



Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry!

Hong Heesu

DADDY, I DON'T WANT TO
MARRY

VOLUME 4

HONG HEESU

TRANSLATED BY
WORDEXCERPT

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CONTENTS

1. Getting Closer
2. Emperor's Plans
3. Handkerchief
4. Troubled Thoughts
5. Making Up
6. Finding Out
7. Diligence
8. Hunting Competition

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING CLOSER



MORNING DAWNED AND I WOKE UP EARLY FOR ONCE. INSTEAD OF LOUNGING AROUND IN MY room like I usually did, I changed clothes and went downstairs.

"Hi, Linda," I greeted. "How about changing the curtains today?"

"Good morning, Lady Floyen. I'll go get new curtains, then."

"Cindy, I still see dust on the furniture!"

"Y-Your Ladyship! I'm sorry!"

If I stayed locked up in my room, I wouldn't have been able to see the scene unfolding before me. Servants and maids were busily bustling about, and I felt strange as I watched them. It seemed like everyone led a hectic life but me. Until now, I hadn't been motivated to do anything. The only matter I had concerned myself with was evading my death flag. Now that I had successfully accomplished it, the diligent workers inspired me to change.

"Good morning, Lady Floyen."

They were greeting me, so I responded in kind. "Good morning."

"Is there anything you need?" a servant asked.

I noticed that my presence was making them uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it was only natural for them to feel a little uneasy around me.

"Oh, no," I answered. "Thanks for all your work."

"Of course."

Only Derrick and the maids who served me directly looked comfortable

around me. The strange feeling I had didn't go away as I passed by more of the staff. Although I had only left my room, I had been greeted with a whole new world.

I hadn't thought about what I would do once I successfully evaded the death flag. The only thing I had dreamt of was dating Max. Our relationship was significant, but I needed to prepare for the new life ahead of me most of all. Thus, I decided that I would write down the things I wanted to do to live a more fulfilled life from now on. And... the first thing on my list was...

I headed to my dad's study. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door.
"Come in."

When I entered his office, I noticed that he was in the middle of reviewing some documents. He was my dad, but I couldn't help but notice how handsome he was. Blessed by his glorious appearance, I smiled happily.

Without looking up, he asked, "How are the preparations for the coming-of-age ceremony?"

I was taken aback by his sudden inquiry. The coming-of-age ceremony? It was two months away—was I supposed to start preparing for it this early? Normally, coming-of-age ceremonies were planned and prepared either by the lady of the household or the person who would be coming of age. Since my mother had passed away, I expected to have to prepare for mine alone, but I hadn't expected him to ask about it now.

I hadn't thought of anything yet...

As I pondered over what to say, my dad spoke up with a determined tone of voice. "Do not forget," he instructed. "My daughter's coming-of-age ceremony must be the most extravagant one in the empire. You may spend as much money as you like, so let the celebrations progress without wanting for anything."

But Dad, I've never prepared a huge banquet before!

His expectations were beginning to burden me.

"Madam Perez, are you listening to me—" he paused. "Jubelian?"

He hadn't been addressing me! I let out a sigh of relief. Of course! Dad wouldn't entrust me with such an important task...

Then, I remembered what he said and blushed. The most extravagant banquet in the empire? For me? I couldn't have imagined him wanting such a thing for me because he had always seemed so indifferent. However, because he mistook me for Madam Perez, I had learned of his affection for me. I was actually kind of embarrassed.

Suddenly, he got up from his chair. "You seem redder than usual. Do you have a fever?" he asked.

Startled, I slapped on a smile. "D-Daddy! Good morning!"

My cheerful greeting coaxed a faint smile from him. "Good morning. You're up early today."

Saying good morning to one's dad might have been a normal thing for others, but it moved me greatly. My eyes grew hot.

No, I wasn't going to cry. I told myself that I would be able to greet him every morning from now on...

I managed to hold back my tears, maintaining my grin. "By the way, Dad, about the coming-of-age ceremony... Did you leave the preparations to Madam Perez?"

"Yes." He glanced at me and smiled. "Do you want anything specific for the ceremony?"

I nodded. Since I was nervous, I struggled to enunciate my words. "Yes. I want to prepare it myself."

He seemed surprised by my answer. "You do?"

The bewildered look on his face made me tense up, but I understood why he was surprised. Until now, I had only prepared small tea parties. I hadn't done anything on the same scale as a coming-of-age ceremony. My inexperience made me feel a little down, but I nodded and waited patiently for his answer.

"That would make you very busy... Will that be okay?"

There would be a lot of work that needed to be done and it would be difficult.

Still, it was my banquet, and I wanted to be responsible for it.

Nodding vigorously, I said, "That won't bother me at all! I'll make sure to do a good job!"

He regarded me with amazement. "All right," he acquiesced. "I have no problem with that."

I wanted to whoop at the top of my lungs, but I was afraid that he would find it inappropriate. He gave me a chance... I needed to show him that I was reliable!

I smiled, determined. "Thank you!"

* * *

AT FIRST, Regis was flustered when Jubelian said that she wanted to prepare the ceremony herself. As far as he knew, his daughter was a quiet child who liked books. However, she still announced her desire to work diligently. She seemed determined to acquire some responsibility now that she was close to coming of age.

He was very proud of her. He almost patted her head without realizing it, but he stopped himself before he could, afraid that she wouldn't like being treated like a little girl. Just as he was pulling his hand away, however, a small hand wrapped around his.

"I haven't done anything like this before... so thank you so much for trusting me," she said. She was pretending to be calm, but her voice trembled.

Regis wanted to say something to comfort her but he couldn't think of anything. He squeezed her hand. "Let me know if you need anything."

Despite his useless consolation, Jubelian smiled happily. "I will."

Observing his precious daughter, Regis smiled bitterly.

* * *

AFTER I RETURNED to my room, I brainstormed some ideas for the banquet. The

only problem was that I had no idea what I wanted. I acted with confidence in front of my dad, but it had been three years since our mansion had last held a large banquet. It was no wonder I was lost.

Madam Perez would be willing to help me, but the problem with that was that she hadn't hosted any parties since my debutante ball, so she wouldn't be aware of the latest trends. I still remembered how much trouble she had preparing for the ball a few years ago.

It would have been nice to have another adult relative at a time like this. I lamented over my lack of connections. I wasn't close with any of my paternal cousins, and while I had an aunt I was familiar with on my mother's side, she didn't live in the empire. In the end, I would have to deal with the preparations alone.

After a moment, however, I realized something: both Rose and Bea had recently hosted their birthday banquets. Bea, in particular, had been in charge of overseeing all the preparations for her event, so it was worth asking her for some advice. According to the plot, Rose would invite Bea to a tea-tasting party. I could simply meet her there.

I smiled. Then, I sighed, wondering if Max would come by today. I missed him...

* * *

BEATRICE SMILED as she read the letter she had received from Rose. How dare Rose invite her to her measly tea-tasting party? Well, she was still debating on whether she should go or not.

Then, she furrowed her brows. What was Jubelian doing these days? She hadn't sent a letter in ages! Beatrice was glad she met new people during the banquet, but she regretted that she hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye to Jubelian. Fortunately, the young lady had sent a letter the next day, but that was it. Ever since then, contact had been lost.

Don't you dare ignore me and think I'm going to show up for the tea-tasting, Beatrice thought to herself, pouting.

Just then, her maid made an announcement. "Your Highness, a letter from the Floyen household has arrived."

Her expression immediately brightened. "Is that so? Bring it here! Quickly!" she shouted.

When the maid delivered the letter to her on a gold tray, Beatrice quickly took it, her heart fluttering at the sight of it. The envelope was pink and the decorations were as pretty as Jubelian herself.

Beatrice quickly but carefully removed the seal and unfolded the paper. As soon as she did, neat penmanship bordered by floral adornments greeted her.

Dear Bea,

How have you been? I've been rather busy, so I haven't been able to write to you. I'm sorry. I heard that Rose invited you to a tea-tasting party, however, and I hope to see you there. There are a few things I have to ask you about.

Beatrice covered her mouth to mask the joy on her face. So, Jubelian was thinking of her, too... Well, if the young lady wanted her to attend the tea-tasting party... so be it.

Ecstatic, she suppressed the urge to hop in place.

Suddenly, her maid's dismayed voice echoed from behind her. "Y-You can't do this!"

Someone entered the room. She frowned at the uninvited guest.

"My dear sister, you don't look very busy right now," Max began. "I must have come at the right time for a chat."

Goosebumps rose across Beatrice's skin at her stepbrother's unfamiliar tone. Why was this *thing* here? She wanted to spit vulgar things at him so that he would immediately leave. However, she knew she couldn't do such a dishonorable thing in front of her maids.

For a moment, she simply glared at Max. Then, she dismissed her maids. "I have something to discuss with my brother. You may all leave," she said.

Once they all left, she sat down and crossed her legs.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

Watching his arrogant sister, Max removed the helmet he wore. In the past, she hated seeing his face. Now, however, she thought he looked better without the helmet.

I guess he's not hideous, she admitted silently.

"You," he began.

"What?"

"I saved you a few days ago, so be honest with me."

Beatrice furrowed her brows at the mention of that incident. "What is it?"

His expression was grave. "Even to you, I'm handsome, right?" he questioned. "After seeing my face, you would forgive me for any wrongdoing, right?"

Instead of answering, Beatrice shot up and pointed a finger at the door, furious. "Get the hell out of here."

However, the eyesore didn't budge. He was faced with far too dire an issue to leave. If he didn't do anything, it would only be a matter of time before Jubelian realized that he had concealed his master's words.

Once she grew closer to her father, she would begin to find some things strange. For example, the duke may say something like, "I told Max about how much I cherish you every day," and this would make Jubelian feel betrayed.

"I trusted you... Did you hide these things knowing how much I wanted to reconcile with my dad?" she might say. "I'm disappointed in you."

Fearing that the disheartened lady might leave him, Max hadn't been able to sleep well. The insufficient rest was beginning to put a strain on his body.

"Come on, be honest with me," he pleaded.

She flinched slightly, but he didn't catch it. The thought she had just a moment ago about how he wasn't hideous had come to mind... and she was overcome with shame.

She must have gone crazy, thinking someone like him had decent looks. "Of

all people, why should I listen to your nonsense?" she demanded, scowling.

Max stroked his chin calmly as he watched his stepsister grit her teeth in anger. "You hate me very much," he mused. "If you say 'yes' to my question, I can be at ease knowing that most of my sins will be forgiven."

He wore a subtle smirk upon his face, and the sight of it had Beatrice striving to suppress her violent urges. Who the hell did he think he was? That crazy bastard!

Now, he was sauntering around her room. Her eyes widened when she realized what had ended up in his hand.

Th-That was—

The precious letter from Jubelian was now sitting between his calloused fingers.

"What do you think you're doing?" Beatrice shrieked. "Give it back!" She stomped toward him, but he was already reading the contents of the letter.

She paused, suddenly smug.

You're jealous, aren't you?"

She was expecting Max to be jealous, but his expression became rather strange instead. Wondering what was wrong, she called out to him. "Maxmillian."

His voice low, he asked, "Is this a reply to a letter you've sent to Jubelian?"

"Y-Yes."

Handing it over, he began to walk out.

"I'm leaving," he announced.

After putting the helmet back on, he headed out of the room.

Narrowing her eyes, Beatrice watched as he left. Seriously, what had gotten into him?

Max furrowed his brow once he left the room. For the past three days, he hadn't visited Jubelian in fear that he might have insulted her in some way. However, he was now heading to the mansion.

She never replied to my letters...! he seethed silently.

Jealousy had taken over, overshadowing his worries.

* * *

UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE person I was currently speaking to, I periodically checked the clock on the wall.

"Lady Jubelian."

Tensing up at the call, I answered quickly. "Yes, Madam Perez. I'm listening."

I was in the middle of discussing the plans behind my coming-of-age ceremony with Madam Perez, the head housekeeper for our family.

"Where are you planning to get your dresses made?" she asked.

Unlike the gentle and amiable butler Derrick, Madam Perez was a strict woman. Her austere nature suited her duties as a housekeeper, but it made it difficult for me to hold a conversation with her.

"Um... I'm thinking of getting them from Lily Muge," I supplied hesitantly.

She scribbled something on a piece of paper. "We'll contact them in advance once you decide when to visit. There will be three dresses needed for the ball: one for the morning, another for the evening, and another for the ceremony itself."

"I understand. About the theme..."

"Ah, yes. The theme..." Frowning suddenly, she rubbed her temples.

Normally, Madam Perez never displayed distraction. She was steadfast to the point that I sometimes wondered if she was even human.

Astonished by her unexpected behavior, I asked, "Is everything all right?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes. Sometimes I suffer from unexpected headaches. In any case, do you have anything in mind for the theme?"

"I would like to get some advice from my friends at the tea-tasting parties. Most of them have been to more parties than I have."

"I see. Please let us know when you decide on one, then." She was speaking clearly, but her complexion was pale.

"We'll decide on everything else once the theme is decided. For now, please go and rest," I insisted.

Madam Perez looked at me in surprise for a moment before taking a bow.
"Thank you, Your Ladyship."

I watched as she left the room. Then, I frowned a little. Was that... what I thought it was?

Tap! Tap!

Startled by the sudden sound, I turned around to discover that Max was watching me from the balcony window. He probably decided that coming in through the front door wasn't any good.

Letting him in, I greeted him. "Come in," I said.

He stared at me for a moment before opening his mouth to speak. "If you want to send me a letter, you can address it to Count Herend instead of the palace."

Taken aback by his ridiculous greeting, I frowned. "If you want a letter back, you should write one to me first—"

I stopped myself from saying anything further when I realized that the letters he had sent me before were still in my drawer...

I won't kill you.

I won't be visiting for a while. During my absence, I hope you realize my importance.

P.S. You will only be able to meet me after you learn of my value.

...If one could call such things letters.

"You're not asking me to reply to a letter that said you won't kill me, are you?" I asked.

Seemingly embarrassed, he turned away.

I took his hands and said, "If you want, I'll write you a letter. It won't be a reply to anything. It'll just be a love letter."

The corners of his lips rose. "Okay."

I watched his bright face for a moment, captivated by the charming expression he wore. I started gently pulling him by the hand. "Come here," I began. "I have something to—"

Instead of following me, however, he lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of mine. I turned toward him and he flashed me an attractive smile. The ticklish sensation of the kiss along with his handsome appearance made my heart begin to pound. No matter how many times I saw him, I couldn't get enough of him.

As I stared blankly at his face, he came closer to me. My heart began to race even faster. Was he trying to kiss me? My dad wasn't home. If he kissed me today, I would be able to accept it without hesitation.

"Okay," I said to myself. "I'm ready."

"This time, I'll use a method other than the carrier pigeon," he whispered in my ear. Although it wasn't anything as romantic as I had expected, it was still a reassuring statement to make.

Relieved, I nodded eagerly. Thank heavens. Now I wouldn't have to worry about pigeons invading my room.

In any case, I started leading Max by the hand once again, ushering him to the couch. Then, I realized he was yawning. He was still handsome even while doing something like that...

Wait a minute. The area under his eyes was slightly dark. He also looked more tired than usual.

"Have you not been sleeping well these days, Max?" I asked, curious.

He avoided my gaze. "I'm fine. It doesn't bother me anyway."

My eyes narrowed at his evasive answer. I pulled my hand out from his. Holding him by his cheeks, I turned his head so that he would be facing me.

"Don't look away," I instructed. "I'm right here."

He slowly nodded. I was proud of how well he listened, but I still had to ask him something, so I held back my smile.

"How long has it been since you've slept?"

"Three days," he said quietly.

The moment I heard those words, I immediately pulled him to the bed.

"Jubelian?" he asked, confused. It sounded like he didn't understand what was happening.

"Lie down," I ordered, patting the bed.

* * *

Did she even know what she sounded like? With trembling eyes, Max glanced at the innocent-looking lady. He swallowed dryly. She obviously didn't mean anything, but...

For a moment, all sorts of fantasies flooded his mind. Peeking at Jubelian, he opened his mouth to speak. "What about Master?"

"He went out somewhere," she said, sounding completely oblivious.

Max adopted a sinister smile. His master wasn't in the mansion. It was a golden opportunity to hug and kiss her as much as possible.

"Jubelian, how about—" he began, but she reached out and untied the knot on his cloak, startling him to a halt. His eyes widened.

She smiled. "You must be tired. You should sleep for a little bit," she suggested.

Did she see him as a man...? Realizing she was this defenseless, Max sighed. It had been a while since he had felt this fatigued. It felt just like the night he had first visited her and he ended up falling asleep in her room.

Still, it would be a pity to fall asleep right away. He didn't want to waste their precious time together. He was just sleepy, so all he had to do was endure it. He could do it...

He had resolved himself to stay awake, but Jubelian yawned and buried her

face in his chest.

"I'm sleepy too," she mumbled.

He couldn't help but smile. Once again, he was completely defeated. "Okay, then. Let's go to sleep."

They got in bed. They had spent quite a bit of time together now, but seeing each other in bed was still a different experience. However, rather than burning with desire, they were simply touched by each other's presence.

Perhaps there would come a day when they could wake up next to each other like this—as family, Max dreamed. A warm feeling spread through his heart.

At the same time, however, he was afraid that he might lose her. If he could, he wanted to stay by her side forever.

"I know I'm not good enough for you... but I hope you won't hate me for my shortcomings," he pleaded silently, his gaze fixed on Jubelian, brimming with emotion.

"Give me a hug, Max," she murmured. He stretched his arm out and she laid her head on top of it. He blushed because of the ticklish sensation on his arm and the fact that her face was now even closer than before.

Suddenly, she kissed him on the cheek. "Good night."

His worries were relieved by the same words that had brought him peace during their initial meeting.

My haven, he thought.

With a faint smile, he brought her closer to him.

"Good night," he whispered.

As soon as he heard her breathing grow even, he, too, surrendered himself to deep sleep.

* * *

OPENING MY EYES, I gazed at Max. He must have fallen asleep by now. I looked up at his face; before, he always seemed intimidating, but now that his eyes

were closed, his features appeared much softer.

In any case, however, he was flawless.

I admired his handsome appearance for a moment before returning to reality. How should I send the invitations for the banquet? As I squirmed to break free, I contemplated this. However, his sturdy arms were wrapped around my waist and they didn't budge despite my struggles. In fact, instead of letting me go, he pulled me even closer.

Afraid that I had woken him up, I glanced up once again, but he was still sound asleep, ignorant of how he had entrapped me. At this rate, I wouldn't be going anywhere.

Then, he began to mumble. "Jubel..." His eyes were still closed. He was probably talking in his sleep. "I'm... sorry... please don't... hate me..."

He sounded agonized. As if in pain, his face was scrunching up, brows furrowing.

What was happening? Had he done something wrong to me in his dream? He looked quite different from usual, even a little vulnerable, like a child asking for forgiveness after a minor mistake.

...It was kind of cute.

Holding back a laugh, I gently brushed his hair away from his face.

"I won't hate you, Max," I whispered.

Perhaps he could hear me because his expression gradually relaxed. Maybe I would be able to get out now...

I tried to lift his arm to check, but he still didn't budge. In the end, I had no choice but to give up. His warmth slowly surrounded my body, comforting me. Listening to his calm, even breaths, I snuggled further into his embrace.

I had spent most of my life in solitude until now, yet here I was, falling asleep in someone else's arms. Drowsiness overcame me, and after blinking sleepily a few times, I drifted off.

CHAPTER TWO

EMPEROR'S PLANS



HE DEFINITELY WASN'T ORDINARY.

Knitting his brows, the emperor recalled what Mikhail had said: "Your Majesty, I would like to request a private meeting with Her Royal Ladyship, as she may feel repulsed if she is forced into a marriage."

The emperor had no problem with setting up a meeting, but Mikhail's manipulative nature made him feel uneasy. And there was that thing with Regis...

At first, the emperor thought Mikhail feared the duke because the latter was the head of the royal knights. However, certain events made the emperor doubt his suspicions. Regis wasn't someone who would threaten another person without reason...

That wasn't all, either. The man's expressions and reactions throughout the conversation were rather unfamiliar to the emperor. The oddity of the situation became even more apparent when Mikhail had been reassured about his worries regarding the duke.

Oh, how nice.

The emperor expected Mikhail to be relieved once he found out that he would be able to conquer a being he feared. However, what burned in his amethyst eyes was an intense hatred instead. The sovereign smirked, realizing his soon-to-be son-in-law shared his hatred for Regis.

In the emperor's eyes, Mikhail's loathing was justified because it had been none other than Regis' daughter persistently chasing the renowned knight

around. The poor young man hadn't been able to reject his superior's daughter, so he held a grudge. The rumors had even reached the ears of the royal family.

The emperor knit his brows once more. That Maximillian... He wasn't good at finding a decent woman. Didn't he know that her appearance wasn't the only thing that should matter?

In the grand scheme of things, however, it was fortunate for the emperor that Maximillian was head over heels for the lady. She had only waltzed with him once, which meant she had no interest in him. If Maximillian had truly fallen in love with her, he would be willing to do anything for her.

Filled with fantasies about a world of his dreams, the emperor smiled. First, he would hold Regis' daughter captive. Then, he would dupe Maximillian into obeying his schemes by using the girl as bait. He was confident that his plan would reduce Maximillian to a meek figurehead and aid in his plans to get rid of Regis in the future. The only problem was coming up with a reason to invite the girl to the palace.

For a moment, the emperor tapped impatiently on his desk, thinking. Then, a sinister smile soon composed his face. What was he worried about? He could come up with a reason—something neither Regis nor the nobles would dare to refute.

* * *

FEELING WELL-RESTED, Max slowly opened his eyes. He looked out the window and realized it was dusk. Had he slept that long? Naturally, he tried to get up. Then, he noticed something squirming in his arms.

He flinched.

Jubelian?

His face reddened like a tomato the moment he realized she was defenselessly sleeping in his arms. Her soft breath tickled his chest. He felt like he was going crazy. He took deep breaths, but it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to control himself.

However, he didn't want to snatch his arm away from her when it was under her head because it would startle her awake. So, he began to whisper to her.

"Jubelian, wake up," he urged.

Carefully taking hold of her shoulder, he shook her gently. In response, she just frowned in irritation, still far from waking—just another testament to her dense nature. Max wondered what to do for a moment before the corners of his lips began to lift into a smile.

He didn't know she could make faces like that. She rarely displayed her annoyance, so this expression piqued his interest. Intrigued, he poked her soft, pink cheek. Once again, she wrinkled her brow slightly.

He grinned. How cute.

He was about to poke her forehead when she moved away slightly. Surprised by the sudden movement, he held his breath and resumed his original position. Then, he took a glimpse of her and realized that she was just shifting positions. He let out a sigh of relief. He would have been in trouble if she found out what he had been doing.

"My lady, it's time for dinner!" a maid called from outside. Smiling, Max turned to his sleeping beauty. There was no way she could have heard that.

Contrary to his expectations, however, she opened her eyes right away. Parting her coral lips, she echoed the maid. "Time for dinner?" she muttered, rubbing both of her eyes in an attempt to awaken.

Max couldn't help but chuckle. He couldn't believe that she would awaken at the sound of someone calling her for dinner. She was utterly adorable.

Soon, their gazes met. Jubelian's eyes widened at first, but she quickly broke into a smile, making his heart skip a beat at the sudden sight. It was thumping hard enough to jump out of his chest. He took another deep breath in a desperate attempt to calm himself down.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

Max nodded slowly. "Yes, I did," he said carefully.

He was consumed by the impulse to wrap his arms around her and kiss her.

Oblivious, she simply slithered out of his arms. Disappointment overcame him and emptiness flooded him in place of her lost warmth.

She extended a hand to him.

"Let's go eat," she said.

Max nodded as he took her hand. Relishing in her warmth once more, he felt relieved.

* * *

I STARED BLANKLY at Dad's empty seat, wondering if he would be late again tonight.

Max brought me back to reality.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

I looked at my plate and realized that the steak had been cut into neat pieces.

"Oh... Thank you, Max," I said.

He smiled slightly at my compliment. Normally, I would eat right away to show him that I was grateful for the gesture, but given Dad's absence, I couldn't. He had never been this late before. Recently, at least.

"Is something the matter?" Max asked. He sounded a bit upset that I wasn't eating.

His worries were forming creases on his forehead, so I decided to confess. "Oh, I'm just worried that Dad isn't home yet..."

Suddenly, he leisurely rested his head on his chin and smiled.

"You're worried about Master?" I nodded, and he continued in a reassuring voice. "Don't worry. Nothing would bother him even if a dragon appeared out of the blue."

He was exaggerating, but I appreciated his efforts to console me and I knew he was right. I must have been worrying for no reason.

Using his fork, he picked up a piece of steak and brought it to my mouth.

"Here."

At first, I was wondering what he was doing, but then I blushed when I realized what he intended. I wasn't a baby... What was he doing? Embarrassed, I shook my head. "I-I'll eat it myself..."

He pushed the fork closer to me. "Say 'ah'..."

Where did he even learn to do something like this? Sighing, I gave in and ate the piece he offered. His face promptly brightened. Then, he brought me a forkful of salad as well.

"Eat this, too," he pressed.

I felt like my face was going to burst from embarrassment. Nevertheless, I accepted his offer because I didn't want to disappoint him. The smile never left his face as he said, "It's nice to see you eat well."

I stared at him blankly as I chewed. Once again, a sense of shame overcame me. I wasn't a helpless baby bird—I had hands I could very well use to feed myself. Still, I decided that embarrassment was only a temporary thing, stopping him as he began cutting another piece of food for me.

"Max!" I called.

Placing his utensils down on the table, he looked puzzled as he turned to me. "Yes?"

I mimicked what he did and took a piece of meat, holding the fork out to him. "H-Here."

His eyes widened before curving into a smile. "For me?" he asked. I nodded and he ate the piece of steak I gave him. "It's delicious."

It was cringey, but I felt appreciated because he was responding to every little action I made.

I think... I might ask Dad about marrying Max, I suddenly thought, arriving at a rather rash conclusion.

Then I remembered what I had seen back in my room. I couldn't help but wonder why he had been apologizing to me in his sleep.

Mischief overcame me, and I called to him in a playful tone. "Max," I began. He turned to me. Even a slow-witted girl like me could tell there was love in his eyes. "Have you done something wrong to me?"

I expected him to fight back and ask me what I was talking about, however...

Clink!

He ended up dropping the fork and knife he was holding.

* * *

MAX'S EYES TREMBLED. How did... she find out? He knew this day was going to arrive eventually but he hadn't been ready. His thoughts tangled into knots and he fell silent.

He was contemplating whether he should feign ignorance again when Jubelian spoke up once more.

"Max?"

She was frowning.

If he told her the truth...

He gazed into her periwinkle eyes. Immediately uncomfortable, he realized that he couldn't be candid, afraid that she might leave him. Despite the terrible feeling that pierced his conscience, Max decided to lie once more. He hastily took her hands in his. "It wasn't on purpose!" he began. "It's because..."

He couldn't continue, however, because he knew that he had already done her wrong by choosing to ignore the misunderstandings between her and her father. He had been so dense that he hadn't realized that their father-daughter relationship was a grave problem until Jubelian had bawled her eyes out a few days ago. Ever since then, his heart had grown heavy at the sight of her. That was why he had avoided her. He never felt guilty for engaging in malicious acts before, yet despite his callous nature, he now felt eternally indebted to Jubelian.

Desperate to resolve this discomfort, he decided not to fool her anymore. He tightened his grip on her slender fingers and switched gears, now confessing.

"It's because... I was afraid that you would leave me once you found out how much Master cherishes you as a daughter."

Jubelian's eyes widened. Then, she sighed. Sternly, she asked, "So, you knew all along that Dad cared about me but you chose not to tell me?"

Instead of answering her question, he apologized, his voice becoming smaller. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry for hiding it from you..."

As he waited for her to speak, his insides felt like they were being charred black. Silence followed, and he lowered his head helplessly. This was the end, it seemed.

Eventually, however, he felt her grab his feeble hands.

"Thank you for telling me this, Max," she said. Her words were unexpected. "Actually, I wouldn't have known even if you kept it a secret..."

Dumbstruck, Max's eyes widened. That wasn't... what she was talking about?

He stayed frozen as she continued. "Of course, you don't have to tell me every little thing, but what you told me just now—you did it for the wrong reasons."

Chastised, Max lowered his head again. "I understand..."

She sighed. "Still, at least you seem to have some sense of morality judging by how you were apologizing to me in your sleep..."

Morality?

Max knitted her brows at the unfamiliar term. He had slaughtered countless men and planned innumerable schemes against the empress's conspiracies, yet he had never felt remorse until now.

"Guilt isn't something you feel all at once, you know," she explained. "It starts off as nothing but a menial worry at first, then before you know it, it's grown into a huge thorn that you can't ignore."

A thorn?

Max recalled the discomfort he had felt the past few days. That must have been it. He had done wrong by her, and it was only afterward he kept being

reminded of the evil deeds he had committed throughout his life. They kept bothering him, and soon, they had grown intolerable.

She tugged on his hand gently. "Well, do you feel better now after letting it out?" she asked. Max raised his head and took in her rosy cheeks and unwavering gaze. "You must feel relieved... like you've grown closer to me."

He certainly did feel like that. Until now, he had been worried that she would leave him. Now that he had confessed the truth, he felt unencumbered.

She was truly amazing.

When he discovered that he had grown fond of her, he thought that she would become his weakness, so he tried to protect her. Little did he know that she would be the one to protect him, preventing him from falling into the depths of darkness.

She wasn't his weakness. She brought him strength.

At that moment, he recalled his master's words: "Swordsmanship exists to protect precious things, not to evoke a slaughter. You seem to have forgotten this basic principle."

Max met her eyes. Although she could be slow-witted at times, she had accepted him unconditionally, and he had learned a lot from her.

I want to get stronger... for you, he decided.

"By the way, does that mean you weren't going to date me if not for the contractual relationship?" she asked suddenly, pouting. He couldn't help but smile.

"I would have chased after you no matter what," he assured her. Then, he brought her into his arms. "Thank you for everything."

She patted him on the back. Then, she reminded him about the very reason for their conversation. "So, are you going to tell me about what my dad said about me?"

Max flinched. Then, he sighed. "Ask away."

* * *

IN THE DEPTHS of a dark cave where an illuminated pillar stood, a dignified voice spoke in welcome. "Come, young transcendent."

Instead of answering, Regis drew one of the two blades at his waist and hurled it through the air. An opening formed out of thin air, and a man appeared.

"Don't you know that bits of iron like this won't leave a single scratch on me?"

Regis drew another sword in response, the silver blade becoming stained cobalt.

The man smiled with his eyes. "Both you and my son—humans are truly interesting creatures."

Noticing how carefree he was despite the energy coming from the sword, Regis frowned. "Fafneil, I have come to inquire about the cursed ring you had created."

The man laughed ridiculously. "How dare you address me by such a lowly term. It wouldn't even be enough to address me as 'The Greatest Existence'!" He clicked his tongue. "Kids these days have no manners."

His pupils narrowed and he unleashed the breath of a dragon, something ordinary humans couldn't survive. Regis, however, remained where he stood, completely unmoved.

With a tut, Fafneil retrieved the deadly energy. "How boring."

Taking that bastard's concern into account, he must be talking about that thing, Fafneil mused to himself, thinking of the Kirke's Eye, a ring studded with sapphires and amethysts. It was modeled after the eyes of a deity that could charm humans with magic. Originally, it was made for a feeble child who was born out of wedlock, but... it seemed to have become a curse for Regis.

Fafneil scoffed. Well, it was none of his business.

"I think I've told you before, but I can't break the spell caused by the Kirke's Eye," he said. "If I kill the caster, the target will die along with them."

Fafneil expected Regis to be brought to despair at those words, but he remained indifferent instead. "I already know that," he said.

Fafneil chuckled. Ah, there it was. That was the reason why he liked him so much. Fafneil's son had passed away a long time ago, so he bore no ties to the Assiette Empire anymore. He decided to do Regis a favor.

"Well, there is a way," he began. "If the ring finds a better owner, that might fix things. Maybe someone like... a sorcerer from the imperial family. It's a shame there hasn't been one for about ten generations."

Desperate, Regis cut in. "What I want is..."

The duke explained his wish.

Afterward, Fafneil burst into laughter. "Wait, you really want to die, don't you?"

* * *

I FELT like I had been through a lot today, so I jumped into the comfort of my bed. It was weird hearing stories about my dad through Max. I doubted whether I was listening to stories about myself.

According to what I had been told, Dad constantly talked about me. I was embarrassed about some of the anecdotes he told Max and I struggled to manage my expression. I mean, why did he have to tell Max about the time I accidentally peed the bed as a kid? I didn't even remember that!

Perhaps it was because I was getting older, or I was just terrible at remembering things, but my oldest memories about my father were from when I was eight years old. He was always strict and cold, keeping a distance from me. I was always left to watch his back as he walked away.

However, Max had said, "Every day, he would talk about how you would beg him for a ride on his shoulders. Then, he would go on and on about how small and cute you were."

According to him, my dad was a pushover when it came to me. He sounded like someone who could only exist in a novel and I wondered if he really said

those things...

I sighed. If this was the case, why didn't he ever show me that he cared? I hid how I felt in front of Max, but listening to my father's stories come from someone else made me miserable. If he had expressed himself a little, our relationship wouldn't have become like this. I almost felt deceived.

Just then, the door to my room creaked open. I quickly shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep. Speak of the devil! I didn't know he would suddenly barge into my room while I was busy resenting him.

While I was questioning why he had come to my room, he began to speak. "You're sleeping rather quietly today, aren't you?" he asked. Was I a noisy sleeper? I felt rather upset about being criticized out of the blue. "You're not snoring, either."

I couldn't help but feel ashamed. He probably kept his comments to himself until now because he didn't want to offend me.

I was still rationalizing his behavior when he suddenly said, "I'm back, Jubel."

His voice was quiet, but he sounded natural. It was as if he had done this many times. His unfamiliar tone of voice made me feel strange, so I began to wonder... Did he always do this while I was asleep?

At that thought, sorrow overcame me, and I felt my heart break. I wanted to show him that I was awake so that I could talk to him, but I continued to feign sleep to avoid creating an awkward situation. I promised myself that I would talk to him tomorrow.

Then, he said something else.

"I don't deserve happiness... but I can't help but want to stay by your side."

Tearful, I immediately sat up. "Don't say that now!" I cried.

His eyes grew wide. He was surprised that I was still awake. Collecting himself, he sighed. "Perhaps that's asking for too much. I've been a terrible father to you..."

Frustrated, I shook my head violently and took his hands. "You can do that from now on!"

Misunderstanding me, he sighed again. "Yes, I'll make sure I—"

Cutting him off, I said, "No. What I mean is that we can try to become closer to each other from now on."

Watching his astonished expression, an embarrassing promise I couldn't dare speak aloud came to mind...

And let's be happy, Dad.

There was a moment of silence.

Afterward, he simply said, "I'm sorry."

My heart sank. I asked for us to grow closer, not for an apology. With trembling eyes, I gazed at him. Why was he saying these things? I thought everything was all right and that we could get to know each other from now on. Despairing, I lowered my head.

"I'm sorry for making you say those things..."

I raised my head once more to look at him, only to realize his usual wintry eyes now carried a warmth to them. They reminded me of a clear sky on a spring day.

"I regret being a terrible father to you."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I always thought he was ashamed of me because I wasn't a good enough daughter, but that didn't seem to be the case. I focused my gaze on the hand he wrapped around mine. He was holding me without shaking me away. Realizing that he had never let go of me, I burst into tears.

Dad tightened his grip around my hand. His other hand rose slightly as if to do something, but he let it fall instead, clenching it into a fist at his side. Although his expression remained indifferent, the calmness that customarily characterized his gaze was absent. Finally, I realized that he just wasn't good at expressing himself. All along, he had cared for me in his own way.

Once I stopped crying, he lowered his eyes. Then, when he next spoke, it was with the stern tone he usually used. "Good night," he said.

Tightening my grip on his hand, I stopped him.

"Dad." He looked back in response. Meeting his eyes, I mentioned what had happened earlier. "Max told me about the stories you've told him."

Seemingly embarrassed, he averted my gaze. "I see. I never thought he would ever mention them to you..."

I nodded. "That was his original plan, but he got caught."

A rare expression crossed his face—he was startled. "You caught him? How?"

I knew I was pretty dull, but he didn't need to look at me like that! In any case, I recounted the day's events. "Well, Max seemed tired earlier, so I let him sleep in my room. Then, he started talking in his sleep and—"

"You let him do *what*?" Dad thundered, stopping me mid-sentence. Realizing he could be even more frightening than I had imagined, I zipped my mouth shut. "That damned bastard slept in your bed?"

I shuddered at his rather harsh choice of words and bitter expression. Then I remembered that I hadn't come of age yet. Telling him that I let my boyfriend sleep in my bed probably wasn't the best idea. What I had done deserved a scolding, so I hastened to provide an excuse: "Daddy, he told me he hadn't slept for three days!"

His expression grew even more frigid. "Being sleepless for three days shouldn't bother him in the least."

Desperate to avoid trouble, I kept pushing. "Anyway, nothing happened!" I swore. "Really!"

"Good. If something did happen, I wouldn't leave that scoundrel be," he said lowly.

I gulped. Then, I let out a laugh when I realized that he was just worried about me. Holding his hand tightly, I changed the topic. "I was actually surprised to hear that I used to ride on your shoulders when I was young..."

A pained smile made its way onto his face, but I didn't know why.

"Ah, yes. You were an energetic kid, indeed."

He didn't sound too interested, but I could tell he was reminiscing about the past. Plucking up my courage, I decided to make a request. "Dad, I want to hear

the stories that Max didn't tell me. I feel like I don't remember most of my childhood memories."

He sighed deeply. Then, with a faint smile, he said, "It may take a long time. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course!"

It didn't matter if we had to stay up all night or if we had to talk until the next day and the day after. I was ready to listen to anything and everything he had to say.

