

Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry

One

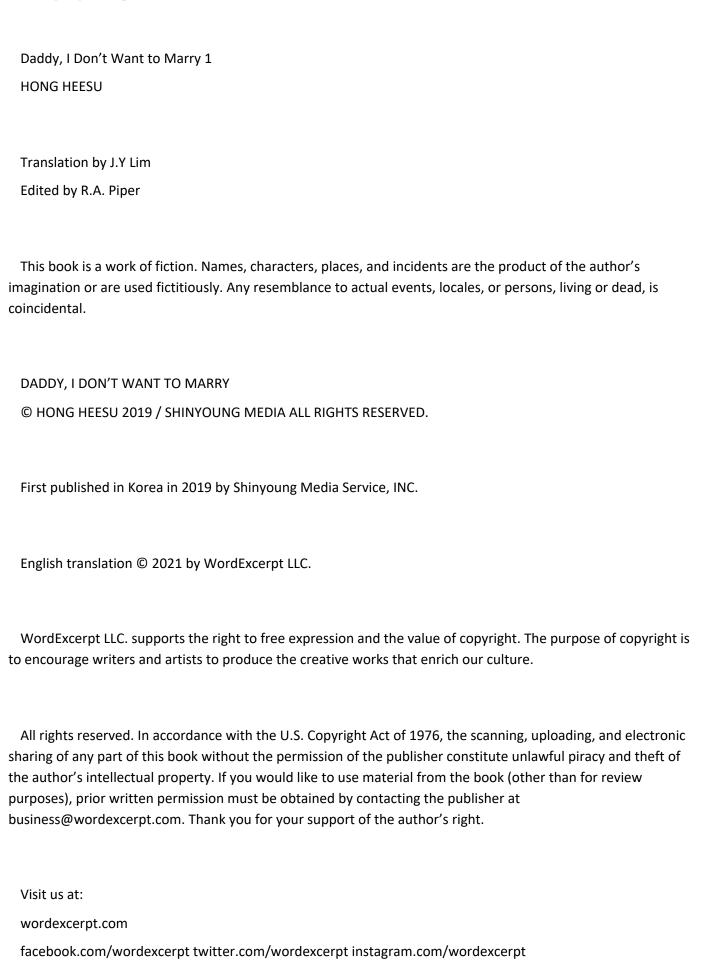
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Death of a Villainess

The story told of a girl whose mother passed away when she was young. Her father was all she had left of her family, but he was never home. She had been alone for as long as she could remember.

One day, she decided she wanted to see her father, yearning for the company of the last member of her family. Secretly, she went to find him, only to be met with coldness.

"Why did you come here?" he asked, his voice echoing like thunder.

She found herself on the verge of tears. "I-I..."

"Do not come here again."

Used to his frigid indifference, she didn't expect him to welcome her with open arms, but his reaction still cut into her sharply. The memory remained with her like a deep scar.

The impression it gave her was clear: her father didn't love her.

Nursing a wounded heart, the years passed and she grew older. Eventually, she made her debut in high society. Her grand debutante ball was held regardless of her father's absence.

"He didn't come today, either," she despaired, leaving the banquet hall in misery. "Was it because he's ashamed of me?"

As she sobbed to herself, a man appeared before her.

"Why are you crying, my lady?" he asked. His words were warm and his gaze was attentive. Although it was a simple kindness that, in his eyes, he could have afforded anyone, it meant the world to the girl. She had been starved of intimacy for years, so he felt like her savior.

After that fateful meeting, she began to trail after him like a shadow, begging for his attention until she eventually succeeded in becoming his lover. "I'll give you anything you want," she had told him. "All you have to do is love me."

Unfortunately, reality strayed far from her wishes. Three years after the start of their new relationship, he came to her with a confession.

"I don't need your love anymore. Truth be told, I've fallen in love with the princess," he said. Then, he bid her his goodbyes.

Her only dream had been to marry him, and the breakup left her devastated.

"Even you have abandoned me..." she mourned. "I will never forgive you."

Time soon passed. Suddenly, the very same princess who had stolen her lover fell ill, immediately collapsing into a coma. The cup she had drank from had been poisoned. Many people had witnessed the sight and had seen who had given the princess the accursed drink.

"You! Did you try to hurt her?" they accused the girl.

By now, she had blossomed into a woman. Although she had hated the princess for robbing her of her love, the woman had never wanted to hurt her. She had simply handed the princess a cup because she had asked for a drink to quench her thirst.

In response, the woman frantically shook her head. "No, it wasn't me!"

No one believed her. The circumstances surrounding the incident and her unusual conduct marked her as the culprit in their eyes.

When this became indisputable, the emperor roared in anger. "Imprison that girl underground!" he commanded. "Now!"

However, no one immediately moved to execute his order. Standing behind the woman was a figure that was even more fearful than the emperor himself. Her father, Duke Floyen.

Although he had always been indifferent toward her, they were still family, so she latched onto his hand as tears rolled down her cheeks. Despite his advanced age, he still looked like a young man.

"Father, I really didn't do it!" she pleaded, but he brushed her off.

"I will personally arrest her," he said. He looked straight at the emperor as he spoke, his gaze steady.

Her eyes widened in astonishment.

The emperor, still wary of the unblemished man before him, sighed. "How can

I trust you? I know you're just going to cause trouble!"

Duke Floyen tried to appease his sovereign's anger. "You will have no choice but to trust me if I lock her within the Room of Shadows," he proposed.

The Room of Shadows was a prison cell devised to confine the empire's most unforgiveable sinners. Neither weapons nor magic could break through it, making it notorious for being inescapable. Only immediate members of the royal family could freely open and close its doors.

By stating as such, the duke was essentially proclaiming he would abandon his daughter.

How could he do this to her? Wrought with despair, the woman was soon led into the underground dungeon by her cold-hearted father.

There, a fishy smell pervaded the chilled, musty air. Entering the prison for the first time in her life was terrifying, but what had frightened her the most was the Room of Shadows, which sat shrouded in darkness.

Before entering her cell, she decided to try her luck one more time. She called out in distress. "Father, I really—"

"Go in," he said icily, cutting her off. An indescribable shock of pain ran through her, coaxing another flood of tears to splatter onto the ground.

She was really being abandoned, wasn't she?

At that moment, her father reached into his coat. Furtively, he handed her something before finally pushing her into the cell.

"Endure."

When the door closed behind her, blocking away his stony voice, a bright light emerged upon its surface. The light formed a circle etched with geometric patterns. It was an enchantment. A powerful one meant to seal the entrance.

The woman confirmed what her father had given her, and the knowledge seized her with misery and desperation. It was a dagger.

Why did he give this to her, she wondered? Did he want her to kill herself?

As the cold air inside the cell began to settle into her skin, so did the reality of

his abandonment. She clutched the dagger tightly and cried silently.

Sometime later, a stranger approached the woman. As the prince, a direct descendant of the royal family, he could freely enter her cell. "I came to interrogate the sinner who had harmed my sister," he told the guards outside. "Get out of my way."

By then, her frustration and despair had left her fatigued.

The prince was dressed in black armor and was renowned for being a bloodthirsty war monger. Although he had a bad relationship with his half-sister, the princess, it was unlikely that he was here to save the woman. He probably wanted to torture her, as he was known by the people to enjoy the act.

His presence scared her even more. As she shook in fear, the guards responded to him cautiously. "W-We apologize, Y-Your Highness, but the emperor, His Majesty, has not yet approved of interrogations."

He laughed, abrupt and harsh. The sound was so terrifying that the guards themselves began to tremble. "Why? Do you think I'll kill her?" he asked.

The question was met with a brief silence. Wordless affirmation.

Eventually, the prince broke it. "Should I chop your heads off before I interrogate her first?" The guards pursed their lips and he laughed once more. "The prisoner will only tell the truth if she suffers pain harsh enough to bring her to the brink of death." He turned to the woman. "But, don't worry. I won't kill you, at least."

He sounded so calm despite the cruelty that left his lips, and it heightened the woman's fears.

Was he going to torture her until she died? It was rumored that the prince had not only slaughtered numerous enemy soldiers at the border, but he had also killed many of their retainers. He was truly insane. A tyrant in the making.

Having such a man interrogate her frightened her. Death might've been more preferable than having to endure a moment at the hands of a man like him.

Her rationality began to fade, paralyzed by frustration and fear. Her last

encounter with her father came to mind. She wanted to be reassured, but he had handed her a dagger instead.

It's good that this happened, actually, she mused to herself. Because... someone like me...

All the insults she had endured up until now crossed her mind. She was the disgrace of Duke Floyen, the good-for-nothing that everyone strove to avoid. Raising the dagger, she laughed hollowly.

It'd be better if I just disappeared.

The prince caught on to her strange behavior and hurriedly reached out. "Stop!" he cried, but it was too late. She had already plunged the dagger into her chest.

Just like that, the woman had taken her own life. That was as far as the story went. The web novel stopped updating at that point.

I sighed with frustration. It would've been nice if there was an actual ending to the story. After all, the real culprit had never been uncovered.

"Jubelian," a man called.

Ah, yes. 'Jubelian Eloy Floyen' was the full name of that woman. She was the villainess of the novel. As unadaptable as she was, she had always frustrated me when I read about her.

The man continued without a hint of remorse, sounding shamelessly annoyed. "Why did you call me here?"

God, I can't believe that was the only thing he had to say after making me wait for three hours. I scolded him likewise, revealing my thoughts as such. "You're three hours late, I see."

His face reddened with embarrassment before cooling back down. "Jubelian," he said once more, this time in warning. His voice had dropped a bit lower.

A natural reaction, I suppose. In his eyes, this might've been the first time she had ever spoken against him like this.

"Did I say something wrong?" I asked.

I was once just a reader of the novel, yet somehow... I had become the villainess. I became Jubelian, who had died after being abandoned by everyone she had ever loved.



Successful Breakup

In my previous life, I was just an ordinary college student who lacked in job opportunities and suffered as a result. I admit that I read novels in my spare time, but other than that I lived rather diligently. I worked part-time, gained the relevant experience required for my dream career, and obtained various certificates for programming. I also did a bunch of random things that would've qualified me for a job as a tea sommelier or bakery technician.

However, all of that had been in vain. If I had known that I would've been hit by a car on my way to my part-time job, I would've invested a little more time for myself.

Actually, I had often daydreamed about being reincarnated as a character belonging to the upper class. Those fantasies never involved becoming a villainess, though. Especially not one destined to have a short life like Jubelian.

In the past, when I read about people who had reincarnated, they would usually try to avoid their untimely death as soon as possible. However, in my ignorance, I had been faithful to the original work so far. It would've been nice if I had realized I was in this specific novel earlier.

I had only remembered the details of Jubelian's fate later on. Three days ago, on my second anniversary with Mikhail, Jubelian's one-sided love, I suddenly remembered how she used to badger him. I recalled how that behavior had only served to corroborate others' accusations, which had ultimately led to her death.

Jubelian used to persistently harass anyone who approached Mikhail. Before, she threw tantrums and cursed at people who simply tried to strike a conversation with him. There had been numerous instances where she had even threatened others through the use of her family name.

It definitely wasn't normal behavior. That was how I realized I had a lot of enemies now that I had reincarnated into her.

Fortunately, I was at a point in the novel where I had yet to collide with any of the other important characters like the princess or the crown prince. Now that I was aware of everything ahead of me, I just needed to fix my behavior. Faced with my grim future, I sighed.

A deep voice riddled with annoyance displaced me from my reverie. "Are you angry because I'm late?" Mikhail asked.

His question puzzled me. Had I ever been angry with him? I didn't think so. Mikhail was the love of my life and the novel's male lead. Now that I saw him again, however, my heart felt terribly still. A despondent feeling arose within me.

I used to be so infatuated with him, but now I felt nothing.

In the past, Jubelian treated Mikhail like he was her savior. She longed for his love and hung onto his every word. Upon the slightest shift in his expression, she became anxious and instantly feared he would leave her.

However, my experiences in the modern world changed Jubelian's personality completely. I had to take care of tuition costs, keep my grades up, look for jobs, and handle all my living expenses myself. I didn't need someone to be my savior. I could change my own future.

After coming to this conclusion, I opened my mouth to speak. "I'm not angry," I said. I simply didn't want to waste any more of my heart or my time on him.

Mikhail stared at me, still obviously bothered. "Jubelian," he said once more. "If you cavil over small matters like this, wouldn't our relationship have problems?"

Although our relationship had been forced, it still lasted for two whole years. I could understand the weight of his words just by listening to the tone of his voice. He wasn't making a request; he was offering me a thinly-veiled warning. He was telling me to stop pestering him.

I smiled innocently like I always did. Except this time, I was being sincere. "I'm really not angry. I was joking when I scolded you for being late," I said pleasantly. I had wanted to lighten the mood, but my response seemed to displease him.

His expression grew serious. "A joke? That doesn't seem like something you would do." He huffed, observing me with weary eyes. "So, again: why did you call me here?"

I sighed at the sight of the blatant displeasure on his face. Well, I guess he couldn't help getting upset. The Jubelian of the past used to interfere with his training a lot, after all. I decided to let his attitude off the hook this time because of my past mistakes.

"Mikhail, could you please—"

He cut me off before I could even finish talking. "You said you only needed to see me for a brief moment." I laughed at that, but he didn't look amused. "If it isn't anything important, I'll be going," he glowered.

He was going to leave first, as usual. He was pretty eager to be rid of me. Despite his rudeness, I knew that nothing good would come out of making enemies with the novel's male lead, so I kept cordial.

"It will only take a minute," I said.

He shook his head. "I have to go now. There's an important training session I have to attend."

When I met his icy gaze, I felt irritated. Ugh, how pathetic! He didn't think I was worth even five minutes of his time!

Three days ago, I had taken care to ask when he would be free to meet since I was afraid of getting in the way of his training. I wanted to prevent this exact situation from playing out. When our promised appointment came today, however, I ended up sitting in the imperial knights' waiting room for three hours. No matter what I did, he would always ignore my efforts. He valued his own time. Never mine.

I had no reason to endure this any longer. I set the mood by lowering my voice, adopting a more serious air. "Sit down, please. It'll only take a second."

"I'm pretty sure I already refused."

His tone took on a threatening aura, as if conveying how he was the superior one of us in this relationship. I felt the urge to break that delusion of his.

"Father knows that we're meeting today. Wouldn't it be odd if you returned early?"

His expression stiffened when I mentioned Father, who was his boss. Mikhail

both feared and respected him.

"Five minutes," Mikhail conceded, sitting down obediently. He was the strongest knight around, but it seemed that even he was afraid of the empire's only Sword Master. Maybe I should've mentioned the duke sooner.

I chuckled, thinking back on how I used to struggle to do everything I could to please the man before me. My efforts had all been in vain. To think that there was an easy way out of my suffering this entire time...

"What's so funny?"

Although his mood had failed to lighten, it didn't matter to me now that I didn't need his goodwill anymore. I started off by opening with something sentimental. "For the past two years, we've spent quite a bit of time together __"

"Did you call me here just to say that?"

Wow, he lost patience so quickly. Again. He didn't even let me finish what I had to say. He must've hated being with me. Unfortunate, since I was about to give him a gift, too.

His demeanor disgruntled me, but I gave him a smile nevertheless. It was an insincere one I had perfected from working at my part-time job, though.

"You won't be as busy anymore," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. Even this was conveyed with a nasty attitude. I frowned. I understood being frustrated due to Jubelian's history, but I was trying to be civil. He was simply too much.

I honestly wanted to threaten him a bit, saying that I'd report all this to Father, and that Father would fire him. It would definitely cow him since he knew about my family background. It would teach him a lesson on what power could really do. Truthfully, however, Father would never fire a subordinate he cared about. If Mikhail and I came to actively despise and oppose each other, it would just end badly for me.

I didn't want to make enemies anymore. My goal was to live a long life.

In my mind, I reaffirmed this decision. "I'm saying that I'll let you go," I said

slowly, really letting it out there.

At that, his eyes widened for a moment before he composed himself once more. A corner of his lips quirked up in disbelief. "You're bluffing," he scoffed. "Do you really think I'll believe that?"

I sighed at his wariness. Well then, it'd be a waste of time to say much more, wouldn't it?

"It's up to you whether or not you'll believe me. I already said what I needed to say."

I got up, turning around to leave, but then his cold voice stopped me in my tracks. "Fine. I'll trust you," he said. "Just never show yourself around me ever again."

Now it was my turn to smirk a bit. How unexpected. I guess the breakup could be considered a success with that? Whatever his reasons might've been, he accepted it in the end.

What a relief.

Now, my goal was to enjoy life to the fullest. Although Father regarded me apathetically, he didn't mind supporting my luxurious status as his daughter. Spending his money and using it to live happily didn't seem like such a bad idea.

My spirits lifted as I imagined a bright future ahead of me. I glanced back at Mikhail and smiled. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened until now," I told him. "I wish you happiness."

After sincerely bidding him farewell, I left.

Whenever I used to meet up with him, I wore pretty, yet uncomfortable, shoes so I could look my best. The ones I wore today were plain and low-heeled. Pleasant. Was my comfort what enabled me to walk away without regrets?



Mikhail scoffed as he stared at Jubelian's retreating figure.

She said she was sorry for everything? Bullshit. It must've been a ploy to get his attention.

He was certain that she would turn around and come rushing back to him at any second. Contrary to his expectations, however, she continued to walk away without sparing him another glance. When she vacated the waiting room entirely, he clenched his fists.

Was she really being serious?

Jubelian Eloy Floyen. Despite being ill of mind, she was undoubtedly beautiful. He had endured her behavior, which she had justified in the name of love, for the past two years. She followed him wherever he went, treated anyone he spoke to with hostility, and became overjoyed at the slightest bit of attention he would spare her. Like a dog. A stupid dog who wagged her tail even when he pushed her away, lavishing him with affection the likes of which he, her master, would never afford her.

It was incredibly annoying, but he tolerated her because of the attention he received from her father and his idol, Duke Floyen. Her presence seemed to drive away other potentially annoying women, too.

So, why did she suddenly change her mind? Plagued with uncertainty, Mikhail stiffened. Unexpectedly, now that she was completely out of sight, he felt strange instead of victorious. It should be reassuring that he wouldn't have to deal with such a troublesome woman anymore, so he tried to shake away his conflicting thoughts, but...

"Damn it," he cursed. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Her words continued to play out in his mind.

She said she was sorry. She said she wished him happiness. She had smiled.

He couldn't forget that smile, because she had even looked a little relieved.



Ah, it felt like a knot in the pit of my stomach had unraveled. I had just come home from parting with Mikhail. On my way to my room for a bit of rest, I accidentally ran into a handsome man by the front door.

Father.

I had inherited his silver hair and blue eyes, but not his striking appearance.

He was, in essence, a transcendent being who aged slowly. In fact, it even looked like we could be siblings.

There might come a day when I'll even look older than him.

"Father, how was your day?" I greeted. I spoke with an upbeat tone, the complete opposite of how I felt inside.

He stared at me, unchangingly aloof. Although we were family, it had been many years since I had greeted him like this. "Do not come here again," he had told me once. After being turned away, I only talked to him about important business. However, now I had a reason to feign friendliness.

I just wanted to live happily.

After remembering my previous life, I had come to learn of an important fact: no matter how much I begged for his love, Father would eventually abandon me. In addition to how lacking I was in many ways, I was nothing more to him than a shameful thing he never mentioned to others. Since I was never going to have his love, I decided to give up and find happiness elsewhere.

Yes, precisely: happiness in money!

Of course, I still had a conscience, so I didn't intend to be greedy. A small estate on the outskirts of the city, some money from Father, and a job handling one of his countless responsibilities would be enough for me. In fact, I'd still be living a luxurious life with those things alone.

I had no intention of begging for Father's love anymore, but as long as I needed his money, it was important to maintain a proper relationship with him. If I stayed on the original novel's path and alienate myself from him, I might not end up with a single penny.

I gave him the same fake smile I learned from working in retail. "You must be tired from supervising training operations all day," I said.

Once again, he didn't answer. I mean, my god! Would it kill him to speak to me? His behavior tanked my mood like it would for any other rational human being, but I was used to such treatment from him by now.

"You should go and relax," I suggested hurriedly. I wanted to finish this one-

sided conversation. "I'll go up, too."

Immediately, I started climbing the stairs to the second floor. That was when I finally heard him speak.

"There had been no training today," he said.

His voice was unfamiliar to me. I doubted my ears. Huh? Did he really respond? It had been a long time since I last heard him speak. I was taken aback for a second before coming to my senses. When I realized what he had just said, I grit my teeth.

Mikhail, that bastard! He said he had to hurry back because he had some training to do. He lied to me! Upon realizing this, I became even more irritated. I wanted to curse at him for how he treated me, but I quickly schooled my emotions.

"Calm down, Jubelian," I silently told myself. "He's no longer in your life. Let's be cool about this."

Although this was my second life, my experiences in retail from my first life had taught me that I shouldn't get worked up so quickly. I recalled a time I had to deal with an annoying customer and controlled the expression my face.

"You came early today," Father continued.

Ah, about that... Now that I think about it, in the past, I used to come home late because I busied myself with following Mikhail around. However, since I had broken up with him today, coming straight home afterwards, I returned much earlier than usual.

Should I tell him the truth?

Similar to the original story, Father seemed to hold Mikhail in high regard. He often made things convenient for him and treated him with relative kindness. Since I was useless as his only child, he might've been thinking about making Mikhail his successor.

I couldn't help but laugh. If I was anything like the Jubelian of the past, I wouldn't have considered telling Father anything. I would've been too afraid that he would hate me for making such a mistake. I had come to learn

something, though: it didn't matter. Earning his love was a futile endeavor, and he already hated me anyway.

I looked into his cool blue eyes, which were similar to mine. "I parted ways with him," I spit out.

Although I hadn't mentioned Mikhail's name, Father probably knew who I was referring to. The newfound creases on his face proved this, expressing his consternation.

"Why?"

The short question was laden with discontent, but I understood the reason for it. If Mikhail became his son-in-law, he wouldn't have to worry about fretting over succession rights, but now that we had broken up, those plans were ruined. Even so, a relationship is composed of two people, and I had to take care of myself.

"I didn't want to spend my life with someone who didn't have feelings for me," I explained.

As soon as I finished speaking, his face crumpled with horror. He was probably astonished that I had broken up with a man of such talent just because of my pride. The way his eyes narrowed seemed to be in reproach of me. Although my heart constricted at the sight of it, it didn't ache. I wasn't a child to be hurt by him anymore.

"I simply want to get married to someone who will love me, Father. I want to be happy."

Truthfully, I was planning on staying single for the rest of my life, but I figured it'd be better to hide my intentions. If I offended him even more, he might slip me a dagger like he did back in the novel. I didn't realize this before, but I knew now: continuous neglect was better than cruel abandonment.

"I'll live quietly without bothering you," I promised him silently, "so please leave me alone like you always did."

Such a thought would've driven me to tears in the past, but now I didn't feel the slightest bit of sorrow. It was as if all of my emotions had dried up in the wake of my newfound knowledge. I watched Father for a response, but he turned away wordlessly.

Did that mean that he didn't want to talk to this pathetic daughter of his anymore?

He had ignored me plenty of times before, so I wasn't offended. I stared at his retreating back, breathing a sigh in relief.

Now, to my room for some rest. A lot of things had happened today and I was really tired.



Jubelian's maid, Merilyn, gulped nervously. The reins that used to keep Lady Floyen occupied were now gone.

Merilyn had been able to breathe easily these past few days because Jubelian had been in a good mood, but now that she had broken up with Mikhail, things were definitely going to be different. The news was both sudden and unexpected.

"I'm in trouble now," Merilyn lamented to herself.

Lady Floyen was a very beautiful woman, so adorning her in flattering clothes and accessories was a rewarding task, but her emotional ups and downs made Merilyn's job very difficult. Whenever she felt upset, she would scream and curse freely, breaking expensive tea sets and ripping her clothes in anger. Terrified they would be treated in much the same way one day, the maids would become extremely anxious upon witnessing her tantrums.

To avoid provoking Jubelian, Merilyn spoke cautiously. "I will help you change out of your clothes, Lady Floyen."

Jubelian's bright eyes, shining like sapphires, looked upon Merilyn with indifference. Merilyn gulped nervously. Did she say something wrong? Already?

At that moment, however, a subtle smile began to manifest upon Jubelian's face in greeting, immediately drawing Merilyn's gaze. She fixated on it, thoroughly charmed.

Lady Floyen was so beautiful when she smiled.

Merilyn was still staring blankly when Jubelian next spoke. "Why are you just

standing there, Merilyn?" she asked. "I thought you said you would help me change out of my clothes."

Lady Floyen's smile had disappeared while Merilyn was occupied. Merilyn snapped back to her senses, and, realizing what she had done, turned pale with fear. If she hadn't before, she probably got on Jubelian's nerves somehow now! She erupted into a nervous sweat, her blood running cold. She couldn't find the courage to lift her head.

"Actually, Merilyn," Jubelian's clear voice rang out, "you don't have to help me. Just prepare a bath for me, please."

Jubelian's tone made Merilyn doubt herself. It didn't seem like her lady was irritated or angry... She regarded the beautiful woman before her with suspicion. When their eyes met once more, a brilliant smile blossomed like a flower on Jubelian's face, looking even more lovely than the last.

"Ah, and please prepare some products that'll help me sleep for the bath. I'm tired and I want to go to bed early," Jubelian added.

"Y-Yes," Merilyn said. Although she stuttered, she was able to compose herself and reply in time. "I will prepare lavender scented ones."

Why was Lady Floyen suddenly acting like this, Merilyn wondered? She couldn't get used to it... if anyone had asked her what she thought of the lady, she would've said that she was an unfavorable person to serve, replying without hesitation. Although Lady Floyen had never physically abused her maids, she had done plenty of psychological harm.

"I'll be waiting for the bath, then. Thank you," Jubelian said, ending their brief conversation with grace. She walked past Merilyn and entered her room. Rather than a spiteful remark, she had given Merilyn an encouraging one.

Glancing back at the door her lady had left through, Merilyn staggered, her legs losing the strength within them. Sella, an assistant maid, rushed toward her. "Merilyn!" she cried. "Are you okay?"

Merilyn refused her help. "I'm fine. I will prepare a bath for Lady Floyen as she had requested." In an attempt to calm herself, she began to give Sella instructions. "Please prepare some clothes for her."

She had assumed Jubelian would be angry or upset... her lady was acting very strange today. The Jubelian she knew would throw tantrums when she wasn't in a good mood, ruining everyone else's mood in turn. It was as if she had become a completely different person.

The moment Merilyn had thought this, goosebumps began to dot her skin. She strove to compose herself once more. She shouldn't think such useless thoughts. She just needed to her job well.

Nevertheless, Jubelian's smiling face continued to plague her. Was it because she didn't seem particularly energetic? Merilyn had even felt a little sorry for her.

Merilyn sighed at that, slapping herself in the face. Who was she kidding? "Wake up, Merilyn," she scolded herself. She needed to stay vigilant before her lady.



Taking a bath was always an enjoyable experience because useless, bothersome thoughts would scatter the moment I soaked myself in some warm, fragrant water. Unfortunately, today's events had tired me out so much that a bath didn't really seem all that appealing.

Should I just skip it? I had been thinking about simply going to sleep for a while now, but...

I quickly decided against it. I couldn't skip it. The servants were probably doing their best to prepare it for me. Changing my mind at the last minute would be very inconvenient.

After realizing that I had been cruel to the maids in the past, I had wished I could start over from the beginning, but I knew it was already too late. Even if I began to shower them with kindness now, they would probably be wary, believing me insincere.

Nevertheless, since I decided to be at least a little nicer going forward, I continued to wait for my bath to be ready. Despite my determination, however, I couldn't stop yawning.

I was honestly about to pass out. What could I do?

After waiting for another five minutes, I began to rethink cancelling the bath, but then I heard a knock at my door.

"The bath is ready, Lady Floyen," a maid announced.

"Alright."

I rose from my chair to head to the washroom. I was so sleepy that I kept resisting the urge to yawn, though, and when I finally gave in, tears began to flow down my cheeks at the force of it.

Ah, I was really, really sleepy. I doubted my capability to take a bath in this condition...

I raised my hand to wipe my eyes and gently rub the tears away. Suddenly, a voice called out to me.

"Lady Floyen!" Merilyn gasped. She was here with me, watching me in astonishment. It was quite an unusual look on her.

Oh no. Did she see me yawn? I probably looked like a hippo with my mouth gaping wide open like that. Well, that was embarrassing. I smiled as gracefully as I could while trying my best to keep my lips shut, compensating for my mistake.

"Sorry about that," I said. "Did I look bad?"

Like a professional, Merilyn didn't say anything about me yawning. Instead, she just adopted a careful, concerned tone, asking, "Are you okay?"

It was better to be honest with her since she was asking me like that. I guess I must've looked exhausted, so she was discreetly asking if I was still alright with taking a bath.

A few tears leaked from the corners of my eyes once more as I suppressed another yawn. "Actually, I'm really tired, so I'll take a bath tomorrow. Could you help me change into some sleepwear?"

Merilyn nodded silently and began helping me into my clothes. For some reason, she wore a sullen expression.

Maybe she was upset that I made her prepare a bath for no reason and regretted the wasted effort... I had heard that it was easier to see things from

someone else's perspective if you had been in similar situations before. It might've been because of what I had experienced at my part-time jobs in the past, but I felt sorry for Merilyn since she had suffered all this time beneath what had been my influence.

I tried to explain further, hoping it would soften things up a bit. "It's because...
I'm very tired right now," I said gently. "I really am."

Her eyes widened at my excuse. She hurriedly lowered her head in deference. "It's not a problem. Please rest." She was probably still upset despite pretending that everything was okay.

"Thank you, Merilyn."

Her legs seemed to wobble for a second, but I was so tired that I must've just been seeing things. As soon as Merilyn left the room, I collapsed onto my bed.

Ah, wow. Did I really end things with Mikhail today? I felt giddy and my body shook lightly with laughter. What a relief!

Although I felt sorry for Merilyn since I had probably upset her, I had at least done something good earlier. Because of that, I slept soundly.



Late into the night, long after the moon had risen in the sky, the maids were chatting secretly in a garden full of white roses.

"Ah, I had a difficult day today," one of them sighed.

"Same here..." nodded another. "Oh, but where's Merilyn, by the way?"

"She's probably being scolded by Lady Floyen."

At that moment, the person in question appeared in front of them. "Merilyn!" they cried. The maids approached her with anxious expressions and bombarded her with questions.

"How was your day?"

"Are you okay?"

At Sella's question, Merilyn recalled what happened recently and sighed. Jubelian had pretended to be okay... but... Merilyn had seen the tears brimming

in her indigo eyes no matter how hard she tried to conceal them. She had worn an awkward expression and a forced, almost embarrassed smile. Jubelian used to bully the maids frequently, but seeing her reduced to something like that had Merilyn sympathizing with her nonetheless.

"No, there was some crying," Merilyn eventually supplied.

The maids widened their eyes, astonished. Then, criticisms regarding Jubelian began to flow from their lips.

"Lady Floyen is really too much!"

"That's right! She should've taken it out on Sir Mikhail, not you, Merilyn."

Merilyn massaged her temples. It seemed like the maids had misunderstood her, seeing as they were trying to console her. "No, not me," she corrected. "Lady Floyen was the one crying."

One of the maids that had asked if Jubelian had thrown something at Merilyn amidst the clamor of criticisms, became startled by her claim. Her rabbit-like eyes widened with surprise. "What?"

"I went into her room after preparing a bath and saw her crying in secret."

All of the maids frowned, suspicious. They knew what kind of person Jubelian was, so it was difficult to believe what Merilyn had just said.

"Did she really?"

Merilyn nodded. "It seems like the breakup affected her greatly. She looked very lethargic as well."

Silence pervaded the solemn atmosphere before a man's voice eventually broke it.

"She cried?"

At his sudden interruption, all the maids jumped in surprise. "M-Master!" they cried.

Duke Floyen, the owner of the estate, leveled them with a stony expression, making them tremble with fear. After being caught red-handed gossiping about Jubelian, there was no way they could provide a decent enough excuse that

would spare them punishment.

Instead, however, the duke's peacock-blue eyes fell on Merilyn. "You," he commanded coldly. Merilyn held her breath. "Tell me in detail what you saw."



When I woke up, my body felt lighter than it had yesterday. *Ah, today's going to be a good day,* I had thought. It wouldn't be a bad idea to spend a few days as a homebody. My plan was to eat a lot of delicious food and live in seclusion for a while.

Unfortunately, that was just wishful thinking. For some reason, Father asked to have breakfast with me this morning.

"How is the food?" he asked.

"The food is good, of course. It's your presence that's making me sick, Father," I wanted to tell him, but I kept quiet. There was no way I could express the truth like that. "It's great," I said instead, eating quickly. The faster I finished my meal, the sooner I could return to my room.

I practically inhaled the food despite finding it a bit burdensome for a light breakfast.

"Eat slowly. You'll get sick."

Father looked at me like how one would look at something pathetic. Again, I'd sooner fall ill from having to endure his company. The food's nothing compared to him. I had already been shocked by the sudden breakfast invitation, but his staring was making things worse.

Why was he doing this? Was he silently scolding me for breaking up with Mikhail?

I wanted to leave the dining room as soon as possible, but doing so would only reveal my discomfort. I continued to force my food down my throat. Before long, Father looked away from me and sighed, doubtlessly disappointed by my behavior.

Indeed. The fact that he probably thought I was pathetic made plenty of sense. He bore the grand title of a duke and led an elite group of imperial

knights along with the entire central army. Twenty years ago, after leading the war to a great victory, he became the empire's most revered hero. The strongest swordsman.

Father had everything. He was handsome, too. Even now, he still received marriage proposals on occasion.

His opinion on me couldn't be helped. Compared to him, I wasn't just mediocre. I was truly pathetic. My transgressions didn't stop at being untalented, either; I also dragged my reputation into the ground after chasing Mikhail around. I didn't have any friends because I was bad at socializing.

In other novels, villainesses were still popular within their social circles no matter how outrageously they behaved. Jubelian's character was a bit more realistic in this sense.

I had unconsciously began to sulk at the thought when I made eye contact with Father once more.

"Do you want this?" he asked. He must've thought I was looking at the plate of food in front of him. I shook my head, but he was already tossing a large chunk of meat onto my plate. "Eat."

Despite being full, I couldn't refuse. Why was he doing this to me?

As I silently suffered from overeating, he suddenly called out to me. "Jubelian."

"Yes?"

"What is your ideal type?"

I dropped my fork at the unexpected question. Why on earth was he asking me this? A servant in the dining room quickly replaced my fork with a new one, but I was so shocked that I felt like I was just going to drop it again if I picked it up.

"I'm just curious," he supplied.

Although it was a simple question, it didn't make sense coming from him, considering how he had been treating me the past eighteen years. He had never been interested in me before, so why was he asking me this now?

An uneasy thought suddenly occurred to me. No way... was he trying to marry me off to someone else?

He must've really wanted a successor.

The more I thought about it, the likelier it seemed. It was a credible hypothesis, really. Despite being his only child, I didn't qualify as a successor to whom he could pass down his title. I'd rather have a stepmother and half-brother than get married, though!

After quickly mulling over the intentions behind his questioning, I mentioned something that suddenly came to mind. Something completely impossible.

"I'm not sure. Maybe a man stronger than you, Father?" I proposed innocently.

He murmured something to himself. Then, his gaze returned to me. "Are you serious?" he asked, voice still cold.

Upon hearing his tone and meeting his icy eyes, I realized that I had made a mistake. After all, there could be no man stronger than Father within the empire. To avoid annoying him any further, I hurriedly amended my answer. "I mean, that would be nice, but no such person exists, right? Father is the empire's strongest swordsman!"

His expression softened at my praise. Ah, it was really hard to stay on his good side...

"So, what's your final answer?"

I had hoped to move on to a different topic by now, but it seemed that he had no intention of doing so. To avoid getting matched up, I needed to list some near-impossible conditions no one would ever meet. All without annoying him.

No other family possessed higher prestige than the Floyen household. Even if he introduced a man for me to marry, I could just say that he didn't fit our family's standards and dismiss him.

Having cleared up my thoughts, I looked up at Father, determined. "I'm not going to marry a man unless he has everything. I want the most wealthy, famous, and competent guy there is."

I snuck in the insinuation that I wasn't going to marry at all and observed his expression for any changes. His face stayed the same, making it hard for me to guess what he was thinking about.

After a long silence, he finally spoke.

"I see."

It seemed like I had convinced him. I sighed in relief. I was so tired all of a sudden. I only needed to keep enduring this for a little while longer, then I could go back to my room. Spending time with Father made me deeply uncomfortable, so I desperately waited for breakfast to end.

"Jubelian."

"Yes?" I was a little nervous about what he might say next, but this time, I was ready to answer. No matter what he wanted to ask me, I was prepared to come up with something.

His lips slowly parted. "Let's go somewhere together."

I dropped my fork for the second time, startled by his out-of-the-blue question.

"Go somewhere?" I echoed, disbelieving. I searched through eighteen years of my memories to see if I had ever accompanied Father anywhere, but nothing came up. "Why?"

He spoke calmly. "Just because."

Bewildered by his brief answer, I felt a dull ache rise in my head. Why were you doing this to me, Father?



We ended up going to Arcade Street. There was a high-end shopping mall here, similar to modern shopping malls where several stores gathered under one roof.

Father pointed to a strange-looking owl watch. "That."

The clerk guiding us called out to someone. "Neil, add the owl watch!"

I sighed with frustration. My head throbbed, so I briefly closed my eyes. I

didn't get it. Why the hell was he doing this?

When I opened my eyes, I tried to not let my gaze linger on any one object for too long, but as I walked past a myriad of stores, a porcelain rabbit caught my eye. It was really expensive.

In my previous life, ceramics were a common thing, but in this world, it was a high-quality item that only a few people could afford. That was why ceramic figures in the form of animals, flowers, and people were envied by many. It was a shame. I didn't even consider it all that lovely...

Around us, onlookers seemed to rave about its beauty, but the various pigments that were made to color the rabbit's smooth veneer just looked messy and bizarre to me. I couldn't understand why someone would pay so much money for something like this.

At that moment, I felt a burdensome gaze behind me and quickly directed my attention elsewhere. Ugh, not again...

Although I had been determined not to look at any one object for too long, I had been staring at this bizarre thing for a while. As I dwelled on my mistake, I heard Father say something.

"That one as well."

Right on cue, he pointed at the porcelain rabbit.

I frowned, frustrated. Why did he keep buying things that I glanced at? I thought this would just be a simple outing, but he was buying everything I laid my eyes on. This was really uncomfortable.

Shopping might've been an inevitable part of my new life, but I didn't want to lavishly waste money without careful consideration like this. I liked to buy things that were actually to my liking. Was he testing me to see how I would behave once I ran out of patience?

All I wanted to do was to return home, but the reality of it was that I was the duke's daughter. My dependence on Father meant that I couldn't rebel against his will, otherwise I'd just end up in trouble. This was all my fault for failing to gain any independence from him.

I sighed. At that moment, something suddenly appeared in front of me. It was the bizarre porcelain rabbit I saw. If I broke it and pretended I had slipped by mistake... would I be scolded?

Without a choice, I accepted the rabbit. Father looked at me.

"Let's go."

For some reason, his expression was more relaxed than before. If someone he knew had seen him, they might've even asked if he had heard some good news.

I didn't think that he was pleased with annoying me... or was he?

I sighed and glanced at all the things he bought. Maybe he was the type to relieve stress by shopping. I followed him without a word, careful not to plunge him into a bad mood.

Then, something caught my eye again. This time, it was a person. She was carrying a sword. The empire had clear-cut gender roles, so it was difficult to find swordswomen. As such, she couldn't help but stand out. I knew that the steady stream of swordswomen stopped coming after Sir Yulia, the first empress's captain of the guard, went missing, though...

People around us began murmuring, but I thought that it would be nice to see more women wielding swords again. At that moment, Father also caught sight of the swordswoman and stopped in his tracks.

"Wait here for a minute," he told me. Then, he approached the woman everyone was looking at.

Did he know her?

When they disappeared into the crowd, people's conversations shifted. "Was that person Duke Floyen?" I heard someone wonder. The people were whispering, but I could still hear them. I felt awkward with all the unwelcome gazes on me.

I just wanted to rest at a quiet place...

I cautiously stepped away from the crowd, but my movements were noticed by Geraldine, my escort knight and my older cousin.

"Where do you think you're going, Jubelian?" he asked.

I frowned at Geraldine, who met my gaze with suspicion. He must've thought I was planning on making some mischief.

"There are a lot of people here. You should speak to me with respect, Sir Geraldine," I said.

He sulked at my remark, embarrassed, but then quickly composed himself. "So, where are you going, Lady Jubelian?" he asked more respectfully this time.

"I want to buy something from that shop."

Geraldine's expression hardened when I carelessly pointed to a lonesome shop at the corner of the street. He spoke haltingly. "Is that... really... where you want to go?" The strange tone he adopted confused me, so I turned around to get a better look at the place and flinched.

The sign advertised it as the 'Growling Bear Armor Specialty Shop.'

Ugh... why did I have to point at a place like that? I was starting to regret my actions.

"I will respect the lady's wishes," Geraldine said sarcastically.

Unable to change my decision now, I simply nodded. "Thank you."

I entered the store with Geraldine and was greeted by an owner who was built like a bear. How fitting.

"Welcome to... huh? Is an angel arriving at our store?"

Although the shop was mostly empty, I was still embarrassed by his exaggerated praise. "Oh, I..." I trailed off.

"What do you need?"

I couldn't say that I didn't need anything if I was already here... I glanced at Geraldine for some aid, but he was already distracted by something else. "Oh, I love this gauntlet!" he gushed.

Wow. He was here to protect me, but he just started shopping for his own stuff.

"Price?" a new voice suddenly asked.

I peeked at the source, and I found a man wearing a black cloak that draped

over the length of his entire body standing to the side, his face concealed by a hood. Although he had only spoken a single word, his frigid and saturnine voice made me tremble.

He looked a little suspicious...

"Ten silver coins, sir!"

In response to the owner's lively statement, the man searched through his pocket. He was so tall. I could tell he was handsome just from the glimpse I got of his nose...

At that moment, his eyes—red, a shade that I could barely make out from under his hood—swerved over to me. I hurriedly avoided his gaze but not before our eyes briefly met.

Well, that was embarrassing... I probably needed to apologize, right?

Then, I heard him speak up, his tone incredibly distasteful. "What are you looking at?" he sneered.

Wow. Rude.

It was true that I stole a glance at him, being the first to display some bad manners, but I didn't want to apologize to someone who spoke so impolitely to a stranger.

"Oh, um... I was looking for the thing you're buying right now," I answered, making up an excuse.

The owner stiffened at my claim.

"Miss, you want to... buy this?"

Wait a minute. Was that armor polish?

I tried to maintain a serious expression after realizing what I was looking at. Knights were usually associated with armor, but in reality, they didn't have to wear any unless they were fighting in a war. In other words, armor polish was functionally useless to me.

Nevertheless, I made a firm declaration. "Yes, I need it!" I didn't want to admit that I had been secretly looking at the cloaked man instead. "It's a shame,

but the decorative armor sets in my house have lost their luster."

The owner nodded. "Of course, but one would not be enough to shine everything in a house."

"What? No, I just need one..."

I tried to refuse him, but it seemed like the owner didn't hear me. He continued to speak. "Wait here. I'll go through the warehouse to find some more!"

After the owner had disappeared, it sunk in that I had purchased something wholly unnecessary out of impulse.

I... I just bought some useless polish... I couldn't criticize Father for his thoughtless spending when I had just done the same...

I sighed. I had dug my own grave. The man next to me placed a gold coin on the table, picked up his polish, and turned around.

I would've ignored him if he had just placed a small amount of money down, but a gold coin held enormous value. This amount could feed a commoner's family for two weeks.

"Hey, what about the change?" I shouted after him loudly and clearly, but he didn't respond, so I followed him and shouted even louder so he wouldn't miss it. "Your change!"

He should've been able to hear me, so I began to wonder if he was a little hard of hearing. Maybe he had heard the wrong amount from the owner. Suddenly, I felt sorry for him.

"Hey, can you hear me?" I asked again.

At that moment, the man stopped in his tracks. He turned around and stared at me.

His hearing was fine, apparently.

Despite my embarrassment for having caused a commotion, I said, "I think you heard the shopkeeper wrong. The amount you paid is ten times the price."

While I was explaining this to the man, I heard Geraldine call for me. "My

lady, what's going on?"

"Um... this guy..."

I tried to explain what was happening, but the man took my distraction as an opportunity to leave the shop. Was he just that rich or something? I was frowning, more than a little embarrassed, when I heard the owner of the shop's voice return.

