltrate and disguise himself! Or did he disguise one of his comrades because he was in the middle of wearing a disguise himself? Either way...*

"You should have told me!" I crumpled the letter in my hand and shouted. "What did I go through the fear of running away for?!"

"I agree." Lord Simeon nodded. "Do you know how I felt having him take you away twice? I was at my limit trying not to strangle him at the art museum."

"No wonder! He was having us search for top secret information! I knew something was off. And don't pretend like you have nothing to do with this. You tricked me too, Lord Simeon!" I glared at him in retaliation, and he looked

away, clearly uncomfortable.

“I didn’t mean to trick you... I actually didn’t know until later on.”

“Lutin was concealing his identity,” Lord Severin intervened. “I understand why you’re upset, but please try to understand. As skilled as he may be, infiltrating the Scalchi Familia is dangerous. Not only would he fail the investigation by drawing attention to himself, but it would also put his life in danger. Lagrange had no choice but to cooperate with him since we were involved.”

I wondered if Lutin would have explained everything to me had I followed him from the beginning. He surely would have let me go or protected me afterward, so I wouldn’t have had to go through such harrowing experiences. *But I had no idea! I couldn’t help it! Reporter Pieron also couldn’t see those men as anything other than the frightening Familia, so I had no choice but to run with him.*

I pouted, not saying a word, since I couldn’t reveal these feelings to His Highness.

Captain Poisson was cackling. “Let’s save the complaints for Prince Liberto. If we tell him how much trouble he caused, he’s sure to make it up to us.”

“Indeed,” Prince Severin agreed, probably to calm me down. “I’ll argue with him when I contact him again.”

Well, I certainly hope you will! I’ll do so as well when I meet him next! “May I attend Princess Henriette’s wedding the month after next? She asked me to.”

“You just want to go to Lavia, don’t you?”

“I’m not satisfied, so I want to go say a few words to that prince. And maybe punch him!”

“Don’t do that!”

As it turned out, Lord Simeon had agreed to the farce at the museum after learning that Valeriano was Lutin. The other men there had been true members of the Familia, so he’d played along to not let them in on the secret. That was why he’d been so insistent on the capture at the end—outside of the building.

“Lutin has no right to complain, since we went through the trouble of

dispatching knights to help him with the farce.” My husband had a cold smile on his face as he scoffed at the first letter.

“But it looked like they were genuinely trying to capture him at the end there,” I said.

“Yes, as I ordered them to. It would be too obvious that we were faking it if anyone held back. It wouldn’t have been necessary anyway, since he probably had comrades waiting beyond the grounds as well. Isn’t it good that the acting was so genuine?”

The chaos outside of the museum had been because, though it would have been bad to actually capture Lutin, he probably would have escaped no matter what. The knights might as well have tried their best to suppress him to make it look real. And aside from a few outliers, the Lagrange police were capable. They’d do their best to arrest someone they were told was a heinous criminal.

“As long as the Familia had one person to report that Damian had died and the roster was retrieved, there shouldn’t have been a problem,” Lord Simeon continued. “The rest of them were better off captured. They were only following orders, so we won’t get any decent information out of them either.”

He kept up his assertion that he was kindly assisting Lutin. Though that might have been true, it surely wasn’t the forefront reason. I could only laugh bitterly at his expression, which made it obvious that he was feeling smug that he’d needed to aid Lutin. His Highness and the captain were also chuckling.

To sum it all up, this whole ordeal had been a part of Prince Liberto’s spring cleaning plan, and Lagrange had merely helped him with it. If one were only to mention the important parts, then the incident was simple, but so many other elements had been involved that the situation had become unnecessarily complicated. No one associated with it could have predicted the outcome.

If only Mr. Damian hadn’t stolen the roster... That was what I wanted to think, but he would have gotten chased by the Familia either way, so perhaps this was the better option. The situation had become an escape ploy that roped in the leaders of two kingdoms, so this was the best outcome for him.

The day after this meeting, I went to check on Mr. Damian. His complexion

looked much better, and he calmly apologized for everything.

“I caused you so much trouble. I didn’t think things would become so severe... I’m terribly sorry.”

Reporter Pieron had been released, and he’d finally managed to get home after these past several days. He’d left the Familia almost twenty years prior, so they wouldn’t have recognized him even if they’d seen his face. Still, he hadn’t been able to go to his job or his home during the incident, so he’d finally been allowed to return to ensure no one would report him missing.

“How do you feel?” I asked Mr. Damian.

“I’m fine now, thanks to you all.”

I was meeting with Mr. Damian alongside Lord Simeon in the interrogation room in the knights’ residence. The bandages on his head made it seem like he was in pain, but he wasn’t so pale anymore. After falling from a two-story building and getting hit by a carriage, he’d been through a lot, but it revealed that he wasn’t a mere civilian. None of his injuries were fatal, and he’d regained his strength after plenty of rest and good meals.

“I was devastated when they told me you had died,” I said.

“Yes, well, they did intend to kill me. I would have died in that coffin had no one found me. It’s a horrifying execution method befitting the Familia.” He chuckled ironically, but I could tell he felt differently on the inside.

There was barely any space to move inside the coffin, as it was human-shaped. Once the lid was shut, there was no way out. Mr. Damian would have suffocated after a short while, but the reason he was fine was because a thin plate had been wedged into the small space between the lid and the body of the coffin, which I would learn of later. The space had been right next to Mr. Damian’s face, so he didn’t suffocate. It was obvious who’d come up with that idea: Lutin had planned to keep Mr. Damian alive from the start.

While held hostage, he’d apparently awakened once, but the Familia hadn’t done anything to him. The day at the museum, he’d been put to sleep with medicine then placed into the coffin. That had been Lutin’s mischievous way of making the farce seem genuine. He’d made the Familia think they’d retrieved

the roster and gotten rid of Mr. Damian, so now they wouldn't come after him anymore. Quite kind of Lutin, considering that Mr. Damian getting killed would have been the result of Mr. Damian's own actions. Perhaps Lutin had felt some sort of solidarity with him as a fellow person who wanted to wash their hands of the underworld. Not that he would admit anything if that were pointed out to him. I thought it best just to drop the subject.

"I'll give this back to you." I pulled the brooch with the violet motif from my pouch. Lord Simeon nodded in approval before I handed it to Mr. Damian.

"Ah...! Thank you very much! I'm so, so sorry about everything. Thank you so much!" His expression changed as soon as he saw the brooch. He accepted it as if it were an award, all while thanking me over and over.

The expression on his face didn't seem congruent with the sort of person who would steal money from others, but I also couldn't keep quiet. "What are you going to do with that? Are you going to take it to the Delmer trustee and receive the inheritance?"

"Well..."

"We confirmed with the late baroness's trustee and discovered that the inheritance was real and that it was to be passed on to you." Lord Simeon had been the one to investigate this. Almost everything Mr. Damian had told me had been true—everything except for the fact that he wasn't the baroness's son.

"Will you go to the trustee and accept the inheritance? But that would be forgery. You don't have the right to take it. We won't stay silent about it if you try to accept it while pretending to be someone else."

My words made Mr. Damian shrink back. If he wasn't arguing, then he really had been aiming for the inheritance. But since we knew who he was, he couldn't keep pretending to be Eric.

Lord Simeon wasn't sitting with us—he was standing next to me. "When my superior and I discussed what to do with you, we considered sending you back to Lavia. Many of Lavia's people suffered at your hands in the past. Would it not be proper for you to receive punishment there?"

Mr. Damian didn't respond.

"I agree." I narrowed my eyes. "Though you decided to wash your hands of your past, you haven't made up for your mistakes. On top of that, you assumed the identity of another man when you returned to Lagrange. In the eyes of the law, you can't be acquitted."

His face grew pale once more. Lord Simeon was emitting a forceful pressure with his arms crossed as they were, not to mention his ruthless words. "We discussed whether to send you back to Lavia or put you in jail here in Lagrange, but we received an appeal from House Delmer."