* * *

THINKING about how he had fallen asleep a while ago with Jubelian in his arms, Max felt a smile tug on his lips. If he could, he wanted to get married sooner so that he could see her every day. However, his current situation rendered it impossible to hold a wedding because he was still planning an uprising against the emperor. Max was tempted to welcome her as his companion in secret, but... Regis would never allow it.

The lady still liked him though, didn't she? Assuming that she would agree to his proposal no matter what, Max stepped into his room.

Victor and Dennis greeted him.

"Your Highness! You've returned!" Victor cried, making a great fuss. "We were worried sick about you!"

Seeing his uneasy subordinates, Max frowned slightly. "Did something happen in my absence?" he asked.

Nodding, Dennis handed over some documents. "Please take a look at these."

Max perused the inked writing. It was a notice from the emperor. He furrowed his brows. "To commemorate the harvest festival... a hunting contest will be held in three weeks?" he recited. "Not just the royal family, but nobles ranked higher than counts and their families are obliged to participate..."

To his knowledge, the emperor hated hunting, and it wasn't because he was uncomfortable with slaughtering animals. The man was just terrible at it. So,

why in the world would he hold an event like this?

Victor lowered his head. "It's been said that the emperor has been meeting with Marquis Hessen's heir," he reported.

Max gritted his teeth and his expression hardened.

"Mikhail," he hissed. "It's unusual for the two to meet so frequently."

A murderous spirit overcame Max, and Dennis swallowed nervously. "It seems like the emperor is trying to connect him with the princess by using the event as an excuse," he speculated.

All of Max's questions were now answered. He could see it now. The emperor didn't have a reliable support from the nobles, so the marquis must have been an attractive candidate for an ally.

Just then, Max thought of Beatrice and frowned. Ladies tended to dislike hunting contests since most of them viewed them as barbaric. However, some women cheered on the men they were fond of in the hopes of bringing back valuables from the game.

She's such a pushover. It's clear she'll easily fall for his tricks, Max thought to himself.

He didn't know why Mikhail had suddenly switched targets from Jubelian to Beatrice, but rather than feeling relieved that his competitor had disappeared, he felt uneasy. He had been too complacent. The disgusting obsession he had seen in Mikhail's eyes was still clear in his mind. He couldn't believe that the man had given up on Jubelian, and the fact that he was trying to get close to the emperor was suspicious.

"We'll keep watch on the man," Max declared.

Then, having given his orders, he left the room.

* * *

THERE WERE STILL three days until the tea-tasting party, yet Beatrice was busy checking the mirror for any flaws in her appearance.

Her hair had become frizzy lately, she noticed. She had been applying heat to curl her hair, and this seemed to be the consequence. Frowning, she began to give an order to her head maid.

"Sarah, I'll need some oil for my hair," she announced.

Once the maid left, Beatrice looked in the mirror for another moment and then smiled. She thought of sitting next to Jubelian during the tea-tasting party, and the idea alone made her heart flutter in excitement. Squealing, she fantasized about giving all the tea cookies to her friend. Jubelian would definitely enjoy them, and Beatrice could watch her eat them one by one like a mother bird watching over her chick.

She was immersed in happy thoughts when she heard it.

Tap! Tap!

Startled by the noise coming from the balcony window, she turned around and spotted Max. Wondering why the uninvited guest was standing behind the glass, she shivered when she realized something: was it possible that he saw what she had been doing? She glared at him.

"Open it before I break the windows," he threatened.

Beatrice's face crumpled in displeasure. No matter how many favors he had done her, he was still an ignorant brute in the end. She opened the doors to avoid further trouble.

"What took you so long?" he complained.

She sneered.

"Be grateful," she spat. "Who else would open their windows to someone sneaking peeks into their room?"

Max tilted his head.

"Jubelian never made me wait so long," he retorted.

Her expression hardened. How brazen could he be to secretly watch her?!

"It's shameful to watch others without them knowing," she scolded, irritated. "If you love your partner, you shouldn't do that."

Max scowled at the criticism. However, regret washed over him once he recalled how he had behaved until now. Maybe that was why she kept asking him to come through the main door. Looking back on his actions, he became concerned about what Jubelian thought of him.

"What brings you here anyway?" Beatrice asked, interrupting his worries.

Reminded of his purpose, Max opened his mouth to speak. "Take great care during the hunting contest."

"Why?"

He sighed. "Nothing's certain, so I can't say anything. I just think the emperor is holding the event with ulterior motives."

Beatrice stiffened at the mention of the emperor. She understood now. He must have been doing it to gain something. She briefly wondered what benefits her father would obtain from doing this before quickly coming to a conclusion.

The emperor had been holding audiences with Mikhail rather often these days, so was he trying to marry her off? She scoffed in disbelief before turning back to Max. He had warned her about future troubles before her banquet. Did he come here to notify her of similar concerns once more?

It was strange, but her stepbrother was trying to protect her from dangerous things. Appreciative, she parted her lips to speak. "Thank you for letting me know, Max."

The siblings had always been cold to each other, but a warm atmosphere now flowed between them. Beatrice had just begun to think that she might eventually be able to reconcile with him in the near future when he next spoke.

"By the way, you look ridiculous when you're making a big fuss about something," he said, insulting her.

Trembling in anger, she threw a pillow at him. "You stupid creep! Get the hell out of here!"

* * *

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR, Mikhail smiled. Everything was going according to plan

so far. He wasn't concerned with winning the princess' heart since his goal had been to get close to the emperor from the beginning. Mikhail wasn't sure how, but it seemed like the sovereign knew how to control Duke Floyen.

All he had to do now was come up with a way to manipulate that idiot of an emperor. Getting rid of the duke wouldn't be a problem then, and once the powerful disruptor was gone, Mikhail could take his time to think about what to do next. For example, he could marry the princess and turn her against the crown prince to get rid of them both.

Just as dangerous ambitions were tainting his heart, someone knocked on the door.

"Young master, a letter has arrived from the royal palace."

Smiling, Mikhail allowed his servant to enter the room. "Come in."

Once the man was inside, Mikhail picked up the letter from the silver tray handed out to him and frowned. Suddenly, he was infuriated.

How dare this bastard...!

He forgot that the letter he was holding was from the emperor and crumpled it.

* * *

IN THE ROYAL STUDY, the emperor sat in his chair, stroking his chin. He was thinking about what Mikhail had said the other day.

"How about a hunting contest?" Mikhail had proposed. "It might help announce to the empire that our families have developed friendly relations."

The emperor hummed thoughtfully, mulling over his choices. A better idea might have been...

Suddenly, the grand chamberlain called out to him. "Your Majesty, Mikhail, the eldest son of Marquis Hessen, requests an audience."

"Let him in."

Once he beheld the knight's handsome face, the emperor smiled brightly.

"Welcome. It seems you're glowing brighter with each passing day!"

Mikhail bowed in response to the praise. "Thank you, Your Majesty. However, you must know that my appearance is insignificant when compared to yours."

In good spirits, the emperor asked, "So, what brings you here?"

Mikhail clenched his fists.

This greedy bastard, he seethed silently. How dare he try to meddle with what's mine?

His fury had grown to the point that he wanted to stab the emperor to death. However, he stowed his emotions away and spoke calmly.

"Thank you for the letter, Your Majesty," he began. "I, however, cannot understand your intention to connect His Highness the Crown Prince to Lady Floyen."

The emperor smirked. "Maximillian must be dying to make the girl his," he explained. "It's a shame that she made it obvious that she wasn't interested in him."

"Then you should let him be so that he would suffer," Mikhail wanted to say.

"Love is like a spark. If there is no opportunity for him to progress further, his interest in her is bound to fade away. I'm just putting a bit of firewood into the flames so that they stay lit." Glancing at Mikhail, who was still silent, he added, "Even if it might serve as a trial for him."

Trial? Mikhail could feel himself digging his nails into his palms. The emperor's letter contained a clumsily written scheme about putting Jubelian in danger so that the crown prince could rescue her. Even if he was the emperor, if he dared to lay a finger on what was Mikhail's, he wouldn't let him be. He was determined to make sure the emperor couldn't carry out his plan.

Masking his boiling sentiments, he answered coolly. "How wise of you."

CHAPTER THREE

HANDKERCHIEF



THE TEA-TASTING PARTY, WHICH HADN'T BEEN HELD FOR A LONG TIME, WAS FINALLY HERE. The atmosphere was lively and everyone was enjoying each other's company.

"Lady Veronica, your necklace is gorgeous!" Catherine complimented.

In response, Veronica lifted her chin to show off the accessory. Although it wasn't flashy, the floral ornaments were lovely.

"I personally designed it not long ago," she boasted.

Oblivious, Catherine asked, "In which workshop did you have it made?"

Veronica took a sip of her tea and sneered. "Hmm, I wonder," she said, feigning ignorance. "Where do you think I had it done?"

"Come on, tell us!"

Furrowing her brows, Veronica harshly set her teacup down on its saucer. "Why don't you tell me why you ladies played card games without me?" To make it worse, you played with someone from the Nayren family?! You all know that our families are at odds."

"Oh, please! We've already apologized for that matter several times!"

I watched the two ladies quarrel over what had happened at the banquet for a bit before I turned to Bea. She was sitting across from me, staring at her teacup in silence. She looked quite annoyed. Perhaps Rose, who was sitting next to her, noticed this as well.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?" she asked.

Bea quickly glanced at me before shaking her head.

"No," she said. "Nothing's the matter."

I was about to join in on the two ladies' conversation when Catherine suddenly shifted the blame onto me.

"Lady Jubelian also agreed to play card games back then!" she cried. "Stop criticizing me alone!"

She must have done that because she knew Veronica was particularly kind to me. Sure enough, Veronica stiffened in her seat. "Th-That's because Lady Jubelian was probably swept away by the atmosphere. I don't believe she would have done it intentionally!"

Actually, I did it on purpose to avoid Max—or rather, the crown prince—and to play card games with Lord Elios, but I stayed quiet since I had nothing I could say.

Then, someone spoke up for me.

"That's right, she was just swept away," Bea said. "I can vouch for that."

My eyes began trembling. I looked at her. Why was she...

Then, I realized everyone was now wearing stony expressions, so I decided to change the topic and hopefully lighten the mood.

"By the way," I began, "I had some questions about holding a banquet—"

"Oh, I can help!"

"Me, too!"

Rose and Mary Ann perked up in unison like they had been waiting for me to ask.

Glancing at Veronica and Catherine, who were still pouting, I continued. "My coming-of-age ceremony is less than two months away. I'm trying to plan it by myself... but it's proving more difficult than I thought."

Only then did Veronica and Catherine join in, saying that they wanted to help too. Now, only one person was left. Bea had been motionless.

I looked at her and asked, "Your Highness, could you help me as well?"

Meeting my eyes, she gave me a slight smile. "There are only a few women in

this empire as well-informed as me when it comes to banquets."

I smiled at her confident tone.

* * *

"IT'S BETTER for the curtains to have a lighter hue."

"I agree with Lady Veronica. Dark curtains tend to ruin the atmosphere."

Beatrice looked back and forth between Catherine and Veronica with a curious expression. They were fighting just moments ago. How could they talk to each other as if nothing happened? She turned to Jubelian. Despite being the one who had livened up the atmosphere, Jubelian was simply observing everything, sipping her tea.

Then, she began to speak. "Thank you two for your input on the decorations. As for how the banquet will be organized, I thank Rose and Mary Ann for the advice."

Each of the members smiled in delight once they received her gratitude. Beatrice, as the only one who had yet to receive a compliment from Jubelian, was feeling a bit down.

Thankfully, however, Jubelian still had one last thing to say: "And thank you, Your Highness, for helping the most today."

Beatrice's mood improved instantly. Jubelian was certainly something else when it came to charming her. She seemed quiet, but she was magically skilled at socializing.

If people were quarreling in front of Beatrice, she would have threatened them. She reflected on this as she watched the gentle lady sit in harmony with the others. In Beatrice's eyes, she was dazzling.

Perhaps this is why I'm so attracted to you,"she mused silently, smiling faintly.

"The hunting competition will be held a month before Lady Jubelian's banquet, it seems," Rose noted.

Beatrice sighed, suddenly reminded of the event she had just forgotten about.

She knew that the emperor and empress would do anything to tie her up with Mikhail. The knight would gladly accept the gesture and he might even offer her some game after the contest was over. If that happened, the nobles would believe there was a romantic relationship brewing between the two, and there was no question that the empress would appreciate that situation.

Her mother would gladly welcome any circumstance for her as long as it would help her brother, who was still growing in her mother's womb. Beatrice felt her stomach turn. If she could, she would give up her position as the royal princess and run away from the palace.

Unaware of the dire situation she was in, the members of the tea party talked amongst themselves in peace.

"I would like to cheer on Lord Elios that day," Catherine said.

"Me too!" Mary Ann chirped, agreeing with her.

Rose sighed. "I'm planning on cheering for my older brother. What about you, Lady Jubelian?"

"Oh, I... I don't have anyone to cheer for."

Suddenly, the members of the tea party remembered that Jubelian's lover was a commoner. Beatrice immediately thought of her stepbrother. Why didn't that guy announce his relationship with Jubelian already? Having seen how coy Max acted around Jubelian, Beatrice didn't doubt that he was charmed by her. Moreover, he was the type of person to obsess over what was his. No matter how much she thought about it, she just couldn't understand why he wasn't making their relationship public.

It felt like he was planning something...

Beatrice pondered over this, catching Jubelian's eye. "Your Highness, what are you so deep in thought for?" she asked. Her face was the picture of innocence.

Smiling, Bea made up an excuse. "Ah, I was thinking of what to give you for your coming-of-age present," she said. Genuine enthusiasm began to burn through her. Right. She shouldn't care too much about the hunting contest. The most important thing was to make sure Jubelian enjoyed her banquet.

* * *

JUST BEFORE SUNSET, I returned home from the outing. I was going to say hello to my dad, but unfortunately, he wasn't home.

"Master has been out for a while, Lady Jubelian," a servant told me. "He requested that you eat dinner without him since he would be returning late."

I contemplated whether I should discuss the ideas I had for the banquet with Madam Perez, but I was too tired, so I decided to meet with her tomorrow. Instead, I got ready for bed.

Then, Merilyn called out to me.

"My lady, there's a guest here for you," she said.

I had an idea about who it could be, so I opened the door. It was Max, just as I had expected.

"You came through the front door today," I noted, letting him into my room.

He looked at me without saying a word. Then, he hugged me.

"You don't like it when I use the window," he said gently.

Somewhat proud of him, a chuckle bubbled out of me.

"So, you're not going to do anything I don't like from now on?" I teased with a smile.

His expression stayed serious. "If you have something you don't like, feel free to tell me."

"I understand."

He gently brushed his thumb atop my lips.

"I missed you today," he whispered.

Before I knew it, he had wrapped his other arm tightly around my waist. He was obviously tempting me, but I was at a loss on what to do.

At that moment...

"My lady, please come out for a minute!" Merilyn shouted urgently.

I flinched in surprise.

* * *

"ANOTHER CUP of tea for me please, Derrick."

A man sat in the drawing room elegantly sipping on his tea. I sighed. No wonder Derrick hadn't been the one to call me even though he was the one that usually came for urgent matters. Given who the guest was, he couldn't help but attend to the man.

Noticing me, his expression brightened.

"Lady Floyen!" he called.

I was afraid that Max might leave my room after getting worried about me, so I decided to deal with this quickly.

"Welcome," I greeted. "I was told that you have some pressing news to discuss with me."

The man bore an intelligent appearance. He smiled warmly.

"Long time no see. How have you been?" he asked.

"Lord Elios," I sighed.

He paid no heed to my impatience, flashing me a charming smile instead. "I'm sure I asked you to call me Fred."

My brows furrowed. "I'm sure you didn't interrupt me from my rest just to greet me and remind me of what I should call you."

"Ah." He nodded. "It's nothing. Some criminals in our territory have fled to the village of Aden—the one under His Grace's authority."

Criminals? Taken aback, I asked for further clarification. "What kind of criminals are they?"

His demeanor remained relatively calm in comparison to mine. It was enough that I actually began to harbor some spite toward him.

"They're a group of thieves that had committed murder and robbery," he

explained. "Most of them have been arrested, but the head of the group as well as some of their more infamous members have made it out."

"How many are there?"

"Ten."

Aden was a small town with a population of less than 50 when they counted last year. If only counting healthy adult men who could fight, there would be only about 15. It would be a different story if only one criminal had fled—but with 10 of them, there could be an attempt to attack the village. Why did such a serious matter have to arise while Dad is away...

I was lost in thought when Lord Elios began pressing me for an answer. "Our family organized a squad to subjugate the outlaws, but we're unable to enter your territory due to the non-aggression pact. Therefore, we need your cooperation."

I clenched my fists. Was it okay for me to make such an important decision like this? I hesitated for a moment. Then, I remembered what Merilyn once told me: "Please keep in mind that you must lead the family in the absence of His Grace, my lady."

I glanced at Derrick. He was watching me without a word as if waiting for my decision. I could suddenly feel the weight of my position as the duke's only child.

Everything I enjoyed was thanks to the people who trusted and followed this family. Rights came from duties, and I bore the responsibility to use my best judgment at a time like this.

"Fine. I will allow your squad to enter my territory," I decided. He smiled and opened his mouth to say something. However, I stopped him before he could. "Just so you know, this is only on the premise that you can guarantee the safety of our residents."

The smile disappeared from his face, and I knew why. After receiving my permission, his original intention was likely to attack not only the criminals but also the villagers in our territory who could be cajoled into joining the bandits.

"If you're talking about compensation for any losses, we will make sure to—"

"No," I interrupted firmly. "As I said, the safety of our residents comes first. I don't care about compensation."

He frowned at my unyielding stance, seemingly bothered.

"I don't understand," he said. "To obsess over the safety of a few useless civilians in a small town that doesn't provide significant financial support to your territory like this..."

Suppressing my anger, I spoke as calmly as I could. "It's a small town, but it's still a place with locals who pay us taxes. The lord or the lady of a territory is responsible for protecting the people. That is why we have our rights."

"Still, I would say it's a waste of time to capture some criminals just to ensure the safety of—"

"I've heard that you, Lord Elios, are a scholarly nobleman who possesses great skill in swordsmanship. Your achievements are such that you're already set to become the next prime minister. Therefore, it's quite surprising that you have yet to devise a plan to subdue 10 measly criminals and protect some helpless civilians with a squad consisting of skilled soldiers and knights."

Provoked, he glared at me for a moment in disgust. Then, he lowered his voice, muttering under his breath. "Interesting," he said.

Unlike the gentle tone he usually employed, his voice sounded cold. Nonetheless, I was far from afraid. This was nothing compared to when my dad got angry.

Suddenly he smiled and gave in. "Fine. I will accept your suggestion."

I nodded and turned to the butler. "Derrick, we'll need some paper, a pen, and a seal. I will write a letter of cooperation in my father's absence."

Once he left the room, Lord Elios suddenly covered his mouth and started snickering.

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He stopped laughing. "It's just that... I'm more intrigued than I thought I would be."

"Intrigued?"

Meeting my eyes, he asked a strange question in lieu of answering mine. "What will I be rewarded with if I follow your orders and manage to take care of the criminals without harming any of the civilians?"

A reward, huh... As expected from the calculative prime minister's son. He wanted to profit from anything, it seemed. I frowned as I contemplated what to answer.

"Well, I don't seek anything big," he added.

"What, then?"

He gazed at me in silence for a moment. Then, he opened his mouth. "A handkerchief."

I was dumbstruck. "I'm sorry?"

He grinned. "The hunting competition. It's just around the corner. I want you to cheer me on."

Only then did I understand what he was talking about. Was he asking me for an embroidered handkerchief? Giving one was similar to giving a good luck charm to a man heading off to war—it meant I wished Lord Elios a safe return. Usually, such a request was made to a family member, acquaintance, or someone you wished to get close to. In a way, it was like a confession.

Regardless, the intentions behind this request didn't sound pure, and it didn't make any sense to think that he had suddenly developed favorable feelings toward me after we had just argued. I tried to guess what he was thinking.

"That's an absurd request," I said, smiling.

"What makes you say so?" he retorted, unperturbed. I decided to attack back with an answer he couldn't deny instead of an abstract one like saying there was no way he could like me.

"The fact that the criminals are on our land is clearly your family's fault. You cannot ask for a reward when you are the cause of the work you find yourself responsible for."

His eyes widened. Then, he began to laugh again, his hand concealing the amused curve of his lips. Incapable of comprehending why he reacted like this, I

felt insulted. Nevertheless, I remained silent. He likely wouldn't hear me anyway because he looked ready to die of laughter, snorting and shaking in his seat.

Displeased, I frowned.

When he finally managed to calm down, he gave me another weak apology. "I'm deeply sorry if I've offended you. I didn't think that the negotiation would be easy, but to be cornered like this... Well, I'm thoroughly entertained."

I was about to tell him that I wasn't enjoying this exchange at all, but he continued before I could.

"Ah, it's been a while since I've laughed like this," he sighed, utterly delighted. "Thank you."

"I feel rather offended," I grumbled.

He simply snorted again at my response, making a sound similar to a balloon being deflated.

I glared at him indignantly and, without a hint of regret in his expression, he apologized again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he said.

I scowled.

Stop laughing if you're sorry, I silently groused.

* * *

MEANWHILE, in Jubelian's room, Max sat with a disapproving look on his face as he waited for her to return. He wondered who could be visiting her this late. His patience was running thin. However, he kept as still as he could manage, remembering what she had said.

"Max, you have to wait for me here, okay?"

Taking a deep breath, he tried to clear his cluttered mind. However, his delusions only grew as time passed. About an hour after Jubelian left, Max began to imagine that a nobleman was clinging to her, asking her to marry him.

Thoroughly disgusted by something that hadn't even happened, Max jumped from his seat. He told himself that it wasn't because he didn't trust her; rather, he didn't trust the flies that constantly buzzed around her.

Therefore, he headed to a window that provided a view into the drawing room where Jubelian and the uninvited guest were. As he got closer to it, he could hear someone laughing. His expression hardened as he tried to gauge the owner of the idiotic laugh, and the moment he looked into the window, he spotted a familiar face.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but I believe the first person that asks a lady for a dance has the claim over her."

That damned fox.

His blood boiling, Max considered breaking into the room. Then, he heard a cold voice speak up.

"What's so funny?" Jubelian asked.

She sounded angry and her expression was cold, unlike usual. This reassured Max. She never showed her cute side to anyone else but him. As her boyfriend, Max felt proud once he realized this.

However, Frederich didn't give in. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just that... I'm more intrigued than I thought I would be. The hunting competition. It's just around the corner. I want you to cheer me on."

With fiery eyes, Max glared at the man. He would hunt him down for the competition if he could. A murderous impulse gradually overcame Max, but then he heard the lady say, "That's an absurd request."

"Why do you think so?"

"The fact that the criminals are on our land is clearly your family's fault. You cannot ask for a reward when you are the cause of the work you find yourself responsible for."

Releasing a sigh of relief, Max smiled and thanked the heavens that she hadn't been swept away. At the same time, however, he was astonished by her unusually quick-witted behavior. Smirking, Max looked back at Frederich, only

to find the man gluing his lustful eyes onto Jubelian. To make matters worse, he began spewing that irritating laugh of his once more.

Frowning, Max clenched his fists. That bastard. How dare he look at her with those eyes? Max wanted to give the nobleman a beating and warn him not to come near Jubelian ever again. Unfortunately, doing so would reveal their relationship, and that could make her upset.

Just imagining her angry frightened Max. However, he couldn't just stand by when men like Frederich might continue approaching her. With a ferocious gaze, Max glared at the nobleman once more before turning around. He needed a plan for the hunting competition, he realized, smirking.

He hadn't even thought of the handkerchief... He should thank Frederich for the idea.

* * *

HAD I done the right thing? I didn't want to regret what I had already done, but it was the first time I had made an important decision on my father's behalf. Just the thought of it daunted me.

Sighing, I returned to my room and discovered Max sitting on the sofa. I had been worried that he would barge into the drawing room, but he had waited patiently for me in the end. Wearing a pleasant smile, I approached him.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he was in front of me.

Huh?

His eyes were fixed on me.

"What took you so long?" he asked. There was some resentment in his voice.

I sighed. "Lord Elios asked to cooperate with our family. Apparently, criminals who escaped from his father's territory are in a village under my father's authority. The discussion ended up drawing out."

Gazing at me with suspicion, he began to interrogate me. "Was that all he came for?" he asked.

His question reminded me of what Lord Elios had said about the hunting competition.

I wondered how Max would react if I told him the truth. The sudden urge to play the mischievous girlfriend arose within me but I didn't want to cause a misunderstanding, so I held my tongue. I had clearly set boundaries between Lord Elios and me, so I had no reason to feel guilty.

I nodded. "Yes, that's all."

His gaze had grown fiery.

"I waited patiently just like you told me to," he reminded me.

If there was a medal I could give him at this moment, I would. However, the problem was that there was no such thing.

"Good job," was all I could say.

Once I commended him, he hugged me.

"Then, could you do me a favor?" he asked.

For a split second, I questioned what he might want from me. Swallowing nervously, I nodded. "What is it?"

"I want an embroidered handkerchief made by you," he whispered.

Startled, I recoiled a little, meeting his eyes. This reminded me of the conversation I had with Lord Elios just moments ago. Did Max overhear? He already had a record of eavesdropping spanning several instances, so I couldn't help but doubt him.

I was studying him questioningly when he spoke up again.

"You don't want to?" he asked, his eyes pleading. He looked a bit disappointed.

"No, that's not it..." I reflexively shook my head. "Why do you suddenly want an embroidered handkerchief?"

As an answer to my question, Max pulled something out of his pocket. My eyes grew wide with surprise. He still had the pink handkerchief I had given him a long time ago.

Carefully, he unfolded the fabric as if it was the most precious item in the whole world. It was clean but it looked a little old, as if he carried it around all the time.

"Thanks to this, I was able to get through the battle against the Lagon. This was a reminder of the moments we spent together," he explained.

I gave him the handkerchief unaware he was going to war. Filled with embarrassment and regret, I gazed at him.

"I won't force you to make me another one, of course. After all, you must be busy preparing for your coming-of-age ceremony."

Shaking my head vigorously, I cried, "No way! There's still a long way to go until then!"

Smiling with his eyes, he asked, "Does that mean you'll do it for me?"

Realizing the promise I had just made, I forced a smile. Having spent most of my life as a spoiled, good-for-nothing brat, I wasn't familiar with even the basics of sewing.

However, Max gave me one last chance to backpedal. "I guess I would be putting you in a difficult place. It's okay. I still have this handkerchief."

He kept making me feel sorry, so I couldn't bring myself to reject him. "F-Fine! I'll... do my best," I said. That way, he wouldn't be able to make fun of me even if the product ended up looking ridiculous.

He hugged me tightly.

"I love you," he said.

They were sweet words, but at the same time, I was worried that I might not live up to his expectations. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I sighed. What was I going to do now?!

* * *

RECALLING JUBELIAN'S FLUSHED APPEARANCE, Max chuckled. He imagined what kind of embroidery she would make as he happily opened the window to his room.

When he stepped in, however, Victor took notice.

"Your Highness, you've returned!" he cried, his eyes wide with astonishment.

Dennis was also in the room, and his expression brightened as if he had just met his savior.

Puzzled, Max remained silent.

"You must change your clothes immediately, Your Highness," Dennis urged, restless.

It was unusual for a calm man like him to rush Max.

"What's going on?"

"The emperor sent a message requesting a private meeting with you. He has something to say about the upcoming hunting competition."

"I was so worried that you wouldn't come back in time, Your Highness!" Victor chimed in.

Max frowned. What could his father be planning now?

"Do I meet him at his office?" he asked.

"No, he asked you to come to his room for a drink."

The crown prince's expression crumpled at the mention of booze. "All right."

* * *

ONCE MAX LEFT, I was tempted to ask Merilyn for help regarding the handkerchief. Judging by her personality, however, it was obvious that she would do all the sewing, saying that I would need to watch her first before doing anything myself. I told Max that I would embroider one myself and I wanted to keep my promise.

While I was preoccupied with coming up with a suitable candidate for teaching me how to do this, someone knocked on my door.

"It's Perez, Lady Jubelian."

"Come in, please!" I called as I got out of my chair.

She entered my room, notebook in hand. "My lady, I've come to discuss the concept for the banquet..."

Although I didn't have to, I wanted to let her take a seat. By the looks of it, she was older than my mom was back in my previous life.

"Please, sit down," I invited.

"Thank you, Your Ladyship," she bowed, her speech rather robotic.

I smiled.

"So, the concept for the banquet," I repeated.

"Yes. I was thinking of hiring a professional for the preparations if we couldn't decide on one by the end of this week."

It seemed that, as a perfectionist, she wasn't fond of my ways. Still, the blame lay with me because concepts play a huge part in banquets.

I let out a quiet sigh. "I have one in mind. It's just not organized yet. I was going to discuss this with you tomorrow since it was getting late."

"I see." She nodded. "Please let me know tomorrow, then."

I watched as she stood up before I suddenly remembered something: she took care of all the maids working in our mansion.

"Oh! Do you know any maids who know how to embroider?" I asked quickly.

She sank back down. "Embroidery, you say?"

"Yes. I just want to learn..."

She squinted. "I'm sorry?"

Now, I was thoroughly embarrassed, but I still managed to keep my composure.

"I want to make something for my lover... and my father."

She took a moment to simply observe me.

"I must say that now I truly feel like we are preparing for your coming-of-age ceremony, my lady," she said eventually. "Seeing how much you have matured..." She smiled warmly.

A peculiar feeling overcame me—I guess I *had* been living too crazy of a life until now. Although everything I had done to ‘mature’ was to get rid of my death flag, through the eyes of others, it must have looked like I was undergoing a positive change.

"I've also heard that you have successfully undergone a negotiation with Lord Elios today," Madam Perez continued.

"O-Oh no, I'm still worried that I might have made a grave mistake."

With a faint smile, Madam Perez shook her head. "Not at all. His Grace will certainly praise your deeds once he returns."

I had never received such compliments before... A ticklish feeling began to bubble within me. Being praised like this for the first time, for something I had done, made my face grow hot.

"Thank you for saying that," I mumbled.

Madam Perez turned to the clock. "I've kept you occupied for too long with my unnecessary comments. It's almost time for bed. There's a girl who works in the laundry room and she's excellent at embroidery. I will send her up tomorrow."

"Thank you. Have a good night."

"You as well, my lady." She bowed before heading out of the room.

I ran to my bed once she left. Once I threw myself into the coziness of my mattress, the soft and warm blankets embraced me. It was getting late, past when I should have gone to sleep, but I was so excited that I couldn't rest.

CHAPTER FOUR

TROUBLED THOUGHTS



IT HAD BEEN A WHILE SINCE THE EMPEROR BEGAN DRINKING ALONE IN HIS BEDROOM, SO HE was starting to get irritated. Where was that goddamned bastard? He was about to call for the grand chamberlain when a voice suddenly called out to him.

"Father, I heard you called for me."

Smiling, the emperor raised his head. As ordered, his son hadn't donned his usual helmet. He was glad that Max had listened. Thanks to that, it would be easy to check his reactions.

Wearing a satisfied smile, the emperor pointed to the chair across from him. "Come and sit down, Maximillian."

Once his son sat down, the emperor poured wine into the golden goblet until it had been filled to the brim.

"Here," he said.

However, instead of bringing the drink to his mouth, Max picked up some snacks.

"I'm avoiding drinks these days," he explained.

Taken aback, the emperor asked, "What was that? Why?"

Max smiled. "I haven't been feeling well."

His answer didn't make sense, but the emperor couldn't argue against it. Instead, he just glared at his son.

You're choosing not to drink, huh? he thought to himself. It might be difficult

to get into your head, then.

His face crumpled once he realized this wasn't going to be as easy as he thought it would be.

Watching his father glower, Max laughed. It was obvious why the emperor, who usually remained distant, had sent him an invitation to drink.

He must have wanted something from him.

Max didn't know what it was, but he had no intention of simply giving it away. After all, his father was more enemy than family. No matter how kind he pretended to be, Max remembered how the heartless man had left the late empress to die. After his mother had been poisoned, the emperor left her to wither away in her room, citing the excuse that he hadn't wanted to watch her suffer. Max wanted to behead his abominable father immediately and dedicate him to his mother's grave, but he couldn't, so instead of displaying his hostility, he wore a bright smile.

"Regrettably, I must decline your invitation like this," he said consolingly.

"Don't worry about it," the emperor assured him, his tone caring. "If you're not feeling well, I'll let the doctor know so that he can send you some medicine."

"I don't mind you enjoying the drink, and I'll stay to keep you company," Max smiled.

"Good." The emperor nodded.

Once Max poured the liquor into the goblet, the emperor took the cup and downed it at once.

"I've never tasted anything better. It's a shame that you can't drink with me," he teased.

Max remained silent, waiting for the emperor to throw his bait.

As expected, his father soon got right to it.

"Maximillian, aren't you of marriageable age now?"

Max was flabbergasted. The emperor had told him he was still too young to

get married just a few days ago. Did his father finally find a powerless family to marry him off to? In the past, Max would have played along with his father's schemes, but he had no such intention now. The only lady he wanted to be with was Jubelian, so he shrugged and said, "I'm still young—I've never thought of anything like marriage."

He had only reiterated what had been said before, but the emperor's reaction was still a sight to behold.

"What do you mean?!" he exclaimed. "You're 22 years old. I should be seeing grandchildren by now."

"Not too long ago, you told me I was too young for marriage," Max mocked.

The emperor guffawed. "I was only saying that because you're my son, the one I hold dearest to my heart. In any case, I want you to settle down, and I've found a suitable partner for you."

Realizing that the emperor was trying his best to dismiss his own words, a corner of Max's lips quirked up. He saw what the emperor was trying to do. He started speculating on what useless family his father might have had in mind, but then he decided he should listen to what the man had to say first. Whatever it was, Max was prepared to argue.

"So, I was thinking—what do you think of Duke Floyen's daughter?"

Max almost replied that she was a lovely woman. However, before he could, he caught himself and realized something, his eyes growing wide. Why was the emperor even mentioning her? Max had only danced with Jubelian once and they had never met in public before. In his mind, there shouldn't have been anything that could have caught the emperor's eye.

The collar of his shirt was starting to feel tight, suffocating him. He rummaged through his memories. During Beatrice's coronation ceremony, when he interrupted Jubelian and Fredrich's conversation...

Damn it!

In the end, did he put her in danger? Max felt his blood begin to boil. It was his mistake. He shouldn't have acted so rashly.

Quickly collecting himself, he replied with composure. "Well, I don't even recall what she looks like."

"Is that so? If I remember correctly, you offered to dance with her during the banquet," the emperor said. "Wasn't that because she caught your attention that day?"

Max smirked. "No, I was just looking for an excuse to irritate Duke Elios' son since he was being an eyesore."

The emperor frowned slightly. He agreed that, given Maximillian's nature, it was likely that he would argue with someone he perceived to be a nuisance, but something still felt off.

Forcing a smile, the emperor attempted to entice him further. "Just be honest with me. If you like her, I'll set up a meeting for you two."

He had expected Max to immediately agree to the offer, but his son conveyed disgust instead.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "The duke's daughter is ill-reputed. I would have to have gone mad to be interested in someone like her."

Furrowing his brow at Max's cold voice, the emperor studied his son.

"I see. She's definitely not good enough for you, then. I'll exclude her from the list of possible candidates for your bride." Refilling the golden goblet with more amber-colored liquor, he dismissed his son. "It's getting late. You may leave."

Max let out a quiet sigh of relief. "Good night, Father."

His face carefully blank, the emperor remained still in his seat after his son left, staring into his full goblet.

The grand chamberlain soon entered his room, spurring him from his thoughts. "Your Majesty, the spy assigned to the crown princess has sent a report."

"Ah, yes. What is it?" the emperor asked, remembering the man he had asked to keep watch on Beatrice.

"Her Ladyship has kindled a friendship with Lady Floyen. Mind you, it's not just an acquaintance. It's a close relationship."

Regis' daughter and Beatrice... The two were close?

The emperor stroked his chin thoughtfully at the unexpected news. He might be able to use this to his advantage in the future, but for now...

Having achieved his goal, the emperor wore a triumphant smile. When he had first asked his son about the lady, there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. However, the emperor was quick enough to notice that something was odd about his son's reaction; although Max was degrading the girl verbally, his eyes were trembling. It was uncharacteristic of someone who had been called a 'monster' on the battlefield.

He had hoped it would be true... but he couldn't believe his son was in love! The emperor burst out into laughter. When the suspicions that he had had in mind had become a certainty, he was overcome with a sense of bliss. He could finally execute all of the plans he had devised.

He turned to the grand chamberlain.

"Catch a wild beast to be released on the day of the hunting competition," he ordered.

* * *

REGIS HURRIED home once he received the message from Derrick's carrier pigeon. However, it took him a while for him to return. Once he did, the butler greeted him with a smile. "Welcome back, Master."

"How did the issue with Elios go?"

The butler held out a piece of paper. "Take a look at this, Your Grace."

Taking the document, Regis perused the writing. A satisfied smile gradually began to spread across his face. Jubelian had resolved it on her own... This reminded him of the time he had asked her about a theory on fief management.

"The three most important elements of an estate? First, the people," she had stated adamantly. "The lord may change throughout time, but without the people, the land cannot be established."

"I didn't do anything to help Her Ladyship, by the way. She did this on her own," Derrick added.

Regis' smile grew even more prominent. "Yes. She wouldn't have a problem without me."

The statement startled Derrick and he gazed at his master. However, the duke remained expressionless. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, the butler decided that he must have been worrying for no reason and he let out a sigh of relief.

"How are the preparations for Jubelian's coming-of-age ceremony going?" Regis asked.

"Ah, according to Madam Perez, Lady Jubelian has said she would discuss the concept for the banquet tomorrow morning."

Regis nodded. "I see."

With a mischievous smile, Derrick asked, "May I be so bold as to ask what gift you're preparing for her, Master?"