He laughed. "Miss! It turns out that we have ten more of these."

"No, I don't need ten..."

I tried telling him that I didn't need that much, but the owner wouldn't listen to me.

"One gold coin for all of these!" he paused. "Oh, you've already done the math!"

One gold coin. It was the same amount that the man in the hood had paid before leaving.

I tried to clear the shopkeeper's misunderstanding, but he continued to make his own assumptions.

"By the way, did that guy take my stuff without paying?"

"No, you're mistaken—"

"That damned bastard!"

The owner began to curse at the man. Despite my attempts to interject, I wasn't able to get a word in until he was finished.

"He paid you that gold coin!" I finally burst out.

The owner of the shop became sheepish. "Is that so? You should have told me earlier."

Was he really trying to blame me for this? I had been trying to tell him this entire time!

In my exasperation, I decided I'd never step foot into this shop ever again.



Next to a carriage parked in a vacant lot, a short-haired woman was anxiously waiting for someone.

Where was he?

She was nervous, but when the man she had been waiting for arrived, she sighed in relief. "My Lord, I have informed Duke Floyen of your appointment," she reported.

"Good."

Although his voice was as cold as usual, he sounded somewhat annoyed. The woman took notice of this and asked, "Did something happen?"

The man was thinking about the lady he had encountered in the shop. He recalled how she had called out to him repeatedly. "Hey, can you hear me?" he remembered her saying, her voice echoing in his mind.

She had no fear, even around someone like him, a vicious dog who bared its teeth to warn people around it to stay away. He had been annoyed for a second, but the moment he turned around and met her eyes that last time, all of his hostility had disappeared. Reminiscing, the young man frowned.

"Nothing happened," he said.



Ah, I was so tired. I left the shop frustrated, and as I walked away, I tried to brainstorm ways I could recover from what had just happened.

"Where have you been, Jubelian?" Father asked me. For some reason, he looked displeased. I quickly answered him.

"Oh, I bought something."

Father turned to Geraldine, who was carrying the bought goods.

"And what is that?"

"It's armor polish," Geraldine replied.

At Geraldine's answer, Father glanced at me with a slight frown. Then, he sighed. "Let's go."

I knew I had bought something useless, but there was no way he could berate

me. If he had a conscience, that is.

I resumed following Father for who knows how long. When an obstacle appeared before my eyes, my composure threatened to crumble.

Ugh, stairs!

I had been following him for several hours today, so my feet were throbbing, but I needed to get through this. I only needed to endure for a little while longer. I tried to ignore the pain I felt by imagining the bright future I was going to have after inheriting Father's wealth.

Wait, what was happening?

I suddenly felt a tingling sensation in the back of my head and my vision began to obscure, blotting up with specks of black dots. My legs also lost their strength and I struggled to take another step.

"Help!" I cried.

Fortunately, I hadn't fallen because I grabbed onto something in front of me.

Phew. I survived.

As soon as my eyesight came back, I looked up to see what I was holding onto and the sight had me stiffening in fear. I had latched onto Father's arm.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." To avoid ruining Father's mood, I hurriedly apologized and tried to back away from him, but he held onto my wrist.

"Stay still."

My field of vision swayed violently as he spoke. The next thing I knew, I was in a princess carry. I choked in embarrassment. "F-Father?" I usually never stuttered but I ended up doing so because of the embarrassing display we made in front of everyone.

Instead of acknowledging my inquiry, he continued to walk while holding me in his arms. "We're going back to the carriage," he told me.

I looked up at him, surprised by what he had just said. Icy blue eyes and a twisted expression met my markedly more harried ones. It looked like he was annoyed that I had gotten in his way.

"I'm fine, Father." I tried to convince him to put me down, but he ignored me, and his voice was a harsh winter's night upon his next command.

"Quiet."

As he continued to hold me in this embarrassing position, I somehow gathered enough of my wits to swallow my shame. Why was he acting like this today? He had also acted strange when we were shopping. Maybe it was due to the stress, but my head was throbbing. I was in so much pain that when Father sat me down on the carriage seat and took off my shoes, I couldn't say anything.

It hurt. I felt a stinging sensation around the back of my feet; I must've chafed my heels. I decided to apply some medicine and get some rest after I arrive home.

While I was concentrating on enduring the pain, I heard a stern voice.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. He was in a bad mood because I had ruined his day, wasn't he? Well, he insisted on coming to the carriage despite my protests.

I tried not to reveal my heightening stress. "Because it's really not a big deal," I answered calmly. "Let's just finish shopping." If I pretended to be okay, maybe he wouldn't treat me like I was useless. That ought to do it, right?

Contrary to my expectations, however, his response was uncompromising. "We're going home."

"What? But..."

"Don't say anything useless and stay still."

At those words, I clamped my mouth shut. Then, I let out a small sigh. Although I had listened to him all day and behaved nicely, he still looked so displeased. It was incredibly difficult to make him happy.

I could feel my forehead becoming warmer and my headache worsening. What was this? I felt sick. As soon as I became conscious of how strange I felt, Father began speaking once more.

"Jubelian." I turned to him. He sighed. "Sooner or later, I'll... a good one... shopping... your thoughts..."

How strange. Father's voice kept cutting off and I couldn't concentrate on his words properly because of my pounding headache. Oh well. I'll just agree to whatever he said. I nodded along even though I couldn't hear him very well. I didn't want to keep ruining his mood, after all.

My head began to feel awfully heavy. In fact, it got so bad that I couldn't sit upright anymore.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. Fortunately, I could hear him clearly this time.

"It's nothing. You don't have to worry about me," I tried to say, but nothing came out. His eyes widened as if something startled him.

"Jubelian?"

Him calling my name was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.



A carriage adorned with a crest that bore a lily and sword, thus symbolizing the Floyen house, emerged in the distance. A butler came outside to greet the approaching carriage and smiled to himself, wondering if Duke Floyen's date with his daughter went well. He had been excited about it.

The butler recalled his master's serious expression as the imposing man questioned the other servants about Lady Floyen's preferences, and tried to suppress his amusement at the memory. He had almost succeeded, but he couldn't help the laughter that spilled from his lips.

When the carriage arrived at the mansion and the door opened, he bowed to greet his lord. "Welcome, Master," he began, but after he rose once more, his smile immediately fell from his lips. Eyes widening in shock, he cried, "L-Lady Floyen!"

Jubelian, deathly pale in the arms of her father, looked like a wax doll.

The butler stuttered, trying to find the right words to say. "Wh-What is—"

"Derrick," Dyke Floyen snapped, cutting the butler short with a fierce voice.

Panic reflected in his eyes despite the ice-cold steel he wore upon his face. "Summon Allen. Right now."



In the past, I had fallen sick a few times, but it was never severe enough for Father to show up. I used to be sad about this, but now I felt nothing.

However, a voice was murmuring in my ears. "Wake... up..." it told me.

Out of annoyance, I tried to open my eyes to spot the culprit, but I could barely make out the blurry, distorted face of the man before me. The fact that my body was floating in the clouds, devoid of any sense of reality, certainly didn't help.

"Jubel!"

It was strange. Was this Father? No, he had no reason to call for me like that, or gaze at me with such tearful eyes...

"No, this can't be. If you're gone, I..."

It is said that dreams are unconscious expressions of what the dreamer desperately wants.

"Please wake up..."

What a terrible dream.

As soon as that thought ran through my mind, I sank back into darkness.



When I gained consciousness, I was lying on my bed. The first person I saw was Allen, the Floyen family's personal doctor. That was when I realized I hadn't fallen asleep but passed out instead.

"Are you feeling okay, Lady Floyen?"

"How long have I been out, Allen?"

"Three days, my lady."

I observed my surroundings. Some maids looked back at me with anxious expressions. I counted the maids in my room: Merilyn, Julia, and Sella. Father,

meanwhile, was nowhere in sight. Well, I didn't expect him to be here in the first place. He hadn't even shown up to my debutante ball.

"Are you feeling okay, Lady Floyen?" Allen repeated. I didn't answer right away because at that moment, the door opened. Allen brightened and ushered the person who had arrived inside.

Turning around, I checked to see if it was Derrick, our butler, but I ended up with a surprise instead. Wide-eyed, I witnessed as Father stepped closer.

Why was he here? I stared at him, unable to reconcile his presence with reality. He gently placed a hand on my head.

"You're awake," he said. Unlike his flat, emotionless tone, his large hand felt warm. Was I dreaming? I couldn't believe what was happening. As I continued to thoughtlessly stare, he withdrew his hand. "Rest."

Then, he began to retreat. I watched him go. Regaining my senses, I laughed at myself. "Don't be fooled, Jubelian," I thought to myself, reproachful. Ever since I was a kid, his heart had always proven cold when it came to me. He had even gone as far as detaining me himself back in the novel we were written in.

He only checked up on me because he didn't want to look like a heartless father who neglected his bedridden daughter.

To avoid developing worthless expectations, I destroyed any lingering attachments I might've had.



"You've overexerted yourself recently," Allen had explained to me. "Please rest well."

As he advised, I decided to rest by reading a book in bed, but... It was boring. A novel would've been more entertaining, but this book was about human resources and estate management.

I guess this is what I got for neglecting my studies up until now.

Some people might wonder why the duke's only daughter would even bother studying, but the reality of the situation wasn't that simple. Father wouldn't dare pass his title down to an incompetent like me, so he would probably

remarry and produce another heir. In that case, I would have to get married too, or become independent and obtain a small share of my inheritance to support myself with. I had no intention to choose the former option. Getting married would be too risky.

In a conservative society such as ours, married women's ventures were limited to fulfilling their responsibilities as dictated by and for their families. They were expected to diligently uphold their families' reputations while also maintaining their dignities as hostesses. If their husbands were their only source of income, they could be shackled with monetary limitations and have to forego any hopes of living lavishly. All of this would oppose my goal of spending money on what I want, whenever I want.

Therefore, that left me with only one real solution. If I got a bit of an inheritance and became independent, I could use that money to make myself some more money. If I got lucky, I might even be able to acquire a bigger share of the inheritance than what I'd originally expect. Maybe some titles under Father's jurisdiction, too.

Unfortunately, however, the biggest stumbling block would come after getting my hands on what I could. In this new life, all I had learned were some manners and the basic literacy skills required of a noble lady. With such a meager skill selection, it would be difficult to survive on my own. I could try building a source of income on my own power alone, but I knew better than that. Starting a business isn't for everyone.

Although I possessed knowledge of a more modern civilization, I didn't know how to make many things. I didn't have excellent oratory or entrepreneurial skills and nor did I make any connections. There was a high probability that I would fail and end up saddled with debt.

Currently, all I could do right now was try and ensure I obtained the maximum amount I could from Father—the issue being, of course, that I had no idea how to.

I sighed at this unpleasant conclusion. Then, I heard a knock at my door.

"Some letters have arrived for you, Lady Floyen," Merilyn announced.

I sat up. They had come, just as I had expected. Although my reputation in

society lay in shambles, my notoriety was nothing compared to Father's prestige. He was a living hero and people revered him.

"Please bring them here," I said.

Merilyn carried in a silver tray stacked with a pile of correspondence. "Here they are," she said, presenting them to me.

I skimmed through them one by one, unable to resist the urge to laugh each time. Although there were dozens of letters, none of them felt sincere. It was as if they were telling me that I had lived my life in vain.

Although this left a bitter taste in my mouth, I wasn't upset. After all, I was to blame.

In the past, I never cared about what other people thought of me because I was too busy trying to win Mikhail's affection. I lashed at anyone who offended me while I showered him with favor regardless of how he treated me. Consequentially, I became a loner. I had brought this upon myself and I had no one else to blame for it.

"Do you want me to put these letters away, Lady Floyen?"

I suddenly heard Merilyn speak, and I looked up at her. Since I was done skimming through them, she probably thought I wanted to put them away.

"No, I will reply to them all myself."

"Are you sure... you want to reply to these letters?" she asked haltingly, her eyes growing large.

I chuckled. "Yes, I'm sure. They sent them to me out of concern, so I must personally reply to them."

I knew very well that these people didn't send me letters because they were worried about me. However, there were several reasons why I couldn't just ignore them like I usually did. A lot of them had grown resentful toward me for ignoring them and I had to show them that I wasn't that kind of person anymore. No matter how poorly they used to perceive me, their opinions would certainly change after showing them my subtle, yet clear transformation.

Writing replies was a part of my plan, but then I ran into another obstacle

before I could even start: I had no idea what to write.

Since I had been extremely uninterested in the lives of others, I was ignorant of their preferences, much less how to maintain correspondence. I didn't even know anyone well enough to come up with some shallow compliments.

When I glanced at Merilyn, however, something came to mind. Merilyn must've been writing replies to these letters this entire time.

When one thinks of a maid, they usually think of someone who does the laundry or cleans the house, but unlike ordinary maids, maids-in-waiting were expected to be eloquent and possess ample knowledge of social affairs. Because they were tasked with assisting aristocrats, they usually hailed from fallen noble families or middle-class families that could afford an education. In other words, Merilyn was like my secretary.

"I have a request, Merilyn," I began.

"Please, do tell."

"Could you help me reply to these letters?"

She gaped at me, bewildered. This wasn't a strange reaction because I had never asked for her help before. Things were changing, though. I wasn't the same stupidly prideful girl I used to be anymore.

"I just need to know a little bit more about the families we usually interact with," I explained.

She nodded. "Yes. I will do my best."

"Thank you," I said, smiling at her compliance. "Your help is reassuring to have."

Following that admission, Merilyn shot me an odd look for a brief moment before quickly schooling her expression once more. "I'll bring you a pen and some paper, then," she said.



Merilyn stood outside the door of the duke's office with a stiff look on her face. Madam Perez, the head of housekeeping, glanced at her before making her announcement.

"This is the girl who serves Lady Jubelian, Master," she said.

There came no answer, but the door opened nevertheless. Merilyn gulped nervously and stepped inside.

The sight that manifested before her quickly turned her fear into admiration. The duke was standing in front of a large window, his silver hair stained red with the crimson light of the setting sun. He looked picturesque, like a painting brought to life.

His voice promptly brought Merilyn back to reality. "What did Jubelian do today?"

"A-after reading a book, she replied to the letters she received," Merilyn answered.

The duke's stony expression began to shift. "She read a book?" he asked. He seemed surprised, but the look left as quickly as it came.

Merilyn glanced at his blue eyes and tried her best to keep herself together. They reminded her of a vast, unfathomable sea.

He continued his line of questioning. "What kind of book?"

"Its main topic was about estate management."

The duke gave a slight frown. "Why?"

Jubelian had never read any books before, which explained the duke's reaction. Contemplating her reply, Merilyn recalled what Lady Floyen had said when requesting the book in the first place: "I'll be a nuisance to Father if I can't even grasp the basics."

"She told me she doesn't want to be a nuisance to you..."

"I still don't understand why she would read something like that."

He sounded annoyed, but Merilyn could feel that it was markedly different from when he talked to her. She ended up speaking without a second thought. "Perhaps... she wants to converse with you," she suggested.

The duke stiffened, making Merilyn gulp nervously. Did she just say something stupid?

"She doesn't have to know anything like that to talk to me," he said, his voice lowered. Contrary to the indifference he spoke with, however, he was smiling. It was such a dazzling sight that Merilyn couldn't help but regress back into staring blankly at his face again.

"Take good care of my daughter," he commanded with a soft voice. Then, his face became solemn once more. It was as if he had never smiled in the first place.



Four days had passed since I secluded myself in my room. During that time, I finished reading everything I borrowed from the library. Now, I needed a new book...

Merilyn had gone out to do some errands, so Sella took her place in my room as a substitute. I looked at her.

"Is there something that you need, Lady Floyen?" she asked, prompted by my gaze.

Unfortunately, I couldn't ask Sella to bring me any books because unlike Merilyn, Sella could only read some basic words. She hadn't received the same education. It would've been better if I went to the library myself.

I didn't want Sella to feel bad if she knew the reason why I didn't send her to the library, so I decided to send her elsewhere. "Can you bring me some chocolate cookies and tea, Sella?"

"Yes, of course!" she said. "I'll be right back."

When she left, I told another maid that I would be getting books from the library and ventured outside my room. When I reached my destination, I was lost in thought. It always proved to be quite a hassle trying to find the right book to read every time...

Opening the library doors, I gasped when I saw who stood behind them.

"Oh, F-Father! G-Good morning!" I stuttered, astonished. I greeted him, but I didn't expect him to give me an answer. To my surprise, he proved me wrong.

"It's not morning, but the afternoon," he corrected.

He found fault with something I said, which tempered my surprise a bit, but it wouldn't do me any good to get hurt by his response.

"Yes, it is indeed. That was my mistake," I agreed calmly, hoping that it meant the end of our conversation.

I walked towards the bookshelf. Noticing, his stare burnt holes into the book I picked up. "That's... estate management theory."

His stony expression gave away his thoughts. He hadn't asked, but I could tell he was wondering why I was reading something like this. I hurriedly placed the book back on the shelf.

"Yes. I was simply curious about what kind of duties Father performs as a lord."

His expression hardened at my excuses. "Why were you curious about that?"

Oh. What if he thought I was getting greedy? I didn't want him to misunderstand me, so I replied dryly to avoid sounding materialistic or ambitious. "I was just curious," I said. "I had no other motives."

Although I tried to avoid offending him, he still frowned slightly. I gulped nervously and added, "I'm sorry for bothering you. I'll be going now."

I ended the conversation and sneakily tried to leave the library.

"Jubelian." Hearing my name spoken so coldly, I turned back again. Father was staring at me with a stony face. "Sit down."

Did he have something to say to me? My head was starting to ache with all the effort it took to try and figure out his intentions. Allen had advised me to relax my mind and body... still, I couldn't ignore Father's burdensome gaze no matter how afraid I was of falling ill again.

I guess this was unavoidable.

I settled myself on the couch across from him. The soft, fluffy cushion relaxed my body, but I was still on the edge about what he had to say.

"Jubelian," he began, and I forced myself to listen to him attentively. "Do you know the three elements that make up an estate?"

For a moment, I doubted that such a question left his lips. I hadn't expected him to quiz me. Nevertheless, I responded as promptly as I could, not missing a beat.

"The land is the foundation of an estate, the lord establishes and protects order, and the people are responsible for the production of resources," I explained.

"You have learned well."

"Yes, I read an entire book on the subject."

Thinking that this was all he had to say, I was about to ask him if I could go back to my room, but then he asked me something else. "Then, do you know this as well?"

He moved on, quizzing me further. Father's pop quiz hadn't ended with just that first inquiry, and he continued to go over information as if to check whether or not I had thoroughly read the book.

When was this going to end? Eventually, I checked the time, and it was already three o'clock—two hours after I had left my room. I usually had teatime at this hour.

Oh, those chocolate cookies I told Sella to bring...

I was still thinking about them when I heard a knock at the door.

"The guest has arrived, Master," Derrick announced.

Father stood up. Was the test finally over? I observed him with tentative relief. "Please, please leave me alone," I begged him silently.

However, Father continued to defy my expectations and walked in front of a bookshelf instead of out the door. I suppressed the urge to sigh.

"Master," Derrick called again.

Father didn't answer. Why was he looking for a book instead of replying?

Before my curiosity could continue to swallow me up, he walked towards me with two books he had just picked out. "Read these," he ordered, handing them to me. Then, he left the library.

I looked after his tall profile with trembling eyes before checking the titles of the books he gave me. I could scarcely believe what I saw.

Father, why would you ever want an ordinary lady like me to read about military strategy and tactics? It would've been helpful if he had given me books on agriculture or commerce, but these books contained information that I was never going to use in life.

However, since he told me to read them, I needed to try at least. Right?

I had already planned to read a lot of books to aid my goal of becoming independent. It was rather troublesome that he added more to my growing list, though.

I was sighing at the thought of the growing list of things I had to do when something caught my eye.

A pendant?

Before me sat a familiar-looking pendant inlaid with a large blue gemstone. Now, where had I seen this before? Oh! It was similar to the necklace that Father always wore around his neck. It must be his.

He must've forgotten about it, leaving it behind. After deciding that I would return it to him later, I tucked it into my pocket.



When I came back to my room, Merilyn had also returned from her errand.

"Did it go well?" I asked.

She nodded politely. "Yes, Lady Floyen. As requested, the letters were delivered to their respective noble families."

"Thank you for going through all that trouble."

When I commended Merilyn for her work, a strange expression crossed her face again. Hm... Did it seem like I was being too petty? Well, come to think of it, I used to hate having to do more work than usual.

I decided to give her a bonus later. For now, I'd just give her some sweets.

I handed Merilyn a plate of chocolate cookies. "Take this," I said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I haven't touched it yet," I assured her, just in case she thought I was giving her leftovers. "They're new."

Merilyn continued to gape at me with that same strange look in her eye, but she took the cookies and bowed regardless. "Thank you."

"Of course. You can leave now."

I began to sip my tea when she left the room. Responses to my letters would be coming soon.

Until now, I had never replied to anyone, so the noble houses I sent out letters to certainly wouldn't be expecting anything personally handwritten by me. So, when they finally read them, they would be obligated to write back. Now all I had to do was wait patiently. It was a cumbersome but necessary process for the sake of my future.

I could only live peacefully after I subdued the hostility others felt toward me.



As always, the royal family was a topic of concern amongst the nobles.

"The borders are stable now, so why doesn't His Majesty the Emperor bring His Highness the Prince back to the palace?"

"Her Highness the Princess is also coming of age soon. Will they ever grace us with their presence?"

The prince and princess had never shown their faces at any society events, so the nobility had grown rather curious about them.

"Didn't you say your cousin was serving at the northern border, Lord Luigi?"

"I heard from him that His Highness the Prince is always wearing a helmet, so he has never seen his face."

"Is there a reason why he's always wearing a helmet?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has a scar on his face or—"

Everyone tensed, so the person who had previously led the conversation prevented the other noble from making such a bold claim. "That may be the

case, but we don't know unless we see him in person, right?"

After that, someone quickly brought up something else to talk about. "By the way, did you receive any letters from Lady Floyen?"

Following immediately after the royal family was the ducal family in terms of gossip, and faced with another topic of interest, people gladly began to join in and voice their thoughts.

"Yes, it seems like she has finally matured," a noble answered pridefully. He had been one of the few families who received a reply.

However, a new, grating voice wasn't afraid to voice some criticism. "There's no way a person like her could have changed."

"He's right! You can't just forget about all the things she did in the past! The letters must have been written by someone else."

Among the many nobles who didn't receive a reply from Jubelian, those who resented her didn't hold back on condemning her.

"It's weird that someone who used to do whatever she wanted so brazenly would suddenly do something like this."

Those who neither received a reply nor resented her also expressed their doubts. Lady Floyen's change of behavior was inevitably a concern in the social world due to her powerful position and beauty. Although they gossiped about her, they were subtly envious of the people she had replied to.

"This is sickening," a man attending the banquet thought. He felt disappointed by all the things he heard.

"What do you think about this incident, sir?" someone asked him.

In response to the noble's question, the man glared at him with cold eyes. His lips twisted into a frown. "I think you're very rude to ask something like that," he said. Then, after speaking his mind, he turned around

"S-Sir Mikhail!" The noble desperately called after him, but he was already gone.

After leaving the banquet hall, Mikhail clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. What did he think about this? A certain woman's pale face came to mind. In an

instant, a cold smile graced his lips.

Her intentions were obvious. This was just another scheme to get his attention.



Fluttering Heart

I had been spending most of my time in my room enjoying the lifestyle of a homebody. Still there, I eyed the clock.

I was bored. There were still two hours until dinner. As I thought about what I could do in the meantime, something caught my eye: the books Father gave me.

Should I... read them?

I didn't know when he was going to give me another pop quiz, so I figured it was a good idea to start. I picked up the book on tactics first, and although I expected it to be boring, I was actually presently surprised. Like, wow. What was this? Anecdotes and clever war tactics were described vividly within the book's pages, almost like I was reading a heroic fantasy novel.

In fact, the book was so entertaining and compelling that I soon forgot the uncomfortable position I had situated myself in.

Oh no. My arm was numb.

Fixing my posture, I felt something rustle in my pocket. Ah, Father's pendant. I bookmarked the page I was on and took the pendant out of my pocket. The blue gemstone reminded me of the sea, and the light reflected upon its surface scattered silver shards in every direction.

Should I just keep this? It looked expensive. Although I was tempted, I was too afraid that Father would find out, and in the end, I decided it would be better to just give it back to him.

Since he spent most of his time in his office, I ought to go there.

I left my room and walked through a long corridor lined with all kinds of decorative paintings and statues. It was always so clean here. The white marble floor shone pristinely because the maids frequently cleaned it. They were probably swamped with work every day...

When I saw the gleaming armor sets lining the wall, I suddenly felt guilty about all the varnish I had bought. With such thoughts running through my mind, I passed the drawing room and continued to walk toward my destination.

I was just about to turn the corner that led into his office when I heard a voice ring out from within it.

"Don't think of trying to convince me anymore."

I stopped in my tracks. There was someone else with Father. A guest. I had heard this voice somewhere before; was it one of his servants?

"It's a warning, not a suggestion," came the apathetic voice of Father.

Who would undergo such a lengthy discussion with him like this? Even Derrick would leave Father's office in less than an hour, and that was already considered a pretty long time. However, this person had probably been here since I last saw Father back in the library, taking up five entire hours.

It was unusual for someone to be able to talk with him for this long.

At that moment, the door to the drawing room next to the office opened with a creak and I quickly hid behind the corner. Fortunately, there was a pillar in front of me that further obscured their view. They wouldn't be able to see me from here, right?

I peeked at the corridor and saw Father with a young man in black cloak. Wow. He was really tall. He was even taller than Father, so I knew he definitely exceeded average height. Still, he didn't look like a brute...

Hm... he looked familiar. Just as I was about to place where I might've last seen him, the man spoke and interrupted my train of thought.

"It'd be useless to tamper with it."

I leaned a bit further out to get a better look at the man, and my breath caught in my throat. Again, wow. I had grown up accustomed to Father's visage, so handsome men rarely impressed me, but even so, I couldn't help but admire this guy. He had black hair and red eyes. As if he were a bit drowsy, his gaze bore a slightly aloof air. His masculine yet beautiful face looked simply ethereal. He wasn't just good-looking; he was comparable to a craftsman's magnum opus.

Never before had I seen anyone who didn't look subpar standing next to Father. Both of them possessed cold demeanors, but there was still as subtle difference between them. While Father composed himself with sharp elegance and visible intellect, this man felt darker. More dangerous.

An overdue inquiry made its way through my head: who was he? It must've been my first time seeing him, but I felt like we had met before.

I slowly inspected the man once more. He wore a black hooded cloak and a claymore strapped onto his back...

I could tell he wasn't a knight or a soldier due to the large size of his sword because using a sword like that near one's allies could accidentally injure them. Still, it would've been unreasonable to label him a thief or an assassin. Those jobs required blending in, which would've been impossible to do with such a prominent weapon. With those options ruled out, I figured that he had to be a mercenary or a wandering swordsman who didn't have to worry about equipment restrictions.

Father placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "Max," he said.

Was that the man's name? My curiosity heightened even further because Father didn't call many others by name. Who was this man and why was Father so friendly with him?

I was still trying to glean the nature of their relationship when Father suddenly glanced around. I quickly dove behind the pillar once more. Whew. I almost got caught.

After calming down some, I frowned. Wait. Why was I hiding?

"Swordsmanship exists to protect precious things, not to evoke a slaughter," Father continued, his voice so sharp and stern that I flinched. "You seem to have forgotten this basic principle."

The other man was adamant. "I didn't forget. I simply didn't want such a weakness."

His words reminded me of myself. I smiled bitterly. I was a person with many faults... that was why nobody ever needed me. Father had kept a distance from me for as long as I could remember, and my ex-boyfriend, Mikhail, was no different. Although I wasn't upset about this anymore, I pitied my past self. I sighed.

"Sometimes, people become stronger to protect their weaknesses," Father said.

I wondered what he wanted to protect. His lofty status and sense of honor, perhaps? Or, more graciously, his precious subordinates? He always placed such great importance on his work, after all. I didn't know what his weaknesses were, but he could defend himself no matter what happened. Unlike me...

The young man's grim voice broke through my sorrowful thoughts. "Master," he said, and my eyes widened.

Master? I didn't think Father had taken any disciples... surprised, I peeked out to get another look at them.

"I don't want to hear any more of your lectures. I'll be going." He spoke with such menace and dispassion that even Father's tone seemed to pale in comparison.

There wasn't any need to be better than him at things like that... I frowned, continuing to watch them.

"Someday, you will also have someone precious to you. Someone you will want to protect," Father said. Although he spoke sternly, his voice was filled with affection the likes of which I had never witnessed from him before.

I bit my lip unconsciously before I could stop myself. There was nothing left to mull over, though. I had already decided to give up on vying for his love.

I still had a long, happy life ahead of me. I didn't want to be dragged down by this anymore. Let's not be shaken. Nothing he said could hurt me anymore. I promised to stay resilient.

Father's disciple lowered his voice to a cold whisper. "Well, I haven't found anything precious yet, but I did find a hidden rat."

I came to my senses upon hearing the very thing that aroused my worst fears. What? A rat? I shuddered with disgust as goosebumps rose on my skin, frightening my melancholy thoughts away. Where? Where was it?

I couldn't bolt from my spot without getting noticed, so I frantically scanned my surroundings. The thought that this creature could've been near me was

terrifying.

"Shall I catch it?" The man's question came to me like that of a savior's.

I nodded violently even if he couldn't see me. "Yes, please catch it!" I wanted to shout.

However, my desperate pleas were rejected by Father. "Don't," he said.

I was incredibly displeased. Why not, Father?

Father's disciple began to speak perversely. "Why? Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

What? I didn't expect Father to say that he was acquainted with a rat, but then it occurred to me that I was in a novel. I managed to calm myself. In fairy tales, animals and humans could communicate... Father was a transcendent being, so perhaps he could talk to them. If he saw the rat often, he might've developed some affection for it.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel uneasy. I really hated rats!

In my previous life, I once saw a rat the size of the entire length of my arm. I had been looking around the warehouse of a convenience store that I was working part-time in. Although the rat scampered away after I made a great fuss, I was too scared to enter the warehouse after that and soon quit my job.

Now, I was faced with the same problem, but what was worse about it was that this rat had infiltrated my own home. I didn't feel safe here anymore; it could've found its way around the corridors, rooms, and everywhere else. The rat could've nibbled at the food I ate, too...

How frightening! The more I thought about it, the more my courage grew to take action. If I ignored this problem, more rats could appear and overrun my home.

Because my mother was no longer here with us, I was still the only lady of this family, and therefore the highest ranking one. Although I didn't have much authority, this position was a good enough reason for people to take me seriously if I asked them to catch the rat.

I was going to tell Father.

I was about to walk up to him, determined, but then I heard him say, "If you touch that child... I won't let it slide, even if it's you."

I had never heard Father speak with such chilling vitriol before. It sounded like he was warning me. I immediately changed my mind. Maybe I should just go back to my room. I needed to live, after all.

I squeezed Father's pendant and quietly left, thinking of the affection he held toward the rat.



When the person listening in on their conversation left, the tense air relaxed slightly.

Those steps. How annoyingly grating. This mysterious cause had brought a frown upon the young man's handsome face.

"Max," his master called.

"Yes?"

"Did you call her a rat knowing who she was?" Although his master's monotone voice wasn't too different from usual, the look in his eyes was very fierce. It had been a long time since this man revealed what lay behind his mask of indifference.

"I didn't know."

There was only one person who could excite such a reaction from his master, however, and although Max knew who she was, he continued to meet his master's stare with indifference.

Ten years had passed since he started learning swordsmanship from Duke Floyen at the age of twelve. He knew how strict and blunt the older man could be. Even so, there were moments when his master softened his usually stony demeanor, and those moments were reserved solely for...

"My daughter. She's my daughter, Max."

Max recalled her name. "Jubel."

The duke smiled. "Yes."

Max had only mentioned his daughter's nickname, but his expression had already softened. The young man frowned. The duke was impossible to understand.

When Max's mother died at a very young age, his life was threatened by enemies within his own family. It was Duke Floyen who protected him from frightening situations and taught him how to defend himself.

"Since you consider me to be your master, I will secretly teach you swordsmanship to ensure your survival," the duke had told him.

At one point, Max looked up to his master so much that he wanted to become just like him. He had no such aspirations now.

The duke had leashed himself for someone like her. At that thought, a chill seemed to cloud the young man's red eyes. The corner of his tightly pursed lips raised crookedly.

I'll never allow myself such a weakness, he thought to his master. Not like you.

Max knew very well how much difficulty his master's precious daughter brought him. The tighter the leash, the weaker one becomes. Max laughed cynically before reverting back to his usual ironclad expression.

His master observed him silently for a moment before asking, "Do you happen to have someone who frequently comes to mind?"

At the unexpected question, Max shook his head, then scrunched his eyebrows upon recalling an unpleasant experience.

"Hey, what about your change?" a woman's voice echoed in his mind.

He pulled an odd expression. The duke sighed at the sight of it. "Go back before it gets too late," he ordered.

Max draped the hood of his cloak over his head and stared at him with sunken eyes. "You take care of yourself."

After bidding a cold farewell, Max jumped out of the window. His master watched over him despite knowing that he was too skilled to get hurt.

"It's gotten worse than I thought," the duke thought to himself as he watched Max go. He had taught Max to cherish life, but his disciple was slowly growing more and more cold-blooded. He didn't hesitate to kill off his enemies if he saw a need for it, regardless of means or method.

A dark shadow fell on the duke's ethereal face. He used to be like that, too.

Duke Regis Floyen had realized long ago that in times of war, the weak died first. Rather than sympathizing with them, he hadn't bothered to hide his disgust. He had changed since then, however, and all because of a girl so fragile that he took care even to touch her hand.

His little girl's voice lingered in his memory. "Dad!" she called.

In the dark, a gentle smile lit his face.

Max didn't know anything. For Regis, his lovely daughter was his dull life's only salvation. He wanted to teach the importance of this to that foolish disciple of his.

Because of her, he could still call himself a human being. He wasn't a monster.

She was why he still lived with his sanity yet intact.

After returning to my room, I told the maids that I had seen a rat.

"A r-rat?"

"The butler recently hired a pest controller, so I thought he had hunted down every last one of them.

Merilyn shook her head. "There must have been some left because the mansion is so big. Rats breed quickly."

Just thinking about it made my knees weak. This was terrible. Even seeing just one of them would be scary...

Merilyn noticed my concern. "Don't worry," she assured me. "I will report it to Madam Perez so they will never appear again."

I calmed down and smiled. Good thing I didn't tell Father. If I had spoken to him at that time, he would've stopped me from asking the maids to hunt the

rat, but since he didn't know that I had eavesdropped on his conversation, he would probably assume that I had spotted a rat elsewhere in the mansion.

I could finally relax knowing that they would take care of it.

"For this reason, I have gathered the servants to catch rats."

Regis sighed upon receiving this report from Madam Perez, the housekeeper. His daughter had misunderstood the conversation. He became worried as he tried to come up with a means of reassuring her.

"I instructed the servants to catch the rats, but none have been caught yet," Madam Perez carefully reported again.

Regis closed his eyes and purposely enhanced his senses to detect every living being in the mansion. Even his daughter, who was now in her room, was accounted for. When he couldn't detect any sign of the small beasts, he opened his eyes and sighed softly.

They couldn't find the rats because there weren't any.

The housekeeper grumbled, unaware of the situation at hand. "Not only are the girls afraid, but Lady Floyen is also anxious," she said.

He flinched. She was anxious?

"Get Derrick," the duke immediately commanded.

A moment later, the butler entered the room. "I heard you called, Master."

The duke leveled his butler with a serious gaze. "Derrick."

"Yes?"

"I need your guidance."

Derrick widened his eyes upon hearing his request. His master... was asking him... for guidance? This was a first. It was customary for his master to handle most matters by himself. What on earth was going on?

He nervously waited for his master to speak.

"Where do rats usually hide?"

Derrick wasn't sure if he heard correctly. He looked at his master with trembling eyes and asked, "Rats?"

The duke sighed at Derrick's nervousness. "Never mind. It was a slip of the tongue," he dismissed. "How's the progress on Jubelian's list of prospective marriage partners?"

Derrick had grown concerned that his master had become ill due to the amount of work he had to do, so he was relieved by this question. "Ah, yes. I'm still searching and considering all necessary aspects, such as family background, appearance, wealth, and fame. The list will probably be completed by today."

"Alright."

Fortunately, the duke looked content. Derrick sighed in relief, then reported something that he had been hesitating to disclose for a while. "Also... Sir Mikhail sent another letter."

The moment he mentioned that name, the duke's expression changed. "What did he write?" he asked.

Although Derrick had nothing to do with this matter, his master's tone frightened him. "He is still urging us for an answer. He dismissed Lady Floyen's actions as a ploy to get his attention."

"I see." The duke was expressionless as usual, but his eyes turned icy and his aura hostile.

Derrick merely watched him. His master was really angry, but to be fair, he would've been angered by this, too. Mikhail had gone too far even in his eyes. Although Jubelian had treated him crassly before, there was no reason for him to insult her personality.

A moment later, the duke rose from his seat and approached Derrick, whose anxiety grew the closer the other man got. Did the duke want to read the letter himself? Derrick tried to guess his master's intentions, extending the letter out for ease of taking, but the duke just ignored him.

Huh? What was he doing? Derrick was about to investigate when his master next spoke.

"Burn it," the duke said softly.

By the time Derrick finally turned around, his master had already left.



"I heard that a rat was caught, Lady Floyen."

"Really?"

"Yes, only one was trapped! There weren't any more, so I guess it must've entered the house by accident!" Sella explained excitedly.

It was a comfort. Good. Now the house was safe.

I was smiling with relief when Merilyn delivered a letter on a silver tray. "This is addressed to you, Lady Floyen," she announced.

This was my first reply after that batch of letters I sent. Although it was probably a standard one, I needed to read it to determine the usual reaction I would receive when communicating with other people. Picking it up, I saw a rose on the seal.

This was sent by Count Arlo?

Count Arlo had a close relationship with Father, so I had a relatively good relationship with his daughter. Or, more accurately, I had a relatively good relationship with her at this point of the novel.

Was this a reply to the letter I sent them? I opened it, excited, and was surprised to see what was inside: an invitation!

There was a long message written in some cute, feminine script. The sender had been Rose, the youngest daughter of the family. She was known as a friendly and lively lady in the social scene. In the novel, she became close friends with the royal princess and contributed to my downfall.

Shall I see what she wrote? I began reading the letter, a bit concerned that she might have written me something sarcastic.

But—oh? Rose asked about how I was doing and talked a bit about herself. She also said it would be great if I could come to her upcoming birthday banquet. Nothing sarcastic had been said.

I got it. She wanted to know whether I had recovered and if I could attend the banquet she was planning in three weeks. This was good news since it meant I wouldn't have to be a loner in the social world, so I had no reason to decline her invitation.

"Could you bring me some papers and a pen, Merilyn?" I asked.

Merilyn quickly brought me the requested materials, but I frowned slightly when I saw the yellowish paper and black ink in front of me. They looked very dull.

She had invited me to her birthday banquet, so I didn't want to reply half-heartedly. It would be beneficial for me to develop a friendly connection with her since she was going to be acquainted with the royal princess in the future. I wanted to avoid my death at all costs.

I wondered what she liked. Then, suddenly, I recalled all the times I had seen her before. Although I had only noticed from a distance, I remembered that she enjoyed wearing pretty clothes. I could even tell from her beautiful handwriting that she cared a lot about appearances.

When I figured out what to do, I called the maids. "Sella, please bring some flowers from the garden. Julia, please bring some lace and ribbons."

After a while, what I asked for had arrived. "Here are the things you requested, Lady Floyen," my maids told me.

It was time to show off my pen pal skills.

"L-Lady Floyen!" the maids gasped, appalled by what I was doing, but I didn't care.



Upon the news of Lady Floyen's illness, the family had prepared a gift with a standard letter.

Rose squeezed her eyes shut at the thought. "We won't even receive a reply back," she complained to herself silently. "Why should we bother sending a letter in the name of Count Arlo?"

The only daughter of the duke was as beautiful as a doll delicately sculpted by

a craftsman. At one point, Rose had even admired her. When she encountered the lady in person, however, she found out that Jubelian was very rude, cold, and uncaring. Jubelian only had eyes for Mikhail and she never bothered to greet anyone else. Following this discovery, Rose figured it'd be a waste to personally send her gifts and letters.

Until she received a direct reply from her, that is.

Dear Count Arlo,

Thank you for your consideration. How have you been? I am recovering well, but it's frustrating for me to have to stay inside even on sunny days.

I heard from Father about the roses owned by the House of Arlo. I suppose they will be in full bloom soon. I still remember how much Father admired their beauty, and it is regrettable that I cannot see them with my own eyes.

Speaking of roses, is your daughter Rose doing well? Although we have not conversed much, I feel close to her as we are of the same age.

Rose recalled that Lady Floyen hadn't cared about anyone else except for Mikhail, but she had even mentioned Rose's name in the letter. She knew her name! And she thought of her after thinking about roses? Rose was well connected with others, but she was otherwise an ordinary aristocratic girl. In the past, a few girls had even made fun of her name, which meant *queen of flowers*, and said that she wasn't worthy of it.

Now that Lady Floyen, who was always at the center of attention, had mentioned her personally, Rose's heart pounded with excitement.

One of the count's vassals would've been responsible for writing a reply following Lady Floyen's, but Rose insisted that she do it herself. Even so, she didn't know what to write and ended up inviting Lady Floyen to her birthday banquet. She certainly didn't expect her to accept her invitation, but Lady Floyen proved her wrong in her next reply.

"Father!" she called. "This letter is from Lady Floyen!"

She opened it with trembling hands.

Dearest Daughter of Count Arlo, how have you been?

I was surprised by your reply and thrilled by your unexpected invitation. This is my first time communicating with someone by letter, so please understand if my reply proves lacking. I tried decorating it with my limited skill since I heard that the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo likes flowers. What do you think? My letter is probably nothing compared to yours, but I hope you still like it.

It's fun to communicate with someone who is both kind and beautiful, just like the roses that your respected family proudly owns. I look forward to meeting you and will spare my words until then.

— Jubelian Eloy Floyen.

Not only was her writing good, but Rose also liked the letter itself. There was a lace frame around the paper, and it was decorated with small ribbons and pressed flowers.

Rose giggled to herself. "She decorated this for me?" A strange sort of excitement overcame her as she looked at the lady's letter. It was like she had become someone special to Lady Floyen. Rose lay on her bed and read it several more times before grabbing some papers from a drawer.

She had to reply quickly!

Right before she was about to dip her quill in some ink, however, she stopped. No, she couldn't send her letter looking like this...

She called for her maids and made a great fuss. "Emily, pick some flowers for me! Laura, bring me some ribbons—the pretty and colorful ones!"

"You're not going to use it to decorate the letter, right?" Laura asked. "If the madam finds out..."

Rose became sullen. "Can't we do something about it?" she pouted.

"I can take some ribbons off of some torn clothes," Laura replied with a sigh.

Rose's face brightened and she nodded with excitement. "Okay!"



I opened another letter from Rose and sighed. I didn't know she would send me another one... In my previous letter, I had subtly implied that she shouldn't reply since we could talk once we met at the banquet. It seemed like she didn't understand.

Well, I this could be a good way to practice my writing skills, I suppose.

This time, her reply was tremendously long, which made my own task of reciprocating seem even more daunting. What should I say this time?

I smiled after looking at her letter again. The awkwardly decorated flowers and ribbons showed that she had tinkered with it as well. It didn't look so bad. Was it because she was just a teen? It was really cute.

A condensed version of it was as follows:

Dear Lady Floyen,

I am writing to you on a sunny day, but you have brightened it even further by accepting my invitation and decorating your letters. I look forward to seeing your beauty and elegance at my birthday banquet!

If you don't mind, I also hope that you will call me by my first name the next time we meet. If that makes you uncomfortable, please don't feel too pressured and forgive me with an open heart.

I look forward to seeing you, Lady Floyen.

Sincerely,

Rose

In the elaborately designed letter, she had also written praises about me and details about how magnificent her banquet was going to be. As a result, the total messages amounted to filling three entire pages.

Seeing as to how she wrote back to me in such detail, it was clear that she was expecting me to bring her a nice gift. I sighed, folding the letter back up.

"Please make preparations to go downtown," I told Marilyn.

"Do you have something that you need to get?" she asked, puzzled. "If so, I can just call the trader here."

"No, I want to choose something myself."

Merilyn continued to look at me with befuddlement, but I was full of determination. Rose would surely be disappointed if I gave her an insincere gift, so even if it proved to be a hassle, I had to pick something out for her personally.