"Huh...?" Those last words made Mr. Damian raise his head slightly.

"They said they would like to give you a second chance. They requested to take you in and monitor you, so they asked that we hold off on your punishment. Though the one who wrote the appeal itself was most likely Moran, we confirmed that these were the wishes of the baron himself. He respects you quite a bit. It appears you worked hard at fulfilling the baroness's request to protect the young baron."

Mr. Damian was shaking and at a loss for words. His aging, sunken eyes brimmed with tears.

I softened my tone. "Mr. Moran told us that you treated Lord Lenny as if he were truly your nephew—that you protected him. He felt that you did it truly out of love, not only because the late baroness asked you to. Would that be right for us to believe? Pookie's nest box was very carefully constructed. I could feel the love from the maker in the craftsmanship. To you, the Delmer baronage wasn't just a place for you to hide, was it?"

Lord Lenny evidently wasn't the only person who'd been feeling lonely. Mr. Damian had been a member of the Familia since he was young, so he had no one to call family. He ran away all by himself too, so he must have felt very alone.

Tremors ran through his hand as he gripped the brooch, which was the symbol of his promise with the late baroness. He kept his eyes focused on it as he spoke. "The madam didn't turn me away even though she knew I was a fake. She seemed to think that relying on someone like me was the only way she

could protect the young master. A normal person would have reported me to the police, but she accepted me without question. I was happy when Eric told me about all this... He told me it would be fine for me to live in that house in his stead.”

The baroness had apparently been very worried about her son, who’d run away from home. I was glad she was able to hear of his fate before she died, even though she never got to meet him again.

“She told me I could do what I wanted with the inheritance. It was a completely favorable discussion for me, but I began to feel guilty. I felt so shameful for trying to trick her... *Me*, of all people. I’d never felt guilt for deceiving people before, but then I became filled with regret toward the madam.” He laughed bitterly as the tears flowed down his cheeks. “Though it’s embarrassing to say at my age, that was the first time anyone had ever been so kind to me, despite knowing who I really was. I was the type of imposter who made a living out of deceiving others, and I thought that promises were meant to be broken. But I’ve decided to keep my promise to the madam—until the end of my life if need be.”

So even a hardened criminal could reform with just a single good reason. Contact with just one person could bring anyone happiness or unhappiness. This person had been brought into a brighter world by meeting the baroness, and he was being led to happiness.

Mr. Damian wiped a tear away. “I thought of telling the young master the truth, but I couldn’t... I felt guilty for making him believe I was his uncle, but I still doted on him. I couldn’t help it... I thought that had I lived a normal life, I might’ve had a child like him one day. I was terrified of him discovering the truth.”

“Mr. Moran explained things to him,” I said. “Lord Lenny is smart, so he understood properly. He was surely a bit disappointed, but he’s still saying he wants you to return.”

“R-Really?”

“He said he wants you to make a feeder for the birds!”

“Ah... That’s because they keep coming for Pookie’s food... He told me to

make another one so they wouldn't fight."

"Then you'll have to keep to that promise, won't you?" I looked up at my husband, whose beautiful face had softened from its severe look.

He pushed up his glasses. "We'll tell Lavia we won't be sending you, but they'll probably respond by telling us we don't need to be sending each and every imposter over there anyway. Lavia's going to be filled with arrestees soon enough, so they won't have time to deal with you personally."

"Huh?" Mr. Damian was at a loss for words.

"However, there is a possibility that they will require the information you have on the inner workings of the Familia. We're going to have you cooperate when necessary."

"Ah, yes...er...?" He still didn't look like he was fully understanding.

"Your punishment is indefinite penal servitude. It has been decided that the Delmer baronage will be your retention facility."

Mr. Damian opened his eyes wide. Tears overflowed.

A trace of a smile flashed across Lord Simeon's otherwise unbreaking expression. "We will have you work under Moran's supervision. You will be paid enough for living expenses, but nothing beyond that, and you will not be allowed to leave the mansion unattended. There will be periodic reviews of your status, and if it is decided that you have not reformed or are plotting another escape, your retention facility will be changed to the Libert Prison."

Despite the harsh tone of that announcement, this sentence was a very gracious one. Lord Simeon had actually suggested Mr. Damian be put in a prison for a period, but His Highness Prince Severin showed my husband the appeal from House Delmer. In the letter, after the portion that Moran had written, a plea in a child's handwriting was included. Even Lord Simeon had to bend to a child's fervent plea, so a very lenient punishment was bestowed upon Mr. Damian.

"If, in the future, it is accepted that you contributed a fair amount to the rebuilding of House Delmer, your punishment period will come to an end. After that, you may choose to continue working for them and receive a proper salary,

or move somewhere else.”

“Th-Thank you...so much...” Mr. Damian’s bandaged head bowed to Lord Simeon over and over. “Thank you very much...”

This man, who had deceived people for many years, was apologizing with trembling shoulders. I couldn’t think this was all just an act. Lord Simeon calmly watched this man sob with joy.

I held my hand out. “Please promise us that you will protect Lord Lenny and that beautiful manor.”

Mr. Damian took my hand in both of his. “Yes...I will. With everything I have. I promise.”

“House Flaubert and House Clarac will assist House Delmer. If anything occurs that’s too much to handle, don’t resort to trickery. Be honest and ask for help. We promise we won’t abandon you.”

He looked up at my smiling face, then over to Lord Simeon, who nodded with a kind gaze.

“Thank you so much...”

This man’s bad habits that he’d developed over many years wouldn’t disappear so quickly. But I believe that people can change when they gain something to protect. If someone has something more precious than themselves, they’ll do anything to keep it safe.

People can change, no matter what age they are. As long as they’re still alive, they have to do their best. Mr. Damian’s new life would begin in that kind manor, which was as beautiful as a fairy-tale land. Surely, a very happy future awaited him.

Chapter Fourteen

“U-Unbelievable...!”

The moment he set foot onto the manor grounds blanketed in that floral fragrance, my brother Gerard Clarac couldn't help but shout in delight.

“What a beautiful garden! This is nothing less than paradise! A utopia made just for me!”

He'd reacted just as I'd expected to the outside of the manor—it was similar to my own reaction—and by the time we were through the gate, he was already off the planet. His eyes behind his messy bangs and black-rimmed glasses typically gazed boredly at all of his surroundings, but now they were spinning wildly to get a look at everything and sparkling as if they belonged to a different person.

I could understand wanting to jump with joy in front of one's favorite things. This type of thing was what my brother could fanboy over. I just wished he would take a moment to do his greetings properly. *Look at that! The Delmer household is laughing at you!*

I'd brought my brother specifically because I'd known he would love the place, but our main goal was a meeting to prepare for the future of House Delmer. As we had told Mr. Damian, House Flaubert and House Clarac would be providing assistance to House Delmer. I'd said as much to my brother beforehand. I'd also said that he shouldn't just give his name but go in with the intent to get on good terms with House Delmer. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to be in a state to do so. There were many people in this world who loved gardening, and the residents of the manor didn't seem surprised that he was acting this way. They seemed quite composed.

Lord Lenny was as energetic and cute as ever. He awaited our arrival with Pookie in hand. Behind him, Mr. Damian was patiently attending to him. Dressed as an apprentice butler, he wasn't in a higher position than the other servants. His main duties were odd jobs, helping with cleaning, laundry, or

whatever else was asked of him. He didn't seem displeased with his treatment, and he bowed politely to me and Lord Simeon.

When my brother finally tore his eyes away from the majesty for a moment, he took an unusually bold step forward to greet the Delmer household. "It's a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Gerard Clarac. I was ecstatic to hear that our houses would be forging a relationship. I very much enjoy passing by the front gate of your manor and taking in the outside scenery every so often. I'm rather desperate to ask you to show me the inside as well, as neither my home nor the home my sister married into had any previous relations with House Delmer. I've spent longing days from afar watching the blooming cycle of your flowers, along with their ever-changing colors. I heard that this garden was so beautiful that it couldn't have possibly been made by human hands, and I've fantasized about visiting so much that this place has even appeared in my dreams. My heart is positively soaring to the heavens as I'm visiting today. Indeed, your garden is nothing less than a paradise on earth!"