What present the duke had for his daughter was of great interest to the staff of the Floyen mansion. As the butler, Derrick tried to obtain a hint using his close relationship with the duke, but Regis gave nothing away.

"The best thing I could give her," he answered.

So, he's keeping it a secret from me as well, Derrick lamented silently.

He understood that it was his fault that the lady had discovered where the training hall was located during that incident, but...

He paused and smiled. He would find out what the gift was in due time. Silently, he vowed to take good care of the lady and his master until then.

* * *

I HAD trouble sleeping last night because I was anticipating many things, but I seemed to have fallen asleep without realizing it. When I next opened my eyes, it was bright outside. Today, I would discuss the concept for the banquet with Madam Perez... I yawned, desperate to sleep for a little longer. Nevertheless, I

forced myself to leave the bed because I wanted to keep my promises.

Once at my desk, I started writing out my plans for the banquet. The most important aspect was elegant but trendy decorations that would suit the duke's mansion but still catch the people's eye. I jotted down notes on all the details I could conceive, and once I finished, I could better envision the banquet in my head somewhat. This was good enough.

Turning to the clock, I then realized that quite a bit of time had passed. Glancing at the plan on my desk, I called for my maid. "Merilyn, could you please ask Madam Perez to come to my room?"

* * *

MADAM PEREZ SIGHED at the sudden surge of heat that overcame her. She was far from feeling well. She always felt hot, cold, then hot again. She had been suffering from the symptoms of menopause for a while now, but she endured for the sake of the late duchess's request: to remain until Jubelian's coming-of-age ceremony.

"Madam Perez, I realize this is a difficult request, but... I want you to remain as the housekeeper until my daughter comes of age," the lady had said.

It had been many years since she had been employed by the Floyen family and she had endured many hardships, but this wish helped her cope until now. Reminding herself that the banquet was just around the corner and that she could soon retire, Madam Perez entered the lady's room.

"Welcome, Madam Perez," Jubelian greeted.

She wore a simple dress, and after seeing her, Madam Perez found herself tearing up for some reason. Although Jubelian had been difficult to care for during her childhood and teen years, she had grown up to be a wonderful lady.

Sitting down, Madam Perez began to look through the plans that Jubelian had written. The ideas weren't too extravagant, but they were creative.

"This is excellent," Madam Perez praised, satisfied.

"Wow, really?!" Jubelian exclaimed excitedly, much like a child.

If Madam Perez had known Jubelian loved compliments so much, she would have praised her more often. She smiled. In any case, such regrets were now futile. She would be quitting soon, after all.

She stood up. "I will prepare the banquet according to these notes, then."

"Wait a minute!" Jubelian blurted.

Madam Perez looked back, curious. "I'm sorry?"

Taking something out of her pocket, the young lady handed her something. "Take this."

"This is..." At the sight of the unexpected gift, the older woman trailed off.

Jubelian smiled. "It's primrose oil, which is rumored to be a useful remedy for menopause. I've also told Allen about it. He'll send you some medicine, too."

It was strange. Madam Perez had already made up her mind to retire after Jubelian's coming-of-age ceremony. However, now she wanted to stay by the charming young lady's side for a little longer.

Bowing, she expressed her gratitude. "Thank you, Lady Jubelian."

* * *

I JUMPED onto my couch once Madam Perez left, glad that she was appreciative of my gift. Worried that she might consider my actions excessively meddlesome, I had thought long and hard about giving her the primrose oil. In the end, however, no misconceptions were had, so I was relieved.

Madam Perez had served our family for many years. That was why I wanted to see her in good health for longer. Recalling our meeting, I gazed at the piece of paper before me. The concept for the banquet had been decided, which meant that half the battle was already over. Feeling proud, I got up from my chair. Since the seamstress would be visiting today, the next thing to do was decide on a design for a dress.

* * *

IN THE CROWN prince's study, Max sat with his closest aides, Dennis and Victor.

"Your Highness," Dennis began, "we should begin setting up a base for our—" He stopped himself. Then, he let out a small sigh; his lord was far from engaged in the conversation.

Typically, Max was serious when discussing plans for the uprising, so this was a peculiar sight. Dennis didn't understand the shift in his lord's attitude, but one thing was certain: he had changed after he met with the emperor the previous night. Instead of his usual leisurely air, he looked uneasy.

Overcome with an ominous feeling, Dennis turned to Victor, who was sitting on the other side of the table. Unsurprisingly, Victor was smiling with his head resting on his hand. Their good-for-nothing comrade was daydreaming again, apparently.

Furious, Dennis kicked Victor in the leg under the table. Victor cried aloud, but despite his exclamation, the crown prince didn't stir, still deep in thought.

"Just be honest with me. If you like her, I'll set up a meeting for you two."

The emperor's words lingered in Max's mind. He was thoroughly bothered that the emperor had mentioned Jubelian. If he could, he would visit the lady at this very moment to check if she was okay. However, the problem was that he was stuck in an important meeting.

"Your Highness, is something the matter?" Dennis asked, finally bringing Max back to reality. He raised his head to look at his right-hand man. "I don't know what happened during the meeting with the emperor last night, but I'm concerned. It seems like you're upset about something."

Max pursed his lips, wondering if it would be appropriate to disclose personal issues to his aides. Victor and Dennis had been by his side for many years and through countless battles. Nonetheless, Max had never learned to trust them—or any of his other subordinates, for that matter. To the crown prince, the men he led were existences to protect, not ones to depend on.

However, a familiar voice began to sway him.

"Well, do you feel better now after letting it out?" Jubelian had once said.

At one point in time, Jubelian had just been another person to protect. However, she had encouraged Max to be more open about his worries and everything changed.

Having come to a decision, he began to explain his woes. "The emperor has found out about my weakness. He mentioned it last night."

Dennis's expression grew foul. The weakness in question must have been Lady Floyen. The lady would be an excellent asset for the uprising as she could be useful when convincing the duke to side with them. If the emperor had noticed this already, it meant trouble.

Anxious, Dennis asked, "What have you told him, Your Highness?"

"I simply denied it."

If they weren't careful, there was a chance that Duke Floyen could become their enemy instead. For this reason, Dennis praised the prince. "A wise decision, Your Highness. I agree that it would be best to hide the truth for now."

"Well, if we're close to getting caught anyway, wouldn't it be better to show the emperor that he will have to pay if anything happens to the lady?" Victor suggested, butting in with his simple advice.

Dennis rubbed his temples. "And if the emperor decides to intervene... Actually, never mind. This isn't even worth my time." Then, turning to his lord, he said, "Anyway, please go see the lady, Your Highness. We understand your situation."

Silence followed, and Dennis lightly kicked Victor's leg under the table. The man flinched. Then, sighing, he grumbled, "I, Victor, will guard this place on behalf of Your Highness."

"Please don't worry about us. We'll take care of any issues should they arise," Dennis assured his lord.

An unfamiliar feeling overcame Max, and he awkwardly began to express his gratitude. "...Thank you."

Dennis observed him. He really had changed for the better. Despite all the years that Dennis had spent with his lord, the crown prince had always been

somewhat distant. He seemed like a flawless being far beyond them, but now, he had someone he wanted to protect, and by trusting his subordinates and asking them for advice, he was unveiling a weakness of his. Dennis was deeply moved by the great transformation his lord had undergone. It was unlikely for a ruler who listened to his subordinates to turn into a tyrant. Although Dennis didn't expect Max to become a sage, the knight was sure his lord would nevertheless become a wise ruler.

"Your Highness," Victor called, interrupting Dennis's train of thought. "Shouldn't you tell us what your weakness is, then? We're your right and left-hand men—we won't tell anyone!"

Dennis' face crumpled, but much to his surprise, the crown prince simply muttered, "I'll tell you two later."

With that statement, he left the room, unaware that his aides were watching him leave with astonished expressions.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAKING UP



IT WAS GOING TO BE A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EVENT FOR ME, SO IT WOULDN'T HURT TO BE fancy. At least, those were the words I had engraved into my head as I mulled over the design for my dress.

A sudden knock on my door jerked me from my thoughts, however, and I turned to the clock. Earlier than expected, huh...

My guest was reputed to be a diligent person, but I hadn't expected them to be four hours early. I was fortunate that I had gotten ready to meet Madam Perez before the appointed time. If not, I would have been caught in my pajamas. I hastily opened the door to my room.

"Oh, Dad!" I exclaimed.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Of course!"

Taking a peek inside my room, he said, "There's something I would like to discuss. Can I come in?"

"Please do!"

We had always conversed in the dining hall or drawing room until now. This was the first time Dad had properly come to my room. Suppressing my excitement, I walked over to a chair and sat down.

He focused on me. "I heard about what happened with Elios."

I studied his expression. Although his eyes were as cold as usual, I wasn't afraid of receiving criticism from him.

"Yes, I have," I answered. "Dad, do you remember the question you had asked me while I was reading the *Theory of Fief Management*?"

"Of course," he nodded. "I had asked you about the three most important elements of an estate."

He still remembered. I smiled. "Yes. I still think the same way, and that's why I put the people first when I made my decision."

Dad gazed at me for a split second.

"Well done," he praised.

I couldn't help but beam. I was elated! Perhaps this was what true happiness was. In the past, I used to think I would be content with my life once I was wealthy enough, but little did I know that I was an arrogant fool to think in such a way. What mattered were the people around me. I wanted to spend my days with those I cherished.

I smiled, recalling familiar faces. However, Bea soon came to mind, and I immediately deflated. According to the current progression of events, there was a chance that she would drink poison a couple of months after my coming-of-age ceremony...

Until now, I had been busy thinking of ways to avoid my death flag, and in the process, I had decided on living alone for the rest of my life. Now, however, I wanted to protect myself and those around me instead of just running away. The original novel didn't mention the culprit's identity, but I decided to find out on my own.

"Jubel."

I brought the smile back to my face.

My father called me by my nickname and it didn't sound awkward at all.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Don't worry about the expenses for your coming-of-age ceremony. I want you to purchase whatever's needed for the experience you want."

Assuming he was exaggerating, I responded playfully. "Quit joking, Dad! We might go bankrupt if I did that."

However, he remained stern. "We have enough assets—no, more than enough. You won't be able to spend all of it even if you spent your entire life trying. So, please use them to your heart's content."

Was this true? I knew my family was rich, but were we *that* wealthy? Maybe this was how it felt like to wake up one day as the heir of an affluent family. It was true that I wasn't forced to live a frugal life until now, but now that I was permitted to spend freely, I was beyond excited.

However, although an enormous amount of money now sat before me... did it matter? I made plenty of money until now working with Ian. Moreover, he constantly sent me accessories, and they were luxurious enough for me.

Nevertheless, I didn't want to disappoint Dad by making it seem like I wasn't interested, so I answered with exhilaration.

"Thank you, Daddy!"

"Yes, from now on—"

Bang!

Suddenly, Dad's words were cut short by a loud thump on my door.

I frowned.

Who could it be?

I was about to get up, but Dad stopped me.

"I will get the door," he said.

"Thank you."

Once the door creaked open, and I heard a familiar voice. "Master?"

I quickly turned my head, realizing it was Max.

"Oh, Max!" I exclaimed, approaching him. "What brings you here—"

Once again, Dad reached out and stopped me. Shaking his head and sending Max a death glare, my father snarled. "I'm sure I had already told you to be responsible before," he accused.

"I'm aware. There's a reason why I am here!" Max hissed back.

I listened to their exchange for a moment then frowned.

Something was strange.

"Whatever the circumstances are, you must take the responsibility for your position if you want to spend time with my—"

"Wait a minute!" I cried. I had no choice but to interrupt my father. "You two. I want to know what happened behind my back!"

At my scolding, the two men froze in place.

* * *

NOTHING SEEMED to have gone wrong, Max noted once he arrived at the Floyen mansion. When he entered the estate, he was greeted by Derrick. The butler hastily bowed and approached him, but Max simply strode up the staircase to where Jubelian would be. There, he crashed into another person: Merilyn.

"Oh! It's nice to see you here again," she said. "Unfortunately, Lady Jubelian is busy at the moment—"

The crown prince ignored the maid, too. The only thing on his mind was his lover. He was sure that nothing would have happened. However, since his worrisome thoughts were slowly eating him away, he had to check for his own sanity. Anxious, he unknowingly banged on her door. He swallowed nervously as he waited for an answer, but once the door creaked open...

"Master?"

He had expected to be rewarded with her lovely appearance at last, so his mood turned foul once he encountered Regis. What was the duke doing in her room? Ignoring him, he peeked into the room through the crack and saw Jubelian in the back. Realizing she was safe, he let out a sigh of relief. Now, the only problem he had to face was the obstacle standing between them. Max glared at his master with a murderous gaze.

Regis didn't flinch, returning Max's death glare with one of his own.

"I'm sure I had already told you to be responsible before."

Upon hearing his master's icy tone, Max realized he had no intention of letting him in. He wanted to force his master to leave but he couldn't dare to act violently in front of Jubelian. So, he decided to play the pitiful victim.

"I'm aware. There's a reason why I am here!" he said.

Unfortunately, however, Regis had already read his thoughts.

That bastard, he seethed silently. How dare he play the victim after sleeping with my daughter in the same bed?!

He trusted his daughter's claims, but he still couldn't help but think that Max was a good-for-nothing who needed to be kicked out of the mansion immediately.

"Whatever the circumstances are, you must take responsibility for your position if you want to spend time with my—"

"Wait a minute!" Jubelian cried.

The duke flinched. Then, he sighed. Was his daughter going to take Max's side? In any case, Regis had no intention of letting this issue slide. Determined, he was about to scold her when she suddenly issued a demand: "You two. I want to know what happened behind my back!"

Regis was bewildered by her unexpected exclamation. He couldn't understand how his dense daughter had found out.

Meanwhile, Max was equally perplexed. He thought she would never find out. What happened?!

Once the two men froze in place, Jubelian frowned. "Just tell me what happened already. What did you two talk about and when was it?"

However, neither Max nor Regis could tell the truth. Max didn't want his lover to know that he had been beaten up by his master. Regis wanted to hide the fact that he had secretly followed his daughter around because it was an indecent thing for a father to do. Having barely restored his relationship with her, he didn't want to end up back at square one. Max felt the same regarding their romantic relationship.

Silence filled the room and Jubelian pouted.

"Why? Is it because I'm not good enough to know?!" she cried, frustrated.

Shivers ran down the spines of both men.

Max took the risk and spoke first. "Jubelian, it's not what you think... What happened was—"

Regis interrupted him. "I'll tell her what happened."

Judging by his sharp gaze, Max deduced that his master had a plan.

Swallowing dryly, he nodded.

"Remember when Max and I dueled?" the duke began.

"Yes," Jubelian nodded. "At the training hall."

"At that time, I told him that swordsmanship was crucial if he wanted to be a suitable partner for you, but that wasn't all. I also told him that he must be diligent in his duties as the crown prince."

Max frowned slightly. This man... He was making it sound like Max wasn't doing his job. However, despite his indignation, he remained silent because his master's insinuations that he lacked diligence were true to some extent. Also, if Max decided to reveal everything that had happened instead, he would be at a disadvantage.

Jubelian turned to Max. "Is that true?" she asked, her eyes wholly innocent.

Max didn't want to lie to her, but he nodded. "Yes, it is."

At his confirmation, Jubelian sighed. "Dad, Max, can't you two just get along?"

Disgusted and resentful of the suggestion, the two men's faces contorted.

Nonsense, thought Regis immediately. He's a cheeky bastard who's always looking for a way to take you away from me.

I would rather tell Beatrice that she's pretty than get along with that condescending man, Max groused.

The two glowered at each other.

"I just want you to get along well..." Jubelian mumbled softly.

At the sound of her sad voice, the two stopped glaring at each other and

looked at her, their hearts immediately breaking at the sight of her sullen face.

Perhaps they should pretend for now... Regis and Max exchanged glances.

Jubelian delivered the final blow.

"It'll make me upset... to see the both of you fight constantly like this." Tears began to well up in her periwinkle eyes.

At the mention of her getting upset, Regis was instantly unsettled. "Jubel, I..."

Max suddenly raised his voice. "Jubelian! What are you talking about?! It's nothing like that! Don't you know how much I respect my master? He's protected me ever since I was little!"

Bastard, Regis thought, scowling.

Max never listened to his advice even after he saved his disciple from death's door. Max was lying through his teeth.

"Is that true?" Jubelian asked.

"Of course."

She smiled and her eyes curved into crescent moons. "I'm glad."

Regis sighed at her daughter's naivety. He couldn't believe she trusted Max to this extent.

In no time, however, his innocent little girl stood right before him.

"Dad," she called.

He flinched a little, but he answered evenly, concealing his nerves. "Yes?"

Her coral lips parted. "You've been protecting Max since he was young, right?"

Remembering Max as a kid, Regis adopted a bitter smile. "*I will make sure to repay this favor in the future*," his disciple had once said. Instead of repaying the favor, however, Max was now hovering around the person most precious to Regis, irritating him. He wanted to let out a loud sigh showcasing his annoyance, but deep inside, he knew he couldn't blame his disciple. After all, Jubelian liked Max too.

"Yes, I have," he answered.

Taking Regis' hands, she smiled. "Does that mean Max is precious to you as well?"

Regis recalled Max's youthful face. The hostile boy had looked into the duke's eyes and said, *"I won't bow down to you for saving me. However, I will remember the grace you've shown me."*

Max was arrogant... but... Regis sighed and nodded.

Beaming, Jubelian said, "Then why don't you two shake hands as a means of reconciliation?"

Regis nodded.

Max glared at his master but eventually gave in, sighing and approaching the other man.

"Master, I'm sorry for all the wrongs I've done until now," he said.

At Max's apology, Regis smiled slightly. Taking his pupil's outstretched hand, he gave him a slow handshake.

Max couldn't help but smile a little once he saw Jubelian's expression brighten. At least he got to see her smile like that. This might have been worth — His thoughts immediately halted once he registered the terrifying amount of force being exerted around his hand. His master's grip was impossibly tight. He barely managed to swallow a groan. What was that about?!

Regis smirked as he watched his disciple stiffen, the smile on Max's face becoming forced.

You impudent fool. Just know that I have no intention of handing her over yet, he silently warned.

* * *

I WATCHED my father as he nodded. His expression was more stern than usual. Well, it was true that he cherished his disciple a lot. I had even misunderstood their relationship in the past.

I grinned at Max, who stood still as he looked at me. "Then why don't you two shake hands as a means of reconciliation?" I suggested.

They shook hands awkwardly. When I found out that they were at odds, I wanted to resolve it naturally at first, but then they began showing more and more hostility toward each other as the days passed. Since there was no sign of them making up, I had decided I couldn't just leave them be, so I faked some emotional reactions.

It was a little embarrassing because I sounded like a little girl, but I was glad it worked out in the end.

Watching as they smiled, I felt warm inside.

"We should have teatime—with some sweets too!" I suggested.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDING OUT



CURSING INWARDLY ABOUT HIS STILL NUMB HANDS, MAX MASSAGED THEM AS HE GRITTED his teeth. Then, he realized a certain someone's gaze was upon him.

"Max, what's wrong?" Jubelian asked.

Shaking his head, he plastered a smile onto his face and huffed out a chuckle. "Nothing! I suddenly remembered something that had happened on a battlefield once..."

Her eyes widened. "It must have been terrible if it suddenly disrupted your thoughts like that!"

"Yes, it was," Max nodded, sighing softly.

She was usually slow to notice these things... so why was she so sharp today?

"Anyway, what was the thing that you needed to tell me so bad that you even left behind your duties as the crown prince?"

Max frowned. Should he tell her the truth? He agonized over it for a moment before coming to a decision: yes. She needed to prepare for the worst that could happen.

He gazed at her and began his explanation. "Last night, the emperor asked me what I thought of you. Then, he tried to convince me that he could let me have what I wanted."

Jubelian widened her eyes, and...

"Say that again, Maximilian," his master snarled.

There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Although he often revealed his true

nature when it came to his daughter, the duke usually managed to maintain a generally calm demeanor nevertheless. Yet...

"What did the emperor say?" the duke pressed. His ferocious gaze made even Max's knees wobble.

Max swallowed nervously. "At first, he asked me what I thought of Jubelian. Then, he told me that he would help me have her if I wished. I kept denying his speculations... but it looks like he might be plotting something."

Gaze sharp, Regis asked, "When do you think he found out?"

"The day... I asked Jubelian for a dance," Max answered after a moment of hesitation.

Regis' eyes grew cold.

"I am glad you are aware of what you have done—exposing my daughter to the emperor."

Max couldn't deny the criticism. He slowly lowered his head, wishing he had been a little more patient during the banquet. Only then did he realize why his master had only mentioned Jubelian to a few people. It must have been to keep her from attracting the emperor's attention. Feeling pathetic, he clenched his fists.

Just then, Jubelian grabbed her father's hand and smiled. "Don't worry, Dad. The emperor will stop paying attention to me as long as Max proves his claims true."

Regis sighed at her optimism. "Jubel, this isn't something that should be taken lightly. The emperor is—"

"An ignoble man, quick with his wits," she supplied, cutting him off. "He spots others' weaknesses well and is excellent at planning schemes around their deficiencies."

She said exactly what Regis was going to say. His eyes widened, incapable of believing that his daughter had already realized the emperor's true nature. Although incompetent as a ruler, the emperor was skilled at defending his position on the throne. For this reason, he always played the dignified monarch

at official events. Only high-ranked nobles and close aides who met with the emperor often knew of his true nature. Therefore, it was strange that Jubelian had seen through the man.

Regis was sure that she had only seen him a few times at banquets... Suspicions littered his mind.

"I understand that I may be ignorant at times, but I do know what kind of person the emperor is. He's our common enemy, isn't he?" she asked.

Regis flinched.

"I understand that you're concerned about my safety, but I should be prepared to face the emperor as well."

Regis sighed at his daughter's words, but a faint smile soon graced his lips. "You're right."

Watching the father-daughter duo converse, Max was overcome with a peculiar feeling. Once again, he had been protected by the woman he initially thought he had to protect.

At first, he had proudly assumed that no one would be more suited to stand by her side than him, but the more he got to know her, the more he felt he was lacking in comparison to her. Did he deserve to be by her side? He felt dazed at the thought.

"Don't blame yourself for anything," Jubelian said.

Her voice lifted him from his thoughts. She had approached him in seconds, and the moment he met her periwinkle eyes, he realized his worries had been futile. He burst into laughter.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he scoffed, purposefully dramatic.

Jubelian grinned. "I won't worry about it, then."

Watching her lovely face, Max made another pledge.

I will protect you no matter what.

* * *

PRETENDING to be the crown prince in his room, Victor cleared his voice once he heard a knock on the door.

He had to make his voice as low as possible and sound as irritated as possible.

"What is it?" he growled coldly.

A servant promptly answered. "It's Princess Beatrice, Your Highness."

It wouldn't have mattered if it was anyone else. However, Victor didn't feel comfortable meeting Beatrice. She spent a lot of time at the crown prince's side during the last banquet, so there was a chance she might notice something was off.

"Tell her to come by later," he said. However, the door creaked open anyway. From outside, Victor could hear the troubled servant cry out.

"Y-Your Highness, you can't—!"

Despite the servant's attempts at stopping her, Beatrice elegantly strode into the office. "My dear brother, I have come here to discuss something pertaining to this 'friend' of mine. Could you please send away the servant?"

Victor's face crumpled. Why the hell was this woman trying to approach His Highness? Usually, the knight treated Beatrice with neither hostility nor kindness, but he still served the crown prince. There was no way he could view the princess favorably.

Thinking that the crown prince would have asked her to leave, Victor announced coldly, "Your friend is none of my business, so get out."

Beatrice's face hardened. She glared at Victor.

"You," she intoned. "Who are you?"

Victor felt his blood curdle. Nonetheless, he tried to continue his act. "What nonsense are you babbling about? Get out. Now!"

Instead of leaving, however, Beatrice turned to the servant.

"You may leave," she commanded.

Frightened by her frigid tone, the servant immediately scurried out of the room.

"Beatrice, did you jus—"

She cut him off, demanding, "Unless you want to be imprisoned for impersonating a member of the royal family, take that helmet off right now."

* * *

QUITE A BIT of time had passed since teatime finished. Max checked the time and frowned slightly. The evening meeting was about to start. Usually, he wouldn't have cared, but strangely enough, his subordinates were all he could think about at the moment.

"I think I should head back now," he said reluctantly.

His master nodded.

"Don't forget. From now on, you can only visit her once a week," he said. It sounded like he wanted some confirmation Max understood this, but instead of answering, he just got up with a scowl.

At that moment, Jubelian took Max by the hand. "Dad, I'll see him off."

Regis shot Max a look of displeasure, but he permitted it.

"Go ahead," he said, still maintaining his death glare. His expression promised that he wouldn't leave Max alone if he decided to do something stupid. Max glowered back.

"Max," Jubelian urged, lightly tugging on his hand. He decided to forfeit the staring contest so he could follow after her.

Once they exited the front gate and reached a remote place in the garden, Jubelian let go of him.

Turning to him, she bid him farewell. "Be careful on your way back."

Max had expected something more, but it was just a simple goodbye.

Suppressing his disappointment, he nodded. "Okay."

As he was about to leave, however, he felt a soft, tickling sensation on his back. "I'm terrible at embroidery actually, but I'll do my best since I'm making it for you," she said.

He was awestruck by her loveliness, charmed by the way she told him she would try her best. Removing her tiny hands from his waist, he turned around and embraced her. Her unique scent, a fragrant yet sweet one, stimulated the tip of his nose. He wanted to do more than just hug her, but he had duties he must attend to. Suppressing his desires, he pulled away.

"I will do my best as well," he told her. She regarded him with a look that seemed to ask what he was referring to, but he just smiled instead of elaborating. "Stay safe."

Before she could say anything else, Max quickly disappeared from view, leaving her alone.

"We won't be able to see each other again for a week..." she mumbled. "How could he just leave like that? How heartless of him."

Watching the lady's figure from far away, Max sighed. She was someone he deeply cherished, and if he could, he would keep her in his pocket. He had wanted to kiss her, but...

He twisted his lips into a frown, glaring at his master as he stood before him. He didn't want to do anything while this man was prying. While he didn't care what his master saw, it was clear to him that Jubelian would be embarrassed if she ever found out that her father had witnessed her affectionate actions. Since Max had decided to put Jubelian first before anything else, he refrained from stealing a kiss.

Yes, it was all for her.

Max couldn't help but resent his master for going so far as to interrupt their goodbye.

"I see that you still don't respect your daughter's privacy," he spat scornfully.

Regis wrinkled his brows, annoyed.

"Didn't you say that you were busy?" he coldly retorted. Sarcasm laced his voice, implying that he wanted Max to leave immediately.

Surprisingly, however, his disciple kneeled instead of getting upset.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, thoroughly irritated.

However, Max remained unmoved as he looked up.

"I want to become stronger," he said. "Please help me."

Regis looked into his disciple's eyes. A sense of desperation and an intense longing for something lingered within their crimson depths. Unlike before when he didn't have any clear goals, he seemed to have something in mind now.

It looked like he finally came to a decision. Although Regis was proud, Max was still an arrogant disciple. Thinking that Max might be tainted with pride once more, Regis remained indifferent as he accepted the request.

"Very well, then."

At his master's acceptance, Max exhaled a sigh of relief.

* * *

VICTOR GULPED, his eyes on Beatrice. He couldn't understand how the princess had found out. Although the crown prince's personality was different from his, Victor possessed a similar physique, eye color, and even tone of voice. If one excluded the crown prince's closest aides from the count, Beatrice would have been the first to have seen through the disguise.

Victor knew this was bad. With the uprising just around the corner, how could he...? This could serve as a fatal weakness, he lamented.

"You mean to say that my brother often goes out, leaving a body double behind to sit in his room?" Beatrice asked.

Victor frowned. "Please don't distort the answer I gave you earlier. I made it clear that this is a one-day only situation."

Beatrice's eyes narrowed in response. "Who'd believe that?"

The princess was no joke, and now Victor was cursed with a throbbing headache. Captain Dennis would be here soon... He was definitely going to get scolded. And His Highness...

For some reason, Victor was more afraid of being beheaded by the crown prince before the princess could tell anyone about this. He swallowed

nervously. Now that it had come to this, the only choice he had left was to convince Her Highness. Hoping that Max would come back as late as possible, Victor glanced at the princess.

"Your Highness, that friend you mentioned earlier," he began, "I'll assist you with them if I can be of any help."

Beatrice studied Victor, humming thoughtfully. He didn't look very trustworthy, but he was one of Maximillian's closest aides, and there must have been a reason for that. Also, that meant that he wouldn't dare to win Jubelian over for himself.

If Maximilian showed an interest in Jubelian, there was a high possibility that the emperor's attention would end up with her. However, if it was just a knight Beatrice would give orders to, no one would think it strange even if he wandered around Jubelian.

After making up her mind, Beatrice answered his proposal. "On the day of the hunting competition, you must protect my friend," she declared.

At first, Victor tried to refuse. After all, the only subject he needed to protect was his lord, the crown prince. However, the moment Victor heard the name of the princess' friend, he changed his mind.

Lady Floyen?

Victor believed he had fallen in love at first sight. He couldn't forget her elegant appearance at the princess' coronation ceremony. In the knight's eyes, she resembled a beautiful elf.

He couldn't believe the opportunity had come. Although the crown prince had asked Lady Floyen for a dance, Victor was convinced that it was simply a scheme of some sort. His Highness already had the Handkerchief Lady. He must have asked Lady Floyen for a dance so he could keep the Handkerchief Lady safe from the emperor's influence.

Victor made up his mind.

"I'll take responsibility and protect the lady," he promised Beatrice.

Hearing his serious pledge, Beatrice smiled contentedly. Maximilian's

subordinates were certainly loyal. The only people Beatrice kept close were the empress' subordinates, so the princess couldn't help but feel a bit of envy.

"Fair enough," she said. "I'll keep what I saw today a secret in exchange."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Having finished the trade, she got up. "If anyone asks what had happened, I came here to argue with my brother about the hunting competition. Do you understand?"

Victor nodded. He knew that Beatrice had nothing to benefit from being seen as having a close relationship with the crown prince. That would only raise the emperor and empress' hostility toward her.

"Understood," he said.

Then, Beatrice left and Victor donned the helmet once more, grinning.

The princess was a better person than he had once thought.

Suddenly, a familiar voice came from behind him. "Victor."

Startled, the knight turned around. "Oh, Your Highness. You've returned earlier than expected."

His lord looked somewhat more tired than usual. Victor observed his lord for a moment before noticing the crown prince's gaze on him. He quickly stood up.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?" Max asked as he sat in his chair. Victor hesitated for a moment, recalling the conversation he had with Beatrice just now.

"If anyone asks what happened, I came here to argue with my brother about the hunting competition," she had said. *"Do you understand?"*

If his lord found out that the princess discovered his identity, he could be beheaded, so he made up his mind to report false information as he had planned with Beatrice.

"The princess came and argued that her knight would be a better hunter than Your Highness," he said.

Max furrowed his brow slightly in response, wondering why Beatrice would

suddenly pick a fight with him. Could it be because of...

No matter how much he thought about it, the only explanation he could come up with behind his sister holding a grudge against him was that he caught her dancing hideously alone in her room the other night.

"I see."

Noticing Max's sinister smirk, Victor hurriedly added, "Of course, I mocked the princess once I heard what she had to say!"

Aware that his subordinate wanted praise, Max nodded.

"I see. Well done," he said. "Anyway, I think it's time to start our evening meeting..."

"Ah, tonight's meeting is canceled," Victor replied quickly. "Captain Dennis should be with Lady Fresia right now."

"Fresia? What did she need him for?"

"Ah, she had something to discuss about Your Highness' orders to keep an eye on the emperor's activities regarding the hunting competition. Anyway, the captain should be returning soon."

"I see."

Once Victor was about to take off the crown prince's armor, Max suddenly pointed something out.

"By the way... You seem uncomfortable," he commented.

Victor flinched a little.

"I'm sorry?" he asked. "In what way do I look uncomfortable?"

"I'm only saying this because you've been acting extremely nervous since I arrived. Is something wrong?"

Victor had finally received the attention he very much desired from the crown prince. However, his blood was curdling. He swallowed dryly. His lord had never been this interested in him before... What had gotten into him?

If Victor reported what had happened, he was sure to receive disciplinary action for failing to fulfill his duties. Shaking his head, he forced a smile.

"S-Something wrong?!" he stammered. "Of course not, Your Highness."

Studying his subordinate's face, Max frowned slightly. Laughing with a pallid complexion. How suspicious. Maybe something did happen while he was gone.

Max was about to interrogate Victor further when a knock resounded. "It's Dennis, Your Highness."

Max sighed. He would have to save this matter for later, then.

"Come in," he said.

Dennis entered the office with some documents in hand. "Your Highness, Lady Fresia has done some investigations on the speculations you discussed earlier."

Max took the papers. Then, his face contorted. "The emperor caught a wild beast?"

"So is the word."

It wasn't an uncommon thing to catch and release a wild beast for a hunting competition. However, it was peculiar that the emperor dared to catch one for the event when he didn't even enjoy hunting in the first place. No matter how Max thought about it, this wasn't like his father. The man was afraid of wild beasts even when they were locked up in cages. There was no way he would enjoy one running around in an open field.

Max fell into deep thought for a moment.

"Tell Fresia to keep an eye on the emperor," he said, "and ask her to find out if he has any means to control the wild beast—either with tools or medicines."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The emperor will stop paying attention to me as long as Max proves his claims true.

An ominous feeling overcame Max as he recalled what Jubelian had said earlier.

He clenched his fists.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DILIGENCE



I pointed to a part of my draft sitting on the table.

"If possible, I would like you to make this part exactly as described," I requested.

The seamstress from Lily Muge replied with a smile. "An excellent choice, Lady Floyen. I can already see the dress flattering you very well."

I had delayed the visit with the seamstress by a week because of my father and Max's abrupt visit. However, it worked out for me somehow because I needed time to think about the dress. There was about a month and a half left until the coming-of-age ceremony, so I still had plenty of time.

The seamstress took my draft.

"Thank you for trusting us to make your dress again," she said excitedly. "We'll do our best."

"Of course."

I sighed once she left. I had taken care of most of the things required for my coming-of-age ceremony... but it bothered me that it had been about a week since I had last seen Max. Dad had been busy as of late as well. All he had been doing was saying hello to me in the mornings and wishing me a good night before bed.

In any case, I was able to embroider handkerchiefs for them during my time alone. After much trial and error, they were finally finished. I smiled proudly at the results of my labor. I had embroidered a dragon, the symbol of the royal family, onto one handkerchief. On the one for my dad, I had embroidered a lily

and a sword, the symbols of our family. In my eyes, they were adequate, and I hoped that the recipients of my gifts would appreciate them as well.

I sighed as I looked at my fingers. I didn't expect them to get this bad... Since I was an amateur, I pricked myself with the needle many times while sewing the patterns. For a moment, I observed the scars before smiling. They didn't matter to me because my efforts proved fruitful. I carefully placed the fabric in my desk drawer before applying some ointment from Allen onto my fingers.

The hunting competition was just around the corner. Nobles ranked equal to or higher than a count were obliged to participate in the event, meaning that each family would have selected adequate participants. I heard that Geraldine and a few other knights were selected from our family. If my dad participated despite being the only transcendent being in the empire, no one else would have had a chance, so he was unfortunately banned from participating.

It was a bit disappointing because I was interested in the reward. The emperor was offering the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess. It was one of the empire's treasures, and the people were excited about it because it was a necklace made out of a rare mineral that only existed deep underground. Many people participated for their lady's honor and won prizes for them. I wondered who would take the honor for a moment. Then, I quickly concluded that it wouldn't be my family.

Although I treated the knights of our household like people who received wages without much effort, they were renowned for their swordsmanship. I was confident they could win the competition, but Dad had put them under strict orders to lay low likely because of the warning from Max.

"Don't do anything that would pique the emperor's interest," I heard my father say the other day.

For that reason, the knights were probably going to aim for second or third place. They were looking a little down these past few days...

I was thinking of what I could do for them when Merilyn called out to me.

"My lady, there's a guest for you," she announced.

Was it Max? At the sudden news, I rushed to the mirror to check my

appearance. It was acceptable, so I calmed my quivering heart and opened the door. However, all I found before me was Merilyn. Once again, I wondered where Max was since he promised to visit me in a week.

Suppressing my disappointment, I asked, "Who's the guest?"

Merilyn had a troubled expression as she answered me.

"Oh... Lord Elios is visiting," she murmured.

He was an unwelcome guest. Still, it was my duty to welcome him in the absence of my father.

"All right," I sighed, following Merilyn to the drawing room.

* * *

THE SWORD's trajectory had been straight at first, but it suddenly twisted, drawing a curve. Gritting his teeth, Max barely managed to fend off the attack. His master was disgustingly strong, but...

At first, he hadn't been able to follow the swift blade's movements, but now he could make them out. Meeting his master's blade, Max attempted a counterattack. It felt like he wasn't far from achieving transcendence, and once he realized he could protect Jubelian from danger and receive his master's approval soon, the corners of his lips rose.

At that moment, however, an eerie voice came from behind him.

"I told you to remain vigilant."

Max's face crumpled.

Damn it!

When would he be able to catch up to him?

* * *

I GLARED at Lord Elios as he sipped his tea in front of me.

"So, that's why you've come to see me?" I demanded.

He gracefully set down his teacup before answering my question. "Oh? I thought I would be praised for coming to see you, but judging by your expression... Hmm, interesting. I'm sure I resolved this issue without harming your precious people."

"Just be grateful that I didn't claim compensation for the persecution of our residents," I spat, irritated. "The criminals escaped your estate due to your negligence."

I expected him to be offended by my comment, but he just smiled at me as if he had been waiting for my criticism.

"Oh no, it looks like I'll have to pay compensation for the damages, then."

"There's no need—" I began, wanting to end this discussion as soon as possible, but he cut me off.

"Because you're so angry, I see that I have no choice but to offer the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess to you."