I could tell that was why she had praised me so much in the letter despite the fact that we weren't close. This wasn't a surprise when one took my powerful status into account, but it was still a bit burdensome having to meet such expectations.

I began to ruminate on what would be a suitable gift and left the mansion.



High society was once again thrilled to hear about what Lady Floyen had been up to.

"My goodness! It's a surprise that the brazen princess didn't ignore the invitation!"

"She used to ignore every invitation that wasn't sent by the imperial family... it's truly amazing."

"Count Arlo's daughter is rather ordinary. What kind of charms must she possess to make Lady Floyen behave in such a way?"

"I heard that many women are decorating their letters with pressed flowers

and ribbons these days!"

"Does Lady Floyen know that she's started a trend?"

A young man who had been quietly listening to their conversation turned around and pursed his lips. "Count Arlo, huh," he mused. After leaving the banquet hall, he went straight to his carriage. "Let's head home," he told a servant.

His carriage arrived at Marquess Hessen's townhouse.

"Welcome back, young master."

Instead of acknowledging the servant who had spoken, Mikhail took his coat off and handed it to him. The servant bowed his head and took his coat, then stilled upon hearing his master's cold voice

"Tell the butler..." He hesitated for a brief moment before continuing, his domineering presence towering over the other man's bowed head. "Tell the butler I will be attending Count Arlo's banquet."

"Yes, young master."

The servant was about to leave the room when he spoke again, more urgently this time. "Oh, and... have any letters come for me?"

"No," the servant replied with a shake of his head. "Are you waiting for something?"

"No. You may leave," Mikhail said evasively, voice cold.

As soon as he was alone, he gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes. "How can you do this?! Jubelian!" he seethed silently.

Although he believed that she had faked her illness, he sent her house a letter out of consideration, thinking back to the days when they were engaged. She still hadn't answered him, but he couldn't accept that fact. She was just someone who used to annoy him—a stupid dog—so how could she treat him like this?

Did she want even more attention from him?

He tried to come up with an explanation for her actions and understand her

intentions, but doing so only led him to greater frustration. He ground his teeth and punched the wall, resentment roiling within him.

What in the world was Jubelian doing?



Living quietly was a difficult thing to ask for, it seemed...

I counted how many people were following me. Geraldine, Owen, Castro, Todd... the top ten knights of my family had surrounded me like walls.

I was just going to go shopping... they really didn't need to do this.

I had planned to go with just one or two escorts to avoid unnecessary attention, but there was nothing I could do about my current predicament since Father refused to let me go outside unless I was accompanied by all of them at once. There was good security near the capital, so I didn't see why I needed this many guards...

Recently, I had been keeping quiet and staying out of trouble, so I thought I would be able to shop peacefully by myself. This clearly wasn't the case. Well, there didn't seem to be a lot of people out today. I was glad about that, at least.

Where was that workshop I needed, anyway?

I surveyed my surroundings. There were three workshops that produced handicrafts for women around here. Kerin Workshop, the largest and most famous one, was located at the center of the downtown area. However, I had another place in mind because if I gave Rose something from Kerin, she might end up disliking me.

Later in the novel, Kerin Workshop was exposed for using toxic materials. If I gave her something from there and she fell ill because of it, it would only be a matter of time before rumors spread and I became the Arlo family's public enemy. There was still a chance for me to sour my potential relationship with Rose, so I definitely had to avoid buying from that place.

I continued walking until two other workshops came into sight. Then, a wide smile graced my lips. There! The signboards!

One told of the Fyodor Workshop, while the other presented the Grada

Workshop. Although Fyodor boasted a long history, it was on the verge of bankruptcy. On the other hand, however, Grada was still afloat, and multiple craftsmen collaborated from within to systematically produce things.

I stepped toward my destination, but Geraldine, the leader of the escort knights, stopped me. "Are you sure you want to enter that place, Lady Floyen?" he asked.

I couldn't blame him for doubting my decision. Although I had two other seemingly suitable choices, I was heading towards the shabby Fyodor Workshop instead, and it was located deep inside a dingy alleyway.

This was definitely the place, though. Anyone who listened to the rumors surrounding Fyodor would avoid it, wary of their burgeoning bankruptcy, but I knew things that others didn't.

"Yes," I answered Geraldine.

When I entered the store, I found a man sitting in a corner surrounded by shabby handicrafts. In addition to his untidy appearance, the man's long, disheveled hair covered most of his face. Despite being young, he was devoid of vitality. A normal person would've backed away from the scene, perhaps even stumbled, but I approached him resolutely.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not in a state where I can make anything right now. I apologize if I have disrespected you or your family in any way, but please go somewhere else."

I was the only customer to come, but he still refused me. I laughed, reassured. It was a good thing I decided to come here. Other people would have left, indignant, but I knew he was behaving like this because he had inherited his family business and struggled with the responsibility that came with it.

From the day of his birth, Ian Fyodor, the master of this eponymous workshop, had been under immense pressure to become a craftsman like his father, his grandfather, and all those before him. However, when the expectations became too much to handle, he lost the motivation to make anything, neglecting the business.

"I want to request something from you," I said, heedless of his warning.

"Why?" he asked. I could hear the distrust in his voice.

Because you will soon become known as the greatest craftsman in the empire, I thought.

Six months later, the princess would wear a necklace with an unusual design on the day of her coming-of-age ceremony. It would become a hot topic amidst high society and propel Ian Fyodor into fame. His value was set to skyrocket in the future, so it wouldn't hurt for me to buy some of his work in advance.

In other words, I wanted to invest in him for the sake of my prosperous future. I looked back at Ian, my new lottery ticket.

"You're the only one who can make what I want," I explained.

"Are you trying to intimidate me now?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, just that..." Ian glanced at the knights standing behind me and trailed off.

I turned around, but it didn't look like any of them were threatening him. After all, there was no way those good-for-nothing escorts would stand up for me.

I tilted my head. "Is there any reason why I can't request something from you?"

He didn't answer my question. "Why are you being so stubborn?" he asked instead.

"Because I believe you could make it better than anyone else can."

At my earnest claim, Ian parted his lips, disbelieving. "Me... you believe in me?"

"Yes," I said. Then, I smiled and imagined the prosperous future I was going to have after selling something that he made.

"Can you tell me what you want, then?" Ian asked with a low voice. He sounded unsure, but I had definitely won his approval.

Finally! I was going to get my hands on something from him after all. I happily

recalled the item I had in mind.

It should be good enough, right?



Derrick handed a document to Duke Floyen. "Here is the list for Lady Floyen's prospective marriage partners, Master," he said.

The duke furrowed his eyebrows after reading it. Why was his name here...?

He circled the name with gritted teeth and called for the butler. "Derrick, please remove this name—"

At that moment, the door to the office opened. Roy Hamilton, the duke's lieutenant, strode in. He was a prudent person, so he only reported to the duke when there was a major issue.

"What is it?" Duke Floyen asked.

Roy swallowed nervously. "A messenger from the emperor is here to see you. It seems like he wants you to visit the imperial palace."



After I picked out Rose's gift, I thought about what else I needed to buy. The escort knights continued to follow me, but I did my best to ignore them.

I needed cosmetics, colored ink, and paper... and oh! That, right before me—that looked nice as well!

I was glad I could shop comfortably now that Father wasn't with me. I sighed when I thought about his pendant. It was still tucked away in my drawer. When should I return it to him, anyway? I hope I don't get scolded for keeping it for so long without informing him.

As I mulled over my predicament, something caught my eye: a set of blue gemstone cufflinks with silver rims. I studied them. Wow, they looked so neat and pretty... they would be a suitable accessory for Father. Maybe he wouldn't be as mad if I returned his pendant along with those cufflinks. If I used their beauty as a bribe, I might be able to keep him happy.

I pointed at them without hesitation. "I'll be buying this."

The clerk placed the cufflinks in a wooden box and handed it to me. This should be enough, right?

At that moment, someone called out to me, saying, "Oh, who is this? If it isn't Lady Floyen!"

When I saw the person who greeted me, my expression hardened. Radian. A man who possessed a viper's tongue.

He usually led social gatherings. He was infamous for starting rumors, so I avoided him even before I had recalled my past life, which only emphasized just how notorious he was. And, to make matters even worse, he was also Mikhail's cousin.

"This is the first time I've seen you since your aunt's birthday banquet," he said.

Wasn't it common sense not to acknowledge your cousin's ex-girlfriend? Although I was displeased, I smiled and greeted him anyway. "Yes, it has been a long time, Esteemed Son of Droil."

"What do you mean by *Esteemed Son of Droil*? I'm disappointed that you're referring to me so formally. It's not the first time we've met, after all." He kissed the back of my hand and laughed eerily. "Please call me Radian, my lady. You're as beautiful as a daffodil."

Asking someone to call another by their first name and kissing the back of a lady's hand without permission was improper, even if the two involved had met in the past. I wanted to point this out but refrained from doing so because the last thing I needed was for him to start a bunch of rumors about me in retaliation.

It would also complicate things if he talked to Mikhail about me.

"I wish I could talk to you more, but there's somewhere I need to be," I said sternly, hurriedly removing my hand from his. "Please excuse me."

Radian laughed. "Why are you in such a hurry, my lady? It's as if you're running away from something—"

"I have a strict schedule," I said firmly.

Although my words probably made him bristle a bit, Radian laughed again. "Ah, I see," he hummed lightheartedly. "Well, it was nice to meet you. I—"

"Yes, it was nice meeting you as well. Goodbye."

I didn't want to waste any more time with him, so I cut him off before he could prolong the conversation again and turned around. The escort knights formed a barricade around me.

"This way, Lady Floyen," Geraldine said politely. I guess my knights managed to do their job at times like this. That was good.

I feigned a smile.

In the end, it probably didn't even matter if Radian started rumors about me because his reputation was just as bad as mine. Still, he had ruined my mood, so I decided to continue shopping some other time. It was fortunate that I was able to get away from him so quickly, otherwise he would've had too much to say to Mikhail about me.

I shuddered at the unpleasant sensation that lingered on the back of my hand, still fresh from his kiss, and rubbed it against the hem of my skirt. I hoped we would never meet again.



An unexpected visitor arrived at Marquess Hessen's townhouse before dinner: Radian Svel Droil.

"It's been a while, Mikhail," he drawled. Mikhail's expression twisted when he saw his cousin. He didn't get along with him, but that didn't deter Radian. "My legs are sore. Can I sit down?"

"Get ou-"

"Oh, so you want me to sit down? Thanks," Radian said. Mikhail had tried to order him to leave immediately, but he was one step ahead of him. Radian had cut him off before he could finish speaking, promptly sitting down on one of the chairs in the drawing room.

Mikhail frowned. "What do you want?" he asked wearily.

Radian laughed, looking by all means perfectly relaxed. "Now there, I came

with good news. Shouldn't you bring me some tea?"

"Spit it out and leave," Mikhail said coldly.

Radian wasn't intimidated by his cousin's tone. He shrugged and said, "I guess this attitude of yours is why Lady Floyen left you for her new lover."

When Radian mentioned the words 'new lover,' Mikhail's face twisted. "Nonsense. What are you talking about?"

Without a hint of concern, Radian pulled a smoking pipe out from the inside pocket of his coat. "Nonsense? Aren't you being too harsh to me? I haven't even explained what I had seen today." He grinned as he lit the pipe. "She was buying a set of cufflinks. I witnessed it with my own eyes."

Cufflinks? Mikhail's eyes widened. Cufflinks were usually given to family members or lovers. It was a way for women to demurely express their love and possessiveness.

No. It couldn't be.

Mikhail narrowed his eyes.

"Isn't this good news for you? You were worrying yourself sick wondering if she had faked that goodbye!" Radian smirked. Smoked puffed out of his mouth as he snickered.

Mikhail was extremely displeased by the unpleasant scent of tobacco and his cousin's vulgar countenance. "Get out if you're done talking," he spat. "I have nothing to say to you."

"I apologize if I've offended you in any way, but I wonder if my presence is truly the real cause of your displeasure," Radian said, a knowing smile upon his lips. Then, he stood up and left the room.

Mikhail frowned and clenched his fists. This was ridiculous. He couldn't help thinking about Jubelian and how she had obsessed over him these past few years. He had thought it strange of her to suddenly say goodbye without any regrets, but now it all made sense. Upon learning the truth, Mikhail felt justifiably angry.

She had a new man? He furrowed his brows and gritted his teeth. Prior to

their separation, he had desperately wished for her to become interested in someone new so she would stop bothering him, but now that it had actually happened, he was filled with fury.

Why did a woman like her make him so upset? As confusion ravaged his thoughts, a memory of Jubelian's beautiful face when she had first confessed to him came to mind.

"I like you, Mikhail."

The recollection flooded him with so much anger he punched the wall.

"Young master! Are you okay?" his servants called, running to him in surprise.

He stilled, wholly unresponsive. Distracted.

"I'm sorry for everything that's happened until now," her memory said. "I wish you happiness."

She had left him without a hint of regret, and the knowledge of that brought an unpleasant tinge to his chest. Mikhail ignored the pain and clenched his fists once more. She had acted as if he was the only person she'd ever love for the rest of her life, but now she was seeing someone else? Already?

His eyes gleamed.

"You will pay for deceiving me, Jubelian," he hissed.



I wanted to give the pendant and cufflinks to Father as soon as I came home, but he was absent. Would he be home late again, I wondered?

As if Merilyn had read my mind, she spoke up. "Master said he won't be home for the next few days because of special training sessions."

It wasn't uncommon for Father to leave the mansion for multiple days at a time, so I calmly went up to my room and placed the pendant and cufflinks in my drawer. I would just give them to him upon his return.

Afterwards, I took a bath and changed into comfortable clothes. Then, I opened the military tactics book that Father had given me. It was so entertaining that I quickly immersed myself in its contents.

The emperor's secret mission for Duke Floyen was a simple but laborious task.

"I haven't been able to sleep well after that rat snuck into the imperial family," the emperor began ambiguously referring to the assassination attempt that had once been made against him. "I want you, the man I trust the most, to take care of them."

The purpose of the mission was to eliminate the mastermind behind the work of the assassins. Since the only assassin that was captured committed suicide without leaving any evidence behind, they had no other option but to ambush another assassin for an interrogation.

Although it might've been appropriate for the emperor to give this order to a close and trusted friend, it wasn't a suitable request to ask of a duke and the hero of this empire. Nevertheless, Duke Floyen accepted the mission.

As soon as he left the emperor's office, the imperial guards erupted in resentment. "Are you really going to follow this command? If it's an ambush, we—"

They rambled about wanting to ambush the assassin in the duke's stead.

"You men have no need to become a chess piece like me," the duke said sternly. Although he was being considerate of his subordinates, the knights groaned at their superior's words.

Max, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, silently scoffed. The duke could get rid of that trash their nation called an emperor if he wanted to, but he was still following his orders. "I'm disappointed in you, Duke Floyen," Max said to himself, frowning.

In Max's eyes, the current emperor, Carlos, was a greedy and pathetic man who was no match for his master. However, it was obvious why this outstanding man, who he had once aspired to be, continued to endure the emperor's gall.

For his weakness. For his daughter.

As Max cynically contemplated this, a knight approached the duke. "I am here

to report that I have successfully completed my escort mission," he said.

Still bearing an expression of indifference, the duke asked, "What did Jubelian do today?"

"She went shopping. She looked very happy."

"I see." Duke Floyen smiled warmly at the news.

Max furrowed his brows. Why was his master like this? He used to think that his master was akin to him, but during times like these, he just couldn't comprehend him at all. When Jubelian inevitably gets married, she wouldn't be a part of the Floyen house anymore, so why did the duke devote so much to her? For the sake of the family name, it was a common practice to abandon useless children, but whenever the duke thought of his nuisance of a daughter, a soft spot would emerge in his otherwise impenetrable exterior.

When the emperor first noticed this weakness, he used it to exploit the duke.

"Sometimes, people become stronger to protect their weaknesses," Duke Floyen had said. What a load of crap. Max scoffed.

Then, his eyes gleamed with a newfound determination. Maybe he should check her out himself? He decided to pay a visit to the person who dragged his master down so much.

He headed over to the Floyen family mansion. It was quiet. Max was close to achieving transcendence, so it wasn't hard to break in, especially in the absence of the duke. No one noticed him climb over the wall, walk through the garden, and approach the main building.

Max surveyed the exterior and noticed a large window with a balcony. There it was.

He quietly climbed to the third floor using the building's jagged exterior. Then, he tested if the balcony's transparent glass door was locked, but it opened fairly easily once he pushed on it. The lace curtains fluttered behind it. Max smirked. The mansion was essentially defenseless. His master wouldn't be able to make any excuses if she ended up murdered or robbed.

When he entered the dark room, he could make out a woman's silhouette on

the bed. Max approached her silently. She looked weak.

Max thought she would resemble his tall and strong master, but she looked slender and frail. It was as if she could break at any moment. She wouldn't be able to learn swordsmanship with a body like that, and that implied his master had no plans of making her his successor. So... why on earth was the duke so obsessed with her?

Although Max couldn't comprehend his master's intentions, an idea suddenly occurred to him. The corner of his lips quirked up.

What would his master do if she disappeared, he wondered?

He silently observed Jubelian, his gaze rife with bloodthirst. Even in the dark, he could see the woman's slender neck; it looked like it could easily snap beneath his grip.

At that moment, a voice broke the silence. "I don't know who you are, but I think you've come to the wrong house."

Max reeled back in surprise. Jubelian had spoken, and so casually, too! She was awake this whole time?

Usually, a person's reaction in a circumstance like this would be to beg for mercy or scream in fear, but for some reason, she was behaving rather strangely. "This is Duke Floyen's mansion," she said lazily.

What was wrong with her? Max furrowed his brows, a foreign feeling he had never encountered before washing over him. Countless people venerated him and bowed to him in admiration. A few even dared to patronize him, but he never met anyone this laid-back and carefree.

Duke Floyen would certainly be helpful at a time like this, but he wasn't in the mansion tonight. Max supposed she must've been bluffing to conceal her fear.

"I've come to the right house," Max said bluntly. He smirked as he imagined her dropping to her knees and begging for her life, but her reaction continued to stupefy him instead.

"Really? How about changing your mind now?" She rose up into a sitting position. "I think you'll regret coming here."

The moonlight filtered through the window, outlining her ethereal face. Although she looked tired, her expression seemed to harmonize with her peculiar, languid aura. It was no wonder she was the subject of envy amongst the empire's young women.

Even so, Max wasn't amused. No matter how much he thought about it, there was nothing useful about her, except for her outstanding appearance. She was nothing special.

When the woman's mouth widened with laughter, he found himself staring at her. Her red lips parted to say some more. "I still have a year left before I die," she drawled, her tone impossibly dry. It didn't match her humorous appearance.

It seemed like she was talking to herself, but Max could clearly hear the confidence in her voice. Did she simply fail to comprehend the situation? Her casual demeanor as she fearlessly stretched out before him annoyed him. He frowned at the unpleasantness of it all, then reminded himself once more that she had to be bluffing.

When he remembered the faces of others who had dared to act as arrogantly toward him, his handsome face contorted with bloodlust. This act of hers was destined to collapse the moment her life was truly threatened. Max made his mind up to frighten this foolish woman, but she just reached over and lit a candlestick that had been sitting upon the bedside table.

How dare she? He tried to extinguish the candle and knock the woman down, but he paused at the sight of her face, now brightly illuminated by the candle's glow. She possessed the delicate figure of a doll, but it was her terribly unconventional gaze that captured the full extent of his attention.

"You are..." Max almost said, unconsciously stepping forward. He recognized her.

At that same moment, her face came to life, lighting up with equal recognition. "Oh, you are Father's disciple," she said with a smile.

Although Max had made up his mind to scare her, all thoughts of doing so fled as soon as her smiling face came into view.

"Oh, um... I was looking for the thing you're buying right now," he remembered her saying.

She was the woman who had managed to annoy him during back at that armor shop.



I woke up feeling very thirsty. Judging by my sore throat, I probably had a cold. I figured I'd take some medicine in the morning, but as I opened my eyes to consider grabbing a drink of water, I saw something nearby.

What was that? A black shadow loomed over me. Was I having a nightmare?

A gust of chilly air came through the open window of the balcony, proving my supposition otherwise. There were only two explanations for a situation like this: this man was either a thief or... an assassin.

With this in mind, I pondered over who might've sent him here, but there were too many people I could've chosen from. After all, I was a villainess.

"Why did you behave like that, past me?" I asked myself, reproachful. Then, I realized something. In novels, there existed an unspoken rule that made it impossible for the protagonists, supporting characters, and villains to die at the beginning of the story. In other words, my life as the main villainess wasn't in danger until the princess's coming-of-age ceremony.

I appeared in many chapters of the novel... maybe this was something that was supposed to happen to me. I shouldn't be scared. Calming away my anxious thoughts, I stared at the suspicious shadow looming over me.

I felt like I had seen him somewhere before. Who was this guy? Since he broke in and entered my house at night, he probably wasn't anyone reputable. Although I was still largely uncertain about everything, I knew for sure that he couldn't be sane, at least. If he was a normal person, he wouldn't have aimed for Duke Floyen's mansion given that the duke was the best swordsman in the empire.

"I don't know who you are, but I think you've come to the wrong house," I eventually said. "This is Duke Floyen's house."

"I've come to the right place," the man replied. He was either insane or really bold.

"Really? How about changing your mind now? I think you'll regret coming here." I tried to persuade him to leave out of pity, but the man stayed silent.

"I still have a year left before I die," I mumbled to myself. Of course, I had no intention of dying that soon because I still had the time to improve my reputation, and I didn't plan on missing a single opportunity to do so.

I decided to light the candle on my bedside table to inform the knights standing guard at my door that someone had broken into my room. I kept my eye on the man while picking up a match and wondered what he was thinking. When the candle caught on fire, my surroundings lit up as well, revealing the man's black hair, pale skin, and inordinately elegant appearance. His was a face that was impossible to forget.

"Oh, you are Father's disciple," I said. Maybe he did come to the right place, after all. Thank God. The fact that the intruder was neither a thief or an assassin relieved me greatly.

Although I tried to convince myself that I wasn't going to die at this point in the novel, I had actually been very scared. I was just putting up a front to reassure myself of my safety. Additionally, this encounter had taught me a very important lesson: I needed to make sure to lock the windows and doors from now on.

I sat down on my bed as the adrenaline left my system and left my legs weak. Father's disciple, who had been staring at me blankly for a while, suddenly looked at the candle fiercely.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Wow. I was the daughter of Duke Floyen. How dare he treat me like this? If I were any other noble, he would've been sentenced to death by now. Although I was letting him treat me this way for now, I figured it would be better to teach him a lesson moving forward.

"Excuse me," I said. "Why are you talking to me like that?"

He looked at me coldly. "Because it makes sense to."

In addition to being extremely arrogant, his manner of speech resembled Father. The difference, however, was that Father never took it that far. It had been said that the pupil is meant to surpass their master, but this wasn't what that proverb meant.

Out of equal parts relief and fatigue, I found myself unable to stop smiling regardless. "So, what's your name again?" I asked.

Instead of answering my question, he glared at me. Somewhat embarrassed, I tried to explain why I was asking. "Oh, it's not that I forgot your name on purpose—"

Suddenly, there came a knock on the door. "Is something the matter, Lady Floyen?" a knight asked.

Although I was reassured by the knight's presence, that reassurance fled as soon as the tip of a sword flew to hover over my neck.

I stared at the culprit, Father's disciple. Was he frightened? No, he looked to merciless for that... no sign of surprise lingered in his scarlet eyes, only fierceness. I watched him, trying to reason as to why he started threatening me.

Oh. He wanted me to act. Well, I was already living the life of a villainess, so this felt like a rather simple request.

"Ah, I just had a nightmare, so I decided to light my candle for a bit," I explained. It seemed like a good enough excuse, but Geraldine questioned me once more, sincere in tone.

"Really? Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I couldn't go back to sleep, so I'm reading a book." I felt as though I was going to pass out again, but I was afraid that Father's disciple was going to act rashly if I told the truth.

"Sleeping late is bad for your health. Go back to bed as soon as you can," Geraldine said.

It was fitting that he gave me advice like that at a time like this. "Yes, thank you for your concern.

I couldn't hear anything by the door after that. The knights had gone back to

their posts, it seemed, but did they really leave? Although I wasn't sure, that didn't change the pressing problem I was yet undergoing. Father's disciple was still watching me with his sword pressed against my neck.

"I did what you wanted, so could you move your sword now?" I asked quietly.

His expression twisted. "What did you just say?" he asked sternly.

When he leveled me with anger, I frowned. "I don't know why you're upset when you're the one in the wrong."

"Speak to me politely," he said icily.

I didn't understand why he wanted me to do that. It didn't help that I was getting more and more sleepy, but I managed to keep my eyes open. "If you want me to talk to you politely, you should have—" I tried to snap back at him but I just ended up yawning before I could finish my sentence. My embarrassment roused my senses, making me forget my fatigue for a moment.

Oh, I just made an unseemly display.

He suddenly removed his sword from my neck, but he didn't stop staring at me. "What are you doing?" he asked.

I probably looked ugly when I yawned, but he was looking at me as if he had seen something truly strange. In order to avoid upsetting him again, I decided to speak very politely, as if I were a preschool teacher soothing a whining child.

"I haven't been able to sleep because of you, so I'm tired," I explained carefully. "Don't you have to go back home as well?"

The man continued to silently stare, so I wondered if he was going to ignore my question again. Then he said, "I don't have a home."

I looked at him with surprise. His physical appearance was so refined that he could've passed off as a prince. Well, okay, maybe that was a bit of a stretch.

Due to the appearance-based nature of aristocratic society, it was unheard of to go outside without wearing luxurious clothes. The man in front of me, however, only wore a simple white shirt and black pants. Although he carried a long sword instead of a claymore today, it was unpolished. He seemed more like a wandering swordsman or mercenary than a knight or prince.

He had also been wearing a hooded cloak before. Considering his current and previous attire, he had to be...

"Are you a wanderer?"

He nodded, his expression unpleasant.

I was right. He must've been a wandering swordsman or mercenary who usually frequented inns. Judging by his simple clothes and lack of belongings... he was probably kicked out because he couldn't pay. I guess he came here because he had nowhere else to go. Why today of all days, though?

Now that I thought about it, he didn't receive an official welcome when he visited Father a few days ago. The servants didn't attend to him either, so he probably wasn't an official guest. That was probably why he didn't come through the front door, but through my window instead.

I sighed, displeased by Father's absence at a time like this. I guess it couldn't be helped, though. I wasn't a nice person by nature, but I wasn't so coldhearted as to ignore someone who didn't have a home to go back to. After renting so many one-bedroom apartments in my past life, I knew how sad it was not to have a permanent place to rest. I regarded him with pity.

"If you don't have a place to go tonight, you can stay in my room for a while," I offered.

His eyes widened. "What?"

For some reason, his shock made me feel a little proud. "You don't have to thank me. Just pay me back when you become successful in the future."

He looked incredibly confused. I didn't blame him for it. Not many people would display such kindness.

"I'm going to go back to sleep," I said, content that the situation had sorted itself out. "You should go to sleep, too. Okay?" I laid back down, but suddenly felt a gust of cold air ghosted through the open window. "Hey, could you close the window?" I asked him.

"Why should I?" he responded arrogantly. He folded his arms and looked down at me haughtily.

What did Father even teach this guy? Obviously not some manners.

I begrudgingly sat back up again, then noticed his thin clothes. He was troublesome indeed, but it couldn't be helped, so I closed the window myself. Then, I grabbed a blanket. The entire time, he hadn't budged, standing there with an arrogant arch in his back.

"It gets cold at night because we're in-between seasons," I reminded him, handing him the blanket I acquired.

He just scrutinized me without accepting my offer. Seriously? He couldn't even do something like this on his own? I felt like I was caring for a pet. Although I wanted to say something, I didn't even have the energy to argue with him anymore. I stood on my tiptoes and placed the blanket over his shoulders myself. The look in his red eyes seemed to inquire as to what I was doing, but I didn't have it in me to explain myself.

"Goodnight," I said, going back to bed. Then, I immediately fell back asleep.



She really fell asleep. Max furrowed his brows and gazed at the woman lying in repose before him.

What kind of person was she?

He had met many people in his life, but no one had treated him like this. They either trembled in fear or tried to hide their fear behind flattery. Their fear was the only thing they shared in common. However, his master's daughter wasn't like either of those things. He recalled the first time they met.

"Hey, can you hear me?" she had asked.

This time, she had been relaxed the entirety of their discussion and had even fallen asleep in front of him. Not even the duke, as strong as he was, had shown such a defenseless state toward his disciple. Max had no choice but to marvel at her.

This was annoying. Her cavalier attitude and impolite speech bothered him. Upon remembering his top priority, which was to deal with the source of his annoyance, Max reached toward her neck with narrowed eyes. Without

realizing it, however, his hand froze in place, his fingertips hovering over her lips. Gently, he brushed against them, but she didn't stir, sleeping soundly.

She was so dull. Max frowned and combed a few strands of her hair away so they wouldn't obscure her face. She was so troublesome that he was actually starting to get tired, too...

When he became aware of this, his expression hardened. He was getting tired? After witnessing numerous deaths out on the battlefield, he had become cautious, weary. He never let himself relax, but now he was actually growing drowsy. His eyelids were feeling heavier and heavier. He blinked, trying to stay alert, but exhaustion was soon swallowing him whole.

"I can't fall asleep here," he tried to tell himself, but his determination to observe the woman before him was beginning to dwindle in its strength. Eventually, he had to admit defeat. "I'll just... rest for a little bit..."

Max blew out the candle and curled up at the foot of Jubelian's bed. The warm blanket covered him completely, cradling him into further drowsiness. When he closed his eyes, he felt comforted.

It was a sensation that he hadn't felt since his mother had passed away.



A vicious dragon was ravaging the empire. It was like a natural disaster had swallowed the empire in its entirety, inflicting harm even when barriers had been set up and people were being evacuated.

I quietly hid at home when the dragon began attacking our mansion. It spotted me, then began to approach with its nostrils flared. Before it was too late, Father appeared to fight it.

"How dare you aim for my daughter," he said. "I won't let you go!"

Although it was clearly a dream, I felt happy when I woke up. Dragons, huh? It seemed like a lucky dream. For some reason, I felt like today would be a good day.

Until I saw the man sleeping near the foot of my bed, that is.

Why did he have to fall asleep here out of all the places? Did he just like my

bed or something? I sighed, observing his face. Now that his warlike eyes were closed, he looked docile. Despite his bad manners, he was a handsome guy.

Suddenly, I became concerned about the fact that someone might see him in my room. Perhaps they would assume that the vicious Lady Floyen had kidnapped and imprisoned a handsome man for her wicked schemes. While it was true he was much more attractive than Mikhail, I wasn't very fond of the situation at hand. He needed to leave before someone misunderstood.

The maids wouldn't come into my room without my permission, but I still didn't want to risk it. I locked the latch on my door and shook his shoulder, trying to wake him up.

"Hey—huh?" The man pushed me so hard I ended up flopping onto the floor. I was lucky it was carpeted, otherwise, I could've hurt my back.

A moment later, he loomed over me. His eyes shone brightly. "What are you doing?" he asked, stealing the words right out of my mouth.



Max hadn't felt such warmth and comfort in a long time. He wanted to sleep like this forever, but when he realized that someone was approaching him, goosebumps prickled his skin. After surviving many battles, his body had become extremely sensitive to changes in his environment.

Even before he had fully awakened, Max pushed the person who had briefly touched him away. He climbed over their body, hands flying instinctively to wrap around their neck. That's when he saw a pair of blue eyes staring back at him. They were akin to periwinkles floating atop a serene lake, and there could only be one woman with eyes like that.

Oh. He remembered now.

When his senses gradually began to calm, so did his sense of reason. Then, he realized what he had done. "I've become insane," he silently berated himself.

He had originally planned to leave after resting for a while, but somehow, he had lost control of himself, falling into a deep slumber. He couldn't find any trace of the drowsiness that had dominated his body, but the aftermath impacted him greatly.

He couldn't believe he let his guard down in front of her. He reprimanded himself, then noticed that Jubelian was watching him.

She wasn't even agitated... his actions could've been fatal, but she didn't look the slightest bit frightened.

"What are you doing?" he spat out, attempting to scare her, but things didn't go as planned.

Against all reason, she broke out into a smile. The corners of her eyes creased and her pink lips parted to reveal pearly teeth. Her cheeks brightened to complement her beautiful complexion, reminding him of a flower in full bloom.

He tried to look away, but some irrefusable force kept him from doing so. For a moment, he forgot how to think. All he could do was stare.



Strange Things Happening

I stared at Father's disciple. Why was he so ungrateful? I had given him a place to sleep and I woke him up on time, but he was still speaking to me in the same rude and impolite way he did last night. He reminded me of someone in my previous life who refused to open up to me even though I had treated him very nicely.

Seriously, why was he so obstinate? He gave off such a familiar feeling... for a moment, I began to reminisce about who he reminded me of, but then I regained my senses. That wasn't important right now. I had to ask this guy why he was speaking to me so rudely.

"What are you looking at?" he asked aggressively.

I suddenly forgot what I was going to say and burst out laughing.

"Why are you laughing?"

He was clearly displeased, but I couldn't stop myself. He and that one little guy from my past life were so much alike.

He glared at me. "Don't laugh," he said fiercely.

I felt bad about laughing at him for what must've seemed like no reason, but it was difficult to control myself after seeing the expressions he made. Yes, just as I had thought: he resembled the aggressive little black kitty I often saw by my house.

He frowned, unhappy with the smile on my face. "Stop laughing," he commanded once more.

It was difficult to control myself, especially since we weren't in any dire situations anymore. Then, I heard Merilyn's voice outside the door. "Have you awakened, Lady Floyen?"

I immediately stopped laughing and calmed. I needed to keep myself together. First, I had to do something about the man on top of me.

"Hey, can you move?" I asked. He frowned at my request but stood up anyway. "You have to help me up, too," I said. I extended my hands out to him, but he glared at me and turned around, leaving me no choice but to get up

myself. I frowned and dusted off my clothes.

Seriously, what was the matter with this guy? With his stubbornness, he wasn't going to listen to my plan.

I supposed it couldn't be helped. Rather recklessly, I grabbed his hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Surely enough, he didn't budge when I tried to tug him away. I had no choice but to trick him.

"Come here. I have something to show you," I lied.

He frowned but didn't put up a fight when I dragged him into my dressing room, which was connected to my bedroom. It should prove safe for him in here.

I began to open my closet door. "If you don't want there to be any misunderstandings, stay here and be quiet."

"Misunderstandings?"

"You know, something like how we *spent the night* together. Well, we sort of did, but I mean it in a different way."

"A different way?" he asked with curiosity.

I was surprised that I had to explain this to him, but I tried to do so in a refined way. "Like how animals mate," I explained tactfully.

"What?! What kind of—" he yelled, but I quickly covered his mouth with a hand. How could he raise his voice like that when Merilyn could hear? I couldn't believe how careless he was.

When it seemed like he was calming down, I removed my hand.

"You don't want anyone to think that, right? Great," I said. "Me neither."

His handsome face twisted at my earnest statement. Alright, he was listening to me now. I smiled. "I'm just asking you to cooperate since you've been staying in my room."

The man stared at me then nodded slowly. I felt somewhat dispirited since this rebellious guy suddenly turned obedient. "How nice it is now that you're listening to me," I muttered unconsciously

I saw him frown again. "You—" He tried to say something, but I hurriedly closed the closet door before he could finish.

"Is everything okay, Lady Floyen? Why is the door locked?" Merilyn asked.

As soon as I heard her, I rushed to my bedroom door and unlocked it. I could've gotten into big trouble if I didn't. Sighing in relief, I opened the door, revealing Merilyn standing behind it. She regarded me with puzzled eyes.

"Did something happen?" she asked, worried. "You've never locked your door before..."

"Oh, um..." I scrambled to make up an excuse. "...I was afraid that someone might break in."

"Huh?" Merilyn asked, surprised. Then, she smiled. "My lady, there exists no such person in the world who would try to break into Duke Floyen's house! If there did, they'd be out of their mind. It's a well-known fact that neither assassins nor thieves would ever dare to come near the mansion."

I sighed. While I was free from assassins and thieves, there was definitely an insane guy in my closet at the moment. Merilyn was always pretty careless about such possibilities.

I couldn't tell her about the intruder hiding in my closet, so I hurriedly added, "We can never be too sure, especially since Father isn't here."

Merilyn's expression hardened at my words as if she suddenly realized the danger we could be in. She took my hands into her own. "Lady Floyen," she said with a somber expression, "Master will return home safely."

"Yes, I know," I answered. Although I was confused as to why she was suddenly saying this, I agreed with her. After all, how would others return to their homes safely if the strongest swordsman in the empire could not?

Merilyn still watched me with worry. "It's a wonderful day, my lady. How about taking a walk?" she suggested.

Again, I didn't understand why she would suggest such a thing. However, if this were any other day, I would've joyfully agreed, but I couldn't because of Father's disciple. I had no choice but to lie to her. I looked down. "No, I'm not

feeling well today," I said.

Technically, this wasn't a complete lie since I felt a little sick from the cold air last night. Also, I had gotten a bit sore after Father's disciple pinned me to the floor earlier.

"Really? What's wrong?" Merilyn asked.

"Oh, I'm just feeling a bit under the weather today. That's all," I reassured her. I deliberately remained vague about my symptoms so I could use them as an excuse not to go outside, but Merilyn wasn't just going to let it slide.

"Shall I call for Dr. Allen?"

"No, you don't have to do that," I said.

She shook her head seriously and said, "Even the smallest of things shouldn't be overlooked. You are the only heir to the Floyen family."

"It's really not that big of a deal, though."

She looked dissatisfied. "You must remember that you're the only one who can lead the family during the master's absence, my lady."

I inhaled sharply at her burdensome reminder. I had no intention of leading the family whatsoever...

"As I thought, I can't just let this slide," she sighed. "I will call Dr. Allen, after all."

A thought suddenly occurred to me. Even if this ruined my image any further than it already was, I had no choice but to make this excuse. "It's really not a big deal," I said. "Truthfully, it's actually because... I fell out of bed."

Merilyn widened her eyes. "You fell out of bed?"

She was probably surprised because this had never happened to me before. I nodded. "Yes, but it doesn't hurt that much because I fell on the carpet. My back just aches a little."

I thought this was a pretty good excuse considering that I had indeed fallen on the carpet, albeit not of my own accord...

"Oh, then I will just bring some medicine for muscle pain," Merilyn said.

I nodded, then wondered what time it was. I was hungry, but the clock indicated that it was just before eleven in the morning, which was too late for breakfast yet too early for lunch. If I didn't have someone waiting in my closet, I would've gone downstairs and wolfed down a filling brunch.

"Merilyn, could you bring me some sandwiches as well? More than you usually would, please."

"Of course, my lady. Is there anything else that you need?"

"I didn't sleep much because I was reading late into the night. I'm feeling a little cranky, so please don't enter my room without permission," I added. It was actually Father's disciple who was feeling cranky, but this request probably wasn't strange, considering Jubelian's past personality.

"I will do as directed."

As soon as Merilyn left, I hurriedly focused back on my closet. When I had pushed the man inside, I had forgotten that some of the dresses I had in there were made out of fabrics that wrinkled easily. I just hoped he didn't move around too much.

Opening the door, I checked over my clothes first and thankfully found that they looked perfectly find. Then, looked down and spotted Father's disciple crouching in a really uncomfortable position. I felt rather proud of him.

"Can I come out now?" he bluntly asked me.

"No, I'm just checking on you. I asked my maid for something, so you'll have to wait a little bit longer."

The man's expression twisted with further dissatisfaction. "How annoying," he spat. Despite his glower, he still looked handsome.

Thinking that didn't mean I had feelings for him, though. I occasionally admired his appearance, but my appreciation held no deeper meaning; it was akin to how an art enthusiast would admire a painting that pleases them. More than anything else, however, I refused to get involved with people who only looked good on the outside and proved far less beautiful within.

"What are you looking at?" he asked me. It seemed to me that his manner of

speech defaulted on disrespect and incivility. Because I was a noble lady, this was enough of an offense to press charges, but I had given up on teaching him manners last night. I wasn't even angry at him anymore, not after seeing how much he acts like a wild animal. It would've been a waste to pick a fight with him knowing he would only be staying for a little while. I shouldn't have to exhaust myself on immature people.

With this in mind, I asked him something that I had been curious about.

"How long do you plan on staying here?"

Although I was doing him a favor, I couldn't keep him here forever. I would make a decision on how to proceed based on what he planned to do. Instead of answering me, however, the man looked surprised.

I hoped he didn't plan on staying until Father returned. I didn't know when that would be.

My thoughts were beginning to get more and more complicated when he finally replied. "I intend to leave... today," he said, hesitating a little. The expression on his face didn't look too good either, which made me feel a little bad.

Did it sound like I was trying to kick him out? Out of concern, I asked, "Do you have a place you can go?"

He stared coldly. "Does it look like I don't have a place to go?"

Getting upset over a sensitive topic was a natural reaction. And, well, he had no reason to come here if he had a place to go in the first place. Nor would he have worn such simple clothing.

"It's okay to be honest with me," I said with a sigh.

He frowned. "What nonsense are you spouting?"

Even though I was trying my best to be considerate, he was still acting absurd. What was causing him to be so rude? My frustrations absorbed me for a while, but soon I began to suspect the cause of his unhappiness. If he was kicked out yesterday, he probably skipped dinner and didn't have anything to eat since then.

I could suddenly empathize with him a little better. People were prone to easier irritation when they were hungry and homeless. I couldn't help but pity him.

"Let's have brunch together later," I said softly.

He stared at me stonily. "What?"

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

"Our chef is pretty skilled, so you can expect delicious food," I said as I closed the closet doors again.



Eat together?

As he sat quietly within the closet, Max replayed the woman's words in his mind, bearing an odd expression all the while.

Wait, why was he even listening to her?

Suddenly plagued by doubts, he came to his senses and became engulfed in anger. He should just break the doors open and leave—

At that moment, he sensed someone's approach. Judging by the rhythm of their feet, it was the maid who had visited previously. Frankly, Max was irritated; he felt the impulse to break the closet doors down and ruin the woman's plans to keep him out of sight, but upon remembering her expression when she had offered to eat together, he paused, mollified.

He was going to wait for just a little longer.

This was the first time he had ever decided to patiently wait for someone else.

"I brought some medicine and sandwiches, Lady Floyen."

"Thank you, Merilyn. Just a second."

"Yes, my lady."

"Could you come over here and apply the medicine to my back and my neck?"

Max had expected to get out of this stuffy closet soon, but Jubelian was taking

her sweet time. His patience had been difficult to muster, but it was quickly running out. He gritted his teeth in anger. She had told him it would only take a second. What in the world was she doing?

Max clenched his fists, ready to break open the closet doors, but then he remembered what the woman had said once again: "Let's have brunch together later."

Strangely enough, he wasn't able to succumb to his fury whenever her laughing face came to mind.

Why was he...

Now that he thought about it, many things were strange. He hadn't thought about leaving until she had asked, and his heart had tingled when she had offered for them to eat together. Now, he found himself unable to defy her wishes. Max furrowed his brows and contemplated his behavior.

Suddenly, his musings were interrupted by a scream coming from the very woman who had bothered him this entire time.

"Ah!"

Although he couldn't see her, he became alert. Was there an ambush? What happened? All sorts of scenarios crossed his mind. Only two people should have been in the room, but there was a possibility that an adept assassin had hid somewhere.

She had even gone to sleep without locking her windows... from Max's perspective, she was defenseless. It wouldn't be strange to discover she had been attacked.

He needed to see what was happening. He reached out to push open the closet doors, but then he froze.

Why did he even care?

He frowned at himself for a moment, but when he heard another groan outside, he backtracked. He was only helping her because she was of use in the future... that was all. Max tried to rationalize his incomprehensible behavior and reached out again. He stiffened when he heard the woman's voice for the third

time.

"It's a little further down, Merilyn."

"Right here, Lady Floyen?"

"Yes," she gasped.

After listening to their conversation, Max finally figured the situation out. His face scrunched up. What on earth was he doing? He couldn't believe he had been swayed by a woman like that... an overwhelming sense of shame wove through him.

"I think it'd be better to get some pain medicine from Dr. Allen, my lady," Merilyn said.

"It's okay. I'll get better now that you put some medicine on me."

Max frowned. She was good at putting on an act, especially considering she hadn't even been injured. His expression hardened further when Merilyn spoke again.

"It's only natural for your back to feel sore. There are some bruises under your shoulder blades."

Bruises? What kind of...