"Your heart is soaring to the heavens, but the paradise is on earth? Please do a more proper greeting, brother! How embarrassing!" I chided.

"You're one to talk! You know better than anyone else how it feels to lose your ability to speak in front of your greatest admiration!"

"Unfortunately for you, my way of expression is purely through words, so I am able to praise my object of affection however much I want. That's my whole profession!"

"Am I not praising them right this very moment?!"

"Your long sentences are so tedious! It's odd. This is why you should put a little more effort into appearing at social events rather than drowning yourself in flowers!"

"I don't want to hear that from the person who uses social events as opportunities to gather intel!"

Lord Simeon's eyes were wide. "You really are siblings..."

Lord Lenny was a bit overwhelmed by our colorful banter, but he must have figured that he had to speak up to us as the head of his home. Or maybe

curiosity just got the best of him because he cocked his head and cutely asked my brother a question. “Do you like flowers, uncle?”

“Unc—?!” My brother stiffened up.

Lord Lenny smiled brightly. “My grandmother and grandfather gathered these flowers! The garden used to be very lonely, so they wanted to fill it with flowers.”

“I-Is that so?”

“They said they wanted all our visitors to have fun here, so please look at the garden as much as you want, uncle!”

“Ha ha, thank you very much... ‘Uncle’...”

I further chided my brother as he muttered under his breath. “You’re old enough to be his father, so it’s only natural. You’re twenty-eight years old, so you can’t let something like this get to you.”

“A person in their twenties wouldn’t be an uncle! And if *I’m* an uncle, then what would that make Sir Simeon, who’s a year older than me?!”

“Well, from Lord Lenny’s perspective...”

“Urgh!” A stray bullet hit Lord Simeon squarely. The servants around us were laughing at his pitiful state, including Mr. Damian.

Though there was a trace of loneliness here, this manor of flowers was filled with a peaceful, happy atmosphere.

Lord Lenny took my brother’s hand and led him into the garden proper. They walked through the arch of roses, down the path that led to a fairy-tale world. The waves of emotion hit my brother one after the other, making him forget about the little shock he’d just been through and letting him delve into the dreams of flowers once more.

Seeing him in such a state, it seemed he’d be readily agreeing to assist House Delmer wherever necessary. He would genuinely want to protect this beautiful home, not just out of obligation. Though he acted the way he did, he was a kind person who would surely protect Lord Lenny.

I left them to their devices and moved to a place where I could see the

wisteria on the walls of the manor. It had been a week since I'd last visited, so the blooms were beginning to open up much more than before. The long, light purple calyxes drooped all around, creating a very lovely scene.

I walked all the way to the fence facing the outer road and spoke to the person waiting there. "You should come inside as well."

"I'm just a reporter for a gossip rag. People like these high-and-mighty nobles wouldn't welcome me."

He was gazing at the manor from beyond the gate. As always, the stubble on his chin stood out, making him look as tired as ever. He was truly a dreary, middle-aged man. His appearance and aura had been effectively influenced by the daily life of a commoner, so even *I'd* been fooled up until this incident. *Well done, sir.*

"I'll take that to mean you won't be revealing your identity and returning home, yes?"

"What identity? I'm just an unimportant newspaper reporter."



Oh, this man! He came all this way at my behest yet is acting so stubborn.

I put my hand through the bars and snatched the hat off of Reporter Pieron's head.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

"Your height, hair color, and eye color are very similar to Mr. Damian's. The structures of your faces are as well. That was why you conjured up this plan of him assuming your identity, didn't you?"

His brown hair stuck up in all directions, and his eyes were a calm dark brown. If one were to look past his tired demeanor, his face was rather well put-together. It was most likely just a coincidence that he and Mr. Damian had become friends, but their similar likenesses must have been what led Reporter Pieron to this plan.

"Ha," he scoffed. "There're tons of people with brown hair and brown eyes. Including you!"

"Indeed. But despite your rough language, your way of speaking is refined, you eat with perfect manners, and you know how to ride a horse. These traits can't have all come out of nowhere."

"Some people are just like that."

"You didn't hear because you came in a little late, but right before Mr. Damian passed out, he told me to 'give the brooch to Eric.' Don't you find that strange? You told me that Eric passed away long ago."

Reporter Pieron didn't respond. Instead, he silently tried to steal his hat back from me. I dodged him and put it on my own head in jest. It was larger than I thought it would be, so it was quite roomy inside.

"I'd noticed that he was trying to assume Eric's identity, so I didn't find his words particularly strange. Right after, you told me that Eric was already dead, which is where the seams began to come apart. Had I misunderstood Mr. Damian? But thinking about it, I had no proof that Eric was dead. There was no reason for Mr. Damian to lie in that moment either, so the person who was most likely to be lying was..."

Footsteps approached. Lord Simeon had come to quietly stand by my side so as to not interrupt our conversation.

I smiled up at him as I continued. “You probably thought that you could get away with your trick because you were the one helping Mr. Damian assume your identity. As long as you told him traits and memories about your family and had him act as you, you could even trick your own mother. But even *you* had to have known that it wouldn’t go so easily.”

Reporter Pieron was just silently biting his lip. An obstinate man to the very end.

“According to Mr. Damian, he was supposed to split the Delmer inheritance with you in half rather than monopolize it. You told him you wouldn’t accept it, as you wouldn’t ever be returning to that household, but he wanted to respect your mother’s wishes and still give it to you. That was why he was so desperate to retrieve the earring.”

Reporter Pieron clicked his tongue and turned his back to us. He leaned against the fence as he pulled out a paper cigar, took a drag, and exhaled thin smoke.

“Once your mother was told that you were in Sans-Terre living well, she became very happy. Mr. Damian said that he showed her your articles since he couldn’t bring you to her himself.”

“That bastard...”

“Had you written something you didn’t want your mother to see?”

“Shaddup.”

I chuckled at his stubborn back. *Don’t worry—I trust that Mr. Damian chose the articles with care.*

“You knew your mother would see through the ruse as you sent Mr. Damian off, didn’t you? You were worried since she didn’t have much time left, but you still couldn’t return home. That’s when you reunited with Mr. Damian, and you came up with a plan to aid him while also letting your mother know you were out there somewhere.”

Another puff of smoke came from his lips, but he said nothing.

“You knew that your mother would accept Mr. Damian once she heard the circumstances. Though there was a possibility that he would bring danger to House Delmer, he could also bring some peace to your mother during her last breaths. You were torn in this dilemma, but you ended up prioritizing your mother.”

“Man, you talk a lot.” He sighed, his back still turned.

“Hmph! That’s because you won’t be honest with yourself. You’re so stubborn!” I put my hands on my hips and puffed out my chest. Reporter Pieron let out a soft chuckle, and I smiled at his kind demeanor. “When you were young, you ran away from your affluent household and didn’t return for twenty years. You were gone for a long time, and I know you didn’t want to give up the life you’d built for yourself. I don’t plan on attacking you for not returning home.”

He was twiddling the cigar between his fingers.

“Your mother must have understood as well. She didn’t try to force you to come home. She just wanted to know that you were all right, and she must have known why you sent Mr. Damian.”

Normally, a person wouldn’t suddenly let a stranger into their home to act as their son. But perhaps Baroness Delmer did so partially because she knew her son’s reasoning. Though he wouldn’t come see her himself, Reporter Pieron had worried for his mother. She had most likely been happy that they could be connected by those emotions through Mr. Damian.

“Your feelings got across to her. You were with your mother after all. Though you were physically apart and couldn’t see one another’s faces, your feelings reached her. That’s why her last moments were spent in peace. I’m sure she was happy.”