My eyes widened at his serious tone. What he had just said was...

Aghast, I asked, "Are you proposing to me?"

I was hoping he was joking. However, he slowly nodded.

Saying that he was going to give me the winning prize in the hunting competition meant that he would make a public confession to me in front of all the nobles. A conversation like this would usually be exchanged between lovers who would soon get married. I couldn't believe that this man, who I had only known for a few days, was saying something like this.

"Lord Elios, we've only met a few times. How could you suddenly say to me something only committed lovers discuss with each other? Frankly, I find this absurd."

Once I pointed out the ludicrous nature of the situation, a chuckle escaped his lips. He gracefully placed his teacup down.

"Unbeknownst to you, I've been watching you all along, Lady Floyen," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I nourish an unrequited love for you?"

His shocking words prompted me to recall the first time I had met him.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" he had said. "I never imagined that an opportunity like this would come to me."

At the time, I simply thought that he was interested in playing cards with me, but maybe I was wrong. Was he saying that he had been interested in me even before then?

Lord Elios was an attractive gentleman. I couldn't believe someone like him was interested in me. My eyes trembled, but I forced myself to keep my gaze focused on him. Lifting his teacup, he took a small sip. Once he met my eyes, he smiled brightly.

"If you could, please refrain from looking at me like that," he said. "My heart might jump out of my chest at any second."

I continued to study his expression regardless. His eyes were relaxed and his smile was sly. His claim about unrequited love wasn't convincing at all.

"You must be joking," I said sternly.

The radiance soon faded from his fine features. His turquoise eyes, which I had always thought carried a warm light, grew dark.

"I'm serious."

His tone had completely changed, and I involuntarily flinched a little. Unperturbed by my reaction, Lord Elios grinned as he put down his teacup.

"Not too long ago, I had looked down on your disrespectful conduct. After all, I am the son of a duke, just as you are the daughter of one."

Furrowing my brow, I attempted to counterattack. "In the end, this was your true intent—"

However, he cut me off. "Nonetheless, you kept changing for the better, and I couldn't help but notice it. At some point, I realized that I was smiling every time I saw or thought of you."

Unsure of how to react to his strange confession, I lowered my eyes.

"Jubelian," he continued, "I believe that I would be an excellent candidate for a marriage partner."

He was one of the most beloved men in high society, not to mention the prime minister's successor. It was an undeniable fact that he would be the bachelor to marry throughout this empire, but I still had Max.

"I'm sorry, Lord Elios. Unfortunately, I'm not interested in you."

I refused resolutely. Even so, he spoke confidently, devoid of any disappointment. "I understand. This is why I want to take the time to show you my strengths."

I declined once again. "There's no need for that."

However, he put on a charming smile. "There's no use. I've already made up my mind."

Speechless, I bit my lip.

Having finished his tea, he rose from his chair.

"I'll see you at the hunting competition then, my love."

After he left, I stared blankly into space for a moment. Then, recalling what had just happened, I sighed. Why was he so bent on winning my heart? I had absolutely no intention of accepting his confession.

However, there was still a chance he would make a public one. Just the thought of having to reject him while being the center of attention amidst all the nobles throughout the empire terrified me. I would become a hot topic for gossip amongst those in high society, but I was also worried about how Max would react. In any case, I was determined to stop Lord Elios from winning the competition.

With this pledge, I decided to go back to my room.

Just then, Merilyn called out to me.

"Lady Floyen, there's another guest here to see you," she announced.

Confused, I rose from my chair with a frown. How could someone who had just left come back so fast? It almost seemed like he was just using me for his

own amusement. Gritting my teeth, I shoved the door open.

Then, I flinched.

"Jubelian?"

Lord Elios wasn't the one before me. It was Max, and he wore a puzzled expression.

"Oh, hello, Max," I greeted, quickly putting on a smile. "Please, come in."

He was quick to realize something was wrong. "You seemed somewhat angry just now... Did something happen?"

"Oh, no. Nothing happened," I answered, giving him a white lie.

"Come on, what happened? Tell me what's wrong, Jubelian."

He was a persistent one. For a moment, I thought of telling him the truth. Then I remembered what Lord Elios had said.

"Jubelian, I believe that I would be an excellent candidate for a marriage partner."

If I told this to Max, he would be extremely displeased. I didn't want to hurt his feelings when I hadn't seen him for a long time, so I said, "Well... It's because I haven't seen you in so long."

At that, he enveloped me in a tight hug.

"I missed you, too," he said.

I snuggled into his embrace, burying my head into his chest. As if I was being protected by him, his muscular arms and broad shoulders made me feel at ease. It had only been a week, yet I had missed this feeling dearly.

He brushed his fingers through my hair.

"It seemed like someone had just been here," he noted with a soft voice.

Uh-oh! I had been too occupied with my thoughts to clean up the tea set. I quickly came up with an excuse to avoid mentioning Lord Elios. "Ah, I was talking to my seamstress about a dress..."

He studied me with narrowed eyes before lifting me into his arms.

"Let's go to your room," he suggested. "We'll talk there."

Embarrassed that I was being held bridal style, I thought about asking him to drop me. However, the biggest problem was him inquiring about the visitor I just had, so I meekly stayed put as he carried me upstairs.

* * *

MAX SWUNG his sword without stopping. However, his master swiftly avoided the strikes, even making counterattacks in response. He didn't show any sign of exhaustion.

Max wondered if he would become like his master once he was a transcendent being as he struggled to discern his master's movements. Rushing toward him, his master's sharp blade suddenly stopped once it reached his neck.

"That's all for today," Regis said, lowering his sword. "Go see Jubelian."

Max was only surprised at the unexpected permission to visit her for a moment because he quickly began to suspect that it could be a trap.

"What's making you so generous today?" he demanded.

His master wrinkled his brow. "Don't jump to conclusions. It's not because I think you deserve anything, but because Jubelian wants to see you."

Max felt his heart flutter. She missed him so much that his master was permitting him to go see her? A smile began to grow upon his lips.

Wham!

Something suddenly impacted the back of his head and Max turned to his master, his face twisted in pain. "Ow! What was that about?"

"Get stronger if you want to know," his master taunted, smirking.

He was playing cheap and dirty. Max inwardly insulted his master, swearing that he must grow stronger than him.

"I won't let you live if you do anything to my daughter today," Regis warned. Then, he disappeared into thin air.

Did that mean he wouldn't be at the mansion? Max had felt insulted at first, but now he was strangely excited.

* * *

AFTER CHANGING INTO CLEAN CLOTHES, Max headed to the Floyen mansion, but he realized something as he grew closer to the estate. He frowned. A carriage?

His mood grew foul the moment he spotted the Elios household seal. It was a rose surrounded by thorns. Reminded of the hypocritical duchy that claimed to be righteous, Max cursed. That damn fox. What did he want from Jubelian this time? Murderous thoughts slowly engulfed him, but he eventually managed to regain his sanity.

They should have been in the drawing-room. With that in mind, Max quickly headed to the side of the building where the window to the drawing-room was located. He peered in and saw Jubelian and Frederich having tea.

"Because you're so angry, I have no choice but to offer the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess to you," Frederich said, suggesting a confession.

Max gritted his teeth. The man must have had a death wish.

"Lord Elios, we've only met a few times. How could you suddenly say to me something only committed lovers discuss with each other? Frankly, I find this absurd."

Max nodded in agreement.

She's right. I'm her lover, he silently groused. How dare he talk nonsense like that...

The crown prince began to brainstorm ideas on how to slaughter the nobleman upon hearing the flirtatious words that followed. Fortunately, Jubelian refused the sweet talk without hesitation.

"I'm sorry, Lord Elios. Unfortunately, I am not interested in you."

Max felt his mood improve; he was proud that she was so resolute in her decision. Catching glimpses of his precious lover, Max smiled.

"I understand. This is why I want to take the time to show my strengths."

"There is no need."

"There's no use. I've already made up my mind."

Displeased by his continued efforts despite her refusal, Jubelian was now frowning, but even her exasperated face looked lovely in Max's eyes. The problem, however, was that he wasn't the only one who found her charming.

"I'll see you at the hunting competition then, my love."

Max's sense of reasoning evaporated once he heard those last words. 'My love'? What an utter bastard. He sent Frederich a death glare as he left the drawing room.

Then, he turned his attention to Jubelian and inhaled sharply. She was sighing deeply, anguish etched on her face. Why did she look so troubled? Could she have been swayed by his words?

Max came to a decision: *Frederich, you won't be able to confess because I'm going to win the hunting contest.*

Frederich soon left the mansion looking pleased. Max watched as the nobleman strode elegantly to his carriage. Once he was out of sight, Max headed to the entrance of the Floyen mansion.

"Oh, what a surprise to see you here!"

Perhaps it was because of Frederich's visit, but the maid seemed slightly bewildered as she greeted Max. Realizing this, he was now thoroughly irritated. However, he knew he would receive a scolding from Jubelian if he vented his anger out on the maid.

"Take me to your lady," he instructed.

Once he reached the door to the drawing room, he swallowed nervously. Not only had he witnessed what had happened, but it had also been a while since they had last met. He was excited and nervous at the same time.

She would be glad to see him, Max thought, anticipating her arrival. He was different from that fox.

"Lady Floyen, there's another guest here to see you," the maid announced.

Afterward, the door opened, and Max quickly scanned Jubelian's expression. However, she didn't welcome him as he had expected. She seemed rather down, and Max felt his heart shatter.

How come? He was once again reminded of the anguished expression on her face. Was she truly swayed by his words?

"Oh, hello, Max." She greeted him with a smile. "Please, come in."

Her voice was as sweet as usual, so Max felt his mood improve again. However, such a feeling only lasted for a moment. Her initial reaction continued to bother him, and the jealous child inside him wanted an explanation.

"You seemed somewhat angry just now... Did something happen?" he asked carefully.

"N-No? Nothing happened."

She was feigning ignorance.

Suppressing the rising anxiety within him, he asked again. "Come on, what happened? Tell me what's wrong, Jubelian."

There was a moment of hesitation before she blushed. "Well... It's because I haven't seen you for so long," she said.

Max knew she was lying to avoid a complicated conversation. Nevertheless, her charming expression made him forgive everything. He quickly took her into his arms, and his crimson eyes soon lit up.

Now that it had come to this, he had no choice but to win the hunting competition.

* * *

HOLDING ME IN HIS ARMS, he plopped down onto the couch once we entered my room. We were a little too close for comfort, so I tried to get out of his arms, but it was no use since he only hugged me tighter.

"What's wrong?" he whispered in my ear. "You don't like this?"

"That... That's not it..."

His fingers slowly climbed up my back, gently caressing the back of my neck, and I shivered. It would have been fine if it ended there, but the heat from the tips of his fingers ignited a fire in my body. I felt my face grow red. Embarrassed, I tried to push him away by his chest.

"Max, don't—" I began. However, he grabbed me by the wrists.

"What happened to your hands?" he asked.

His question reminded me of an important thing I had forgotten about.

"Oh, I finished embroidering the handkerchief for you!" I exclaimed.

"Your fingers became like this because of the embroidery?"

He sighed. I examined my hands, and they were covered in small wounds from constantly pricking myself with the needle. I was somewhat self-conscious of the wounds because they served as proof of my insufficient sewing skills.

I kept my mouth shut. He brought his lips close to my fingers.

"If I had known you were going to get hurt like this, I wouldn't have asked you for the embroidery," he said.

It was strange. Was he feeling sorry for something as small as this? Suppressing a smile, I looked at him. Unlike before, he looked apologetic, as if he was blaming himself for what happened to my hands.

"Don't worry about it," I consoled him. "I did it because I wanted to."

Once I finished speaking, Max kissed me slowly. I accepted his gentle gesture for a moment, but then his kiss suddenly turned passionate, bringing me into a swirling storm. Without realizing it, I was gasping softly as I struggled to accept him. Not long after, he pulled away. His relaxed eyes met mine before he lowered his head and kissed my neck.

"Max, that's my—"

I was slightly taken aback by how his lips were on my neck. Then, I felt pain; he was sucking my skin and digging his sharp fangs into me.

Startled by the unfamiliar sensation, I called out to him. "Max, wait a minute

—"

However, a soft sigh suddenly escaped me. The pain had turned into pleasure, and I trembled from the foreign experience. He started licking my neck and I continued to quiver at the peculiar feeling—a mix of pain and a tickling sensation. He looked up and grinned.

"You're beautiful."

I stared blankly at his handsome face for a moment. Then, I realized what had happened and pushed him away.

"Max, just now...!"

I was going to yell at him for what he had done to me and educate him on how this was an inappropriate act, but then he gave me a light kiss on the lips.

"What kind of embroidery did you sew onto the handkerchief?" he asked.

I shot him a sullen look for interrupting me, but he hugged me to distract me again. "I love you, Jubelian."

In the end, I couldn't get mad at him. I had no choice but to pat him on the head instead.

* * *

TAKING in how she caressed his hair, he smiled slightly. He was glad that she didn't get upset. At first, Max was just trying to appease his impatience by burying his face into her porcelain neck to relish in her fragrant scent. He had no other intention. However, the moment he saw her unblemished skin, a barbaric impulse arose from within him. He wanted to leave his mark on her skin so that others wouldn't dare to approach her.

He hadn't planned on this from the beginning, so he had tried to stop his assault-like behavior. However, as the bruise grew more prominent on her pale skin, like a blossoming flower, he couldn't stop. Her tearful eyes and soft sighs didn't help, either.

As he dug his teeth into her, Max became anxious. What if she ended up changing her mind and saying goodbye to him? He was afraid that someone

other than him would see her like this.

If he became one with her now, would this intense longing for her go away? His whole body was aflame with his desire for her, but after looking into her naïve eyes, Max had no choice but to calm himself down. She wasn't ready yet. He was on the verge of going mad from impatience and frustration but he made a promise to himself.

"I love you, Jubelian," he confessed.

Even if it meant he would be in pain for now, he would wait until the woman he loved was ready. Until then, he would hide his debased desires and feign innocence.

Pulling Max by his hair, Jubelian began to complain. "If you do that again without notice, I'll kick you out. Do you understand?"

Even her whining sounded cute. Max laughed for a moment. Then, his crimson eyes lit up.

Well, that wouldn't matter because he would propose to her after her coming-of-age ceremony. Until then, Max pledged to remain patient about the bothersome flies surrounding his lover.

He lightly caressed her cheek.

* * *

AFTER MAX LEFT, I examined my neck in the mirror. It was ridiculous; I had a huge bruise on one side of it now. I scowled unconsciously. He acted like a vampire and the marks he left behind were far too clear. It was inconsiderate on his part since now I had to cover my neck even at home. I sighed as I looked for a piece of cloth I could use.

Would this do? I covered the bruise with a small scarf. I had just finished when I heard someone call out to me.

"Jubelian, it's me."

It was Geraldine. I opened my door, and he greeted me with a displeased look.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

Although I deemed him a good-for-nothing, Geraldine was a skilled knight and, frankly, a bit of a show-off. It was only natural for him to be dissatisfied with the situation he was in. After all, he didn't know Max's identity or the other important factors contributing to my father's order to keep a low profile at the hunting competition.

"Actually," I added, "I have a favor to ask you, Dean."

He sighed. "What is it?"

"About the hunting contest—" I began, and he let out another sigh.

"I already know. I'll stay out of the public eye, so don't worry too much."

"No, not that. Are you aware that Lord Elios visited earlier?"

"Yes."

"The thing is, he was arguing with me and saying that he would win first place in the competition."

I made it sound like he made a declaration against my family, but that wasn't what had happened. All he did was give me a simple proposal, but I bent the truth for my own purposes. Given Geraldine's personality, I knew exactly how he would react.

As expected, his expression conveyed his displeasure once I finished speaking.
"Did he really say that?"

"Yes," I affirmed. "He told me he was going to take first place and that I should cheer for him."

"Are you telling me the truth?" Geraldine asked, his eyes full of doubt.

I deliberately adopted a disappointed look. "Yes, I am."

His face contorted with rage. "What the hell does he know? All he's held throughout his whole life would be some books! How dare he look down on the Floyen household? Our knights are renowned as the most skilled swordsmen in this empire!"

I took Geraldine's hands. "Dean, I'm heartbroken. I feel like my family's being

looked down upon because I'm representing my house as a woman..."

"What are you talking about?! Such a thing doesn't matter! You're still His Grace's only heir! I won't let anyone look down on you!"

"It's a shame that our knights might be looked down on because of me..."

I trailed off on purpose. Geraldine held my hands tightly. "Don't worry. Even if we can't get first place, I'll shut that Elios guy up."

At his reassurance, I grinned. "Thank you, Dean."

Geraldine smiled back. Then, he furrowed his brows. "By the way, why are you covering your neck? Did something happen?"

"Oh, this is just... I have a bit of a sore throat," I lied. "I think I caught a cold."

Quickly shaking me away, Geraldine staggered back. "Why are you only saying that now?! I could've caught it, too!"

I knew he cared about himself a lot, but I didn't know it was to this extent.

"Oh, I can't let this go. I'll go visit Allen," he said.

Listening to his selfish jabbering, I sighed. Could I really trust him to carry out my plans?

CHAPTER EIGHT

HUNTING COMPETITION



READING THE REPORT HE RECEIVED FROM HIS SUBORDINATE, COUNT PYREX GRINNED SLYLY. This would be an opportunity to make up for his mistake.

With only loyalty and mediocre swordsmanship, Count Pyrex had risen to the rank of the captain of the emperor's bodyguards. Although he didn't possess exceptional skills like Duke Floyen nor Marquis Hessen's shrewdness, the count believed he was trusted by the emperor.

"For protecting me through the war, I appoint you as the captain of my bodyguards."

It was only through persistence that Count Pyrex had been promoted to his lofty status. Thus, he had lived contentedly until now in his place as the third-strongest swordsman in the empire.

Nonetheless, he had failed to link the princess with the king of Lagon. This led him to a crisis where the emperor now treated him coldly. To make matters worse, the eldest son of Marquis Hessen—second to Duke Floyen in swordsmanship—had started frequenting the royal palace.

His Majesty must be aware that I'm more useful than that brat, Count Pyrex seethed silently as he hastily headed toward the emperor's study.

Once there, he said, "I am here to speak to His Majesty."

The grand chamberlain refused. "His Majesty is having an audience with someone else right now. Another time may be better—"

"Are you referring to the eldest son of Marquis Hessen?"

The grand chamberlain remained silent. Count Pyrex's lips twisted into a frown. Normally, he would have left, but at the moment, he had the key to the emperor's heart.

"This is an important matter," he insisted, "so please let His Majesty know."

The grand chamberlain decided to acquiesce.

"Your Majesty, the captain of your bodyguards, Count Pyrex, requests an audience," he announced.

There was a moment of silence before the emperor replied from inside. "Let him in."

Once he entered the office, Count Pyrex spotted Mikhail standing in front of the emperor. The count gritted his teeth. Cheeky bastard.

"Count Pyrex. What brings you here?"

Noticing the emperor's gaze upon him, the count knelt on one knee and bowed his head.

"Your Majesty, I have captured it as you have ordered."

The emperor furrowed his brow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Count Pyrex smirked. "The beast called the dire wolf, Your Majesty."

The emperor and Mikhail had no choice but to cast looks of amazement upon him.

It had been part of Mikhail's plan to slowly push Count Pyrex out of his place as the captain of the emperor's bodyguards. The young man believed that the emperor would place more trust in him this way, and as planned, the emperor decided to hold a hunting competition to improve Mikhail's reputation. He also received an agreement for using the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess as the winning prize for the contest. Despite all these efforts, however, the emperor's gaze was now fixed on Count Pyrex.

Mikhail scowled. Did the count really catch the beast? Such creatures had existed since ancient times. Since their power could easily destroy a village, they were once called the devil's messengers. Many were captured or killed during the Age of Magic. The few that remained had disappeared, and their

existence was now held in doubt.

"Count Pyrex. You have indeed captured the beast?" the emperor questioned.

It was only natural for him to be surprised. A dire wolf was known to possess an intermediate level of power among the magical beasts. Several swordsmen who knew how to use mana would need to cooperate to defeat it. In truth, however, Count Pyrex hadn't captured the beast on his own. This dire wolf was to be auctioned off in the underground network. Nevertheless, the truth didn't matter to him.

"Yes, I have," the count lied.

Trembling, the emperor roared, "Have you gone mad? What if that thing attacks me?!"

Despite the sudden shouting, Count Pyrex didn't lower his head. Instead, he smiled and said, "Do not worry, Your Majesty. I know a way to control the beast."

Eyes wide, the emperor gulped. As long as there was a way to control it, there were many uses for a powerful beast like a dire wolf.

"And what might that be?" he asked urgently.

Glancing at Mikhail, Count Pyrex said, "I would like to keep this confidential. It would be difficult to speak of it with an outsider present."

Seething, Mikhail glared at the count. How dare someone like him... A mere dog of the emperor...

"Sir Mikhail, you may go," the emperor ordered. "You'll need plenty of rest to win the hunting competition, anyway."

Mikhail's blood boiled, but he had expected this to happen. He calmed himself.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he answered.

As he left, however, his eyes pierced vicious daggers into Count Pyrex.

He needed to find a way to control a dire wolf. He thought about who might know such information and clenched his fists once he came to an answer. Yes,

even though that man spoke a lot of nonsense, he was educated in many things...

Once he stepped out of the main gate to the royal palace, Mikhail got onto his carriage. He turned to his coachman and said, "Take me to Viscount Droil's mansion."

* * *

INFORMATION TENDED TO CHANGE RAPIDLY, and for Fresia, it was necessary to review it whenever possible. She frowned slightly as she read over a piece of important intel.

A beast, huh... Trying to put such a dangerous thing up for auction... People were crazy.

Then, she recalled the method of hunting a dire wolf: there was a certain flower that was harmless to humans but poisonous to dire wolves. She tried to recall the name of the flower before shaking her head. No, even that couldn't completely control the beast... There was no reason to take such a risk.

Fresia decided to let go of the information about the beast, and she was about to discard it when...

"Fresia."

She turned her head to the voice that called her from behind.

"My lord, when did you arrive?" she asked.

Max frowned slightly as if she had asked an obvious question. "Just now."

"Oh, I see." Fresia smiled awkwardly, realizing she had asked something unimportant.

"What is that?"

"Ah, these are bits of intel that I've decided to discard. Within them, there was something about a dire wolf being auctioned in the underground network, but apparently, the beast was already sold. If you're interested, Your Highness, I'm willing to inquire about the owner of the magical beast," she offered.

However, Max shook his head, apathetic. "No, it's fine. Such dangerous beasts are difficult to control. They're a headache."

Fresia smiled. Yes, there was no need to be greedy for something that couldn't be achieved.

"By the way, how is the other task going?" Max asked.

"Alas, the emperor often summons Sir Mikhail to the royal study. However, no suspicious movements have been detected from either of them."

Max thought of the faces of the two men he despised for a moment. Then, he clenched his fists. It wasn't a problem. Even if they tried to do something, they wouldn't be suitable opponents for either him or his master. Recalling his master's statement that he would be by Jubelian's side throughout the hunting contest, Max opened his mouth to speak. "What about the other intel I've asked you to look into?"

"I've been informed that Lord Elios is hiding his swordsmanship skills. Apparently, he's quite an outstanding swordsman, and a mana user at that..." Fresia trailed off once she noticed the murderous expression building on her lord's face, quickly changing tack. "Of course, he would be no match for you, Your Highness, and I believe that in the hunting competition in four days, the victory will be yours."

"It better be," he said. As if his mood had improved, he was now nodding.

Fresia sighed. It was so difficult to curry favor with him. How did Lady Floyen get along so well with him?

While she was admiring Jubelian's mysterious powers, Max continued. "And there's one more thing you need to do," he said, tone serious.

Fresia swallowed nervously before lowering her head. "Whatever it is, I will endeavor to serve you to the best of my abilities."

"Jubelian will have her coming-of-age ceremony soon," he began. "I am unsure what to give her as a present."

"I'm sorry?" Fresia asked, taken aback. Then, she realized what her lord meant. "Ah, I see. I'll look into her preferences and come up with the best gift

for her."

A smile finally replaced Max's disgruntled expression. "She liked the gift you chose last time, so I'm trusting you again."

Fresia let out a small sigh. She didn't know how she came to be in charge of Lady Floyen's gifts.

* * *

A PUFF of smoke escaped Radian's lips as he smirked. "A magical beast? How would I know how to control something like that?"

Mikhail's face crumpled. He shouldn't have had any expectations for this guy. This guy was pathetic.

Just as Mikhail was about to get up and leave, however, Radian held him back. "I can't tell you anything about the beast, but I have heard rumors about Lady Floyen."

Mikhail sat back down. Glaring at his cousin, he demanded, "What rumors?"

Flicking the ashes of his cigarette onto his ashtray, Radian met Mikhail's eyes. "Fredrich Lionel Elios, the socialite, has his eyes on the lady!"

Upon hearing those words, Mikhail recalled Frederich's true face and frowned.

"I don't understand," Frederich had said. *"It's pitiful that someone so accomplished like you can't shake off a stupid woman just because of her status."*

Always smiling, the man pretended to be a gentleman on the outside. On the inside, however, he was cold, and blue blood ran through his veins. Frederich had once looked down on Jubelian for devaluing the Floyen household.

"It can't be," Mikhail decided.

Radian took a puff from his cigarette before spitting it out. The musty smell reached Mikhail's face, and he frowned. Then, Radian rubbed the cigarette on the ashtray, putting the embers out.

"My dear cousin, I don't know why you're not believing me... but unfortunately, I can't be wrong about what I just said."

Mikhail was bewildered. "What?"

Looking into his eyes, Radian said, "The noble Lord Elios said to me that he would be the one to give the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess to Lady Floyen by winning the hunting competition. He said he would kill me if I tried to approach her."

Mikhail's eyes widened at the unbelievable tale. Soon, a vicious energy settled in his amethyst eyes. Win? There was nothing that could back that guy up...

Mikhail's expression twisted and Radian snickered. "Surely you won't give her up just because Elios is of higher status?"

As soon as his cousin finished speaking, Mikhail gritted his teeth. "Give her up? Where did you learn to speak nonsense like that?"

His eyes burned with ferocity.

Frederich Lionel Elios, you will never win the hunting competition or take Jubelian away from me, he pledged. Not only that...

The murderous expression soon left Mikhail's face.

Radian, watching all the while, smirked. He would get to see something interesting during the hunting competition, it seemed.

* * *

IT WAS the day before the hunting competition.

"This is the outfit and the hat that you'll be wearing tomorrow, my lady. Please check if they're to your taste."

The outfit Merilyn had prepared looked appropriate for outdoor wear. Since I would be outside for a long time, I told her to prioritize comfort over style. The cape also covered my neck, which meant I didn't need to find an extra accessory to conceal the mark on it. Satisfied, I commended her. "Excellent."

Merilyn smiled and nodded. "I will keep it stored for tomorrow, then."

"Sure. Thank you."

Once she left, I collapsed onto my bed. I would be with my dad during the hunting competition, so I didn't think anything would happen to me. However, the problem was...

I frowned as I recalled how this event was described in the original story. After being commended for getting rid of the beast that suddenly appeared and tried to attack Bea, Mikhail won with an overwhelming score. I knew both the weakness of the beast and the identity of the one who would release it in the field. However, there was no way he would do such a thing now. The villain of the original novel was now my lover.

Thinking about his handsome face for a moment, I was suddenly engulfed by anxious thoughts. Everything had turned out differently from the original story, so I couldn't really pinpoint what was going to happen. Ominous feelings began to creep in, and I was worried that something might happen to Bea.

Just then, Max called from outside the door. "Jubelian."

Speak of the devil... Sighing, I got up.

As soon as I opened the door, he hugged me. "I missed you," he said. He was a lot bigger than me yet he was putting most of his weight onto me. Honestly, I felt a little burdened. Day by day, I felt more like I was spoiling him with my affection.

In any case, the hunting competition didn't leave my mind. Although she pretended to be fine, I was aware that Bea had been concerned about her relationship with her mother.

I would have to ask Max to take care of Bea tomorrow just in case.

* * *

THE DAY before the hunting competition, Max received a carrier pigeon from Fresia. Filled with anticipation and impressed that she had already thought of what to give Jubelian for her coming-of-age ceremony, he smiled proudly. He was in a hurry now that the banquet was only about a month away. All in all,

thanks to his competent subordinate, he had one less thing to worry about now.

He decided to read the note, but upon opening the letter tied to the pigeon's leg, he frowned. Mikhail visited Viscount Droil and has been acting suspiciously since then? It was usually the other way around; Viscount Droil often frequented Marquis Hessen's mansion, but the same couldn't be said for the reverse. If this was true, it would definitely be something to look out for.

That snake. What was he planning? Max cursed inwardly. Then, anxious thoughts bombarded him. Now that he put some more thought into it, all of his master's knights—the skilled ones, at least—would be attending the hunting competition.

No matter how powerful his master was, if the emperor was determined to tamper with the duke's plan to protect his daughter, there was a good chance that he would be swept away. Max was supposed to receive a handkerchief from Jubelian today. He decided to pay a visit to the duke's house to check if Jubelian had plenty of escort knights.

Not only that...

Usually, when a man was to receive a handkerchief from his lover before a grand event like this, he would also receive a kiss that wished him victory. He would have to check if the marks he made were still there. Recalling Jubelian's flushed expression, the corners of his lips began to lift.

Once he entered the mansion and saw her face, he was overcome with relief and emotion. He immediately brought her into his embrace.

At first, he had pulled her into his arms. Then, he gradually began to lean into her. He was certainly... dependent on her now. Max had never even trusted his powerful master, so he couldn't understand how he had come to rely on such a small and delicate woman. He was astonished.

Just then, Jubelian patted him on the back. Sensing her tender and attentive touch, Max smiled, realizing that he depended on her because she supported him. Then, he heard a slap against his back followed by a slight sting. Her soft voice met his ears.

"Max, you're heavy," she said.

He was stunned. He didn't think she would hit him on the back. Did he lean on her too much? He felt ashamed. Straightening his back, he started holding her properly. He had long missed the feeling of her delicate and soft body fitting snugly in his arms.

"How have you been?" he asked.

Jubelian looked up and nodded. "The preparations for the coming-of-age ceremony are going well. The only problem is that... Dad has been returning to the house really late these days."

Max felt guilty. He was the reason behind his master's lateness. Whenever his master would try to go back home in the evening, Max would provoke him into somehow extending the training.

"Is this it? It seems that you've aged," he would say, unaware that what he was doing was making Jubelian lonely.

Regret and guilt washed over him, but Max smiled once he came to a solution.

He was going to do his best to help rid her of her loneliness. Using one hand, he pulled her close by the waist. With the other, he lifted her chin slightly upward.

"I visited to receive the handkerchief from you, as promised. And..." Max trailed off to gaze at her lips. Then, he lowered his head toward them. However, Jubelian's small hand shot out and stopped his mouth from reaching hers.

"No."

He furrowed his brows at her harsh tone. Knowing that it might prove more effective to act pitiful, he sulked. "What's wrong? You don't want to?"

Blushing, Jubelian answered, "It's... It's not that I don't want to. It's because last time..." she trailed off, adjusting the cloth choker covering her neck.

Max smiled mischievously.

"What about last time?" he asked, gently poking the ribbon keeping the choker on her neck.

Jubelian flinched. Her eyes were wider than ever and she glared at him. Nonetheless, she looked nothing short of adorable in his eyes. She looked like a timid little animal on the lookout for its predator.

Max wanted to tease her some more.

"So, what is it?" he pressed.

The sight of her endearing reaction made him want to play with her some more, but what she said next shocked him.

"From now on, you can't kiss me without my permission," she declared.

What? He gazed at her with trembling eyes, but she made herself clear.

"Do you understand?"

* * *

I ASKED FOR CONFIRMATION. However, Max just gaped at me without replying. His handsome face and pitiful gaze almost moved my heart, but I remained adamant in my decision. If he left another embarrassing mark in a place where others could see... I would have to hide from Dad entirely.

A few days ago, I woke up early to see my father off, but as sharp as he was, he eyed the choker on my neck suspiciously.

"Jubelian, why are you covering your neck?" he asked.

I told him that it was because of a sore throat and that I wanted to keep my neck covered. Still, I had been worried ever since then that he might make a great fuss out of my fake illness and call Allen. Also, wearing something around my neck all day was uncomfortable.

I glared at the culprit of my ailment with resentment.

"I wanted a kiss for tomorrow's hunting competition..." he said softly. "Can I really not?"

He was looking at me with puppy eyes now. My heart grew weak. I couldn't do this... Honestly, I didn't want to refrain from kissing someone I liked.

All of a sudden, my mind started making up excuses to let him do as he

pleased, and in the end, I wound up compromising with my desires.

"All right," I acquiesced. "One on the cheek is fine..."

His eyes curved into crescent moons as he donned a captivating smile.

"That's good enough," he whispered.

I swallowed nervously as I approached him. Then, my eyes met his crimson ones. The deep crimson hue was somehow darker than it had been. He was giving me all of his attention, and it made me feel somewhat embarrassed. My face was getting hot. Yes, this was similar to the strange feeling I felt a few days ago when he had initially left the mark on me.

I wanted to crawl into a hole so I told him to close his eyes. He gave me a slight frown but eventually obeyed. My heart fluttered at the sight of him meekly closing his eyes. I was happy that he was listening to me without complaining. I took the chance to study his face while he had his eyes closed. He had long eyelashes and a pointy nose.

How could someone be so handsome? I smiled. On my tiptoes, I resolved to engage only in light acts of affection until I came of age. There wouldn't be any big events after the banquet, anyway, so I didn't have to be worried.

Suppressing the desire to kiss his lips, I approached his cheek. At that moment, Max suddenly opened his eyes.

Huh?

I didn't even have time to protest before he grabbed me by the face and kissed me. I kept my mouth shut, but he gently pressed on my chin, coaxing my mouth to open. Taking the chance, he slid his tongue in, his lust wetting the inside of my mouth.

How was this a kiss for a blessing?! Wasn't it supposed to be a light peck with pure intentions? What we were doing was not pure by any means—it was ridiculous. I groaned inwardly as I berated myself for responding to his kiss. When I opened my eyes, I was immediately met with his. There was a sense of desperation and ferocity within them like that of a hungry beast. I felt as if I had become his prey. My knees grew weak from the peculiar tingling that had begun to resonate throughout my body. I staggered backward, but he held onto

my back firmly.

He bit my lip gently before letting go of me and whispering, "I'm determined to win the contest."

"What? But..."

I wanted to say that we should stay out of the emperor's focus during the competition, but he said, "It would be strange if I didn't do anything, especially since I can't stand losing."

Just then, I remembered his past actions.

Boldly telling me to talk respectfully to him despite my status as the daughter of a duke and treating Baron Gordon the same way by saying, *"I don't know why I have to apologize when you're the one at fault for falling."*

And, lastly, when he had quarreled with Mikhail, the heir of Marquis Hessen, he said... *"It's none of your business."*

There were many other instances, but these were enough to remind me that he was a prideful person. He was right—the emperor was more likely to harbor suspicions if Max wasn't acting competitively. I was completely persuaded by his reasoning.

"More than anything else," he added, "I want to give the winning prize as a gift for your coming-of-age ceremony."

I don't know how I ended up with two men offering to give me the prize. However, it would be a pleasant gesture if Max was the one who gave it to me. I was human, too, and I would be lying if I said I didn't fancy expensive jewelry. The reason why I hated it when Lord Elios offered it to me wasn't just because I didn't like the man, but because he had offered to present it to me publicly in front of everyone as if to show off his courtship.

On the other hand, Max was my lover. I would be pleased with whatever he gave me. The hairpin he bought me when I thought he was a commoner—whatever the price it was—was my treasure. Because he was someone I held dear to my heart, I was elated when he offered to give me something of great value. I pictured him giving the flower to me when we were alone, and if I hid it well, our relationship would remain safe as well!

A national treasure was soon to become mine...!

Unable to restrain a smile, I looked at him. He grinned at me and stroked my cheek with a finger. "

"Are you happy?" he asked. I nodded and he patted me on the cheek again. "Since you like it so much, I'm determined to win the reward for you."

I was happy to hear that for a moment. Then, I remembered what I had been thinking about earlier. This wasn't the time to be giddy. I was about to tell him to protect Bea for me when he suddenly untied the ribbon holding my choker at my neck.

"Max!" I immediately yelled.

Heedless of my shout, he studied my neck.

"It's still there," he said, a satisfied smile on his lips.

I was offended. "

Do you know how much I struggled to hide this?" I asked.

I was about to complain, but he frowned.

"I don't want you to cover this. I want others to know that you have a lover." His eyes turned a shade darker again and I flinched. Stroking the spot on my neck, he continued, "But since you don't like it, I won't do it anywhere visible from now on."

I hadn't said it openly because I was afraid of hurting his feelings, but he had read my mind. "Thank you."

He smiled. "You're welcome."

* * *

MAX LOOKED at the innocent Jubelian and smiled. It didn't matter. He could just do it anywhere once she came of age. As he imagined dying her pale body red, he stroked the mark on her neck.

"Max," she said, "I have a request."

Imagining a happily married life with her, Max nodded happily. "What is it?"

He had already received a kiss and a handkerchief from her as good luck charms for the competition. He was willing to do anything she wanted.

"I want you to take care of Bea tomorrow."

At the unexpected request, Max had no choice but to scowl.

* * *

I DIDN'T THINK he would listen. It looked like things had improved compared to before, but the relationship between Bea and Max still wasn't a close one, likely due to the empress. I had expected this reaction, but it made me uneasy how he just froze up. Was he mad at me?

I was thinking that I may have made an unreasonable request, but then he sighed. Looking into my eyes, he answered, "I'm working on it."

Contrary to his exasperated tone when he would speak of Bea in the past, his calm eyes now contained sincerity.

Thank heavens. Relief washed through me. "Max, I'm actually worried that something might happen to Bea during the hunting contest—"

Before I could finish speaking, he cut me off. "I was planning on having one of my knights escort her."