"Oh, I thought it'd be okay because I just fell on the carpet... I didn't know this would happen," Jubelian replied casually.

It was then that Max remembered shoving her to the floor this morning. Damn it. It was natural for the weak to be the first to perish, so he usually didn't care if others were hurt, but the moment he learned that she had been injured because of him, he felt a little sick to the stomach.

"Anyway, I feel better than before. Thank you," she continued.

"You're welcome."

"Could you bring dinner to my room later as well?"

"Yes, my lady. Please rest."

When the maid left the room, Max obediently stayed put in the closet and eagerly watched the door. A few minutes later, he sensed the woman's light

and careful gait nearing him.

She's here, his anticipation told him, and surely enough, the closet door opened, putting her into view.

"You can come out now," the enchanting woman said. Her surroundings were bright, encasing her in a ring of light. It was as if she had been enveloped in a halo.

"Ah..." Max opened his mouth unconsciously, then closed it. He wanted to ask her if she was okay but he found himself unable to do so.

She laughed brightly, like a bellflower in the breeze. "As promised, we'll eat now."

If Max had been rational, he would've refused her offer since he usually didn't have an appetite and he didn't accept food from strangers. He didn't feel very rational right now, though. Instead, he felt strangely hungry.

"Come this way," she said. Max felt his heart tingle once more when she gestured at him with her hands to usher him.

Again, he tried to explain his confusing actions. I'm only doing this because I'm hungry, he tried to tell himself.

He followed her to a small table in her room where he could see some sandwiches arranged in a way that eased their consumption. He frowned at them when he took a closer look.

Was this what he thought it was? Max wanted to get angry because the sandwich contained an ingredient he hated, but he found himself unable to do so when he saw Jubelian's face.

"Here you go," she offered. Max couldn't refuse when she handed a sandwich over. "Try it," she said. "Our chef is very skilled."

At her request, he took a bite and tasted the very thing that made him tense right up. It was indeed what he thought it was.

The sandwich was full of cucumbers. It was honestly terrible.

"How is it?" Jubelian asked.

Truthfully, Max didn't even know what it tasted like because he had swallowed the sandwich whole. Nevertheless, he continued forcing more into his mouth.

Why was he doing this?

She smiled. "Do you not like it?"

He hated it, but instead of answering truthfully, Max slowly shook his head and met the woman's smiling face. It made his heart give that odd tingle again.

"I was worried because I have strange tastes, but I'm glad you like it as well," she said as she bit into a sandwich.

Max looked at Jubelian. Then, he looked at the cucumber sandwiches he never would've spared a glance at upon any other occasion. Was it that good to her? He took another bite, savoring it this time. The cucumber's bland flavor coupled with its peculiar smell reignited his dislike for the vegetable, but as he continued to eat, he slowly got used to the taste.

Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought it was.



After eating brunch with Father's disciple, I started getting a bit sleepy, but I didn't want to take a nap while he was in the room. Anyway, it wasn't like I was going to pass out.

I decided to read a book to stay focused, but my eyes kept fluttering shut. What should I do? I was so tired. My vision gradually started blurring, but I managed to stay awake for a little longer.

"Hey," Father's disciple suddenly said.

I flinched at his voice and unconsciously yawned. I really needed to control myself right now. Out of embarrassment, I covered my mouth with both hands and barely suppressed another yawn. Even so, I couldn't stop tears from forming in my eyes.

At least my mouth didn't show this time. I squeezed my eyes shut at this thought and the tears I tried to hold back ran down my face.

Ugh. Why did I always do this when I yawned? I tried to wipe the tears away,

but I stopped when I caught Father's disciple looming over me.

Huh? When did he get so close? I was staring back at him when something soft touched my eyes.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

My eyes widened when I realized that he had wet his sleeves with my tears. His shirt was surprisingly soft to the touch, perhaps even softer than my handkerchief, which was made out of the finest cotton in the empire. This was the highest-grade fabric I've ever felt. Wasn't he kicked out because he didn't have any money?

Suddenly, I became filled with doubt, wondering if I had guessed incorrectly about his identity. Then, a thought occurred to me: a person doesn't need to be wealthy to wear high-quality clothes. Some people save up to buy expensive things to feel better about themselves even if they normally don't have much money to spend. Father's disciple was probably like that.

At that moment, he frowned and repeated himself. "I asked why you were crying."

"Oh... it's nothing. You don't have to worry about it."

"Tell me now."

It was honestly a little embarrassing. I didn't want to tell him that yawning made me cry.

"Just because," I replied vaguely. Then, I quickly changed the topic. "By the way, you're really fast. I was startled when you suddenly appeared in front of me."

Although I wanted to change the subject, I was truly surprised. He appeared before me in a flash.

He laughed. "You were surprised by that? How pitiful." It seemed like arrogance was this man's default personality, seeing as he was mocking me.

"You must be a really good swordsman," I said, a hint of sarcasm in my voice. "Like the Imperial Palace knights."

"I am much stronger than them," he replied with a frown. His personality

clearly fit his status as Father's disciple, but even though Father could be cold and inconsiderate, he wasn't this arrogant.

Why was this guy like this? I was silently lamenting his attitude when I noticed him staring at me again.

"So, why were you crying?"

His persistence was a little annoying, so I felt the urge to tell him the truth and get it over with, but before I could, I heard a knock on the door. "It's Derrick, Lady Floyen," said a voice.

I sighed when I heard. If it were a maid, I would have dismissed her, but I couldn't do that to Derrick because he wouldn't have come up to see me for nothing.

I stood up. In this mansion, male servants only attended to Father while female servants only attended to me. Since Derrick personally came to my room, something must've happened.

"If you don't mind, can you go in there again?" I asked Father's disciple as I pointed at my closet.

Although he wore an unpleasant expression, he obediently complied with my request. At least he was listening to me now. After he successfully hid himself once more, I approached my bedroom door and opened it.

"Hello, Derrick," I greeted. "Did you need something?"

"A messenger just arrived from Marquis Crocus' family. He wants to convey a message from Ronald, the eldest son of Marquis Crocus, to you, Lady Floyen."

The Crocus family was prestigious, so the message probably dealt with an important matter. This situation called for me to go downstairs to meet the messenger himself, but I didn't want to leave Father's disciple alone in my room. What if one of my maids were to come in and spot him while I was downstairs? I couldn't let that happen.

I coughed deliberately and replied, "Unfortunately, I am not feeling well, so it will be difficult for me to go downstairs. Could you receive the message in my stead?"

Derrick regarded me worriedly and said, "Of course, my lady. Please rest."

When he left, I glanced at my closet and sighed in relief. Hopefully Father's disciple decided to stop asking me about my tears.

Max tried not to think about it, but the image of the woman's big eyes filling up with tears plagued his mind. Why was she crying?

Unbeknownst to Jubelian, he still worried about this as he sat in her closet.

What had been so sad that she even had to compose herself by covering her mouth with both hands? He suddenly remembered something that he had heard from his close entourage a while ago.

"I heard that Lady Floyen really liked Sir Mikhail. People say that she chased him around without caring about her reputation... in some ways, it's fortunate that they separated."

Was she crying because she couldn't forget about her ex-boyfriend? Max clenched his fists.

Not long after I sent him downstairs, Derrick came to visit me once more. "It's Derrick again, Lady Floyen," he announced.

When I opened the door, I saw him smiling. "Should I be expecting good news?" I asked.

He straightened himself up. "My lady, the esteemed son of Marquis Crocus sent a message about wanting to be your partner for Count Arlo's banquet."

I widened my eyes. No way. Why would such an esteemed person...?

Marquis Crocus's son was considered to be the most suitable successor for the foreign ministry. It felt surreal that such a person was asking to be my partner.

"What is your response, my lady?"

I pondered over this, but it was difficult to come up with a decision on the spot. At that moment, a strange sound came from my dressing room.

No, it couldn't be...

I trembled a little and felt the blood rush from my face. Derrick looked at me with a serious expression. "Did you hear that? A sound came from your dressing room, my lady."

"No, I didn't," I responded calmly. "What do you mean?"

Derrick gave me a wary look. "I clearly heard something... maybe it was a rat?"

I chuckled breathlessly. "That's impossible," I replied smoothly. "However, I'm still not feeling well, so could I rest for now? As for the reply... let the messenger know that I will send one by letter soon."

"Of course, Lady Floyen. Please rest well." Derrick bowed his head slightly and left without another word, as if he didn't want to irritate me.

I sighed in relief. I had really thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest this time.

I went back to my closet and opened its doors to find Father's disciple sitting with a blank expression. "Excuse me. Did you just make that noise?" I asked.

He stared at me and asked, "Are you going to accept his invitation?"

Why was he curious about something like that? Not only was it a strange thing to inquire about, but it wasn't something I could answer right away.

"I'm thinking about it," I said. The esteemed son of Marquis Crocus was clearly qualified to become my partner. His appearance was outstanding and comparable to that of Mikhail's. He was also very popular due to his excellent social skills.

The problem was... I had no idea why such an outstanding individual would want to be my partner.

I sighed. Father's disciple pulled a face. "You should think about it carefully. Appearances aren't everything," he advised.

I shot him a dumbfounded look. This man had a difficult personality and meager social skills to boot; his only asset was his remarkable appearance, but for him to say that... I couldn't believe it.

I was still staring at him in shock when he turned towards me and asked, "What are you looking at?"

I frowned. "You didn't answer my question. Did you make that noise when Derrick was here?"

He parted his lips. Then, he stiffly replied, "That's none of your business."

"Did you know that we almost got caught because of it?"

"But we didn't. That's all that matters."

I shook my head at his shamelessness. "It doesn't work like that. If you were caught, it would've caused a commotion and alerted the messenger downstairs. I could've been caught up in a scandal with you."

In aristocratic society, a scandal with someone of a different status meant immediate ostracization. I personally didn't care about what other people thought of me, but I was still living in Father's house. He would hate me even more if I did something wrong. In the worst-case scenario, if I was kicked out, I would've had to face numerous dangers all by myself.

"I'm taking a big risk by letting you stay here," I said. "I would appreciate it if you were more considerate."

He turned around to look at me again. His red eyes seemed to pierce right through me, but I managed to meet his gaze without backing down. After a while of simply staring, he finally looked away. "Okay," he said quietly.

I was relieved to see he had some conscience, at least. "You can come out now," I said as I reached out to him.

He took my hand and stood up. Then he leveled me with a determined gaze. "If such a thing were to happen... I'll take responsibility," he said.

I sighed. Why was he being so serious now? I couldn't find it in myself to do the same and found his sincerity so funny that I ended up laughing. "Alright, but I doubt anything will happen."

"You don't know that," he said, pulling at my hand slightly.

I looked into his bright crimson eyes. Oddly enough, it almost seemed like he was hoping that something would happen.

I needed to hand this guy over to Father as soon as possible... when was he coming back? I rarely wondered when Father would return home, but I couldn't help it after spending so much time with the man beside me.



Rumors about Duke Floyen working as an escort for the emperor had begun spreading in secret. It was only a matter of time before it reached the prime minister's ears.

"This will rouse the people's resentment, resulting in the same thing that had happened back then..." he thought.

During the war with the Tezeria Kingdom twenty years ago, the young emperor had abandoned the imperial palace and fled from the capital. His people, whom he had deserted, became distressed by their leader's cowardice and pessimism.

In his absence, a young knight took the lead in defending the capital: Regis Floyen, a member of the Imperial Knights and next in line to become a duke. Although many people told him to give up and run away, Regis annihilated the enemies who invaded the capital.

As the successor to a prestigious family that produced great knights every generation, he became known as a war hero who led the empire to a great victory. However, where there was light, there was darkness in equal measure. The emperor, having deserted the capital, became known as a coward and traitor. Many people criticized him and urged for his disposal, but Regis had turned the tables by expressing support for him.

Presently, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that his rapport had barely been maintained by his eldest son, the crown prince, who fought for the empire at the borders.

After realizing the crisis the empire was now in, the prime minister entered the palace and asked for an audience with the emperor. "I need to see His Majesty," he realized.



"Do you plan on keeping him in the palace for much longer, Your Majesty?"

the prime minister asked.

The emperor raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it obvious? There is no one more skilled than him for the job," he said. His fierce voice revealed an underlying resentment toward Duke Floyen.

The prime minister sighed. "Of course, Your Majesty. The duke's presence will scare these scoundrels in advance and lay their efforts to waste, but..."

You are belittling his reputation as a national hero.

He kept that last part to himself then tried again. "If you continue to keep him in the palace, the people's resentment will only increase. I believe it is more important to devise a plan to identify the mastermind behind the assassinations rather than order the duke to stay," he said.

The emperor glared at the prime minister, displeased by his unwelcome advice. "I will make the right decision. You don't have to be so concerned," he said stubbornly.

The emperor cut him off. "You can leave, Duke Elios."

The prime minister sighed. "Duke Floyen had a great reputation in the past, but his current prestige is even greater. If you want to keep him in check, you must bring His Highness the Crown Prince back into the capital. Please use good judgment."

With these parting words, he bowed and left.

The emperor's face twisted as he stared at the ring on his middle finger. How dare the prime minister advise him without knowing anything? The ring he wore was the eye of Kirke, a symbol of imperial sovereignty created by an archmage who became the very first emperor.

A smile slowly appeared on his face.

As long as I have this, he cannot disobey me, he thought.



Somewhere near the central palace, Regis sat on a tree branch with his eyes

closed. He didn't budge even when a weary little bird perched on his shoulder. It jumped up and down a few times before settling comfortably on his shoulder to fall asleep. The atmosphere was so peaceful that it seemed like Regis was taking a break rather than guarding the palace.

Then, he sensed someone close by. Opening his eyes as the wind rustled his hair, he observed the person he caught approaching the central palace. When he realized who it was, he relaxed and let out a yawn. It was just Roy.

Well, he should probably get down now.

"Go," Regis ordered the bird on his shoulder. When it woke up, the bird chirped and clung to him in resistance. "My daughter dislikes small animals," he said firmly. It gazed at Regis with rueful eyes before spreading its wings and flying away.

When the duke jumped down the tree, Roy reeled back with amazement. "S-so... you were here."

"What is it?"

"Oh, I just received some news from the mansion—"

"Go on."

Roy sighed. His boss impatiently cut him off before he had even finished speaking. "Yes. It's about Lady Floyen—"

"What? Did something happen to Jubelian?" Although his boss was far from talkative, he cut Roy off again.

"No, it seems like she is... anxious because of Your Grace's absence..."

Regis's blue eyes glinted when he heard the news. Jubel was looking for him? The corners of his lips lifted slightly.

Roy was surprised for a moment. Was His Grace smiling?

Nevertheless, he continued reporting the news from the mansion. "Lady Floyen is also feeling unwell," he said. "It seems like she's very anxious because she hasn't left her room since you left."

The duke's smile disappeared from his face. "I see. It's time for us to drop this

act after all."

He gazed at the window that led to the emperor's office.



I glanced at the three-seat couch that had become the bed of Father's disciple. He really made himself at home, huh?

Four days had already passed since I first let him stay. Thankfully, my large room boasted a bathroom connected to it, so it wasn't an inconvenient accommodation. I just had to be careful when the maids occasionally came by to clean my room or see how I was doing. Still, secretly cohabiting with someone wasn't just smooth sailing.

He probably didn't know that the couch he currently lay comfortably upon was originally where I tended to lounge. I complained silently to myself. His presence didn't just diminish my personal space considerably, but also made it difficult to differentiate our boundaries.

"What is it?" the man questioned, his gaze expectant. He must've noticed that I had been quietly sighing to myself, so he was probing for the cause of my dissatisfaction.

"Oh, it's just... you look comfortable. That's all," I mumbled.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "Not really," he grunted. Then, he closed his eyes.

His response disheartened me. I gave up my rest spot for him, but this was the response I got back?

I turned my head toward the window. There, I could see the sunset.

I wonder why he had to meet Father...

"Why do you keep staring at me?" he asked, interrupting my train of thought. My gaze had found him once more.

"Oh. I was just thinking... that it seems like you have a good relationship with Father..."

There was a moment of silence before he finally said, "It's not like we're on each other's bad sides."

Of course it wasn't. I chuckled emptily. In front of his disciple, Father's facial expressions and manner of speech were so foreign to me that he seemed like a different person.

Now that I thought about it, I still had to give him back his pendant and gift him the cufflinks I bought, but... I really didn't want to do it in person. I was afraid that he might not like the gift because I was unfamiliar with his preferences. I didn't want him to throw them away because I would surely be offended.

Wait a minute. This man might have known more about Father's tastes than I did.

"Hey," I called out. When his eyes turned to look at me, I reconsidered my actions. There was no way someone with a terrible personality like his would answer me honestly.

As I contemplated whether I should ask him what I had in mind or not, he grew impatient. "Say what you have to say," he said. "I hate it when people stall." His tone was blunt, but it seemed like he was willing to help me.

"What do you think about giving a set of cufflinks as a gift?" I finally asked.

He frowned. "A gift?" His eyes became hostile, making me flinch.

Why was he looking at me like that? Does he not like the idea of cufflinks?



Cufflinks were usually gifted to a woman's lover. Max immediately thought of Mikhail when Jubelian asked him about cufflinks. "Who are you giving it to?" he asked.

"Who else would I give it to? You should know who," Jubelian replied quietly.

Max felt his mood worsen. Was this stupid woman thinking about clinging to her ex-lover once more? He had learned to never show his true emotions, lest it could be used against him, but his expression became fiercely independent of his own accord.

"You're going to give cufflinks to someone like that?"

As soon as he asked this, her eyes turned cold. "Hey, that's a little too harsh,"

she replied sharply. It was unlike her.

Max rarely gave advice because he simply wasn't interested in other people, but it was frustrating to see her defending Mikhail without thinking for herself. He felt a rush of anger and his stomach roiled. He was trying his best to be considerate of her, so why was she taking that other guy's side? His knuckles turned white from clenching his fists.

"How can you cling to someone who's so indifferent to you... do you have no pride?" he asked coldly.

Try refuting that, he thought with snark, challenging her. Max had never regretted insulting someone before, but the moment he saw the woman's face turn pale, he couldn't explain the subsequent aching in his heart.

What on earth...?

His face twisted as he tried to cope with the strange pain. Although he was angry, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. The unfamiliar sensation only subsided when she next spoke, mentioning someone unexpected.

"I'm not clinging to him. I just want to get along with Father," Jubelian said.

Max's fierce, crimson eyes wavered. "You're planning to give them to your father, Duke Floyen?" he asked for confirmation.

She frowned. "Who else?"

Max felt his mood improve greatly. It didn't seem like she knew how much her father cared about her. She had easily misunderstood his sharp insults, which revealed that they probably didn't get along very well. Was this what you wanted? he wondered silently, ridiculing, thinking of the countless array of sacrifices his foolish master made for the sake of his daughter, only to hide them from her.

Finding the situation both funny and pathetic, he chuckled.

"Hey, stop laughing and say something," Jubelian said, sulking.

If he didn't listen to her, would she get upset again? Max usually wouldn't think this far, but he couldn't stop thinking about her shocked face blanching at his biting claims. He sighed and unconsciously hardened his expression.

I had felt somewhat dispirited until I learned that we weren't talking about the same person. Who was he talking about, if not Father?

At that moment, the man suddenly laughed. Although his handsome face was pleasing to the eye, it didn't make me feel any better. Was he making fun of me?

"Hey, stop laughing and say something," I responded brusquely, displeased by his rudeness.

At my words, he stopped laughing and looked at me. His gaze was so serious that I became nervous. What did he want to say?

"The gift is a set of cufflinks?" he finally asked.

"Yes, here they are."

When I showed him the cufflinks, he frowned slightly. "They're not a very useful gift for a swordsman."

I frowned. Although I wasn't a swordsman, I still thought it was a good enough gift. Was this guy trying to start a fight with me?

"You must be very good at picking gifts," I said sarcastically.

A smile appeared on his face. He was handsome indeed, but that was all he had going for him. Nevertheless, my eyes lingered on him for a moment longer, captivated by the rare change in the direction of his lips.

"I gave my father a present a while ago." His smile began to fade, replaced by something steelier. "He looked bored these days, but thanks to my gift, it seems like he's gotten more energetic now."

Upon seeing his content expression, I supposed that he must've been a filial son. But what kind of gift would help his father become more energetic? "So, what did you give him?" I asked with sudden curiosity.

"That's none of your business," he said sternly.

Of course he wouldn't tell me. Although I hadn't expected an answer in the

first place, I frowned at his disgusting personality.

Then, he continued. "The duke will like anything from you."

What? Anything from me? That would only be possible if Father was possessed by someone warm and friendly. I was a little offended by his insincere answer. I guess he didn't know Father as well as I thought despite being his disciple.

I sighed. These cufflinks were expensive, though... I should just give them to Father anyway, since I have to return the pendant.

If I didn't leave a note, he wouldn't know they were from me. Since he was a workaholic, he was probably going to stop by his office first upon his return, right? With this in mind, I decided to write a letter that would explain where the pendant and cufflinks came from before leaving everything to sit in his office.



Four days had passed since the emperor called Duke Floyen to the Imperial Palace.

"Why are you taking so long, Duke Floyen?" the emperor silently questioned. Although more reinforcements were brought in besides the duke, who was guarding the Imperial Palace, the emperor couldn't be sure he was completely safe.

He reminded himself that he could not be careless. If the duke betrayed him, the assassins would easily be able to attack him. He gritted his teeth. "If you betray me, everything you care about will crumble to dust, Regis," he swore.

At that moment, the grand chamberlain entered the emperor's office. "Duke Floyen has asked for a private meeting, Your Majesty," he announced.

"Of course he would." The emperor observed his ring with a smirk. He was very curious to know who the mastermind of the attack was. "Tell the duke that I will see him in the evening," he ordered sternly.

Although he didn't have anything important going on right now, the emperor had a reason for stalling the meeting. The duke made him anxious by taking too long to complete the task, so he thought to make the duke wait in turn.

"There is another piece of news, Your Majesty," the grand chamberlain said, continuing carefully.

It didn't matter; the emperor was content with himself. "What is it?"

The grand chamberlain swallowed nervously. "Several officials have signed a petition calling for the return of His Highness the Crown Prince."

The emperor's gaze turned fierce. "Bring it here."

The grand chamberlain delivered the petition to the emperor on a golden tray. When he read it, his expression contorted with anger.

"These men must be torn to pieces! How dare they?!" He crumpled the petition up and threw it to the floor. "Find a companion for the crown prince and educate him to become the next emperor? They've gone mad!"

A twisted smile suddenly slithered onto his face. "They dared to sign a petition like this when I'm still in good shape. They must think too lightly of the throne."

The grand chamberlain swallowed nervously; the emperor's obsession with the throne was close to madness. He did his best not to provoke the emperor any further, afraid that his anger might befall him as well.

"Bring those impudent men before me," the emperor ordered coldly. "Right now."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the grand chamberlain replied. He stayed complacent, wary of irritating his sovereign any further.



I grabbed my quill pen to begin writing the letter. Then, I froze.

Hm... what did people normally talk about with their fathers? In my previous life, I had been raised by a single mother. In my present life, I had an awkward relationship with Father. I doubted that Merilyn could help me with this.

I was still deep in thought when I noticed Father's disciple staring at me curiously. "What?" I asked.

"What are you doing?" he replied, anticipatory.

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"Oh, I'm writing a letter."

"To whom?"

"To Father."
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His gaze softened slightly at my answer. "I don't think that's necessary."

I wanted to counter him, but it occurred to me that he was Father's disciple. He probably knew more about him. I didn't have any expectations... but...

I set down my quill pen and called out. "Hey."

Although I wasn't sure if he was going to ignore me again, he responded quickly, as if he was in a good mood. "Yes?"

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"What do you usually talk about with Father?"
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"You mean my master?"
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He sat upright and stroked his chin for a while. Then, he leaned back on the couch. "I'm not sure. We don't talk much."

I was disappointed by his abrupt, lackluster answer. Well, neither of them were the talkative type, so that was to be expected.

After deciding that it was futile to rely on others for this matter, I began to write the letter by myself. In my previous life, I volunteered for public institutions and had a lot of experience writing for official matters, as well as writing with pen pals. It should be fine.

My letter was completed not long after. This was probably good, right? I read through it and didn't find any mistakes, at least.

Since I had worked hard, I decided to eat something delicious. While I silently praised myself, Father's disciple came up behind me.

"Are you really going to give that to him?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes," I replied earnestly. Then, I took another look at my letter.

Dear Father,

How have you been? To think that I'm all grown up now, with my 19th

[&]quot;Yeah."

birthday just around the corner... time flies by, doesn't it? Considering all the hectic years that have passed by, forgetting important things is normal.

You lost your pendant a while ago, did you not? I just want to let you know that I had it. I should've given it back to you earlier, but this was delayed due to unavoidable circumstances. I hope you understand. These cufflinks are a gift for being so patient with me.

I apologize again for not returning your pendant earlier due to personal reasons.

Sincerely,

Jubelian Eloy Floyen

I thought this was good. I admitted my faults and asked for forgiveness, so he couldn't be angry with me. The letter was also clear and to the point. I was certain that Father was going to let this incident slide.

"His reaction would be an interesting sight to see," Father's disciple said, smirking. I assumed he was just bitter that I was able to write an acceptable letter without his help.

"I'm going to go to his office and come back. You know what to do if someone tries to enter the room, right?"

"Whatever."

Despite his response, he nodded at my request. After his initial hostility, it was a little odd to see him show some consideration for me now.



Duke Regis Floyen visited the emperor's office even later than the time scheduled and bowed to his superior. "Your Majesty," he greeted.

"You came even later than I told you to," the emperor scolded.

Regis remained indifferent. "Yes."

How shameless. The emperor was irritated by Regis's stoic confidence, which never seemed to waver even in the most unfavorable circumstances.

The emperor struggled to regain his composure before speaking. "So, did you figure out the identity of the vile rat who was behind all this?" the emperor demanded.

Regis smiled instead of revealing the truth right away. *Max had also called my daughter a rat...* I guess this was retribution, he thought wryly to himself. He had known for quite a while that the assassinations were the work of his one and only disciple, who was skilled at both swordsmanship and manipulation. Although Max despised the emperor and hoped that he would clash with his master, he miscalculated Regis's patience.

"I could not find the culprit behind the assassinations."

The emperor frowned. "Are you serious? If you didn't accomplish my order, then why..."

As the emperor angrily went on, Regis recalled his disciple's challenge: "Are you really afraid of a guy as weak as him?"

No. Regis only permitted the emperor to live because it wasn't the right time to rid of him just yet. When that time came, his prey wouldn't be able to run away no matter how hard he tried.

Soon, the duke promised himself.

Then, he leveled the emperor with a calm gaze, never betraying even a hint of anger. "Don't you know why, Your Majesty?" he asked.

The emperor found it difficult to breathe under Regis's burdensome stare. Was he trying to start a rebellion? Overwhelmed by fear, he was incapable of responding for a while.

It was Regis who finally broke the silence. "As long as I stay at the Imperial Palace, they won't attack you."

There was no sign of reproach in his calm voice, but the emperor, who had felt the weight of his monstrous energy, felt as if he had just heard a thousand criticisms directed his way. He clenched his fists with resentment.

Then, he glared at the duke and raised his voice. "How can you guarantee that when I had already been attacked?"

The duke could guarantee it because he was certain that his disciple, the mastermind behind the assassinations, wasn't going to act rashly from now on. As long as he stayed calm, Max knew a revolution wouldn't take place no matter how much he tried to push the emperor to the extreme.

"Tell me right now!" the emperor shouted. Even now, he was causing a scene, oblivious to the machinations that brewed below the surface. By nature, he was an easy man to manipulate.

In response, Regis allowed a small sigh to escape him. "Your Majesty has become increasingly guarded, so the mastermind probably realized that sending out more assassins would be futile," he supplied vaguely.

Although Regis spoke kindly, the emperor regarded his words as an implication that he himself was frightened of the assassinations. How dare he...!

He fumed with resentment, but the duke continued. "There's no need to act rashly in a situation like this, seeing as it has already attracted a lot of attention from people."

Every word he said was right, but the emperor refused to admit it because doing so meant admitting defeat.

That vile rogue. The emperor knew Duke Floyen was just running his mouth to cover up for his incompetence. The emperor was flooding with indignation, but he calmed down by stroking the ring on his finger. "No, as long as I have this... he cannot disobey me," he assured himself.

Even so, he couldn't help but feel nervous. The duke didn't seem concerned about his weakness anymore; in fact, he hadn't in a long time. Since the emperor couldn't be sure, he had to find something else he could use.

At that moment, the prime minister's advice came to mind. "If you want to keep him in check, you must bring His Highness the Crown Prince back to the capital," he had said.

The emperor had finally found a use for his son, who he had always considered nothing more than a terrible existence that threatened his place on the throne. Yes, it was a good idea to use him to keep this atrocious man in check. His son wouldn't suspect anything if he acted like he was planning on giving him the throne.

"I realize my personal affairs have bothered you, duke," the emperor said, adopting a relatively mild tone.

His subjects would usually refuse to admit such a bold claim, but the duke didn't respond. It was like a silent affirmation. The emperor clenched his fists, barely suppressing his urge to throw something at him.

"Seeing as the mastermind might still be observing the situation, shouldn't you guard the palace for at least another week, Duke Floyen? Please work hard for three more days."

Upon this last-notice command, Regis bowed at the emperor. "Yes, I will do

my best to serve you, Your Majesty."

As soon as Regis left the office, he heard the sound of something breaking. Despite the commotion, he wore a pleasant expression upon his handsome face.

"I'm getting bored of how predictable he is," Regis mused to himself, tilting his head back to wearily observe the night sky. When he witnessed the moon glowing amidst the darkness, a hint of warmth colored his frozen expression.

He wondered if his precious child was doing well.

If he stayed in the palace for a little longer, the people would blame the emperor for mistreating him. The duke just wanted to go back home to see his daughter.

Jubel...

It had only been four days since he left the mansion, but Regis couldn't wait to go back home and see how she was doing.



It was quiet. Without Father in it, the office felt far emptier than I thought it would. I didn't know his absence would make it seem so deserted.

Even so, I was relieved that Father wasn't here. I would be too mortified to give the letter to him in person.

He would read it if I put it on his desk, right? I walked toward it. Once there, I spotted an opened ink bottle, so I secured the lid back on it so it wouldn't dry up. As I pondered over where I should place the letter more specifically, I glanced over a stray sheet of paper without much thought.

Huh? Wait, a list of prospective marriage partners?

I wondered if I had seen it correctly, so I carefully read it from top to bottom to be sure. The list clearly contained the names of eligible noblemen around my age.

Why did he make this list without confiding in me...?

I suddenly remembered the conversation I had with him after I broke up with

Mikhail. "What is your ideal type?" he had asked.

No way... was he actually trying to find me a man with all the conditions I had provided? I inspected the list with trembling eyes. Among the many names, some were underlined. Was he really trying to set me up on extravagant blind dates with these distinguished men?

One of the underlined names was the son of a foreign royal family. Another one was Lord Frederich, the only son of Duke Elios, the prime minister. Although his family was wealthier than Mikhail's, he was the supporting character of another supporting character who didn't even appear in the original novel.

For a brief moment, I thought it might be a good idea to marry one of these men and live happily ever after. Doing so would allow me to live comfortably, as well as escape my predestined death.

Lord Frederich had good qualifications and good looks. He was probably the best choice that I could ask for. Even so, I had no intention of changing my mind about getting married. The moment I did, I would have to live as that man's wife and not as myself.

It was reassuring that both of these underlined names were from families that were just as wealthy as ours because I had asked Father for someone whose wealth exceeded ours. I could only think of one family that was qualified in this aspect. There was no reason for us to get involved with them, though, so that was a relief.

I continued to skim through the list with a smile on my face until I stumbled upon a circled name. Huh? Why did Father mark this? When I looked closer, curious, I ended up dropping the paper I was holding.

Maximillian Casein Assiette?

I couldn't help but be shocked. This man was the heir of the only family that was wealthier than the Floyen House, and the person who was written to kill me in the future...

Why was the crown prince's name here?

I remembered a part of the novel that encapsulated the crown prince as a

psychopath who neither shed blood nor tears. Although this sounded harsh, it probably didn't even do him justice. I heard that he didn't hesitate to kill his victims, and there existed quite a few anecdotes of his cruelty. One of them was about the time he sent an assassin's severed head to his sister, Beatrice, as a gift for her coming-of-age ceremony.

That one incident ought to be enough to prove how insane he was, but his atrocities didn't end there. At the beginning of the novel, he sent assassins to kill the emperor. He wasn't just a psychopath. He was a wicked man who seemed to have split personalities; a purely tyrannical character who shed neither blood nor tears.

If his name was circled, that probably meant he was Father's final choice... he was going to be my partner... the thought was dizzying and I was barely able to support myself when I stumbled.

No matter how much I think about it, isn't this too cruel? Even other nobles try to avoid marrying their daughter off to the crown prince...

Although the crown princess' position was usually sought after, there was another reason why it was left vacant. At the beginning of the novel, bizarre rumors about a burn scar on his face circulated, which explained why the crown prince always wore a helmet.

What's more... yes, there was another rumor that didn't concern his appearance. It was that he was a sadist who was violent in bed.

These rumors caused many noblewomen to hasten their marriages with other men to avoid getting engaged with the crown prince. So did their parents, who didn't wish for their daughters to marry a man with such a violent temper, even if he was the crown prince.

In the memories I had of my future foretold, he had even visited me in prison! In the novel, Jubelian had ended her life to avoid being tortured. She realized that it would be better to die than to fall victim to his vices.

Was Father really trying to sell me to this terrible man? I gritted my teeth. Although I had asked for someone who excelled in terms of wealth, competence, and fame, this was just too much...

He forgot about the most important thing, too... I definitely mentioned appearance, Father. The crown prince always covered his face, so no one knew what he looked like, but even if he was attractive enough to meet my standards, I still didn't want anything to do with him.

My life would always be in danger if I married him, but the most urgent problem was...

My head started to hurt as I mulled over my predicament. I could reject other noblemen because I was the daughter of an esteemed duke, but I couldn't reject someone from the imperial family. If I was set up on a blind date with the crown prince... I couldn't refuse to go.

Of course, the prince had to like me for us to marry... but if he was truly a psychopath like he was rumored to be, it didn't matter who his partner was; it simply would be enough for him to have someone to harass.

The most I could do was change Father's mind about the crown prince, but that wasn't going to be easy. I sighed and placed the list back on the desk.

I had to come up with a countermeasure without letting Father know that I saw the list. Otherwise, he might hasten the blind date so that I wouldn't be able to avoid it. For this reason, I left his office with the letter, cufflinks, and pendant back in hand.



Was her room always this spacious? Max looked around the desolate quarters and sat on the chair the woman always used. It was uncomfortable. Nevertheless, he slumped into it, feeling strangely weak.

When was she coming back?

He rarely talked with the woman when she was around, but now that her constant presence was gone, he didn't know how much longer he could endure being alone. He felt a strange sense of emptiness in the desolate room.

Why was she taking so long? Max looked at the door forlornly. Then, he suddenly became alert.

Someone was here. His gaze snapped towards the open window that faced

the balcony. He moved so fast that the culprit lost track of him for an instant before he reappeared.

They screamed.

"Who are you?" Max grabbed the unwelcome visitor by the neck, firm even as the man gasped and struggled in his hostile hold. "I asked who you are!"

"Please let me—argh...!"

Max tightened his grip. "What business do you have here?"

"Madam sent for—" The man squirmed and spoke with difficulty.

When Max loosened his grip, the man collapsed like a marionette cut from its strings and coughed. He stared at the intruder. "How did you know that I was here?" he asked coldly.

"Madam said you might be here..." When the man just trailed off, Max furrowed his eyebrows.

"So, what do you want?"

The man managed to catch his breath and replied, "We received a report saying that the emperor's movements have been unusual as of late."

Max smirked. "Yes, he should be busy trying to keep himself alive."

In response, the man shook his head. "I was told that he was impatiently calling for the return of the crown prince at the advice of the prime minister and the other officials." Max listened without saying a word. "I think you should head back to the palace right away, Prince Maximillian."

Max knew that he should leave the mansion quickly because this was an urgent matter, but for some reason, he didn't move a muscle and stayed rooted to the spot.

Did he really have to leave right now?

Max turned around stiffly. Why wasn't she coming back? He glared at the door that she had tightly shut behind her, but he couldn't feel her presence no matter how hard he tried.

"Your Highness?" the intruder asked, puzzled.

Max's face twisted. Why was he...

Each time he made up his mind to leave, his body wouldn't listen. He was filled with worry about Jubelian, concerned that she might try to look for him if he disappeared without a word.

"Wait for me outside," he said. "It'll just take a second."

The man noticed that the prince possessed an unfamiliar look in his eye, his gaze hesitant, but he silently obeyed and left the room. Max exhaled when he couldn't feel his subordinate's presence anymore. He couldn't believe he was doing something like this...

He went to the woman's desk, pulled out a piece of paper, and began writing diligently.

"This should be enough," he thought, his tense posture relaxing.



It was eerily quiet when I came back to my room.

I figured he must've been hiding well. I was proud of him for it. Walking toward my closet, I expected to find him there. I hoped he wasn't annoyed at me for taking so long.

I opened the door, and...

Huh?

Instead of a man pouting as he huddled among some tulle, I saw only my clothes. Did he decide to hide somewhere else? I searched through my other closets, but he was nowhere to be found.

Where did he go? I already had a lot on my mind right now... I was about to place Father's letter on my desk before searching for him elsewhere when I saw a piece of paper lying atop it, scribbled with some words.

What was this? I inspected the letter with a strange sense of foreboding and frowned. The handwriting was horrible. Even a cat could write better than this.

I concentrated on the contents of the letter and read what it said: **Don't look** for me. I'll come back when the time comes.

"I never told him he could come again," I sighed. Then, I sprawled out on the couch that he used to occupy.

I finally got my place back, at least. I relaxed on the comfortable couch. It was still warm with his body heat, but I felt as if I had gone back to my days of silence and peace.

He said he would return, but when would that be? I pondered over what he wrote for a moment before I quickly came up with an explanation: he probably intended to come back to see Father, so it had nothing to do with me.

I frowned when my head started to ache. Ah, I felt really tired. I was drained from worrying about how to avoid the incoming disaster that was my prospective marriage partner, the crown prince.

What should I do? Although I was anxious, the fatigue that weighed down on my body proved persistent. I closed my eyes.



When Max left the duke's mansion, his body tensed and his senses sharpened.

He was back to how he used to be. He faltered. That woman. He wondered if she read his letter.

Max unconsciously glanced back at the duke's mansion. When he spotted the marble building, he realized what he had done and pulled a face.

A letter... it was unlike him to leave such a thing. Why did he do that?

When he was a child, Max learned that carelessness was a direct cause of death, so he always remained vigilant. Strangely, however, the days he spent in Jubelian's room had not been spent in perpetual caution. He had even allowed himself to remain defenseless a few times without realizing it.

If his subordinate hadn't come for him, he might've continued staying there. Max couldn't understand this change in heart; it was as if he had been bewitched. He wondered if she had some sort of secret method she used to make him feel this way, but he didn't dwell on that thought for long.

First, he needed to go back and do something. Max fastened his pace and

headed towards his destination.			



Chosen Partner

Hm... Why was it so bright? I glanced at the clock in my half-asleep state and startled upon discovering the time. Although I had only planned to nap for a short while, I had fallen into a deep slumber instead!

I worried about Father's disciple, who depended on me for food. He must've been hungry, so why didn't he wake me up?

Oh.

Habits were hard to break, it seemed. I was still looking for someone who I knew had left yesterday.

Since he left so abruptly, he probably found another place to stay... I had already packed some travel necessities for him to take in advance, but I didn't expect him to leave so abruptly, so I never got to give them to him. He could've at least said goodbye...

No, I shouldn't be sad. He was just a stranger. I quickly replaced the frown on my face with a smile. Nonetheless, despite my efforts to comfort myself, I couldn't help but feel a little empty inside.

I barely managed to collect myself with a sigh. First, I needed to take care of the impending problem concerning my prospective arranged marriage. I didn't get much sleep last night because I was busy thinking about a solution for it only to end up empty-handed.

Ah, I really didn't know what to do. I sighed again, feeling uneasy about my predicament. Then, one of my maids called for me from outside my door.

"This is Merilyn, my lady," she said.

I opened the door for her. "Hello," I greeted.

"Good morning, Lady Floyen." She suddenly stopped short and looked at me, looking a little surprised. "Oh... You don't look well, my lady. A-are you okay?" she asked with a stutter.

Huh? I didn't look well? I wondered what she meant, but then I remembered that I had essentially stayed up all night, eventually drifting off from exhaustion. Ah, I probably... had some dark circles under my eyes from the sleep

deprivation...

"Yes, I'm fine," I said with a smile, hoping she wouldn't worry about me unnecessarily. Although I was upset about my romantic future, I did my best to look calm. I didn't want her to think that I was behaving suspiciously.

When was Father coming back? I hoped it wouldn't be sooner than expected... it would be terrible if Father came back when I still had yet to devise a plan to escape the marriage. I trembled as I imagined that situation play out.

"Um, Merilyn, did Father say when he would come back by any chance?" I asked.

Merilyn flinched and shook her head. "No, but I think he'll return in two days."

Her statement reassured me. I didn't need to be hasty. I still had some time.

With this in mind, I felt more at peace.



Lately, the servants had been worried about Lady Floyen's unusual behavior. Their lady had become strange. Before, she would wander around the mansion frequently, but now she spent most of her time in her room. It was incredibly odd that she restricted the maids from entering, too.

The butler sighed with worry. He knew she had started behaving like this after the master left for training, but because his return had been delayed, five days had passed in his absence. The servants in the Floyen household treated Jubelian with great care because they were anxious that she might return to her old, unreasonable self.

Derrick sighed again. His master must return soon.

That was when his worried ruminations were interrupted by Madam Perez, the head of housekeeping. "Is it true that the master will be back in two days, Derrick?" she asked

"Yes," he answered. "Why do you ask...?"

Madam Perez sighed. "The girl who takes care of Lady Floyen told me she was acting strange again."

"Strange? Can you elaborate...?" Derrick trailed off, listening as his eyes wavered nervously.

"She said that Lady Floyen had grown pallid. Then, she said that the lady had asked her when the master would return."

"What?" Derrick was shocked. What she had just told him reminded him of a certain day in the distant past. His heart still ached when he remembered Jubelian's tearful periwinkle eyes.

"Derrick, why isn't Daddy coming back?" she had asked him.

Derrick sighed regretfully. "I shouldn't have done that back then," he thought.

"I will contact master right away," he said.

Madam Perez gave a sigh of her own and nodded. "Thank you."



As the wind blew through the open window, Merilyn heard Jubelian sigh in the middle of reading a book on her couch. Although her face looked full of anxiety, she was still beautiful.

She must've been sighing because she missed her father, right? She looked so sad that Merilyn couldn't help but try to strike a conversation with her. "The weather is so nice today, my lady," she said.

"Yes, it is," Jubelian replied weakly.

Merilyn regarded her with pity. This is the first time she had ever seen her look so weak. Although she was in higher spirits these days because Jubelian was treating everyone so kindly, she had grown concerned about her lady's despondency.

She wanted to help her. Although this was a presumptuous thought, one that might even reignite Jubelian's temper, she felt the urge to do something.

"How about taking a walk, my lady?" she suggested. "Basking in the warm sunlight will surely make you feel better."

Jubelian looked up. Although she gazed at her calmly, Merilyn became frightened. Oh no... what if she had angered her?

She had gathered up her courage to speak, but the fear of Jubelian's rage remained due to her reputation for being fickle. Merilyn glanced down nervously.

Jubelian parted her red lips to speak. "Alright," she said. "I do feel a little suffocated staying inside all the time."

Merilyn looked at her, dumbfounded. She agreed so easily!

Then, she suddenly recalled something Jubelian had said once in the past: "I hate being home. Daddy is never here and I'm always alone..."

Merilyn looked at Jubelian with pity.

Lady Floyen...

Although it wasn't too long ago that she had been subject to her violent episodes, Merilyn felt sympathetic when she remembered Jubelian's lonely childhood. She used to be a violent and vexatious person, but the more Merilyn got to know her, the more she discovered that Jubelian had actually become rather considerate. Merilyn felt rather attached to her now, so she couldn't bear to leave her in low spirits.

"I will always stay by your side, my lady."

When she expressed her heartfelt thoughts for the first time, Jubelian's lips curled into a slight smile. "Thank you," she said. Although her smile looked lovely upon her youthful face, it still bore a hint of sorrow.

Merilyn thought about her plan with conviction. Just making that claim wasn't enough. She needed to cheer her up.



"The crown prince just sent a message saying that it will take longer for him to return due to a problem at the border, Your Majesty."