More puffs of smoke floated up in the air. They disappeared after lingering for a moment each, with perhaps a tinge of dampness to them. He wasn’t turning around because he was stubborn, but Reporter Pieron might not have wanted us to see his face either. Not answering was an answer in itself.

To be honest, I did feel that he should have met with his mother in person, just once, especially since it had been at her last stretch of life. Reporter Pieron hadn't had a good relationship with his father, who was no longer alive, and his brother and sister-in-law had also already passed. There'd been no one left to judge him, so he might as well have returned home... That was what I'd like to think, but everyone had their own reasons. Sending Mr. Damian to let the baroness know he was alive must have taken all of his strength, and she'd received that message, so all's well that ends well.

It was all in the past now. With just a bit of bitterness and pain left over, it was a tale he could quietly reflect on.

"But Lord Lenny needs an adult relative he can rely on. I won't ask you to live with him, but could you at least contact him?"

"Someone like me popping up out of the blue would just end up being an embarrassment to the family." Reporter Pieron had given up on pretending. "Twenty years is a long time, kid. I can't go back to the world of nobles. It's better if I live as a different person...for both me and the house."

"Do you really think so?"

"Well, if there's ever a job only I can do for them, have them send you to tell me. I can't promise I'll be of any help, but I'll at least hear them out."

I blinked in surprise. I'd thought he'd refuse anything and everything, but he'd just told me some good news. Perhaps his heart had opened up a little after we'd tackled a problem together. I didn't see this man as a mere bother anymore—we now had a sort of ambiguous relationship that could even turn into friendship down the line. It was rather exciting!

He hurriedly added an appendix to that statement since my aura behind him was brightening up. "But isn't your husband there going to introduce good people to them anyway? Sir, go on and do a good job of that so I won't have to involve myself."

"In that case, I have a condition." Lord Simeon opening his mouth caused the reporter to finally turn around, looking as suspicious of him as ever. I couldn't tell if his eyes were wet or not.

“Condition?”

“In exchange for us hiding your identity as Eric Delmer and supporting the Delmer baronage, you need to promise us that you will not reveal Agnès Vivier’s identity.”

“Oh ho, so that’s how you’re going to play.”

The two men glared at each other, one of them coldly, the other laughing bitterly.

“From here on out, do not try to uncover and reveal what any female author is trying to hide. You should know how it feels to harbor a secret. You can’t push what you deny onto others. Also, please write an article stating that the plagiarism accusations against Vivier are false. Not a small one in the corner of the paper, but a large one that will catch all eyes.”

“You said *one* condition! How many are you going to add?”

Lord Simeon didn’t back down at this resistance—he gained even more power as a brutal, blackhearted military officer. “You’re responsible for all of this as well, so I believe these are fair demands. You do have a right to refuse, of course. If you would like to report freely, go ahead. In that scenario, we will respond with retaliation of our own, so please prepare yourself to never be able to pick up a pen ever again.”

“Jeez...”

“I do not mind this becoming a mudslinging competition at all. I will smash anyone who harms my wife with everything I have. I am much more fearsome than something like the Scalchi Familia. Go on, come at me with that in mind.”

Reporter Pieron turned to me. “Damn, your husband’s scary! Wait, and why are *you* foaming at the mouth?!” It seemed he had taken notice of me quivering next to Lord Simeon.

“Don’t you find him just *riveting*?! I simply cannot get enough of his brutal, blackhearted flavor!”

“No, I have no idea what you’re talking about! Is he really being blackhearted right now? He just spewed all that out of nowhere!”

“My, oh my! Lord Simeon really is the best husband of all time! Earnest, kind, and cute, but he doesn’t hold back in the face of enemies. I love you!”

“I can’t fathom this at all!” the reporter exclaimed. “I guess you authors really are a different breed.”

Letting out an exhausted sigh, Reporter Pieron reached back through the bars of the fence to retrieve his hat from my head. He then turned away and started walking off.

“What’s your response?” I demanded. “Aren’t you going to promise us?”

He waved his hand behind him as he walked. “I’m not brave enough to make the Flaubert Earldom my enemy, and I owe Vivier now. I’ll do as you say, so please keep up your end of the bargain and help my nephew.”

I shrugged, exasperated at the sight of his disappearing back and his puffs of smoke. *He made this promise in his own way.* “Why can’t he say as much to the boy himself?”

“He has his reasons,” answered Lord Simeon. “I don’t believe it’s our place to pry.”

“I suppose.”

Everyone has things they can’t give up: secrets they’re keeping, things they have to do no matter what, things to protect. It’s important to respect others. Though we were parting with Reporter Pieron here, we were sure to meet with him again eventually. And it seemed that next time we’d be meeting with different feelings. *I’m looking forward to it, Mr. Expert Reporter.*

I clung to Lord Simeon’s arm and had him spoil me. “Thank you very much! I’m relieved you went that far for me.”

“This ordeal was a mess. We were looking forward to your birthday, but the whole thing ended up no better than a sopping wet disaster.”

“It’s fine. The real deal is still on the horizon.” I looked up at his blue eyes and laughed. I removed my glasses and stood on my tiptoes. He bent down to meet me.

“Happy twentieth birthday,” he said in a kind voice. He lifted me up high.

“Bless this day you were born. I’m grateful you spent yet another year energetic, and I hope that the day will come again. Here’s to us being together until then, and being able to celebrate like this every year.”

My smile only widened when I heard his words, which were more wonderful than any gift. I kicked my feet and snuggled into him, then kissed him again.

I give my thanks for this good day as well—for being able to live happily for twenty years without any grave mistakes and for the miracle of being able to meet a person who is more reliable and beloved than anyone else in the world. And lastly, for the joy of being able to live with this person for the rest of my life.

No matter how old I became, birthdays were special days. It was an anniversary just for me, once a year. *Let us make many more memories every year. I’ll be sure to give you just as much thanks and joy for your birthday, which comes a little later than mine.*

“We’ll have to begin preparing for our trip once we’re home,” I remembered. “Tomorrow, we’ll finally be setting off! With all the commotion, I was so worried we wouldn’t make it in time. I’m glad it was all wrapped up before our departure date.”

“Indeed, but with you in the equation, I just can’t help but feel that something will happen again. I can only hope that it will be a peaceful trip.”

“Please don’t say it like all these incidents are my fault. I firmly believe that I’m just getting roped into them!”

“That’s what I’d like to believe as well, but when they happen in such quick succession...” Lord Simeon trailed off.

“Are you tired of it?” I asked.

“I could never get tired of my days with you.”

It was spring, when flowers would bloom en masse. The sky was shining bright. Today was a fun, special day—the day I was born.

I’m happy that I get to feel that way.

Thank you, and here’s to the future.

Marielle has turned twenty.

The Offense and Defense of a Working Man

As far as they knew, the target had crossed the border into Lagrange and was hiding in the capital, Sans-Terre.

According to their investigations, the target's home was a small town in the eastern part of Lagrange. Their parents were dead, and they didn't have siblings, but their uncle's family was apparently still doing well. However, the target wasn't likely to return there. In the countryside, there weren't many people, so outsiders stood out. But in Sans-Terre, which was one of the world's leading metropolises, there were many foreigners, so it was better suited for hiding oneself.

"Problem is, *where* is he going to hide?"

In a hotel room that was serving as a temporary base, a man sighed as he opened up a newspaper. The Scalchi Familia had a wide reach in both the political and industrial worlds, so they had associates in many kingdoms, not just Lavia. The man could have made his base in any place through the Familia's go-betweens, but he avoided doing so in favor of a hotel room.

Why? Because he wasn't a real member of the Familia. He was an imposter—an operative who took on the voice and appearance of a member he'd quietly captured. There was a possibility that his identity would be uncovered if he had prolonged contact with anyone, so at the moment, it was difficult for him to move freely. That was part of why he'd chosen a hotel as his base—so he could relax a little.

To this man, who was renowned for his disguises, long-term infiltrations always came with danger. And if the organization to be infiltrated was a notorious crime syndicate, one mistake could cost him his life.