His brow was slightly furrowed. Still, my heart swelled at his promise.

"Really?"

"Yes. I don't want to let the emperor get what he wants."

Although he was saying this, I could tell that he was more concerned about Bea than wanting to get revenge against the emperor.

"Thank you."

He hugged me again and asked, "By the way, who will be escorting you on that day?"

"Ah, don't worry about me. I decided to watch it with my dad. Besides, not all

of our knights will participate."

He sighed in response to my answer and patted my head. "I see."

He seemed somewhat uneasy, so I smiled to help ease his worries. He was a busy man. I didn't want to cause unnecessary concerns.

"Don't worry. I'm just going to watch as a member of the audience anyway. What could happen?"

"But..."

I stood on my tiptoes and brought my lips close to his. It wasn't a deep kiss like before, but it was enough to surprise him. Eventually, when I thought it was enough, I gently pulled away from him. Then, he pressed his lips firmly against mine, his soft tongue penetrating my mouth.

I had just kissed him, yet he was biting and sucking like someone who had starved for several days. I sighed. I guess he wouldn't worry so much now.

* * *

HAVING TASTED ECSTASY, Max now lusted after her coral lips ceaselessly. Her petite but full lips resembled a red fruit and tasted just as sweet. It was enough to blow away the worries that had been giving him a headache.

Wait... I just... Max realized, his sense of reasoning returning.

He pulled away and looked at Jubelian. Her slightly puffy lips and long wet eyelashes tempted him once more, but he managed to hold onto his rationality. These safety measures were not enough.

Max sighed softly. He then turned to Jubelian, who was looking at him curiously.

"What's wrong?"

Contrary to her fragile appearance, she was a stubborn one. It was clear that she would be disappointed if he did what he wanted and attached an escort to her.

Kissing her on the cheek, Max replied, "You're beautiful."

Flushing, she looked up. Seeing her smile with her eyes, Max felt his face heat up. Her pale hand soon caressed his cheek.

"You're beautiful, too, Max."

He frowned slightly. Before, he hated those words, but now they were tolerable. He supposed that it was a good thing she saw him that way. For a moment, he enjoyed her soft touch before burying his head in her shoulder.

She stroked his hair.

"You're like a little kid," she mumbled softly.

If she knew what he was thinking, would she be able to say that? Drunk on her fragrance, Max mulled over her innocent comment. Then, his eyes lit up. There was nothing he could do about it but attach a secret escort to her. Max furrowed his brow as he wondered who might be a suitable candidate. Soon, the corners of his lips lifted in a smile. Yes, he knew who would do well.

As he thought of just the right person for the job, Jubelian smiled, her eyes making little crescent moons.

"Oh, I'll be giving you the handkerchief now!" she exclaimed.

Max grinned once she handed him the fabric. He could see small mistakes here and there, but even those looked lovely in his eyes. It was just as cute as she was.

Misunderstanding the cause of his smile, Jubelian pouted.

"I know it's not perfect, but you didn't have to laugh at it," she muttered.

It took all Max had to resolve the misconception.

* * *

MEANWHILE, Victor was smiling and full of anticipation at the thought of escorting the lady. He was going to see his angel tomorrow!

Dennis, who was watching him, frowned. "Victor, are you really okay?"

"Of course, I am!"

Victor enjoyed being in the spotlight, so Dennis thought his subordinate would be dissatisfied with being disqualified from the hunting contest. However, he looked giddy instead. Worries clouded Dennis' thoughts. This guy... Had he gone mad from the shock? Although Victor was a good-for-nothing most of the time, Dennis was undeniably worried. After all, he couldn't just disregard all the years they had spent together.

"Victor, be honest with me," he urged. "If you really want to participate in the hunting competition, I can—"

"I'm perfectly fine! I don't want to participate."

Dennis sighed. He was afraid Victor would cause something.

Just then, the window opened. Checking the person who climbed in, Dennis bowed. "Your Highness, welcome back," he greeted.

He was certain that the crown prince had returned from his visit to the Floyen mansion, yet it looked like he was in a foul mood. Did something happen?

The crown prince turned to Victor. "The reason I excluded you from the hunting competition was because there is an important mission you must accomplish."

The smile disappeared from Victor's face.

"M-Mission, Your Highness? What is it?" Victor asked with a tremulous voice.

"It's an escort mission," the crown prince answered quietly. "However, you must not be found out by the person concerned."

Dennis lifted his head to face Max. The crown prince was cold enough to make one think he was made of ice, but now, he looked noticeably anxious and concerned. Dennis hummed thoughtfully. Maybe the crown prince wanted Victor to escort Lady Floyen. It wasn't an unreasonable request for the crown prince to do. The emperor had already discussed Jubelian with him. Moreover, the man seemed to be colluding with the Hessen family.

"Escort my sister Beatrice during the hunting competition," Max said.

Both Victor and Dennis were taken aback by the order.

"But, Your Majesty—"

Cutting off Victor's complaint, Dennis opened his mouth. "Victor is certainly one of Your Highness' most skilled knights. He'll fulfill your orders without fail. Still, it's difficult to understand why you're asking him to escort the princess and not the Handkerchief Lady."

Max smirked and glanced at Victor. Although he looked like that, he had skills comparable to Mikhail's... So, he would be good enough. Despite being irresponsible at times, Victor was a talented swordsman and one of Max's top three subordinates.

"While escorting her, you will have no choice but to protect the Handkerchief Lady as well."

Although cunning, Beatrice was a careless girl. She showed off too much. She sent a public letter and had even made an official visit to the Arlo mansion. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the princess and the lady's friendship was well known throughout high society.

Of course, Max had no intention of blaming her for being sloppy. The fact that Beatrice was close with Jubelian would have reached the emperor's ears anyway. The only thing Max was worried about was Jubelian getting involved in the emperor's schemes. He didn't know what Mikhail and the emperor were planning, but he was sure it had something to do with the princess.

Given that brat's personality, however... she would refrain from hovering around Jubelian for her sake...

Just then, Max was reminded of what Jubelian had said: "I want you to take care of Bea tomorrow."

Max still trembled in anger when he thought of the empress. But apart from her, Beatrice was...

He no longer hated her.

Max turned to address Victor.

"Risk your life to protect the princess and her friends," he instructed.

No matter how dimwitted Victor was, when he heard the mention of the princess' friends, he could still vaguely guess the Handkerchief Lady's identity.

He swallowed dryly.

If the Handkerchief Lady was Lady Floyen, His Highness would not look past this... Victor was engulfed in fear.

"I believe in you," the crown prince said, adding to the knight's guilt. Now, Victor was thoroughly distressed.

* * *

BEATRICE FROWNED. She didn't know what kind of gift she should give Jubelian for her coming-of-age ceremony. Mikhail and the emperor were plotting against her, so should she stay away from Jubelian? She had already decided on staying away from her in the first place, even going so far as to get one of Maximilian's knights to protect her, but still... She couldn't help but feel bitter.

There was no one to protect her... She would have to protect herself. Her mother, the empress, was no longer giving Beatrice any of her attention, and to make matters worse, most of the princess's aides were her mother's people.

There wasn't anyone she could trust, but she didn't despair. It was fine. She would be needed in the emperor and Mikhail's plan. They wouldn't try to get rid of her so soon.

As Beatrice reassured herself, someone interrupted her thoughts.

"Your Royal Ladyship, His Highness the Crown Prince has come to see you."

Beatrice sighed once she heard her maid's voice from outside the door. She suspected that he came to warn her not to get near Jubelian.

As soon as she opened the door, she was greeted by a man in familiar armor. It couldn't be that stupid knight named Victor, right?

He took off his helmet. This time, it was Maximilian in there. His expression was serious, and he spoke in a low tone. "I have something to tell you."

Beatrice nodded. "I know. I won't go near Jubelian during the hunting contest
—"

"No." He looked into her eyes. "Stay close to her."

Why? Beatrice frowned. She couldn't understand why he was saying this.

"I'll send a knight to escort you tomorrow," he continued.

"An escort?"

Max nodded "Yes. The emperor and empress won't find it strange. It would be a ceremonial thing since this is an official event."

Beatrice understood what he was saying and nodded, immediately assuming that the escort wasn't for her but for Jubelian. She had been worried about getting Jubelian involved in this scheme, but she was relieved now that Max had found an escort for her.

She didn't want anything to go wrong, so she would have to explain to her brother what happened with Victor. Whatever the reason, she believed she had done wrong by threatening one of her brother's subordinates. Right as she was about to reveal the truth and apologize to Max, however, he spoke up once more.

"Don't worry. Both of you will be safe."

Beatrice looked up at her brother in disbelief, her eyes trembling. "You've... You've picked an escort for me?"

Maximilian frowned. Turning his head to the side, he spoke in a disgruntled manner, "Don't flatter yourself. This way, it's easier to protect Jubelian." Beatrice tried to counter; she was about to spit out that she already knew, but she was interrupted when Maximilian added, "And Jubelian asked me to take care of you during the event."

Beatrice felt her heart begin to swell. Both of her parents were turning away from her, so she thought she had been left to survive the upcoming crises alone. However, her stepbrother—whom she hated so much—was giving her the unexpected news that he would protect her at Jubelian's request. Beatrice choked up, a small sob leaving her.

She thought she was alone all this time, but she wasn't. The moment she realized this, her eyes began to redden.

Maximilian noticed and took out a handkerchief. "Here," he said.

The prejudice she held against her stepbrother dissipated into thin air once he offered her this unexpected favor.

"Oh, thank you..." she said, but just as she was about to grab the fabric, Maximilian unfolded it. The clumsy embroidery in the shape of a dragon caught her eye.

"What is this? Did a child make it?" Beatrice questioned, disgruntled that her brother was still holding the handkerchief without giving it away.

"This is a gift from Jubelian," Max said with a smirk.

"Oh, I knew it! I can feel her innocence from it!" Beatrice cried, belatedly correcting herself. Nonetheless, Maximilian's expression remained foul. She carefully watched him, hoping he wouldn't tell Jubelian what she said...

"I will win tomorrow."

At his sudden declaration, Beatrice's brow wrinkled slightly. With his eyes still on her, Maximilian smirked. "So, you just sit still and watch. Don't wander off anywhere."

Hey, why was he telling her what to do all of a sudden? Beatrice had been greatly moved just moments ago, yet he had blown everything away with just a few more careless words. Indignant, she clenched her teeth. "Get out of my room. Now!"

Once he left, she groaned. Then, she flopped onto her bed. Her anger soon subsided, and she recalled what Maximilian had said earlier.

"Don't worry. Both of you will be safe."

Beatrice felt a smile begin to grow on her face. Still, she felt relieved... She prayed for the hunting competition to pass by without any major incidents.

* * *

"WHAT IS the state of the beast we'll be using tomorrow?" the emperor asked.

Count Pyrex lifted a brow. "Why don't you take a look, Your Majesty?"

The emperor and the count descended to the cellars. There, they could hear

the beast roar. Normally, the emperor would have fled in fear, but he remained calm this time.

"Looks like it's still healthy," he commented.

Once the emperor drew closer, the huge wolf beast reared back. Glancing at the silvery flower in his hand, the emperor adopted a sinister smile. "It's amazing how something called a 'magical beast' yields before a small flower."

Count Pyrex nodded in response. "I was shocked by this as well, Your Majesty."

The emperor gave the count a suspicious look before shaking his head. Well, it didn't matter where the count got the beast. As far as the emperor was concerned, as long as he had it in his hands and he knew how to control it...

Recalling Mikhail and Beatrice's faces, the emperor grinned. He was looking forward to what would happen tomorrow.

* * *

THE DAY of the hunting competition finally arrived and I was exhausted. Unlike banquets which were usually held at night, this event was held during the day. Because of this, I had to get up early to get ready. Nothing should happen today, though.

Sella and Mary were helping me get ready.

"Lady Floyen, you look stunning! Gentlemen will line up to offer you the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess!" they exclaimed.

Normally, I would have taken those words as the compliments they were, but I didn't want anyone to notice me today. Especially Lord Elios. I didn't want him to win the competition.

I let out a deep sigh of dismay. Merilyn, who was tying a bonnet at my chin, tried to reassure me. "Don't worry, my lady. That gentleman—your lover—will also be able to participate in the hunting contest next year once he becomes a member of the master's family."

I had heard that other families were hiring mercenaries. This wasn't the case

for mine, though. After all, my dad wanted to avoid standing out, and our knights would likely be affronted if we hired mercenaries since they took pride in their swordsmanship.

Merilyn must have thought I was sighing at Max's inability to participate in the hunting competition.

I guess she had even thought about having him come under our family. The crown prince inheriting a duke's name... Just the thought of it made me burst into laughter.

"L-Lady Jubelian?" Merilyn asked, confused by my sudden mirth.

"Thank you," I replied. "That relieved my worries."

She grinned. "I see. I am glad to hear that."

I smiled at her. Then, upon remembering something, I asked, "Oh, Merilyn. Did you get the item I asked you about?"

She shook her head. "The flower you mentioned is a very rare one, my lady."

I sighed. It was something that had a calming effect on magical creatures—there was no way it could be easily obtained.

After a moment of disappointment, I smiled at Merilyn. "Thank you anyway. It wasn't something I really needed. I was looking for it out of curiosity, so don't worry about it too much."

Then, I let out a small sigh. I was looking for it so it could serve as an extra safety measure. However, I figured I could still fare well without it. Besides, there was no way Max would try to do anything with the magical beast now.

With that thought, I managed to smother the anxiety lurking in the depths of my heart. Just then, however, I heard my dad's voice outside the door.

"Jubelian, are you ready?" he asked.

I couldn't believe he had come upstairs for me instead of calling for me from the first floor! I hurriedly got up.

"Yes!" I answered. "I'm on my way out!"

* * *

BY THE TIME Max arrived at the hunting grounds, the participants were lined up and prepared to begin. "It looks like everyone's anxious for this to start."

Dennis nodded. "It's the first one in years." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "And for some, it's an opportunity to crush a family of higher status."

As soon as he finished speaking, the entrance announcements began. "Duke Elios' knights will now enter!"

Max stared at Frederich. The latter was donned in silver armor and standing under his family's banner.

Max scoffed.

The rat.

Lord Elios spoke to his knights with a stern expression. "I believe in your abilities. Everyone, please do your best."

The knights shouted in response. "Victory to our lord!"

The knights of other families watching the scene remained still, their expressions darkening. Their morale must have broken. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that the crown prince's knights were the only ones who still looked confident.

"It seems that Duke Elios' successor is as well-reputed as the rumors proclaim," Dennis noted.

Max clenched his teeth. He turned to his own knights.

"What did I say about defeat on the battlefield?" he snarled. In his black armor, he was reminiscent of the grim reaper, and to make matters worse, he spoke in a frightening tone.

His men gulped nervously.

"Only death will be our defeat!" they roared.

Max smiled. "I pray that you guys won't forget that."

The knights realized that they might die at the crown prince's hand if they lost today. They cried for their survival.

"Don't worry, Your Highness!"

"We'll make sure to win the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess for you!"

"Victory is ours!"

Their voices weren't just filled with spirit. They sounded pretty desperate, too. The other squads and the audience began talking amongst themselves.

"Is it because they have experience on the battlefield? They look more determined than others!"

"I agree!"

Beatrice, who was quietly watching, sighed. Did he have to stick out from the crowd like that?

Just then, a loud voice came from behind her.

"Wow! Everyone looks so handsome!"

Thanks to his exclamation, the majority of the audience turned their heads to where Beatrice was located. She felt her face heat up.

Out of everyone, he had to be her escort. His appearance was decent, but his actions were so frivolous that it made Beatrice regret her decision to ask Maximilian about Jubelian's protection. Would he fulfill his duty as their escort? She fanned herself using her hands to cool off the heat.

"Duke Floyen's knights will now enter!"

Once the trumpet sounded, a flag bearer holding the seal of the Floyen family entered the field. The knights wearing armor engraved with the Floyen family's coat of arms followed the flag bearer. The people marveled.

"Oh, as I expected!"

"They're different from the others."

The men walked uniformly without even a hint of sloppiness. Their organized movements were mesmerizing—a truly befitting representation of the family of the most powerful swordsman in the empire. Once they stopped, a handsome

young man standing at the vanguard held his helmet at his side and gave the knights behind him a sharp look.

"Do not forget about the weight of your blade. Remember who we serve," he told them.

At that, the knights drew their swords in unison.

The leader of the knights, Geraldine, continued, "All of you! Do your best for our master, the great hero of this empire, and our lady! Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

With his sword held high, Geraldine shouted, "For the glory of the Floyen family!"

"For our glory!"

It was a truly spectacular sight to see. The knights gathered in a circle and brought the tips of their shining swords together. Beatrice was amazed, too. As expected from the Floyen household. They were truly inspiring.

Just then, a voice muttered something from behind her.

"What a bunch of bluffs."

Frowning, Beatrice turned and scowled at Victor.

He shrugged. "It's true," he said.

Unlike him, the rest of the spectators were exclaiming as if they had witnessed a scene out of a fairy tale.

Soon, they noted someone on the field and began to roar in excitement.

"Duke Floyen is here!"

His silver hair shimmered in the sunlight. He was an attractive man with a radiant appearance. Next to him was his beautiful girl, Jubelian Floyen. Unimpressed by what she had just seen, she remained expressionless.

"She isn't even a bit amused."

"Well, that's only natural. She must see those great knights every day, right?"

"Either way, she's a lovely lady."

"Agreed. Both of them are dazzling."

Beatrice felt proud even though she wasn't the one receiving the compliments. Of course. Her dear friend was a lovely woman.

Just then, she heard a sigh come from behind her.

"How could a lady be so beautiful? She must be an angel."

Wrinkling her brow, Beatrice turned around again. Could she really trust this idiot? Victor's idiotic smile deepened the princess' distrust.

* * *

I YAWNED while in the carriage and Dad looked at me.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"Oh, no! I'm fine."

He sighed quietly in response to my hurried assertion. "So, is your plan to watch the game with the princess and her friends today?"

"Oh, will that make today uncomfortable for you?" I had decided to stay by my dad's side today for safety purposes, so I asked if it would be awkward for him to sit with my friends.

He simply shook his head. "No. It's just that... your friends might feel uncomfortable."

I smiled at his answer. "You don't know how much my friends adore you, do you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Adore me? I don't understand. I'm not even considered a proper swordsman..."

He frowned as if he truly couldn't comprehend it. I sighed. He didn't realize how accomplished he was. How modest!

A few moments passed and I could see the greenery outside the window.

"Wow, it's so spacious!" I exclaimed.

My father nodded. "It's said that the previous royal family enjoyed hunting."

Perhaps it was because the blood of dragons ran through their veins. After all, those creatures were considered to be at the top of the food chain. I wondered if this was why Max had a talent for swordsmanship. In any case, he had spoken rather boastfully about winning today.

As worries began to fill me, my dad must have noticed, because he said, "Don't worry about the crown prince. No one in this empire can deliver a fatal blow to him except me."

"You're right, Dad," I chuckled.

Things would have been different if Beatrice had awakened as a sorceress. However, she was an ordinary woman right now. Keeping my thoughts to myself, I decided that maybe that was for the best.

In the original story, the catalyst that spurred her powers forward was her utter loneliness and despair. If she needed to endure such hardships to achieve magical knowledge, it was probably better to live without it. I just had to protect her with Max. That would likely suffice.

"I wish that he would just jump over the obstacle before him already," Dad muttered quietly.

I looked at him, surprised. I had heard of many mentors who grew jealous of their students' progression... but it seemed that my dad had a kind heart.

Just then, I felt the carriage come to a halt.

Dad extended a hand to me. "We're here."

I grabbed his hand and took in the scenery as I got off the transport. Outside the amphitheater was a long line of carriages. Barracks dotted the empty fields, and the knight captains of each family held their seals high, ready to enter. Even though the invitation only extended to nobles that ranked higher than a count, there were more than enough in the audience.

I was against hunting for entertainment, so I was dismayed to find that there were so many people. It was incredibly unfortunate that animals had to sacrifice their lives for human entertainment, but in the end, it couldn't be helped. This was a royal order. The only comforting news was that the meat from the animals hunted today would be distributed to those living in the

slums. At least the emperor was thinking of the public.

"Shall we, Jubel?" Dad asked.

I held his hand tightly as we entered the stadium.

"Duke Floyen's knights will now enter!"

At the loud announcement, I turned my head to the field only to see Geraldine enter with a stiff expression. He was extremely conscious of how he was portrayed in front of the people, it seemed, especially around Lord Elios, given what I had told him. All of the knights were moving in unison, but I could tell from their nervous demeanors that they cared very much about how the crowd was viewing them.

"Do not forget about the weight of your blade. Remember who we serve."

Geraldine spoke in a graver tone than usual. I was convinced that the people's attention was making him more pretentious than usual. Afterward, the knights drew their swords in unison and gathered them together in the air, making me inhale sharply at the sight. Why were they doing things they didn't do on a daily basis? I wouldn't have cared if they were people I didn't know. However, the problem was that these knights were mostly good-for-nothings who got paid for sloppy work! They spent their days simply acting as barriers around me whenever I would go out. It was strange to see them pretending to be chivalrous.

"For the glory of the Floyen family!" they yelled, and I couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

Shivers ran down my spine. Unable to tolerate it any longer, I turned away.

"I've told them many times not to stand out..." Dad spoke softly. "I will have to supervise their training myself to discipline them."

I let out a sigh. When I had told Geraldine about Lord Elios, I didn't mean that we should beat him in terms of how charismatic we looked. My cousin was definitely an idiot.

Watching me sigh, Dad took my hand and squeezed it tight.

"Come on, let's go sit down," he suggested.

As we moved to our seats, I scanned my surroundings, locating Bea in her dedicated seat. Glad to have spotted her, I grinned ear to ear. I was exhilarated to reunite with her, but I realized it would appear unsightly to others if I approached her informally.

"Todd, could you ask Her Highness as well as my close acquaintances to join me?" I asked my escort.

He nodded. "Of course, Your Ladyship."

I cringed at his response. It wasn't just Geraldine—all the knights were being ostentatious.

* * *

BEATRICE MET the knight's eyes.

"Join her?" she echoed.

She turned her head slightly and looked toward where Jubelian sat. Wearing a bonnet decorated with flowers and lace, she resembled a porcelain doll. When their eyes met, Beatrice blushed. What a beautiful yet bold lady, being the first to extend the proposal and requesting to sit with her.

Beatrice concealed her excitement.

"Fine," she said. "Lead the way."

With a grin, Todd nodded. "I am honored to be escorting you, Your Highness."

As Beatrice followed the knight, another announcement rang out. "Marquis Hessen's knights will now enter!"

The knights immediately entered the arena. Realizing who was at the front, Beatrice's eyes narrowed. Mikhail... She glared at him. Meanwhile, he looked around the area with a curious gaze before fixing his eyes on her.

She recoiled. Why was he giving her that look?

Just then, someone carefully touched her shoulder.

"Your Highness," came a clear, familiar voice, "is everything okay"

Beatrice turned around to behold the face of the one person she had longed to see. As usual, Jubelian's skin was flawless.

"Oh, it's..."

Beatrice shifted slightly to check Mikhail's movements. Once he turned his back toward her, she frowned. What the hell was he plotting? His eyes were eerie enough to send shivers down her spine.

He said he loved her. She clenched her fists. That was a bunch of bullshit and Beatrice knew it.

"Bea, are you okay?" Jubelian whispered.

Beatrice met her gaze. Then, something suddenly occurred to her. Mikhail probably glared in Beatrice's direction because Jubelian was behind her.

The princess observed the lady watching her with worry in her jewel-bright eyes. The sight of Jubelian concerned for her filled Beatrice with courage.

Don't worry. I won't let that scum approach you, she silently promised.

* * *

OBSERVING the lady adorned in a pale blue dress, Mikhail blushed.

My Jubelian, you are beautiful today as well.

For a moment, he stared blankly at her, but once she began moving, Mikhail frantically looked around to track her. Where was she going? Murderous thoughts began to invade his mind when he lost sight of her, but when he spotted her again, his eyes lit up with relief. Nonetheless, the traces of obsession remained within them.

Once she became his, Mikhail planned to break her legs first so that she couldn't run away from him again.

Reinforcing his delusions, Mikhail turned his attention to the woman next to her. He furrowed his brows. The princess—was she looking at him just now? Upon realizing that Beatrice was watching him with a ferocious gaze, Mikhail smirked. It didn't matter if she was a member of the royal family. She was

nothing but a rude and helpless girl.

Just then, someone soundlessly approached Mikhail.

"My lord, His Majesty is calling for you."

Turning around, Mikhail clenched his fists. Jubelian wouldn't be able to keep playing hard to get once he proposes to her in front of all the nobles today.

A menacing smile spread across his face.

* * *

ALL OF MY friends were here except Bea. My invitations had been delivered in order of proximity to where I was seated, and Bea ended up being the last to be asked. In any case, it worked out, because it was most proper to deliver the last invitation to the person of the highest status. Just like how the final boss of a game appeared at the end of it, nobles were much the same. The etiquette was to show up late if you were of higher status than others so that the group could have some time to talk comfortably amongst themselves.

Full of excitement, Rose whispered, "Thanks to you, I can watch the contest from a special seat, Lady Jubelian!"

I guess one could call it a privilege. A duchy was considered to be the top of the noble class, and our seats were separated from others. Frankly, however, this was a place made to entertain aristocrats, so any seat was bound to be comfortable. In any case, I turned my attention to the central seats where the emperor would sit.

The colorful chairs looked more comfortable than all the other seats in the stadium. There was also a mysterious silver-colored flower that adorned the seats for the royal family. It seemed to be a rare flower that couldn't be easily found even in the capital, but I just saw the decoration as another way to waste money and turned my attention back to Bea. She was standing off in the distance with a pale complexion. Worried about her, I stood up.

"Where are you going?" Dad asked.

I pointed to where Bea was, which wasn't too far away. "I'm going out to

meet my friend halfway."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll be watching, so don't worry."

Feeling reassured, I hurried to Bea.

"Your Highness, is everything okay?" I asked once I reached her.

Instead of answering me, however, she stood stock-still with a hardened expression. Concerned, I repeated my question several times until she responded.

"Oh, it's..." she finally began. "I feel nervous for some reason."

I took her hand. "Don't worry. I'm here."

"Yes," she smiled. "Thank you for saying that."

She followed me back to my seat, and just like that, we safely arrived.

"Welcome, Your Highness."

Everyone bowed formally to Bea. The only one who gave nothing more than a slight nod was my dad because he was equal to the royal family in terms of status. She acknowledged Dad first.

"Thank you for inviting me to join you, Duke Floyen."

Dad glanced at me. Unlike usual, his expression was more relaxed. "I would like to thank you for getting along with my daughter."

Bea beamed brightly in response. With an elegant voice, she said, "I have only recently debuted in high society, and Jubelian has taught me a lot. I hope that we will continue our amicable relationship."

This time, Dad turned to me. From the look in his gaze, I could tell that he was proud of me. My face grew hot, so I avoided looking at his gaze directly, and the center box seats caught my eye again.

I could see the emperor approaching his seat. I furrowed my brows at his entrance while my dad said, "Please, make yourself comfortable."

Bea sat down at his suggestion. I was about to sit down as well, but then I realized something familiar about the flower on the emperor's seat.

A silver flower.

I hadn't made the connection a moment ago, but now I realized its identity. Holding Bea's hand, I abandoned my seat. "Your Highness, could I have a moment with you?"

As if taken aback by my sudden request, Bea blushed before nodding.

* * *

WHEN MIKHAIL ARRIVED at the emperor's seat, the man beamed. A cloak made of marten fur covered his back and shoulders.

"Welcome, Mikhail," he greeted. "How are you feeling today?"

"Thanks to Your Majesty, I feel well-rested," the knight replied politely.

Satisfied, the emperor nodded. "Yes. We'll become family sooner or later. It's only natural that I'm concerned about your well-being."

Mikhail was irritated by the premature assumption yet he didn't show it. He simply bowed his head, feigning appreciation.

"I'm just worried that my lack of skill might prove as an obstacle to your plan, Your Majesty."

"Don't say such things. The only unforeseeable variable is Maximilian since he likes to go on a rampage at times."

The crown prince. Mikhail had heard of the man's excellent swordsmanship many times. The knight couldn't, however, estimate how great it truly was.

Well, even so, the emperor was on his side, so he would be at an advantage. When the wild beasts were initially brought in, the emperor had marked the map where the ones with the highest bounties were located so that Mikhail could win. While the crown prince could do nothing but frantically search the forest, Mikhail would enter knowing precisely where the beasts were located from the start. He smiled.

"Oh, and speaking of wild beasts... It won't be on the map I gave you before," the emperor said out of the blue, shocking Mikhail.

Glaring at him, Mikhail's forehead wrinkled in consternation. However, he made himself relax and resumed smiling. "Do you have a better plan in mind, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"Of course."

If he could, Mikhail wanted to grab the man by his collar and force him to confess what the deal was. Instead, he gathered all the patience he had and asked, "Could I have a hint?"

The emperor turned his head. Pointing with a finger to somewhere further away, he asked, "Do you know where Duke Floyen is seated?"

There was no way Mikhail didn't know. In fact, he was even aware that Jubelian and Beatrice were heading somewhere already. Where were they going? Was she giving her handkerchief to someone else? His thoughts anxiously spun, and a man with a decent appearance flashed in his mind. Since this contest allows mercenaries, it was highly possible that Jubelian's lover—a commoner—had been hired by the duke. Mikhail gritted his teeth.

"The princess is with Regis' daughter. It's perfect," the emperor continued.

A fire erupted within Mikhail once the emperor mentioned Jubelian, but he kept himself carefully controlled. "I'm foolish, and I don't know what you mean, Your Majesty."

The emperor tutted before shooting him a grin. "You'll emerge victorious and fuel Maximilian's feelings for Regis' daughter."

Mikhail's expression hardened.

* * *

STANDING IN THE FIELD, I watched the emperor and Mikhail as they conversed. It was too suspicious to be a coincidence. According to the original plot of the story, Max was supposed to bring the magical beast. Since that situation was totally out of the picture now, I thought this day would end up being relatively uneventful. Unexpectedly, however, there was a silver flower where the emperor was seated, and a flower that could manipulate beasts had been

described as being silver in the text. It matched.

I got Bea's attention.

"Bea, that flower over there." I pointed to the flower sitting on the center box seat. "Do you think you can get it for me?"

She gave me a puzzled look. "What do you want that for?"

How could I explain it to her? Could I say that there might be a magical beast hidden in the field which might be involved in a grand scheme by the emperor and that the silver flower might be a poisonous plant that could paralyze the beast for a while? There was no way she would believe me. And, to make it worse, she could start treating me like I was a weirdo.

I swallowed dryly before saying whatever just came to mind.

"It's just... so pretty," I finished lamely.

Her eyes widened initially. Then, she squinted. Was she upset? Frankly, I understood her. I would think this was an absurd request, too, if I was her. I wet my dry lips as the silence between us stretched.

"I see," she finally said, putting on a bright smile. "You really want that flower."

"Ah... Yeah!" I nodded.

Gently stroking my cheek, she said, "If my dear Jubelian wants it so much, of course I'll bring it for you."

I was relieved when she easily accepted my request. This just served as another testament to how understanding Bea was when it came to her friends.

I was still immersed in such thoughts when she said, "Wait here with Victor. I will be back soon," so I reacted belatedly to her departure.

"Wait, Bea! Wait a minute!" I cried urgently, but she didn't seem to hear me. I watched as she confidently walked to the emperor's seat.

Turning to Sir Victor, I said, "I'm fine, so please go protect Bea."

"I'm sorry? But..."

I took in my surroundings.

"There are so many people here. Nothing could happen!" I insisted. Despite my reassurance, however, Sir Victor still looked perplexed. I pointed to a spot in the audience. "My father is watching me from there, so please don't worry about me."

His face now pale, Sir Victor nodded. "Understood."

He was about to turn his back toward me when I called urgently, "Oh! And... Please let Her Highness know that I would like the flower to be taken without the emperor knowing."

The knight smiled ear to ear. "Understood, Lady Floyen. Please stay put!"

For a moment, I watched as he chased after Bea. Then, I turned my attention to the waiting knights. They all looked ready to begin the hunt. I quickly spotted Max in his black armor. He was holding his blade, and tied to its hilt was the handkerchief I had given him. Upon noticing it, I couldn't help but smile. I wanted to wave to him but I decided it wouldn't be the best idea.

Just then, someone touched my shoulder, and I flinched. Startled, I turned my head to see a familiar face.

"What are you doing here, Lady Floyen?"

"Oh. Hello, Lord Elios."

He sighed. "What are you doing on the field?"

I was only here because it was out of the emperor's sight and I would stand out from the crowd if I monitored his movements from my seat. However, I couldn't tell Lord Elios that.

"Oh, it's... I just came down to have a look around," I said, giving him a vague answer in lieu of the truth.

His expression hardened. "There are a lot of weapons here. You must be aware that they're dangerous, especially since there are knights who are practicing their archery."

Realizing I made myself sound stupid, I admitted my defeat. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that I would get in the way."

He sighed at my answer and then smiled. "That's not what I meant. I'm only

saying this because I'm worried that you'll get hurt."

I felt strange after hearing his unexpectedly sweet statement. Perhaps he wasn't as bad as I once thought.

Just then, someone called for me. "Jubelian!"

It was an angry shout, and the source of it soon intervened in the conversation I was having with Lord Elios.

* * *

As THE EMPEROR's seat grew closer, Beatrice took a deep breath.

I must take it without Father noticing. This is what Jubelian wants! she reminded herself.

The princess felt a pang in her heart when she recalled how hesitant her friend had been. Her gaze was so desperate—Beatrice couldn't imagine how much she wanted this thing.

Beatrice turned to Victor, who had been following her.

"Wait here," she instructed.

Victor nodded as he watched the princess leave him. He understood that the request was from Lady Floyen herself, and that she was like a goddess among men, but... he didn't expect the princess to act immediately.

Taking a deep breath in, Beatrice notified the guards near the entrance to the box seats.

"I have come to see my father. Make way."

Instead of letting her in, however, the knight spoke calmly, "His Majesty is having an important conversation with a distinguished guest at this time."

Distinguished guest? Beatrice smirked wryly. How dare a guard favor the mere son of a marquis over her?! Glaring at the guard, she gritted her teeth. Then, she realized he had a familiar face.

This man...

"Beatrice has come to see me?" the emperor asked. "Let her in."

Once the emperor gave his permission, Beatrice gave the knight a good look as she entered the enclosed space.

He was the one who tried to kidnap her last time, she realized, clenching her jaw. She vowed to take revenge one day.

"Come in, my daughter. Is something the matter?"

Suppressing the rising anger within her, Beatrice answered the emperor. "Ah, I just happened to see my dear father from the other side and I came to say hello."

The emperor smiled contentedly. "I see. Are you watching the competition with Regis' daughter today?"

Realizing he was trying to grasp the situation, Beatrice answered with nonchalance. "Ah, yes. She's the daughter of a duke, after all—a useful asset."

At her slightly cold reply, the emperor smirked. "I understand. Relationships like that aren't a terrible idea."

Beatrice would have appreciated such a compliment in the past. Now, however, she felt extremely uncomfortable. She wasn't with Jubelian to profit off her. Regardless, she was unable to reveal her true feelings at the moment.

Smiling sweetly, she headed toward the railing. Then, she hid the flower in her sleeve as she said, "Of course, it's all for you, Father."

A corner of the emperor's lips quirked up. "You're as clever as always, Beatrice."

She gulped nervously, afraid that her father was somehow privy to her ulterior motive.

However, he simply gestured to Mikhail. "If you're so concerned about me, please wish Sir Mikhail success. He's the young man I'm cheering for."

Beatrice bit her lip a little. Then, her expression lifted slightly. "I hope you win today."

Mikhail smiled. "I plan to do my best for the honor of His Majesty and Her

Royal Ladyship."

He was about to take her hand, but she hurriedly bowed to the emperor to avoid the knight's touch.

"It seems that the game will be starting soon, so I'll be going, Father."

The emperor nodded. "Okay. Remember to stay safe."

Then, he glanced at the special seat where Regis sat. His expression was cold and he was focused on something. Upon seeing that unfamiliar expression on the duke, the emperor smirked. He couldn't let that bastard get in his way...

He inspected the ring on his finger.

* * *

WHILE PREPARING FOR THE COMPETITION, Max snuck glimpses at Jubelian. She was as lovely as always. He smiled under his helmet.

"About Lady Floyen—doesn't she look like an angel today?"

The voice was faint enough to be inaudible to normal ears. Max, however, possessed far superior senses. Clearly hearing the comment, he began to brood. His issue was that infuriating pieces of shit were constantly threatening to approach Jubelian because of her beauty... Once he ascended the throne, should he make a law that prevented people from coming face-to-face with his empress?

Gritting his teeth, he filled his mind with dangerous fantasies.

"Wow, it would be great if a beautiful lady like her embroidered a handkerchief for me."

"Dream on. We're not even royal knights. A knight from a regular aristocratic family will never get something like that."

Hearing those words, Max smiled as he glanced at the handkerchief tied to the hilt of his sword.

Yes, I have what you all will never have,"he privately boasted, delighted.

Then, a voice came from behind them, inside the barracks. "Well, you never

know. I've heard that her lover is a commoner..."

"Of course! She gets along well with commoners! There's still hope for us."

A ferocious expression soon clouded Max's face.

At that moment, Dennis found him.

"Your Highness, what are you doing here?" he asked.

With his jaw clenched, Max turned toward the barracks where the irritating comment had come from. A brown flag engraved with its family crest swayed in the wind. Count Pyrex, he noted, a disquieting smile stretching his lips.

"Oh, I was just looking around," he answered. "I thought that it would be fun to beat up one of the hounds."

A hound? As far as Dennis knew, everyone should have been forbidden from using one. He wrinkled his brow at the absurd comment.

"Do you need something from me?" the crown prince asked. He sounded more upset than usual.

"Ah, I just wanted to let you know that all of the weapons are ready. I've also scanned all of the participants and what they have in their arsenal," Dennis began.