The emperor gritted his teeth. That vile Maximillian... If the emperor told him to come back, he needed to come back immediately. Why was he taking so long?

His son was already an eyesore, so it didn't help that he was resisting an imperial order. The emperor felt a surge of anger as he thought about his

arrogant child. He swore to give his son a hard time upon his return.

He was still seething when the door to the emperor's office opened roughly.

Bang!

"Y-Your Grace! You can't—" The royal guards tried to restrain the intruder, but they were no match for the skillful man. He easily traversed the line of guards and soon enough, he stood before the emperor.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

The emperor, still fuming from his son's disobedience, witnessed Duke Floyen's impudence and flushed with anger once again. "What on earth do you think you are doing?"

Duke Floyen bowed his head without a hint of fear. "I came here to have an urgent word with you."

"So? What's all the fuss about?" the emperor asked coldly. He wanted to convey that he wouldn't let the duke's rash behavior slide if the matter at hand wasn't important.

The duke met the emperor's gaze with determination. "I caught wind of the assassins who have been troubling Your Majesty these past few days."

The emperor's eyes widened. "What? Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Then bring the culprits to me!"

Regis shook his head. "I will need to go back home to find more clues," he said softly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I suspect an intruder visited my mansion while I was away."

The emperor's face contorted. "What? What does that have to do with the assassin who tried to kill me?"

"The intruder's footwork was similar to the assassin who infiltrated the palace."

The emperor glared at the duke. He knew that this was just an excuse to leave the palace. How dare he try to make a fool out of him...!

Even so, the emperor himself had ordered the duke to head the investigation. Now that he had been presented with some reasonable evidence, he had no choice but to grant the request.

Duke Floyen met the emperor's piercing gaze and smirked as if he knew what his sovereign was thinking. "In order to acquire more clues, please grant me permission to leave the palace," he said.



Ah, even people need sunlight once in a while. Although I enjoyed spending the past few days in my room, I had felt my energy slowly draining away. Yes, this would certainly be a more productive environment I could use to think about a countermeasure for Father's plan.

Merilyn interrupted my thoughts. "Aren't the flowers pretty, my lady?"

"Ah, yes."

Even though I had replied shortly, Merilyn looked at me patiently and said, "The flowers are pretty, but you're even more beautiful, my lady."

It was a bit burdensome for Merilyn to follow me around and shower me with nonsensical compliments like this. She had been acting strange recently. Was she working too much? As I pondered over whether I should give her a vacation, I found a bench by the side of the garden and sat down.

I needed to think about more pressing matters first, though. There were only two days left until Father was said to return. Although I thought of it as *only* two days, it was enough time for me to formulate a plan. I would look strange if I just stared out into space, so I opened the book that I brought with me.

Oh, it was the one on military tactics. Although it was very entertaining, I wasn't in the best situation to be reading a book that Father had recommended.

"Ah, will you be reading a book, my lady?" Merilyn said, looking a bit shocked. Going by her reaction, it was as if reading was a strange thing to do outside. "Yes, it's perfect for spending some time alone."

Merilyn observed me for a moment when I said the word 'alone.' Then, she lowered her head. "But, my lady..."

"I'll head inside when I'm done, so you can go ahead," I said politely. I didn't want to directly order her to leave me alone, but I did want to read quietly. At that moment, someone spoke up. It was a familiar voice, but one that I certainly didn't expect to hear.

"Jubelian."

At the sound of my name, I reflexively turned towards the speaker. Father, who I had hoped would return two days later, now stood in front of me. Why was he here?!

I tried to keep calm and said, "Welcome back, Father."

He stared at me as I struggled to gather my words. "Thank you," he finally said.

"You must be tired from the training. Why don't you get some rest?" I tried to get up from the bench to avoid spending more time with him, but he gently placed his hand on my shoulder.

"No, I have something that I need to say to you right now."

I observed him with trembling eyes, aware of my predicament. I was ruined...

"Jubelian," Father began. As he gazed at me with cold eyes, I braced myself for what he would say next.

Since he was taking his time to get to the point, it was obvious what he wanted to talk about. When I made up my mind to steer the topic away from the marriage list, Father took his hand off my shoulder.

"From now on... you won't be left alone," he said quietly.

I doubted that I heard him correctly. What did he mean by that? He didn't even mention who wouldn't leave me alone, but that didn't stop me from coming up with a few conclusions. Was he going to keep me under surveillance so I wouldn't be able to run away from the upcoming marriage? As I imagined all the possibilities, I regarded him with confusion.

"Have you eaten dinner?" he asked.

"No," I replied truthfully. It was a rather sudden question.

He furrowed his brows. "If you keep skipping meals, you will pass out again."

It might have seemed like he was worried about me, but I knew better. If I kept passing out, it will be difficult to marry me off to the crown prince... he just wanted me to be in prime condition for marriage.

I was contemplating passing out at a major social event to ruin his plans when he said, "You must never pass out again."

How prompt. He sounded like he was going to punish me if I did, so I discarded the burgeoning idea. Ah, there was probably a limit to what I could do. As I lamented over being the villainess in this novel, Father took my hand.

"Let's go eat."

I wasn't hungry because of all the snacks I ate earlier, but I didn't refuse him out of worry that he might get upset. I needed to eat dinner with him to avoid any more trouble, so I convinced myself to keep my hand in his. Although he was cruel for trying to marry me off to a tyrant prince, his grip was big and warm.

When I was little, I used to follow him around just because I wanted to hold his hand... It was amusing that I couldn't hold it back when I had desperately wanted to, but I could now that I had let all lingering attachments go. He didn't mean anything to me anymore.

I let him guide me into the dining room. The time it took us to get here felt longer than usual.

"Sit down," he ordered.

This felt really awkward.

Although this wasn't the first time I dined with Father, we usually didn't talk when we ate. Our silence became so ingrained that I usually didn't find it awkward, but today was different because... I was anticipating what he was going to say.

When I sighed, Father said, "I heard that you are going to a banquet next

week."

It was obvious why he suddenly mentioned Rose's birthday party: he was going to criticize my decision to go. I collected my thoughts. "Yes," I replied with a smile. "I was invited to a birthday banquet hosted by Rose Marie Arlo, the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo."

Father raised his knife and gracefully sliced into his steak. "Who will your partner be?"

In the book that Father had given me, several tactics could be employed to maneuver delicate conversations. One method was to disturb the opposing party's emotions. Another—the standard method—was precise in that it cut to the chase and kept the opponent from escaping. Of all methods, Father had used the standard one on me!

He wouldn't find fault with me if I had a partner, but the problem was... I didn't have one yet. It wasn't like I didn't try. Although it was more comfortable to be alone, I didn't want to stick out in the cliquish and conservative aristocratic social scene. Several people even wanted to be my partner, and all I had to do was choose one.... but I didn't because I had become far too preoccupied with devising a countermeasure for the marriage predicament. Finding a partner had completely slipped my mind in the meantime.

I smiled awkwardly at Father. Ah, what should I say now?

I tried to calm myself down first. If I showed any sign of unease, Father might take advantage of that and talk about the list of bachelors he had. In moments like this, I needed to make sure I didn't panic so I could respond steadily.

When I effectively gained control over my emotions, I feigned ignorance. "Ah, I haven't decided on my partner yet," I said. Father just stared at me. His observant gaze was so uncomfortable that I suddenly lost my appetite. Instead of becoming agitated, I continued, trying for casual. "There were quite a few people who wrote to me asking me to be their partner. They're all wonderful, so it's been difficult to make a decision."

"I see," Father said quietly. The sound of his silverware resumed.

Did I just successfully defend myself? I let out a soft sigh of relief. The rest of

our dinner was accompanied by a series of dizzying questions from Father, but as long as he didn't mention the marriage list, I considered the whole thing a success.

I needed to take a look at my letters after I finished eating, so I decided to quickly finish my food. That way, I could head back to my room and find a partner to take with me to the banquet.

"Jubelian," Father called once more. The sound of his voice brought me a wave of nerves and I inhaled sharply. Maybe he was going to mention the marriage list after all.

"Yes?" I managed to ask. His piercing gaze seemed to urge me to meet the crown prince at once. I swallowed unconsciously and tried to breathe through the thick tension. As Father continued to stare at me, he cut a piece of his juicy steak and placed it on my plate.

What was this all of a sudden...? Although I normally would've declined such a thing, there was a problem keeping me from doing so this time. Out of everything on his plate, why did he have to give me meat...?

During these past few days, I hadn't been able to eat properly because of Father's disciple. The maids would've found it suspicious if I had asked them to bring me two sets of silverware, so I had ordered finger foods instead. As a result, I had been craving meat. Unfortunately, I couldn't risk staying in the same room as Father any longer because it would increase the chances of him mentioning my marriage.

I had to... decline... but...

My determination faltered when the steak's savory aroma suddenly met my nose. I would surely melt in my mouth if I ate it, wouldn't it? While I agonized over what to do, Father spoke up firmly. "Eat," he commanded.

Since he was telling me to eat, I suppose I had no choice. He could get upset with me if I didn't listen to him. Coming to this conclusion, I took a bite of the steak without hesitation. The soft meat immediately softened in my mouth, rich with flavorful juices. It was exactly the high-quality taste that I had been salivating over these past few days. Although I was deeply immersed in the flavor, my troubles didn't end there.

"Eat slowly," he said. "You'll get sick."

Father was the only reason I would ever get sick, but I didn't dare tell him. Instead, I just continued to eat quietly.



As soon as I finished eating, I went to my room and checked over the letters I received. There was one from the esteemed son of Count Rowen, Sir Boromir, and another one from the esteemed son of Marquis Crocus.

I was startled that so many respectable people had requested to be my partner. It didn't make sense at first, considering my social reputation, but then I remembered my lofty status as the duke's daughter. Many people would seek me out just to have an excuse to meet him.

Thanks to Father, it wouldn't be hard to choose a partner. It was ironic that he was the very reason I could avoid the predicament he had placed me in. I sighed in relief, eager to finally resolve this annoying partner-for-the-banquet problem.

But who should I choose? As a member of the Imperial Knights, Sir Boromir was popular for his excellent swordsmanship, his manners, and his decent looks. Count Rowen's son, meanwhile, was famous for his beautiful appearance, and the last candidate, Marquis Crocus's son, was the successor of a wealthy and well-known family. He was also set to lead the foreign ministry in the future. All three of these men were worth more than my terrible social reputation could ever manage. If someone else heard about my dilemma, they would think I was bragging.

The esteemed son of Marquis Crocus did ask first, but... I wanted someone who was less likely to cause trouble in the future. In the end, I made my decision quicker than I had anticipated. There was no way someone as handsome and capable as Marquis Crocus's son would ask to be my partner without possessing an underlying motive. For this reason, I chose the esteemed son of Count Rowen, who had nothing but his appearance. He was handsome enough to be compared to Mikhail.

In the end, it would be best to have a handsome partner. I made up my mind and wrote a letter to the esteemed son of Count Rowen permitting him to take me to the banquet. Then, I gave it to Merilyn.

"It would be too late to send today, so please deliver this tomorrow," I requested.

"Yes, my lady."

Now that this problem had been solved, I was relieved that Father hadn't mentioned anything else to me. Writing the letter quickly drained my energy. There was still something else I needed to do, but I was so sleepy...

I eventually gave up on trying to stay awake. As soon as I rolled into bed, I fell into a deep slumber.



When Jubelian fell asleep, the maids turned off the lights and left her room. They were startled to find someone waiting for them at the door, however.

"Master!" they cried, astonished.

"Where's Jubelian?" he asked, his indifferent voice a stark contrast to theirs.

Merilyn, who was expected to answer as Jubelian's head maid, gulped nervously. Their master rarely visited Lady Floyen's room, so he must have had something urgent to tell her.

"Please wait a moment," she said. "I will let the lady know that you're looking for her." Merilyn was about to go back into Jubelian's room and wake her up, but the duke shook his head.

"No, just leave her be."

In response, Merilyn lowered her head. "Could you tell me what kind of business you have to discuss with the lady, master?" she asked politely. "If it's something I can answer in her stead, I will."

At the word *business*, the duke glanced blankly at the door to his daughter's room. "Did she choose a partner for the banquet yet?" he asked.

Merilyn nodded with a cheerful expression. "Ah, yes! She has decided to go with Mister Edmund, the esteemed son of Count Rowen. Isn't that great?"

Upon hearing the name of Jubelian's partner-to-be, a handsome man who

was quite well-known in high society, Regis murmured to himself for a bit. "I see..." he finally said.

When he returned to his room, he recalled how uncomfortable his daughter looked during dinner. "There were quite a few people who wrote to me asking me to be their partner. They're all wonderful, so it's been difficult to make a decision," she had said.

Regis sighed, recalling how she had used the word wonderful.

He should check Mister Edmund out himself, he decided.



It was late in the day. Count Rowen was tense due to the appearance of an unexpected visitor. Even his second son, a boy who was usually rather arrogant, had no choice but to remain polite in front of the visitor. After all, he was the father of the lady he fancied and the hero of this empire, Duke Floyen.

"Wh-what's your purpose for visiting us this late at night, Your Grace?"

Regis coldly glared at the young man in front of him. "I'm not going to marry a man unless he has everything," he remembered his daughter saying. "I want the most wealthy, famous, and competent guy there is."

As he observed the young man before him, the duke pondered over Jubelian's standards.

"You fall short of the requirements, Edmund Anshan Rowen," he finally declared.



The next morning, I woke up in a groggy state. Ugh. My back hurt.

Although I had solved yesterday's problem and avoided talking about the marriage list, something still felt a little off. I tried thinking about the cause of this unpleasantness, but I could only focus on my empty stomach. It had to be because I didn't eat breakfast.

I pulled the line meant to summon an attendant and Merilyn soon entered my room. "Good morning, Lady Floyen," she greeted.

"Could you help me get ready for breakfast?" I asked.

"Of course."

I washed my face, changed into some casual clothes, and braided my hair. Afterwards, I felt more refreshed and looked suitable enough to go downstairs for breakfast. Nevertheless, the unpleasant feeling I had refused to go away. What was wrong with me? There had to be something...

At that moment, Merilyn said, "A package arrived from the Fyodor Workshop today, my lady."

I nodded. So that was why I felt uncomfortable. Rose's birthday was coming up, but her gift had only just arrived. "Could you bring it to my room?" I asked her.

"Yes, my lady." Merilyn left to get the gift. I waited for her to return with high hopes.

How did it turn out? Hopefully he did what I instructed him to do...

Not long after, Merilyn entered with a box in her hands. "Here it is," she said

When I opened the box, I found an object that perfectly replicated my order as I had dictated it, but there was another item that had a different color sitting next to it, too. I was satisfied with my order, so why was there something else here? Was this a buy one, get one thing? I inspected the object with bewilderment.

Then, I found a note inside the box. "For you, my muse," it read.

Although it was merely a note, the word *muse* made me feel uncomfortable. I pondered over the meaning of the note, then settled on the supposition that it was simply an exaggerated phrase used by most artists. Well, a good thing was a good thing.

As I looked over the objects with satisfaction, the maids started asking me questions.

"What is this, my lady?"

"I've never seen anything like it."

"I'll tell you its purpose soon," I said to them. They watched my stuff with much curiosity.

I placed the gifts in my drawer, putting them away for now. I had something more important I had to do.

Suddenly, I heard someone speak from outside my bedroom door. "Breakfast is ready, my lady."

Looking cheerful, I quickly left my room. I needed to eat first, after all.



At Madam Fresia's Blooms Salon, women wearing masquerade masks were engaged in an animated conversation about the birthday banquet that was to be held a week later.

"I look forward to seeing how Count Arlo decorated the mansion," one woman said.

"Me too," agreed another. "The venue was beautifully decorated with red roses last year, so I wonder how it'll look this year..."

"I'm also really curious about what the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo will wear."

"She's a lovely lady, so she'll look pretty no matter what she wears. Anyway..."

When the woman trailed off, another woman's eyes lit up and asked, "What's wrong? Go ahead. Tell us."

Her lips curled up as if she had been waiting for this very affirmation. "I am very curious about who Lady Floyen's partner is going to be." The main star of the banquet had only been mentioned for a little while before the topic had already shifted. Now, the women were beginning to reveal their true nature.

"It was Lady Floyen who made me interested in attending the banquet, especially since she always causes trouble..."

"There have been more scandalous rumors about her recently as of late, haven't there?"

"Ah, there's a rumor about the man she's seeing. I heard that he cannot be revealed because of his inferior status—"

Smash!

The woman speaking froze when an intense shattering sound resonated throughout the salon. Transparent debris lay haphazardly on the floor. People glanced at the glass shards and assumed the damage had been an accident. Just when they were about to resume their conversations, a man's low voice broke the silence.

"Does babbling about groundless rumors please you?"

The salon was a place where nobles could socialize, a place for honorable guests to gather. Although everyone's faces were concealed with masks, shrouding their explicit identities, there existed an unwritten rule to respect each other regardless. In response to the man's harsh language, the women who had been chatting sharpened their gazes.

"How can you be so rude?" a lady shot back. "People have even witnessed the man she was with!" She fanned herself haughtily, but her anger quickly fizzled out when she sensed the man's dangerous aura. A strange force began to overwhelm her, and she silently gasped for air.

The man gave her a crooked smile. "But did you see it for yourself?"

"E-even if I hadn't, that doesn't change the fact that she has committed many misdeeds. That's probably how the rumor started."

"Misdeeds, you say?" The man chuckled. "Try saying that in front of Lady Floyen herself," he muttered callously. He observed the silent masses around him, but everyone avoided his gaze. The mocking smile on his face disappeared. "I see that none of you would even dare to speak to the person involved."

There still came no response.

He turned to the attendants present. "Clean this mess up," he ordered sternly. They obeyed his order without hesitation.

Soon, the nobles began to recover their senses. They started criticizing the man.

"Who on earth is he? Why is he so rude?"

"He has no compassion for the ladies. How disrespectful..."

The man stared at the nobles who dared to speak against him. Eventually, they became overwhelmed by a strange, eerie feeling that drove them to shut their mouths right away.

The man laughed. "Pathetic trash," he spat.

Although it was much more of an explicit insult than anything he had said to them before, no one dared to stand up against him this time. They sensed that if they continued to offend this harsh man, they could pay for their transgressions with their lives.

When he finally turned around and left, the nobles watched him go with bated breaths, only exhaling when he was completely out of sight.



After eating breakfast, I went back to my room and began to write replies to the letters I had received. I had to let the two other men who offered to be my partner know that I had already found one. I also needed to reply to my other letters as well.

At that moment, someone knocked on my door. "This is Derrick, my lady," the butler greeted. His visits were always to be taken seriously. Derrick only sought me out if an important matter arose during Father's absence, or if there was a guest waiting for me.

I turned towards Merilyn. "Please open the door," I requested. When she did, Derrick came into view and bowed, looking a little tense.

"Did something happen, Derrick?"

"Edmund, the youngest son of Count Rowen, is here in response to your letter, my lady."

Oh, he came here directly instead of just writing to me. I was a bit taken aback, but since he was going to be my partner for the banquet, I saw no harm in getting to know each other in advance. "I'll prepare to head down. Can you please tell him to wait a moment?"

"Yes, my lady."

When Derrick left, I turned toward my maids. "Alright, then—"

I barely got out a couple words before they already began busting themselves with preparing my outfit. "Come this way, my lady. We will dress you as quickly and beautifully as possible."

I sighed upon noticing Sella and Merilyn's determined expressions. I just wanted to change my clothes...

Well, I guess it couldn't be helped.



A woman parted her red lips and swept her long, red hair to the side. "Oh my, it's been such a long time!" she gushed.

This was Madam Fresia, the owner of Blooms Salon. She greeted a man with smiling eyes, but he responded bluntly.

"I see that you've been letting those filthy nobles pollute this place," he said.

"It can't be helped," she shrugged. "They like to talk about other people."

The man smirked. "That's a pretty ironic thing to say coming from an information guild master."

"Well, obviously. The guild will go under if I don't maintain a sense of reality," the woman joked lightly. When the man poured himself a glass of liquor and began to drink willfully, she frowned. The bottle he had casually poured from was as expensive as an entire estate. He was a heavy drinker, too...

It was a wasteful thing for him to chug the expensive beverage down, but he was her financier, so she was powerless against him. Instead of scolding him, Fresia directed her attention towards something else that she had been meaning to talk about.

"You usually hide your feelings well and never treat other nobles as human beings," she noted. "Why were you so angry today?"

He coldly dismissed her observations. "I simply got a few dogs to shut up and stop barking because they were getting on my nerves. That's all."

Fresia sighed. He had become so strange after visiting Duke Floyen's mansion... although she didn't want to criticize him any further, she was determined to protect her master, and that meant preventing him from behaving as he pleased. "I hope you will be more careful about your behavior from now on," she warned.

The man sat on her couch and removed his mask, revealing a handsome, youthful face. "Dig deeper into the rumor about Lady Floyen," he ordered, ignoring her comment.

The woman frowned. "Do you mean the rumor about Lady Floyen's mysterious lover and their secret meetings?"

"Yes," he said. There was a chance that he might become responsible for her in the future. When he thought about that possibility, the man felt an odd sensation begin deep within his heart. "I want to know every little detail about her."

He had spoken without any sign of affection. Why was he looking after her, then? Maybe he was trying to find the duke's weakness? Fresia took a moment to watch him with a puzzled gaze. Then, she lowered her head.

"I will serve you to the best of my abilities, Your Highness, Prince Maximillian."



After getting dressed in a way that didn't seem like I tried too hard, I stepped into the drawing room. The young man waiting for me had blond hair and a handsome face. His bored countenance lit up as soon as he saw me.

"It's been a while, Lady Floyen," he greeted me.

"Welcome, Lord Rowen."

He stepped forward and bowed politely. "I apologize for coming to see you on such short notice."

"No worries. Guests are always welcome. Please, have a seat," I said.

He smiled at me. "Thank you for your hospitality."

He had brilliant blue eyes and hair that shone like spun gold, but he looked

even more charming when he smiled. Although he couldn't be compared to Mikhail, he was nonetheless handsome enough to live up to his reputation.

There were a lot of handsome side characters in this novel, I observed. Upon reaching that thought, Father's disciple suddenly came to mind. Although his personality sucked, he was probably the most handsome person I had ever seen apart from Father. There were times I would just blankly stare at him sleeping under my bed in the morning, wondering if it was all a dream.

I hope he wasn't starving for food out there. He should be doing well, right? I sighed upon realizing that Father's disciple was the cause of the unpleasantness I had felt since this morning. I indulged in such thoughts for a while until a low voice called out to me.

"My lady."

Oh, right. I snapped back to the present and directed my attention back to the esteemed son of Count Rowen, a fair and handsome man.

"Please bring us some refreshments, Merilyn," I requested. When she left to do so, we were left alone in the drawing room.

"I must tell you why I visited, my lady," he said, but to me, the reason was obvious. He probably came to thank me for becoming his partner and wanted to get acquainted with me before the banquet next week.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I was actually very surprised to receive a letter from you. You're rather different from what I've heard."

What did he mean by *heard*? Who did he hear from? "What do you mean?" I asked, voicing my bewilderment.

He looked at me, embarrassed. "Do you know what kind of rumors are floating around these days?"

Rumors? I stay at home all day, every day, so there was no way I would know.

"I haven't been to any social gatherings as of late. What are they about?"

His expression hardened and he sighed. "It's been said that you're deeply in love with another man. That was why I was surprised when I got a reply from

you."

"What?"

I was deeply in love? What kind of nonsense was this? All this time, I had been reading books at home and wandering around the mansion. Even when I went out, an entourage of knights would escort me. Since I spent most of my days in seclusion, I had no opportunity whatsoever to begin a new relationship. I was immensely confused by this ridiculous rumor when a thought suddenly occurred to me.

No way. Did someone see Father's disciple enter or leave my room through the window?

Although I was taken aback by this unexpected predicament, I couldn't reveal my unease in fear that it would solidify the rumors as fact. I calmed myself and glared at Lord Rowen.

"Who said I was deeply in love?" I asked, acting as if he had just said something utterly ridiculous.

He shook his head. "I don't know the details, either. This rumor has spread recently... I just happened to overhear it."

I frowned. If everyone knew that I was the subject of this rumor but no one knew my supposed lover's identity, it must've been created out of malice. If Father's disciple had indeed been spotted, whoever started this rumor probably just guessed who he was to add a few more details to the story. They might have taken note of his handsome appearance as well.

After grasping the situation, I deliberately raised my voice to show my astonishment. "I stay at home most of the time, so that's not possible! If necessary, I can gather witnesses like those who have recently visited the estate."

In response to my stubborn denial, he let out a sigh of relief. "So, the rumors weren't true after all."

I smiled. "Yes, so you can rest assured."

Suddenly, he kneeled before me. "My lady..."

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Rowen?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

He continued to stare at me seriously. He was making no effort whatsoever to stand back up. Was there something else that he needed to tell me? As I observed him anxiously, he lowered his head.

"I'm sorry," he muttered regretfully.

I frowned at his sudden apology. "You're sorry? What do you mean?"

"I made a big mistake."

"A mistake? How?"

"I thought you were going to refuse my request, so I had already partnered with another lady."

His unexpected declaration hit me like a ton of bricks. "You mean you acted rashly before ever even receiving my reply?" I wanted to shout.

Always responding to requests was proper etiquette, as well as waiting for a response before turning around and asking someone else. I was lucky that I hadn't sent a response to the two other men yet, otherwise I would've had to attend the banquet by myself, and if I did that, Father would've tried to spring the list of marriage candidates on me.

Lord Rowen's expression twisted as if he was truly troubled. "I have always dreamed of this day. Unfortunately, I lack—no, I was careless."

He sounded so distressed that it seemed like he was genuinely sorry. I felt relieved that he came. Thanks to him, I had learned about the ill-intended rumor. If I ignored this newfound information, it might create a mess in the future... although it was bothersome, I had to dig deeper into it.

I forced out a laugh to show that I wasn't offended. "Don't worry, I can just find another partner," I assured him. "Why don't you get up?"

"Are you an angel?" he muttered under his breath.

"What?" I asked, wondering if I had heard him wrong.

"Oh, no. I meant that... you have the heart of an angel," he quickly amended.

Hm... I was obviously a villainess, but he still compared me to an angel. Other

people would laugh at this comparison, but I forgave him, knowing that he was just exaggerating.

"Although I can't make up for one of the biggest mistakes in my life, I truly regret it."

His excessive apologies were probably because he didn't want me to tell Father about this incident. That was obvious enough. I never intended to tell on him, though. He didn't need to go this far...

I looked back at his earnest gaze. It was making me uncomfortable, so I tried to console him, but he spoke again before I could do so.

"Most of all, I'm afraid that my careless actions may have hurt your feelings," he said sorrowfully.

I was growing tired of this. He kept going on despite my repeated attempts to tell him that it was all okay. "Don't be, Lord Rowen," I tried again. "I must thank you for bringing this rumor to my attention and for taking the time to visit."

"Thank you for forgiving me, Lady Floyen," he said, smiling bitterly. When it looked like he was about to leave, he suddenly leaned in and whispered, "I was upset because I thought I wasn't qualified... but I'm comforted by your words, my lady."

Huh? Not qualified? I was about to ask him what he meant by that, but I didn't have the chance because he continued once more.

"In that case, why don't we..." He trailed off, abruptly shutting his mouth. He stared at the window behind me, rapidly paling.

Why was he acting like that? Did he see something scary? I turned around to check on what could've caused him to look so pale, but I didn't see anything unusual.

"Did something happen, Lord Rowen?" I asked, incredibly confused.

He stood up abruptly. "Please excuse me for leaving in such a hurry, Lady Floyen."

"What?" It was considered rude for guests to leave before having tea. He had already breached etiquette once, and now he was going to do it again? It was

really disrespectful. I looked up at him, astonished.

"I forgot that I had some urgent business to take care of today. This is all because I'm lacking... please forgive me," he said with some struggle.

I guess it couldn't be helped... although it was rude for him to leave like this, I didn't want to hold onto someone who clearly looked sick. "I understand," I nodded. "It looks like you're not feeling well, so please take care of yourself."

"I wish the kind and beautiful lady happiness as well as a good partner."

After rambling some more blessings, he bowed deeply and left.

Well, it wasn't a big deal because there were other people who I hadn't responded to yet. Not long after he left, Merilyn came back with a cart full of snacks and refreshments. It was actually a blessing in disguise that he left early since I preferred drinking tea alone.

"Merilyn, please set—" Before I could tell her to arrange the table for me alone, someone else stepped into the drawing room. "Oh, Father... hello."

I managed to greet him as naturally as I could. He merely nodded instead of answering. Hopefully he didn't overhear my conversation with Lord Rowen, otherwise he might bring up the whole marriage thing. His sudden appearance made me anxious, and that feeling only grew when he slowly approached me.

"Are you drinking tea?" he asked.

"Yes."

He sat in the chair across from me as if it was the most natural thing to do. "Good. I'm thirsty as well."

I glanced at the steaming teapot, then back at him with quivering eyes. He was going to drink some hot tea when he was thirsty?

I chose not to comment on the strangeness of it.

"The tea is hot, so you should probably drink it when it cools down... or you could just drink some water," I suggested.

"I can talk to you until the tea cools down," he replied.

It would've been more reasonable to just leave and drink some water. I

couldn't believe he was waiting here and having tea with me instead.

Merilyn placed two cups of tea on the table before us. I wouldn't be drinking alone, it seemed. Father lifted the teacup gracefully and gazed over its rim at me. His stare felt warlike.

I smiled brightly and picked up a cookie. Now I had to drink in this tense atmosphere...



"What did you just say?" a low voice asked.

Madam Fresia beamed. "Lady Floyen accepted Lord Rowen's offer to become her partner," she said.

Max felt a surge of annoyance at the word *partner*. "I see," he said, trying to look calm.

"On the surface, he is a handsome and well-mannered young man, but it's rumored that he's a womanizer who's reduced many young ladies to tears," Fresia added playfully.

Max's face twisted. Jubelian, that woman... he had told her not to be blinded by appearances....

For some reason, anger flared up inside of him. "So, are those two are going to the ball together?" he asked sharply.

Fresia clicked her tongue and said, "I don't know if this is a good or bad thing, but he turned the lady down."

Max raised his voice. "How dare a count's son reject someone like her!"

Fresia clicked her tongue again and sighed. Judging by his reactions alone, it was impossible to figure out what kind of news Max wanted to hear. If he was concerned about the lady, he should just offer to become her partner, instead...

"Did you find out who started the rumors about her?"

Fresia's eyes lit up. "Ah, yes."

"Who was it?" Max growled, bloodthirst creeping from every syllable.

Fresia smiled. "It turned out to be Viscount Droil." When Max's expression

hardened, she added, "Isn't it funny? She used to be Sir Mikhail's lover, but he does nothing while his troubled cousin slanders her."

Max descended into deep thought for a while. "Find out every weakness of Marquis Hessen and Viscount Droil," he said eventually. "I also want a report on the others who offered to become her partner."

"What? But...!" Before Fresia had a chance to protest, he disappeared. She sighed. "That information had already been purchased by Duke Floyen," she muttered.



Although the atmosphere was tense, I remained relatively calm. Now that I was used to Father acting like this, I learned to control my emotions. I slowly sipped my tea.

"Did you find a partner?" he suddenly asked.

I had been expecting this question, but I knew it wouldn't do me any good to tell him the truth. I needed to buy some time before I could find a different partner because if I told him that I got rejected, he might mention the marriage list.

"I'm still trying to choose," I said calmly, setting down the teacup.

"If you can't find a partner..." he trailed off, carefully watching me. "Be sure to tell me."

As if to imprint the words into my head, he spoke firmly, each syllable carrying a weight of its own. In that case, what was he going to do if I informed him like he wanted?

Only the most ominous possibilities came to mind. In one scenario, he would deign me pathetic, demanding that I meet with someone from the list of prospective marriage partners. Things only got worse from there.

Ah, life was so difficult. I lifted my teacup to my lips once more, feeling both thirsty and immensely sorry for myself.

"The tea is still hot," Father said unexpectedly. I stopped myself just in time, swallowing a dry laugh. It was like he knew that I couldn't drink hot beverages.

I didn't think he said that on purpose, though. Because I still had trouble understanding Father's intentions like this, I figured it wouldn't hurt to stay careful around him. I couldn't afford to slip up with my life at risk.

Now I had both the rumors and the marriage list to worry about... ugh, why were things getting so complicated? I only had a week left until the banquet, so I didn't have much time to find another partner.

I needed to make a decision quickly but carefully. I stared at my steaming cup of tea and took care to avoid burning my tongue as I took a few more sips.



Max had decided to visit the Floyen household, but his master's sudden appearance forced him to stay at a distance. The duke was rarely at home... why was he here today of all days? Max was displeased by this situation, but his gaze nevertheless found Jubelian's room, focusing of its own accord.

Was she in there? He tried to sense her presence but he felt nothing. Where did she go, then? She was almost always in her room, so her absence filled Max with annoyance. Was she in the library? He was in the midst of guessing where the woman was when his face suddenly fell.

Did she... leave to ask another man to be her partner? Shot with sudden displeasure, Max gritted his teeth. He felt the same strange feeling he did back in the salon.

Whether she found a partner or not had nothing to do with him. He tried to convince himself of this, but as he prepared to leave, he couldn't take his eyes off a certain window on the third floor. It was as if a part of him was waiting for her to return.



"I'll be going back to my room, Father," I said.

Father nodded. "Alright. I will be heading out later today."

He frequently left home without a word, so I didn't understand why he was suddenly reporting this to me. I tried to come up with an explanation for his behavior, but in the end, I decided not to dwell on it for too long, thinking that

it would be more beneficial to solve my own problems first.

"Ah, yes," I said, preparing myself to rise. "Have a nice trip."

"There's something I need to solve."

"Oh, I see. I didn't ask, though?" I was tempted to say, but as the inferior half of this relationship, I didn't have the right. I had no choice but to go along with how he wanted the conversation to flow. "What needs to be solved?" I forced out.

"I have to finish warning some people," he said with a nod.

Although I didn't understand what he meant, I knew that the people he was going to warn weren't going to sleep well tonight. *I feel bad for you guys. I'm sorry*, I thought to them in pity.

"I will be back before dinner."

I didn't care when he would come back. Tomorrow or the next few days—it didn't matter to me. I couldn't tell him, however, lest I incur his wrath and find myself saddled with someone from that dreaded list. "I will wait for you," I said insincerely.

"Alright." Father observed me for a while longer then nodded. His sudden change of attitude was strange, but I could guess his intentions and it made me want to laugh.

By telling me that he had plans to warn some people, was he trying to make an example of them? My heart ached at the thought, but I managed to overcome the discomfort and left the drawing room. When I returned to my room, Merilyn approached me.

"A letter from Count Arlo's daughter has arrived, my lady," she reported.

Hm, another letter. Rose frequently wrote to me these days even though my last letter said that I would spare further discussion until we met at her birthday banquet. It seemed like she was having a lot of fun with it, though. What did she write this time? I opened it with a sigh. Then, my eyes widened upon seeing that she had written about the rumors.

What was this?

Dear Lady Floyen,

How are you? Although this isn't an important matter, I wanted to inform you about a ridiculous rumor I had overheard. In short, it's said that you have a lover who you gifted cufflinks made of blue diamonds.

As my head started to ache from the news, I realized two things: first, I still had to give back Father's pendant and cufflinks. Second, the cufflinks were the source of the rumors. The only people who knew about them were the escort knights, the shopkeepers, and Radian, who I had briefly encountered in the store. The escort knights were out of the equation because not only were they our vassals, they also knew that I usually kept to myself at home. The shopkeepers couldn't be so bold as to start such rumors for fear of decapitation.

Still, even if I had been ignorant of these perfectly valid explanations, the answer had been obvious from the beginning.

Radian.

How could he be so delusional as to start up a bunch of rumors just because I bought a pair of cufflinks? His notoriety as a viper was fitting, seeing as how he had bitten off more than he could chew. Now that I thought about it, Lord Rowen made a lot of excuses. He must've found another partner after hearing this rumor... and the same thing was probably going to happen if I accepted Sir Boromir or Lord Crocus's offers to become my partner.

My only option was to find a partner who wouldn't be deterred by this rumor, otherwise, Father might resort to the marriageable prospects list. However, the problem was... did such a person exist?

As I became lost in thought, the sound of someone knocking on my window broke my concentration. What is it? I turned around to look at the source and a familiar, handsome face came into view. He looked at me and pointed at the latch.

Ah, Father's disciple was here again. I didn't think that he was being sincere in his eccentrically penned note, but he was, it seemed. Coming and going as he pleased, though... how bothersome. I sighed and unlocked the window. He opened it and climbed into my room.

He was still handsome... wait, no—I couldn't think about that right now.

Reminded of what was troubling me, I snapped out of my foolish thoughts. If someone witnessed him coming into my room, the rumor might establish itself as fact. And, well... that wasn't all, either. Nothing good would come from getting closer to him.

I tried asking him not to visit for the time being. "Hey, you know you can't—"

He cut me off. "Where were you just now?" he asked, his gaze piercing.

He was being ridiculous. I frowned slightly. Considering that we hadn't met in a while, his question was absurd

"I said, where were you just now?" he repeated.

Although I wanted to ask him the same thing—stuff like where he went and why he came back so suddenly—I didn't want to argue with someone as immature as he was. I already had a lot on my mind.

"Downstairs," I said.

His tense expression subsided. "I see." He even smiled a little, much to my bewilderment. His moods were difficult to follow.

I didn't have the time to deal with him today. I had a lot of other things to think about. I glanced at him and decided to make him Father's responsibility. "If you're here to see Father, I think he's still home—"

He cut me off again. "No, he just left."

If he didn't want to see Father, why did he come? Did he get kicked out again? My thoughts became even more convoluted as I tried to think about possible scenarios that could've explained his presence on top of my own pre-existing problems.

"Why are you sighing?" he asked with a frown.

Although we became closer after spending a few days together, I wasn't comfortable enough to tell him my troubles. "I'm just worried about a lot of things," I said vaguely.

"Why? What's going on?"

"It's not a big deal..." I trailed off, hoping to end the conversation there.

"Tell me," he said. "I won't tell anyone else."

When I gazed into his crimson eyes, I recalled the time I had told him about my issues with Father. Would I feel better like I did back then? "Then please promise me that you won't tell Father," I said. I watched him, waiting for a response.

He nodded gently. "Okay, I promise."

"A hundred gold bars if you break the promise?" I joked, amused that he was being strangely obedient.

He pulled a face. "Stop joking around and just tell me. I'll never break it."

I was still worried, but then I recalled the days we spent together. His firm voice and gaze also made me trust him a little more. Even if he told someone, the worst that could happen was that I'd get scolded.

When I made up my mind to tell him, he must've thought I was still hesitating because he said, "If I say anything, even by accident, I will give you all my wealth. So, go ahead and tell me."

I burst out laughing because he spoke with such a serious air. He didn't even have a home to return to, but he was betting me all his money? How strange! I quickly forgot about how upset I was.

"Why are you laughing?" He flushed a little, looking as if my amusement had bothered him. I barely managed to suppress my laughter, but I did it in the end. I knew he would just get angry if I continued.

"Then it's a deal," I said. "If I find out that Father knows, I'll make sure to take everything you have."

He scowled. "Yes, so hurry up and tell me," he said sharply, unlike his previously accommodating tone. Although I didn't like his attitude, I felt like I could trust him anyway.

"Well..." I began slowly.



Max's foul mood improved when he saw Jubelian. He had even felt relieved when he found out that she had only been downstairs.

When she smiled, though, his face began to burn. Did he... catch a cold? After mastering swordsmanship, he had never gotten sick, but after busying himself with roaming around and investigating the rumors about her, maybe he was feeling a little off.

If she saw him like this, she might think him weak, so he quickly looked away, hiding the slight blush upon his cheeks.

"Yes, so hurry up and tell me," he said.

"Well..." She hesitated for a moment. "There have been malicious rumors about me."

Max clenched his fists. It was only a matter of time before she found out, he guessed. This was inevitable. Nevertheless, he carefully observed her for any shifts in her countenance, worried that she might've been distressed by the rumors.

"I'm not actually worried about them," she said, and she seemed to be telling the truth. Any noblewoman would've been ashamed by such disgraceful rumors, but she didn't look to be.

"You're not?" he asked

"I have a clear conscience. Besides, a relationship like that is nothing to be ashamed of. It's just..."

"Just?"

Jubelian smiled bitterly. "It seems like everyone who offered to become my partner to an upcoming banquet I'm attending is going to back out because of them."

Max clenched his fists unconsciously. Why on earth were those idiots getting swayed by such groundless rumors? He would never do such...

Surprised by his own train of thought, Max paused. What was he thinking? A sense of shame washed over him, but Jubelian's pleasant voice snapped him back to attention.

"Of course, I wasn't upset about that, either. It doesn't matter whether I have a partner or not."

Max sighed, feeling somewhat discouraged. "What's troubling you, then?" he asked sharply.

The woman's eyes suddenly dropped, making him wonder if he sounded too harsh. He had never asked himself this question before, but he found himself reflecting upon his tone now nevertheless. His regret was fleeting, however, because the woman began speaking again.

"The problem is... Father made a list of prospective marriage partners. I ended up finding out about it."

Prospective marriage partners. Max froze when he heard those unexpected words. "A list of prospective marriage partners?" he asked to confirm.

"Yes. I saw a marked-up list of noblemen from some wealthy families," she explained. "He didn't even ask for my opinion before he made it, so it's likely that he'll force me to meet them."

Max clenched his fists at the thought of his master. The duke was trying to marry his daughter off... if Max had heard about this in the past, he would've praised his master's actions, assuming that his master had finally come to his senses. But for some reason, he just felt angry. Was this the type of person his master really was? Was he only pretending to care about his daughter in front of him? Max wore a menacing expression, inexplicably furious.

"That's why I have to find a partner," Jubelian continued. "I don't want to go on a blind date with any of the men on the list."

Max unconsciously studied her, unable to tire of her eyes no matter how many times he saw them. They looked like periwinkles scattered across a clear lake. He parted his lips, powerless against the strange impulse that overtook him, jabbing constantly at his aching heart.

"There could be a suitable partner nearby," he said.

"Nearby?"

When she observed him with quivering eyes, Max felt his heart tingle. She

had a good eye... seeing as to how she turned to him right away...

He felt like he was going to burst into laughter once he let his guard down, but he hurriedly turned away the moment he realized this. What was he thinking?

"You're right," she said suddenly.

"What?" Max gaped at Jubelian, surprised that she had agreed so easily. She suddenly took his hand, wearing a bright smile. If he wanted to, he could easily shake off her soft, dainty grip, but he simply watched her, unmoving.

"What was I thinking? There was a suitable partner all this time," she said.

He was painfully alert and his mouth dried up. She was still holding his hand and it became increasingly warm. Why was he so nervous? He frowned at his body's woefully out of character reaction. Because of a weak woman like her, he...

Max glared at Jubelian, but the moment he met her eyes, embarrassment flooded him and he hurried to pull away from her.

"I can't believe you're only realizing this now," he said bluntly.

She maintained that same bright smile upon her beautiful face. "I know, right? If it weren't for you, I would've been worried about this for the rest of the day."

His heart tingled with increasing intensity. A partner... Although it was going to be bothersome, he supposed he could be that for her. Max made up his mind to attend the banquet with her.

"A man who Father trusts and approves of... I will ask Geraldine," she declared.

Although the woman didn't mention Mikhail or any of the men who had asked to be her partner, Max felt his mood take an immediate plunge. A man his master approved of? "Who is that?" he asked, immensely irritated.

"Ah, he's one of my escort knights. He's also my maternal cousin, so I won't have to worry about any rumors because of him. There's no one else better suited for this job," Jubelian said jubilantly. She seemed so pleased that her

problem had been solved that she remained ignorant of Max's foul mood.

Still, his indignance gradually subsided. If this guy she was thinking of was a relative, it would probably be alright, he guessed. When he realized that he was relieved, however, his face twisted. What did any of this have to do with him, anyway? He just needed to learn more about his master's weakness...

As Max took care to recall his original purpose, Jubelian's defenseless grin came into view. "Thank you," she said. Her smile was so radiant that the dull ache in his heart became followed by intense pounding. Once he was aware of it, it frightened him.

"I will be going now," he said abruptly. If he stayed any longer, Max wasn't sure he could retain control of himself. However, when he tried to leave, looking almost as if he was running away from something, Jubelian called out to him.

"Hey, wait a second!"

Instead of responding, Max glared at her fiercely, warning her not to come any closer. Strangely, his heart throbbed painfully when he noticed her understand this.

She beheld him calmly and wore the same expression she did when she saw him through the window earlier. Then, she placed some pouches on the floor, stepping back afterwards. "Take these," she instructed.