"I wonder where the guy's hiding? I wish I could've gotten ahold of him before he ran off."

At the moment, the operative's underlings in the Familia were tracing the

target's steps. They'd most likely have his location soon. That was just how fearsome the Familia was, and the operative was grateful for it. He could only hope that he wouldn't have to wait for too long.

"Hmm...?"

The operative's eyes were pulled in by a certain article in the newspaper he'd only opened to pass the time. The headline was quite eye-catching, and it featured a name he was familiar with.

"Oh my, what's this?"

He knew about her secret profession, of course. He wasn't fond of reading novels, but he'd read several of hers because he was curious. In all honesty, he hadn't enjoyed them. He knew he wasn't equipped with the proper emotions to understand her writing. However, they did make him feel that the young lady had written them quite well for her age, and for being a naive noble daughter.

That same young lady was under suspicion of plagiarism...?

"Oh dear." Grinning, the operative switched his focus to the letter under the headline. Just one read through was enough for him to determine that it was a sham. It hadn't been written by a person who was truly confessing something. The contents severely lacked reliability. In other words, this article had been written to bring the young lady down.

"How troublesome. What are you going to do, Marielle?" Though he pitied her, he wasn't particularly worried. The girl wasn't so weak that a mere fake article would be enough to crush her. She would perhaps be depressed at first, but soon after, she would rise up again and retaliate. The operative was excited to think about how she would face this antagonism.

If she's being attacked via newspaper, won't she fight back through one as well? That was what the operative thought as he'd waited for the next edition. Sure enough, two days later, there was movement. He'd predicted the publisher would deny the claims, but the girl herself had published a personal message in the advertisement columns. It seemed she wanted to directly confront the writer of the letter. The operative had to laugh at this, as it was so *her*. That was what made her who she was. Her courage and drive were nothing less than admirable.

During that time, there was no movement in the operative's work. The target remained hidden, and no meaningful information came about. His subordinates from his primary role also had nothing to report, which led to the operative growing more and more irritable.

Two days later, he left the hotel by himself to relieve stress. The writer of the letter apparently wanted to meet with the young lady—they'd instructed her to do something at a certain time and place. The operative had kept watch over this exchange in the paper, so he'd come to observe purely out of curiosity and as a way to pass the time. Taking a walk under the clear spring sky didn't seem like a bad idea either. He'd grown bored waiting for any reports of progress in his stifling hotel room, so he wanted a change of pace. That was it.

Or at least, that should have been it.

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

The operative's mouth fell open at the sight. He'd wondered what kind of person had pulled the girl out through such intricate methods, but against all odds, it had been the target he'd been chasing all along. *With that face, there's no doubt.* The target was dressed as a generic noble at the moment, but he was nonetheless the faker who'd appeared in the Familia's photos.

What in the world is going on?! The operative's brain stopped working at this unexpected development. He and his lackeys had been struggling to pinpoint their target's location, but the target had just appeared on his own.

When the operative recovered from the momentary shock, his heart leaped at the bit of luck, but a part of him was flooded with questions. *Why is he meeting with her? Don't tell me she's involved in this mission...*

"No, there's no way."

Watching from among the passersby, the operative denied the thought. How could the young wife of a peaceful earldom possibly be involved? She'd gotten roped into previous cases, sure, but those had been isolated incidents. She couldn't possibly be affiliated with the underworld.

In fact... The operative turned his eyes to the side. Same as he, there were two other people watching the target and the young lady. One was a tired-

looking middle-aged man. Though he seemed to be used to sneaking around, he appeared to be neither a soldier nor a member of the syndicate. He was most likely a newspaper reporter or something similar. *I don't particularly care about that one.*

Even from far away, the operative could tell that the other observer was keeping close watch to see if the target was going to injure the young lady. *Of course he'd be here. The vice captain would never let her go alone to meet with a stranger who'd picked a fight with her.* As such, the operative was sure that the vice captain wasn't affiliated with the Familia at all.

The operative and the vice captain didn't get along—it was so bad that they would be rivals in any lifetime. However, he accepted that the vice captain treasured the young lady more than his own life. Though the vice captain prioritized his boss and his work during the day, he was sure to protect the young lady if the time came. The vice captain might not have realized it himself, but in addition to protecting her, he depended on her. His overprotectiveness was a manifestation of his fear of losing her. Someone like that would never let her anywhere near the underworld.

After thinking for several moments, the operative came to a conclusion: the young lady and the vice captain were contacting the target without knowing who he really was. Just how had things ended up this way? The thought made the operative sigh in exasperation.

He finally moved so the two observers wouldn't notice him. He had to be careful not to enter the vice captain's line of sight, no matter what. As masterfully crafted as his disguises might have been, the vice captain would see through this one somehow. The vice captain had previously attributed this skill to his bone structure, but the operative was suspicious that he actually had a sense of smell that rivaled a dog's.

The target appeared to be too wrapped up in his tale to notice the looming vice captain. It was very thickheaded of the target—he even had his back turned. Perhaps his story was just that important. *All of the passersby around you are turning their heads to stare, sir.*

The vice captain was a rare sight today. He'd evidently taken precautions by

not wearing his military uniform, and his golden hair was hidden under a hat. Unfortunately, he wasn't making any effort to conceal his overwhelming presence. He was abhorrently skilled at pretty much everything, but it seemed stealth operations were not his forte. He didn't seem to notice that he was standing out, much less the fact that everyone around was gaping at him in fear.

Tall and muscular, the vice captain gave off the air of an expert. Someone like him in the shadow of a tree, glaring straight at a single person, was nothing less than a strange sight—so strange that it was funny. Not to mention that the vice captain himself was always so serious, which made the sight even funnier.

“Serious to a fault. Very vice captain-y of him.”

The operative wanted to tell the target to turn around just once. The target would surely jump up and run as soon as he noticed. The operative closed the distance between them a bit so he wouldn't lose the target if the man ran. It was vexing that the operative couldn't hear what the target and young lady were truly talking about. The target was still turned around and apparently saying goodbye to the young lady. He didn't seem like he'd be finished anytime soon.

After a long, calm conversation without any arguing, the target and young lady parted ways. The operative chased after the target, who'd politely bid farewell to the young lady and walked off. The first order of business was to confirm where the target was hiding—the Familia could capture him at any moment as long as they had his location. While crossing the bridge and pretending to be an innocent passerby, the operative glanced behind him.

Some prince of some kingdom had apparently been born under the star of misfortune, and by the same logic, this young lady's star had to be the one of “chaos.” She often found herself embroiled in incidents, and she was easily targeted by obnoxious people.

This scene brought only bad premonitions to the operative. “Please, don't cause any more of a mess. I don't want you to be in danger either, you know.”

Sighing at the prelude to an annoying adventure, the operative left the river.

And of course, his fleeting wishes were betrayed.

“Yeah. I should’ve known. I underestimated Marielle’s star,” the operative whispered, all the energy leaving his body.

Though it was good that he’d been able to capture the target, the target had run so wildly that he’d hurt himself and was currently unconscious. He wasn’t in possession of the roster either. The young lady had seemingly made a deal with him, but the middle-aged reporter had taken her away before the operative had been able to ask her about it. The situation was in such disarray that he was almost at a loss as to what to do. He’d really thought everything would go smoothly without the bothersome vice captain around. Though cautious, the young lady seemed to be willing to hear the operative out. He’d planned to take her somewhere for the time being, reveal his identity where no one could see, and ask for her cooperation.

Such a simple plan, so why did things turn out like this?!

The operative sighed at the passenger boat that was floating away. He could jump onto the boat himself, but he couldn’t do anything while floating in a river. *That damn old man. So he wasn’t just a random reporter after all. Who is he?*

One of the operative’s subordinates caught up to him. “What should we do?”

“We have no choice but to chase after them, obviously. Try as they might to get away, they can’t disembark from a boat mid-ride. We know where they’re headed, so we’ll just get to their destination first and ambush them.” After telling his subordinate where the destination would be, he added something. “Don’t do anything to them yet. We can’t make much of a fuss in this city, so we have to be careful. Just keep watch over them until I give you new orders.”