"Go on."

"It seems that Frederich Elios has hired a professional hunter as his seeker. As for Mikhail Hessen..." Dennis paused and looked at his lord. His gaze was somewhere else—it was clear that he wasn't listening. What was he so concerned about? "Your Highness?"

Max glanced back with an irritated expression.

"I almost missed it because of you," he scolded Dennis.

He immediately returned to staring at the place Jubelian had just been. His master glared back at him from a distance. His master might be watching, but he still couldn't call him an ally...

He fixed his gaze on Jubelian once more. She was walking hand in hand with Beatrice, which Max found irritating. His sister was holding her hand in public...

Something he couldn't do! He scowled, wrought with jealousy.

Then, he watched as Jubelian ended up alone on the field. Why? Observing as an unexpected situation unfolded, Max frowned and turned his attention to Victor. Why was that good-for-nothing following Beatrice instead of staying with Jubelian?

The lady was located in a safe area, a place where the use of weapons was prohibited. Max wasn't worried that she would get injured. The real danger was that she was just too pretty.

"Isn't that Lady Floyen over there?"

"She's come down to the field! Is she planning to give someone a handkerchief?"

Concerned that other people might try to approach her, Max made a silent pledge: if anyone tried to talk to her, he wasn't going to let them go.

A few moments of carefully watching her passed, and Max's eyes widened. Frederich was approaching her. That damn fox! Murderous thoughts flooded his mind. The only thing holding the crown prince back was...

"Max, you must pretend not to know me during the hunting competition. Okay?"

If he approached her now, all of the effort he had put in until now would end in vain. He seethed.

Damn it!

He felt like he was about to go crazy! How could he just sit still?! He couldn't take it anymore.

He took a step forward. Dennis noticed something was wrong with his lord and tried to stop him. "Y-Your Highness? That way is—p-please calm down!"

However, anger had always swallowed Max whole. He couldn't hear a thing. He wanted to beat that bastard up.

Ferocious thoughts swirled in his mind, clouding his judgment. He decided to approach the safe zone.

Then, someone else came into view. He was...

The crown prince stopped walking, but Dennis had already become ghastly pale.

"Your Highness, you must stay!" he continued pleading desperately. "If you approach the lady now—"

Max smiled. "Of course. It's up to the hound to drive out the fox."

* * *

WHY IN THE world was he here? With a sigh, I looked up at Geraldine. He gave me a disapproving look.

"You," he snapped. "Why did you come down to the field?"

He was interrogating me informally. I couldn't believe it! I would have scolded him if we were at home, but we weren't, and I didn't want to make him lose face since he was our family's head knight.

"Sir Geraldine, you may—"

I tried to tell him that I was about to return to my seat, but Lord Elios cut me off. "How rude of you to interrupt our conversation, Sir Ronel."

Geraldine smirked. "Lord Elios, would you like to tell me why you're flirting with Lady Jubelian?" he asked, words sharp and tone mocking.

I could tell he was ready to argue. I had told him I wanted victory... but I didn't know he would be so blatant about it!

I was about to dissuade Geraldine from going any further but Lord Elios responded before I could. "Well, she is someone I love," he said quietly.

I stared at him in amazement.

Turning to me, he smiled with his eyes. "I'll make sure to win and present you with the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess, Lady Floyen. So, please cheer me on."

"No, I—"

I tried to tell him that such a thing would never happen, but I was interrupted once more.

"In your dreams," Geraldine scoffed. "As the Floyen family's head knight, I have no intention of letting you win."

The nobleman merely smirked in response. "Hmm, I wonder," he drawled. "I've heard that you're a great swordsman, but I don't know if it'll be possible for you to restrain me."

It was obviously a remark intended to provoke, but Geraldine smiled confidently. "All the knights of the Floyen family possess similar swordsmanship skills to mine. On the other hand, have you ever wielded a blade, Lord Elios?"

I had always thought Lord Elios was someone who could mask his feelings, but the dangerous glint in his eyes right now proved otherwise.

"I'll make you pay for that, Geraldine Samuel Ronel," he swore.

Once his full name was recited, a fire lit up in Geraldine's eyes. His face grew red as if about to explode. A fight was about to erupt soon, I realized. Given Geraldine's personality, he was usually the first to start arguments with others. Until now, however, there hadn't been an issue with it. After all, he was my cousin and a vassal of our family.

Now, however, the person he was arguing with was the heir of a dukedom. We had the same rank. This time, I couldn't use my social status in my favor. I grabbed Geraldine by the arm. "Sir Geraldine, please stop,"

"The Elios family has blatantly denounced ours. I cannot let this slide," he seethed.

I watched him for a moment before twisting a brow. "I know."

"Are you telling me to put up with him despite what he's done?"

"Yes."

Geraldine frowned. "For His Grace's honor and Your Ladyship's—"

I interrupted his agitated speech with a calm statement of my own. "That's why I have to deal with him myself," I said, walking Geraldine and leaving him clueless behind me. I stopped in front of Lord Elios.

"Lady Floyen, what I've just said—"

"No."

It sounded like he wanted to give me an apology, but I had no intention of accepting it. Although the knights were paid for doing virtually nothing, I couldn't let anyone else look down on them. They usually just followed me around, making my outings bothersome at times, but they were still family to me. I had been with them for years. There was no way I would be happy with someone belittling them.

"Lord Elios, I've heard the insults you spat about our knights," I said.

"I wasn't insulting them—" he began, but once I realized he was about to make another lame excuse, I cut him off again. I was at my limit.

"Yes, you were." The nobleman frowned, perhaps befuddled after I interrupted him for the second time. I continued, glaring, "And it's a shame, too, since I think our knights will definitely fare better than yours today."

"Whoa, I must've upset you greatly, my lady. Please give a minute to explain —"

I took off my gloves and threw them at him before he could finish speaking. He wasn't the only one who gave me a bewildered look. Geraldine did as well. After all, the gesture represented a request for a duel after an insult.

"Just watch," I said coldly. "Our knights will surely defeat yours. And the winner will be..."

"More than anything else, I want to give the winning prize as a gift for your coming-of-age ceremony."

The corners of my lips lifted into a smile as I recalled Max's face. "It'll be the person I'm cheering on," I finished. "He'll win."

Lord Elios grinned. "I can't agree with that, but thanks for these."

He carefully picked up the gloves I had thrown at him, turning his back on me. I glared at him as he walked away.

Then, I frowned. I just lost a pair of gloves, and I would lose face if I asked him to give me the gloves back...

As I regretted my choice, I heard Geraldine's voice from beside me.

"Jubel, you... Do you want me to win?" he asked. His eyes were trembling as he looked at me. I shook my head.

"No, that's not it. I just wanted to make him shut up—"

Geraldine didn't listen. His eyes shone brightly. "His Grace's orders are unquestionably important, but if you say so... For your sake, I'll do my best to win," he promised. He was even holding my hands.

The person I was talking about was Max, but I couldn't tell Geraldine the truth since he was like this, so I spoke vaguely. "It'll be good enough for us to win against the duke's family. So, please—"

I was about to tell him to act in moderation when a voice shouted for me. "Jubelian! I apologize for making you wait so long."

It was Bea. I had no choice but to give her my attention.

"Then, I'm going to get ready now," Geraldine said. "Hurry up and get back to your seat with Her Highness."

Bea nodded. "Yes. Let's go back quickly."

I was forced to return to my seat without correcting Geraldine...

* * *

ON THE WAY back to our seats, I looked at Beatrice. "Bea, did you get the flow—"

Before I could finish speaking, she pulled out a couple of crumpled flowers from the sleeve of her coat and showed them to me. There were only two, but I was relieved since two would be enough.

Satisfied, I inspected the blossoms as Bea said, "There was nothing I could do about preserving their shape. If I didn't put them in my sleeves, my father would have noticed."

She must have believed me when I told her I wanted these flowers because of their beauty. I smiled and shook my head at her troubled explanation.

"No, thank you so much for doing this, Bea."

"If there's anything else you want, just tell me," she said. "I'll get it for you."

Was it because she knew that I was dating her brother? She treated me like family. "Thank you. If you need my help on anything, Bea, I'm here for you as well."

Blushing, she nodded slowly. "Th-Thanks."

I glanced at the emperor's box seat. Then, I met Mikhail's eyes. He was looking down on us. How long had he been trailing us? Ominous thoughts pervaded my mind for a moment, but I held firmly onto the flowers' stems. Everything was going to be okay; Dad was here with me, and with these flowers, the magical beasts shouldn't be able to attack us.

Taking Bea's hand, I said, "Let's head back."

* * *

MIKHAIL HAD BEEN WATCHING Jubelian and the princess. He frowned slightly. How annoying.

According to the plan, he was supposed to be the one on the princess' side, but after seeing Jubelian beside her, Mikhail had no choice but to feel upset. She smiled so easily around others...

He clenched his fists.

"It must be inconvenient for you that Beatrice is spending all her time with Regis' daughter today," the emperor commented.

Mikhail turned to face him. Was he trying to gauge Mikhail's thoughts? To the public, he was a pitiful victim who had suffered from Jubelian's unrequited love. However, a shrewd man like the emperor could have noticed that something was strange.

Like always, Mikhail put on a mask and spoke with composure. "Our relationship ended long ago. This isn't anything inconvenient for me. As for Duke Floyen, I'm not afraid, for I have Your Majesty supporting me."

The emperor chuckled loudly. "Yes! This is why I like you!" he exclaimed.

Mikhail listened to the emperor's obnoxious laugh for a moment before recalling that he hadn't been told the important details of today's plan.

"In any case, our conversation was unfortunately interrupted by Her Highness."

The emperor stopped laughing. "Oh, yes. You told me earlier that aside from winning the competition, you were concerned about how to expose the crown prince and his feelings for Regis' daughter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With bright eyes, the emperor began his explanation. "It's simple. While the participants are chasing the beasts, you'll deal with the one that will attack the Floyen family."

"By 'the one,' do you mean the dire wolf?"

"Yes."

"But how will a magic beast know to target those seats?"

The emperor smiled. "Ah, it's not a complicated process. I made those cushions out of snow hare leather. Dire wolves are known to go crazy for them. No matter how sensitive Regis is, he'll only think of it as a comfortable chair."

While admiring the lengths the emperor went for his scheme, Mikhail felt his blood boil. This bastard was trying to put Jubelian in danger?

The bastard in question grinned. "Judging by your expression, I can see that you really care for my daughter."

Only then did Mikhail realize that he had let his emotions show. It was a troublesome journey to win the emperor's trust... He couldn't make a mistake now!

Kneeling on one knee, he bowed. "I have committed an atrocity, Your Majesty. I was just afraid that due to the nature of the beast, things might get out of control..."

There was a moment of silence, and the emperor—who initially seemed angry

—suddenly burst into laughter. "I've been doubting the sincerity of your heart toward my daughter since you were always indifferent to her... but I'm relieved that you're revealing your true feelings like this."

Mikhail looked up.

A chuckle escaped from the emperor's lips as he headed toward the railings looking down on the field. "Your intentions will be rewarded today," he said.

Realizing that the emperor was completely overlooking his mistake, Mikhail gave a slight smile.

No, I'm the relieved one. Who knew you would be so foolish? he jeered silently.

Just then, the emperor handed something over. It was one of the silver flowers that decorated the railing.

"This is..." Mikhail trailed off in amazement.

The emperor grinned. "Take it."

Unable to refuse the emperor's favor, Mikhail took the flower.

"This is how you control the dire wolf," the emperor explained. "Just by having it, the beast will stay away from you."

An unexpected harvest. Mikhail smiled. Then, he bowed. "I will surely repay Your Majesty's kindness."

"Very good!" the emperor said, satisfied.

Mikhail slowly raised his head. He still had some unanswered questions. "About the crown prince..."

The emperor nodded. "Ah, the beast—I'm planning to let it run wild once Maximilian returns to base," he explained.

"Pardon? But if that's the case, others will see and try to cooperate..."

"Maximilian is one of the few first-class swordsmen here, yet I still believe it would be unreasonable for him to defeat a dire wolf by himself."

Even if someone trained their swordsmanship their entire life, whether or not they could use mana wasn't up to the effort they put into it. Therefore, the

number of people in the empire who could use mana was limited. There were only about 20 people who could utilize mana, including first-class swordsmen like Marquis Hessen, Count Pyrex, and the crown prince. Some of them weren't even participating in the competition.

The emperor grinned ear to ear. "I'm planning to release a wild animal near the place where the crown prince will be. He'll arrive just in time to witness the spectacle. Just imagine! What man wouldn't go mad if they saw that someone else has already rescued their damsel in distress?"

It took a while for Mikhail to comprehend the emperor's idea. One thing still bothered him, however. "Still, Duke Floyen might be able to hunt the dire wolf himself."

Fiddling with the ring on his left hand, the emperor laughed. "Don't worry about the duke. I plan on giving him a special assignment. So, leave everything else to me and focus on killing the beast."

Slightly taken aback by the mention of a 'special assignment,' Mikhail glanced at the flower in his hand. If he give this flower to Jubelian, would she be safe? But... if he did so, it would make it difficult for him to hunt the magical beast and put him at a disadvantage.

Mikhail clenched his fists. She might just throw the flower away if he gave it to her. Therefore, it would be better for him to save her from danger. Then, she might finally realize...

He knew this was an underhanded tactic, but Mikhail wanted to impress the frightened lady and engrave into her mind that he was her only savior.

As he stared blankly into space with these thoughts, the emperor placed his hand on his shoulder. "The event will begin soon, so go get ready," he said.

* * *

ONCE BEA and I returned to our seats, the ladies greeted us.

"Lady Jubelian, we've been waiting for you!"

Rose and everyone else made a great fuss about our return. Slightly puzzled, I

simply watched them as they tittered.

Smiling, Veronica came forward. "Lady Jubelian, I saw what happened," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You were speaking to Lord Elios!"

"Oh, that's..."

Before I could say anything, I caught myself and zipped my mouth shut. I didn't want to disappoint them because they all had positive opinions about him. I couldn't tell them that I had just challenged him to a duel. However, my continued silence only helped me look more suspicious in my friends' eyes.

"The two of you looked pretty close... Is there something we don't know about?"

Close? We were just having a conversation. They must have misunderstood because I was so far away from them.

"There's nothing between us," I said firmly.

Catherine pouted. "I don't believe it! This is the first time I've ever seen him show so much interest in someone—"

Cutting her off, Rose shouted, "Ah, it looks like the tournament's about to begin! We should all sit down!"

I turned my attention to the field to watch the knights line up. It looked like they were finally going to start the opening ceremony. Gazing at Max and his knights in the distance, I smiled and prayed that he would achieve victory.

Just then, Rose piped up. "Lady Jubelian, you're not planning on watching it all while standing, are you?"

Belatedly realizing that I still hadn't sat down yet, I blushed. I had been so focused on Max that I didn't realize I was even standing.

Fanning myself, I turned to Bea. "Your Highness, please sit," I offered.

"Of course."

I sat in the seat next to Dad and Bea sat next to me. The chair was

comfortable—maybe because they were special ones designated for our family? Just by looking at them, I could tell they were of a higher quality than the regular ones. Ah, the sweet taste of power.

Then, I realized Dad was looking at me.

"Dad? Is something the matter?" I asked.

He sighed. "No one here meets my standards."

His comment felt somewhat random, so I tried to guess what he meant. Assuming he was talking about the knights, I smiled at him.

"That's because there's no one as skilled as you are in swordsmanship," I replied.

It was a given since my dad was the only transcendent being even throughout this vast empire.

"Do you really think so?" he asked, his expression brightening.

Grinning, I nodded. "Of course! You're the best, Daddy."

Feeling better, he gave me a radiant smile. He patted my head over the bonnet.

"I'm glad you think that way," he said.

Did my obvious compliment mean that much to him? Seeing him so content, I realized I had been rather indifferent to him until now. I pledged to praise him more from now on.

Just then, the fanfare sounded. "His Majesty will now enter!"

Once in the field, the emperor climbed up to a circular platform located at its center. Worried, I gazed at Max. Was he going to be okay?

The novel described the magical beast as being really strong. So strong, in fact, that it would be impossible for one man to defeat it alone unless he were a transcendent being or he had become a sword master. If the person who brought the beast in was who I was speculating they were, the emperor, I wasn't sure who the beast was going to attack. Maybe he was going to get rid of the nobles who disagreed with his opinions, including Max. If so, it would have

been a clever plan. If the beast attacked someone while they were busy hunting, the victim would stand no chance.

My anxiety heightened. I gently stroked the silver flower hidden in my coat pocket. Strangely enough, it felt cool to the touch.

I could have been worrying for no reason, but given Lord Elios' sudden confession and Max's victory in the recent war against Lagon... Well, a lot had changed, and the information I possessed wasn't relevant anymore. Moreover, the people's support for Max had grown rapidly after he emerged victorious in the war. Given the emperor's greedy nature, it wasn't a stretch to say that he might have been trying to get rid of Max.

Deciding I couldn't let a scheme like that unfold, I turned around and faced Sir Victor, who was sitting behind Bea. I tried to gesture at him for a quick conversation once our eyes met, but he hastily avoided my gaze.

What was going on? Why was he looking away? After a moment of confusion, I called his name. "Sir Victor, I have a favor to ask of you. Could you please come close for a moment?"

With a stiff expression, he approached me.

"What's the matter, Your Ladyship?" He sounded somewhat frightened, which was strange.

Was he afraid of me because of the rumors about me? But I had been living quietly for the past few months... I sighed. Then, I noticed Bea looking at me with a puzzled expression and a thought crossed my mind: if I gave Max the flowers she went through so much trouble to obtain, she would be offended.

Once Sir Victor was next to me, I took out one of the flowers and gave it to him in secret.

"This is..."

I hushed him, hinting at him with my eyes to put it away as quickly as possible. However, he stood still with his mouth agape and his eyes trembling.

"I-I can't take this, Your Ladyship!" he cried.

Everyone's attention was now focused on him. I frowned. He really didn't

have a clue as to what was happening. Fortunately, it would be difficult for others to see what we were exchanging because of the angle I held it at.

For a moment, I wondered if I could trust this man, but then I recalled that if Max entrusted him to escort Bea, he must have been a dependable person. Moreover, he shouldn't be ignorant of the situation at all... I had no idea why he would mistakenly assume I was giving the flower to him.

In any case, I ignored his frantic cry. "Could you go to my carriage and bring me back a spare glove? As you can see, I'm only wearing one right now, and it's proving rather inconvenient," I said clearly enough to be heard. Then, in a much quieter, quicker whisper, I added, "Give this flower to your master."

* * *

WITH A FEROCIOUS GAZE, Count Pyrex watched as the emperor stood on the platform.

"Chase after Maximilian today and make sure he catches something early. Once he does, drive all the remaining animals to the others so that they cannot return to the arena as easily."

Although he was the one who obtained the magical beast, the emperor completely excluded Count Pyrex from the plan. Instead, he chose Mikhail to become the winner of the competition—using the very beast that Count Pyrex had captured. How inconsiderate of him.

The emperor frequently ignored Count Pyrex. At times, he even slapped him. Still, the nobleman had never doubted his loyalty to the throne. Now, however, he was becoming infuriated. After all, the count had remained at the emperor's side as his close confidant no matter how neglectful he had been. The resentment that had been boiling toward the emperor began to turn into hatred the moment the count saw Mikhail's face.

He clenched his jaw. It was all because of that damned Mikhail!

Just then, the emperor began making his announcement. "As you all know, today's competition will be scored according to the quality of the prey captured," he began. "The more difficult it is to hunt the beast, the more points

one will be awarded if one manages to catch it."

The participants' eyes lit up. All of them were dreaming of winning the competition or building their reputations by hunting leopards, bears, and even rare animals such as the swift silver fox. If they contributed to a victory, they would receive a large reward from their lord.

Not to mention that the ultimate reward was...

Once everyone's attention was focused on him, the emperor beckoned the grand chamberlain over. The grand chamberlain was holding a red satin cushion covered with a black drape cloth. Smirking, the emperor revealed the item hidden below the cloth.

A moment of silence descended as everyone stared at the beautiful necklace in awe. The jewel glimmered brightly, reflecting a myriad of shades including red, blue, and even gold. No one could determine what kind of mineral it was made out of because the impeccable thing deserved the lore it had been presented with: that it was a gift from the god of the underworld to his companion, who longed day and night to return to the overworld.

Smiling, the emperor surveyed the wonderstruck crowd. "This necklace is precious. It is the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess, an imperial treasure that had been given to the first emperor of this empire by his dragon father. I pray that you all do your best to take possession of it."

It was a national treasure, an invaluable item. Everyone's eyes glistened with the desire to win the necklace. Not long after, however, the horn sounded. It was a signal that indicated that one must prepare to hunt soon.

While everyone was preparing to leave the arena, someone rushed to the crown prince. "Your Highness!"

Upon spotting Victor's sudden appearance, Max scowled. Didn't Victor have something better to do?! He was as busy as he could be right now! He knew his subordinate was dimwitted, but not to this extent. Having reached his limit, Max was about to take his temper out on Victor, but the latter acted before he could.

"This is a gift from the Handkerchief Lady," Victor hurriedly reported.

Max's anger immediately dissipated the instant he heard those words and he smiled as he accepted the item.

It was a lunariel. Did Jubelian give it to him on purpose? Lunariels were alluring flowers that reflected what looked like rays of moonlight. They were considered a good luck charm among northerners because they believed that lunariels warded off wicked spirits. Smiling, Max put the flower in his pocket. Maybe she gave it to him to wish him good luck.

He turned to glimpse at the Floyen family's seating area where Jubelian would be. She was looking from afar as well, a smile on her face.

How could someone be so beautiful? Her lovely appearance gave rise to a fluttering sensation in his chest that traveled throughout his body. If he could, he wanted to kiss her deeply, announcing to everyone that she was his. The only thing holding him back was...

"Max, you must pretend not to know me during the hunting competition. Okay?"

As long as this request was valid, he needed to remain patient.

Barely managing to wrench his gaze away from her, he turned back to face the field. Then, he mounted his horse, listening as people cheered loudly for their families.

"You must win!"

"We believe in you!"

Everyone seemed to be going crazy about the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess. Out of nowhere, Max began imagining the opalescent necklace adorning Jubelian's slim porcelain neck. Now he understood why people gave jewelry as a gift. The necklace could be a substitute for kiss marks, he concluded. As evidenced by how Jubelian's blue diamond cufflinks became rumored among high society, giving expensive jewelry as a gift was a way of telling the public that the recipient was the giver's significant other.

He had already received his present, so he should bring his lady victory. Once the signal from the horn sounded, Max spurred his horse forward.

* * *

WATCHING the horses gallop away noisily, I sighed and prayed that nothing would happen. Then, Sir Victor returned. He looked exhausted.

"Here are the gloves, Your Ladyship," he said.

I smiled as I retrieved them. "Thank you."

Now I was less worried about Max being attacked by the magical beast.

Hastily moving away from me, Sir Victor said, "I hope you don't ask me to run private errands like this anymore in the future."

He wore a disgusted expression, but I understood his sentiments. I made him sweat, so it was only natural.

I was about to nod to him in assent when Bea called out to the knight in a sharp voice. "Sir Victor!"

He hurriedly scurried over to her.

"What's the matter, Your Highness?" he asked. However, he spoke with a rather informal tone and my eyes widened in surprise at his casual attitude.

Bea gazed at him with suspicion. "Why did you go down to the field?"

Sir Victor glanced at me for a brief second before answering. "I went down to give my lord some words of encouragement. Is there a problem with that?"

The way Sir Victor treated Bea was unlike how he treated me. He sounded somewhat impudent, actually. Upset that he wasn't treating the princess with respect, I decided to say something to him.

However, before I could, Bea responded to him. "I see," she said. "Return to your duties now that my question has been answered."

Just like that, Sir Victor returned to his seat behind her. Judging from the way he was sitting, I could tell he wasn't enjoying his time out here. I gave him a death glare and then sighed.

I resolved to tell Max about what happened today sometime later.

* * *

THE HARSH WIND ruffled Max's cheek as his horse sprinted across the thicket. The steed was swift, befitting its pedigree of renowned horses.

Max had been scanning the area with his senses and it looked like there were quite a few creatures here. He turned to his men and shouted, "It's near!"

His subordinates fell silent at the call. Dennis grinned from his position trailing right behind his lord. Indeed, this was what His Highness excelled at.

Upon their master's order, the commanders headed to a nearby forest. Honestly, victory was practically in his hands already.

While defending the northern border, the crown prince and his men often hunted to boost the morale of soldiers who suffered from the cold and bleak weather. The prince's hunting skills were by far the best out of everyone there because he had sensitive senses that easily alerted him to nearby animals. As he faithfully watched the crown prince's back, Dennis believed that his lord's skills would prove no different today.

Just then, a rustling sound came from the bushes. Max turned to one of his archers. The archer took an arrow out and pulled the string of his bow taut. Everyone held their breaths as they waited for the animal to appear. Then, a high-pitched noise rang through the air, followed by the appearance of a small animal. Its body was round and white, resembling a snowball. Large ears protruded from its head, and blue eyes stared back. It was adorable, but in the eyes of knights, who were skilled hunters, it was nothing more than delicious food. It was a snow hare; while there were quite a few snow hares in the north, they rarely appeared in this area.

It was a pity that it was an herbivore, but it was rare, so Dennis figured they would still get a lot of points for it. He was about to signal the archer to fire when the crown prince suddenly shouted, "Stop!"

The archers loosened their bowstrings and lowered their weapons in unison. The prey was as good as dead, so Dennis couldn't understand what his lord was doing.

"Your Highness, what is the matter?" he asked.

Ignoring him, the crown prince remained silent as he stared at the spot the snow hare last occupied.

"It... reminds me of her," he answered quietly.

Dennis's face crumpled. Comparing Lady Floyen to a snow hare? Objectively speaking, the hare was an adorable creature, but that wasn't enough to warrant a comparison to one of the most beautiful women in the empire. More than anything, hares get frightened easily. This couldn't be a flattering metaphor...

Dennis was contemplating whether or not he should advise his lord regarding this matter to ensure a successful romantic relationship, but then Max snatched a bow from one of the archers. He aimed it at Dennis.

Why was His Highness—

Before he knew it, Max fired the shot, and the arrow flew from the taut bowstring straight in Dennis's direction. All he could do was stare in disbelief. Much to his surprise, however, it slid past his cheek, ending up elsewhere behind him. The sound of flesh ripping arose, followed by a sharp cry. Horrified, Dennis turned around. Laying before him, a sizable wild cat struggled in pain atop the earth. The arrow had pierced the beast's head.

A fire tiger? How was it here...?

In the south, fire tigers were thought to rule the animal kingdom. However, here in the empire, the center of the nation, there were no jungles, which meant that these beasts were rare to come by if at all. Given that fact, it was highly likely that someone had intentionally set this ferocious beast loose in the fields.

This is what they must have meant when they said the emperor had caught a wild beast, Dennis realized. Contrary to his serious expression, however, the crown prince was grinning.

"Thanks to this, we'll be able to get some good points," Max said.

Drawing his blade, he approached the beast as it writhed in pain. In a flash, the sword took the animal's life.

Now straight-faced, he turned back to command his knights.

"Stay on guard, everyone."

* * *

AFTER THE KNIGHTS LEFT, the stadium was empty. Still, it was far from boring.

Right before leaving us girls alone, my dad said, "I'll be back."

Once he was gone, our little circle of seats became a mini salon.

"Not long ago, Lord Rowen sent me a letter asking for a handkerchief," Rose began, her tone irate. "He said he would dedicate the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess to me."

Mary Ann frowned. "Pardon? I got the same letter from him."

Rose flinched. Then, her face crumpled. "Lady Mary Ann, don't tell me that you gave him a handkerchief... You didn't, right?"

Mary Ann lowered her head instead of answering. That was enough to deduce that she had fallen for his trap. Everyone groaned at the unfortunate news.

Rose shook her head, massaging her temple with one hand. "You shouldn't have, Mary Ann!" she chided. "As far as I know, that man's received handkerchiefs from several ladies already!"

I wrinkled my nose. The rumors about him were true, it seemed. Lord Rowen had long been ill-reputed for his womanizing behavior. Nonetheless, I had stayed away from drawing conclusions about him based on hearsay since I myself had suffered from rumors in the past. So, they were true after all... I couldn't believe it!

"Wow, what a total asswipe!" Sir Victor suddenly blurted.

His sudden comment bewildered me. I turned to him, my eyes trembling. How could he swear so blatantly at a place like this?!

Then, I remembered what I had learned about his background; he was originally a mercenary, but he became a knight because of his outstanding skills.

Was that why he had a foul mouth?

"Dear heavens," Mary Ann gasped quietly, her face ghastly pale. "What do I do now?"

Catherine, who was next to her, patted Mary Ann on the shoulder and sighed. "You're not insensitive to rumors... but, surprisingly, you still made such a mistake..."

Still in disbelief, Mary Ann flushed. "I can't accept this," she said. "He told me he was genuinely fond of me!"

In response to her melancholic cry, Rose shook her head. "Get it together, Mary Ann! Lord Rowen is a ladies' man! The worst one in high society, too!"

"Unfortunately, I'd have to disagree with that," Veronica said, shaking her head as well. Puzzled, everyone turned to look at her. "You ladies know of Marquis Ferdal, who heads the Ministry of Finance, right? Have you heard of his second son?"

"Yes, most certainly. I've heard that he's currently recovering from an illness."

"The truth is..."

Everyone leaned forward, listening intently to Veronica. Currently, there wasn't any gossip about the Ferdal family, so our curiosity was only natural. The marquis himself was a quiet man.

Cough, cough!

An untimely hacking cough interrupted us.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've been croaking for a good while now," Sir Victor said. "Anyway, you ladies continue with your conversation."

We gave him a look then sighed in unison before carrying on.

"So, what's the truth?"

"The truth is that... Marquis Ferdal's second son is a womanizer, too!"

"I can't believe it!" one of us cried.

The marquis was such a gentleman. How could his son turn out to be a philanderer? My mouth was agape at the shocking news.

"Apparently," Veronica continued, frowning, "the cheeky man had tempted an innocent lady before he had even come of age."

Baffled, Sir Victor butt in again. "What?! Is that true?"

Veronica nodded. "Yes. Then, he abandoned her afterward."

Sir Victor's face fell. "What kind of man does that?" he asked. "What a jackass."

Astonished, I observed the irritated expression on his face. Until now, I never thought of him as anything more than a slouch. It was interesting to see him angry at the injustice someone enacted against a lady.

As I admired his chivalrous side, Veronica resumed her account. "I heard that he continued his prodigal habits after that... Apparently, the marquis got fed up with him and sent him to a temple to cleanse himself. Recovering from an illness was only the excuse they used to cover it up."

As soon as she finished speaking, Sir Victor lifted a hand to his mouth, chuckling.

"Why are you laughing?" Veronica asked.

He shook his head. "Oh, you just have excellent storytelling skills," he commended her. "I'm hooked now!" He moved to stand next to her. Looking down, he gave her a relaxed smile. "So, are there more stories about this guy?"

I hadn't noticed before, but after studying him up close like this, I realized that he was a rather handsome man. He was as attractive as Lord Rowen, one of the womanizers we gossiped about earlier.

Likely thinking the same, Veronica blushed. "Hmm... I hear that he's pretty good-looking."

Sir Victor nodded with a grin. "Of course! If he's the worst of all the womanizers in the empire, there's no way he could be ugly!"

Rose shielded her mouth and giggled at his silly comment. As she did so, he approached Mary Ann. He regarded her with a caring gaze. "I'm happy for you, Lady Mary Ann," he began.

She frowned a little in displeasure. She probably assumed he was mocking her

somehow.

"Happy for me?" she asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it fortunate that you discovered that scumbag's true nature before you developed feelings for him? You must have a guardian angel by your side or something!"

At the unexpected claim, Mary Ann burst into laughter. "You're definitely in the right," she said.

Victor smiled. "Don't feel down because of a piece of garbage like him," he comforted. "You're out with your friends now! Your goal should just be to have fun."

I definitely agreed with him. Maybe it was because he was originally a mercenary, but despite how he seemed to speak and act without much thought, he was charming in his own way. Others must have agreed with me because they were all laughing in agreement with him.

With her gaze fixed upon him, Mary Ann said, "If you're one of the knights who serve directly under His Highness, you must have had plenty of opportunities to attend a banquet... but I still think it's my first time ever seeing you, Sir Victor."

He grinned widely. "Ah, I haven't been to a banquet hall in a long time. His Highness always assigns me on secret missions during events like that."

"Secret missions? What kind?"

He chuckled. "I can't tell you. That's why they're a secret."

It was only natural for someone to get even more curious when they were told something like that. Mary Ann's eyes glistened. "I want to know. Could you give me a hint? I'll keep it a secret, of course!"

He laughed. "I don't want to put you in danger, Lady Mary Ann."

Bea had been quiet all this time, but she spoke up just then, clearly irritated. "Speaking of missions... aren't you supposed to be my escort for the day? You're being awfully neglectful of your duties by getting involved in our conversations like this. And you're flirting around, at that."

Victor flinched. "Whoa! I'm attending to my duties, Your Highness," he calmly assured her. "Don't worry about it."

In response to his brazen answer, Bea glared at him and huffed. I smiled at their interaction for a moment. Then, I glanced at the empty seat next to me. My dad was taking longer to get back than I thought he would.

* * *

DUKE FLOYEN STEPPED into the basement underneath the arena. This was a location people rarely visited.

He was sure he felt it here. Where was it? He frowned. The peculiar aura he felt while sitting at the stadium was closer to that of a wild beast than a human. Normally, he wouldn't have bothered with it, but he couldn't leave it be when it might put his daughter in danger. His little Jubel was here. He couldn't risk it.

Regis concentrated once again before reading the atmosphere around him. It was extremely subtle, but he could pinpoint where the menacing aura was coming from. Was it coming from that cage over there? The basement was originally used as an arena before the aboveground stadium was built, so there was a huge cage in it meant to lock up large beasts.

Regis approached the iron bars. What he found astonished him.

A magical beast. A dire wolf, even. What was happening here?

He began to contemplate who could have gone to such lengths to capture the beast and leave it here. Then, he quickly decided on a course of action: he needed to kill it. The dire wolf was no match for a transcendent being like him, but it posed an obvious threat to normal people.

He unsheathed his blade and a bright blue light surrounded the sharp metal, demonstrating that its owner had transcended. His eyes were full of compassion as he gazed at the beast laying helplessly on the floor of the cage. It was immobilized by the silver flowers that surrounded it.

Tightly gripping the hilt of his sword, he silently apologized for what he was about to do.

I know you didn't want this, he thought to the poor beast, and I'm sorry.

Just as he was about to cut down the iron bars and end the dire wolf's life, Regis felt something nearby. He turned around. This energy... It was definitely the emperor.

The crimson aura convinced Regis to flee. However, he couldn't move. He cursed silently—did the emperor use the ring already? Regis stood rooted in place, paralyzed. From inside the cage, the dire wolf growled.

The emperor soon appeared, smiling with his eyes. "You're rather sensitive to have found your way here," he said. "Although I could expect that from an unruly dog like you."

An ominous red light shone from the ring on the emperor's left hand.

* * *

THE ANIMAL most feared by the people differed depending on the region. In the south of the empire, it was the fierce fire tiger. In the wetter areas of the west, it was the cunning swamp leopard.

"Shoot it!"

Cutting through the wind, an arrow escaped its hold and rushed toward its target. The beast, however, had already grasped the projectile's trajectory, raising its claws to block the blow.

It was more advantageous to use ranged attacks on wild beasts as opposed to hunting them up close. Arrows didn't prove useful, however.

"Everyone, raise your spears—" Dennis shouted sharply, but before he could finish giving the order, a spear of unknown origin rapidly flew toward the beast.

The leopard moved swiftly to avoid it but another one pierced it in the back. It growled and a familiar voice arose through the clamor. "Put up your shields and surround the beast to keep it from escaping!"

Dennis gritted his teeth. Frederich Elios. Why did they have to run into him?! The two squads must have crossed each other's paths by chance while searching for their prey. They agreed to go in different directions, but the

leopard had attacked at that very moment, causing this situation to unfold.

They'll end up stealing our game! Dennis thought, furious. He brainstormed, looking to gain the upper hand.

"You idiots." He pushed away the knights guarding themselves with shields and entered the enclosed area where the leopard was.

"Black armor?" the Elios knights asked. Then, they jolted. "Y-Your Highness!"

Their eyes widened in astonishment as they watched the crown prince recklessly approach the wild beast. What was he trying to do? Swamp leopards had fangs and claws that were known to be sharp enough to tear apart crocodile skin as tough as iron.

The leopard yelped once more. Even a rat could be driven to bite its hunter when it was cornered. The beast leaped back, ready to pounce at the crown prince. Since it was surrounded by a circle of shields, it had grown extremely aggravated. It would not miss the seemingly defenseless prey standing before it.

Taken aback by the unexpected situation, Frederich shouted, "Protect His Highness at all costs!"

Nonetheless, the swamp leopard was already approaching the crown prince.

Fredrich cursed. His family might be held accountable if the crown prince got hurt. Of course, the prince would be found at fault for behaving rashly, and since this was an urgent situation, Frederich would receive compensation for helping, but helping the prince at this moment would likely lessen his chances of winning the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess.

How annoying. The unanticipated event distressed him.

At that moment, however, the crown prince's blade drew a crimson arc through the air. It was a single swing, but its elegance prompted Frederich to gape in awe.

Thud!

The beast's massive body fell to the ground with a loud thump. Shouts soon erupted from the crown prince's knights.

"As expected of His Highness!"

"Truly amazing!"

Frederich, who had been staring blankly ahead of him, frowned. He didn't approve of the prince's impulsive behavior. Still, he had no choice but to admit genuine admiration for the man's swordsmanship. He now understood why the prince had been called a war hero.

Just then, a low voice called out to him. "Frederich Elios."