What? Max checked what was inside the pouches and frowned. Money? Why was she giving this to him? He was about to throw the pouches back on the floor and tell her he didn't need them, but then he suddenly met her kind eyes. Her gaze reminded him of the times she had covered him with a blanket and given him food to eat.

Slowly, he lowered his arm.

"It's not free. As repayment, you can help me out if I ever need it," she suggested.

He hadn't planned on ever coming back again, but he couldn't bring himself to say that. He slipped the money into his pockets and prepared to leave the room. "If you have no place to go, you can always come back," she said. "Okay?"

As if an irresistible force was compelling him, Max impulsively nodded at the sight of her warm smile.



"Lord Boromir decided to give up after one word from me..." Regis thought, yet despite the easy obedience he had observed from the previous two men he had visited, it was a mistake to think that the last person would be the same.

So, this was the foreign minister's son? Regis coldly stared at the young man drinking tea before him, appearing by all means relaxed.

"So, you're warning me to stay away from your daughter because I don't meet her standards, Your Excellency?" Although the young man's smiling face was quite handsome, he was still lacking in comparison to Jubelian herself.

"Yes," Regis said. Despite his straightforward answer, the young man managed to remain calm.

"Well, it's true that she's better than all the other ladies."

Although Regis agreed with him, it didn't mean he approved of the young man. "I clearly told you not to approach my daughter, Ronald Herman Crocus."

After giving this final warning, he stood up.

Now that he thought about it, he was also on the marriage list. The duke was determined to revise it; it had been bothering him recently, so he prepared to return home to do so.

"You should change your mind soon," Lord Crocus said. "Your daughter will come to love me."

In response to his boastful claim, Regis turned around and stared the young man down. His eyes lowered when he imagined Mikhail's fine characteristics on the young man's face.

"Do you really think my daughter will appreciate a lowly thing like you?"

The young man tried to maintain his composure, but he suddenly had trouble breathing through the oppressive aura of the unrestrained, transcendent being

in front of him. Was this Duke Floyen's...!

It seemed like he had pushed the duke too far. By showing interest in his daughter, he had wanted to bring the empire's hero to his side for his family's benefit. He had tried to make their meeting memorable, but it had backfired on him instead.

"I have met a lot of people like you..." the duke began. "Opportunists who treat people like tools to get what they want."

From a young age, the young man had been taught by his father, the minister of foreign affairs, to never back down. He had learned to never be the first one to break a stare, to relax in any tense situation, and to always be confident and fearless. But despite years of practice, the young man was nevertheless cowed by Duke Floyen's chilling glare.

"Does my daughter seem easy to you?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry..." When he managed to apologize, the duke's intangible yet insurmountable energy loosened its grip on Lord Crocus.

Regis stared at him coldly. "One mistake is enough," he muttered underneath his breath. Then, he left the drawing room, his blue eyes rife with bitterness.



After he had left without another word last time, I had felt quite restless since I didn't get a chance to give him some travel expenses. When he took the money, it was like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Now I didn't have to worry about him being left hungry for the time being. It was a relief.

I disliked it when others didn't eat properly, so I was discomfited by the thought of him starving outside. Perhaps it was because I was often hungry in my past life due to my impoverished circumstances. Perhaps it was because I felt attached to him after he stayed with me for a while. Either way, he had taken the money and I had given him a way to repay me so he wouldn't feel bad. Things should be okay with him.

Although I had told him to help me if I needed it, it was just an empty request. As a noblewoman, I had no need to ask a commoner for help. I only said that because I didn't want him to think I was patronizing him.

Now, I had to solve the root of my other problem. Before I could ask Geraldine to be my partner for the banquet, I needed to find a way to undo the damage Radian had done. How could I screw him over? The cufflinks I bought for Father were made of blue diamonds—a rare and precious gemstone—that were fashioned with a unique design. Nobles tended to avoid things that looked similar to each other. The odds were that the rumors spiraled out of control because I still held onto these expensive jewels.

I needed to find evidence to defend myself with, but despite my determination, I couldn't think of anything. I began to feel helpless and a dull ache spread throughout my head.

At that moment, a thought suddenly occurred to me. "Oh, yes. I should do that!" I told myself. It wouldn't hurt to try this idea even if it didn't work.

I called Merilyn over. "When Father comes back, tell him that I want to see him. I have something to give to him," I said.



The sun had yet to set when Regis returned thanks to his efficiency in dealing with matters. Dinner was usually after seven, so he still had some time to spare. Fortunately, he wasn't late. He was relieved to be able to have dinner with his daughter.

He handed his coat to Derrick. "The men on the prospective marriage list are substandard," he ordered. "Redo it."

Derrick sighed. He chose from noble families ranked higher than marquis, so if he had to leave any more men out of the list, there wasn't going to be many left...

Although he was displeased, Derrick replied professionally. "Yes, master," he said. "I will do my best."

"If you can, please pick candidates with nice personalities."

Within the aristocracy, trying to find someone in possession of good character was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Although he felt helpless, Derrick nodded without betraying a hint of his dissatisfaction. "I will do as directed," he said.

"Let me know when it's dinnertime."

Derrick turned around, then stopped as if he just remembered something. "Oh, the lady says that she has something to give to you, master."

"Give?" The duke turned towards him, his eyes widening in disbelief. "Alright. Tell her that we can have tea before dinner."

"I will inform the lady."

When Derrick left, Regis glanced at the clock. It was half-past four, but teatime was usually around five, so he still had thirty minutes until then. He had to wait for a while regardless.

He sighed softly. Then, he stared at the paper on his desk. Many names were written below the 'Prospective Marriage Partners heading. Among them were foreign royals, high-ranking aristocrats, and distinguished men from high society. Except for a few names, most of them were crossed out. Regis fixated his gaze on an unmarked name: Ronald Herman Crocus. He picked up his pen and scratched the name out before resuming his study of the list with a sigh.

There wasn't anyone who met all of his daughter's conditions. "I'm not going to marry a man unless he has everything. I want the most wealthy, famous, and competent guy there is," she had said.

Regis mulled over her words for a while then spotted a circled name on the list. It was his only disciple and the imperial family's only successor to the throne, Maximillian.

Now that he put some more thought into it, Max was the only guy who met all of his daughter's requirements. He had originally intended to cross him out, but instead he had accidentally made it look like he had issued a mark of approval. Regis chuckled softly at this blunder for a second. Then, he furrowed his eyebrows. His daughter was more than what this crafty prince deserved.

Right as he moved to cross out Max's name, Derrick's voice came from outside the door. "It's time for tea with the lady, Master."

Ah, the time had already come. Regis ended up leaving his office without making the final correction to the list.



When I arrived in the living room, Father had already sat down.

"Take a seat," he said.

"Yes, Father." I sat down in front of him and deliberately tried to seem friendly. "I'm delighted to be drinking tea with you."

Although I felt the opposite of affectionate inside, I was flattering him for a reason: I needed to get him to wear the cufflinks. Radian's rumors gained credibility because the whereabouts of the cufflinks I bought were unknown, so this misunderstanding could only be cleared up if Father wore them in public.

However, something else was bothering me. "You're at home more often these days, Father," I said.

He nodded. "Because I promised," he said vaguely. Although I didn't know what he had promised or who he had made that promise to, his frequent presence at home would only make my life more difficult. If he kept acting like this, my plan would...

Anyway, I had to persuade him to wear my gift first. If I could get Father to don the cufflinks and visit a crowded place like the imperial palace, the rumors would surely end.

"I heard that there was an assassination attempt at the imperial palace. Is everyone okay?" I asked.

"You don't need to concern yourself with those matters," Father said coldly. Usually, I would've stopped talking because his tone had offended me, but I had an important goal to accomplish today.

"I'm just worried that if you stay at home for too long, the imperial palace won't be as safe. You are the strongest swordsman in the empire, after all. I understand if you are desperately needed there, Father."

I busied myself with flattering him into more work, but then he suddenly said, "I plan to retire within the year."

What? Retire?

I was taken aback because, relatively, he was still too young to even consider

that. If that was the case, however, my plan wasn't going to work... If he intended to live in seclusion after retiring, I could only try to convince him to go to social gatherings, which would be virtually impossible since I had never seen him attend any parties. In the novel, he hadn't even attended my debutante. Everything was going to crumble apart.

"But—"

Although I wanted to persuade him otherwise, he cut me off. "I have been thinking about it for a long time, so don't try to convince me," he said firmly. He seemed to be warning me to not interfere with his personal matters any further, so I backed down, worried that he wouldn't bother wearing the cufflinks if I kept offending him.

"Alright. It's good that you'll be at home more often, but staying inside all the time can get boring. You should think about attending social gatherings to occasionally refresh yourself," I said cheerfully, forcing a smile onto my lips.

However, instead of answering my subtle invitation, he just nodded slightly. It seemed like he wasn't in a bad mood now, so I decided to use this as an opening to give him his pendant and cufflinks.

"This is the pendant you left in the library some time ago, Father." I gave him the object, which he took impassively.

"I see that it was in your possession until now," he said indifferently. I briefly wondered if he even knew that he had misplaced it, but that thought disappeared when I realized that his response was natural given his dry personality.

He would probably receive the gift the same way, I suspected. Without expecting much, I gave him the box that contained the cufflinks. "Have this, too," I said.

Father glared at the box and asked, "What... is this?" He sounded a little hesitant, which was unlike him.

"It's a gift," I said before he could comment any further. I needed to act fast in case he assumed it was something strange. "You can open it."

He silently unwrapped the box and did as I said. When he saw the cufflinks,

his eyes widened, but he stayed silent, so I figured that he didn't like my gift very much. Well, that didn't matter to me, though. It was a reaction directly in line with my expectations.

"I was reminded of you when I went shopping recently. I bought this because I thought it would complement you," I added, laughing casually.

He nodded.

Well, I was glad he accepted the gift. If he refused it, I would've had to give it to Geraldine...

Geraldine wasn't just a vassal or the head of the Floyen knights; he was also my cousin from my mother's side. Since the custom was to give cufflinks to both family members and lovers, he was the most suitable option besides Father, as it would prove that I had purchased it for platonic purposes. He needed to show up at Rose's banquet as my partner too, because doing so would imply that I still nursed a wounded heart and had no intention of dating another person at the moment.

In this scenario, Father wouldn't be able to force me to meet someone on the marriage list. High society was unusually obsessed with appearances, so if people found out that Father arranged a blind date for his heartbroken daughter, he would be criticized. This plan was the best way to resolve the arranged marriage problem as well as the unpleasant rumors about me.

"About my partner..." I trailed off, but Father nodded at me to go on. "I know you are very busy, Father, but for the banquet tomorrow—"

I wanted to ask him if I could borrow Geraldine, his precious subordinate and nephew, but Father's low voice cut me off. "Alright."

Did he know what I was going to say already? Although I was confused, I decided not to question his decision in case he might change his mind. Now that I had his permission, I needed to ask Geraldine to go to the banquet with me.

Everything was working out as smoothly as I had hoped. I picked up a madeleine and was about to take a bite when Father suddenly looked at me and said, "Since that is your wish, I'll accompany you to the banquet."

I dropped the madeleine.

That wasn't the plan, Father!



As Planned

Max stood in a tower next to Madam Fresia's salon wearing a confused expression. That woman, Jubelian... what in the world was she planning? He didn't understand why she looked at him with those eyes nor why she was so kind to him. What did she want him to do? He recalled her face then sighed. He was discomfited by her caring eyes and how they revealed how she had expected nothing from him.

Suddenly, he felt distressed.

This was pathetic. He had no reason to seek that woman out anymore, so why was he always thinking about her? Max tried to erase her existence from his mind, but time and time again, for reasons strange and unknown to him, he would be reminded of her smiling face and friendly eyes.

Damn it!

Max's expression warped violently, but at that moment, the door swung open.

"Oh, dear," Fresia gasped. "Why do you look so irritated, my lord?"

"If you have something to report, say it and leave," Max replied coldly.

He doesn't need to be so hostile when she was just worried about him... although Fresia was displeased, she managed to control her expression and deliver her news. "It's nothing much. Your standin, Victor, has sent a letter."

"Concerning?"

"Ah, the emperor's envoys are refusing to return to the imperial palace because Your Highness keeps delaying your return to the capital."

Simply put, he was now under surveillance. A bloodthirsty smile manifested upon Max's face. "He was the one who delayed my return indefinitely when I wanted to go back before. Why can't he wait a little longer now?" he wondered out loud. "Tell Victor that his actions must look flawless," he instructed icily.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Fresia was about to leave the room, but she suddenly turned around as if she

just remembered something. "Oh, and about Lady Floyen... it seems like she'll be ignored by many at the banquet since there are rumors floating around that she doesn't get along with her father."

Max had barely managed to forget about her, but now he had been reminded of her once again. He scowled furiously. "You don't have to report anything about her from now on," he spat.

He had been so curious about her until now. What caused this change of heart? Fresia was puzzled, but she nodded, knowing how capricious her lord could be. "Yes, Your Highness." She tried to leave again, but a soft voice stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"Huh?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Shouldn't you at least finish the work you've started?" Max proposed harshly.

No matter how hard she tried, Fresia just couldn't keep up with her lord's whims. What on earth was he talking about?



"Have you decided to attend Count Arlo's banquet this week, Lady Daffodil?"

"Of course. And you, Lady Cosmos?"

"Yes, I will be attending as well."

In Madam Fresia's salon, nobles concealed their identity with masks and aliases. Now they were busy talking about Count Arlo's banquet, which would take place over the weekend. This was natural, given that the person at the very center of the rumor mill these days had unexpectedly decided to attend.

"I'm really curious about who Lady Floyen's partner is going to be. What do you think, Madam?"

Fresia was quietly drinking a glass of expensive liquor in the corner. When all the attention fell on her, she smiled as if she indeed knew something. "I'm not sure. She might attend with her relative, Sir Ronel... or she might come alone."

"Oh my! What makes you think that?"

Fresia took another sip of the amber drinks he held and parted her red lips. "If she enters with another man after breaking up with Sir Mikhail, she'll only add fuel to the fire. But if she enters with a relative such as Sir Ronel, or even alone, she'll be able to avoid some of the criticisms that await her."

Everyone admired her speculations.

"Now that I think about it, it's not a bad idea for her to enter alone," someone said.

"Although there's a lot of talk regarding her behavior, many noblemen have long since admired her beauty."

"As expected of Madam Fresia! How wise!"

Fresia laughed at their compliments, the corners of her eyes crinkling with mirth. "No, no, it's all uncertain. I'm just guessing."

"Even so, your insight is amazing!"

Fresia's smile grew. What was truly amazing was that these people couldn't even think that far themselves.

Nevertheless, it felt nice to be at the center of attention even if the target of their admiration was the character she played rather than her own self. Fresia smirked a bit as she continued to drink out of her glass.

"Will you be attending the banquet as well, Madam?"

Prompted by the question, Fresia recalled what her lord had said.

"Fresia, attend the banquet and approach Lady Floyen," he had commanded. "If she gets into trouble, help her. I'm asking you to do this because she might be useful in the future, not because I like her."

She had been ordered to take care of Lady Floyen, as well as keep watch on her. And if that wasn't enough...

"Just in case, I'll attend the banquet to keep an eye on her, too."

Her unpredictable lord was going to follow Lady Floyen to the banquet, too! Why did he give her so many tedious tasks? She had to assist the rumored lady

and her selfish master all by herself! Fresia sighed, brooding over her lord's command. Then, she gathered her wits about her and met the noblewomen's curious gazes.

"Ah, yes. I received an invitation, so I must go," she said gracefully.

Not going meant disobeying a direct order. She had no choice. She sighed and downed more liquor. The nobles around her had no means of understanding her thoughts, so they resumed their chatter.

"Then we can make a bet about who the lady's partner would be," a noblewoman joked while laughing. Instead of answering her, Fresia just nodded and laughed along.

At that moment, another lady asked a question that she had been withholding. "What happens if Lady Floyen attends alone, as Madam speculated? We will never be able to ascertain whether the rumors about her were true, will we?"

"No, no, that's not necessarily the case. We could just find the person wearing the cufflinks!" another woman said. Since they began theorizing amongst themselves, Fresia didn't feel the need to intervene, so she continued to drink soundlessly.

"By the way, I heard that the successor of Marquis Hessen, Sir Mikhail, will be attending the banquet as well."

"Oh!" Everyone perked up at this news. A pair of parted lovers were going to reunite at the banquet hall. How intriguing!

"I wonder who his partner will be."

"Me too! He's so handsome that Lady Floyen did all sorts of things for his sake."

"He's very competent as well... I'm sure many young ladies want to be his partner."

All the women in the salon smiled happily, thinking about Mikhail's outstanding appearance.

"He must be relieved that the lady who used to harass him has found a new

lover..."

"Ah, that's right! They were said to be lovers, but Sir Mikhail didn't reciprocate her feelings at all. It's a well-known fact that Lady Floyen was the only one of them in love."

Fresia nodded slightly in agreement, but her smile fell from her lips when a man passed by her table. He looked very drunk. Although this salon's dreadful patrons acted refined for appearance's sake, sometimes moments where people failed to control their impulses would arise and they would throw a fit.

"Not in my salon," Fresia thought sternly. It was enough that her lord caused some trouble a few days ago.

She frowned and beckoned a guard who was standing nearby. "Watch that guy," she signaled. As befitting an elite member of her information guild, the guard carefully started following the man without making a sound.

It looked like he was leaving. The exit was right around the corner, which meant the guard's task would be over soon. At that moment, the man who the guard had been following suddenly turned around, and to his surprise, approached him.

Huh? The guard tried to defend himself, but the man's hands were faster.

"Why are you following me?" the man asked angrily. The guard could tell he wasn't an ordinary person since he possessed agility advanced enough to instantly overpower his opponent. What on earth was he?

Although the guard was confused, he responded quickly to manage the situation. "Oh... I thought you were drunk, so I was worried," he explained.

The man's eyes peered through his mask and inspected the guard. When he saw the salon's badge on the guard's jacket, he loosened his grip.

"I'm not drunk," he said. Then, he turned back around and headed for the exit. The guard stared at his retreating back with a blank expression, wondering what he should do.

He sighed. It was alright. The man left and didn't cause a commotion. It wouldn't make a difference if he continued to follow him or not. After making

this judgment, the guard went back to the main hall.

The man who he had been following boarded a carriage that had its household seal covered. "Let's go home," he said. After informing the coachman of his destination, the man took off his mask, revealing a pained, twisted expression.

"Jubelian," Mikhail thought.

Even if she had deceived him, he had tried to ignore any news of her, thinking that it would be a waste of time to care about her any longer. Now that it became clear that the rumors were true, however, he couldn't continue to act as he did before.

Did she really gift a pair of cufflinks to another man? And to a lowly person who couldn't even reveal his identity, at that...!

Mikhail's expression crumpled in anger, but he couldn't understand why. Then, he recalled how Jubelian used to cling to him.

"I only did that because I was upset about you spending time with someone else, Mikhail. It won't happen again, so please don't abandon me," she had begged.

Jubelian was someone who always repeated the same mistakes over and over again, clinging to him endlessly. He thought he would be overcome with joy once they parted, but every time he heard about her, he only felt anger.

Why did this woman make him feel this way?! Mikhail clenched his fists, confused by his emotions.

Suddenly, his eyes lit up, recalling something he could use to hurt her. Yes! Jubelian would surely be flooded with regret if she saw him with another woman!

Mikhail slowly closed his eyes, pledging to make the woman who deceived him suffer. Although his heart ached inexplicably, he forewent examining the pain. It was probably because of all the drinks he had.



I entered my room and sighed. Ah, what now? I never planned for Father to

be my partner. If I went to the banquet with him, I would have to be careful with every little thing I did.

I worried about how to act for a while, but when it became too cumbersome to worry any longer, I quickly concluded that I wouldn't have a problem as long as I stayed as quiet as possible.

No one would even know I was there.



Time passed until it was finally the day of the banquet. The carriage ride to Count Arlo's residence was a little boring since I could only see a series of indistinguishable buildings near the capital, but the view reminded me of downtown Seoul, where it was also crowded with similar-looking skyscrapers

Ah, everything near the capital looked the same. There was nothing interesting to see.

I wanted to yawn because I felt strangely tired, but I restrained myself, afraid that Father might scold me for appearing unrefined. Ah, I was so sleepy... my vision began to blur.

"Don't worry," Father said. I glanced up at him. He was looking out the window. "I will stay by your side today."

I didn't know why he was telling me this, but I supposed he was uneasy about what other people would end up thinking about our family. They might find it strange if we entered as partners only to end up interacting awkwardly in the end. He was also probably concerned that I'd cause a scene.

"I'm mostly worried about you, Father..." I wanted to say. I couldn't figure out what he was thinking lately, so I was nervous that he might interfere with my plans. Nevertheless, I wore a smile to cover up my true thoughts. "Oh, I appreciate that you're coming with me, Father," I said. As long as I didn't make any mistakes today, there wouldn't be any problems.

At that moment, I noticed Father smiling softly as he continued looking out the window.

What was he smiling at? I turned around to look outside the window to check,

spotting a pretty mansion surrounded by flower beds brimming with red roses. The roses gave it a lively atmosphere. We had arrived at Count Arlo's townhouse, which was located at the capital's outskirts.

It was a pretty house, just like Rose had said. I was staring blankly at the beautiful mansion when Father called out to me.

"Jubelian." I turned my attention to him. He was reaching out to me. "Let's go," he said.

I studied his hand for a moment before tentatively taking it. I held it delicately in case my touch bothered him, but he squeezed my hand tightly.



"Announcing Duke Regis Adrey Floyen and his esteemed daughter, Lady Jubelian Eloy Floyen!"

The banquet attendees stirred at the herald's introduction, especially since the famous Duke Floyen usually didn't attend social events. As everyone held their breaths, the picturesque father and daughter duo alighted upon the banquet hall, making them all gape in astonishment. Lady Floyen was dressed in a white dress embroidered with gold threads and she looked so elegantly beautiful that for one fleeting moment, her notoriety was forgotten.

"Her reputation precedes her beauty," someone said.

As they admired her, the duke gently wrapped his arm around his daughter's shoulders. Their attention immediately followed his movements, and everyone noticed that he was wearing a white robe that matched her dress. Despite his age, the duke was still youthful and handsome, comparable to a man in his twenties. The only part of his appearance that hinted at his age was his sunken eyes.

"That's His Grace, Duke Floyen, right?"

"Yes, you're right. It's been a while since he's attended a banquet."

Unmarried ladies as well as noble ladies who had admired him in the past blushed when they saw him.

"He still looks great."

"Yes, he does."

The nobles watched Duke Floyen as if they were possessed, following his every move down to the slight raise of his arm. When he revealed something shiny under his sleeve, everyone saw what it was and their eyes widened in realization.

That was...!

The rumored blue diamond cufflinks everyone had been looking for could be seen twinkling upon the duke's wrists, capturing the light beautifully. The nobles were mesmerized for a moment, coming to an understanding as to why they hadn't seen the cufflinks until now. If they were a gift for him, it made sense since the duke usually didn't wear accessories, spending most of his time at home...

The man in question slowly surveyed the banquet hall. His cold eyes seemed to warn people to not draw any hasty conclusions, making onlookers recoil with fright. Even so, some people smiled in response to his frightening gaze.

Rose, in particular, was elated. She glanced at her mother, who had scolded for exchanging letters with Jubelian. "Are you seeing this? I told you Lady Floyen wasn't at fault," her gaze seemed to say.

Countess Arlo fanned herself in embarrassment. Other nobles who had believed in the rumors looked away as well, equally flustered. There was only one man who fixed his gaze on the duo unflinchingly.

"What? The cufflinks were for the duke?" Mikhail wondered, astonished. He stared at Jubelian, a slow smirk gracing his lips. "Of course. She can't possibly have eyes for anyone other than me."



As soon as I entered the banquet hall, I detected the scent of lilies. Wow, what a pretty house...

Rose's mansion wasn't as big as ours, but the antique interior sported mahogany walls, decorative lily adornments, and cream-colored fabrics that accentuated the elegant and spacious atmosphere.

I might live somewhere like this when I become independent. My current home was made entirely out of white marble, so the servants had to do a lot more work than usual to clean it every day. In addition to sweeping and wiping the floors and walls, they also had to polish them. For this reason, I always felt bad coming back home after spending my day outside when it rained.

Once I lived on my own, I'd decorate the interior with wood! It would be nice to have a rocking chair in the library, too.

I was planning out my future when Father suddenly released my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just have fun."

What? I was daydreaming about my bright future without any worries. Why did he say that?

I was dumbfounded until he took his hand off me and whispered, "Don't forget whose daughter you are."

I gulped nervously and flashed him a smile. For some reason, my hands were starting to get sweaty. He was probably going to kill me if I made a mistake today. Regardless, even if Father didn't warn me, I had every intention to behave properly and attend this banquet inconspicuously.

"We greet our empire's hero and his daughter."

The Arlo family rose from their seats and stepped forward to greet us, as it was customary for the host and his family to greet guests of higher status. I observed the girl standing at the very end; she seemed to be around my age. As soon as our eyes met, she smiled like a blossoming flower.

Rose.

Now that I looked at her more closely, she seems to be a very lovely lady. I could only recall Mikhail's appearance from my memories as the Jubelian of the past, so other people were merely formless figures to me.

I had been missing out on a lot of precious things, it seemed... people would often overlook the stars in the night sky because they were distracted by artificial lights and neon signs. My past life was like that as well, but now I

simply wanted to live happily and enjoy what I had missed out on instead of obsessing over Mikhail, the very light that had been distracting me.

To do that, I needed to be reserved today so I could go home without making any mistakes. I repeated this resolution in my head as the Arlo family members bowed.

"It's an honor for Your Grace and the lady to attend my daughter's birthday banquet," Count Arlo said.

After royalty, dukes were the highest rank in the social hierarchy, so we weren't expected to maintain the same level of formality.

Father bowed silently. "Happy birthday, esteemed daughter of Count Arlo," he said.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

The scene of Rose receiving a congratulatory message from Father highlighted the fact that she was the banquet's main focus. She approached me while I was still observing her. Then, she took my hands. "Thank you for coming today, Lady Floyen," she said.

This was the first time I met her in person, but she was very friendly. Perhaps it was because of all the letters we wrote to each other, but I also felt very close to her.

"Happy birthday, Rose," I said in reply.

Then, I turned around to look at Merilyn, who was holding her present. Noblewomen usually exchanged expensive perfumes, poetry books, tea leaves, and teacups as gifts. What I had prepared was neither flashy nor substandard, which assured me that she wouldn't be offended by it, at least. When I signaled Merilyn, she presented the gift.

Rose gasped. "This is..."

I smiled at her as she beheld the box with trembling eyes. "I sincerely prepared this small gift for you, my dear friend," I told her.

Rose burst into bright laughter, brimming with anticipation. "Ah, thank you so very much!"

Although her smile exuded youthful vitality, the countess frowned at her daughter's reaction, which may have seemed unrefined to some onlookers. Hm... as expected from a lady who's rumored to be strict...

Either way, her displeased reaction was somewhat justified since her daughter was being kind towards a lady rumored to be rude.

"You can hand the gift to me," a servant said.

As the servant accepted the gift from Merilyn, I noticed that Rose was looking at the box with curiosity. Although it was good manners to check gifts after the banquet was over, an exception could be made if the guest gave permission to open them. It wasn't a big deal, so I figured it should be okay.

I smiled at Rose. She looked very eager. "You can open it if you're curious," I encouraged.

Rose didn't hesitate at my approval. "Thank you," she said.

She took the gift with sparkling eyes. Then, she unraveled the ribbon and opened the box to reveal what was inside. When Rose lifted the box's lid, her eyes grew big.

The black object within was almost as big as a fist, but it was shaped like a flat cylinder. Its surface possessed a smooth luster and bore a delicately crafted red rose on top, its beauty undeniable. It didn't serve much of a great purpose, though. Any young lady who wore makeup could identify the fluffy velvet puff housed within it, which was somewhat thinner than the ones more commonly used. This was a portable powder compact with a mirror attached beneath the lid that I had often seen in my past life.

Well, I didn't think Rose would like this gift very much because it was just a modification of something that already existed, but I hadn't expected her to dislike it as much as she seemed right then. She had been murmuring to herself, frowning slightly, so she was probably disappointed. She probably didn't need my gift because her maids already carried all her makeup supplies for her.

I was a bit taken aback because I didn't think her reaction would be this bad, but her disappointment was justified when I thought about it once more. She had spent so much time writing letters to me, but I had given her such a

common gift. I was just grateful that she had been writing to me until now.

I tried to remain indifferent about this situation, but I couldn't help but feel sorry that she had been so kind to an outsider like me.

"I should get going now..." I said, trailing off.

At that moment, however, Rose's voice held me back. "Please wait for a second, Lady Floyen."

I braced for what was coming, wondering if she was going to criticize me, but her next words were so unexpected that I doubted having heard them correctly.

"You gave me such an innovative gift!" she cried. "I'm touched."



At first glance, Jubelian's gift looked suspicious to many onlookers. What was it? Everyone observed the flat, round object decorated with a rose with much interest. It looked like a small, aesthetically pleasing container used for storing miscellaneous accessories, but it was difficult to determine its true purpose. People only began to marvel when Rose opened the case.

Puff? Was it a powder container? At that realization, everyone felt like they had been hit by a ton of bricks.

When noblewomen went out, a maid would usually bring a powder set to correct their makeup throughout the day, but since this was impossible to do if they weren't accompanied, a dull and greasy face was a discomfort many ladies had to endure alone. Jubelian's gift easily solved this common issue.

"Oh, a powder container small and thin enough to fit inside a purse!" someone exclaimed.

"I've never seen anything like it before."

"To think of such an object and request a production of it... incredible."

The object was both charming and practical, so it was no wonder why many eyes possessed such a covetous gleam.

"If she's presenting something like that, wouldn't this year's Star go to Lady Floyen?" a noble asked.

The Star was a brooch awarded to the person who spearheaded the biggest trend in high society that year. This annual privilege was a great honor, as nobles tended to be sensitive about outward appearances.

"I agree. Considering that everyone's eyes are already shining... isn't it a sign that gift will become a trend?"

"Of course, but I doubt Lady Floyen will disclose which workshop she ordered it from."

Although everyone was curious about this, it was a sensitive subject they couldn't freely pursue because nobles rarely disclosed such information. Moreover, it was difficult to approach the lady in question, who was notorious for her wickedness. While everyone cowered, someone eventually brought up what no one dared to ask, and it was none other than Rose, the star of today's banquet.

"If you don't mind, could you tell me which workshop you commissioned to make this powder container, Lady Floyen?" she asked. "I would like to order one for my mother as well."

Even those who had openly disapproved of Jubelian were made anxious by this situation. If she was the Lady Floyen they thought they knew, she wouldn't stop at just causing trouble.

Unexpectedly, however, a soft, amiable voice drifted from Jubelian's dainty lips. "Ah, it was the Fyodor workshop," she answered. "The craftsman there is young but skilled, so you can trust him."

Many people were amazed by her smooth response.

"Thank you so much for giving me such valuable information," Rose gushed.

Jubelian waved her hand. "It's nothing much. I'm quite embarrassed by your extensive praise, so I'm not sure how to react. I can only thank you for liking the gift I gave."

She had not only answered, but answered humbly. At this point, people were wondering if someone had begun impersonating the lady, taking her place in the banquet instead. While everyone's minds were thrust into disarray, it was Countess Arlo, Rose's mother and the lady of the Arlo household, who set out

to calm the chaotic atmosphere.

"I am very pleased that you gave my daughter an unforgettable gift today," she said.

In response to her gratitude, Jubelian gracefully lowered her head. "And I am honored to have been invited to such a high-class banquet, Countess Arlo."

The countess unconsciously marveled at her response. Jubelian was pretty good. Not only had she praised the Arlo family and their guests, but she managed to avoid seeming servile. She had truly mastered the aristocratic manner of only saying what was necessary. The countess's expression, which had initially stood frozen like a sheath of ice in the midst of winter, thawed, becoming akin to a warm spring breeze.

"I hope you have a great time, Lady Floyen," she said earnestly.

"Thank you for your consideration."

When Jubelian expressed her gratitude, the countess and her husband bowed to Duke Floyen, who stood next to her. The duke likewise bowed in silence, then reached out to his daughter.

"Let's go."

They walked toward the corner of the banquet hall. It was usually an inconspicuous spot, but everyone's attention strayed there to observe the lady.

"How can she be so different?" someone wondered.

"She's really pretty when she smiles. Did you catch a glimpse of her face?"

In response to the numerous praises coming from the surrounding noblewomen who had been gossiping about Lady Floyen just yesterday, Countess Arlo spread her fan.

"My daughter certainly has an eye for people," she said. "The lady I met today was befitting of Duke Floyen's prestigious household."

People noticed her shift in attitude and nodded in agreement.



I sighed softly as the banquet hall became noisy, a bit taken aback by

everyone's unexpected attention. I thought it was a simple gift... but I guess it wasn't.

This wasn't what I wanted. I forced a smile, tired from all the unanticipated curiosity I drew from other people. I wanted to go home and rest.

At that moment, Father reached out to me. "Let's go," he said.

It would be nice to go home at this point, but we simply moved to a set of chairs by the window and sat down. It was a bit awkward to sit with Father like this. I looked up at him, but he was staring out into the distance with a cold expression.

It seemed like being here put him in a bad mood. Although I didn't force him to come with me, I felt somewhat uncomfortable.

No, I shouldn't pay so much attention to him.

I turned away from Father and looked at the center of the banquet hall, where men and women were dancing in pairs. It was a pretty sight. I was quite entertained by the beautifully dressed couples moving expertly, so much so that I felt like I was watching a splendid performance coming from a group of professional dancers.

It was just as I thought; it was more fun to watch other people dance than to try dancing myself.

I was still sitting next to Father when I spotted the back of a familiar figure surrounded by a crowd of women. Huh? That guy looked a bit like Mikhail. Was that him?

Even if it were really him, I remembered the warning I had given to him in the past. "Fine, I'll trust you. Just never show yourself around me ever again," he had said.

It was a small world, but he couldn't have possibly come to this banquet, right? I knew that Mikhail didn't enjoy banquets, so it was unlikely that it was actually him. The last thing I wanted to do was get involved with him since a lot of people perceived him as a pitiful, handsome man who had been harassed by me, a villainess, for two years.

"I'll head to the terrace and stay there for a while, Father."

He sighed in response. "Okay," he said.

I had been worried that he would order me to fulfill my responsibility as his partner so I was relieved that he granted me permission. I rose from my seat in a good mood.

Then, he spoke again. "Don't forget that I'm here."

When he said those words, a burdensome weight descended upon me. I couldn't even rest in peace... the thought of staying in the banquet hall for any longer made me exhausted, so I trudged towards the terrace anyway.



Many people watched Lady Floyen enter the terrace, regret rolling off them in waves. "Ah, it's a pity I couldn't ask her to be my partner," they thought. The duke's hostile glare prevented people from approaching her, much less ask her to be their partner.

Mikhail frowned. As one of these people, he had been conscious about Jubelian's presence since she entered the banquet hall. She went to the terrace. Was she signaling for him to follow after her? He was about to follow Jubelian when Duke Floyen, who had been sitting nearby, stood up and leaned against the wall beside the entrance to the terrace.

Damn it!

Mikhail couldn't even move one step forward because the man who had once shown him favor was now exuding candid hostility. Although this uncomfortable encounter left Mikhail feeling uneasy, the duke gave a wry smirk.

This was ridiculous. He couldn't believe Mikhail was such an unpleasant person.

In the past, Regis approved of Mikhail simply because Jubelian liked him, but now that they had parted ways, Regis couldn't bring himself to bother with someone who had become nothing more than a nuisance.

When Mikhail turned around, the duke relaxed his fierce gaze. He couldn't

ruin the banquet his daughter was enjoying just to deal with some insignificant insect.



When I left the stuffy banquet hall and entered the terrace, it became easier to breathe. Because I was on the first floor, the Arlo family's garden sprawled out in front of me.

It was nice that it was quiet. I stared blankly at the garden and took a deep breath. The wind carried a fresh and fragrant scent my way. Although the colorful flowers had been trimmed by human hands, they were still beautiful products of nature and I began to feel at ease as I watched the roses sway in the wind.

I should move to the countryside when I become independent. It would be a good idea to plant some flowers and start a farm as well.

As I planned for my future, my eyelids slowly grew heavier. I was sleepy. I almost unconsciously reached up to rub my eyes but then I stopped. I almost forgot I had makeup on and I could've messed it up if I had touched my face.

At that moment, I felt the sudden urge to yawn, so I covered my mouth and exhaled after lowering my head. Ah, the tears started coming out again. My makeup shouldn't be erased because of a few tears, right? They always came out when I yawned, but I couldn't help this physiological phenomenon.

I left my powder compact at home... Nevertheless, I wiped my tears, hoping there wouldn't be an unfortunate event where I had to correct my makeup.

"What are you doing?"

I turned towards the direction of the familiar voice and saw a very attractive face come into view. He was the last person I had expected to see. What was Father's disciple doing here?

"Hey, how did you...?" I tried asking him for an explanation but stopped short when his long, masculine fingers gently began to wipe away my tears.

"Did someone harass you by any chance?" he asked with a harsh voice akin to the low growl of a beast. Unlike his tender touch, the look in his crimson eyes Max glanced at the azure sky, vibrant roses, and crowded banquet hall, going over all the lovey-dovey guests who displayed their affection for each other on the terrace. As someone who had survived many near-death experiences, Max felt irritated and uncomfortable by the peaceful, picturesque nature of his surroundings.

"It might be difficult to find each other, so please stay at our arranged meeting place, Your Highness," Fresia had told him. Max tried to endure his boredom by thinking about her earnest request, but this was difficult to do considering that he had already been hiding in a tree all day long.

Should he just leave? Although he wanted to abandon the plan and return to Salon Blooms right away, he practiced patience.

"Oh, and about Lady Floyen... it seems like she'll be ignored by many at the banquet since there are rumors floating around that she doesn't get along with her father," Fresia had said.

There was a lot to gain from this banquet. Many nobles who worked at the imperial palace were in attendance. Max decided it would be a good idea to make a mental note of who approached his master and nip them in the bud later.

Despite his resolve, an imagined image of Jubelian wearing a gorgeous dress and dancing in someone else's arms suddenly accosted him. She should've been dancing by now, right? His gaze became increasingly bloodthirsty as he stared out the banquet hall.

If he revealed his identity and went in now... Max was overcome by this intense impulse when the door to the terrace, his arranged meeting place with Fresia, opened. Upon seeing who arrived, his eyes grew wide.

Jubelian? He thought he was hallucinating at first, so he blinked to confirm that the person who entered the terrace was indeed the woman in question. Why did she come out? Various thoughts crowded his mind, but he was strangely contented by her appearance, so much so that the boring and dull

scenery suddenly seemed much livelier. Judging from how she gazed at them so seriously, she probably liked roses.

Max unconsciously smiled as he observed her, but he was soon puzzled by what she did next. Why was she lowering her head?

When she lifted her head back up again, he realized why. Was she crying? He thought he was just imagining things again, but the sight of her tears dripping down her periwinkle, jewel-like eyes was unmistakable.

At that moment, Fresia's earnest words returned to Max once more. She had wanted him to stay here so she could find him easier later...

Max paid no heed to her request and jumped off the tree.



I stared at Father's disciple and frowned slightly. What was he suddenly talking about? I didn't know what he thought of me, but I was still the only daughter of a duke. Although I was infamous for being vicious to others and never having to experience difficulties, it seemed like he thought I was a pushover because I had been kind to him.

"Tell me," Father's disciple said. He spoke in a bloodthirsty tone as if to interrogate me.

I met his gaze. "If I tell you someone harassed me, are you going to punish them?"

"Yes. I promised to help you, after all," he responded immediately.

I sighed, dumbfounded by how he had so casually twisted my words. What a foolish guy! Helping me would only bring him closer to death!

Although I had overlooked his arrogance because I didn't want to seem overbearing and haughty, other nobles wouldn't be as forgiving. They considered it a form of mutiny for commoners to speak informally to nobles and they never hesitated to immediately dole out harsh punishments. As a commoner, he would meet the same end if he used force against a nobleman. Perhaps that wouldn't even be enough.

He could be bluffing, but knowing him... he could actually try something. After

observing Father's disciple for a few days, I realized that he didn't know many social norms, almost as if he had been raised in the wild. His mind was like a blank sheet of paper that could lead to his death if he wasn't careful. We had known each other for quite a while, so I couldn't just let him die. Although we weren't close, I sometimes felt comfortable with him. He didn't seem to have any ulterior motives and treated me like a normal person instead of the unapproachable Lady Floyen.

"Excuse me," I called.

He turned to me. "Yes?"

"If you want to help me going forward, please speak to me formally in public," I said.

"What?" he asked as if I had said something ridiculous.

"I'm still in a situation where I'm being ignored by those in high society," I elaborated. "How much of a joke will they think I am if you disrespected me as well?"

He stared at me in response, deep in thought. I looked into his eyes and said, "You can make friends or enemies depending on how you say things, especially when it concerns nobles. Although this will be a different story if the class system was abolished, I'm just warning you to be careful."

He continued to stare at me even after I finished speaking. If he was dissatisfied, he should just say so instead of looking at me so seriously. Why was he staring at me like that? Before his gaze got any stranger, he slowly nodded.

How nice. He looked like an obedient child when he nodded. I unconsciously felt the urge to stroke his hair as if to praise him, but I hastily pulled my hand back before I did.

"Oh, why are you here at the banquet?" I asked.

"Because of work," he responded quietly.

Well, this made sense. It wasn't uncommon for nobles to hire mercenaries as security guards for banquets. I briefly wondered if he was overqualified to work as a temporary guard, but that wasn't as big of a problem as his appearance,

which was very unusual for a commoner.

"If nobles speak to you, you must respond formally. Okay?" I said, making sure he understood to ease my worries.

He sighed. "Alright."

Despite his affirmation, I knew how arrogant and ignorant of the world he was, so I stretched my pinky finger out. "Promise me."

He frowned in response then sighed and gently hooked his pinky finger around mine. After stamping our thumbs together, he pulled his hand back and spoke with irritation. "By the way, why did your partner leave you alone, making you look like someone who had been abandoned?"

Hm, I probably did look like that. The terrace was a place where guests could, in a positive light, take a break. It was also, in a more negative light, a place where people could escape if they were left out or unable to acclimate themselves. Considering the fact that my partner was a certain someone, I wasn't in a situation where I could enjoy the banquet.

"Father is in the banquet hall..." I trailed off.

He stared at me with amazement when I mentioned Father. "What?" he asked. "Didn't you decide to partner with a relative?"

"Well, that relative ended up being Father."

He frowned in response. "Have you danced yet?"

I sighed. "If someone asked me to dance, would I be acting like someone who was abandoned, as you said?"

As soon as I finished speaking, he snickered. Yeah, he probably thought this was funny. In the past, people often asked me to dance out of reverence for my status as a duke's daughter, but oddly enough, I hadn't received a dance request from a single person today.

Well, it was probably karma for the life I had been living until now. I was lost in my thoughts when I suddenly noticed movement. I looked at Father's disciple, who wore a serious expression as he stretched an unwavering hand out to me.

"Why are you extending your hand like that?" I asked.

"Don't you understand? I'm asking you to dance with me," he said, frowning slightly.

"You know how to dance?" I asked, surprised. "My goodness."

He nodded in response. "You should be honored. I don't dance with just anyone," he said proudly.

I was a bit worried that he would step on my feet, but I couldn't refuse someone who seemed so eager after they decided to be generous. I took the hand he offered me. "Yes, it would be an honor to dance with you."

At that moment, I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. For a second, he looked like an arrogant prince wearing a confident smile, which was quite unusual. His face was probably just really handsome.

I gawked at him almost as if I was possessed.

"Then, let's start," he said, raising my hand.

The orchestra echoing across the banquet hall could also be heard at the terrace. I probably needed to take the lead, right? I moved slowly, trying to be considerate toward a beginner like him. To my surprise, however, he began to lead me instead.

Huh? His steps were too skilled for a beginner; even his guidance was perfect. Every move was completely flawless, almost as if he had practiced many times. How? I stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Ah!"

Perhaps it was because I wasn't concentrating on my steps despite wearing high heels, but I missed a step and almost fell.

"You aren't paying attention," he scolded.

In what felt like no time at all, he closed the distance between us, hugging my waist tightly. Flustered, I tried to escape his arms.

"Is your ankle okay?" he asked. Although he spoke brusquely, his words showed that he was worried about me. I felt strange for some reason.

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"Ah, it's okay. Now—"
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I tried to distance myself, but he suddenly lifted me up into his arms, carrying me bridal style.