“Yes sir.” The subordinate nodded obediently and left. The members of the Familia accompanying the operative were all soldiers who just did as they were told. They wouldn’t give their own opinions if they weren’t asked. Thus, it was easy to give them more peculiar orders since they wouldn’t ask questions.

However, there was a limit to that as well. The operative couldn’t linger, and he had to resolve all this quickly or else he could be found out. Not to mention that if he stayed any longer, the vice captain would show up. Obnoxious and

annoying, that one. The operative wanted to wrap things up before that happened.

He did his best. He'd become one of the Familia and aimed to carry out his mission as he acted his part. He'd even been cautious to protect the young lady. But no matter how skillfully he did these things, perhaps he was particularly unlucky that day—everything he did turned out to be a swing and a miss.

After seeing the reporter and the young lady hide in a small theater, the operative had planned to sneak in, but they'd come out on their own. Even if he had wanted to approach them, they made a ruckus as they walked about. He'd then plotted to cause his own ruckus to throw the surroundings into confusion, but it had been too late. The vice captain had shown up, so the operative's only option had been to run. He'd at least managed to snag the young lady's pouch, but it yielded no trace of the roster.

"Aaagh! Why did this have to happen?!" He cradled his head in his hands as he whispered, frustrated. "I'm at my wit's end right about now..."

As it turned out, the young lady had not merely hidden and bought time in that theater. She'd plotted something of her own. She'd somehow managed to contact the vice captain without the Familia noticing and had created a situation in which they couldn't do anything to her as she waited for his rescue. Honestly, the operative would have applauded her for that in any other situation. He figured things would get so hectic that he wouldn't be able to handle it.

When he thought that, he was reminded of a similar, previous incident. Yes, it'd been one year ago in the spring. He'd also been in the middle of an infiltration mission at the time, and the young lady had barged in and made his plans go awry. Thanks to that, Lavia's honor had taken a hit, and it had ended with them having to unexpectedly pay three million algiers. He remembered getting a stern talking-to from his stingy master. *What, is spring the season of misfortune?*

Though the star of chaos followed her wherever she went, the young lady would always emerge safe and sound somehow—her foes always ended up taking heavy damage. It must have been hard on the vice captain as well,

always having to be strung along with her, but the true victims were surely her enemies.

And at the moment, the operative was in a situation in which he couldn't move as her enemy. *This is bad. At this rate, they're going to close in on me and trap me so I can't escape. I shouldn't have underestimated the evil of her star. What should I do?*

"Mr. Valeriano." As he contemplated, one of his subordinates came looking for an order. The operative didn't want to underestimate these members of the Familia either. There was a chance that one of the syndicate's "eyes" was among them. He had to play the part of "Valeriano" to the end and break down the situation through a method befitting of the Familia.

"Change of plans," the operative said. Hesitation would cost him his life. There was only so much time to worry. "We're going back for now."

He called out to his lackeys and pulled them back to the hotel to regroup. The target might well have opened his eyes by then anyway. Everything would be fine as long as they could get the location of the roster out of him, but they would have to come up with a method to do that as well.

Though the operative looked aloof on the outside, on the inside, he was busy coming up with plans. The situation had already come so far, he might as well fully rope Lagrange into it. This involved them too. The target causing all the trouble was originally from this kingdom, and the young lady being involved made everything more complicated. Lagrange had to take responsibility. That was what he would base his argument on.

"Either she has the roster, or it's in the baronage. There aren't any other options."

"So we'll have to barge our way into the manor?" asked one of the Familia.

"No, stupid. The military would arrive before we found it. They have a base in the nobles' residential district. We won't have to cross such a dangerous bridge—we'll just let them boldly search for the roster themselves." The operative laughed brazenly. He might as well let the Lagrangians play in his hands as he enjoyed the situation. It put him at ease to think that they were being thrown around just as much as he was. "Since the Royal Order is involved, they

probably went to the palace. They'll be relieved that they're in a safe area, so now's actually the perfect time to aim for them."

Thinking of a plan, he chose one of the lackeys that was best suited for the situation. The operative plotted to disguise the lackey as a knight and sneak him into the palace while also preparing a secret message. Right as the operative was about to sign his name, his hand stopped moving. After pondering for a moment, he signed it with a name he didn't usually use.

At the end of the previous year, he'd received a name from the young lady, which probably wasn't a fun story for the vice captain to hear. There wasn't much of a point in the operative adding it to this secret message, but he figured he might as well include it to annoy the vice captain.

"It wouldn't be fun if I just revealed that it's me right off the bat. I'll have this delivered after the vice captain leaves the palace."

The operative wondered what kind of face the vice captain would make after losing his wife for a second time in a day, desperately chasing after her, and then seeing this note. Just imagining it brought him joy. It was too bad he couldn't see it for himself.

That was how the operative restarted his activities under this new scheme. A message of agreement from Lagrange was quietly delivered to him, so things mostly went as planned. The target regained consciousness but would not give up his secrets, even if it cost him his life. The operative wanted to avoid testing that, so he wanted to save that option for after they'd expended all of their other ideas. The operative put his hopes into Lagrange's camp doing their best.

This time, his expectations were not betrayed. The young lady and her entourage found the roster. The operative followed her example and contacted her through the newspaper, then effectively retrieved it. Unlike the first half of this tale, the latter half went smoothly.

The operative faced off with the vice captain, both of them not letting it show that they were acting. The eyes behind the vice captain's glasses glared at the operative with the intent to kill, seething with fury like boiling lava. *Yes, yes, this is it. Everything's finally back to normal.* The operative enjoyed himself as he triumphantly exited the stage.

Unfortunately for him, the vice captain was not going to let him off so easily.

“Thaaat eeevil sooldieeer!!!”

While maneuvering his way through the knights and police coming at him from all sides, the operative let out a scream. It didn’t matter whether or not the others were captured, but what on earth was Lagrange doing trying to capture *him*? What about their plan?! The operative could almost see the vice captain’s mischievous grin in his mind, telling him, “This should be simple enough for you to escape, right?”

Why yes, it is! The operative had his primary, non-Familia subordinates waiting elsewhere as backup. They came to his rescue of their own accord. Abandoning the Familia, the operative made a clean, swift escape from the area. If nothing else, he was rid of the unnecessary comrades and had successfully wrapped things up, but it was still aggravating that the vice captain’s sly face was showing up in the back of his head, saying, “See? I helped you.”

“Damn it! I’ll make sure to get back at you the next time I see you. Remember this!”

The operative spewed venom as he left the flourishing city behind him, putting aside the fact that the vice captain was spewing similar things about him.

The operative headed toward the port near sundown that same day to depart. His business in this kingdom had ended, so all he had left to do was to hurry home to his master, roster in hand. He would remove his disguise right after boarding so that he’d arrive in Lavia as a different man. The intention was to have “Valeriano” disappear at sea. The members of the Familia awaiting the roster’s arrival would be at a loss.

A lot had happened, but the operative was satisfied—this ending was fit for a phantom thief. The subordinate who’d gone on ahead of him should have been waiting with a boarding ticket in hand. But as the operative searched for them, a person silently approached him from behind.

The operative turned around. “Couldn’t you at least say something? You’ll

surprise me if you approach like that.”

The person who had come near wasn't one of his subordinates, nor a person of this kingdom at all. It was one of the Familia's soldiers.

“Oh? One got away? I really thought that all of you had been captured. Good job escaping that place.” The operative smiled with fake elation, but the soldier merely stared back with a piercing gaze. The nerves the operative had been feeling on the back of his neck since a bit ago confirmed his guesses: this person wasn't a mere soldier.

“What is it? I won't understand if you just keep silent. If you have something to say, then spit it out.”

The soldier finally opened his mouth. “I was just thinking about what to say to a traitor. Why were you working with Lagrange behind the scenes?”