The crown prince resembled a thug more than a member of the royal family. Still, social rankings couldn't be ignored. Frederich slowly bowed. "Yes, Your Highness," he answered.

"I heard that you were aiming to win the hunting contest, but it looked like you're easily frightened. Thanks for that. I'm relieved."

Frederich had never been hostile to the crown prince before, yet now the royal was trying to start an argument. Frederich smirked. The prince was strong but arrogant. Frederich was satisfied with his hunting style because it was rational and strategic.

"Hmm, I wonder," he began. "Even if the tides are in your favor, an unexpected injury may still occur. No one knows which of us will win until this is over, will they?"

He was warning the crown prince that he would suffer damage if he continued with his careless ways. Frederich was confident he had provoked the prince, but the latter just shook his head.

"Well, I know one thing for sure. From what I've seen, you're hopeless."

"Can you tell me why you think so?"

"Simple. You still don't know what's happening after seeing a swamp leopard."

It was strange. The insult didn't make any sense, yet Frederich was still angered by it. He clenched his fists.

The crown prince came closer.

"Frederich Lionel Elios," he whispered. "Keep in mind that this is the only time I will let you off the hook. If you try to take what's mine again... I will tear you into pieces."

Despite the baleful warning, Frederich looked up at the crown prince instead of allowing himself to seem intimidated. A menacing aura emanated from the prince.

Frederich tried to meet his eyes, but he turned away and said, "I've finally found it."

What was he talking about? Frederich was about to ask, but the prince had already started to leave.

"So, stay away from what's mine," he finished.

When the prince and his men disappeared from view, Frederich's squad burst into fits of my rage.

"I understand that he's the almighty prince, but wasn't that just tyranny?!"

"I agree. To put it bluntly, he was only able to hunt the prey because we set up the siege..."

Frederich remained silent as he pondered an issue that had popped into mind just moments ago: the prince had said 'again'...

He recalled the first time he had clashed with the crown prince.

"You must dance with me, Lady Floyen—I'm sorry. I mean, would you like to?"

When the crown prince had asked Jubelian for a dance, Frederich had been upset by it. He thought that the prince just wanted her to entertain him for the moment. Was he serious, then? Scowling, the nobleman dug his nails into his palms once he realized he now had competition.

Come to think of it, the swamp leopard wasn't something that lived around here... Frederich suddenly came to a realization. Only then did he understand what was happening.

Was it possible that someone was deliberately releasing dangerous beasts to harm the prince?

If one used wild beasts during the competition to get rid of the prince, they would surely fulfill their wish without any complications. Frederich turned to face the direction the prince had disappeared in.

He smiled. He might be able to get a high score thanks to whoever was doing this.

* * *

A LOT of time had passed, yet the seat next to me was still empty. Where was my dad? He told me that he would return soon, but he was still absent after all this time. I started worrying that something might have happened to him. I sighed in frustration, and Bea caught the sound.

"Jubelian, what's wrong?" she asked.

Suddenly, everyone grew quiet, and I swallowed nervously. All of them were looking at me with worried eyes.

"Oh, it's just because my father hasn't returned yet..." I said, trailing off.

Sir Todd, who had been standing beside me in silence until now, opened his mouth to speak. "I'm unaware of where His Grace has gone, but I can assure you that he'll return soon. His Grace isn't to be treated like an ordinary being, after all."

Sir Victor nodded. "I agree. If it was anyone else, I would've been worried too, but Lady Floyen's father is the most powerful swordsman in the empire. You'd have to be out of your mind to try attacking him."

I nodded and forced the ominous thoughts out of my mind. This must have just been my anxiety talking again. As Sir Victor had said, my dad is a strong person.

At that moment, however, Beatrice grabbed my hand. "Jubelian is worried. Please don't recklessly say things without considering how she feels," she said.

The sight of her serious expression made me feel brighter and I smiled. She knew just what to say and when.

Her crimson eyes looked into mine. "If you're that worried, Jubelian, let's go

find him together."

I would be lying if I said I wasn't concerned about him, but I didn't want to put either one of us in danger. "O-Oh, it's fine. I don't want to bother you..."

Bea remained adamant. "I noticed that you've been looking at the empty seat next to you for a while now and I want to help."

Rose nodded in agreement. "Me too!"

Soon, the rest of my friends chimed in as well, expressing their desire to join us on the search.

Bea smiled. "We've been sitting here for a while now. A change of scenery wouldn't be a bad idea. There are guards surrounding the stadium, so it'll be safe."

"But..."

I was tempted by her offer because it was true that I was curious about my dad's whereabouts, but what if something happened to us while we were on our walk? Ominous thoughts pervaded my mind, and I couldn't answer right away.

Just then, Bea turned to her escort. "Victor, how well do you consider yourself trained?"

Sir Victor stroked his chin for a moment, humming thoughtfully. "I would say I'm one of the top five best swordsmen in the empire," he answered proudly.

He was obviously bluffing, but Bea turned to me and said, "Did you hear him? We have an excellent escort with us. There's no need to fret. Come on, let's go."

She started forcing us to go on a walk, so I was slightly taken aback. Then, she leaned close enough to whisper so only I could hear. "Don't worry," she assured me. "Nothing will happen."

I sighed. "Yes, Your Highness."

* * *

MIKHAIL WAITED near the stadium according to the emperor's instructions. He

wondered where the prince was by now. Not much time had passed, but waiting alone was boring.

What was Jubelian doing right now? If he could have, he would have abandoned all of this and just kidnapped her, but as long as Duke Floyen was by her side, that could only be a fantasy. How the hell did the emperor plan to manipulate the duke?

"This is your final warning. Do not contact my daughter anymore. If you do, it will cost you more than your home."

That day, the duke that Mikhail had witnessed was nothing like a human being. In some aspects, the man was more dangerous than a magical beast. It was strange that the emperor remained relaxed even at the mention of him.

Where was his confidence coming from? Mikhail wondered.

"...Do you understand?" a voice said, coming from afar.

Who was there? Mikhail slowly walked toward the source of the sound. This was definitely the entrance to the basement...

Suddenly, Mikhail froze. Shocked by the unbelievable sight in front of him, his mouth fell agape.

"Understood, Your Majesty."

The duke was kneeling on one knee while the emperor looked down upon him. They looked more like a master and his slave than a lord and his vassal.

Just then, the Dragon Knights, the emperor's bodyguards, approached. "Your Majesty, there is something that requires your attention."

"What is it?"

"The crown princess has left the Floyen family's seats..."

The emperor's forehead wrinkled. The plan with the beast depended on his and Regis' daughters being in their seats. "Then the princess is now—"

The emperor was about to inquire about the princess' whereabouts when a loud noise suddenly came from above. Recognizing it as the sound of a small firework, the emperor scowled. "Damn it—that's the sign that Maximillian is

coming back!" he shouted. "Go find the princess!"

* * *

FURIOUS, Max spun around.

That damn fox. I warned him to stay away from what's mine. How dare he follow me? he grumbled to himself.

He managed to throw Frederich off the scent with ease, but the man's existence was still bothersome.

If I can, I'd like to show him who's superior.

Just then, Dennis quietly called out to him. "Your Highness," he said, indicating something before them.

Max suppressed his vicious impulses to soundlessly observe the scene.

Some men guarding an enormous cage were engaged in idle chatter.

"I can't believe we're stuck trailing the crown prince during an exciting event like this..." one of them bemoaned.

"What can we do? We have no choice but to obey our orders."

It looked like these were the bastards that had been releasing the rare beasts. A sinister smile spread across Max's face once he recognized Count Pyrex's coat of arms.

"What should we do, Your Highness? Should we attack them?" Dennis asked. Max shook his head.

"No, I have a better idea."

"What is—"

"First, help me take off my armor."

Dennis' eyes widened. "Why do you want to do such a thing, Your Highness?"

"Oh, I want to disguise myself as a madman and attack them."

"I'm sorry?" Dennis asked, thoroughly puzzled. "Why would you go to such lengths? Shouldn't we just attack them right now?"

"Count Pyrex is one of the emperor's dogs. If we attack them now, we'll be giving them an excuse for the emperor to pick on us later." Dennis groaned quietly at the explanation while Max took off his helmet. "The interesting thing is that Count Pyrex is one of the few nobles who know what I look like."

"Does that mean..." Dennis trailed off.

Max gave him a crooked smile. "Since there's no reason for us to attack them now, we'll just make one."

* * *

OF THE FOUR WILD BEASTS, one had run off into the wilderness, and two had been captured by the crown prince. Now, only one was left. Count Pyrex, drinking from his canteen, instinctively turned in the direction of the arena.

What the hell was he doing this for? At first, he believed he would be praised if he obeyed the emperor's orders. However, his doubt and resentment grew the more he thought about his situation. There was no way the emperor would acknowledge his efforts, and he knew it.

Damn it! This is all because of that damn Mikhail! he cursed inwardly.

Still, he couldn't act rashly as it was unclear what kind of reprimand he would receive if he failed to fulfill his mission today.

He raised his voice. "Prepare to release the beast soon!"

A few moments passed, and a knight suddenly yelled, "Who's there?! If you come close, you'll be attacked!"

Frowning slightly, Count Pyrex guzzled his drink. Who was it and how did he get in here? The arena was owned by the royal family. Civilians weren't permitted to enter at this time. That meant that this unknown man had to be someone participating in the hunting competition. What a fool. He either got lost or was disqualified.

For a moment, Count Pyrex worried about what might happen if the stranger asked about the beast in the cage. Then, competence took over. They could simply drive him away by force if he was a mercenary. If he was a knight or a

nobleman, they could just say that this is a beast they had captured.

At that moment, an unexpected scream echoed through the air. Count Pyrex jumped up with a frown. Was that an ambush? What a fearless idiot. Despite everything, the count was still considered the third most skilled swordsman in the empire. He was confident that he wouldn't lose a duel to anyone unless his opponent was Duke Floyen.

"What's the matter?" the count asked once he reached the site of commotion.

Several knights were surrounding a hooded man. Furrowing his brow, the count took a swig of his drink. His knights couldn't even keep up with a single person. How pathetic.

Once his canteen was empty, Count Pyrex tossed it behind him.

Bang!

With everyone's attention now focused on him, the count raised his voice. "Everyone, get out of my way! I will deal with him!"

The knights made way at his command and he rushed to the assailant.

Clang!

The sound of metal clashing filled the air. The count stared at the mysterious man guarding against him. He gave the man all he had, yet the man still managed to fend off his attack.

Count Pyrex wielded a bastard sword with two hands. It was blunt and heavy, but its strength made up for its lack of speed because it often destroyed his opponent's weapon with ease. However, the stranger was blocking his strikes with an ordinary longsword. Impressive.

The count smiled. Still, an ordinary person couldn't beat a swordsman who utilized mana. In seconds, a faint light surrounded his crude blade.

I'll break your sword in half! he decided to himself.

With a shout, Count Pyrex attempted to push his opponent's sword away. However, his opponent's silver sword suddenly began to take on a red hue.

Crimson mana? It couldn't be...

Astonished, the count was about to peer under the stranger's hood. Before he could, however, the assailant pulled his cloak back with his free hand, revealing his face.

"As if it wasn't enough to let the beasts loose, you dared to assault *me*—a member of the royal family," Max snapped. "Don't you know your place as the emperor's guard dog? How ridiculous."

Although he hadn't seen this face often, the crown prince's handsome appearance was one the count could recognize at first glance. Now, the prince wore a menacing smile. Shocked, the count dropped his blade.

Without hesitation, Max pointed the tip of his sword at the count's throat. Count Pyrex could feel the pressure of the sword against his Adam's apple. He swallowed dryly, cursing to himself. Did the prince track them down using the beasts? If he failed to carry out this plan...

Count Pyrex frantically searched his mind for an idea to avert the crisis.

"Let go of Lord Pyrex!"

Amid the chaos, the knights aimed their blades at Max. The count was about to stop his foolish men from doing anything more when the crown prince's knights appeared.

"How dare you point your sword at His Highness!" they cried, immediately surrounding the count's knights.

This was a trap all along! Count Pyrex then realized he could be charged with the attempted murder of the crown prince. Anxious, he shouted, "You idiots! How dare you treat His Highness with such disrespect?! Put your weapons down at once!"

Their swords clattered to the ground and Max smirked. "Well, I don't think you should be blaming your subordinates."

Count Pyrex swallowed dryly. "I have committed an atrocity, Your Highness. I simply presumed you were an intruder. Please forgive me with an open heart."

"I see. I was covering my face... so it wouldn't be unreasonable for you to

think that way." Max noticed the nobleman's face brighten immediately. He probably thought he would be let off the hook, but that wasn't what Max was planning. "But for what purpose did my father command you to release that beast? And very close to me, at that."

"His Majesty wanted Your Highness to win the hunting contest—"

"So he arranged such a surprise without consulting me beforehand? Are you implying that my father wanted to get rid of me for good?"

"No, th-that's not..."

The count trailed off. He tried to give a vague answer at first, but somehow, the more he talked, the deeper he fell into a trap.

I was never cunning enough to get around things like this...! he thought.

He wanted to remain silent, but the crown prince continued speaking. "By the way, I don't see Mikhail anywhere around here. There's a rumor going around that my father's planning to marry Beatrice off to that guy."

Count Pyrex's head burned hot at the mention of Mikhail. If it wasn't for that kid in the first place...! He gritted his teeth, attempting to suppress his anger.

"No matter how many beasts you manage to hunt, a dog is nevertheless abandoned once they're useless," the crown prince muttered.

Count Pyrex imagined how the future might unfold.

"As if it wasn't enough to attack the crown prince, you released those dangerous beasts and tried to frame me?" the emperor would cry. "On whose orders?!"

He could tell that he would be held responsible for everything that went wrong today and thrown away, rendered utterly useless. Despite the amount of dedication he had shown to His Majesty until now... he...

Feeling resentful, the count clenched his fists.

Slowly, the blade pressing into his neck retreated.

"Depending on how you act, I can pretend that nothing happened today," the prince said.

Count Pyrex looked up with trembling eyes. No, this was a dangerous gamble. This was... It was definitely a trap!

"Think about it," the crown prince said, pity in his gaze. "The reason I'm giving you this opportunity is that you're a talented person who doesn't deserve the treatment you're getting."

The wall that couldn't be crossed. Transcendence. Count Pyrex had always been overshadowed by Duke Floyen because of this. However, the crown prince of all people had recognized his talent. Overwhelmed with emotion, the count opened his mouth. He knew this wasn't the right thing to do, but he couldn't help it.

"The truth is..."

* * *

FREDERICH BUSILY SEARCHED for the crown prince's trail. He was sure it was around here somewhere...

At that moment, a loud commotion sounded from behind. When he looked behind himself, he could see the Floyen knights rushing toward him on horseback.

"Oh, how nice it is to see you here!" Geraldine greeted, dripping with confidence.

Frederich furrowed his brows a little. Then, his eyes widened once he saw an enormous blue bear resting on top of a cart.

Was that... a type of blue bear that resided in the north?

Geraldine smirked. "It seems victory will be ours today."

At the obvious provocation, Frederich glared daggers at the knight. How annoying.

Just then, fireworks resounded from above. Geraldine and Frederich immediately headed in the direction the noise originated. Eventually, they found something that blew their eyes wide open.

Wasn't that a red lion from the east?

A moment later, a man in a black cloak riding a black horse swiftly passed the two by. Recognizing the man, Geraldine was astonished.

That face... It's that monster-like man. Jubelian's lover! he marveled to himself. *How did he get here?*

A group of men followed the black-cloaked one. Geraldine and Frederich recognized them as the crown prince's guards, and Dennis was leading them.

"Your Highness!" he shouted. "Please wait for us!"

Startled, Geraldine looked in the direction Max had disappeared to. He was the crown prince?

Dennis raised his voice even higher. "You can't subdue a magical beast alone!"

Magical beast. With those two words alone, Geraldine and Frederich could tell that something out of the ordinary was happening. At once, the two men shouted to their comrades.

"Everyone, follow His Highness!"

* * *

HE WASN'T HERE, either. Bea, Sir Victor, my friends, and I had wandered around the arena for a while now. Nevertheless, Dad was nowhere to be seen. Where in the world was he?

I sighed.

"Jubelian!" someone called.

I turned to where the voice was coming from and frowned.

It was Mikhail.

Why was he here again?

* * *

LIKE A MADMAN, Mikhail turned around frantically in search of Jubelian. Where could she possibly have gone?

Feeling nervous, he clenched his jaw. Something was definitely out of the ordinary. He recalled how Duke Floyen had looked just now.

I'll follow your orders, Your Majesty.

His eyes had been out of focus, and his voice was monotone. It was markedly different from the sophisticated Duke Floyen that Mikhail knew. Was that where the emperor's confidence came from? He had the power to control Duke Floyen?

With this, Mikhail realized he could eventually get rid of Duke Floyen by manipulating the emperor. It was something to rejoice about, but it came at a cost.

"Don't worry about the duke. I plan on giving him a special assignment," the emperor had said.

Mikhail was worried. Jubelian's safety could no longer be guaranteed now that Duke Floyen was in a strange condition. The emperor seemed to be plotting something else without him knowing. The sly man could be trying to hurt Jubelian to provoke his son, and just thinking about possible scenarios where that could play out made Mikhail upset.

How dare he try to use what's mine as bait? I will not tolerate this, Mikhail swore to himself, seething.

Just then, a familiar slender back came into view. Finally having found the woman he had been searching for, he smiled. She would be safe as long as she was with him. Elated, he called out to her.

"Jubelian!"

The lady turned around and their eyes met. "Sir Mikhail?"

There was a frown on her face and scorn in her jewel-like eyes. Her irritated tone pierced his heart deeply. Nonetheless, he regained his composure.

"I have something to tell you," he said. "Could you spare me a moment?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, but I'm busy right now."

"It'll only take a moment—"

"Sir Mikhail, I do not have time for idle chit-chat."

Mikhail wondered how long she had felt this way. She spoke firmly, determined not to spend even a moment with him. Misery flooded him, but his rising anger soon drowned out his sorrow. He looked everywhere for her. He even came running for her sake. Why was she rejecting him?

A dangerous light shone in his eyes. She wasn't listening to him... so he had no choice but to use force.

He reached for her wrist. At that moment, however, something swiftly approached his neck, forcing himself to retreat. He had felt the cold breeze of its rapid approach brush his skin.

"Ah, you dodge well."

With a ferocious gaze, Mikhail glared at his sudden opponent.

"How dare you attack me?" he demanded.

The man looked like one of the crown prince's bodyguards, Victor. Mikhail had heard of him before. From what he knew, Victor had been a mercenary in the past.

Mikhail expected him to admit his mistake and beg for forgiveness. Although their formal social statuses were now the same, Victor was of lower birth, and the royal knights were strict about hierarchy.

However...

"I'm on an escort mission!" Victor said matter-of-factly.

Mikhail was infuriated. How dare this low commoner...!

Just as he was about to draw his blade, however, a voice spoke.

"He's right. My brother ordered Sir Victor to escort me," the princess snapped, glaring viciously. "Sir Mikhail, aren't you supposed to be taking part in the hunting competition? If you waste your time like this, you might end up in last place."

She was obviously insulting him. The ladies that were gathered behind the

princess shielded their smiles behind their hands. Jubelian stood still, her eyes wide.

Mikhail gritted his teeth. What a bitch. She was disgracing him right in front of Jubelian.

However, he knew better than to take his temper out on the princess. Suppressing his feelings, he adopted a polite tone. "I am honored that Your Highness is concerned about me. Still, I don't understand why the knight escorting Your Royal Ladyship is attacking me."

"That's because you suddenly tried to—"

"All I wanted was to have a short conversation with Lady Floyen. I don't want anything with Your Highness."

Beatrice's eyes narrowed. "That's because I'm—"

"Ah, let me put it in simple terms for you," Victor butt in. Beatrice and Mikhail both gave Victor the evil eye for interrupting their argument. Nonetheless, he continued with a smirk on his lips. "I just hate idiots who treat a lady without manners."

Mikhail's brows furrowed. Despite everything, Victor was only a commoner. He would be lucky if he managed to keep his place as one of the crown prince's aides. He decided Victor's words weren't worth getting upset over.

"How ill-mannered," he said. "You can't run from old habits, it seems."

He deliberately referenced Victor's lowly origins to provoke him, but the knight shrugged, grinning.

"Well, I think you are acting high and mighty just because of your family." Despite himself, Mikhail frowned. "But, come to think of it, your family isn't even that great."

Insulting another's family warranted a duel.

"I will cut you into pieces," Mikhail hissed.

He drew his sword and swung it toward Victor. Befitting one of the most powerful swordsmen in the empire, his attack was swift and fierce. However, Victor managed to fend it off.

What was this? He was...

Mikhail's head swam. He glared at Victor, but the man was grinning.

"What? I heard that you're going to become the next military commander. Is this all you've got?" Victor taunted.

Mikhail's fury reached its peak once he realized he was devalued by a lowly mercenary knight. "Do you have a death wish?"

Although he had hidden his achievements from everyone except the emperor and his family, Mikhail had become a first-class swordsman and he was able to utilize mana. With this, he believed it would be possible to disgrace this rude man, and once that happened, Jubelian would certainly see him differently.

Back when he was dating her, her eyes had twinkled as she said, "You will surely succeed my father and lead the royal knights in the future, Mikhail." At the time, he had taken her compliment for granted. He thought he would eventually reach that place as well. Now, however, he wanted to prove to her that he was qualified for the role.

Watch me win this duel,"he silently urged her, smiling at her.

She watched on, looking horrifyingly pale.

No matter how good Victor was, he wouldn't be able to do anything once Mikhail used mana. With a sinister smile, he channeled his power into his blade. Formal procedures needed to be followed for duels between knights, but since his opponent was of low birth, Mikhail believed Victor couldn't protest as long as he kept him alive.

Now then, I'll cut off your arm! Mikhail silently swore.

Victor's blade was resting directly against his, but he prepared to push it away.

Suddenly, someone interrupted their duel. After checking who it was, Mikhail's face fell.

* * *

THE BITTER WIND bit his skin, but Max didn't pay attention to it. He couldn't keep still after hearing the emperor's plans from Count Pyrex. He was planning to release a magical beast so an idiot could play hero? Crazy old man!

Max had recently given up on subduing a magical beast because even someone as close to reaching transcendence as he was still couldn't fully control the wild creatures. If something were to go wrong, many people—including the targets, Jubelian and Beatrice—would lose their lives.

Although he had always despised his father, his hatred had never reached heights as profound as this. She would be fine as long as his master was around, but... if she got hurt, he was not going to let his father die peacefully. Cruel thoughts filled his mind. Max spurred his horse faster.

Eventually, he was almost at the arena. With a tight grip on the reins, Max stopped his horse. He knew that if he went back now, the emperor would release the beast immediately. He looked toward the basement under the arena. It was obvious where the old man was hiding the wild beast.

Stroking his horse, Max whispered, "Wait here, Nox. Dennis will be here soon."

The clever horse, who had gone through hell and back with its owner, obeyed. She gazed at him as she remained in place. Reminded of how Nox would stare at him like this in the moments before he went into battle, he smiled faintly before turning away.

He needed to stop his father from releasing the beast. He needed to do this for Jubelian.

His crimson eyes shone with determination.

* * *

I CONTEMPLATED whether I should stop Sir Victor from recklessly provoking Mikhail. In the original story, Mikhail was the one who dealt the final blow to the magical beast, and he needed to be a first-class swordsman to defeat such a creature because only mana could inflict a wound deep enough on the beast's protective skin. Amid the confusion, Mikhail would climb onto the beast's back

and stab it, becoming the winner of the hunting competition. Then, he would confess to Beatrice by dedicating the winning prize to her.

I turned to Beatrice. Then, I took in her disgusted face and smiled. Since a lot had changed, it was unclear whether a magical beast would appear today or not. What was certain, though, was that Mikhail was a first-class swordsman. Therefore, I tried to stop Victor and Mikhail from arguing any further.

However, before I could, someone intervened, prompting them to retract their blades. Seemingly frightened by the fierce gaze he was now on the receiving end of, Mikhail grew silent.

Serves him right, I thought contentedly.

The man giving Mikhail a death stare turned around and looked at me. After finding the person I had been waiting to see all this time, I beamed and gave him a warm greeting. "Dad!" I chirped happily.

I was about to approach him when Mikhail suddenly shouted at me urgently. "Jubelian!"

I gave him a dirty look. What did he want now?

His voice was low. "Please, don't go. It would be dangerous to go back to the arena now," he said.

I thought of dismissing his words as nonsense, but by the look in his eyes, I could tell he was serious. Taken aback, I briefly wondered if there was something I didn't know about.

Then, a voice tore my attention away.

"Jubelian," my father called.

Perhaps I was imagining things, but his eyes looked even colder than usual somehow. It didn't feel like I could approach him as easily. However, he extended a hand out to me and said, "Let's go back."

I looked at him for a moment before giggling. In the past, I had always mistaken his expressions for indifference or scorn. Feeling sorry, I locked my arms with him and gazed up at him. He smiled faintly.

I knew it. I was just imagining things. I turned around to return to the arena.

"You'll regret it," Mikhail shouted after me, still trying to stop me.

Ignoring him, I rested my head against Dad's arm. Everything was going to be okay now that he was back.

* * *

COUNT PYREX HAD BEEN someone the emperor could discard at any time. As a result, the nobleman had been ill-informed of the plan.

"His Majesty didn't tell me where the beast was hidden. However, I know that the beast would be released once the flare signal goes off," he had said. Because of this, Max had ordered his subordinates to fire the signals. Aware of his father's nature, he knew the man would be preoccupied by now.

The emperor was a perfectionist, so it was obvious that he would only let the beast out once all of his safety measures were secured. Now that the signal was fired, Max believed that once he showed up at the arena, the beast would be freed. Therefore, he sneaked into the basement of the stadium.

He still continued to glance back occasionally, however, because he couldn't stop worrying about Jubelian. He kept wondering if she was okay. He tried to shake her off his mind, but he couldn't help her place in it.

Eventually, he managed to soothe his nerves.

It would be fine, he told himself. Master is by her side.

Suppressing the urge to run to her immediately, he scanned his surroundings. Then, he remembered that he wasn't wearing his armor. It wasn't that he was reluctant to expose his appearance to the nobles, but rather that he wouldn't be able to protect Jubelian properly if she were ever put in danger. With his face exposed, the emperor would be able to gauge the full extent of his feelings for her. If he revealed that he was affected, there was a chance that his father would send more threats to her in the future.

However, if he stopped the beast from leaving the cage in the first place, he wouldn't be able to do anything. Max planned to remove those standing guard at the beast's cage and lock the doors leading aboveground.

Was it here? He swallowed nervously once he reached the tall iron bars before him. The beast should be in there...

Tensing up, he carefully observed the cage's interior. Then, his eyes widened. It wasn't here and the door was open.

Max wondered if the beast had already been set free before he realized that there were no guards in the basement. What in the world happened here? He hastily looked around and noticed that the door had been broken by force.

A faint groan emanated from the distance. "Ugh... Please... Help me..."

Max headed toward the direction the sound was coming from and frowned once he reached its source: a knight that was drenched in blood. He was missing the bottom half of his body. Was he still alive? Was he hit by a sword? No, it looked like he was bitten by an animal...

A menacing atmosphere soon filled the empty chambers that surrounded Max. Sensing something flying toward him, he quickly dodged.

Whoosh!

Accompanied by the sound of air splitting, sharp claws brushed past where Max had stood mere seconds ago. As if it was angry that it had missed its prey, the colossal wolf growled. Then, it roared, its cry resonating throughout the vacant basement and shaking the ground. The noise was frightening enough to make an ordinary person fall to their knees, but Max stood still and glared at his opponent.

Ouch, my ears, he thought to himself. He could tell the beast possessed a great amount of energy. Still, it was nothing compared to that of his master. This was going to be fun.

The crown prince's blade shone faintly in the darkness. He hadn't reached perfection yet, but the luminescence was proof that he was a first-class swordsman who could inflict a critical blow on the creature.

Glaring, the beast slowly started to move while Max began to search for his opponent's weakness. Even in the dark, however, the beast kept its attention riveted on Max.

Realizing the wolf had an excellent sense of smell, Max decided to use an herb. He opened the pouch at his waist and took out a poisonous plant that was known to paralyze an animal or a human's sense of smell. The moment he tried to grab it, however, the dire wolf violently shook its massive body. Yelping, it backed away, baring its teeth. Noticing that something was off, Max wondered if the beast had finished scanning the environment and was now ready to attack.

With his left hand on the hilt of his sword, he straightened his stance. He would just have to win this contest by killing this beast, he decided.

What happened next caught him by surprise, however. The beast began to run away. Taken aback, Max stared blankly into the empty space it left behind. Eventually, he gathered himself together and, gritting his teeth, started chasing after the fleeing beast.

He didn't know why it was running away, but he still had to kill it. Once the distance between them narrowed, Max tried to attack it. However...

Thud!

The wolf started banging its body against the wall as if frightened by something. Debris rained from the old ceiling, which Max was forced to evade.

Max cursed, frustrated. He attempted to continue his chase, but the beast kept pounding its body against the walls. Now the underground chamber was half-collapsed and he was unable to move forward. Why was it doing this all of a sudden?

He frowned, glaring at the destroyed walls before him. He took out what was in his pouch and then furrowed his brows. The flower had lost its shape, but it still gave off a faint light. This was... the lunariel Jubelian gave him.

Max recalled what Count Pyrex had said: "There will be silver flowers on the railing of the balcony where His Majesty is seated. The beast won't attack as long as he is guarded by them."

Only then did Max realize the silver flower the count was talking about was the lunariel. So, it could drive off this magical beast...

After dwelling on the strange validity of the northerners' superstitions for a

moment, he came to a realization: that was the direction to the arena.

Realizing the situation he was in spurred Max into action.

"Damn it to hell!" he muttered underneath his breath. "Jubelian!"

* * *

YAWNING, I gazed at the empty arena. No one had returned yet. Hunting competitions usually had a time limit and required participants to achieve a high score within the restriction. It was advantageous to capture rare prey for more points, so that was likely why no one had returned yet. I squinted at the sundial towering over us on the stadium's center stage. There was only about an hour left now.

Thud!

Suddenly, I felt the ground shake. Startled, I grabbed Dad's hand.

Huh? Normally, he would ask what was wrong, but he just stared back at me with a blank face. Embarrassed that I might have acted too childish, I let go of his hand and came up with an excuse.

"Oh, I just thought your hands looked cold," I said.

He remained silent. I was struck by that strange feeling again. He had been acting this way since we returned from wherever he had gone.

Thud!

Another roar sounded, accompanied by the ground shaking. Frightened, I grabbed my dad's hand again. There was a small frown atop his lips he called for me.

"Jubel... ian..."

He sounded a little distressed. I was about to ask him if anything was wrong, but then he stood up.

"Dad, where are you going?"

Ignoring me, he turned away and headed somewhere. What was happening to him? Did he receive some bad news or something?

Suddenly, a knight came running in covered in blood and screaming. He had emerged from the passage leading to the basement of the stadium. I inhaled sharply once I noticed that he was missing an arm.

"Everyone, run away!" he shouted, but the people remained in their places despite his desperate cries.

Not long after, however, something appeared in the arena, snarling.

At the appearance of a giant wolf—the dire wolf, which had only existed in fiction—the people began to panic. One after another, they ran away. I clenched my jaw tightly. I was hoping this wouldn't happen, but now events were unfolding in accordance with the original story.

The knights standing guard quickly surrounded the dire wolf, but I knew they would be useless unless there was a first-class swordsman among them who could use mana. Turning to look at the entrance, I tried to estimate the distance between it and where I sat. The special seats we occupied faced the direction opposite the entrance. We would have no choice but to pass the field where the dire wolf was raging.

"What do we do?" Bea muttered despairingly.

I turned to her to realize that the color had completely drained from her face and her hands were shaking.

Everything was going to be okay. I still had one silver flower. That wolf wouldn't be able to come near us. I didn't want to aggravate the beast by running away, so instead, I held Bea's hands. "Don't worry, Your Highness. The wolf won't even come close to us—"

Before I could finish, however, I saw the beast rapidly approach us from the periphery of my eyes. I dropped what I was saying and immediately shouted, "Everyone, run!"

* * *

THE EMPEROR WAS MORE than startled by the beast's sudden appearance. He hadn't given the order yet. Why was it out there already?

There were no guards experienced enough to confront the beast at the moment. Knowing that he was in danger, the emperor turned to the one who could fight off the dire wolf. Regis, who had just left his daughter without any explanation, stood before the emperor with a blank expression.

He would definitely be able to slay the beast. The emperor contemplated for a moment whether he should order Regis to attack before shaking his head. If he did that, all of this would be useless.

Just then, he saw Mikhail run in from the entrance of the arena.

Right on time. Although the plan had gone awry, it had at least succeeded in instilling fear among the nobles. Now, if Mikhail subdued the dire wolf, no one would object to him becoming the winner.

The swordsman rushed toward the beast, his action reminiscent of a heroic knight in a fairytale.

"Come, dire wolf!" he shouted valiantly. Unfortunately, the animal ignored Mikhail and turned toward the Floyen family's seats.

It seemed like it was true that dire wolves were obsessed with the scent of snow hares. A strange light shone in the emperor's eyes.

"Everyone, run!" Jubelian shouted. She had made somewhat of a wise decision. The only problem was that her shout seemed to aggravate the dire wolf even more. Wagging its humongous tail, it revealed its fangs. With a vicious growl, it began to pursue Jubelian and her companions.

The emperor stared at the entrance to the arena. It was a pity that Maximilian was missing this.

* * *

I THOUGHT the stadium's sturdy walls would protect us, but the walls soon crumbled down like broken crackers. I swallowed nervously once the dire wolf appeared and blocked us from making our escape.

Terrified, both Catherine and Mary Ann screamed. I pulled out the silver flower from my coat pocket.

It would definitely avoid us once it saw this, I thought, bringing out the flower with confidence, but the dire wolf continued running toward us without hesitation anyway. I didn't understand. The beast was behaving differently than I expected.

"Your Highness!"

I turned around to see Mikhail rushing toward us on horseback. Still, he was too far away. The dire wolf now had its mouth open and was running toward us. Todd and Victor swung their swords against the beast, but I knew that it would be useless since they weren't first-class swordsmen.

I flinched, expecting bloodshed, but then my eyes widened in shock. Crimson blood flowed from the dire wolf's neck and the beast was now making a hasty retreat.

"Phew, that was a close one."

A faint green light surrounded Victor's blood-stained blade.

* * *

"**MADAM**, do you think Sir Victor is doing well?"

Fresia grinned at her subordinate's question. She recalled the first time she had met Victor.

"I asked you to help me run away from the place, not get kicked out."

At that time, she had never imagined that the frail boy would become the crown prince's body double, not to mention such a powerful swordsman.

"He'll be fine. Although he's a little flippant, you can't deny his great swordsmanship."

"You're right," the man said. Then, he placed the documents on the desk. "This is the information gathered today, Master. Please review it."

It wasn't a huge pile, but considering its thickness, reviewing it was going to take quite some time.

Fresia sighed. "All right."

A few moments of drowsy-eyed reading passed, and Fresia frowned. She thought they already discarded the data about the dire wolf... She grinned as she read through the newly obtained information.

Once they find a piece of prey with magical powers, they could overcome the paralyzing poison? Interesting. If the sorcerers of the past were still alive, they would have exterminated these beasts.

* * *

I WAS TAKEN ABACK by Sir Victor's performance. It was obvious that he knew how to use mana.

The mercenary knight grinned and laughed. "

I truly am a genius!" he rejoiced.

I couldn't deny his boasting. Only a select few could become first-class swordsmen, and they had to be chosen by the power of mana to reach that level. Therefore, they were rather uncommon. Still, I didn't want to boost his ego. I shook my head slightly once I realized he was being cocky.

The dire wolf slowly bared its fangs. It seemed to be immune to the effects of the flower I was holding. I didn't understand why it was chasing us despite the paralyzing poison in my hand, but then I remembered something I had overlooked.

In the original writing, the dire wolf had targeted Bea, ignoring everyone else. I thought of reasons why the beast would trail the princess and recalled the differences between her and all the others: she was part of the royal family and the blood of dragons flowed in her veins. Also, she had the potential to become a sorceress. One of those aspects might have caused the beast to persistently chase her around.

But, if that was the case, why wasn't it drawn to the emperor? Did this exception mean it was because of Bea's potential to become a sorceress, after all? As I pondered this, a trembling hand touched mine.

Then, I realized Bea must have been scared out of her mind. She was a quick-

witted person, so it was probably obvious to her that the dire wolf was after her. Squeezing her hand tight, I consoled her. "Don't worry," I said. "We have two first-class swordsmen by our side. We can defeat it."

Her crimson eyes swayed slightly at my reassurance. I met her gaze for a moment before turning to Mikhail. There was a chance he could defeat the beast this time since he had done it in the novel.

Our eyes met and he sent me a confident look as if to urge me to watch as he slew the beast.

"Sir Victor, I'll get the wolf's attention, so try to find its weak point," he ordered.

Then, he swung his blade toward it. Unfortunately, the beast simply avoided the attack.

However, the offense didn't end there. Mikhail quickly swung his blade again in an attempt to reach one of the beast's vital points. The dire wolf continued its dance around the stabs, and I observed the situation with concern.

Once the beast was solely focused on Mikhail, Sir Victor quickly approached its rear. It didn't seem to notice that another person was so close by. Intent on not wasting the chance, Sir Victor thrust his sword into the beast's side. Just then, however, Mikhail suddenly launched another attack. It was like he had given up on his original role of drawing the beast's attention and was trying to slay the creature himself. Startled, it went wild, and Sir Victor's ambush amounted to nothing.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, you bastard?!" Sir Victor shouted.

I was startled by his harsh words, but there was a bigger problem at hand.

Where had the dire wolf gone? Anxiety engulfed me. We made a few successful attacks, but it hadn't been enough to subdue the beast. After all, it was a powerful monster that could only be handled with a group of first-class swordsmen. Fearful, everyone waited with bated breath.