Wait—what was he doing?!

Taken aback by his unexpected actions, I could do nothing as he sat me on a nearby bench and applied something to my ankle. The cool sensation reminded me of a pain relief patch. When I regarded him with amazement, he lowered his head.

"You're lucky I brought this ointment... if I didn't, what would you have done?" he complained.

Did he carry around household medicine because he was a mercenary? I stole a glance at him.

"Thank you," I said.

He lowered his head further down in response, looking irritated. "There's no need to say thank you. Just don't get hurt."

I caught sight of a leaf on top of his head just then, so I figured I should take it off for him.

"I'm done n—"

At that moment, he raised his head slightly. I felt embarrassed because, at that moment, it probably looked like I was trying to stroke his hair.

He took my hand. "What are you..."

Oh, did I make him mad? His face had flushed a slight red, so he must've been angry at me. I was about to apologize when I suddenly heard a voice.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I turned towards the entrance of the terrace, where Father was staring at us with a terrifying expression.

"F-Father!"



Regis initially thought that she was going to take a short break, but Jubelian hadn't returned from the terrace for a while. As he continued to guard the entrance back in the banquet hall, he started feeling nervous. Did something happen to her?

Although the duke possessed the ability to detect the presence of living beings, he deliberately avoided using his powers to survey the terrace out of respect for his daughter's privacy, but as the minutes ticked by, he began to imagine the worst-case scenario.

If the emperor made a move...

Of course, he wouldn't act so hastily because he possessed *that*, but pulling a trick wasn't out of the picture for him. The duke had clearly provoked the emperor during his last audience with him, too. Refusing to take any chances, Regis activated his powers to detect his daughter's movements on the terrace.

His eyes grew wide in astonishment. Jubelian was with someone... and it was a man, at that. Regis glared at the door. After briefly detecting Jubelian's movements, he concluded that she was dealing with someone she knew. Regis had no choice but to act carefully because he didn't want to disappoint his daughter any further, otherwise she would lose trust in him if he opened the door in a circumstance such as this.

He decided to identify who it was first and then secretly order a background check later. Although he was trying to be patient as a father, this was becoming harder when the two people on the terrace, who were already close, stepped closer to each other.

How dare that man... Regis clenched his fists unconsciously. He could tell by their posture and the placement of their hands that they were about to dance.

Who on earth was with his child...? After what had happened with Mikhail, the duke was nervous at the thought of another unqualified man deceiving his daughter. Now that someone was doing exactly that after evading his attention, Regis became resentful.

At that moment, Jubelian staggered. Regis flinched reflexively, but he didn't move from his spot because she didn't fall. The man with her had quickly supported her back. Although he felt relieved by that, a strange feeling washed

over him. When Jubelian passed out before, he had wished it was a nightmare he could wake up from, but when he couldn't, his heart had been consumed by fear and anxiety. He worried she would faint without notice again, especially if she was out of his sight.

Thankfully, his daughter was safe because of the unknown man's quick reflexes. His instincts were quite useful. Although his strange pride was quite stubborn, he had to admit that there was probably someone else who could also protect his daughter.

Regis's fists tightened as he tried to suppress his impatience. It would've been alright if he chose to investigate who this man was later...

At that moment, Regis's eyes burst with fury. That goddamn bastard! He didn't usually resort to profanity, but this time he had a reason for it. How dare that man touch his daughter in such a place!

Regis was usually patient—as exhibited by how he dealt with the emperor who liked to provoke him—but when the stranger took his daughter and lifted up the hem of her skirt, he immediately tore the terrace door open. There, he caught the man touching his daughter's ankle with his head bowed low as Jubelian reached to stroke his head.

He didn't know who this person was, but he wasn't going to forgive him. When the delinquent in question raised his head, Regis's expression stiffened.

It was his foolish disciple, whom he had already disqualified for his daughter. Maximillian.

Despite his handsome appearance and many talents, the emperor's son was an extremely ferocious and arrogant man. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that his perverse and foul personality was below her standards on top of other, more average standards as well.

A murderous aura emanated from Regis's eyes. This guy dared to approach his daughter?

"I won't say thank you because you were the one who decided to accept me as your disciple," Max had once said. Although his claims back there were nothing but arrogant, Regis hadn't become angry at him. He didn't expect anything in

return for helping him, and he wasn't so petty as to argue with an immature child.

Even so, he wanted nothing more than to separate his ungrateful disciple from his daughter right away. He wanted to warn him never to see her ever again. He wanted to beat him up until he came to his senses.

This strange sensation made him feel like his head had been lit aflame.

"Father?"

The moment Regis saw his daughter staring at him with wide eyes, he knew he couldn't do this. He exhaled slowly and relaxed his tight fists. Of course. There was no way he could win against her.

That didn't mean that he approved of her relationship with Max, however. If she decided to stay with him, Regis could clearly imagine the hardship she would have to undergo. She could do anything else, but she couldn't get involved with that guy. He was too dangerous.

Regis needed to pull the two apart and ensure they never met again.



When Father suddenly entered the terrace, I became a little nervous, worrying that he would blame me for not showing myself at the banquet hall. Contrary to my expectations, Father simply extended his hand.

"I'll ask for more details later," he said. "First, let's leave."

His reaction was strange, seeing as he didn't scold me, but I approached him anyway. "Okay."

I tried to take his hand, but his disciple held me back. "Your ankle. You're hurt."

I could still walk, so it was a little embarrassing for him to say that. "I'm fi—"

Father smiled kindly and dropped his outstretched hand. "It's not something you should concern yourself with," he told his disciple.

I tried to look indifferent, but it seemed like Father was telling his disciple that I was insignificant and not worth caring about. I was wondering why he wasn't

angry. Was it because his disciple was here?

My mood had begun worsening when someone suddenly lifted me up. Huh? I looked at Father in surprise, wondering why he took me into his arms.

"Because she's my daughter," he continued with a slight smile. It wasn't something for his disciple to concern himself with... because I was his daughter?

In the past, I would've been shaken by his words because I was a child yearning for his love, but I wasn't like that anymore. I couldn't expect anything from him. My past expectations were only false hopes that had always let me down. I thought that he might love me if I acted cutely and humored him, but I had no intention of continuing such foolish behavior anymore because I knew how this story ended.

I was immersed in bitter thoughts for a while before I heard Father speak.

"I will visit you in the future, so don't come to my home anymore," he told his disciple.

As someone who didn't travel for most things, Father personally told his disciple that he would visit him. It seemed like he really cherished him, but when I glanced at the young man, I noticed that he was slightly frowning. Wasn't his expression a little strange for someone who should be deeply moved? I frowned, too.

Wait, Father. Wasn't this a little too much? I didn't realize that he would enter the banquet hall while holding me like this, but he did.

"Father," I called.

His blue eyes focused on me. "You injured your ankle. There's no need to push yourself to stay at the banquet."

No, that wasn't it! I wanted you to let go of me because I was embarrassed! However, if I quarreled with him over this matter, I would only end up standing out even more. The attention I was already receiving was more than enough. I wanted to disappear quietly, but no matter how hard I wished for something, reality wasn't as merciful.

Once everyone's attention in the banquet hall turned to us, so did Count

Arlo's. He approached us. "Your Excellency, did something happen?"

"My daughter isn't feeling well, so we must depart," Father said.

I sighed. Ah, this was so embarrassing.

My original plan was to go home after quietly attending the banquet as it was the only way to avoid further backlash, but now I practically had a spotlight trained on me because I was being held in Father's arms with the excuse of feeling sick. On top of the attention I received after my gift to Rose, by this time tomorrow, I was destined to become the prime subject of every piece of gossip around.

This wasn't anything unexpected or surprising because I was often the subject of others' hostility, but at the thought of suffering from some strange new rumors again, I started getting a headache.



When Duke Floyen and his daughter left the banquet hall, guests who had frequently targeted Jubelian began gossiping.

"I can't believe she caused such a commotion at someone else's banquet!"

"I don't understand how someone who was doing fine just a moment ago could act like that."

"She's not intentionally doing this to get attention, right?"

At that moment, a cold voice stifled their conversation fiercely. "I guess everyone forgot that Lady Floyen had come down with an illness only a short while ago," said Rose, the star of the banquet.

Upon her reminder, silence fell upon the hall. She looked over the guests who had just gossiped about Jubelian.

"It seems like she hasn't fully recovered from her illness, but she came to my birthday banquet anyway despite how sick she felt... I think that was really considerate of her," she said.

Many people began to agree with her words.

"Just a while ago, she was sitting with a pale complexion before going out to

the terrace."

"Yes, I saw that as well."

Rose became teary-eyed after listening to this and said, "Although it hasn't been long since I've become acquainted with the lady, I have gotten to know her through exchanging letters. I feel like she's a very kind person."

Several nobles agreed with Rose and expressed their own opinions.

"Lady Arlo is right. I didn't expect anything when I received a letter under her name, but when I learned that Lady Floyen had written it herself, I realized that its contents were rather distinctive."

Among these voices was the esteemed son of Count Rowen as well. "I made the mistake of finding another partner before the lady could answer me. She forgave me nevertheless and looked like an angel while doing so..."

His words were full of ulterior motives so Rose ignored them. "As the host of this banquet, I am grateful to her," she said. "So..."

When she became at a loss for words, Count Arlo wrapped his arm around his daughter's shoulders and spoke for her. "Dear guests, since we're all comrades with the same political position, shouldn't we all be united?" he asked. "Moreover, if the duke finds out that we have spoken ill of his daughter today... he will be really disappointed."

The guests who had been gossiping about Jubelian gulped in response. It was a well-known fact that people would even slander the emperor if he wasn't present, but the atmosphere a little while ago was becoming too overheated. Moreover, the sight of the duke holding Jubelian in his arms was quite different from the rumors which claimed that their relationship was a neglectful one.

As the silence settled, Count Arlo smiled pleasantly. "It seems like the banquet's liveliness has died down because the music has stopped. Please resume the performance, Maestro."

When the music resumed at the count's request, the icy atmosphere of the banquet hall slowly melted away. Some nobles began to quietly whisper among themselves.

"The count is obligated to act amicably towards the Floyen family because the young lady gave his daughter a great gift, right?"

"You're right. And even if it weren't for the gift, it genuinely seems like the duke truly cares for his daughter... it would be good for both families to develop friendly relations."

As the popular opinion shifted in Jubelian's favor, Rose looked at her father proudly. Now that she thought about it, she had only been able to exchange letters with Lady Floyen in the first place because of the support she had received from her father.

"Thank you, Father," she said.

Count Arlo laughed softly at his daughter's quiet word of thanks. "It seems like you've made a good friend."

Rose gazed at her father affectionately for a moment. Then, she smiled as she recalled Duke Floyen leaving with Jubelian in his arms. She was relieved that Lady Floyen had a good relationship with her father as well.



Although I felt much better after leaving the banquet hall, I was still pretty uncomfortable because Father was still holding me in his arms. My breathing only calmed when I saw our household's carriage in the distance. Once we board it, this discomfort I felt would subside.

After we entered the carriage and Father placed me down, however, I continued to feel tense because he decided to sit right next to me.

"You might pass out like last time, so I'll sit beside you on our way back home," he explained.

Unable to act against him, I forced a smile.



Mikhail balled his hands into fists as he recalled how Jubelian left the banquet hall. She wasn't feeling well? Did that mean she wasn't faking her illness?

Jubelian had always been able to follow him wherever he went. Even when he walked quickly, she never fell behind, doing her best to match his pace. Because

of this reason, he thought she was a naturally healthy person, but now that he thought about it, she wouldn't show herself again for days after following him around. She also seemed to struggle to breathe as she pushed herself to keep up...

Strangely enough, when Mikhail realized this, his heart began to ache.



Because he had suddenly become angry on the terrace, I wondered if Father was going to ask me about what I was doing with his disciple. However, he only left me a request before leaving my room. "Refrain from going out these next few days," he had said. "Allen told me that you should rest."

Because Father ordered me to take care of myself, I was bound to my bed again. Why on earth was he acting like this? He used to treat me like I didn't exist, but now he was acting so differently. Not only did these changes make me feel uncomfortable around him, but they also made it difficult for me to understand him. What was the point of being nice to me?

To my surprise, I came to an answer rather quickly. Well, I guess there were some benefits to treating me like this. He needed to make sure I was healthy enough to marry the crown prince, right?

When I recalled the crown prince from the original novel, I sighed. It would be unreasonable to try to appease a cruel and inhumane individual like him...

I thought that breaking up with Mikhail would save me from the path to death, but if I had known that I would encounter a bear while trying to avoid a fox, I would've found a different solution.

Well, the past was the past. I couldn't do anything about it now. I clenched my fists. Although I needed to obey Father for the sake of a brighter future, I didn't want to end my life by getting married to the crown prince.

"Watch me. This will never go the way you want," I silently promised.



Many Misunderstandings

Max looked at his hands for a while. Then, he clenched his fists.

Why did he keep... thinking about her?

The more he tried to forget about Jubelian, the more she kept coming to mind. He relished the warmth he felt when his hand intertwined with her small, slender one, and savored the peculiar sensation that overcame him as he wrapped his arm around her waist. He tried to shake these thoughts off by distracting himself, but Jubelian's image continued to pervade his mind. His heart had fluttered when she stroked his hair. Whenever her lips curled into a gentle smile, every minute became more and more difficult to hear as he wondered how they felt. It had been as if he was floating in a dream.

However, that dream had ruptured the moment his master appeared, filling Max with resentment. It was obvious that his master had been confining her until now. Although he knew that Duke Floyen was her father, he couldn't help but feel angry when he interrupted them. It didn't help that his master had threateningly ordered him to not visit his residence anymore.

Nevertheless, he reined his anger in because the duke was Jubelian's father before he was his master. He tried to understand the duke from that perspective, but he could only remember the helplessness he felt as his master carried her away in his arms.

As Max recalled what had happened at the banquet, he gritted his teeth. The duke had been abusing his powers by intruding on his daughter.

Fresia sighed as she watched Max fuming by himself. He had become much stranger after returning from the banquet. She couldn't help but be worried for her lord since he had begun behaving incomprehensibly despite the fact that the rebellion—which they had undergone much preparation for—was well underway.

"Fresia."

When he suddenly called her, she raised her head and he leveled her with a serious expression. What did he want to say to look at her in such a way?

No matter how strange he had become, Maximillian always used any means necessary to achieve his purpose. Knowing better than to let her guard down in front of this inherently cold-hearted man, Fresia nervously waited for him to speak.

"Send an invitation in your name, Fresia," he commanded.

"Huh? To whom?"

"Jubelian."

Once that familiar name fell from her lord's lips as she had predicted, Fresia fell deep into thought. "It'll be difficult to invite Lady Floyen," she said matter-of-factly.

He frowned in response. "Why?"

Fresia smiled awkwardly. "Well... Lady Floyen's become quite famous, so she'll be very busy."



My bed was the most comfortable place to be, after all.

Other people might've considered getting grounded a punishment, but it was more like a reward for me. I rolled on my bed mindlessly for a while before sighing when a gloomy thought occurred to me: people were probably in an uproar because of the scene I had caused at the banquet hall.

I didn't need to go to another social event to know what people were saying about me. They were probably questioning the strange gift I gave and talking about how I had dramatically fainted at someone else's banquet. Everyone was probably criticizing me for being an attention-seeker. However, as someone who disliked attending banquets and going to public places that attracted unwanted looks, I was far from attention-seeking. I simply wanted to go home after quietly attending the banquet, knowing that my reputation would continue to tarnish itself if I stood out. The situation had spiraled out of my control, though.

Well, I needed to start thinking about what I could do. In a situation like this, it would be a good idea to explain my point of view to others, but I didn't even

want to bother with that.

Wouldn't people forget about what had happened if I kept out of touch for a while? It would probably be good not to meet up with anyone either, but that idea was soon discarded as well. Doing that would just prove futile if Father decided to marry me off to the crown prince in the end.

When I started getting a headache, someone knocked on my bedroom door.

"This is Merilyn, my lady."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Please come in."

When I gave her my permission, she entered the room. My eyes widened upon seeing a pile of letters on the silver tray she was holding. "That's...?"

Merilyn noticed my surprise and smiled gently. "These are all for you, my lady," she explained.

I opened one of them cautiously, hoping that it wasn't an anonymous blackmail letter. Now that I was the prime subject of all the gossip going around, I was worried that those who held a grudge against me might've enclosed something dangerous—like a razor blade or something—within their correspondence. After checking the contents of the letter, I grew shocked once more.

An invitation? I skimmed through the message. It started off with a greeting before transitioning into a request to attend a social event that the sender, the daughter of a noble household, was hosting. I checked the other letters just in case, and they likewise asked for my regards and expressed their hopes of inviting me. All these letters were sent in the names of daughters from noble families.

Ah, why was everyone suddenly doing this? Although I harbored a suspicion, it simply didn't make sense for other girls to approach me using the same method as Rose had.

I really... hated this. It was, to put it plainly, rather inconsiderate of them to send an invitation to someone who was rumored to be sick. In any case, I had no reason to attend another banquet after going through such trouble recently.

If I declined their invitations without giving a reason, they might become hostile toward me. I should just say that I didn't feel well. It was a reasonable excuse because many people had witnessed my embarrassment leaving the banquet in Father's arms. I sighed, picking up another letter.

Then, I saw a familiar name.

Rose...? This letter was from Rose Marie Arlo. I couldn't help but feel nervous when I saw it. It was only natural of her to be angry with me after all that had happened.

With this in mind, I opened the letter and read its contents, a strange feeling spreading through me.

Dear Lady Floyen,

How are you feeling? I was a little surprised when you left like that during the banquet because I didn't realize that you were still feeling unwell. I sincerely apologize for not considering that beforehand. You had given me the best gift I had ever received in my life, but in return, I had only given you an unpleasant memory.

There are many more things I would like to say, but I will stop here because you are ill. I hope that you will recover as soon as possible.

It felt very strange to read a letter filled with concern from someone who I had expected to react in the opposite way. I realized that it was my first time receiving such kindness in this life. If I considered the relationship between our families, it was natural for her to say these things for political reasons... but, even so, a small smile graced my lips regardless.

I should review the remaining letters and think about how to respond.

I picked up another envelope. Hm. Count Herend... why did I feel like I had heard this name before? I thought about the list of noble families that Merilyn had given me, but I couldn't recall seeing such a name. Well, I only memorized the households that had interacted with my family before. It was only natural that I couldn't remember every noble out there.

This letter was another invitation. I furrowed my brows slightly and stacked up all the letters I got except for the one from Rose. Then, I flopped onto bed. It

wasn't the right time to reply to them. I had to find a solution I could use to discourage Father from making me meet with any of those prospective marriage partners first.



Max wandered restlessly, looking very impatient. "Why on earth hasn't there been a reply yet?" he asked, annoyed. "You must have sent an invitation."

Fresia sighed in response. It had only been two days since the letter was sent. Silently, she grumbled about her lord's lack of patience.

"You mentioned that you struck a deal with Duke Floyen as a way to get information from him, right?"

"Ah, yes." Fresia swallowed nervously because the details of this deal were supposed to be a secret that not even her lord was aware of. It was something that he could benefit from as well... so it was better for him not to know.

"Get in touch with him."

"I'm sorry? I have nothing to report to him at the moment..."

"You can make something up."

Fresia could guess her lord's true intentions from his cold words. He was trying to drive the duke away from his home by using her as bait.



A week had already passed since I had been confined to my room.

"It seems like you're well enough to take a walk outside, my lady," Allen said, lifting the detainment order on me.

I smiled at his words and inadvertently stole a glance at the porcelain rabbit on my bedside table. Father had probably initiated preparations for my meeting with the crown prince already. I sighed. Despite how hard I concentrated these past few days, I hadn't been able to think of a way to avoid the meeting.

It would be another story if I pretended to date someone Father approved of, but I didn't know anyone whom he held in high regard other than Lord Frederick or Mikhail. Even so, someone as accomplished in all aspects of his life

as Lord Frederich would never take part in my scheme.

That meant my only solution was to follow the original novel and cling to Mikhail again... It really seemed like I was going to die whether or not I ended up with either Mikhail or the crown prince. I sighed out of resentment for my unfortunate circumstances.

Then, I heard a noise coming from the balcony attached to my room.

Tap, tap!

I whipped around startled by the sound. Sure enough, a familiar face met me. Father's disciple was here again. I sighed once more, walking toward the window.

Why did this guy keep visiting me instead of Father? If someone saw us...

At that moment, I suddenly thought about the scandalous rumors I once feared would arise from his visit. Wait, that was it!

I hurriedly ran towards the window and opened it. When I saw him, I smiled brightly and grasped his hands tightly. "Welcome!"

After seeing my reaction, his expression hardened. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked seriously.

Well, it didn't matter that he had a bit of a vile personality. He was my only solution. My mouth stretched into a grin. "Hey, do you want to..."



"I can stall him for two hours at most. You must leave the mansion before then," Fresia had said.

Max stared at the duke's mansion as he recalled her words. Why wasn't Jubelian coming outside? He gritted his teeth unconsciously, overwhelmed by restlessness. When he finally saw a familiar shadow manifest afar, a corner of his lips quirked up.

She was finally moving. Max crossed the garden, avoiding the guards around the mansion with ease. After arriving at the familiar ledge, he spotted her again. Judging from how she was standing, her ankle had to be okay by now.

He smiled despite himself, captivated by the view. He came to his senses soon, however. Why was he smiling like a fool? He should just tell her what he needed to tell her before he ran out of time...

It was then that he realized he had nothing to discuss with her. His thoughts absorbed him—this was driving him crazy. He was disappointed in himself for behaving so incomprehensibly, but the urge to see Jubelian and have her see him in turn was too strong to deny. It was great enough to push him forward, persuasive enough to get him to tap on her window.

He watched her turn around at his signal. Her skin looked milky soft and her hair seemed to shimmer with light, her coral lips parting slightly in surprise. Those periwinkle eyes of hers seemed to contain a world of mysteries within them.

This was the face that had been troubling him these past few days.

"What a foolish expression," Max muttered to himself, trying to ignore the pounding of his heart. However, his efforts proved in vain the moment a broad smile manifested upon her face. Even a foolish expression like that looked pretty on her. As if possessed, he continued to stare, hopelessly enthralled.

The door that connected the balcony to her room opened. "Welcome!" she greeted brightly.

Max's heart jumped in his chest. Then, she took his large hands in her smaller ones, and it was almost too much for him to take. "What do you think you're doing?" Max criticized, trying to suppress his emotions as much as he could. He was afraid of her discovering how her actions affected him, but her unfaltering smile made his heart pound even harder.

Why was she smiling even after he had been rude to her? Max glared at Jubelian, wondering if her kindness came from some sort of ulterior motive.

Her delicate lips parted and she began to speak. "Hey, do you want to go out with me?" she asked.

Max stared blankly at her, surprised by the words that fell from her lips. Go out? What was she saying?

When a thought suddenly occurred to him, it felt like he had been hit by a rain

of bricks. Was it possible that... all this time... she had been nice to him because she liked him?

Max had always detested people who approached him with hidden agendas, but the thought of her doing so for such a reason... felt strangely acceptable. Now that he learned the reason behind her friendliness, relief rushed through him. He understood now. That was why she said that.

He tried to control his expression, fighting the smile that threatened to rise upon his lips.

"Oh, in case you're mistaken, I don't like you," she suddenly said. "I just want a contractual relationship, so could you please stop frowning?"

Max's heart fell, his face ruthlessly contorting in response.



Pitch black hair and eyes that glittered like scarlet jewels. A handsome man in possession of a perfectly symmetrical face.

That handsome man was now frowning at me.

I swear he could've been the main character of the novel if appearance was the only requirement... this man was Father's disciple, so there was no doubt that he was a skillful swordsman and someone who Father approved of. This guy was the best person to act as my boyfriend in front of him, so it would've been nice if he could cooperate with me without making a fuss...

His eyes glittered with bloodlust. "Contractual relationship?" he asked. "What do you mean by that?"

Wow, he seemed really angry. He was expressionless just a moment ago, so I must've really irritated him. I mulled over what I said, thinking about what might've affected him so much, and quickly found the answer. Right. Now that I thought about it, I still had yet to mention the benefits that would come with my offer. I heard that mercenaries were sensitive about the conditions concerning their jobs, so if I offered something that he wasn't satisfied with, he could refuse and immediately leave the mansion.

"In exchange for dating me, I'll give you all the money you want," I offered.

His eyes became even fiercer, so I added another condition. "Of course, you'll only have to do it for a limited time, so you don't need to worry. You just have to go out with me until I become independent and leave this place."

His expression relaxed and he sighed. "Why are you trying to leave? Wouldn't that be the start to a difficult life?"

In response to his simplistic assumption, I smiled bitterly and said, "Remember when I told you that Father made a list of prospective marriage partners for me?" When he nodded slowly, I gave a wry snicker. "The problem is, Father already decided who I'll marry."

"If you really dislike that person, can't you just refuse him?"

"Well, he's someone who I won't be able to refuse even if I tried."

He glared at me coldly. "Who could it be that even you, the daughter of a duke, can't refuse?" he asked lowly. It was the same tone he used when he had asked me if anyone had harassed me at the banquet.

An odd burst of laughter bubbled from my lips. Well, he probably thought I wasn't being very smart in this situation. It was reasonable for me to be angry about my predicament like he was, but funnily enough, I wasn't even upset anymore.

"Why are you laughing?" He regarded me with blatant disapproval, as if he thought I was laughing at him specifically.

"Ah, I just... happened to laugh. That's all."

When I evaded his question, his face scrunched up in displeasure. "So, who is this person?"

I noticed this about him a while ago, but this guy was a really persistent person. The point was that I was about to be forced into an arranged marriage, so the identity of the person in question wasn't important. However, given his tenacious personality, he would probably be in a foul mood if I refused to answer. I had no choice.

"Hey, you can't tell this to anyone else, okay? If they find out, I'll be in big trouble," I warned.

"What type of person do you think I am? Just tell me already."

I hesitated for a while. "Maximillian Casein Assiette," I finally managed.

"A trivial person like that—what?"

"The crown prince of this empire."

He met my gaze with immense astonishment. "The crown prince is your prospective fiancé?"

"That's what I said."

He fell silent for a while. "That's weird. There's no way..." he muttered quietly. Doubt riddled his hesitant voice.

Well, he was someone who once insisted on speaking to me informally, so he probably wasn't very knowledgeable about worldly affairs. I decided to be generous and explain the situation to him despite how insensible he was.

"What do you mean, weird? Despite my unruly appearance, I'm still the daughter of a duke. In terms of status, my family is second only to the imperial family," I insisted. "Although my reputation is a mess, it wouldn't be a loss for the crown prince and his family to obtain the duke as a relative."

When I finished giving my explanation, he chuckled. "That's true," he said.

I wondered if he actually understood me, but I continued to explain for now, anyway. "That's why I won't be able to refuse the crown prince if the time ever comes."

A long time ago, a great archmage by the name of Assiette established the Assiette empire. It was said that as a great lord and king, he used magic to solve his people's problems. As such, Assiette's descendants were revered as gods. Perhaps this was the reason why Father's disciple wore such a stiff expression.

"For this reason, I'm planning to tell Father that I'm dating someone else before he could even bring the crown prince up. He won't be unable to force this union together if his daughter ends up involved in a scandal with another man."

At that moment, Father's disciple spoke up. "What are you planning to do if the crown prince says he doesn't mind?"

Goosebumps rose on my skin as soon as I heard his dreadful supposition, but I tried my best not to make my fear known. "That's impossible. The imperial family must be crazy if they approve of a woman who's already dating someone else..."

I trailed off because I was bothered by how his expression had changed. What was wrong with him? He had frowned at the word *crazy*.

"You might suit the crown prince's tastes," he said.

What? I might suit his tastes? A shiver ran down my spine at the thought.

I knew it. It really was unusual that he deliberately chose to visit the Room of Shadows to torture me. If I was really the crown prince's type, it would be difficult to escape from him because madmen derived joy out of arbitrarily killing and harassing others.

I shuddered from these horrible thoughts and quickly calmed myself. "Then I must run away," I said.

As soon as I said that, his expression froze over.

Ugh, why was he making that face now? Was he going through puberty this late in age? I couldn't help but speculate because of the severity of his mood swings.

"Run away, huh?" he said, voice dropping low. "Doing that will only make your life harder, though."

I nodded. "Well, I think I'll be much happier penniless than if I were to marry the crown prince."

Although I would have to sacrifice Father's inheritance, I could sell my jewelry for a good chunk of money. Even without my inheritance, I would still be able to sustain myself by running a small business. Although this meant giving up my dream of living lavishly without having to lift a finger, running away was the only adequate solution I could think of. It was probably a good idea to start preparing right now, even.

"I'm leaving," Father's disciple said suddenly. He sounded really quiet.

"Wait!" I called out to him, but he had already left without listening to what

else I had to say. When I came to terms with his departure, I sighed. "You should've at least told me if you were going to accept or reject my request," I muttered.



Fresia quietly watched Duke Floyen as he reviewed the documents she had given him. For God's sake, she really hoped he didn't notice anything... her back had become clammy after erupting into a cold sweat. She had only managed to stall him for an hour, but that was already quite an achievement.

It was then Regis closed the folder. "I've looked through the documents you gave me, but I don't see anything different from last time."

Right when the duke was about to stand up and leave, Fresia calmly said, "That's impossible. If you look carefully—"

"Yulia."

She tensed when the duke called out her real name. She knew that he only did that when he was about to threaten her. "I don't know what your reasons for doing this are, but if you pull something like this again, I'll call off the deal," he warned. Then, he rose from his seat.

She glanced at him. "I have more information, though. Are you sure you don't want to see?" she asked.

In response, he sat back down meekly despite the hostile expression he had brandished toward her just a minute ago.

A smile spread across Fresia's face. His reaction made her wonder what kind of person Lady Floyen was. Jubelian managed to make both her lord and this scary person before her so obedient.

"So, what is it that you want to show me?" the duke asked.

Fresia took out another folder. "This."

She had planned to disclose this information later, but it couldn't be helped. Fresia decided to show Regis the last card up her sleeve.

A murderous aura emanated from him once he finished reviewing the document. "Was this true?"

Fresia nodded and sipped her tea instead of responding immediately. When she finished swallowing, she set the cup down and smiled sweetly. "Have you ever seen me make a mistake before?"

His face hardened and he stood up. "I'm leaving."

Fresia looked at the duke's retreating back, then back at the clock. Hm... it was a little earlier than what she had promised her lord... but he would probably be able to take care of it.

She picked her cup back up again, drinking what was left of her cold tea before forcefully setting it back down on the plate.



Clang!

A rough burst rang across the room.

What was Jubelian planning? Mikhail looked at the broken pieces of the liquor bottle he had smashed, his face devolving into a wicked scowl. Why on earth was that woman ignoring him?!

He had sent her an invitation, bothered by the fact she had left the banquet in the duke's arms, but she hadn't even replied. What was her reason for treating him like this? He had even apologized this time...

Mikhail had always been treated like a genius, so this was the first time he had ever lowered himself to someone else. When his apology didn't even entice a response, however, it hit his pride hard. Damn it. What went wrong, exactly? Although he had apologized and tried to get in touch with her, she hadn't spared him a single glance. The tables had been turned—he was the one actively seeking her out now.

With a woman like that... he should just act as if she didn't exist, either.

He tried to stop thinking about her with this in mind, but the bitter scent of liquor made him dizzy.

"I like you, Mikhail," she had once said.

Perhaps it was because he was drunk, but this terrible memory clouded his thoughts. He clenched his fists and punched the wall.

Bang!

Max returned to his hideout and slammed the door angrily. Fresia, who had been startled by the sound, calmed herself and observed him. He had returned earlier than expected, but why did he look so glum?

When he sat on the couch wearing a furious expression, Fresia furtively glanced at him. "Did something go wrong?" she asked.

"That's none of your business," Max said coldly.

Fresia frowned. Some personality he had. That was why she didn't even bother to correct all the bad rumors about him amongst the nobility.

"What does it mean when a woman says she wants to run away from her fiancé?"

Fresia fell deep into thought for a while. Then, she smiled. "Isn't it obvious? She must hate that person with a passion."

Max scowled at the answer and clenched his fists. It was just as he had expected, but it infuriated him anyway. Jubelian hated him with a passion?

"So, what happened at the mansion to make you so angry?" Fresia asked softly.

He furrowed his brows and began to reproach her cold-heartedly. "I said it was none of your—"

"Did you propose to the lady, by any chance? And if so, did she say that she wanted to run away from you, my lord?"

Max felt his face getting hot in response. "Who proposed?! It was her who—"

"Hey, do you want to go out with me?" she had asked.

Unable to continue, he changed the subject instead. "Is there any news from the emperor?"

"Oh, you know. He's doing the same old thing, rushing you for your return and... ah...!" Fresia's expression became serious. "Rather than the emperor causing trouble, the empress sent another assassin. I told our men to keep him

alive for now."

Max smirked. "Really?"

This wasn't the first time his spiteful stepmother, the current empress, had tried to kill him. He suspected that she had also killed the former empress, his birth mother, so he harbored a deep hatred for her. It felt like a good idea to behead the assassin and send it back to her as a gift.

"In that case, let's..." Just as he was about to reveal this gruesome thought, someone else came to mind.

"Then I must run away," Jubelian had said.

He squeezed his fists and clamped his mouth shut.

"What should we do about him?" Fresia asked.

"Keep him alive," Max said softly.

"Yes, Your Highness."

With this, Fresia began to head out of the room.

"Ah, I'm asking this out of curiosity," Max began quietly, halting her for a moment, "but have there been any invitations for me to meet with a prospective marriage partner?"

Fresia gave a small smile in response. "If there had been such a thing, I would've informed you immediately, Your Highness. But why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

Instead of replying, Max waved her away dismissively. Seriously, would it hurt for him to answer her right away? Fresia complained to herself silently.

When she left the room, Max frowned and recalled what he had thought to his master in the past: "I'll never allow myself such a weakness. Not like you."

He had never hesitated to dye his hands red with blood before, but strangely enough, he didn't want to today. Why did he... suddenly feel so regretful?

He clenched his fists.



Every time I dined with Father, I felt as if I was walking on thin ice. I was constantly preoccupied by the fear that he might bring up arranged marriages. Ah, I really shouldn't have let his disciple leave so easily that day. When I sighed mournfully, Father called out to me.

"Jubelian."

"Yes?" I asked calmly. Although I tried to look calm, I was nervous that he was going to start talking about getting me a fiancé. "Please don't talk about that. Anything but that," I prayed silently.

"What do you think about the crown prince?"

When I realized that I had to confront the very thing that had been troubling me, I could only turn to the heavens. *Dear God, why are you doing this to me?* I thought. If I could avoid answering Father's question forever, I would, but if I kept tight-lipped, he would think I was acting strange. I hesitated for a moment before deciding to beat around the bush.

"Hm, I'm not sure," I deliberated. "I don't really think about him."

When I responded like a naive noblewoman would, Father slightly furrowed his brows. "I see," he muttered before picking up his spoon again. Just as I was about to feel relieved, he said, "Still, you should learn about him."

Chills ran down my spine. He wanted me to learn about a sadist who might kill me? No, thank you.

Contrary to my thoughts, I smiled shyly and changed the topic. "Well, I've been reading a lot recently. It's made me realize that history is an exciting subject." I was trying to show him that I was doing my best to live my life to the fullest instead of staying a good-for-nothing. Father took the bait.

"I see. What have you been reading?"

"Ah, the history of this empire's founding."

His face hardened a bit. "I see," he echoed.

I was concerned, yet again, that he might mention a marriage meeting, so I continued talking. "The most interesting part of the book is about the first emperor." I actually thought that the treasures left by him were the most

interesting, but they were both involved in the same context. "I learned that he left behind many peculiar things... do you think they're still being passed down even today?"

Father set his spoon down. "Well, I'm not sure," he said. Then, he stood up from his chair. "I just remembered I have some urgent business that I have to take care of. You can take your time with your meal."

I was a bit taken aback because Father was never the first one to leave the dining room when we ate together. Hm. What was it that was so urgent? While on one hand I felt relieved, I felt empty on the other.



Regis sighed after returning to his room, worried that Jubelian might consider his behavior strange. He shouldn't have said that...

After feeling regretful for a while, he thought about what she told him earlier: "Hm, I'm not sure. I don't really think about him."

Although she was unreceptive to rumors, it was impossible for her not to know about all the awful things going around about the crown prince. However, his daughter had donned a stern expression, looking as if she didn't want to think about the prince's unpleasant qualities. It was also suspicious that she had been reading about the imperial family.

Regis looked at the cufflinks his daughter had given him as a gift and sighed. He really needed to stop them from getting together.



When I returned to my room after I finished eating, I saw Sella arranging some flowers in a vase. The assortment of pink and white roses looked quite pleasant. Now that I thought about it, we didn't have many of them around here.

I stared at the flowers blankly until a voice pulled me out of my reverie. "My lady."

I turned around and spotted Merilyn holding another silver tray. "It seems like I've received more letters," I commented.

"Yes, my lady," she said. It felt like a heavy burden had been lifted off me when I heard her warm voice. We had become close recently, so she no longer acted uncomfortable around me.

Well, receiving more letters wasn't a bad thing. When I opened one of them, I recognized Rose's familiar handwriting.

Dear Lady Floyen,

How have you been these days? You haven't mentioned anything about your health recently, so I assume you've fully recovered. Even so, I'm worried about you. I hope you don't feel sick anymore and continue to stay healthy from now on.

By the way, I have been attending tea tasting parties recently. Since it involves surrounding oneself with like-minded people, I believe it's a befitting way to peacefully enjoy tea without feeling burdened or uncomfortable. If you have any interest in joining us, please let me know.

If I rejected her when she was making an effort to invite me out... I would end up isolated. In the event I had to run away from home, it would be best to garner some sympathy from others by becoming more sociable. I should also learn more about the crown prince as Father suggested and discover what he disliked.

"Could you please run an errand to Count Arlo's residence for me?" I asked Merilyn, setting down the letter.

She nodded in response. "Of course, my lady."



"Lady Floyen has fully recovered from her illness!" Rose exclaimed.

"Oh my, that's great news."

Members of the tea tasting circle were delighted to hear that Jubelian had overcome her indisposition. Rose smiled sweetly. "She also said that she's interested in joining our next meeting. What does everyone think?"

"Oh my goodness, that would be amazing!"

"Of course she can!"

While everyone else shouted in joy, one person remained silent. Rose looked at her and said, "The next tea party will be at your place, Veronica. You're okay with that, right?"

Once she had been addressed, Veronica, looking dissatisfied, spoke up halfheartedly. "Sure, she can be invited." Although she tried to seem excited, her hand trembled as she picked up a sugar cube with a pair of tongs.

So, that woman is coming to my house, she thought to herself.

Unaware of Veronica's mood, Rose became giddy and her cheeks flushed with happiness. "Yay! I'm so excited that I'll let her know as soon as possible!" she exclaimed.



"The hostess of the tea party was usually the only one with the privilege to invite people, but Lady Arlo invited a personal acquaintance to the group at her own discretion!" Veronica recounted, gritting her teeth.

The person listening to her sighed. "Lady Veronica," he said. Although he spoke with a cold and lofty tone, that was part of his charm.

"Yes?"

"I'm very tired right now..."

It seemed like he was commanding her to leave, so Veronica quickly mentioned a certain someone he disliked to grab his attention. "Ah, but that personal acquaintance was Lady Floyen. Can you believe it? Isn't it pure nonsense?" she prompted. "I know social status is of great importance, but how could she invite a selfish woman like her?!"

The man's indifferent eyes glimmered in response. "Did you say that you're hosting the next tea party?"

"Ah, yes I am."

"Could you invite me as well? I'm worried about you now that Lady Floyen is attending."

If he had been anyone else, Veronica would've suspected the motive behind his misleading claim, but her everlasting, unrequited love for him prevented her from thinking clearly. He was worried about her! She was certain of it, elated. The gift of his attention on her, however brief, made Veronica so happy that she ended up nodding brightly. "Of course, Sir Mikhail!"

Mikhail's lips slowly lifted into a smirk. We'll finally meet again, Jubelian, he thought.



I went into my dressing room to browse through my clothes and let out a sigh. Hm, I haven't shopped for anything new to wear in a while. Although I had all the appropriate dresses for going out and attending that last banquet, I needed something that would suit this new occasion. Tea parties were considered more casual in nature and they required little formality. I wanted to wear a different style, too.

As I was debating on whether I should go shopping or look through the catalog of a famous boutique, Merilyn approached me with a wrapped box. "It's a gift from Fyodor's, my lady," she said.

After accepting the box, opening it, and spotting what was inside, I became confused. Wait, this was...

It was a brooch decorated with aquamarine gemstones and set with platinum. I could tell it was expensive just by looking at it. He couldn't have sent it to me for free... I opened up the letter accompanying it, which read somewhat like this:

Dear Lady Floyen,

I am sending this gift in order to celebrate your recovery. I hope you like it, my lady. It is thanks to your benevolence that business in the workshop is now booming, after all.

Although it's not much, I would like to send you a gift every month as a token of my appreciation. Please accept them without restraint, as I do not expect anything in return. It would also be an honor if you visited my workshop whenever you can, my muse.

The letter was lengthy, but it was essentially thanking me for promoting his work. If I thought about it, I did somewhat advertise his workshop... so it

should've been okay to accept this.

Thanks to him, I didn't have to worry about my lack of accessories anymore. I didn't plan on selling his gifts, since I could use them as emergency funds in the worst-case scenario. After silently thanking Fyodor for his useful gift, I turned to Merilyn.

"I plan to visit Arcade Street," I said. "Please make preparations."



"The lady is getting ready to go out, master. She says it's been a while since she went shopping."

Regis sighed in response. "Who are her escorts?" he asked.

Derrick listed the most skillful knights from the Floyen household. "Sir Geraldine, Sir Todd, Sir Dylan, Sir Howard, and Sir Ronald," he said. "Five escorts in total."

Regis nodded, satisfied. "Alright. That is sufficient."

"A messenger from Madam Fresia is also here. She says there is urgent news you must be informed about."

Although she seemed carefree on the outside, Fresia was inherently cautious and rarely summoned him for trivial things. Regis sighed. She probably wasn't pulling his leg this time like she did last time... he needed to go.



"Do you have plans for today, Your Highness?"

Max pulled a face at Fresia, who was hinting at him to leave. "Why?"

"A guest is coming."

He felt his temper rise. "If it's a guest, use another room here," he said, expressing his displeasure noticeably.

"Well... the problem is... the guest is Duke Floyen."

His demeanor grew even more unpleasant. "So? Are you telling me that I should run away and intentionally avoid him?" Max had always maintained a semblance of cordiality towards the duke because he was his master, but, as

indicated by his extremely obstinate behavior, he was severely enraged as of now.

Fresia knew he was her lord... but he was so difficult to deal with. She silently groaned to herself and said, "We will be discussing an important issue this time, so I think it will take a while."

"What issue would take that long?" he retorted.

She sighed softly. It wasn't anything she could tell him... what should she do? In the end, she didn't dwell too long on that question. Due to her experience in assisting him, she decided that the best course of action would be to give him a piece of information she had planned to give the duke as part of their deal. "I heard Lady Floyen will be attending a small tea party held by some noblewomen," she said. "Sir Mikhail, of all people, will be attending the party as well."

Max's eyes grew large. Then, they narrowed severely. "What? Why him?"

It used to be difficult to recognize his emotions in the past because he had always been expressionless, but he had become a lot more transparent as of late. Fresia tried her best to suppress her laughter. "I don't know. That's something only he could divulge. But if he's attending a gathering to see his exlover, doesn't that make it seem like he still has some regrets?"

Max glared at Fresia. His expression was fierce, but it was quite different from the face he usually made when he was angry. Fresia could identify the subtle differences. This was jealousy, it seemed, and she had never thought her lord was capable of expressing such an emotion before. Not long ago, he had been an unfeeling man who didn't hesitate to ruthlessly kill his enemies. Although he was rather generous to his allies, he was incredibly cruel and merciless toward those who opposed him. So much so, in fact, that it frightened even Fresia sometimes.

At some point, he must've changed.

"Keep him alive," he had commanded last time. Fresia couldn't yet tell if these changes were going to benefit or harm him, but she didn't mind them. In the past, her lord gradually seemed to be turning into a monster like the emperor, but now she could sense a faint trace of humanity from deep within him.

"That's why I'm telling you to hurry up and go..." Fresia began, but she trailed off upon seeing that Max had already disappeared. She clicked her tongue. "That was fast. How energetic of him."

Someone knocked on the door. "The guest has arrived, Madam," they announced.

Fresia's face hardened. It was time to work.