“Why? We just had them search for the roster and bring it to us.”

“Stop with the act. You betrayed us for the grand duke, didn't you? Are you going to take the roster to the palace? I won't let you. Give it here.”

“I see. So you were the ‘eye.’” The operative scoffed at the barrel of the gun that was close to his face. He'd acknowledged the possibility, but his deal with Lagrange really had been found out. As expected, a higher-up of the Familia was more skilled than the underlings.

However, this soldier had yet to realize that the operative wasn't “Valeriano” at all, so even if the soldier reported back to the Familia, “Valeriano” was the person they'd go on to chase. As such, all the operative would have to do was escape this current situation.

“Sheesh. I was doing so well up until this point.” Reluctantly opening up the mouth of his bag, the operative pulled out the contents. He showed the roster to the soldier. “How much would it cost for you to let me go? Personal benefits are the most important thing to you, right? I'll pay however much you want if you'll keep this quiet from the org.”

“Sad to say, but orders are my priorities. My main goal is to take that thing home.”

“Serious, aren’t you?” The operative sighed and held out the roster.

The soldier kept the gun steady in one hand while reaching out with the other. He was able to take the roster without a hitch.

But as soon as he did, the sound of a gunshot cut through the tumult of the port. The operative had predicted this and dodged a split second beforehand, then lunged at the soldier without giving him time to fire a second shot. The knife the operative had been hiding stabbed straight through the soldier’s heart at an intense speed, right on the mark. The soldier fell without a sound.

Picking up the roster from the ground, the operative wiped the blood off the knife. “Sorry. I, too, prioritize my missions.”

He picked up his bag and turned on his heel to leave before anyone could come near. Crimes happened in this city every day, so the police were surely used to finding unidentifiable bodies by this point. But he’d only taken three steps when multiple footsteps resounded around him. He clicked his tongue and readied himself. There wasn’t just one attacker—the Familia had doubted him from the start. No, perhaps the original “Valeriano” had been the suspicious one?

The situation wasn’t good. The operative internally clicked his tongue again as he searched for an escape route. He wouldn’t be able to fend the Familia off even if he made it onto a ship, but he also couldn’t take care of them by himself since there were too many. It would have been possible if his subordinates came to his aid, but he didn’t want to make a risky bet.

Seeing a gun as more effective of a weapon than a blade in this situation, the attackers came at him with similar weapons. Just as the operative contemplated giving up on the return ship and running, one of the attackers in front of him shrieked and crumpled to the ground. Blood spattered; angry bellows resounded.

The tall, quick figure who had jumped into the fray came to stand back-to-back with the operative, causing him to laugh bitterly.

“What’s wrong, Vice Captain? You chased after me, after all? Did you have something you forgot to say?”

“I have a mountain of things to say to you, actually. So many that I don’t know where to start!”

Screams rose with every glint of the vice captain’s saber. And the operative’s knife didn’t lose out—it ended enemies left and right. Numbers-wise, his allies had only grown by one, so they weren’t overwhelming the enemy, but everything was different now. Though the two of them mutually agreed that they had the worst chemistry, even their breaths were now in sync. Their adroit, cooperative strikes turned the tables on the situation, and within a few minutes, no one was left standing around them.

“Oh, come on. Put the final nails in the coffins! It’s more bothersome if they’re kept alive.”

Half of the soldiers lying on the ground were immobile, but they hadn’t been hit in their vitals. The operative complained loudly to the vice captain for holding back. The vice captain turned with his pretty face as he cleaned the grime from his saber.

“I’ll collect them, so there’s no need to worry. You may carry on with your day.”

“Excuse me? What the heck is that? Why did you even bother coming here, then, Vice Captain?”

“Can’t you tell?” The vice captain’s light blue eyes glared coldly back. He was finally hiding his bashfulness and anger. He didn’t want to show his flustered inner thoughts, no matter what.

The operative laughed mockingly. “Oh, I see! I can’t believe you went out of your way to come save me. Were you going to see me off until I was safely on the ship? You were *that* worried about me? How kind of you.”

“That’s right.”

Though the operative had only said those words to get a rise out of him, the vice captain affirmed them without hesitating. In the short moment the operative’s voice caught in his throat, the vice captain gave a brilliant smile. “There wouldn’t have been a point to us aiding you if you didn’t end up safely delivering the roster to His Highness the Prince of Lavia. I just took it upon

myself to oversee you to the end so that you wouldn't waste all our hard work."

The operative's face silently stiffened up. He wanted to talk back, but the words wouldn't come out.

This abhorrent vice captain was hiding a blade of ice within his irises. "I'm glad I followed you. This proves you can't let your guard down, even until the very end."

Aaaaargh! Obnoxious, obnoxious, obnoxious! This is why I hate this man! Too damn serious, no fun, no leeway! A stubborn rockhead! The only thing proper about him is his looks! In truth, he's weak to mean jokes—he'll get depressed as soon as you poke fun at him! Not to mention, he's a pathetic man who's dependent on his wife and is deathly afraid of losing her!

So why is he so skilled at his job? And did he come to show off those skills as a form of revenge?

Not cute at all!

The more aggravated the operative got, the more the corners of his lips drew upward. Though the temperatures of the two men's eyes were low, their lips were smiling.

"I could have handled it without you saving me, you know."

"Indeed, you could very well have escaped if you'd run away with all your might. But so long as we're working together, it's my duty to see you off to the end. Just saying you'd 'probably' be all right wasn't good enough."

It doesn't matter what I say—he'll have some kind of retort. There's nothing cute about him.

Passersby had begun gathering around at the commotion. Police could be seen among them, but no one was approaching out of fear of the two men smiling in a staring contest surrounded by men covered in blood littered along the ground. There were military officers in uniform among the onlookers as well, but they also didn't seem to want to come near, as they were pretending to push back the audience. Everyone was surely thinking, "What's wrong with those two?" as they watched. The chill that was running through the port evidently wasn't just because of the evening wind.

Exhaling out his discomfort, the operative readjusted his emotional state. Though he had some leftover feelings, he couldn't just stand there and glare forever. It was almost time to board the ship.

Just as he was about to say something, the vice captain moved first, pulling an envelope from his pocket and holding it out. "Could you take this with you? It's an official letter from His Highness Prince Severin to your master."

The operative wrinkled his nose. The contents of the letter were most likely—no, *undoubtedly* unfavorable to him. He had to shake away thoughts of "accidentally" dropping it into the ocean as he took it. "Honestly. This turned out to be one hell of a job. Everything goes in unexpected directions as soon as Marielle's involved. Well, I suppose that's one of her charms as well—we found the target thanks to her too. Could you say thanks to her star for me?"

The vice captain's graceful face hitched, as it always did when the operative called the young lady's name.

The operative laughed and put the letter into his bag. "It's almost her birthday, so I'll send something for it—it'll also be a gift to thank you all for help with this case. The bighearted vice captain wouldn't dare get upset with something so trifling and take it away, would he? He wouldn't want his beloved wife to see him as a small man, after all!"

The operative turned around, and the people blocking his way fidgeted and opened up a path for him.



“I...suppose.” The vice captain’s voice followed the operative’s back. “It’s only right for you to thank us, so I’ll allow that much. Yes, I don’t mind. The day it arrives, she’ll be having so much fun on her vacation that all thoughts of you will be gone from her mind, but surely she’ll remember when she returns.”

The operative had to intentionally keep his legs walking, since it seemed like they were going to stop of their own accord. Truthfully, he wanted to turn around and give the vice captain a piece of his mind, as he could think of quite a few things to say that would depress the vice captain. He was confident he wouldn’t go down without a fight, but he knew it was pointless in a place like this.

His mission still wasn’t finished. This wasn’t a situation where he could take his time dragging out a fight. The operative knew that, but it was still unfortunate. He was most upset because he’d been rescued at the end. The operative was fine with using people, but needing to be rescued went against his morals.

They’d cooperated several times prior, so the vice captain was simply making up the favor... The more the operative came up with excuses, the more he felt like he’d lost, which worsened his mood.