Mikhail approached Beatrice.

"Your Highness, are you all right?" he asked.

I briefly wondered if she had grown fond of Mikhail, but then I saw her stormy expression.

"This isn't the time to care about me, is it? Instead, I want you to know that what you just did put us all in danger."

Disappointed, Mikhail nodded. "Understood, Your Highness. This place is dangerous, so you must—"

Bang!

Before Mikhail could finish speaking, the ceiling of the stadium broke. The beast quickly fell in and swung its claws at us.

Mikhail hastily blocked its attack with a grunt, but he was injured in the process. Blood dripped from one of his arms as he held his shield up against its claws. Then, it swung its large tail and threw him.

Bang!

Sir Victor stood in front of us and swung his blade. However, the beast tossed him back too.

"Damn it! Run!" he shouted, but the beast was already standing in front of Beatrice. It licked its lips as if ready to savor a luxurious meal. Even if Bea ran away, it was obvious she would be caught quickly.

If she used magic... No, there was no sign she could use magic. I tried to think of a way out of this crisis.

"I'm scared," she wept. That was all she could say. After all, she was just an ordinary girl my age.

The beast took its forefoot off the ground and leaped forward.

What I had read was a novel, but the place I lived in now... This was reality. A miraculous plot twist wasn't going to happen. Realizing this, I did my best to push Bea away. The impact rolled her to the side and she gaped at me in surprise.

I looked into her guilt-ridden eyes.

"It's not your fault," I said.

As soon as I finished speaking, a giant set of paws knocked me down. The dire wolf's menacing golden eyes stared down at me and I suddenly became painfully aware that the death I so desperately wished to avoid was now imminent.

* * *

MAX LEFT the basement and headed toward the stadium as quickly as possible. Because of the fleeing crowd, however, he couldn't get to the arena as fast as he wanted to. He hurriedly scanned the large stadium once he entered.

Where was Jubelian? Frustration enveloped him for a moment before he felt a strong presence and turned his head. Was it over there? Impatient, he ran with all his might toward the direction the energy was coming from. Once he grew close, he finally spotted the one face he had longed to see.

You're safe," his relieved mind chanted.

Just then, the ceiling broke and the beast appeared. After pushing Mikhail and Victor out of its way, the beast slowly approached Beatrice.

That damned animal! Max started sprinting. However, it was clear that he wouldn't be able to stop the beast at this rate.

Damn it, Beatrice, he cursed silently. *Why are you standing still?*

Although he was irritated, he was hoping that his sister would be safe from the beast's attack.

Please! Move!

At that moment, someone pushed Beatrice away just as Max had wished. However, the very same person that had helped her had now taken her place as the beast's prey. Once he realized who it was, Max's eyes trembled violently.

No! his mind screamed. *Why are you...?!*

As he watched Jubelian stand before the beast on his sister's behalf, Max's blood ran cold. She had requested that he pretend not to know her during the competition, but now that he was in this situation, he saw no reason to keep the oath. Wrought with desperation, he cried out her name.

"Jubelian!"

Hurriedly, he drew his sword and charged with all his might. However, the beast had already pinned her to the ground. Its enormous front paws weighed down upon her slender body.

Ten steps. He was ten mere steps away.

It was a short distance but the distance between Jubelian and the beast's mouth was infinitely closer. Feeling hopeless, Max stretched out his hand as far as he could. He thought he could snatch her away, but he was just out of reach.

Please, please...!

It didn't matter if it was to a god in heaven or hell—if either of them could help save her, Max was ready to give up his soul. *Just a moment is fine, so please protect her*, he prayed silently.

However, the deities betrayed his earnest wish, and the beast shoved its jaw forward.

A single tear fell from Max's eye.

"No!"

Just then, something exploded inside of him. His blocked senses suddenly opened, and everything began to flow slowly.

* * *

I THOUGHT the beast only responded to Bea, but now it was looking down at me. I was pinned to the ground by its feet. Judging by the saliva dripping from his mouth, it was going to eat me alive.

I couldn't believe I was going to die such a horrible death. I was glad I saved Bea from the monster, but it broke my heart to think about Max grieving for me. I had taught him about worldly affairs... What if he started doing whatever he wanted again?

My heart sank deeper the more I thought about him. Realizing I was going to die soon, I decided to be honest about my feelings. In the end, I wanted to live

happily ever after with Max and Dad...

As if to trample on my wish, the giant wolf opened its mouth and lunged for me. Unable to stand the terrible sight, I closed my eyes.

"No!"

I heard Max's voice as soon as I clenched my eyes shut, but I decided I was just hearing things because I was close to death.

I prayed for this to be over as quickly as possible, bracing myself for the pain

Bang!

Out of nowhere, there came a loud noise, and the heaviness that weighed on me disappeared. A warmth suddenly surrounded my body.

"Jubelian."

Was I dreaming? Concerned, I slowly opened my eyes, discovering that the one I had longed for was now looking at me with moist eyes.

"Max," I said, and he hugged me. His teardrops dripped onto my face.

He was taller than me, yet his face was buried into my shoulder. I wondered what other people thought of us. If they knew that he was crying, they would be shocked, but I thought his actions were nothing short of lovable.

"Don't cry, Max," I whispered, patting his back.

"I was afraid that I would lose you," he responded sorrowfully.

I was too. I was frightened that I wouldn't be able to spend any more time with him or Dad. I was terrified to think that my life would come to an end like this. Swallowing those words back, however, I stroked his tear-stained cheek.

He pressed his forehead against mine.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. Sincerity laced his voice. "I will never let you go through something so scary ever again."

I looked up and met his eyes.

"Get your filthy hands off her right now, commoner. Otherwise, I will behead you."

Surprised, I looked toward the source of the sudden interruption. Mikhail was pointing his blade at Max.

"Mikhail, what do you think you're—" I stopped myself. Max was my lover, and I wanted to protect him, but the problem was...

"Don't worry about it," Max whispered, gently placing his index finger against my lips.

Then, he turned to Mikhail. "Strike me if you can."

* * *

MIKHAIL WAS aware that he was doing something reckless. Nonetheless, he proceeded to attack the beast because of his petty greed. He believed that if he showed Jubelian that he could inflict a critical blow upon it, she would return to her former passionate self.

The result of his folly was disastrous.

He felt his heart sink when he saw her lying helplessly on the ground, pinned down by the beast's front paws. All of this had been for her... His amethyst eyes obsessively captured every part of her.

If only she came back, he thought. I would treat her well.

Mikhail fantasized about hugging and kissing her—about sharing each other's warmth every night. He pledged to whisper to her all the sweet words in existence. Everything he hadn't told her before. Once her lovely face and beautiful body were his again, everything would be fine, yet she had willfully sacrificed her life just for the sake of the princess.

Don't joke with me here, he silently fumed. You can't die without my permission!

Gathering his remaining strength, he tried to get up. However, the beast's gaping maw was rapidly approaching her. Despair stained the knight's face. Unable to say anything when faced with the horrific situation, he let out a silent scream.

Just then, something appeared in a flash. At the arrival of a man covered in a

black cloak, the beast stopped what it was doing and took a defensive stance. Why was it doing that? Who the hell was that person? Mikhail's eyes widened once he recognized the man's face. This was Jubelian's lover—the commoner. Did he participate in the competition as well?

Infuriated, Max kicked the dire wolf's body. Unexpectedly, the beast fell helplessly at the impact. Now on its side, the dire wolf jerked once. It didn't stand back up.

How did he do that? He reminded Mikhail of...

"However, after seeing how all of you conceited fools are trying to manipulate my daughter, I have reached the limit of my patience."

Witnessing power great enough that it was comparable to that of Duke Floyen, someone who destroyed a mansion with his bare hands, Mikhail shuddered.

"Max," Jubelian said, her voice mournful.

She fell into his embrace. Shame and resentment washed over Mikhail. How could a commoner like him...

Mikhail used to be her lover. If nothing had changed, he would have defeated the beast and he would have been holding her in his arms by now.

How dare you... take what is mine? he thought angrily.

Furious, he forced himself to get up and approach the couple. Using his uninjured hand, he pointed the sword at the commoner.

"Get your filthy hands off her right now, commoner. Otherwise, I will behead you."

As soon as he finished speaking, Max looked back with menace in his eyes. He smirked. "Strike me if you can."

Mikhail was enraged. To him, it seemed that the commoner was being overly confident since Jubelian was by his side. Did that lowly thing underestimate him? He pointed his blade up to attack the arrogant commoner's neck.

However, he soon felt something tightening his body. His legs began trembling. What was this? Damn it! He tried to resist the overwhelming

pressure, but it was to no avail. In the end, he couldn't stand the suffocation and plopped onto the ground.

"M-Max. What you did just now...!" Jubelian cried, bewildered.

The commoner kissed her on the cheek.

"Ah, I didn't want that insignificant bastard to bother you anymore from now on," he whispered in her ear.

Mikhail's blood boiled at the fact that he had to hear such insults, let alone from a commoner.

You conceited rat, he seethed to himself. I'll teach you where you belong!

Exasperated, he managed to stand up. As he got ready to swing his fists, however, new voices emerged.

"Are you all right?!"

The crown prince's knights had come rushing in, returning from the hunt.

As expected of the prince's dogs—they were late. Mikhail frowned at this, but then he quickly adopted a sinister smile. Even if he was strong, commoners had an insignificant status. They weren't protected by the law. No matter how skilled they were, they were treated like mercenaries at best. Given the importance of class, Mikhail could simply dismiss this incident using his social status. It was unfortunate that the crown prince was not among the guards. In any case, Mikhail believed that the knights would side with him.

Pointing his finger at Max, he ordered, "Arrest this man. Right now!"

The captain of the prince's guards wrinkled his nose.

"For what crime do you want us to arrest him?" he asked.

How haughty of him to doubt Mikhail when he was merely the captain of the bodyguards. Mikhail was particularly talented among the royal knights and he was often the subject of envy from others until now, so he decided that Dennis must have been harboring similar feelings.

"This lowly commoner disturbed the subjugation of the dire wolf. He also insulted me, the eldest son of a marquis," he explained. "If you adhere to

chivalrous ways, you must realize that he has committed a felony."

The women, who had been silent until now, opened their mouths in shock.

"This is ridiculous!"

"You are the one who interrupted, Sir Victor!"

Mikhail shook his head. "I originally intended to inflict a critical blow on the dire wolf. This man took the kill away from me, and as if that wasn't enough, he is now threatening me."

Dennis narrowed his eyes. "I see what has happened," he muttered softly.

The captain raised one hand, and his squad drew their blades.

That arrogant man will finally meet his end! Mikhail thought triumphantly.

The knights, however, betrayed his expectations and aimed their swords elsewhere.

"What is this?" he asked, ready to lose his temper because of the knights' gall.

"How dare you insult my lord..." Dennis muttered quietly. "You must have a death wish."

Mikhail was taken aback by the abrupt threat. How had he insulted the crown prince?

"Sir Dennis, what are you talking about all of a sudden? Your lord is His Highness the Crown Prince. I haven't done anything to offend him!"

The commoner now stood with his back straight.

"Dennis," he called.

It was unacceptable for commoners to refer to a noble by their first name. Smirking, Mikhail made sure not to miss his chance. "Can you see it now? Do you see how ill-mannered this—"

Dennis cut him off.

"Yes, Your Highness!" he answered, responding to the commoner's call.

Unable to continue, Mikhail gaped at Max. This man... was the crown prince?

Jet black hair and ruby eyes. The handsome man shot him a smug smile.

"Let him go," Max ordered.

All at once, the knights removed the blades that they had aimed at Mikhail's neck. Then, they knelt on one knee in deference to their lord. As if he deserved it, Max accepted their greeting with a haughty expression.

Was he truly the crown prince? Mikhail was disgusted.

Max approached him. "Mikhail Albert Hessen. You should be kneeling before me right now."

Realizing he had to assume a humiliating position in front of Jubelian, Mikhail flushed red. Still, he couldn't disrespect a member of the royal family. Sending Max a vicious glare, he slowly knelt.

Once I get the emperor's trust, he swore to himself, you will...

Just then, the crown prince used his hand to force Mikhail's head to the ground. It collided with a bang.

"You should know to bow once you're on your knees," the prince muttered, voice cold. "Especially now that you know who I am."

Mikhail trembled with fury and gritted his teeth. He swore to have vengeance for what this man had done.

* * *

SINCE HE WAS SO ARROGANT, I was quite satisfied to witness Mikhail learn his place. At the same time, however, I was worried. Was it okay for Max to reveal that he was the crown prince? Mikhail currently had the emperor's trust and was close with quite a few nobles, so that would mean many of the nobles would come to know what Max looked like.

Not having other people know what he looked like must have afforded him many merits... Even now, most of the nobles didn't know his face. Suddenly exposing it, however? It felt like he was being a bit reckless. I decided to talk to him about this matter later.

Our eyes met. Max pushed Mikhail further onto the ground with his foot.

"Now, get out of my sight," he spat. He could have said it in a way that better suited a nobleman, but he decided on hostility in the end. I sighed.

"If you try to do anything to my sister or Jubelian from now on, you will die," he swore.

He turned to me, the darkness in his eyes shifting into a passionate light. He looked like a puppy asking for praise, so I smiled sheepishly.

I was definitely proud of him. Honestly, I was pleased by what had happened. No matter how many times I told him not to come near me, Mikhail would somehow find and torment me, so this was a relief.

Thinking Bea shared similar feelings, I turned to her. However, she simply remained where she sat, her head bowed. She didn't say anything, so I grew worried and tried to approach her.

Before I could reach her, Max suddenly lifted me into his arms and held me like a baby.

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

I was about to ask him to put me down, but then I realized everyone's gazes were on me. They were definitely curious about how I met him since he was the crown prince.

Meanwhile, Max's guards observed the two of us with twinkling eyes. I lamented this; how embarrassing...

"It's..." I hesitated, unable to come up with a proper answer.

"From now on, you'll always stay next to me. Okay?"

I flinched when I heard that. Always stay next to him? Did that mean he didn't mind others finding out about us? He was currently trying to hide me, his weakness, from the emperor. It would be rash of him to announce his relationship with me to the public since the uprising had yet to take place.

I glanced at him to discover that he was watching me. His crimson eyes were a bit darker than usual.

"If we do that, the emperor might..." I trailed off.

He chuckled. "I'll take care of him, so if you don't mind... I would like to make our relationship official."

I could hear the urgency and impatience in his voice. It looked like he was worried that I might refuse. I sighed softly.

"Of course," I replied, smiling.

Max's expression instantly brightened.

"Thank you so much," he gushed. "I'll treat you with the love and respect you deserve."

As I watched his lovable visage, I smiled. Then, I cautiously brought up what I had been bothered by this whole time.

"Um, Max... I have something to say..." I mumbled.

He looked at me nervously. "What is it?"

I didn't want to ruin the sweet mood, but I had no choice. Being on the receiving end of everyone's gazes at once was incredibly burdensome.

"Everyone is looking at us, and I'm embarrassed," I said. "Could you please let me down?"

I thought he would listen to me, but what he did next made my face heat up even more.

"All of you. Shut your eyes," he ordered.

At the sight of everyone hurriedly clenching their eyes shut, I sighed. I would have to teach him how to speak using the appropriate words in the future.

* * *

THE FLOYEN and Elios knights had done their best to follow the crown prince's guards in the direction Max had gone. At the entrance to the basement of the arena, however, only the prince's horse remained.

"We cannot return to the arena so hastily. If we go back now, we might be going against His Highness' plans," Dennis had said. "Everyone, please wait here. I will head to where the beast is supposed to be."

Putting their trust in him, the Floyen and Elios knights had waited patiently. Not long after, one of the knights announced, "Captain Dennis found traces of the beast in the underpass and hurried to the arena. Everyone, please make your way there as soon as possible."

Once the knights from both families had reached the arena, the case had already been resolved.

"Now, get out of my sight."

Frederich smirked as he watched Mikhail lower his tail to the crown prince. How ugly.

Then, he turned his head to see Jubelian in the prince's arms. She seemed more lively than usual.

Lady Floyan—Jubelian. She was someone he had considered pathetic at first. She was utterly incorrigible, and he was embarrassed that such a person could be the daughter of a duke. However...

"Why don't we call it even with this, Lord Gordon? Speak as informally to me as my guard did to you."

He had happened to witness her on that day in Arcade Street, and that was when she had caught his attention. Since then, his interest in her had only grown. He was overcome with a strange sense of elation every time he saw her change. She was gradually being carved to perfection like a finely crafted jewel. From a certain point onward, he would smile every time he saw her without even realizing it.

That was why he wanted to make her happy... Frederich had hoped that he would be the one to put a smile on her face, but in the end, it didn't work out the way he wanted it to.

Well, as long as she was happy.

No. He pretended to be okay at first, but he felt sick to his stomach. She was the first person he had ever loved.

Sensing the crown prince's gaze upon him, he narrowed his eyes slightly. Truthfully, he didn't like the man. However, instead of revealing how he felt, he

smiled with his eyes.

If the crown prince could make her happy, then Frederich would gladly bow to him. With this resolution, he lowered his head, and Max frowned.

What was wrong with him? He expected Frederich to stare back with hostility like Mikhail did, but there was a bittersweet mixture of respect and vexation in the nobleman's eyes instead. How annoying.

"People are coming. Let me down!" Jubelian cried, squirming in his arms.

She looked bewildered, and her cheeks were now rosy with embarrassment. She still looked lovely to Max, which just made him want to tease her more.

Smiling mischievously, he hugged her tighter.

"Yes, people are coming, and this is an opportunity to show them that I am yours," he said.

Wriggling in his arms, Jubelian covered her face with both hands. Max headed to where the Floyen family's seats were with a smile.

* * *

THE EMPEROR CLENCHED HIS FISTS.

Damn it! Mikhail, that idiot... he cursed silently.

Not only had the knight acted recklessly, but he messed up the plan by being unable to slaughter the beast.

The emperor watched his son walk with Jubelian in his arms and smirked. Well, at least he found Maximilian's weakness.

Then, their eyes met and the emperor noticed a dangerous glint in his son's eyes. Those who dared to meet the crown prince's eyes trembled in fear. Nonetheless, the emperor thought the sight of his son cradling Jubelian as if to warn him was laughable.

Was Maximilian saying he wouldn't let him be if he did anything to her? Turning to Regis standing behind him, the emperor grinned. "I didn't expect a girl to become my son's leash... Thanks to your daughter, Regis, everything will

be much easier for me."

Like a disloyal vassal, Duke Floyen remained silent. The emperor simply turned back to watching Jubelian as if the silence had been expected.

"If I put that girl in jail, my son won't make that arrogant face at me anymore."

Just thinking about that scenario put the emperor at ease. He now had a way to control his rampant son. Additionally, he gained another card he could throw away after using.

Looking at Regis again, the emperor smiled contentedly at the duke's unfocused blue eyes. "Don't be too heartbroken," he said. "I'll bury your daughter once I take care of my son. And when you're no longer useful, I'll kill you too so you may rest with her."

The duke remained as still as a statue as the emperor voiced his cruelty.

"Your Majesty, what do you plan to do with the winner of the hunting contest?" the grand chamberlain asked.

The emperor quickly turned around and said, "Due to the severe damage done by the beast, there will be no reward."

Then, he turned around and left the box seats.

Eventually, Regis' blank eyes gradually rediscovered their light. Clenching his fists, he glared at the emperor with determination and bloodlust.

He was not going to let the emperor have his way.

* * *

ONCE MAX SUBDUED THE BEAST, the nobles who had fled returned to the arena.

"The crown prince took care of the dire wolf?"

"He's amazing!"

"By the way, where is he? Doesn't he usually wear black armor...?"

People were enthusiastic about the fact that the crown prince had defeated

the dire wolf. After all, he was a heroic figure who had previously made many contributions to wars in the past.

"His Highness protected us once again."

Meanwhile, I was elated to hear people praising Max. He was my lover, after all. Nonetheless, I couldn't just sit back and enjoy the atmosphere.

"Wait, isn't that Lady Floyen over there?"

Oh, this was mortifying.

Feeling countless gazes on me, I was beyond embarrassed. It would have been fine if I was just standing next to him, but the problem was that Max was still holding me bridal style as he headed back to the seats.

"Max, let me go," I urged.

"Why?"

It was unfair that he was still handsome even when he was doing something I hated. He gave me a puzzled look, so I decided to tell him my honest opinion. "I'm not a little kid and I'm ashamed to be seen like this by others."

He sighed. "If I put you down now, you won't be able to walk because of your ankle."

"It doesn't hurt—ah!"

Max lightly brushed his hand over my ankle while I was speaking and pain immediately followed. I was sure nothing had happened, but now I realized that I had aches throughout my body. It felt like I had been severely beaten.

Why all of a sudden? I was very confused.

Max sighed again. "Don't you remember how hard you fell to the ground just moments ago?" he prompted. "Not just that, too. That huge beast was pressing down on you. Your whole body must be sore by now."

Now I realized why he insisted on holding me like this.

"Then you hugged me because..." I trailed off, unable to continue.

With a faint smile, he answered, "Of course, there were other reasons. I wanted to show off and tell the others that I'm yours."

I furrowed my brows and he put me down on an empty seat. Relief that the cause of my embarrassment was over ran through me until he suddenly kissed my hand. Flustered, I questioned what he was doing.

"Who is that young man who carried Lady Floyen back to her seat?" the crowd began to whisper.

"Yes, I was wondering the same. Other than Duke Floyen, I had never seen such a handsome man."

Their words reminded me of Dad. Where was he? A lot had happened, and I didn't understand why he hadn't come looking for me. What bothered me more, however, was how he had looked.

He looked different from usual. Suspicions clouded my mind.

"His Majesty will be entering soon! Everyone, please show your respect."

The emperor was the culprit of everything that had happened today. I clenched my fists, but Max whispered, "Don't worry about him. I won't let him touch a hair on your head."

I looked into his eyes. Although they were the complete opposite color, they reminded me of my dad's for a moment.

"Okay," I said, deciding to trust him. Max smiled softly.

Then, his expression hardened when he saw a certain someone. I, too, turned to the person he was looking at and frowned. Dad?

Throughout the crisis, the person I had spent so long searching for had been standing behind the emperor. Had he been escorting the emperor all this time? Maybe it was his duty to do so. After all, no matter how incompetent and greedy the man may be, he was still the emperor, and my father was the head of the royal knights. It was his responsibility to ensure his sovereign's safety.

Regardless, I couldn't help but feel upset. The beast hadn't even looked at the emperor.

Max placed his hand on my shoulder.

"It's okay, Jubelian," he assured me. "He must have a plan in mind."

I nodded slowly. He was right. My dad wasn't loyal to the emperor in truth, and above all...

I recalled Dad's hazy eyes. They had been bothering me, and they looked really strange earlier... Maybe it had something to do with the emperor.

With this conviction in mind, I glared at the emperor.

* * *

PEOPLE RETURNED to their normal selves once the crisis was resolved. When they came back to the arena, the nobles gawked at the handsome man sitting next to Jubelian.

"The young man next to Lady Floyen is extremely attractive!"

"Yes, I was thinking the same. From what lord's family is he?"

"Perhaps he's her commoner lover as the rumors say!"

The man kissed the back of Jubelian's hand at that moment, and the people marveled.

"His gestures are so elegant. There's no way he could be a commoner."

"Who is he, then?"

Knowing the answer, Mikhail glowered at the man sitting next to Jubelian, the crown prince. If he could, he would kill the man and take Jubelian for himself. However, he suppressed his violent desires. There was still work to be done.

The emperor was the only one able to manipulate both the crown prince and Duke Floyen. Therefore, he headed to where the emperor was seated. He was now leaving the box seat.

"Your Majesty."

At Mikhail's call, the emperor scanned him from head to toe once.

"Wait here," he ordered.

Mikhail rarely had to wait after winning the emperor's favor because he had become the sovereign's top priority. However, now he was being treated like

Count Pyrex—a mere dog who could be disposed of at any time.

Gritting his teeth, Mikhail lowered his head, feigning obedience.

That damned royal. Once I achieve my purpose, I will get rid of you, too, emperor, he swore to himself.

Unaware of his intentions, the emperor simply passed Mikhail by with a smile. He couldn't get rid of Mikhail just because of a small mistake. It was pathetic to think that the knight had messed up even after everything had been set up for him, but the emperor still had much to gain by having him by his side. He wanted Mikhail to learn from his mistake, so he would make sure the knight would receive an adequate punishment.

The emperor headed down to the field and the grand chamberlain shouted, "His Majesty will enter soon! Everyone, please show respect."

Spotting his son sitting beside Jubelian, the emperor grinned. His son was totally infatuated with her. He never thought the girl would serve as a leash for him.

Maximillian began approaching the emperor. Looking into his son's crimson eyes, which were slightly a darker shade than his, the emperor whispered to Duke Floyen, "Wait here. If anyone tries to do something to me, you can attack them without hesitation."

Just like that, the emperor had set up a safety measure for himself. He was afraid that the crown prince might try to pull something during the confusion.

"My son," he began, "I heard that we were able to prevent extensive damage thanks to you."

Only then did the people realize the identity of the man next to Jubelian. They immediately clamored about how beautiful he was because they had been clueless about the face he had hidden underneath the charcoal helmet.

"As your father, I am proud of you."

The emperor thought Max would simply bow as he usually did, but he remained with his back straight, no longer concealing his hostility.

"I only did what I had to do," he said. "I am part of the royal family, and it is

my duty to protect the people."

On the surface, his words simply sounded like an adequate response to what the emperor had said. However, he knew that, in truth, it was a veiled criticism for simply watching from the box seat as the incident unfolded.

The emperor clenched his jaw. Cheeky bastard. He wanted to slap his arrogant son right that second, but the prince was now a hero to the people because he had taken care of the beast. It was clear that slapping him would incite the disapproval of the public.

The emperor's crimson eyes traveled to Jubelian. Well, his son could be as full of himself as he wanted. Soon, he would make his son kneel before him by using that girl he loved!

Hiding his schemes, the emperor smiled. "Yes, I'm glad the damage was minimized. It was all thanks to you."

Some of the knights had lost their lives due to the beast's rampage, but no nobles had died. Normally, the emperor wouldn't have mentioned anything about the harm done by the beast because the bereaved families could demand compensation for what they lost. This was a different case, however; the emperor didn't want to give his son a national treasure.

Now, if the crown prince asked for a reward for what he had done, the people would immediately treat the prince as a money-grubbing snob. By mentioning the losses caused by the beast, it was evident that the crown prince would keep his mouth shut.

"I think it would be better not to select a winner for today's contest."

As expected, the crown prince nodded obediently. The emperor was about to breathe a sigh of relief, but then Max spoke up. "Yes," he said, "but before that, there is something I need to point out."

The emperor swallowed nervously. What the hell was he trying to say? Something bothered him, but the emperor couldn't let it show. Feigning ignorance, he asked, "And what is that?"

The crown prince turned to his men.

"Bring it here," he ordered.

The guards left and swiftly returned with the corpse of a huge beast.

The emperor frowned. "I told you already that there would be no winner for today's contest—"

Cutting him off, the crown prince snarled, "Isn't this strange? I caught not just one, but two beasts that weren't from this area."

At that, the emperor realized his mistake. Count Pyrex, that idiot! The emperor had been busy with many other things, so upon determining that it would be too cumbersome to pay attention to the beasts on top of everything, he left Count Pyrex to manage them. He couldn't believe that the count brought in beasts that didn't live here!

He was taken aback. However, he spoke without revealing that he was flustered.

"I see," he said. "But judging from how there were only two of them, perhaps these animals got lost and ended up here by coincidence."

The crown prince smirked. Then, he donned a mean scowl. He raised his hand and the Floyen knights brought in a giant blue bear. "Coincidence, huh?"

Forcing a smile, the emperor nodded. "Yes, coincidence! What a wonder!"

The crown prince glared at his father for a moment before giving another order. "Bring the rest of it."

The emperor's eyes widened when he saw what the prince's knights brought.

No, how could he... he thought, his mind spinning.

Before the emperor stood a caged wild beast and an exhausted Count Pyrex.

The prince glared at the emperor with cold eyes. "Unfortunately, it wasn't a coincidence. I have witnessed Count Pyrex use his men to free the beast."

As soon as the prince finished speaking, a man came forward. "As an eyewitness, I would like to say that His Highness is speaking the truth," he said. It was Duke Elios' successor, someone who had a strong influence in high society. The crowd began to murmur once he came forward.

The emperor looked down at his once loyal servant with trembling eyes. Then, he clenched his fists. What a foolish man, ruining things like this!

As the emperor tried to think of an excuse, the prince continued, "The count has confessed that he released the wild beasts for the hunting competition... at the orders of His Majesty the Emperor. Could this mean that Your Majesty is also the one who let the dire wolf out?"

The nobles began chattering louder amongst themselves.

"His Majesty did such a thing...?"

"Aren't those extremely dangerous creatures?! How could he do such a thing without mentioning it to anyone?"

"If the beasts were released near His Highness, that must mean..."

The emperor bit his lip once their suspicions began growing.

Damn it! he cursed to himself. *How dare those little things...*

He wanted to order the Dragon Knights to annihilate everyone in the area. However, the emperor calmed his hot head.

No, he needed to think. The only evidence that showed I planned all this was...

His crimson eyes landed on Count Pyrex. If the nobleman didn't confess, the truth would sink to the depths, never to be seen by others. The count was a loyal dog, and the emperor was well aware of his weaknesses.

The emperor glared at the count in warning.

"If you talk nonsense from now on," his gaze said, "I will tear your mother apart and kill you."

Count Pyrex lowered his head slowly as if he had understood. With that, the emperor determined that it was now time to throw away this old dog of his.

"How dare you go against my orders, attack my son, and then blame me for it?!" he cried indignantly. "I've trusted you all this time, and this is what I get?!"

Like a man who had truly been wronged, his voice was full of anguish. With his head lowered like a sinner, Count Pyrex remained silent. The people began

to clamor, and the emperor laughed inwardly.

You fool, I knew you'd think it'd be better for you to die alone than harm your family, he silently taunted the count. *Well, thanks to you, I will be able to get out of this safely!*

Turning to his son, the emperor said, "You're probably upset with me due to what he's said about me."

The crown prince neither confirmed nor denied those words. The people took his silence as an affirmation. Suppressing his irritation, the emperor feigned sincerity. "To restore our trust, I'm going to leave you to take care of that man," he said.

This meant Max was granted permission to interrogate the count.

The nobles began whispering amongst themselves.

"Is this really something Count Pyrex came up with himself?" they asked.

Even so, only a few of them were thinking such thoughts. Many still harbored suspicions about the emperor. However, in a situation with clear evidence like this, there was a chance that they could be punished severely if they decided to voice their speculations. Therefore, most remained silent.

Gauging the nobles' reactions, the emperor let out a sigh of relief. However, he was soon forced into another frown. Expressionless, Maximilian was still staring at him. The emperor believed putting on a show would convince his son, but it didn't seem to work.

Who did Maximillian think he was? Oh, perhaps he was upset about...

Remembering the prince's feats, the emperor opened his mouth. "Due to the crown prince's efforts in dealing with the dire wolf and uncovering the scheme behind this incident, the victims will be able to rest their spirits at ease. To congratulate you on your achievement, I will grant you the Flower of the Underworld's Goddess."

The prince slowly lowered his head. "Thank you, Father," he said.

Thanks to his more docile reaction, the nobles seemed to be shifting toward the theory that Count Pyrex was indeed the culprit behind today's disaster.

The emperor smirked, quietly ridiculing the crown prince and the people. Foolish beings. They were so simple.

"But I don't need the necklace," the prince added. "All I want is to commemorate the souls of those who have lost their lives today and give condolences to their families."

* * *

THE EMPEROR skillfully escaping his crisis by using the crowd reminded me of a lizard running away by cutting its own tail off. Upset, I clenched my fists. He was blatantly lying! He obviously knew Count Pyrex's weakness and that he wouldn't confess. This was why he was putting on a show!

I was hoping that the emperor would be dethroned at this moment, so I was frustrated and infuriated that he managed to get out cleanly even after committing such atrocities. Upon the comment Max supplied afterward, however, I couldn't help but smile. I couldn't believe he screwed him over like this! He was asking the victims to be given top priority. Anyone with a functioning head would realize that the emperor neglected those who were sacrificed to the beast in favor of congratulating his son instead.

"Long live His Highness the Crown Prince!" The people conveyed their respect toward their prince with enthusiastic shouts. I knew this would give the emperor a sense of defeat, and unsurprisingly, he was trembling with fury, his face an unpleasant red.

He left the field shortly afterward. Watching my dad follow behind him, I bit my lip. I was worried since I had just seen how Count Pyrex—the emperor's most loyal dog—ended up. I didn't understand why such a strong man like my dad followed the emperor, but...

A thumb brushed over my lips.

"Stop it. You're bleeding," Max said.

He was looking at me with worried eyes. Moved by his sweet gesture, I leaned on him, and he hugged me.

Soaking in his warmth, I pledged, *I will save you from the emperor's magic, Dad.*

* * *

"I'M sorry for all you've been through until now."

Jubelian was the first person to recognize Beatrice's pain. She had always lived in darkness. Now, Jubelian was her light. Despite being a weak person herself, she still tried to protect Beatrice.

"My friend and I got lost and ended up coming all the way here. Is this a restricted area by any chance?"

"Are you okay, Your Highness?"

Watching Jubelian snuggle into Max's arms, Beatrice let out a small sigh. She was immensely grateful that Jubelian was safe. However... what was that back then?

The memory of what had occurred with the beast began to manifest clearly in Beatrice's head.

* * *

THE MOMENT the beast had tried to kill Jubelian, despair had overwhelmed Beatrice.

No! she cried soundlessly, sobbing. Please, I'm willing to risk my life! Someone, please protect her!

Once she made this earnest wish, the world momentarily halted.

This was...

Beatrice's eyes were fixed on the unmoving beast when she suddenly heard a laugh.

"Well, well, well," a voice began. "What do we have here? I didn't know we would have a wizard this generation."

"Who are you, and what's happening?" Beatrice wanted to ask.

"Stopping time with magic!" the voice nevertheless answered. "Isn't this great? Alas, you have yet to fully awaken—the ring won't choose you just yet."

The princess asked many times what these words meant, but there was no answer.

Time began to pass slowly.

"But at this rate, slowing down time wouldn't be of any use..." she thought mournfully. She tried to run toward her dear friend, but as if it was similarly stuck in time, her body wouldn't move.

Was it going to end like this? Hopelessness began swallowing her alive when a miracle happened.

"How did he..."

Her stepbrother, Maximillian, was swiftly approaching the beast. Time didn't seem to be affecting him. For a moment, Beatrice was reassured.

Then, a terrible pain began to pierce her heart. The voice returned.

"Ah, your power is depleted. That's a sign that the magic can no longer be maintained!"

Suddenly, time began to flow normally again.

To the beast, Max had somehow appeared in front of it in an instant, startling it. It shook its tail ferociously, toppling a building down and spraying debris in all directions.

Beatrice stared blankly at a boulder flying toward her. She had to move. She knew it. However, her heart still felt as if it was being torn apart, and she couldn't even manage a flinch.

She closed her eyes and waited for the pain to strike her. What came instead, however, was the feeling of being hugged tightly. Beatrice opened her eyes to see that a man was on top of her and his head was bleeding. He had been struck by the debris on her behalf.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

* * *

MEETING the man's ruby eyes, Beatrice blushed.

"Your Highness, are you still not feeling well?" Victor asked. His head was now wrapped in bandages.

Startled, she crawled backward.

"Are you okay?" he asked once again. She could feel the warmth of his hand on her shoulder.

She hurriedly shook him off. "W-What do you think you're doing!?" she cried nervously. "You startled me!"

Victor sighed at her apparent irritation. He had only been worried about her.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to have scared such a fainthearted person... Although I've already called Your Highness three times before," he added. "Are you ready to be escorted to the carriage? Could you please answer me, Your Highness?"

Now, she was conscious of how he looked at her. Not wanting to get entangled with him any further, she tried to dismiss him. "I'm fine, so you may leave—"

"Are you all right, Your Highness?"

Jubelian and Maximillian arrived before she could finish her sentence.

"I'm fine," Beatrice answered. "How are you?"

Jubelian nodded. "I just showed the doctor my ankle. He told me it was a minor injury and that it would heal in a few days."

Noticing her lovely smile, warmth filled Beatrice.

"Victor, escort Beatrice to the palace," Maximillian ordered.

"What? I just said I'm fine!"

She didn't want to go back with him when she felt so awkward. Keeping her face straight, she tried to refuse, but Victor beat her to the punch.

"Of course! I was already going to," he said. "As you can see, I'm an extremely responsible escort!"

Beatrice glanced at Victor before quickly turning away. A responsible escort...

A melancholy expression characterized the princess' face for a moment. However, she quickly shook off her thoughts.

What she needed to do first was find out about the magic she used earlier.

Volume 4 End

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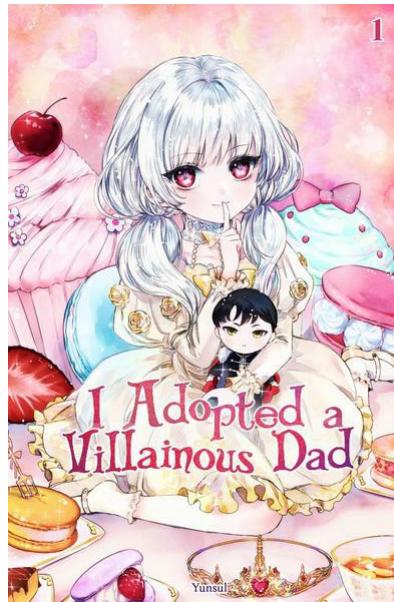
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Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry

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About the Publisher

WordExcerpt was formed in December 2020 around the dream of giving voice to talented foreign writers who needed a leg up and an audience to speak to in the western market. Acquiring bestselling titles such as *Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry* and *I'm Not the Final Boss' Lover*, WordExcerpt has since expanded its ever-growing back titles and incredible team of talented employees.

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