Max felt his blood boil and his head get hot. Back when he was ridiculously weak, he could only survive by deceiving his father and stepmother. The experience made him adept at suppressing his anger, and it became a skill which he had maintained even after he had grown in strength. However, this emotion rampaging within him—something he had always been able to restrain—now escaped his ironclad control because of a single fact: Jubelian was going to encounter Mikhail again.

After his mother died, Max decided to tread the path of becoming emperor and pledged never to be swayed by something as trivial as an emotion ever again. He swore never to let one ruin his plans. He had abided by this resolution since he was young, but now he felt the very thing he had desperately tried to avoid.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but visit her. As he rushed to find her, he recalled the words she had said to him before...

"It gets cold at night because we're in-between seasons."

"I was worried because I have strange tastes, but I'm glad you like it as well."

"It's not free. As repayment, you can help me out if I ever need it."

Max felt her poisonous presence take effect, spreading over him. Even so, he found himself unable to escape, hanging on like a man addicted.

He ran to her as if he was being chased by his thoughts, arriving at Jubelian's house in no time. He would usually check if his master was present first, but he was too focused on simply making it to her room. When he arrived at her

balcony, however, he had realized too late that no one was there.

Where did she go? As he frantically peered into the room and searched for her, he sensed someone getting closer. Who was that? The person's heavy gait differed from Jubelian's light, feather-like footsteps. Just as the bedroom door was about to open, Max hid himself.

"What kind of dress will our lady choose this time?" a maid asked.

"I'm not sure, but I think she'll look nice in a flowy dress with frills."

"She's so beautiful. What wouldn't suit her?

"You're right! I'm envious, though. I wish I could shop at Arcade Street without any worries, too."

Max obtained Jubelian's location from the maids' conversation. Arcade Street, huh?



I closed my eyes due to an intense bout of fatigue before reopening them once more. Just a few months ago, I had gotten at least some exercise from following Mikhail around, but now my stamina had deteriorated from staying cooped up at home all the time. I shouldn't forget to take regular walks from now on, at the very least.

With this in mind, I entered a renowned boutique in the capital.

"Oh my, what a surprise!" someone gushed. Although I heard the person who spoke, I didn't think the statement was directed toward me until she blocked my path. "Have you come out to shop as well, Lady Floyen?"

Hmm... no matter how hard I studied this noblewoman, I couldn't figure out her identity. Nevertheless, I decided to respond to her as if I knew her, or else she might naturally get offended at me for not recognizing her. "Yes, are you looking for dresses as well?" I asked.

"Oh, Lady Floyen! Other than that, there's no other reason to visit a seamstress," she said. "Well, I'm actually here to take a finished dress of mine home."

"Ah, I see. Then if you don't mind..." I excused myself, preparing to walk past

her to continue shopping.

Suddenly, however, she sighed. "It's such a shame," she said. I reflexively turned toward her and noticed that she was still looking straight at me. That meant that she was still trying to continue the conversation.

"Huh? What is?" I asked.

In response, she spoke as if she had been waited for me to ask. "I just don't think these dresses will suit you very well because of your slender figure, Lady Floyen. If fashion trends weren't so important, you wouldn't have to wear such uncomfortable, unflattering dresses. You could actually wear something that looked good on you. It's simply... a shame."

Her words sounded sarcastic, but I had to admit there was some truth to them. These dresses were definitely uncomfortable. The trend these days was the robe á la française, as seen in the show *Rose of Versailles*. With its showy stomacher and sizable skirt, this dress funneled attention to the bust. Although it was pretty, it was extremely confining. I had originally planned to order a dress to follow the trend, but this interaction reminded me to take my comfort into consideration if I was going to go through the hassle of requesting a dress in the first place. Thanks to her, I realized something important.

Regardless of her intentions, I was grateful that she offered me some useful advice. "Thank you for the advice. I will take it into consideration and order a dress that suits me," I said with a smile.

She looked reluctant and a bit disappointed at my cordial response. "Ah, okay..."

"Then, I'll excuse myself."

As I strode past her, I thought about what kind of dress I wanted to request to the designer before coming up with an idea.

Ah, yes. That should be good.



I was exhausted by the time I finished ordering the dress, but it was a worthwhile endeavor. I think the new dress was going to suit me much better.

Now that I had completed what I had set out to do for the day, a wave of fatigue crashed into me. I was contemplating whether or not I should go back home just yet when I heard a disruptive outburst.

"You scoundrel!" someone cried. "Are you trying to avoid taking responsibility after putting a nobleman in danger? Apologize right this moment!"

I frowned, wondering who would harass a commoner at a public place like this. This guy sounded like an idiot trying to recover his self-esteem by humiliating someone else. I cast a furtive glance at the dispute, then knit my eyebrows. Why... was he here?

The nobleman mistreating the commoner was a famous enough that even I knew of him. His name was Baron Gordon, and he had once been a hot gossip topic amongst the nobility because he was a commoner who managed to ascend into the upper class. I mentioned famous, but he was more infamous to be precise. As a former usurer, he had acquired the favor of high-ranking nobles by buying them expensive gifts. He must've thought he could buy anything—even status—with money, but it was impossible for the nobility to easily accept him amongst their ranks since they depended heavily upon the principle of blood and lineage. Eventually, he vanished from high society after being cast away.

I was wondering why I hadn't heard any news about him for a while. He was probably busy running around and doing stuff like this. I focused most of my attention on the commoner rather than Baron Gordon, however.

"I don't see why I have to apologize when you're the one at fault for falling," the commoner said.

I knew of only one person who would dare to confront a noble with such informality. I knew it. I knew this guy wasn't going to keep his promise.

I sighed and glared at Father's disciple.



Max disliked busy places because it reminded him of the battlefield, the only other environment that could get that crowded. Because of that, he felt lost when he stepped foot upon Arcade Street, which was wholly unfamiliar to him.

A wandering musician surrounded by onlookers played an instrument in front of the fountain at the center of the plaza. Lines of people stood outside renowned shops. A wide range of people traversed Arcade Street, moving in groups as family, friends, or lovers.

How tiring. The peaceful atmosphere made Max feel even tenser. He felt like an outsider stranded in a strange place. Where on earth was Jubelian? He was constantly moving around, trying to look for her. A man was about to bump shoulders with him, but he swiftly avoided the collision.

The man ended up falling by himself, crashing to the ground with an angry shout. "Agh! Damn it!" he seethed. "How dare you?!"

Max frowned at the man's bizarre and excessively loud voice. What was this thing? He never avoided people who tried to start fights with him, but his top priority right now was finding Jubelian, so he ignored the man and tried to leave. At that moment, however, a group of young men who looked like guards suddenly appeared before him, surrounding him.

"What's the matter, my lord?" they asked the man who fell. They helped him get back up.

"Where do you think you're going after offending a nobleman like this?" the man yelled fiercely once he was back on his feet.

Max scowled. "What did I do wrong?" he countered.

"That thing you just did, you wretch! Didn't you just trip me?"

Max unconsciously smirked, a murderous urge rising within him once he realized the man was picking a fight. Should he just kill him? Max flexed his hands, clenching and unclenching his fists. The guards surrounding him were big guys, but he knew they couldn't compare to him. If he decided to fight back, he could guarantee himself a complete victory.

If he dirtied his hands over a matter as trivial as this, however, he would end up delaying search.

"That has nothing to do with me," Max said, speaking as nicely as he could manage. He tried to leave once again, but the nobleman continued to rave in fury, unwilling to let him go unpunished.

"You scoundrel! Are you trying to avoid taking responsibility after putting a nobleman in danger? Apologize right this moment!"

Since he was going on about *danger*, Max wanted to vindicate his claims and endanger the man just like he seemed to ask for. Max suppressed his bloodthirst, however, and remained as calm as he could. "I don't see why I have to apologize when you're the one at fault for falling," he said.

The baron gritted his teeth in response. How dare that good-for-nothing commoner look down upon him! As a nobleman who had been born a citizen of the lower class, Baron Gordon had been disdained in high society for his origins, making him miserable for quite some time. No matter how much support he won using money, there seemed to be no end to his suffering. Then one day, he witnessed an unpleasant scene while he was in an extremely foul mood: a group of noblewomen who usually ignored him started fawning over a good-looking servant.

"Oh my goodness," one of the ladies gushed, "what's your name?"

Another joined in. "Won't you work for us? I'll pay you plenty," she cooed.

It was disgusting. He was so irritated by what he had seen that he ended up summoning the servant and picking a fight with him. In response, he received an apology: "I'm sorry for making such a foolish mistake," the servant had said. "Please be generous and forgive me."

It was truly a great spectacle to witness having this worthless peasant—once frustratingly overconfident around a group of noblewomen just moments ago—beg for mercy and kneel on the ground like a dog. Experiencing that made him feel as if he could fly. "I'm the noble here," he had thought, reassuring himself and finally relaxing.

After that day, he bullied tall and attractive commoners to vent his anger, but unlike his other victims who easily apologized, this new guy continued to remain stubborn until the end. Baron Gordon found himself sinking back into his violent tendencies once more. He couldn't let this bastard go!

"What are you doing? Tie up that arrogant commoner!" the baron shouted, his voice radiating vicious anger. The guards surrounding Max advanced at his orders, but another voice soon made them pause.

"Stop that right now," it said. It sounded gentle and sweet in pitch, but its tone was cold and laced with firm dignity. Everyone immediately dropped what they were doing to glance at the woman who spoke.

"Y-you are...!"

There stood an elegant woman with silver hair, periwinkle eyes, and alluring features brilliant enough to dazzle the eye. One could immediately tell that this gorgeous woman glaring with a frigid expression was of the upper nobility. Although Baron Gordon had been deserted by aristocratic society, he wasn't so dull as to fail to recognize someone who outranked most of high society.

"I greet the lady of the great house of Floyen. I am—"

She listened to his greeting briefly, giving a slight nod before cutting him off. "I know who you are, Baron Gordon," she said. Although she had spoken icily, Baron Gordon was delighted to discover Lady Floyen recognized a low-ranking noble like him.

"To meet you by coincidence like this... I am truly a lucky person," he marveled.

The children of dukes were usually treated as if they possessed the rank of a count or countess. It was rare for a baron to obtain the opportunity to strike up a conversation with someone like her. She was rather notorious, but what did it matter? If he could win her favor and eventually become noticed by the duke, it would be worth it, even if it meant utilizing all of his wealth. It would be very easy to please a young girl. Baron Gordon's eyes shone covetously.

Lady Floyen's coral lips parted to speak.

"Really?" she asked. "Because I'm very annoyed right now."

The baron flinched. Her voice hadn't contained the slightest hint of warmth.

Continues in Volume 2

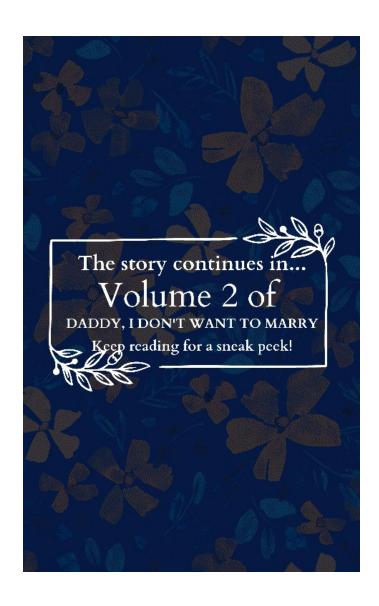
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Protect You

"I'm sorry? D-did I... by any chance... offend you, my lady?" Baron Gordon stuttered, taken aback. Rather than sympathy, however, I felt anger churning my insides. He treated the powerless brutally but had the audacity to act pitifully in front of me.

He reminded me of my superiors in my past life. They frequently abused their authority, acting servile toward those who stood above them while raising their voices against the weak. Although I wanted to berate him to my heart's content, I was aware that we were in the middle of a busy street where many nobles frequented. If I blindly supported Father's disciple, a commoner, I was bound to excite more rumors about me. I had no way around this situation without first putting on a little act.

I pointed at Father's disciple and straightened my spine, donning an austere gaze. "Well, weren't you mistreating my man just now?" I declared.

Immediately, Father's disciple looked aghast. He was taken aback, which I thought understandable. "I'm trying to save you, so keep your mouth shut. Okay?" I tried to hint, leveling him with an intense gaze.

Although I had spoken to the baron, I unexpectedly received a reply from elsewhere: the knights.

"What? What do you mean by that, my lady?"

"What did you mean by my man?"

Their unusually gloomy voices startled me. *Yikes*. I forgot about them because it was a habit of mine to ignore my escort knights since they made me feel uncomfortable whenever I went shopping.

I turned around. "He's a secret escort Father privately assigned to me," I explained calmly. "He's a very skilled mercenary."

"I was never informed of this, my lady," Geraldine said, looking stubborn. He seriously lacked the ability to adapt to these kinds of situations.

I sighed. I decided to explain the circumstances of this situation to them later. This moment called for a few white lies. "I asked Father to keep it a secret from my knights because I assumed it would displease you all."

"But—"

"I'm talking to someone right now, so I'll give you all the details about this later.

Geraldine bowed with a sigh. "Yes, my lady," he said, stepping back.

I resumed glaring at Baron Gordon. "Now, do you really think I'm just going to let you go after messing with my guard, Baron Gordon?"

The baron winced in response. "What do you mean *messing* with him?! That man tripped me then spoke to me informally!" he protested. It was like his life was on the line or something. "How are you going to compensate for the damage done to me?"

Within aristocratic society, a noble only held their subordinate accountable for a mistake if the conflict it inspired got out of hand. Therefore, it was more common for both parties to let the issue slide so as to not offend each other. Now that he knew it would be hopeless to attempt to forge any friendly relations with me, he switched gears, trying to squeeze some money out of me instead. As a self-made noble with common origins, he was just as servile as expected, but he wasn't the slightest bit agreeable, judging by how fast his attitude had changed.

Sighing, I realized how much I really didn't like this person. Even at first glance I could tell that the baron had been the one to initiate the argument, unjustly demanding an apology he had no right to receive. In any case, it would've been impossible for Father's disciple to degrade himself in front of someone who picked a fight with him. Even if he had truly been in the wrong, I doubted he would ever apologize with that fierce personality of his.

It couldn't be helped. In a situation like this...

"This escort of mine grew up in the countryside, so he isn't accustomed to the social norms prevalent here. Nevertheless, it's my fault that I didn't teach him any manners, so I will take full responsibility as his lady," I said softly. I leveled

the baron with a flagrant death stare, and he met my gaze with a bright expression.

He was probably getting excited at the thought of how much I might compensate him, wasn't he? But, as the saying goes: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. In this type of situation, masters either punished their subordinates or compensated the other party involved, but since I planned not to waste my time or money by doing either, I came up with another method to resolve this ordeal. It would prove both peaceful and frugal.

"Why don't we call it even with this, Lord Gordon?" I began. "Speak as informally to me as my guard did to you."

The baron's smile immediately disappeared from his face.



Speak informally? To her?

After digesting Lady Floyen's suggestion, the baron shivered, coming to a realization. He had made a faulty judgment. The nobles he had acquainted himself with had babbled about the lady's lack of manners and her dreadful, arrogant personality, so he had been certain about this course of action. However...

"Go ahead. Say something," she said haughtily, her gaze as clear as it was intimidating and fierce. No matter how he looked at her, she wasn't the immature child he assumed her to be, but rather a fiend that would threaten his life the moment he lowered his guard.

This vile wench... She only had the nerve to make such a claim because she knew he wouldn't be able to do it. The baron had attained his noble title through staying shrewd, so he knew that if he sought to assuage his pride and forgo formality when addressing her, he would be punished for mutiny. It was a crime serious enough to strip him of his hard-earned yet insignificant status.

Hurriedly, he bowed. "I have caused my lady great inconvenience. Please be

generous and forgive me."

Even though he apologized, she shook her head with disapproval. "I don't think you should seek forgiveness from me, but from my guard," she said coldly.

The baron gritted his teeth, livid at the prospect of bowing to a commoner. Even so, he immediately lowered his head, knowing that he would enrage Lady Floyen if he didn't. "I'm sorry about what happened. It seems that I've misunderstood you," he forced out. Sensing his insincerity, Max simply looked down upon him in lieu of responding.

How dare a commoner behave with such arrogance merely because he was backed by a lady of prominence! The baron stared back at Max, furious, but then he reeled back when he saw the commoner's red eyes cloud with bloodlust. He didn't realize it until now. How were that man's eyes so...

He suddenly came to his senses.

He had done everything to climb the social hierarchy, from becoming a hitman bound by contract to threatening and harming others. Despite all his dirty deeds, he had never seen such menacing eyes.

That thing was dangerous.

The commoner now frightened the baron more than the lady did. Nervous, he gulped, the urge to leave as soon as possible rising rapidly within him.

"Now that I have apologized, I'll be leaving," he hurriedly said. Then, he disappeared, fleeing the scene.

Max watched the man go, and as he scrutinized him, a devious smirk slowly slithered upon his lips. He took note of the lowly noble. *Baron Gordon, huh...*

He should kill that fool soon.

At that moment, however, a voice tickled his ears. "Are you okay?" Lady Floyen asked. "Did you get hurt anywhere?"

When the person he had been searching for came into view, his bloodthirsty gaze dissolved into something much more docile. Did she think an idiot like that baron could hurt him? Max was about to respond as he usually did, but then he stopped, remembering what she had told him once before.

"I'm still in a situation where I'm being ignored by those in high society," she had said. "How much of a joke will they think I am if you disrespected me as well?"

He took her small, slender, and warm hands, grasping them tightly. "I'm fine, my lady," he replied.

Jubelian's eyes quivered.



I couldn't believe he would run away like that. It was odd to witness the baron leave so quietly after causing a commotion and insisting on an apology like that, but it wasn't so strange when I really thought about it.

I didn't intend to make him uncomfortable by telling him to address me informally, but he probably couldn't help but feel that way due to my lofty status. Well, either way, there was no telling what he would've done to Father's disciple if I hadn't intervened and unintentionally demeaned him. No matter how skilled Father's disciple was at swordsmanship, he wouldn't be able to avoid getting punished for opposing a nobleman.

I cast a furtive glance at Father's disciple, but it didn't look like he was injured anywhere. *Hmm*, since he seemed so stiff, was he shocked by what had happened?

Out of concern, I extended my hand toward him. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt anywhere?" I asked. He turned toward me. He probably wasn't frightened because his eyes didn't look any different from how they usually were. That was a relief.

Was it because I had confided in him a few times already? We weren't close enough to be considered friends, but I felt comfortable around him anyway. I was glad. After what had happened, I got worried he would be intimidated and keep his distance from me...

At that moment, he suddenly took my hands in his.

Um... Why was he holding them so tightly? His firm grasp reminded me of a lost child who had finally found his parents. It amused me that I could glean such innocence from him despite his imposing size.

I guess he was relieved to encounter someone he knew. Letting him stay in my room and feeding him hadn't been in vain, it seemed. He was finally opening up to me.

Then, he addressed me in a manner I never thought I'd ever hear from him. "I'm fine, my lady," he said.

His sudden formality made me skeptical. I didn't doubt my ears since they were working perfectly fine, so I paused wonderingly. What had gotten into him? I couldn't understand why someone who frequently invited trouble with his stubborn impropriety now treated me in a wholly uncharacteristic manner.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked again. His dispute with the baron had gone on for some time before I had intervened, so it was possible someone had hit him on the head or something. Bearing that suspicion in mind, I inspected his face attentively, but I couldn't see much because of his tall stature.

At least he had his height going for him. Not only did he tower over me, but he was also handsome. Even though the commotion had passed, a lot of people continued to stop and gawk at him.

"Who is that gentleman over there?" one person asked.

"Hm. I'm not sure, but isn't that Lady Floyen next to him?"

"Oh my, it is. And they're holding hands, I see!"

No matter how big the plaza was, it still sat at the very center of the capital. As the most infamous lady in high society, people recognizing me wasn't a surprise.

Uncomfortable, I decided to ask him to let go of me so we could head somewhere else. "Hey, we can stop—"

He interrupted me. "There's something I have to let you know, my lady," he said. "About that contract you mentioned..."

I still had goosebumps from when he first started behaving politely, but now

another issue plagued me. Startled, I covered his mouth with my hands to prevent him from continuing. "You want to discuss the payment you'll receive from Father, right?" I asked, bluffing. He could only be referring to one *contract*, and that had to be the proposal I once made to initiate a contractual relationship. He probably had an answer for me, but I couldn't have such an important conversation occur in such a crowded place. Others could be listening.

"Follow me," I instructed, dragging him toward my carriage by our clasped hands. "Here, get in."

Instead of getting in like I directed, however, he regarded me gently. "Why don't you get in first, my lady?" he asked, and his unexpected offer made me feel incredibly strange. Did he become a little kinder?

Once we got in and the carriage door had closed behind us, I resumed our discussion. "Before, on that day... why did you leave without saying anything?" His upset expression at the time bothered me, and I had wondered about it since then. Did he hate the idea of being in a contractual relationship with me that much? He should've rejected me on the spot if that was the case. I could've started brainstorming ideas on how to run away, instead...

He gazed at me arrogantly then tilted his head back as if he couldn't bear the sight of me any longer. "That's none of your business," he said.

I knew it. It was impossible for someone to change so easily.



"I have something urgent to discuss with him, so please refrain from staying too close to the carriage," Jubelian said. Despite ordering her escort knights with a firm, decisive tone, she didn't sound too forceful. Max gazed at Jubelian, ruminating on her pleasant voice.

Jubelian had always been excessively considerate toward him, which had made her seem somewhat naive. Now, however, she acted with refinement befitting her status as the only daughter of a duke, bowing to none but the imperial family. Bearing witness, Max no longer worried over someone potentially taking advantage of her kindness.

"Although I trust you all, there will be consequences if someone eavesdrops on our conversation," she continued. The sight of her exercising her authority was an unfamiliar one, but it relieved Max. She wouldn't get sucked into any trouble, at the very least.

Jubelian met his gaze after they ensured their privacy. "Before, on that day... why did you leave without saying anything?" she asked.

The question flustered him despite the fact that he was rarely the type to find himself taken aback. *Shit*—what should he say? She had told him that she was planning on running away should she be forced to marry the crown prince. He couldn't tell her the truth—that he was the crown prince in question—because she would end up fleeing.

"That's none of your business," he said somberly, burdened by the thought of her running from him.

She let out a sigh instead of pressing him for an explanation. "Alright," she said. "Then, what's your answer for my proposal?"

Max hesitated. There was something that had been bothering him ever since she first brought the subject up: why did she want to start a contractual relationship with *him* specifically? "There is something I need to ask you before I decide," he began, hoping the stifling feeling inside of him would dissipate once he heard her reasons.

"Okay, go ahead."

"Why did you pick me for something like that?"

"By something like that... do you mean the contractual relationship?"

"Yes," Max responded, clenching his fists. He was wrought with an unknown source of tension. Jubelian's expression hardened.

"That's because... you're Father's precious disciple?"

Contrary to his expectations, she praised neither his appearance nor his swordsmanship skills. He scrunched his face up at the absurdity of her answer.

She wanted to date him for such a trivial reason? Disappointment and anger inexplicably surged within him. He couldn't believe he was wasting his time with a woman like her...

If Jubelian were anyone else, he would've angrily lashed out at her for trying to use him, but he found himself unable to do so because... well, he was looking at her. The longer he gazed at her, the more he felt his irritation subside. Why on earth was he being swayed... by a woman like her?

Consumed by a sense of shame, Max frowned, his eyes downcast.

"I also have another reason..."

When he looked up, he saw her smiling sweetly.

"You're the only person I'm comfortable enough with to ask this favor from," she finished.

Comfortable... Max felt the same about her. "I see," he said.

His sour mood immediately dissipated upon hearing that she felt the same way. Now filled with joy, his heart fluttered warmly. He had more he wanted to ask, but he didn't want to think about them anymore. Yes. This was good enough.

Without realizing it, Max smiled.



Suddenly, I saw him smile. Why? Nevertheless, it gave me a pleasant feeling for some reason.

Well, it was no secret that he was handsome. Although I didn't want to admit it, I couldn't help but acknowledge that he was my type. He might've had a vile personality, but I wouldn't mind being in a relationship with someone with a face like that.

Then, I realized that I still hadn't gotten an answer from him.

"I answered your question, so shouldn't you answer mine now?"

He nodded and said, "Alright. I'll accept your request."

I smiled brightly, relieved that I had finally found a way to avoid my predestined death. "Thank you. How much do you want for compensation?"

He furrowed his brows. "I don't need any," he said, his voice cold. "I'm just doing this to pay back what I owe you."

This almost had me picturing him as an angel. Now that I was trying to save money and stay aware of my finances, this would help me sustain an independent lifestyle in the future. So what if he was ill-mannered? He was kind.

I wrapped my hands around his, deeply moved. "Thank you. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Okay. I get it, so let go of my hands," he said, scowling.

I had no intention of letting go, however. "What do you mean? We have to act like lovers from now on... it will be difficult to explain if you act halfheartedly!"

Because my life depended on this humorless act, I... I swallowed the last part of my sentence and stared at him steadily as I continued. "Now that we've decided to be in a contractual relationship, you must hold hands with me, lock arms with me, and address me affectionately," I explained. "Do you understand?" Silent, he wore a hardened expression. "Say something," I said.

He sighed. "Alright," he quietly muttered. I gave a half-smile and moved on to discuss another essential aspect involved in the start of a legitimate relationship.

"By the way, I don't think you know my name yet, but—"

"Jubelian," he said clearly, interrupting me. My eyes widened in surprise. "I know what your name is."

I wanted to tell him what my name was because he always referred to me as 'you,' so I thought he was just as clueless about me as I was of him, but... he knew? My heart shook at his earnest voice, but then an upsetting realization dawned on me: if he knew my name all along, why didn't he ever use it?

Nevertheless, another problem needed to be addressed. "I still don't know your name. I've asked for it before, but you've never answered me. Could you tell me now?"

I spoke carefully so as to not hurt his feelings. Fortunately, he didn't seem offended. A brief silence ensued before he opened his mouth to answer.

"It's... Max," he said.

Max. If I were to find fault with this name, it would be that it was a little too close to the crown prince's name. Nevertheless, it didn't have a bad meaning.

"That's a good name. Your parents must've wanted you to become a great person," I said.

He stared at me for a while. "Yeah," he finally said.

I thought he was going to look away from me again like he did before, but he continued to hold my gaze with his red, sunset-hued eyes. I felt strange for some reason, so I decided to change the subject.

"Hey, about—"

He interrupted me. "Didn't we just decide to call each other by our names?"

I smiled awkwardly because he had caught me off guard. "We did, Max," I conceded. A soft smile appeared on his face after I said his name.

I watched him for a while before deciding to get down to business. "Why don't we write out an official contract?" I suggested.

At the word 'contract,' he pulled a face and glared at me. "A contract? Would writing such a thing be necessary? I clearly remember telling you that I didn't want to be compensated for this," he said.

I sighed. What did Father teach him, if not common sense? What if he got scammed by someone? I decided to assume the position of an instructor to help this pure, innocent man in front of me. "Every deal you make must be officially written out," I began. "If you don't do that, people will think you're a pushover and take advantage of you. I mean, they could refuse to compensate you or they could do bad things in your name."

Although I could tell he was listening to me, he still looked clueless. Ugh,

should I explain it all to him again? I sighed, contemplating whether or not I should use simpler words so he could understand me.

"But you won't do that to me," he said sincerely. He spoke with such conviction it made me feel strange.

Until now, no one had ever trusted me... I had been living my role as a villainess, so the hatred I accrued had been a natural thing. A given. No one had ever confided in me before, either—not even Father. In the novel, Jubelian had pleaded for him to trust her, but he ignored her and threw her in prison anyway. However, Max's red eyes were focused on me, wholly doubtless. An odd feeling arose within me, tugging at the depths of my heart.

Ah, but this wasn't the right time to be zoning out. I barely managed to compose myself. "Scams are so effective because they're usually done by people you trust!" I insisted.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's why no matter how close you are with someone, you shouldn't just hold them accountable. Don't just take their word for it. Make them write an official contract, okay?"

He nodded, sighing at my continued nagging. "Alright."

His obedient response only made me more worried, though. This guy was really naive and ignorant of worldly affairs... would he be able to handle this unkind reality?

I was originally concerned about his fearsome personability, but now I was worried about his carelessness and ignorance. After mulling over my concerns for a while, I made a promise to myself: while in a contractual relationship with him, I should teach him about a lot of things. In truth, I felt bad that he had refused payment, so I could repay the favor by teaching him life lessons.

"Before we write the contract, let's come to terms about the most important thing."

"And what's that?" he asked.

I had been thinking about this for a while. "Geraldine is the leader of the

escort knights. So, judging from his personality, he's definitely going to interrogate us on how we met. We can't tell him the truth, so we should make up a story we can both agree on."

"Ah... I see."

Even he couldn't deny my reasoning. After all, our first meeting involved trespassing, threats, and a sword.

"So, I was thinking... how about this story?" I told him a scenario I had been concocting for a while, but he quickly raised his voice against it.

"What? No, I absolutely hate it!"

I could tell he loathed my scheme just by looking at him. "Could you come up with anything better, then?" I asked sternly.

"Can't we switch roles? What if I'm the one who—"

I cut him off. "No, that wouldn't make any sense. You know I'm always surrounded by knights." I studied him as I fell into deep thought. Then, I took his hands and held them tightly. "It might be daunting now, but it won't mean anything later," I insisted, coaxing. "If it's still too difficult for you, you can just stand beside me and let me take the lead."

He nodded with a blank expression. "Alright."

Opening the carriage door, I walked out with him. "Make your hand on my shoulder more obvious," I whispered quietly. His hand, which had rested awkwardly atop my shoulder, promptly covered its entirety. "Good job," I praised him.

He remained silent. Although I hadn't expected him to put on a convincing act in the first place, I felt a little frustrated. I guess I had no choice but to bear the bulk of this task.

The escort knights waiting for me seemed to be taken aback by the sight of us posing as a couple as we came out of the carriage. Geraldine, in particular, observed me as he pressed his fingers against his temples.

"Could you please explain what in the world is happening here, my lady?" he asked. As expected, he immediately began interrogating me about our

relationship.

"What I said earlier was actually a lie, Sir Geraldine," I confessed.

He nodded as if he had already known. "Ah, yes. Of course. His Grace would never assign an outsider a task without letting me know." He studied me with a probing gaze before continuing. "So, who is that man and why is he allowed to treat you so intimately?" he asked coldly.

"He's my boyfriend," I announced confidently.



Max's hand felt hot as it rested upon her small shoulder.

"Good job," she muttered.

Although he was aware of the fact that she had spoken, he was too preoccupied with worrying over whether or not she could hear the rapid beat of his heart to truly listen. She wouldn't notice it, would she? To ensure her ignorance, he tried to restrain himself with focused intensity.

At that moment, a disobliging voice met his ears.

"So, who is that man and why is he allowed to treat you so intimately?"

"He's my boyfriend."

As soon as Jubelian finished the sentence, angry protests erupted around them.

"What? How could you say that, my lady?!"

"We have always escorted you closely, but we've never seen a man like him."

Max removed his trembling hand from Jubelian's shoulder and clenched his fists. How annoying. He thought of her guards as eyesores and resented how they were permitted to be around her in the first place. Furthermore, it was ridiculous that these men dared to show such blatant hostility toward him.

Suddenly, Jubelian placed her hand atop his.

"It will be alright," she whispered, bearing a light smile. The moment he saw her face, his sizzling anger gradually subsided. His heart tingled, seeming to swell.

She turned back to the knights. "It's a given none of you know about him. I met him at Count Meissen's banquet, which was held quite a while ago." The knights stared at Max with disbelief in their eyes.

No way. Was Max a nobleman? Geraldine could tell he was well-off despite being dressed in shabby clothes...

Count Meissen was known for holding banquets with guests who only came from reputable, aristocratic families. If the man in front of them had attended such an event, he was probably an esteemed son from a renowned house. What family was he from? Geraldine had never seen him in the capital before.

Geraldine observed Max with sharp eyes.

"He's no noble; he's a mercenary that had been hired to compensate for the lack of guards," Jubelian said. The knights narrowed their eyes at the word mercenary.

"I wonder why a mere mercenary would approach our lady," Geraldine said. The other knights' eyes were filled with condescension.

Max scowled. How dare a few lowly knights regard him in such a way. The immediate urge to draw his sword, displaying his strength and superiority, soared within him. Nevertheless, the hand that held him, anchoring him in place, was so warm that his irritation couldn't help but disappear. Jubelian's touch stopped him. How did he end up like this?

Max blazed with heat. Oblivious to this, Jubelian began to counter Geraldine's accusation.

"We met each other during a critical situation," she said.

When the knights heard the phrase *critical situation*, their aggression calmed somewhat. *Ah*, so this man saved their lady during a serious encounter...

However, Jubelian's next explanation had the knights doubting their hearing.

"I saved him from being surrounded and cornered by a hoard of

noblewomen."

"I'm sorry? You saved him, my lady?"

"Yes. They all ran away when I asked them about Mikhail's whereabouts." The women probably ran away because Jubelian was infamous for committing wicked acts toward people who approached Mikhail. "Afterwards, he told me he wanted to return the favor, saying that he owed me his life. Although I declined his offer and continued to search for Mikhail, I couldn't stop thinking about him. He was the reason I broke up with Mikhail in the end."

The knights looked simply astonished.

"When we met again here at Arcade Street today, it was as if we had met by destiny. I was certain that he was the person for me," Jubelian continued. "None of you understand how moved I was when I found out that he had been looking for me as well."

Her story flustered the knights for a while. Then, they gave Max a sinister look. How dare a commoner do such a thing. It was understandable that Jubelian thought and acted this way since she was someone who exhibited no awareness when she was blindly in love, but they couldn't help but think that it was absurd for a commoner to attempt to court the daughter of a duke. He didn't know his place.

Max realized that the knights were trying to intimidate him by giving him menacing looks. It was irritating. Baron Gordon had already drained him of patience not long ago, so it wasn't an exaggeration to say his current composure ought to be considered a miracle. He had never bothered to endure people who treated him with blatant belligerence before.

Right. He should just stomp on these bugs for thinking they could intimidate him.

After coming to this decision, he conveyed his antagonism through a glare. The knights, receiving his sharp, vicious energy head-on, flinched and instinctively reached for their swords.

Who... was this man?

Through the sheer force he had emitted, they could tell he was someone who

walked the path of swordsmanship rather than knightship. He was strong. Where did a man like him suddenly come from? His gaze was so dangerous that it ignited the knights' impulse to draw their swords and prepare themselves for an opponent's attack. However, they couldn't act rashly because Jubelian stood right next to him.

A cold voice broke the silence.

"Excuse me," Jubelian said. "Are you guys threatening my boyfriend?"

We're the ones being threatened! the knights lamented silently in response. Feeling as if he was being treated unfairly, one knight tried to confess the truth. "That's not it, my lady..."

He trailed off when Jubelian narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean by that? Did you think I couldn't see the frightening expressions you all were making at him?"

"That's a misunderstanding, Jubelian. What happened just now—" Geraldine tried to tell her that there was someone even more frightening behind her, but Jubelian continued to rattle on without giving him any more time to explain himself.

"He's so terrified that his hands are shaking!" she exclaimed.

Max, who was standing behind Jubelian, smirked at her defense of him. The sight appalled the knights. They desperately wanted to implore her to look behind her, but Jubelian's gaze remained steadfastly fixed upon them.

"As a group of people daring to intimidate a single person, you're the same as the noblewomen back then. You all should be ashamed!"

The knights tried to suppress their dissatisfaction as she spoke sternly, recalling the duke's orders. "Please protect my daughter," he had said. Until now, the knights had guarded Jubelian wordlessly due to their loyalty to the duke. It was part of their job to frighten others, so they truly believed that this situation was unjust. They hadn't done anything wrong.

"My lady, we really..." Todd began, but he trailed off when Jubelian turned around as if she couldn't even bear to spare the knights another glance.

"Are you okay?" she asked Max.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, my lady."

The man who had been bombarding the knights with a bloodthirsty gaze suddenly hid his hostility, feigning innocence before the lady.

Seriously, what kind of person did that? The knights gaped in astonishment and couldn't help but wonder if the man had deliberately set up that banquet just to get close to Jubelian.

"My lady, that man—"

Geraldine tried to warn her, but Jubelian held Max's hand tightly and glared at the knights. "Just know that we'll be going back to the mansion for now," she said coldly. Then, she turned to Max, lowering her voice to whisper. "Don't worry. I'll protect you no matter what."

Max furrowed his brows. Then, he let out a sigh. A weakling like her... protecting him? Everything she was saying sounded preposterous, but for some reason, he didn't mind it or the warmth of her hands around his, no matter how nonsensical.



When we arrived at the mansion, the butler looked at Max with surprise. "My lady, how did you come back with...?"

Perhaps it was because he knew Max was Father's disciple, but Derrick was unable to continue his sentence. Well, if I'm going to tell everyone anyway, I should make it clear at the start.

"He's my guest," I said.

I couldn't tell what Derrick was thinking after hearing me say that, but he sighed. "Ah, I see. Then I'll take him to the drawing room—"

I interrupted him. "He's also my boyfriend."

Clang!

At the sound of something falling to the ground, I turned around and saw Father looking at us with an astounded expression.

"Jubelian, what did you just..." He trailed off.

On one hand, I felt nervous since the very situation I had been planning for had finally arrived. On the other hand, I felt hopeful because I could finally get rid of a problem that had been bothering me this entire time.

I wore a satisfied smile. "Max, say hello. This is Father."

Father's expression hardened. "Jubelian, what did you just say?" he asked. I had never seen his eyes look so ferocious before. He almost looked barbaric, which was unlike someone who usually seemed indifferent about everything.

A person who never cared about anything I ever did, no matter how much trouble I caused, was suddenly getting all upset like this... it inspired something in me: a small urge to rebel. He was probably furious that I refused to be his puppet and comply with the arranged marriage he set up for me, straying from him to tempt his disciple instead.

I proudly locked arms with Max. "I said we're officially starting a relationship."

Father glared at me in response. "Come inside first, then we'll talk," he then said quietly.

Geraldine and the knights believed my lies because they were rather naive, but if I tried the same with Father, I was bound to get caught. Because of this, I needed to mix some truth into my story.

Would I be able to pull it off? I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but I didn't want to have any doubts at the moment. "It'll be okay. I can do it," I promised, trying to encourage myself.

Suddenly, the arm locked around mine loosened. Max had unfastened his hold on me. Didn't I ask for his cooperation? I tried to give him a look to convey this, but he ended up surprising me instead. He had removed his arm so he could hold my hand.

"Let's go... my lady," he said. Although he sounded a bit awkward, I didn't mind because he had addressed me formally.

Was it because he was with me? For some reason, the thought of being scolded today didn't frighten me.



How did it end up like this? Regis clenched his fists, realizing that he should have exercised more vigilance in keeping his sly disciple away from his daughter. What on earth are you scheming, Maximilian? Regis seethed silently.

He was certain that Max had planned this situation with wicked intentions, knowing full well the depths to which his disciple's inhumane and evil nature reached. The reason he wanted to get close to Jubelian was probably...

Does he want to get me involved in the rebellion by using Jubel? Regis questioned to himself. As his uncertain guesses grew clearer and clearer, a smug smile slowly began to appear on his face.

"Master, you need to know the right time to let your pawns go," his disciple had once told him. "It's common sense to make some sacrifices during a revolution."

Max was someone who saw people as pieces upon a chessboard, so it was possible he harbored intentions even more wicked than Regis had originally predicted. How dare that man consider his daughter a pawn... although his speculations weren't confirmed, Regis couldn't help but feel enraged. His disciple had already made a move.

That scoundrel. This was how Max pay him back after all he'd done by becoming his enemy? Although their relationship hadn't been built on pure intentions, he had never hesitated to give his disciple advice because he valued Max at heart. Regis had even protected him from the assassins sent by the empress when he was young, but it seemed like all those supportive efforts had gone to waste.

I can't let a monster like you take my daughter away from me, Regis swore, gritting his teeth in disgust. Although he really wanted to punish his ungrateful disciple, he knew that Jubelian would be unhappy if he did so, considering how

she seemed to cherish the people and things she valued.

How irritating.

Regis felt as if his head was going to burst, but he carefully masked his feelings and offered his daughter and disciple a seat. "Sit down," he said.

Right as Jubelian was about to sit, Max pulled a chair out for her. "Here."

She smiled. "Thank you."

If he had been the disciple that Regis had come to know, he wouldn't have been affected by her words at all. Nonetheless, the despicable man replied meekly. "Sure," he murmured.

That spiteful rogue. He tricked Jubelian by putting on an act. Regis clenched his fists, embittered. Having observed Max for a long time, he knew that things rarely affected him. Once, he had even once said: "You want me to show compassion to the weak? That will only get me beheaded."

Regis had tried to soften his disciple's personality on numerous occasions, but he only became more perverse with time. There was no way a guy like him could change so suddenly.

"How did you two meet?" Regis asked coldly, speaking as if to interrogate. An aura of aggression emanated from his eyes.

"During the last few days you've been gone, he came to visit you," Jubelian began. "Since you weren't here and there was no place else for him to go, I let him stay in my room for a while."

Unable to suppress his anger, Regis' face twisted. So that was why that vile snake lured him to the imperial palace!

Although she seemed mostly expressionless, his daughter had possessed a soft heart from a young age.

"I don't want these birds anymore, so don't catch them, okay?" she had once told Derrick, mourning the death of her pet bird. She had only been seven years old.

She was the type of kid who could never ignore abandoned dogs and cats she spotted on the streets. She was lenient toward the weak and pitiable, and Regis

knew it. Bearing in mind that truth, Max's crimes grew even more infuriating. Regis could never forgive his disciple for taking advantage of his daughter's kindness.

"Why didn't you ask Derrick? He could've taken you to a guest room," Regis said, leveling Max with a murderous gaze. Although his question was clearly directed toward his disciple, Jubelian responded instead.

"It had been very late at night, so I felt awkward alerting anyone since the knights had already come by," she said. "Also, I assumed he wouldn't hurt me because he was your disciple, Father."

Regis sighed softly in response. In truth, Max was the most dangerous man she could have met... he used whatever means necessary to accomplish his own ends. In Regis' eyes, he was no different from an outrageous tyrant. With that atrocious mentality of his, he wouldn't think twice before inflicting danger upon her as soon as she displeased him or as soon as he had drained her of her worth.

Jubelian probably didn't know that her life was now at risk.

Nevertheless, Regis couldn't blame his precious daughter. The reason she had presented him for letting Max into her room—the fact that Max was his disciple —was a valid one. After all, it was probably his fault from the start. He never should have taken Max under his wing...

He sipped his well-brewed tea. Its fragrance was pleasant and mellow, but he could only taste bitterness in his mouth.

"That was inappropriate of you, considering her reputation," he said coldly, criticizing Max for treating Jubelian inconsiderately.

Once again, she replied in Max's stead. "You probably know this already, Father, but I don't care that much about my reputation," she said. Although Regis' heart ached at the things the exaggerated rumors said about his daughter, he didn't care much about them, either. No matter what others thought, he knew that his daughter was a kind and lovely person.

Jubelian straightened up and looked straight at Regis, continuing her speech. "Still, I took extreme care because I was afraid of causing you any trouble.

Nothing had actually happened between us," she said. Regis was taken aback by the look of vigor in her eyes. "I'm embarrassed to say this, but up until now, I've only been in a one-sided relationship. I honestly think it's a miracle that someone I like now likes me back." She sighed, voice suddenly soft. "Father, you might not trust me because of all the problems I've caused up until now, but I swear I'll never disgrace our family's prestigious name. So, please allow us to date."

Regis had originally planned to declare their relationship thoroughly impossible to permit, but as he listened to his daughter's desperate pleas, a soft spot began to arise within him.

How could... how could she manage to weaken him like this?

She was the apple of his eye. Regis truly wanted to do everything he could for her, but the terrible existence she had become attached to forbade him.

He gathered his wits about him. "I can't allow this," he said resolutely. "End the relationship."



I understood. He had already made up his mind on my marriage with the crown prince.

I sighed. An arranged marriage between a crazy, tyrannical crown prince and a duke's only daughter. Other nobles might've considered having the prince as their son-in-law as well, but they would never go as far as to make it a reality. Father was a transcendent being, however, so he looked much younger than his actual age. He could probably marry again and bear another successor in the near future if he so wished. He could start over whenever he wanted.

It made sense that he would prefer to trade with the royal family rather than give his foolish daughter a fresh start. After all, it was simply the most advantageous choice available to him. What should I do now, though? If I opposed him, he would certainly push the marriage all the sooner. I sighed in frustration, hanging my head low, when someone suddenly grasped my hand

tightly....