He finally found his subordinate and went over to them. Ticket in hand, he headed toward the ship. After boarding safely, he went out to the deck. He wanted the wind to soothe his downcast feelings.

As he did that, he casually scanned the area for more of the Familia’s “eyes.” Looking down at the port, there was someone gazing at him from among the people. The vice captain’s beautiful white uniform caught his eye whether he wanted it to or not. As the vice captain had said, he was going to see the operative off to the very end.

At that point, the operative didn’t have the energy to be irritated anymore. The vice captain didn’t like him either, but he’d put those feelings aside to diligently carry out his mission... No, that couldn’t have been the only reason. He probably didn’t realize it himself, and the operative didn’t want to acknowledge it, but the vice captain most likely wanted to ensure the safety of his acquaintance.

“Honestly, he’s such an idiotic, too-damn-serious, rockheaded...nice guy.”

Leaning on the handrail on the side of the boat, the operative let out a tired laugh. Both of them were stubborn, and both of them were nice—the husband and wife fit each other perfectly. The operative began to feel foolish for picking on such clumsy people.

Still leaning, he waved his hand. Though he couldn’t see the vice captain’s expression from that distance, he could see a reaction. His blond hair had turned away, but after a moment, he reluctantly returned the wave.

The operative laughed out loud. Both of them got on each other’s nerves. The vice captain couldn’t rid himself of these feelings either. They attacked each other, then got back at each other. They were sure to continue doing so forever.

“We’re going to meet again, against my best wishes. Guess I might as well look forward to it... Might as well.”

The foghorn sounded in the evening sky. The scenery below began to move, the shore broke away, and the ship departed toward the next port of call. The destination would be, to the operative, his home. To the vice captain, the operative’s destination was a neighboring kingdom he would soon visit. Which one of them would make the next move? Or perhaps both of them would become fools running in circles.

“He’s in love with the star of chaos, after all.”

The operative pushed himself away from the handrail as he remembered the cute yet evil goddess. The ship cruised along to the west, chasing the sinking sun as it hid the premonition of turmoil in the peaceful spring evening.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Haruka Momo. In this volume, Marielle is finally graduating from being a young lady in her teens!

I don't really wish to write an adult heroine, and with this development, Simeon will be approaching old-man age. However, many things have happened, and the seasons have changed—time passes no matter what. Marielle's married now, and she can't be a little girl forever. Her age won't change anything she does, but Marielle is growing ever closer to becoming an adult woman. Probably.

The international issues from the last volume have settled down for now, so the story for this volume was about the characters' peaceful daily lives. Violent things like war and assassinations don't make much of an appearance. Though Lagrange gets involved with their neighbor's trouble again, the one suffering from it is Liberto. Marielle and the others take it in stride. She is even able to be lovey-dovey with Simeon in the middle of it all. How fun!

I wanted to write about the scenery in the town, not just about castles and mansions. As Marielle and the others solved this case, I hope you were able to get a feel for the place they live, the things they use, and the period they live in.

And a character that you all probably weren't expecting made a reappearance. When I first had him debut, I didn't think much of it, but I ended up quite liking him, so I wrote him into another story. In my mind, he wasn't a cool character, just one that looked like he smelled of old man, but my editor strongly suggested that I add some flourishes, so he became a lucky man who had his beauty factor cranked up. Good for him!

As for the other man, his appearance was modeled after a background character who appeared in chapter 44 of the manga. This character drawn by Alaskapan-sensei was just so cool that I had to ask if I could use his likeness. I'm very grateful to Alaskapan-sensei and Maro-sensei for agreeing to let me.

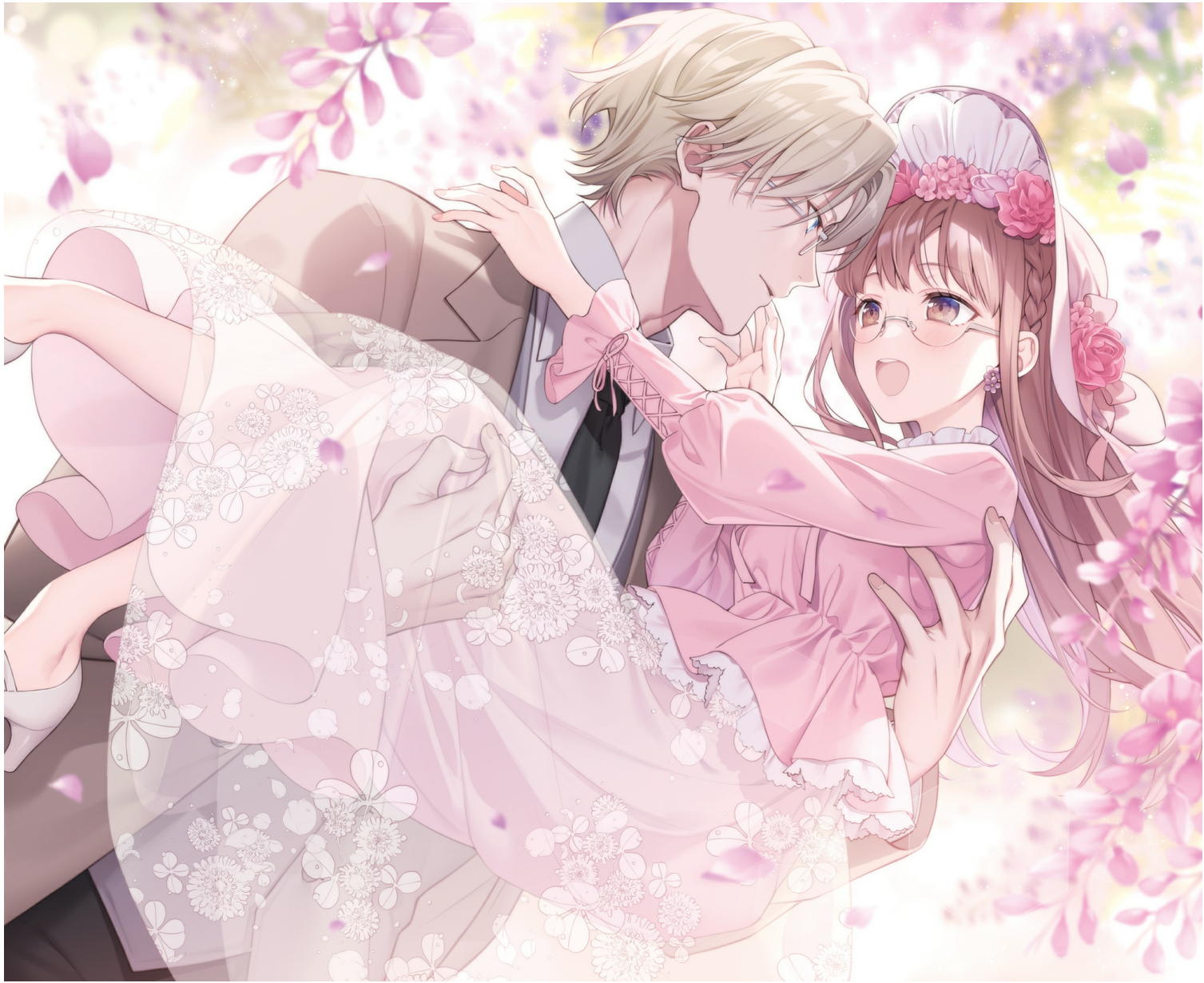
Several characters appeared in illustrations for the first time in this volume.

The pinups and the Holmes-esque cover were all so fancy and extravagant! My editor and I excitedly chatted about how we couldn't believe such amazing art would be included in this book. Marielle is incredibly cute. So much thanks to the illustrators for everything.

The princess's wedding is approaching, and many things are sure to happen on Marielle's vacation. There's so much I want to write! I hope we'll meet again in the next story as well.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank everyone at my publisher who put everything into this volume. And to the readers, thank you all so very much.







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